I remember every detail of that hallway. I remember the cream-colored cinderblock wall against my back as I sat on the cold tile floor, sobbing into the pay-phone receiver. People shot quizzical looks at me as they came or went from the public bathrooms, but I didn’t care.

I’d come back to Texas to attend my cousin’s wedding. It was the first time I’d seen my family after I moved out of state to be with Anna about four months earlier. My relationship with my mother had been awkward since I’d left town, but I wouldn’t have said it was broken. Still, I didn’t yet feel comfortable wearing in front of my family the beautiful diamond solitaire ring that Anna had given me, so I put it in a velvet bag in my pocket when I went to the airport. Somewhere along the way, before I got to Houston, the bag fell out, or was stolen, or anyway was gone. I was heartbroken. It seemed like a terrible omen of things to come, and indeed, it was just the beginning.

After my cousin’s wedding, back at my mother’s house, she gave me my Christmas presents early. I sat on the soft little loveseat with the cabbage-rose print in her den, and opened the beautiful, extravagant gifts she’d brought me from her recent trip to Europe. I couldn’t help but think ruefully as I admired my new Mont Blanc fountain pen that, though it was something I’d always wanted, what it cost would easily have paid our rent for December, something Anna and I were struggling to find the money to do.

And once all the presents were opened and I had thanked her, there was a pause. Then she said, flatly, with no inflection, “How are you and Anna?”

I’d dreaded this discussion, which we seemed pointedly to be avoiding all weekend. I drew a deep breath, saying the one thing I thought would cast everything in a positive light: “We’re very happy.”

But instead this answer seemed to confirm what she’d hoped not to hear, and she sighed and looked disgusted.

This wasn’t the first time we’d had a discussion along these lines, but this was one of the first times it was personal, not bloodless. Only a couple of years earlier, before I’d separated from my husband, my mother and I had disagreed about the bishop’s stand about abstaining from sexual relations outside marriage. His argument was that homosexual relationships were sinful because they were outside marriage.

I found this to be a childishly absurd and circular argument. “So just let gay people marry, then!” My mother thought that I was being ridiculous. I didn’t press the issue. I had discovered after I married that a part of me was attracted to women, but at the time, it seemed like a moot point. What mattered more to me then was that my many gay friends were being discriminated against. But that, too, didn’t seem important to argue about with my mother.

Now, here we were, arguing about that very thing. I don’t remember much in detail about what exactly was said that day. I do remember that I’d been advised by many of my friends that parents naturally only want happiness for their children, and that I should emphasize that fundamental point in order to achieve some common ground. I fervently believed that this one idea, the idea of love, would keep us together and striving for understanding between us. I vaguely remember saying, “Doesn’t it make any difference to you that I’m happy now?”

I do not remember her answer vaguely. I remember it with utter clarity, word for word, though I wished many times since then that I could forget.

“I would rather you were back with your husband and *unhappy* than in *this* situation.”

She spat the words at me, speaking with a cold and bitter finality that cut me off completely. I was so shocked that she would say such a cruel and ugly thing that I couldn’t comprehend it. I had no response. It was as much the disdain in her voice as the words she said that let me know just how things stood now.

She rose from her chair and left the room. Even so, the house was suddenly much too small, and I had to get out. More important, I had to call Anna, and I couldn’t do it with my mother listening in. Chagrined, I realized that because I had flown home on a visit, I didn’t have a car. It was cold and wet outside, with nowhere I could hang around within a close walk. In order to leave the house, I had to go and plead like a teenager for the car keys.

I suffered the indignity and went to her. I was devastated. I hoped that when I spoke with her, she would show some sign of being sad or troubled or being in some way approachable. But instead she was chilly and composed and utterly unassailable, granting me permission to use her car from some great emotional invulnerability, far from where I was. There seemed nothing to appeal to.

I drove to the bookstore nearby. I took the back way, because I was crying so hard that I didn’t trust myself to drive in holiday traffic on major roads. There, in the hallway leading to the restrooms, I used the pay phone to call the only person in the world who loved me and wanted me to be happy.

Anna did her best to console me. But when your mother—your mother!—tells you that she cares more about impersonal church authority and societal approval in general than she cares about your happiness, there is not a great deal anyone can say that will reassure you.

My mother had, when I moved to Vegas, stated forcefully that what I was considering was against the Bible. I found myself full of consternation at this argument, because I hadn’t grown up in a very pious home. My mother had been intermittently religious but never that devout, and my father had been an agnostic who didn’t really like to talk about his views. In general, we just weren’t that observant, and religion was never used as the reason to do or not to do much of anything.

I became an Episcopalian after college, shortly after my mother did. It seemed a philosophy that I could embrace. I hadn’t found anything in its traditions that I had a problem with, as I had with my previous religion, which banned alcohol. I didn’t see anything wrong with drinking, and I didn’t want to be a hypocrite. Since I had a number of very close friends who were gay, it was also one of my benchmarks to see how gay people were treated in the church: whether they were present and active, whether they were out, whether they seemed comfortable there. The Episcopal Church seemed to fit my requirements.

But when my parents divorced, my mother started enfolding herself more and more in religion, becoming more and more rigid and dogmatic and, to my way of thinking, ostentatious about it. She made a big deal of genuflecting all the time, and instead of saying something like “thank goodness” she would say “thanks be to God.” I felt as if I didn’t really know her in this regard any more, and it made me uncomfortable, made me feel distanced from her, but we hadn’t any truly serious differences of opinion, so I chose not to argue with her.

So when I was about to leave town and my mother initially objected to my relationship with Anna on biblical grounds, I was exasperated. I said, “Look, you can use the Bible to justify any position you want to. I can find plenty of passages that would support me, and I can argue with you about the interpretation of the ones you’re using.”

To which she said, triumphantly, “Yes, but you’re using the letter of the Bible, and I’m using the spirit of it.”

I guess we let that one lie at the time, because it didn’t need to be said: We disagreed, and there was nothing that would change either of our minds about it.

Now, months later, in my anguish, in my wish to bring my mother’s love back to me, I went to the shelves of books marked Religion in that Barnes and Noble, and I searched, searched in desperation for some reference, some authority, some passage that she would respect, that would endorse me to her and help her to see that God was love, that I loved her, that what Anna and I felt for each other was love, and that love was really the only thing that mattered.

I didn’t find much. The issue of openly gay relationships as part of the fabric of society still seemed extremely new as a topic of discussion in 1992. k.d. lang, one of the very first celebrities to come out, had done so only months before. It seemed as if the church was only beginning to talk about the matter. The passages I found that even touched on such a thing were muddy and unclear and still open to interpretation. Plus, what was clearest of all was that my mother just didn’t want to hear it. And I didn’t have the heart to contend with her.

I flew back to Anna and my new home, one that still felt foreign to me. I was suffering from a certain amount of culture shock at the difference between Texas and Nevada. People seemed reserved at best, hostile at worst, my lack of friends, or even of friendly faces, mirroring the other loneliness I felt at the rift between my mother and myself. We talked on the phone at intervals, but whenever I called her, she spoke to me with such coldness and such distance that I found myself less and less inclined to call her. It was just too difficult to struggle with finding anything at all to say, and the empty, shallow, faltering conversations were excruciating, no matter how brief. Our communication dwindled still more over the months that followed.

Meantime, we struggled. I grew up in fairly privileged circumstances, and although my adult life had never been anything close to affluent, I could usually keep my head above water. When I couldn’t, I could count on my family to help me. That safety net was appallingly absent now, coinciding with the most financially desperate time I’d ever known. I won’t dwell on those details here, but when I found myself choosing a box of pasta that cost 47**¢** instead of the brand I preferred, which cost 52**¢**, I realized that I’d come to a new place in my life. I felt scared and alone, with only Anna to rely on. No other help seemed forthcoming.

Did I pray? Oh, yes, of course I did. Talking to God was something I did all the time, and had done for years. Now that I was in the weeds, you bet I did. I used to find such comfort in the stillness of my mind. I saw it as God’s peace. Now, however, that reassuring quiet had become an ominous silence, with an outer deterioration to go with it. In August, I sold what gold jewelry I could bear to part with in order to pay rent. I held onto a few pieces, partly because I couldn’t bring myself to sell them—partly because I feared we might need them for September’s rent, or October’s.

At the end of that summer, I finally wrote a long letter to my mother. I tried to explain to her how I felt: about how much Anna meant to me, the pain I felt at being estranged from her, how I believed that we were not so far apart in our thinking as she might imagine. To this last point, I quoted John Shelby Spong, who at that time had become the one great hope I clung to. As an Episcopal bishop and an advocate of gay inclusion in the church, Spong seemed like the precious bridge between my mother and me that I’d been searching for.

The letter she sent in return shattered that notion. Among a great many other, more personal and more hurtful comments that I haven’t the heart to repeat, she wrote, “I would never heed anything that man had to say. He is on the verge of being excommunicated from the church.” To my pain at being separated from her: “I didn’t go anywhere. You did.”

And so began a period of about six months when we did not communicate with each other at all. It doesn’t seem like a very long stretch now, but at the time, as I anticipated never seeing or speaking with my family again in my lifetime, with no reconciliation in sight, it seemed literally to be forever.

I was still searching for some sort of religious endorsement. Even though I no longer hoped to bring my mother around, something in me wouldn’t give up. I didn’t believe in the literal infallibility of the Bible—I’d studied enough foreign language to realize that the translation problems alone were enough to invalidate that idea for me. In my mind, there was plenty in the Bible that a modern person with any sense simply could not take seriously. The same sections of Leviticus that everyone used to decry homosexuality contained prohibitions about eating shrimp and wearing cotton-blend fabric, and in support of slavery and putting rebellious children to death. So, it seemed that the Bible was meaningless as a universal and incontrovertible authority.

My experience of quoting Spong to my mother was a critical point in my understanding that church authorities were authorities only to those who chose to respect what they had to say. The Bible was written by human beings with imperfect understandings, and people like Spong were likewise only human. People like me, who quoted him, and people like my mother, who rejected him, were human as well. Who, then, should we heed? What, then, is authority?

What, indeed, is truth?

And with the pulling of this thread, my religion began to unravel. I began to be troubled by the basic unquestioned misogyny of religion as well as its homophobia. Plus, I couldn’t help but remember the many instances when I sought help or comfort from my church—from its leaders or its members—and they had let me down again and again and again in bewildering fashion. Once again, I had to face the fact that even intelligent, well-meaning people were nothing but fallible beings. And so, knowing that I could no longer rely on people, imperfect beings as they were, I was even more doubtful of organized religion, since it was only a collection of those same weak humans, often with a motive toward power and money besides.

And I came to question my whole idea of God. I did not intend to question it. I knew I could reject religion without rejecting God. I knew that I could accept people as flawed without rejecting God.

Or could I? The silence in response to my faltering prayers was utter. My dwindling resources, both tangible and spiritual at once, had reached the lowest point I’d ever known. It was plain that there was no hope or help on my horizon that I was not willing to create for myself.

My childhood image of the benevolent parent—the kindly white-bearded man on a huge throne—had never before entirely vanished. Now, with the ragged events of my life trailing behind me, with the deep feeling of separation from comfort or help in any direction, this concept didn’t ring true any more. Whatever God might be was unknowable. God might be present in some way within the great universe of our existence, but I no longer had any conviction of what form that might take, or what the concept of “God” might mean under the circumstances.

And so I lost my faith.

My religious viewpoint was now like an optical illusion, where first you see the young woman, and then you see the old one; first the vase, then the two profiles. Having once seen the other view, it is impossible not to see it. Now that you’re aware of its existence, at best, your mind only alternates between the two, neither being more dominant than the other. Having heard the terrible silence on the other side of the tranquil hush, I cannot stop being aware of it. I can see all the good in my life as coming from God, or I can see it as my own adjustment and hard work, coupled with pure dumb luck.

Perhaps other people have seen this dual image and have chosen to cling to one side and ignore the other. For me, neither side is trustworthy. In seeing both sides, I no longer know what I’m looking at when I view at the strange, mysterious whole. Yes, it has raised questions for me, questions that I’d love to have answered. Unfortunately, there’s no one who can tell me, with any certainty I’d find acceptable, what those answers are. I am seeking to accept that I will not know certainty in my life, but that I can only strive to accept uncertainty.

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It is many years later as I write this. I spent most of the day at my mother’s house yesterday, and we had a happy visit as we planned some of the details of my wedding to Anna in just a few weeks. Much has changed, much of which I never could have imagined back then, so very much to be grateful for. Things will never be the same again. But though I am thankful for the joy in that idea, I know that it, too, is a dual image. I can now see the great love my mother has for me, but I have also seen the human frailty and fear that caused her to reject me. She has apologized for it; I understand it, and I long ago forgave her. But I have seen the whole, and having seen, cannot unsee. I can never again fully rely on her better nature, never entirely forget that she’s only human, doing her best, and yet capable of falling short.

Likewise, God is unknowable for me. Having heard the dreadful silence as well as the reassuring hush, I can no longer fully place my trust in the unknown. I cannot say what God is, whether God is. One day, perhaps, I will know. But I’ve done all I can for now.

I’ve become comfortable with not knowing the answer.