

#1

I guess this is about faith and free will.

I am a wanderer, never satiated in one place. My mind is noisy, a landscape of chaos and questions. My feet, so callused from walking (metaphorically, of course; my literal feet are quite soft because I apply lotion every night), carry me; to church, school, my childhood home in Orange County, a friend's house. I've tried many things to reach a state of peace and equilibrium: indulging in a secular lifestyle, playing tennis, completing puzzles, journaling, reading.

This sounds like a build up to a mind-blowing anecdote. Sorry—nothing crazy happened to me. Yes, I did end up finding my savior and it (or He..) was right under my nose. No miracle. No wild and crazy “signs.” No burning bush. No angels. But, in a strange paradox, religion, something that is seen as constricting and rigid, delivered the true freedom and peace I was looking for.

I grew up in a churchgoing family, attending services almost every Friday and Sunday. Unbeknownst to me, the fear that settling for this familiar lifestyle would result in me missing out on other aspects of life festered in me. I blame this on the fact that I never got to actually choose my own religion—my church never seemed like a choice. Because it was never a choice, the engaged curiosity and enthusiasm that comes with choosing your own spiritual path never came to me.

When free will became a factor in my spiritual journey, it stopped being about “settling” and started to be more about digging for deeper connections, more intimacy, and the realization that I had been harboring a shallow connection with God for so long. No, I didn't change religions or anything radical like that. I'm still a plain old Christian. But something did change in the way I viewed my faith. What felt obligatory because of how I was raised, was becoming something I *wanted* to commit to, resulting in my second baptism.

Life got harder after I had myself re-baptized; as it turns out, it's harder than it seems to “be in the world, but not of the world” as the Gospel of John suggests. It doesn't matter if it's big stuff or small stuff—whether it means dedicating half of my week to church or committing to being a teen female who doesn't gossip (spoiler: not easy). Full disclosure: I used to sorta-kinda cheat on quizzes in elementary school. And you know what? I was good at it. Now I've realized that although I possess the brain to successfully cheat without getting caught (unlike some), it's just not worth it: it's unethical, it's not fair to others who actually studied, I lose out on a learning opportunity, and I just don't feel good at the end of the day. More studying? Yes, but no regret.

My generation preaches acceptance and autonomy: do, be, and say whatever you want! But, is it really acceptable if you're doing something that the majority thinks is wrong? Is it really free will if you are limited to certain things and beliefs? There is so much paradox in the idea of “faith,” or “will,” for that matter. What do we truly control? Not much. Ourselves, on a good day. I do believe that as the earth ages, the people on it become more accepting and liberal. However, it's wrong to assume that the restricting line has disappeared—it has expanded, but it's still there.

This might sound counterintuitive, but for me, committing to a faith was an epic act of will power. Not that my family was antagonistic; they weren't. Not that I bailed to join a cult in Bhutan; I didn't. For me, this re-baptism, on my own terms and in my own timing, was an expression of my God-given free will. It just so happened I used it to recommit to a Christian path.