

## On Atheism

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Atheism is weird.

I'm saying that as an atheist, but it's true: atheism is *weird*. After all, most people aren't born as atheists... they become atheists later on in life. They experience some sort of seminal, life-changing moment that results in the epiphany that God doesn't actually exist.

Most atheists don't want to admit to that. They want to say that they came to their decision logically, as if they stayed up all night scribbling equations on a chalkboard only to shout "Eureka! I have scientifically proven that God doesn't exist!" or some other nonsense. That's just not how people work.

People operate on a much simpler level. I don't think calling people animals is generally a good idea, but the phrase "monkey see, monkey do" applies here. Typically, you believe in a god because your parents believe in a god, and their parents believe in a god, so on and so forth. You were trained (perhaps more cynically, "brainwashed") to believe that there is a god and that this god loves and cares for you, and that if you push your hands together and look at the sky long enough, he'll do what you ask him to do, so long as it's within reason.

And yeah, that may sound pretentious, but I promise: I don't have some sort of superiority complex... at least I hope not. After all, like many atheists, I was there at one point. I was a good Christian boy and I believed in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost (and the fact that three gods could also somehow be one god at the same time). My mom was a Sunday school teacher and I helped prepare her lessons. I held hands at the dinner table with my mom and whatever boyfriend or husband she had at the time and said a prayer before chowing down. I even remember sitting in my former stepsister's room praying to God with her that my mom and her dad would stop fighting and that the police wouldn't have to show up *this* time.

But, like most other atheists, something happened that changed my stance. For some, it's when their prayers weren't answered. For others, it's when they experience incomprehensible loss. But for me, it wasn't anything like that. It was something far more subtle, but something which left an irreversible stain on the religion I had become familiar with up to that point.

My mom and I attended a protestant reformed church since we moved to the Central New Jersey area. The story goes that at every other church, I would sit in the Sunday school class for all of five minutes before bursting into tears and running back to the sanctuary crying for mommy. It wasn't until I went to a Sunday school class with snacks that I actually managed to sit through the whole lesson. Harlingen Reformed Church had the right idea: I'm pretty sure it says somewhere in Job that "he hath showered the children with unhealthy snacks to show them the light of God"... it was right before God bet Satan that he could torture a man for thirty years for no reason and get away with it.

The pastor of this church was a guy named Bill DeYoung and, after just a few weeks of attending, my mom and him got along really well. It seemed like every Sunday I would wait in the reception area for my mom to finish catching up with the pastor for around fifteen minutes or so before I finally met up with her. Of course, the reception area *also* had food, so I wasn't complaining.

Contrary to what his surname might suggest, Bill's services were very old-fashioned. It's pretty clear in retrospect that he was much more interested in Biblical analysis than actual preaching, because most of his sermons consisted of introducing a concept, reading a bunch of loosely applicable verses, talking about how it fits into the themes of that particular book or chapter and the historical context of its writing, and then saying that Jesus sacrificed himself for us a few times before having us sing "Praise to Lord the Almighty" or something similar. He even did a "Books of the Bible" series where he dedicated a week to a particular book of the Bible. 66 weeks later and I'm pretty sure the church had around half the membership it had before.

Of course, when I was younger, I didn't have to sit through those sermons. I'd be in Sunday school all the way through sixth grade. I was also the proud recipient of a number of "perfect attendance" rewards, but no one else cared since the congregation was already asleep by the time the lady finished explaining all of the rules to perfect attendance (because, naturally, it couldn't be as simple as "go to Sunday school every week").

Bill's preferences for Biblical analysis infected the Sunday school program as well, though, because after sixth grade came two years of pre-service Bible study classes taught by the man himself. One year on Biblical history and one year on Biblical theory... and it was not fun in the slightest. After class and before the church services started, however, I'd head some rumbling from the other kids about this thing called "youth group" that all the high schoolers went to. Apparently it was more fun than even the best Sunday school classes, and way better than

Pastor Bill's Bible study. It was a whopping three hours on a Sunday night, but it was rich with games, activities, discussions, and social experiences. People made life-long friends through Youth Group, and I was excited.

Then, one day after church, my mom was looking to have her normal conversation with Bill when he approached my mom and I. He mentions a concert by the Philadelphia Orchestra that he was planning to go to with his wife that, rather unfortunately, she could no longer attend. After explaining the situation, he then invited me to attend the concert with him.

See, I don't think Bill saw me as a complex, multi-faceted human being... I think he saw me as that kid who played piano during church a few times when the offering plate was going around. Most people in the church saw me this way, as the "piano kid" who "played piano". No one knew that I enjoyed writing and wanted to be an author at the time because that would take too much effort to learn about. It wasn't until I did something to directly enhance their church-going experience that I meant anything to these people. This was the same case for Bill. After all, in the ten years up to that point that he talked to my mom after church, he only bothered to ask how I was doing all but a few times. Why I was his go-to second choice to go to this concert, I'll never know... but so it was. The "piano kid" from church was going to a classical music performance with his pastor.

I don't remember why I accepted his offer. I don't even know whether it was my decision. For all I know my mom could have simply agreed for me, as she did with almost all of my mostly-piano-related contributions to the church. Ultimately, however, it was on a partially-cloudy Saturday morning that Bill drives up to the house to pick me up.

I had never really had a one-on-one conversation with the guy before this day. After all, of the few times he did talk to me after church, it was in the relatively public setting of the reception area. I expected the usual talk:

"How's school?"

"What are you learning about?"

...or perhaps even worse...

"How's the piano going?"

Had he asked those questions, my answers would have been "Good", "Nothing exciting", and "Fine" respectively, but instead, he asked a more peculiar question.

“So how’s your dad?”

My parents were never together, making a sort of pastime out of suing each other over minor custody issues. My dad was never a conversation that even remotely came up in a church setting, but Bill seemed oddly comfortable with the topic, as if he had talked about it many times before. Later, I began to wonder if these conversations were, in fact, frequent, but without my knowledge.

Still shocked by the question and half-mindedly saying that my dad was well, Bill threw me for a loop again with his second question.

“Does your dad drink?”

Years later, I’d learn that the answer to this question was a resounding *yes, my dad does drink, he drinks a lot, far too much actually* but back at this time he was more responsible, only having a single drink on nights when I visited him. My mom, who never would set out to severely inebriate herself, arguably drank more than him to my knowledge and, somewhat ironically, it would be her and not my dad who would get a DUI ticket two years later. So, after reeling for a moment, I responded, saying that my dad had a drink every now and again in the same way my mom had a drink every now and again.

I don’t remember where the conversation went after that, but I’m fairly certain it returned to the more generic type. If not, then I don’t know whether my go-to responses “Good”, “Nothing exciting”, and “Fine” made sense in context, because I couldn’t stop thinking about those two questions.

It made the already-uncomfortable trip even more uncomfortable as the day went on, with the same two questions just continuing to take their toll on me as the orchestra’s performance of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 went on and on and on. Being someone who genuinely grew to enjoy classical music after the years of piano playing, I probably would have enjoyed the performance more if I wasn’t so distracted.

We went to a sports bar for dinner afterwards... literally the last possible place someone would expect a pastor to take a random kid for dinner. He seemed so out of place in a location that was overflowing with drunken masculinity, striking up minutes-long conversations with random passersby and, as we entered and exited the restaurant, holding the door for people who didn’t

even bother to acknowledge his presence, let alone thank him. Perhaps the first sign that my faith was waning came when I thought to myself, *only a pastor would be this nice to such rude people.*

When I got home, I recalled a story my dad told me about Pastor Bill one time when I was visiting him, something which I dismissed at the time. Back when I was around five or six years old, during one of his court-allotted “parenting time” weekends, he was to drop me off at church on Sunday morning before driving to the airport and flying back to St. Louis. His flight wasn’t until later in the day, so he figured he might be able to spend a little more time with me before driving back. He learned that the Sunday school was doing a charity event on this day called “Operation Christmas Child” where we pack shoeboxes full of toys and send them to third world countries as a way for the wealthy American middle class to feel better about themselves.

I’m fairly certain he was as skeptical of the concept then as I am now, but that didn’t matter. This was time he could spend with his son, and that was all he wanted. He cared so much about his time with me that he’d fight against my mom to get even the smallest amount of extra time. The idea seemed sound, as he could leave after making a shoebox with his son, but before my mom finished the church service. She wouldn’t even have to see him, and he’d still get those precious extra moments that he cherished oh-so much.

Unfortunately, that never happened. According to my dad, it wasn’t my mom, but rather Pastor Bill DeYoung, who told him that he was not welcome at Harlingen Reformed Church.

My dad was baffled that a minister of any kind would have the audacity to ban anyone from a religious establishment. It seemed completely counter to the entire idea of a church: inviting people, welcoming them, and worshipping with them. At the time I believed, however, that Bill, being an incredibly devout Christian who was traditionalist in every sense of the word, wasn’t physically capable of doing such a thing. That’s why I dismissed his story.

It wasn’t until after that cloudy Saturday going to Philadelphia with Bill that I realized that my dad - despite his tendency to exaggerate and occasionally fabricate stories - wasn’t lying. Bill was capable of banning my dad from the church, and he could do it because he was convinced that my dad was a far worse person than he actually is. Bill was afraid that my dad would cause a public scene at the church and disrupt his service when, in reality, he just

wanted to spend time with his son. And the only person that could have convinced Bill of such a thing... was my mom.

And that's what did it for me. The fact that a pastor could be convinced that a person is irredeemably bad by someone who is directly involved with them on an emotional level speaks volumes to his own credibility as a messenger of the supposedly perfect God.

When I got into high school, I learned that all of the rumblings about how great the youth group is were true. Those experiences were by far the greatest I had ever had in that entire building. Joe McLean was absolutely fantastic at working with teenagers, managing to build relationships with each and every one of us through engaging discussions, educational activities, and enjoyable games.

But the damage was already done.

There was one lesson where we were sitting in a circle in the church sanctuary, discussing the basic principles of what Christianity meant to each of us: the idea that there was a God, the idea that humans were imperfect, the idea that humans who repent their sins will be forgiven, et cetera et cetera. The lesson culminated in a simple yet incredibly powerful question: *Do you believe in this?*

I was sitting to Joe's left, and the first person to answer was on Joe's right. As I waited my turn as the last respondent, I watched and listened as, one-by-one, everyone in the room responded with a simple, confident "yes". By the time the responses got closer to me, I realized that there was no one else in the room who would even dare to think of saying "no".

So, when it was my turn, I looked outside of the circle, up at the giant cross hanging on the wall, proudly displaying the corpse of the tortured Jesus, and lied to everyone in the room.

The adult congregation, especially the church board, was less than thrilled with Joe's youth group. They failed to see how he moved people and drove them to become more passionate in their beliefs. They failed to see how he could get a group of people with a wide array of interests to become the closest of friends. All they saw was a damaged emergency exit sign from that time someone threw a dodgeball poorly.

Joe still leads the youth group to this day, but for years he never attended the morning church services. He went to church with his family elsewhere... until recently. That's because, this past June, Bill retired and moved out of New Jersey with his wife to be closer to his other relatives in Michigan. While I haven't met the new pastor, I've heard from my mom that he's a younger gentleman who wants to push the church in a more modern direction. Not too modern, of course: I'm convinced homophobia was a requirement for the job.

My mom didn't know about my views on Christianity until college, when she checked my "religion" status on Facebook, of all things. She couldn't believe her eyes when it read "nonreligious".

But instead of asking me why I came to that decision, my mom asked me something comparatively more mundane: "Where will you go when you die?"

I paused for a minute. The answer wasn't hard. I could say what every other atheist says: "When you die, you rot in a hole in the ground... and that's it". To me, it was a simple answer to a simple question. But to my mom, the answer wasn't nearly as simple. Her belief in what happens after death is what drives her. She wants to spread the "good news" so that everyone she knows and cares about can join her in the afterlife. She uses the Bible and her faith in its contents to help her make difficult moral decisions. She even tries to get the dog to join us in prayer before dinner so he can go to heaven too.

That's the real reason why atheism is weird: it has a pretentious aura to it. My inherent rejection of systematic religion suggests that I think all other beliefs are "wrong", and that notion places me on a pedestal. But I hate that pedestal, and I wish it didn't exist. As much as I despise the religion I once took part in (and as much as I enjoy making fun of it), I can't bring myself to denounce it entirely. Bill DeYoung tore my faith from me back when I was in middle school, but that's no reason for me to tear faith away from everyone else.

So when my mom asked me what will happen when I die, I told her that I'll happily join her wherever she's going.