

Memoir

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Preface

On October 12, 2002, I witnessed something extraordinary: the birth of my first son.

It's one of a select few moments in my life that leave me convinced in the existence of a loving God.

A Good Christian Boy

Los Angeles, 1972 - 1979

The year is 1975. I am three years old. It's a bright Sunday morning, I can see from the sunlit east window. I'm in the back bedroom of our small house. I'm with my parents; for now, it's just the three of us. They're both sitting in their respective La-Z-Boy recliner chairs, and I'm standing between them. We're holding hands, which, in my father's case, means I'm holding his index finger in my small fist. We're watching television: it's the Oral Roberts show. I recognize him by his distinctive swept-straight-back hairstyle and his style of speech which sounds so much like my parents. My parents' eyes are closed, as mine should be too, but I'm peeking. Oral Roberts is leading us in prayer. It's a calm, still, peaceful moment.

This tiny house in which we live is on Leland Street, in a peaceful seaside neighborhood in San Pedro, California, a small city in the metropolitan Los Angeles area. Outside, the air here feels thick and moist and smells briny. The Pacific Ocean is only a few miles away.

But in this same house, during this period of time, there is also something dark. I've been having a recurring nightmare of some kind of evil entity that wants to eat me. The nightmare is so terrifying it sends me running and crying to my parents' bedroom. My mother wakes. She rises and takes me to the living room. There she sits in her La-Z-Boy recliner chair and gathers me into her lap where she holds me, rocks me back and forth, and gently strokes my hair. She holds a hand on me and prays for me, and sings "Jesus Loves Me" and "Jesus Loves the Little Children." I know Jesus from my picture Bible. He has long dark hair with a dark beard and wears long flowing robes. He smiles at children who have gathered around him. This image suggests he might smile at me too, and this comforts me. I can't see him, I can almost feel him in the living room with us. Between this feeling of his presence and my mother's care, my terror subsides, and I feel calm and safe.

Finally, it is a bright sunny day in the first week of May. My grandmother ("Granny") has come to visit and the two of us are alone in the house. We're in the living room looking out its east window to the street where the sun is rising. We're waiting for my parents to come home from the hospital. Eventually our family station wagon pulls up to our house and comes to a stop. My mother slowly gets out of the car from the passenger side. She is holding something that fills her arms. My father joins her and they slowly come to the house. "Look, Jack," Granny says in her Texan drawl. "That's your sister." I'm thrilled to see the new baby.

These are my earliest memories.

They take me back to where I began: that tiny house in a neighborhood close to the ocean, where I came into the world and experienced my first sensations – my first foods and drinks; my first pleasures and pains; my first home, and my first travel beyond the home; my first culture, including my first toys and play, my first television shows and music. My first restaurants. It all began there.

And its imprints have lasted a lifetime. To this day, one of my favorite songs is “Love Will Keep Us Together” by Captain & Tennille. The smell of heavy, briny ocean air makes me feel good. I feel more at home in a big city than a rural setting, and in the few times since I’ve left that I’ve been back to Los Angeles, I’ve thought, “This is *home* ... but I could never live here again.”

I lived in Los Angeles for the first seven years of my life, and my various memories of that time are overwhelmingly fond. Most occurred in a house on a busy street – Duarte Road – in Pasadena, which was probably near where my father found a job and was near his relatives. In a city near us lived my father’s aunt Barbra and uncle Frank and their son, Kelly, who later went to seminary and church ministry. There also was my father’s grandmother Rena who was the oldest woman I’d ever met. She frightened me a little, but she was a peaceful woman. For those few years, we gathered together to celebrate holidays. We said grace over big meals, and afterwards my sister and I played while the adults discussed doctrine and theology, quoting Scripture all throughout. Our house had a large backyard with a large swing set. I remember swinging as high as I could, watching my sister sitting in the dirt - eating it. I remember playing my parents’ records - John Denver, Engelbert Humperdinck. I remember a wonderful Christmas with the house full of extended family. My mother looked beautiful in her black dress. I remember being trapped in the icebox. Heidi saved my life. I remember eating out at a nice restaurant with extended family. I enjoyed the taste of medium rare steak. I remember seeing *The Swarm*, *The Eyes of Laura Mars*, *Bambi*, *Star Wars*, and *Saturday Night Fever*. I remember Gummy coming to stay, and kicking Heidi, and me saying “Stop that!” and being chased around the house for my disrespect. I remember these early years with fondness. Los Angeles in the 1970s was a big and exciting place to be a child. Life was fun and interesting, and I felt I belonged, and that I was loved.

These years were the origin of my faith. At that age, faith is, like so many things, inherited. What one learns of God, and how to live in relation to this God, one learns from the family.

My earliest memories of faith are of faith practiced in family. We were a religious family. Faith was an important part of who we were. Before I was born, my parents had moved from Texas to Los Angeles to be near my father’s relatives (his aunt, uncle, and grandmother) who had deep roots in the Pentecostal church in California. They were faithful people. Several holidays we gathered together where we shared a big meal. We said grace over the meal, a huge home-cooked meal, after which my sister and I played while my parents and the other adults talked for hours, telling stories of people and places in the past, and of God who had “worked in their life” or who had “had other plans” for their life. They said phrases like, “Praise the Lord!” and were quick to quote Scripture. My parents didn’t belong to a church or any other organization; this family was their community.

At home, my parents modeled faith to my sister and me in two ways. One was prayer. My mother was quick to pray. When my sister and I were sick, she laid her hands on us and prayed for physical healing; and when we had nightmares, she would pray for God to calm us. The other aspect of faith was discipline. Both parents were religious in their rationale for spanking us kids with a leather belt: "Spare the rod, spoil the child." We believed in God, and by this we meant *a* God, *a* Being, who created us and loved us but would punish us for disobedience. We were followers of His Only Son Jesus Christ.

I don't remember the details of my young faith. I don't remember my own prayers or my imagery of God. I probably accepted what I was taught of an all-knowing, all-powerful God, personified in Jesus, who loved but wanted obedience. I probably imagined God as a parent who was loving but would punish my disobedience.

Albuquerque, 1979-1982

In 1979, when I was seven years old, we left Los Angeles and moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico. My father had gotten a good job there as an assistant pro at a country club. My father was an ambitious man, and for him, this was a big step up in his career.

And it was a step up for us four. My father's job at the country club was prestigious and probably came with a decent salary that bought us a comparatively higher standard living than we had had in Los Angeles. We bought what was for us a large house in a prestigious neighborhood, Sandia Heights, in the foothills of the Sandia Mountain Range to the east of the city. In this house, I had my own room, and my sister hers, and from its perch on a sloping hill, the house had a breathtaking view of the city to the west. The house also enjoyed some distance from neighboring houses, surrounded nearly on all sides by undeveloped mesa where I enjoyed playing, cautioned by my mother to look for snakes. From this house I most enjoyed seeing the annual hot air balloon festival when it seemed the sky filled with colorful balloons which, from a distance, looked like candies.

For me, it was a difficult move. I was in the first grade and had become smitten with a girl in my class. I don't remember her name or what I saw in her, but leaving her broke my heart and cast a pall over the move.

Our Albuquerque years were hard. It was a difficult time for my parents. They seemed to fight all the time--terrible fights with shouting and screaming and crying and violence to property. My father worked long hours and was often in a bad mood. There were parties with drinking, and I didn't like how my father acted after he had been drinking. Nor did my mother. My mother and grandmother did not get along, and my mother also had problems with Granny and Grandad.

My memories of faith over this time are dim. We did not pray over meals. We went to church on some Sundays. There my parents went into the sanctuary while my sister and I went to Sunday school. Whatever faith we practiced as a family was probably my mother's doing.

By this age I had formed an affinity for Jesus. He was a friend. When I was eight years old, I saw Robert Powell's portrayal of Jesus in Franco Zeffirelli's miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth*. This made a powerful impression on me. At recess, a fellow Christian friend in my class and I would re-enact key scenes from the movie. (He always played Jesus while I played Pontius Pilate.) To this day, when I picture Jesus, I see Robert Powell.

We left under difficult circumstances. My father lost his job suddenly, and this hit him hard. There were days when he spent long hours in bed, and once, when he and my sister and I were out walking in the neighborhood, and he was carrying my sister, I heard him crying. For a time he searched for a new job, and he found the perfect position as the Head Pro at a city golf course in Phoenix. Things were looking up. When we left, once again leaving was hard for me, because I had made friends and liked my school and become smitten with a girl.

Phoenix, 1982-1995

I took it on faith that Jesus "died for our sins" so that we could go to heaven and not hell, a place of eternal conscious torment.

Our home, like most Evangelical homes, was a biblical home. We saw the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. It was to be interpreted literally with a plain reading. The Bible was the authority. All this was taken for granted. Surely there was some verse that we could lift out of context to apply to our own needs. We went to churches and watched religious television that reinforced this. With no exposure to other Christian traditions or hermeneutics, we really had no reason to question it. I never wondered where the Bible actually came from.

Prophecy was a part of my experience. My mother was an avid viewer of religious television, particularly Trinity Broadcasting Network with Paul and Jan Crouch where Hal Lindsey was a regular guest and offered his latest prophecies based on current events. I lived with the hope of being swept up in the Rapture and the fear of being left behind to go through the Tribulation. I was also afraid of being annihilated at any time by nuclear war with the Russians.

From the sixth grade through half of seventh, I attended a private Evangelical school where I had many difficult times with peers. In my science class I learned about creation and evolution and in my history class I learned about dispensationalism. From seventh grade through half of ninth, I was home-schooled. When I entered high school, I found that I excelled academically but was very socially deficient.

Looking back on these years, I had the kind of faith I was taught to have: a healthy reverence and respect for the Almighty Father and a "personal relationship with Jesus." I prayed with some frequency. I believed as a historical fact everything found in the Bible and viewed every commandment and exhortation in it as binding to all people worldwide throughout all of human history. I believed that Jesus "died for my sins" and that the point of Christianity was to go to heaven and not hell. I hoped to be swept up in the Rapture and feared being left behind for the Tribulation. I believed in a supernatural realm of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, angels,

demons, and Satan which actively influence human thoughts, emotions, attitudes, behavior, and thus human history, and that history was heading nowhere good. In these respects, fear was a very important part of my faith. The God in which I believed was a god who wanted obedience and would severely judge those who disobeyed. Above all else, God was a god of judgment.

I grew up in a world oriented toward salvation. There were two kinds of people in the world: the saved and the damned. And for all the scorn my family had toward Catholics for “rituals”, what separated the saved from the damned in our world was one ritual: the Sinner’s Prayer.

By this measure I was “saved” more times growing up than I can remember. The one I most remember was at a high school winter camp. A group of us high school kids from our church retreated to a camp in the mountains where we slept in cabins and spent much of our time playing games, singing songs in worship, and hearing sermons. On our final night, the youth pastor gave a compelling sermon, and this was followed by a period of quiet music and a pastor’s voice gently inviting us to “give our lives once more to Jesus,” especially as repentance from some sin. It worked on me. The sin about which I felt particularly guilty was a rock album: Rush, Moving Pictures. Moved by the music and wracked with guilt, I rose from my spot in the crowd and tiptoed my way to the side where one of several youth pastors was waiting to receive wayward young souls. When I sobbed my “confession” of listening to Satanic rock music and he helped me through a prayer of repentance, the look on his face gave me the distinct sense that he was working very hard to conceal his amusement.

This memory attests to my teenage faith. I truly believed that I had sinned, that I had gone against what God wanted of me. But I also truly believed that God forgave sin, and that from wherever I had gone, I could come back to Jesus.

Deconstruction

By my high school years, a number of things happened that caused me to question the faith I was taught.

The first was a difficult conversation about faith between my parents and me. One night we as a family were driving home from a vacation. My father and I were sitting up front and began to engage me in conversation about faith, raising to my awareness some of his musings and questions about various aspects of doctrine. My mother would have none of it. She lambasted my father for “corrupting” my faith and vigorously defended the orthodox positions on the matters we were discussing. This bothered me. Something seemed wrong with a faith so easily threatened by a few good questions and deductive thinking.

The second was a conflict with my father over evolution. That first year I was taking a speech communication course, and for my required speech I decided on an argumentative speech on creation over evolution. The night before my speech, I shared the speech with my father along with reservations about its merit or how it would go over with my peers. My father got angry

and demanded that I deliver the speech persuasively and leave no listener unconvinced. This upset me on multiple levels. Of course no teenager appreciates a heavy hand, but this went deeper. To me, the speech was a stupid assignment with the stakes being my image among my peers whom I was trying to impress. To my father, the task was evangelical; to him, the beauty and majesty of Creation were (and probably had been and will be) incontrovertible evidence of the Creator that demands a verdict, and perhaps he never had the time, interest, or intellectual humility to go beyond the simplistic understanding of evolution science. While I agreed, what bothered me was the seemingly unnecessarily heavy hand. A so-called faith that needed a raised voice and authoritarianism seemed very brittle and unattractive.

The third was my first and only deliberate effort at evangelism. That year I became friends with a Jewish boy my age who was not very popular. One day I took him aside to tell him about Jesus and invite him to say the Sinner's Prayer. In response, he laughed and proceeded to give a very lengthy yet polite defense of his faith and rejection of Christianity. I found it convincing. He was a generous and virtuous person of clearly deep faith in God and love for his tradition. That he declined to give his life to Jesus seemed to me a technicality and hardly worth an eternity of conscious torment.

The fourth was a conflict with my parents on racism. My junior year in high school, I saw a documentary series, *Eyes on the Prize*, that showed me, for the first time, the horrors of racism and the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement. I was horrified by what I saw--images of black Americans being sprayed with water, beaten with sticks and clubs, and lynched. When I shared this with my mother, what I saw in her was an utter lack of affect. When I later brought my concerns to my father, his response was the same. Neither racism nor any other social justice issue concerned--or, as far as I could remember, had ever concerned--my parents. Or, for that matter, any church we had ever attended, any sermon we had ever heard on televangelism. My parents were more interested in heaven than earth.

This troubled me deeply. Here, it seemed, was the first expression of my own conscience screaming that something was wrong, that surely Christians should be part of the solution rather than bury their heads in the sand. But my parents, my church, the entire Christian world, rather than confirm and affirm my stirring of conscience, seemed silent on the issue. It became increasingly clear that my parents held to and practiced a Christian faith that no longer seemed credible or attractive to me.

The End of the World

Phoenix, AZ, 1982-1995

Sometime close to 1982, when I was 10 years old, we moved to Phoenix, Arizona. My father landed a job as the Head Professional at a city golf course in Phoenix. We moved a few times.

These were my adolescent and teenage years. This was a time of difficult growing and transition for me. I have more than a few painful memories of these years. This was also a time of intensive religious formation for me.

My father's midlife crisis

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Around the block from my home in Scottsdale was a Presbyterian church. I had two girlfriends from high school who attended this church. Some time in my early college years, I decided to try it.

There were several things I liked about. I liked the liturgy. It followed a format and it seemed traditional. I liked the sermons. I liked the minister. I liked the focus on social justice.

I started attending on my own. I was part of a Twenties group that met after the main service to do a more in-depth Bible study. I enjoyed being part of the 20s group. I don't remember much about what was discussed but I enjoyed being part of it. Here was a church that was not afraid of education and critical thinking.

Blacksburg

1 The Path to Rome

THE PATH TO ROME

Early attractions

The Way of St. James

RCIA

Where I am Now

References