Otherwise Known as Attempting Christianity

Rebecca Evans

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Honors Thesis

OTHERWISE KNOWN AS ATTEMPTING CHRISTIANITY

by
Rebecca Evans

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

English Department
Brigham Young University
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This thesis examines the relationship between the pursuit of spiritual principles and the genre of the essay. The three essays are accounts of the author’s experiences with faith, hope, and charity.

The introduction provides a thorough explanation for the motivations, limitations, and goals of the project. It also helps to highlight the reasons why the essay genre was the most suitable style for this thesis.

The first essay, “Be Believing” discusses the role of faith in book censorship. The second piece, “Hope of Israel” explores how the average person can maintain hope in a world full of serious conflicts. Inspiration for this essay came from the author’s experience on an international study abroad program. The final essay, “Honor Thy Father,” depicts an important phone call between a father and a daughter. Then it explores the relationship between charity and forgiveness.
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To Joey Franklin, Kerry Muhlestein, and John Talbot: It has been an honor to have the three of you guiding me on this project. Your insights and questions have pushed me to rethink my conclusions, examine my assumptions, and recognize my weaknesses. These essays have been transformed by your influence.

To Laura Bennett: Thank you for reading through countless drafts with a fine-toothed comb. Without you, these essays would be riddled with typos and incomplete ideas. Thank you for pushing me to be better, and for making sure that I laugh at least once per day.

To my Mama: You have heard more about these essays than any human being should have to. You answered every time I called. You encouraged me when I was frustrated. You listened to me when I cried over this project. I love you all the way around the world and back again.
# Table of Contents

Title and Signature Page ........................................................................................................ i  
Abstract ................................................................................................................................ iii  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................... v  
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................. vii

*Honors Thesis*

Inspiration from the Feast of Tabernacles: A Critical Introduction ...................................... 8  
Be Believing .......................................................................................................................... 19  
Hope of Israel ....................................................................................................................... 32  
Honor Thy Father ............................................................................................................... 44

Works Cited ......................................................................................................................... 59
Inspiration from the Feast of Tabernacles: A Critical Introduction

There is something you should know before we continue any further. I really enjoy the New Testament. I don’t tell you this to give an impression that “I’m-such-a-holy-person-because-I-read-the-Bible-for-fun.” Nor am I trying to say, “Please-compliment-my-massive-intellect-because-I-read-Luke-instead-of-James-Patterson.” I simply mean that reading the New Testament tickles my brain. I love the way the stories stay the same, but the meaning changes over time. Or rather, the way I apply the meaning evolves with time and experience. It’s exciting to feel like I’ve uncovered the one true meaning, only to revisit the same story later and realize that my scope was far too limited. I love the moments when I see how a teaching applies in new, seemingly unrelated context. For some reason, which I haven’t fully unpacked yet, this happens most often when I am reading the New Testament, as opposed to any other religious text. Maybe it’s the parables. I love a good parable.

One poignant example of a set story with an evolving application is John 7. This chapter takes place in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles—occurring sometime in the bridge between September and October. In Judaic tradition, “feasts were both commemorative and instructive occasions” (Gardner 110). This particular celebration occurred at the temple and lasted for eight days. It commemorated the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, and offered instruction about the coming Messiah. The festivities included animal sacrifices, a water-pouring ceremony, and lighting giant lampstands. Ryan Gardner, a writer for religious curriculum for the Latter-day Saints, speculates that
during this particular Feast of Tabernacles, “many Israelites…seem to have forgotten the true purpose and meaning of these sacrifices, which was to point them toward the Messiah” (Gardner 112). This claim is substantiated by the fact that Jesus arrived at the feast and was met with more doubt than recognition from his fellow attendees. Dr. Frances J. Moloney offers further insight on this interpretation through an analysis of John 7:11 in the original Greek. The verse indicates that a certain group among the Jews was seeking Jesus out at this Feast. However, lest we misinterpret the motivation of seeking, Moloney shows that the Greek text uses the verb ἐζήτουν which “indicates their seeking him so that they might put [Jesus] to death” (Moloney 203). It was amid this festive and hostile scene that Jesus offered a simple formula for uncovering spiritual truths. According to the King James Version, Jesus taught, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17).

If any man will do, then he will know. This suggests that spiritual knowledge is dependent on taking actions. Jesus suggests that a person cannot simply stumble upon a lasting testimony of the Divine, nor can he or she inherit religious convictions from well-meaning acquaintances. There can be no spiritual arrival without a preemptive spiritual pursuit. Jesus even specifies that this is a universal process when he says, “If any man will do…he shall know.” This interpretation is supported by Joseph Longking, who wrote a Sunday School manual for the Methodist and Episcopal Church in 1842. Longking concluded, “That to do his will…is to pursue a course of action. Whosoever sincerely desires to do thus shall be instructed of God in the truths of Christ’s doctrine” (Longking 14).
The ideas in John 7 took on a new application once I realized that the same spiritual formula of doing before knowing plays an important role in the writing of personal essays. Though the term “essay” has become synonymous with defending an argument in a five-paragraph structure, Philip Lopate, the editor for the popular anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*, highlights how the essay mirrors Jesus’ teaching from John 7:17. Lopate writes, “The original, pristine meaning of the word [essay], comes from the French verb *essayer*, meaning to attempt, to try, to leap experimentally into the unknown” (Lopate 128). Just as a spiritual pursuit foreshadows spiritual understanding, Lopate says that an essayist must abandon their comfort zones before they can ever reach new conclusions. The only way to forge new ground of understanding is to think and write your way into it. As the British essayist Paul Graham puts it, “In a real essay, you don’t take a position and defend it. You notice a door that’s ajar, and you open it and walk in to see what’s inside…it is something you write to try to figure something out” (Graham). Ultimately, beyond any metrics of tone, style or creativity, the goal of the essay is to document a procession of actions taken to understand a subject—even if the “action taken” is merely the writing of the essay itself. Though the essayist may never fully comprehend her subject, her efforts to explore the mind and “acquire substance” gives the essay merit (Franzen xviii).

One of the most meaningful quotes I stumbled upon was written by Brian Doyle, a man who has been an inspirational, spiritual essayist for me. He described the essay as “a grapple, a cheerfully desperate attempt to drape words on thoughts and emotions mostly too vast for words” (Doyle xi). This quote, among many others, inspired the idea for this project. I decided that, despite my lack of experience with creative writing, I
wanted to grapple with spiritual concepts which I knew I didn’t fully understand. Rather than trying to understand the concepts from a solely scholastic base, I wanted to try and wrestle with concepts in order to come to a conclusion on how these attributes apply in my daily life. Clearly, there were a lot of elements of Christianity that I could have chosen from, but I ended up settling on the triad presented by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13—faith, hope, and charity.

My interest in pursuing these topics, over others, started at a young age. I grew up with a mother who was a very faithful, happy Catholic, and with a father who was a very loud and proud Protestant. I grew up bouncing between churches and when I was seventeen, I chose to become a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Imagine it: a Catholic, a Protestant, and a Mormon all living under one roof. That sounds like the beginning of a bad joke, but it was our reality. Though all of us had a love for Jesus, a respect for God, and a belief in the Bible, it was remarkable to see how each of us carried different interpretations about faith, hope, and charity.

One memorable example of our differing opinions revealed itself over a conversation about the role of faith in “seeds and harvests.” But first, a bit of background. For many years, my dad had started his mornings by taking long pulls of black coffee while listening to sermons from televangelists. I can no longer remember which televangelist had been asking for seed offerings—it could have been Joel Osteen, Ruth Myers, Jimmy Swaggart, or maybe T.D. Jakes—but earlier that day, my dad decided to respond to this request to plant a “seed” of $500 in the foundation to their ministry, and then wait for God to grow a “harvest” for him. The idea being that God would reward the act of faith by then multiplying the blessings for the giver. For Dad, this request didn’t
seem odd; it perfectly aligned with his definition of faith. From his perspective, faith was about proving something to God. It always seemed, to me, like faith had less to do with pure belief and more to do with determination to do an impossible task. Our family certainly didn’t have an extra $500 collecting dust in a vault, and to my ears this prospect didn’t sound anything like faith. It just sounded like a scheme to use God to prey on vulnerable people looking for miracles. How odd that Dad had been one of the fundamental teachers in my spirituality, yet somehow, we developed such different ideas about it. We never really dealt with our differences of belief. Dad believed in his definition of faith, while I believed in mine. I looked back on this experience as I began this project and I wondered if there were ways both of us were right. Or even more interestingly, in which ways both of us were wrong. What could I have learned about faith from my dad, if I hadn’t just accepted that we had an irreconcilable difference of opinion? Even if I never agreed with him, would I have discovered something new if I had entertained his notions? Probably.

Another memorable difference of opinion happened many years later. I was visiting my parents over Christmas break, unaware that they would be divorced by the next major holiday. Somehow the conversation began circling our different beliefs about the afterlife. Mom expressed a traditional Catholic belief in heaven, hell, and purgatory. Dad rolled his eyes so hard I thought he might pull something. He then emphatically explained that there was nothing in the Bible to suggest that purgatory existed. Needless to say, neither of them changed their minds through the course of the conversation. Later I approached each of them separately to try and understand their beliefs, and I realized that both of their beliefs stemmed from the same source. For Dad, who cherished the idea
spoken about in John 3:16, that God sent His Son to die, and if we believed on Him then
eternal life was an automatic inheritance. I remember him saying, “And if you get to the end and never accepted the Son, then you’re out of luck. You had your chance, now you’ve got to pay the consequences.” He found a belief in purgatory to be so abhorrent because it undercut some of his beliefs about the fundamental nature of God. Whereas Mom believed that purgatory showed God’s infinite mercy and charity. To her, the idea that a soul wasn’t automatically damned but could be saved gradually proved that God was merciful, charitable, and perfect. Both had a fundamental belief in God’s love, yet vehemently disagreed about the scope, limitations, and manifestations of that love.

Thinking back on how passionately they disagreed, perhaps I shouldn’t have been so surprised when they divorced a few months later.

I share these excerpts not to suggest that my experience is indicative for all Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons. I know that my two parents cannot be considered representatives of entire sections of Christianity (nor would they want to be), but they were my examples for applying Christianity for large portions of my life. Like Scott Russell Sanders, “I drew unwittingly on the passions of my parents” (Sanders 141). I now believe that the bedrock foundation of my spiritual beliefs was influenced by my parents more deeply than I realized. As I thought about their differences in belief about faith, hope, and charity, I was reminded of a quote by Joseph Smith. As he grew up in a community full of different sects of Christianity, he expressed something I felt at many points in my life, “In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?” (Smith).
My answer was the essay. I began this project out of a desire to write and explore working definitions of faith, hope, and charity. As I tried to seek opportunities to learn about these virtues, I realized that many unrelated topics were helping forge spiritual insights. For example, I had not anticipated that finding a controversial library book would teach me about faith. Nor did I know that an elevator ride could offer insights about hope. Finally, a seemingly unimportant conversation with my dad sparked a lengthy discourse on charity. Why was I able to make these connections? Partially because I was on the lookout for things to write about. Additionally, these connections came because I knew I was not only writing for my own amusement, I was trying to make connections that could be read by others. Though this added some additional pressure and inspired many late-night trips to the grocery store for Ben & Jerry’s and Dr. Pepper, I am ultimately grateful for it because during the writing and revision process I experienced something that Paul Graham described in “The Age of the Essay”, “Just as inviting people over forces you to clean up your apartment, writing something that other people will read forces you to think well” (Graham).

However, before I let you read the aforementioned essays, there are some things we need to get out of the way. One fact that you deserve to know is that there are many essayists who are better at this than I am. Brian Doyle and Scott Russel Sanders are some of my favorites in this category. I admire the way that they both make the mundane meaningful, the way they flirt with language, and the way they craft the essay to feel like you’re having a conversation with an old friend. My favorite example of this comes from Brian Doyle’s essay “A Prayer for Pete.” It’s a short piece that explores the hopelessness Doyle felt after hearing the news of a terminal diagnosis for his young friend, Pete. He
wonders if praying for Pete will do any good at all. While he quickly accepts that his prayers won’t change the outcome of Pete’s diagnosis, Doyle prays anyway. He writes of the experience, “I believe with all my heart that [the prayers] mattered because I was moved to make them. I believe that the mysterious sudden impulse to pray is the prayer, and that the words we use for prayer are only envelopes in which to mail pain and joy…it is the urge that matters” (Doyle 172). This carefully crafted conversational tone allows Doyle to discuss spiritual topics without ever making the reader feel like they are in the middle of a sermon.

After you have accepted the fact that I have yet to write something so profoundly simple and beautiful as Doyle, you deserve to know that there are also many theologians who know more about faith, hope, and charity than I probably ever will. Though, in an effort to overcome this inadequacy, I have tried to rely on the work of scholars to understand the context of the Good Samaritan parable, the impact of the Law of Moses upon the woman with the issue of blood, and the information based on the Feast of Tabernacles featured in this introduction. I make no claims at expertise. I only claim to be a Christian who consistently falls short of being faithful, hopeful, and charitable. I only claim that I want to be better. When it comes to matters of discipleship, perhaps an earnest desire to improve is more helpful than an archive of scholarly knowledge. Then again, someone without a scholarly base would have no idea if this was actually true, would they?

So, after you’ve heard that I am not a prolific essayist nor a brilliant theologian, you may be asking yourself why you should read my essays. Where does their merit come from?
To answer this, I think it is best to end where we began: The New Testament. From a spiritual perspective, there is a precedent for ordinary people taking action, arriving at profound spiritual revelations, and subsequently sharing their experience with others. One lovely example of this process is the apostle Peter. While he was once a simple Galilean fisherman with no other known credentials, he put down his nets and followed Christ all over Galilee and Jerusalem. As he explored the potential of Christ’s divinity, he took action, and subsequently came to the most important realization that any Christian can come to: “Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). This example from Peter’s life proves that a person doesn’t necessarily need a comprehensive doctrinal education or an upcoming book deal to validate their spiritual experiences (though I’m sure a doctrinal education wouldn’t hurt).

Additionally, from an essayist’s perspective, an essay doesn’t have to be flawless in order to have merit. In the introduction to The Art of the Personal Essay, Philip Lopate describes the true purpose of essaying. He says, “The trick is to realize that one is not important, except insofar as one’s example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish” (Lopate xxxii). At the heart of this project, there is a sincere effort to truthfully expose my successes and failures with faith, hope, and charity. Not editing my faults has been difficult, but my shortcomings remain in each essay to hopefully make others feel less isolated in their imperfect efforts. It would not be a true depiction of learning to apply spiritual principles without a few hiccups along the way.

These essays are not perfect. They are not finished. I suspect I will be editing them, changing them, revisiting them for many years to come. The point is not perfection
in scholarship or rhetoric. The point of this collection is to reflect a process of acting, considering, pondering, and to reveal how those efforts led to knowledge. Hopefully, my attempts at being a good Christian help others feel less isolated in their pursuit of the Divine.
“I am not indifferent, and in the very suffering religious thoughts sometimes console me a great deal.”

-Vincent Van Gogh
Be Believing

The Harold B. Lee Library, located on the campus of Brigham Young University, has over ninety-eight miles of shelving and contains more than six million items. This is pretty remarkable considering that in 1876 the library was just a humble collection of a few hundred books at Brigham Young Academy. In less than 150 years, the library’s catalog expanded so rapidly that it’s not surprising that we have some odd items in the collection. Statistically speaking, when you have millions of books in one location, you are bound to get some weird ones.

My appreciation for the peculiar contributions to the Harold B. Lee Library has grown since I started working there in August of 2017. I’m a shelver, which means I have the sacred duty to return books to their proper place. Before we continue, it may be helpful to mention that shelvers tend to be a bit eccentric about their employment. You’ll soon find that I am no exception.

As a shelver, I spend a lot of time staring at the spines of books. Some of the most intriguing titles that I’ve stumbled across include: If You’re Mad, Spit; The Psychic Mafia, The Romance and History of Shoes, That Damn Y; Polygamy, Prostitutes, and Death; and my personal favorite: The Power of Prayer on Plants. These titles simultaneously tell me everything and nothing about the books. Either way, I’m interested.

A few months ago, I was gathering abandoned books from study tables and computer desks when I stumbled across the strangest book yet. Let me begin by saying: there was nothing remarkable about it at first glance. There was no title on the front
cover, and the printing on the binding had faded. The overall wear on the book suggested that it came into the library catalog around the time people were sporting beards and bell bottoms throughout mainstream America.

When I initially glanced at the binding, it looked like the title read as *The Unhappy Days*. I thought it must be a book about depression. That particular section of the library holds many books about mental illness and self-help, so it didn’t seem like anything too unique. However, as I turned the book over in my hands, I noticed a pink Post-It poking out of the top.

To a normal human being, this Post-It is an irrelevant afterthought. It isn’t hurting anything and doesn’t deserve a lot of time and attention. This is not the case for a shelver. When I was initially hired, I was trained to treat additional paper left in books as a malignant force of evil. No one had elaborated on why, but we were given a strict commission to never re-shelve a book with added papers still inside of it. After some diligent research off the clock, ahem…Googling, I found a manual entitled *Damaged Books*. It was published by the British Library Preservation Advisory Centre, and it helped me understand the reasons why library employees felt such disdain for the additional papers. The Advisory Centre taught that “inserting slips of paper to mark [pages] but not removing them after use causes chemical damage to [pages] unless slips are acid-free and lignin-free.” Additionally, leaving paper in books introduces more dirt into the pages of the books “causing staining and increased risk of mould/insects.” Ultimately, leaving paper in books “leads to distortion of book structure.” So just to recap, what is a simply inoffensive Post-It note to a regular human being, is—to a library
shelver—the beginning of book death. Knowing this, I, naturally, went to remove the offending Post-It, just as any decent shelver would.

To my surprise, the Post-It wasn’t just a left-over tab from a student looking to locate a quote for a paper. Instead, it was leaving a message for the library. The Post-It read, “Why do we even still have outdated books like this? Definitely good for a laugh.”

Good for a laugh, I wondered, isn’t this a book about depression?

I began to inspect the book more closely. As I looked at the spine again, I realized that I had misread the title. Instead of being about *The Unhappy Days*, the book was actually called *The Unhappy Gays*. Assuming the book couldn’t possibly be about what it sounded like it was about, I opened the front cover. There in bold, black letters came the corroborating evidence on the title page: *The Unhappy Gays: What Everyone Should Know About Homosexuality* by Tim LaHaye, published in 1978. Side note: if the author’s name sounds vaguely familiar, then perhaps you have also encountered the wildly successful sixteen-book *Left Behind* series which he co-wrote with Jerry B. Jenkins to help Christians prepare for the rapture.

As I looked down at *The Unhappy Gays*, I knew I should re-shelve the book. I was on the clock, so I should have been responsible, gone back to work, and moved on with my life. But then I thought, what’s the point of working in a library if you don’t take time to indulge in the desire to open a book? As I started skimming, I had the naïve thought that I would only take a minute. Clearly, I have yet to learn that I possess very little willpower when it comes to closing books.

I’ve included a sample of some of the most “interesting” passages from LaHaye’s book:
Page twenty-two: “Homosexuals think differently than straights, they act differently… I’ve seen them in action, and I can assure you—it’s a different world.”

Page thirty-one: “It is not uncommon for a homosexual to ‘have sex’ with as many as 2,000 different people in a lifetime.”

Page thirty-two: “Homosexuals never experience that soul-satisfying oneness with another human being.”

Page forty-two: “Not every alcoholic is a homosexual, but every homosexual is an alcoholic.”

Page fifty-one: “Many homosexuals are hostile at police ‘for infringing on their rights,’ at psychiatrists for calling them ‘mentally ill,’ at the church for labeling them ‘sinners,’ or at straights for calling them ‘perverts’ or ‘deviates.’ If they do not learn to cope with their open or suppressed hostility toward all who oppose or disapprove of them, they will remain in a state of constant discontent.”

Page 154: “Prohibiting [homosexuals] from teaching school is not persecuting them; is it protecting our children. If they wish to teach school, they have three alternatives: 1. Stop being homosexual—that is their choice. 2. Organize a school for homosexuals taught by homosexuals and paid for by homosexuals and their supporters. 3. Pass legislations which will enable them to maintain their perverted lifestyle while teaching children produced by homosexuals.”

Page 196: “If the 1977 version of the ‘Gay Rights’ legislation introduced into Congress earlier this year by the present mayor of New York is passed… you will not be able to refuse to rent your home to mating
homosexuals, even if your straight children are being raised next door. Straight employers will not be able to hire only straights; that freedom will be gone.”

*Page 197:* “When all job discrimination for homosexuality is removed...teachers can be expected to brainwash our children with the ‘blessing’ of the unhappy gay life. Misery loves company, and you can expect homosexual teachers single-handedly to double the homosexual community within ten years.”

I couldn’t believe what I was reading. With each new quote I read, I found myself turning my back to patrons until I was nose to nose with a neighboring wall. I was more shocked by the rhetoric and sentiments in this book than I was when I uncovered a *Playboy* tucked inside of a library book on the third floor (although I suppose that is a story for another time). Then, as it usually does for me, my shock morphed into anger. What was BYU thinking, keeping a book like this in the library?! Independent of the conservative politics or religious beliefs about homosexuality that abound at BYU, I was furious that my university kept a book full of faulty science, outdated statistics, and hateful language meant to ignite homophobia and prejudice. It felt like the book stood for the opposite of everything that should be in a university library.

For a small moment, I was overcome with a sense of vigilante justice and thought about throwing the book away. After my experience of discretely disposing of the *Playboy*, I knew exactly which trashcan I could toss it into without any patrons seeing. However, the closer I got to the infamous trashcan, the more I hesitated. As an English
major, I have always been a vocal opponent against censorship and book banning. I have adamantly criticized school boards and superintendents who have banned novels, poems, and plays on the belief that their content is harmful (usually after only reading one compromising page). I mean really, who could ban *To Kill a Mockingbird*? In every argument about censorship in schools, I have loudly quoted *A Clash of Kings* where George R.R. Martin writes, “When you tear out a man’s tongue, you are not proving him a liar, you’re only telling the world that you fear what he might say.” Though a few months after this event, I realized that we’re usually more afraid of what people will do once they’ve heard him, instead of what he actually says.

I digress.

In that moment where I wrestled with the idea of trashing *The Unhappy Gays*, that quote by Martin came back to haunt me. Symbolically, I did want to rip out LaHaye's tongue by getting rid of his book, and it was entirely because I feared the impact of his words on others.

If I threw *The Unhappy Gays* away, I would have to accept some new truths about myself. I would have to accept that I am a hypocrite, who only opposes censorship when it is coming for a book that I think has merit. Or I could put *The Unhappy Gays* back on the shelf and allow another patron to find it. I couldn’t decide which would make me feel worse (clearly, neither option was going to make me feel good). If I left the book in the library and someone came along after me, read it, and believed everything that LaHaye wrote about how gay people were a threat to children and greater society, would that somehow be my fault? What if this book convinced someone to hate all gay people?
Could I live with that? I had to decide: would it be better to leave that opportunity sitting on a shelf or to throw out my principles alongside the book?

Eventually, I decided on a compromise…of sorts. Instead of throwing the book away, I schemed to tuck it behind books in a random section of the library. Technically, the book would still be *in* the library but would be impossible to find. Especially if I tucked it behind some of the books on a random top shelf near the water fountain. Trust me, I have dusted those shelves, and I can declare with absolute certainty that no one is looking behind those books.

I realize that, in the eyes of some, my behavior may have been over-dramatic. After all, the book has been in the catalog since 1998, and there has yet to be a BYU Militia against homosexuals. It’s not like this book is in high demand or is constantly being checked out (though it was checked out three times between November 29th and December 20th of 2017). It’s one book of millions at the Harold B. Lee Library. Yet, leaving those ideas on the shelf without knowing what kind of impact they would have was very difficult for me. Though it probably meant nothing in the grand scheme of humanity, it felt like hiding the book was the best solution at the time.

As I went to find the perfect shelf to entomb LaHaye’s book, I started scanning the books on various top shelves. I was looking for shelves with books that seemed especially uninteresting. My skimming led me to a top shelf, three rows after the water fountain, which just so happened to be packed solely with copies of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. In case anyone was curious, the Harold B. Lee Library has seventeen copies of it. (However, lest anyone starts condemning BYU as a bigoted institution that endorses
hatred, my subsequent research has also shown that UC Berkeley has 62 copies of Mein Kampf in their library, as well as their own copy of The Unhappy Gays.)

For a moment, I thought it might be poetic justice to tuck LaHaye’s book behind Hitler’s and form a section of the library dedicated to historical bigotry. Then I realized what I was doing. (As an aside, I hate those moments when you’ve committed to a course of action, but then your brain starts thinking without your consent and suddenly you’re in the middle of an existential crisis.)

Here was the problem: I was disposing of a book because it held ideas I didn’t agree with. Though I believe my motives were pure, staring at Hitler’s name on the spine of a book made me remember that my solution was not innovative.

Less than one hundred years ago, the Nazi German Student Association's Main Office for Press and Propaganda proclaimed a nationwide “Action against the Un-German Spirit.” This proclamation was fulfilled on May 10th, 1933 when German student associations (called Burschenschaften) engaged in one of the most historic acts of censorship ever recorded. To fight against any “Un-German Spirit,” university students burned an estimated 25,000 volumes of books across thirty-four towns. The students threw “uncultured books” into bonfires with great fanfare. In Berlin, there was even a live band playing to celebrate the destruction of “morally corrupt” texts.

While I can never know what everyone’s motivations were for participating in this burning, I imagine that many of these university students believed they were doing the right thing. They were getting rid of dangerous ideas, just like I was considering with The Unhappy Gays. The Germans burned copies of Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms
because of its argument that war is not a positive solution to conflict. They destroyed the words of Helen Keller because of her encouragement for the disabled, pacifism, improved working conditions, and women’s voting rights. Naturally, the Nazis also burned books written by Jewish authors. One example is Franz Werfel who wrote about his experiences fighting in World War I in order to warn against future acts of mass murder. By encouraging nonviolence, love for mankind, and caution towards extreme nationalism, these books contradicted so many facets of the Nazi agenda. Therefore, they were dangerous and needed to be disposed of.

As they burned these works, maybe the Nazis also felt like they had done a public service. Maybe they felt the same horror and shock at the words of Jewish author, Franz Werfel, as I felt when I saw the ideas of Tim LaHaye. Maybe they felt honored to participate in an effort to remove dangerous ideas from their university libraries.

On the night of May 10th, 1933, the Nazi’s revealed one of their core beliefs about the nature of mankind. Their book burning proves, at least to me, that they believed that mankind is fundamentally weak. Even the “perfect” race Hitler wanted to form was one that couldn’t handle the presence of opposing ideas. The implication of this idea is that a man’s mind and a man’s soul are so powerless that any exposure to different ideas will lead them away from truth. By this logic, taking away contradictory materials is a gift. Censorship is meant to soothe the simple creatures whose minds are not equipped to deal with conflict. It provides the same comfort for a human as a rub on the head does for a dog.

Perhaps every act of wide-range censorship stems from a lack of faith in humanity.
Upon seeing the connection between my actions and those taken by the Nazi party, I decided to reconsider the question: what benefit does a book like this bring to the Harold B. Lee library? I opened Tim LaHaye’s book again. Upon my first skimming, I was so engrossed in the audacity of his claims, that I had paid no attention to the annotations by students in the margins.

As I opened the book again, beneath the shadow of Mein Kampf, I saw that many students had written their reactions to LaHaye in the margins. Sometimes even writing over each other. Some wrote about how LaHaye’s writing contradicted the things they had seen, felt, and experienced in regard to homosexuality, while other students wrote about their acceptance and agreement with LaHaye.

A particularly interesting entry came in a section where LaHaye is writing about how all gay men are slaves to their sexual appetite and are destined to a life of loneliness and sexually transmitted diseases. One student circled the passage and wrote, “That certainly hasn’t been my experience at BYU. I’ve met many gay men here and none of them are like this.”

Another poignant annotation was on page 96, where LaHaye is writing about conversion therapy. As LaHaye meanders about the success of curing homosexuality, someone underlined his words and wrote, “They tried this at BYU, and it didn’t help me.”

It’s difficult to tell what that person was thinking as they wrote about this experience. Were they expressing a longing, a wish, that the conversion therapy had
worked—that they were happily straight? Were they expressing a sense of victory of enduring the treatments, a feeling of pride that they didn’t conform to social expectation?

I’ll never know.

As I stared at these comments and saw how readers responded to LaHaye and to each other, I realized that my biggest fears were unwarranted. While the mass book burning on May 10th, 1933 showed a belief that mankind couldn’t handle opposing ideas, the annotations in LaHaye’s book were a testimony that the Nazi’s grossly underestimated humanity. Each of them who wrote in the margins, read charged, polarizing content and responded. Many did not automatically accept his words simply because they were published.

Now, if a random passerby picked up The Unhappy Gays, they would have access to all of LaHaye’s assessments that accepting homosexuality will cause God “to give up
on us.” But because of those who came before me, future readers will also have access to the written critiques that push against his ideas in the margins. My hope is that a random reader will encounter these conflicting ideas, and realize that the issue is not as simplistic or as fearful as LaHaye made it out to be.

I turned away from Mein Kampf. I decided that hiding the book wasn’t the solution. Perhaps fear of allowing certain voices to be heard is a lot like a wound that needs to scab over. It’s painful and tender, but the worst thing that can be done is to wrap it up too tightly and never let it be exposed. With a wound kept tightly under wraps and bandages, it stays damp and cultivates bacteria. But once the wound is uncovered and exposed to light and fresh air, the damaged skin can begin to dry out and slowly pull itself back together.

With this in mind, I walked the book back to its proper place: HQ 76.25.L33.

Before sliding it back into place, I strummed my fingers across the cover. I opened the book again and stared at the Post-It note in all of its Pepto-Bismol glory. Despite my training about the consequences of leaving paper in books, I put the Post-It in the center of the first page. I took out a pen, and underneath the author’s note about how this book was good for a laugh, I wrote: “Agreed.” I slid the book into its designated space and walked away.

While I don’t know if I made the “right” decision, I’ve decided that I acted with faith. While we typically use that word in relation to religious devotion, I choose to use it here because this experience with The Unhappy Gays caused me to reevaluate how I define faith as a concept. Instead of automatically calling faith a moral belief in a higher
power, I now think that faith—at its most basic form—is the belief that things can be left out of our control and still turn out alright.

However, lest I start demonstrating too much pride over my massive amount of faith, I have to give credit to the other readers. They are the ones who showed faith first, and they are the ones who taught me something new. Many of those who disagreed with LaHaye had seen his book, read his words, and written a critique. Some were based on logic. Some personal anecdotes. Either way, they left their words as a testimony that the lives of homosexuals are not automatically unhappy or unfulfilling. Then, they cemented that testimony by leaving his book for me to find later. The actions of these readers proved that the Nazis were wrong about mankind. We will not go gentle into that good night of automatic acceptance. We are not just mindless sheep in need of a shepherd. We do not need to be protected from opposing ideas in books. The margin-writers proved that readers are strong enough to see different ideas, and walk away with their convictions still intact. Best of all, they proved that the Nazis were wrong because when they saw ideas they disagreed with they didn’t silence them. Instead, they started a conversation that is still happening in the margins of a book forty years after it was published.

I’ll never know who has seen Tim LaHaye’s book since I reshelved it. I’ll never know what they took away from it. However, even without knowing the answers to these questions, I still choose to believe that I did the right thing by leaving it on the proper shelf. I choose to believe that, as a whole, humanity is strong enough to handle ideas that conflict with what I believe to be morally correct. I choose to believe that censorship is not the correct solution to fear.

I suppose if I ever change my mind, I know where the book is.
Hope of Israel

“I used to think that if I cared about anything, I would have to care about everything, and I’d go stark raving mad. But, now I have found a purpose…and I feel the most wonderful freedom.”

-Susannah Grant & Andy Tennant, *Ever After*

Like many American millennials, I have dedicated a significant portion of my time (post-2015) to listening to the Broadway musical *Hamilton*. It’s been three years since the release of the soundtrack, yet I am still fascinated with the story. I love the way the musical carefully paints complex characters who are not entirely good, selfless, or wise. Everyone is shown to have a fatal flaw, and somehow that just makes me love them more. While Alexander Hamilton is shown to be a brilliant, yet incredibly prideful adulterer, I fall in love with him at the end of Act I when he sings: “I’ve seen injustice in the world and I’ve corrected it.” Beyond any arrogance or bravado, there is something
hopeful about Hamilton’s belief that his circumstances are not set in stone, and that he can correct the wrongs he’s seen around him.

I’ve always felt inspired by people who believe that they can leave the world better than they found it. I think this mindset took hold when I was a child and my parents told me about the Good Samaritan story in the Bible. Though Jesus gave the parable to teach the lawyers about the true definition of neighbors, I’ve always felt like the story showed me the effects of hope.

Imagine it: a man is making his way from Jerusalem to Jericho when he is attacked, robbed, humiliated, and left for dead. As he lays there—beaten, unconscious, and bleeding—a Levite and Priest pass him. Though Jesus didn’t give any insights into how those two felt as they passed by the wounded traveler, I wonder if they felt sorry for him. I wonder if they thought to themselves, “That’s so sad. What is this world coming to? I wish there was something I could do for him.” Maybe they didn’t even realize that there were things they could have done to help the suffering man. Instead, they passed by with heavy hearts but unburdened consciences.

Then, the least expected person comes to the wounded man’s aid. Putting aside political and social precedent, this Samaritan stops his journey and helps the wounded Jew. Without knowing whether his administrations could save the man’s life, or if his efforts would even be appreciated, the Samaritan sees the injustice of suffering in his small corner of the world and makes every effort to correct it. He binds up the Jew’s wounds, sets him on his beast, brings him to an inn, and takes care of him until he must move on. Even as he leaves, the Samaritan makes arrangements for the Jew to receive additional care from the inn-keeper. While others were unwilling to get involved, the
Good Samaritan’s steps are guided by hope—a belief that the darkness of the situation can be dispelled through acts of kindness. I think the Samaritan’s compassionate care is one of many reasons why Jesus finishes the parable by saying, “Go and do thou likewise.”

Once I heard this story, I knew that this was the type of person I wanted to be. I wanted to consistently reach out to the people who were hurting, and be a force for good. Perhaps I’ve always romanticized the notion of wearing yourself out, day after day, for the sake of others.

For a while, I satisfied this craving by doing simple, meaningful things. I volunteered at an adult literacy center twice a week while I was in college. I tried to donate blood a few times a year, even though I really hate needles. I usually gave money to the people with signs on the side of the road. I tried to make sure my roommates laughed at least once a day. Though I don’t think I did these things to receive recognition or praise from anyone else, I loved how I felt about myself afterwards. I felt like I was on the right track towards becoming a full-fledged Good Samaritan, and I hoped that my actions were improving the lives of the people around me.

However, recently, it has started to feel like these actions are just small drops in an ocean of global need. It is difficult to feel like I’m doing enough as I read about Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons on his own people in Syria, the devastation in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria, the viral campaign of “Punish a Muslim Day” promoted by domestic terrorists in the United Kingdom, teenagers dying by gun violence in Florida, and the stories of thousands of illegal immigrants being separated from their children at the border between Mexico and the United States.
Clearly, I am just one person and don’t have the resources to solve all of these problems single-handedly. My head knows that, but my heart doesn’t seem to get the memo. Accepting my limitations hasn’t brought me any more peace. Instead, I feel like accepting my inability to fix the world has put me on one of those terrible rides at amusement parks where I am being swung back and forth on a pendulum, and am trying not to puke on the lady in front of me. On one side of the pendulum, I am feeling the full Hamiltonian bravado. I see a struggle and am fueled by explosive passion—thinking that I can solve the problem through sheer grit, determination, and moral resolve. Unfortunately, this burst of passion is more like a firework than anything else. It flares, but can’t last forever. Eventually, the pendulum swings to the other side where I feel heartbroken by the suffering in the world and am helpless to stop it. On the side of the swing, I am less of a Good Samaritan and more of a Levite who thinks, “How sad; I wish there was something I could do,” and then continues on about my business. I’m either disconnecting or I’m on the edge of ripping my hair out—neither being the most productive outcome.

I have to consistently remind myself that a symptom of hope is action, not misery. A while back I thought to myself, perhaps the best way to get off the carnival ride from hell is to dedicate myself to a single global cause, become educated, and then recognize what I can do to help those who need it. I was afraid that if I didn’t do this, I would lose track of hope in the crowd of global tragedies, and would, subsequently, be disconnected from compassion and empathy.

After deciding on this course of action, I was encouraged by different stories of people who specialized in one cause. I read about Viola Liuzzo: a white, thirty-nine-year-
old, mother of five who was killed on March 25, 1965 by the KKK. In the wake of the events of Bloody Sunday, Viola traveled from Michigan to Alabama and participated in the fifty-mile march from Selma to Montgomery. Her daughter, Sally, later commented on her mother’s motives saying, “Even if she was not involved in any church, she would have [marched] anyways; that is who she was. She loved her country and knew segregation was not right; she wanted a better world for her children.” Though I think it would have been easy for this white housewife to feel distant from the suffering of African-Americans in the South, Viola was propelled forward by hope. She believed that standing with the oppressed would help change things. Of course, her efforts didn’t cause change overnight. Compared to others who participated in the Civil Rights movement, Viola’s impact is almost nonexistent. Even still, she inspires me because she became involved in a cause that she had the privilege to ignore. While she could have walked past the large groups of African-Americans who had been brutally beaten by State Troopers in Selma, she tried to use her feet and her voice to change the situation for the berated.

I also read about Diane Jones: a brand-new nursing graduate who started working at the San Francisco General Hospital in 1981. She spent the early part of her career working almost exclusively with patients suffering from the disease that would later be called AIDS. When she started working, the official cause of AIDS was yet to be determined and a fear of contamination led many doctors, nurses, and hospital staff to refuse to care for the patients with this disease. Diane Jones was one of the nurses who volunteered to take care of these people. She worked in the first AIDS unit in the United States, known as Ward 5B, until she retired in 2016.
Obviously, she didn’t cure AIDS. She also couldn’t stop the suffering and death of the afflicted patients; I’m sure she wanted to. Though she had to accept her limitations—that curing her patients wasn’t an option—she realized that caring for them was. I believe that this is what kept her coming to work each day. For decades, she dedicated her life to seeing people instead of lesions. She used her time to take care of people when few others could drum up any compassion. Like Viola, Diane is a literal Good Samaritan for she found men who were beaten by a virus that robbed them of everything they had. And when she saw them, she had compassion. Rather than passing by, she did her best to bind up their wounds and provide comfort for people who desperately needed it.

Every time I thought of Viola and Diane, I felt inspired. I wondered which cause I would dedicate myself to. I was shocked when I found it 7,000 miles away in the Middle East.

I flew to Jerusalem for several reasons, but the main catalyst was going through a truly heinous break-up and deciding that the only man I wanted to get to know better was Jesus. Encouraged by a desire to forsake boys and participate in an adventure, I applied to study abroad at the BYU Jerusalem Center. At that time, I thought that going to Jerusalem would mean taking a sabbatical, mending a few emotional wounds, and learning more about the Bible. While those things did happen, I ultimately realized that my time in Jerusalem was more about what was presently happening in the lives of the people rather than what had happened thousands of years ago.

When my plane touched down in Tel Aviv, I was immediately overtaken with a panicked nausea (that comes from a general lack of preparedness before international
travel). That nausea continued for a very different reason once I got on a bus heading to Jerusalem and saw how closely the driver followed the cars in front of us. I was initially panicked because American media had trained me to believe that there was nothing in the Middle East except ISIS, bombings, and terrorist activity. I expected to see cars on fire, to hear gunfire, and to constantly fear for my life. I couldn’t even name who I thought would be setting cars on fire or shooting guns at tourists, but I knew that people were angry for reasons I had the luxury not to understand.

As I sat on the bus going towards Jerusalem, I must have internally asked, *What have I done*, no less than two hundred times. Though I had been so certain that living in Jerusalem was a great idea beforehand, my bleary, sleep-deprived-self was convinced that I had just entered into a terrain so dangerous and foreign that there was no way I was going to make it out alive.

Thankfully, I found out pretty quickly that that version of myself is a bit of a drama queen. I was shocked, in the first few days, when my professors allowed us to go walk throughout the city without them. As I explored with my new classmates, I was pleasantly shocked to realize that this beautiful, holy city wasn’t as treacherous as I had imagined. Instead of being filled with bombings and gunfire, it was filled with early morning mosques issuing a call to prayer, vendors selling pomegranate juice or cashmere scarves, and Jews celebrating bar mitzvahs in the streets. Instead of a soundtrack of gunfire and explosions, my time in Jerusalem was accompanied by the sounds of children laughing, old men shouting at their TVs, and the resonance of lutes echoing down the streets. The city was more joyful and alive than I had ever anticipated.
As I began my semester there, I realized another misconception I brought with me. I thought I was living there to see the land: I flew over there to see religious sites. I wanted to pray at the Garden Tomb, I wanted to see where the walls came tumbling down at Jericho, and I wanted to see where Jesus walked on water. Maybe a lot of travelers come to the Holy Land for that reason. I was encouraged to change my perspective when a professor started a class by telling our group, “You are not tourists. You are pilgrims and scholars.” For me, being more than a tourist, meant trying to see the lives of the local people. I wanted to know what their living conditions were like, I wanted to eat falafel with an Armenian family in their home, and I wanted to know some of the merchants in the Old City by name. I knew that it would be impossible to understand all the nuances and complexities of the culture in Jerusalem, but by listening to the locals I believed I would understand more than I ever could by reading a book.

As I listened to local people talk about the impact of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, I knew that I wanted this to be my cause. While Viola helped people enduring oppression and prejudice in the Civil Rights movement, and twenty years later Diane helped people who were often publicly misrepresented and hated, I felt like this conflict incorporated both of these extraordinary efforts. The more I learned, the more I felt like I wanted to help alleviate some of the pain endured by people on both sides of the conflict.

Looking back now, I realize that I was on the side of the pendulum ride where I was running on the fumes of passion. I was certain that I could change the situation, simply because I wanted to. What a typical 20-something American, visiting a foreign country, and simplifying all of its problems so greatly that she assumes she can solve
them. While I won’t apologize for being passionate about helping people in the midst of this conflict, I recognize that this was naive in many ways.

Subsequently, I have accepted certain limitations about myself. I learned that if I want to be a positive force for change in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, I need be a Viola rather than trying to be a Martin Luther King Jr. After all, I am not a native to the region—I was merely a visitor. The conflict isn’t mine, and I won’t be able to solve it. Though I wish I could fix things, I haven’t lived through it in the way that the locals have. I do not know enough to solve it, but I know enough to help. When I think back to the Good Samaritan, I realize that trying to do something for a fellow traveler is better than walking passed those who are hurt along the path. Hope may be naïve, but it is better than indifference.

With that said, I have to admit that once I came back to the United States, I started to feel useless. A person can only donate to so many charities or contact their representatives over so many issues before it starts to feel like a moot point. These feelings were heightened earlier this year when the United States formally relocated their embassy from Tel Aviv into Jerusalem, which ignited Palestinian protests throughout Gaza, and led to the loss of many young Palestinian lives and feelings of terror throughout the region. It felt like all I could do express my heartache on Facebook and wear my politics on my sleeve. I wondered if I was being like the Levite and Priest from the Good Samaritan story, who looked right at the bleeding man in front of them, but couldn’t see all the things they could have done to help him.

Perhaps one of the hardest things about living in today’s world is that you see the tragedies play out in photojournalism and headlines, you may feel heartbroken, but you
still have to go about your daily business. There are still bills to pay, groceries to buy, and
work that has to be done. As I continued to go throughout my daily routine, it felt easier
and easier to disconnect from the devastation experienced by the people in Israel and
Palestine. Time heals all wounds, especially when they aren’t your wounds to begin with.
Rather than finding a balance of hope, I found myself swinging to the other side of the
carnival ride where things felt generally hopeless.

A year after living in Jerusalem, while working in Scotland, I found myself
sharing an elevator with Bruce Adamson—the Children and Young People's
Commissioner. Having had some contact with his office for a work assignment, I
recognized him and began to ask him some questions about his latest initiative. From
what I gathered, he was an ambitious man and I wondered how he maintained hope that
he could change things.

“Mr. Adamson, I understand that you’re working on implementing new policies to
try to completely end child abuse…”

“Yes…” He said with a smile. He was humoring me, I could tell.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how do you stay positive when you’re working
against something like that?” His smile drooped slightly, and suddenly he wasn’t
humoring me anymore.

He thought for a moment, readjusted his tie, cleared his throat, and said, “I’ve
been working for children’s rights as a lawyer for the last twenty years, and I’ve had to
hear about some truly terrible things that kids have lived through. You have to let those
things stay with you because they keep you hungry. They keep you focused. But you also
have to let yourself go to a daycare or a playground and hear kids laugh once in a while. If you only look at problems on a page, you’ll never feel like it’s enough. I have to keep myself in check by spending time with kids off of the page, and realizing that things aren’t always as bad as they look on paper.”

Though his solution is a simple one, I think it has been helping me.

Seeing a conflict or a tragedy off of the page doesn’t magically give you the tools to solve it, but it may prevent indifference and compassionate fatigue. When we aren’t just looking at figures or listening to news commentaries, but are interacting on a human level with those who suffer, we can feel hope that our small interaction of kindness will make a difference for them. I think that is what made Viola want to march, and what enabled Diane to keep going back to Ward 5B for decades, maybe that’s even what motivated the Good Samaritan in Jesus’ story.

Unlike Alexander Hamilton’s musical persona, I will not be able to simply correct injustices in this world. The globe is too big, and I am too small. Accepting that has been a wildly important part of my life for the last few years. I think it has kept me off of Prozac.

I cannot fix the situation in the Middle East. I cannot undo the loss of life that has occurred on both sides. I cannot restore the land to everyone who has a proper claim to it. But that does not mean that I am hopeless. Hope is about recognizing what can be done, and then doing it regardless of the outcome. Despite all that I cannot do, I can choose to use hope as a catalyst for actions of kindness. I can use it as fuel to push me out of my comfort zone and finally contact some of my friends in the Holy Land who I haven’t
spoken to in months. I can listen to them. I can hear their stories. I can do my best to spread awareness of their situation. This is not enough to change things overnight, but it is better than doing nothing. After all, the Good Samaritan isn’t good because the story has a perfect ending. Jesus never even tells us what happens to the wounded traveler afterwards. Maybe he died in that inn. But even if the Jewish traveler didn’t recover, that wouldn’t make the story about a Bad Samaritan. He is not good because he solves every problem and ensures that the abused have conflict-free lives, but he is good because he uses the tools that he has to take care of someone who is suffering. The ending isn’t the story, it is his efforts to help that make the story worth telling.

It may be a naïve notion to hold onto, but even if it is I think it is the most important story we can tell ourselves. We may not have the tools to solve every conflict, cure every disease, eliminate every prejudice, but if we are willing to use whatever tools we have then we have reasons to remain hopeful.
Honor Thy Father

I was in the middle of inspecting a chicken breast, fresh off the George Forman grill, when the Jaws theme started blaring from my bedroom. Dad was calling me. I stared at my chicken and contemplated letting the call go to voicemail, but my dad had tried to reach me several times that last week. I knew something bad was coming. He’s never this persistent about sharing good news.

Out of guilt, I wandered into my room, prepared myself for impact by getting situated on my bed, and answered the phone. I heard wind and rustling before I heard his voice. For all my dad’s vast life experience, the man has yet to discover that holding the phone further away from his mouth makes it more difficult for me to understand him. No matter how many times I ask him to move his phone closer to his mouth, it always manages to end up somewhere near his neck. Old habits die hard, I guess.

“Is this my long-lost daughter?” He asked in his thick Southern drawl. My dad didn’t always have such a noticeable accent, but ever since he got ‘called to the ministry’ and became a Baptist preacher, he’s really started laying it on thick. Apparently, all those mornings watching televangelists taught him that a Southern accent is synonymous with discipleship. I’m sure Peter, James, and John had twangs too. Though, perhaps, theirs’ were of a more Middle Eastern variety.

“Yeah Dad, it’s me. What’s going on?” I tried to sound pleasant instead of anxious.

“I’m just driving home from church, and I thought I’d take a chance and try and call you. I never can reach you. I guess I just always call at the wrong time. Plus, I know
you’ve got other things you’d rather be doing than talking to your ol’ Daddy.” Apart from his abrupt divorce from my mother, this passing remark reveals another reason why I contemplated not answering his call: conversations with my dad always makes me feel like I need to apologize for something.

“Yeah, sorry about that, Dad. Things have just been busy with school and work lately.”

“Oh, I’m sure they have, Baby Girl! Since you brought up school, there’s something I wanted to tell you ‘bout. In my online Bible classes, we are learnin’ more ‘bout the geography of the Holy Land.” He then proceeded to tell me about how the Old City of Jerusalem is situated on a hill between two valleys, and the Sea of Galilee is shaped like a harp. I was already aware of these facts, since I studied abroad in Jerusalem for four months and had to supply both of these facts for a final exam, but I let him tell me anyway. It was easier to just listen, and I was pretty sure that an audience is all he wanted.

This is what our calls usually consist of—sermons instead of conversations.

During a typical phone call, Dad tells me about his latest conquests in the ministry: how many people accepted Jesus during his sermons, his experience being a “prayer warrior” for a troubled youth at Home Depot, and how just last week he convinced two lesbians to leave their partners and return back into the fold of heterosexuals. At least, that’s how he says it happened. I have my suspicions that all of his miraculous stories have been airbrushed to a certain extent. Though that isn’t necessarily indicative of his merits as a pastor. My suspicions exist only because I have,
inadvertently, caught him airbrushing certain stories that involved me. Honestly, I don’t know if he even realizes he was doing it. Though I don’t blame him for wanting to tweak certain stories to make them sound more meaningful, knowing about his tendency to embellish has caused me to err on the side of caution when it comes to his spiritual victories.

If the phone call follows our normal pattern, Dad will finish updating me on the growth of the kingdom of God and then tell me that he needs to go. However, before he hangs up he always makes sure to leave me with a father’s blessing. Sometimes he sticks to the basics and says things like, “Blessings be upon you my girl.” Other times he gets himself really worked up and passionately declares, “Baby Girl, I know that I know that God will provide for the things we need. All we have to do is rely on the cross and we will find ourselves in green pastures! Praise the name of Jesus!” The second example was a direct quote from a voicemail he left me three years ago, which—in my opinion—shows that he will start a sermon anywhere, even if no one is listening.

During these rote exchanges, I don’t think he realizes that he never asks about anything that is happening in my life because he’s so preoccupied with talking about what’s happening in his. However, that particular call was slightly different. After he finished telling me about the Holy Land, the conversation shifted. Without the nudge of an awkward pause, Dad uncharacteristically asked, “Baby Girl, when are you planning to graduate?”

I was mildly surprised by his interest, and I replied, “I think I’ll graduate next April.”
Dad’s accompanying sigh translated into: “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

He has very expressive sighs.

If I were a better Christian, I would have asked my dad, compassionately, “Do you have a conflict? Is everything okay?” But I was, decidedly, not a better Christian, so I just waited.

I let the silence stretch and started picking at a wayward string in my bedspread.

Finally, my dad confessed, “Baby Girl, I have a conflict. I’m gonna be graduating in April from my Bible college and I really want to walk across the stage, so I don’t think I’ll be able to make it this time. But when you graduate from grad school, I’ll definitely be there.”

I blinked twice, briefly contemplated saying what I really thought (which is something Jesus would most definitely not approve of), and chose to respond with acceptance, saying, “Oh yeah, Dad. Of course! That makes sense! It’s no problem at all. I might not even walk at graduation anyway.”

Dad seemed to be satisfied with the outcome of our call. Clearly, he had talked about the issue that was on his mind, and after receiving my blessing to be absent from my college graduation, he said, “Okay, well I know you’re busy, so I’ll let you go!”

Once he hung up, I sat on my bed and tried to process the various, conflicting spurts of anger, relief, and sadness that were wrestling inside my brain. Anger won first. I was angry because April has thirty days in it, and I suppose my dad had decided that his graduation from Bible college would take up the entire month. I was livid that he planned to miss my graduation ten months in advance. However, relief soon overpowered anger.
when I realized that on the weekend of my college graduation, I wouldn’t have to focus on entertaining him and his new wife, Kay, during their maiden voyage to Utah. I wouldn’t have to explain the “complexities” of Mormon culture to them—such as why many of the shops are closed on Sundays or why some restaurants don’t serve sweet tea. For a moment, I was certain that Dad’s decision not to come was actually a good thing. It felt like a blessing, like a gift.

Once anger and relief had tired themselves out, sadness came in for the kill.

Dad’s latest decision forced me to confront some things that I would have rather left alone. I was sad because my dad was already seventy years old, and the odds of him being alive and well at my next graduation weren’t good. I wasn’t sure how to cope with the idea that my dad could be gone, or the fact that he was already making plans to be gone, from the major events in my life. I’m not sure when he stopped wanting to celebrate with me.

Maybe that’s unfair. I really do think that my dad would have liked to celebrate my college graduation, but he would rather celebrate his own accomplishments more. In his defense, he worked hard and wanted to be recognized for his efforts to learn more about the Bible. I decided that I wouldn’t be hurt if I had known for sure his graduation landed on the same weekend as my own, but it was the fact that he didn’t know—that he hadn’t even bothered to ask—and still decided not to come. Whether he meant to or not, I felt like he shoved me aside—making me feel less like a daughter and more like an inconvenience.
I pushed myself off my twin bed, and started pacing. As I mowed down the carpet with my heavy steps, I wondered if I should cry or scream. Would it have made me feel better? Probably not. It was just a temporary solution to an ongoing problem. I started to wonder if I ever really knew my dad at all. If I did, would this moment have been such a surprise? Would I have been so blindsided?

It was more than the fact that he’s not coming to my graduation. My rapidly deteriorating relationship with my dad was a cocktail of disappointments and let-downs that had been blended together over the last several years. The divorce, the quick remarriage, the suspected affair. All of these actions committed by a self-chosen “man of God”, who is most comfortable telling other people how to change their lives to be closer to the Lord.

It took me a long time to become willing to admit that, maybe, I’m too sensitive about his choices. I still don’t think that I’m being unreasonable for being upset with him, I have also realized that it’s impossible for me to see my dad objectively. I can’t think about him without the surrounding baggage of memories and expectations. In the months following that phone call, I did try though. I tried to push through my own assumptions and uncover certain base-level truths about my dad. After lots of internal monologuing, this is what I discovered: my father is, most certainly, not an evil man. However, I don’t think he is a good one either. All I know for certain is that he thinks that he is good, and that I disagree.

Though, immediately after this call, I hadn’t realized these things yet. Instead, as I walked back to the kitchen following that disastrous phone call, I was struck by a different realization. There was a reason we only saw each other a few times each year,
and that we talked on the phone once a month: we have absolutely *nothing* in common. There are so many things we cannot talk about because we both feel so passionately opposed to the other person’s idea (it was Dad’s idea to take these conversations completely off the table). We don’t value the same things, or if we do, we show that we value it in impressively distinct ways. The only thing we *do* have in common is sharing so much of the same DNA.

It doesn’t feel like enough. In that moment, it felt like sharing half of his genetic makeup wasn’t enough to stop me from hating him.

Yet, there was something that stopped me from calling him back, and forcing him to confront the depths of my uncensored rage. It was more than the fact that I don’t like confrontation. It’s that, no matter what he does, he is still my dad. I don’t remember when I started loving him, and I don’t know how to stop. Somehow the hatred that had been maturing from years of disappointment didn’t automatically erase the love I have for him.

I almost wish it had. I think it would have made things easier.

When I returned to the kitchen table and sat to eat my dinner, the lukewarm chicken tasted bitter.

That night, my roommates could tell that something was wrong with me. In a valiant effort to lift my spirit, they started discussing taking a potential road trip together. We thought we might go visit Arizona, to see where one of us grew up. As a result, I started thinking a lot about the Grand Canyon. It’s strange to think that the area now considered to be a wonder of the natural world used to be a piece of unified land. I bet at first, the land didn’t even notice that a chasm was forming. I’m sure it didn’t seem too
significant to have little pieces weathered down and gradually taken by gravity. After all, there was such a strong underlying foundation that it didn’t matter when small pieces of the middle were swept away. I wonder if after a while, the land forgot what it was like to not have to shout over the Colorado River. The separation started to feel like the new normal, and then suddenly (as much as we can call millions of years of erosion sudden), a canyon had formed. Perhaps the sides of the land still look at each other from across the eighteen miles divide and wonder how they got here. Erosion is a powerful thing, partially because you can’t see its impact until it is too late to undo it. My relationship with my dad feels a lot like the Grand Canyon. We lost the things that held us together so gradually, that we didn’t even notice the distance until we had to squint to see each other across a chasm.

Over the next several days, this discontent wracked through my body like a cramp—flaring up at unpredictable moments. I couldn’t stop thinking about how much I never wanted to speak to my father again, while simultaneously I also desperately wanted to call him back to try to understand how our relationship became so unrecognizable.

As a child, it would have been impossible to imagine spending a day without my dad. One night during a Texas thunderstorm—the type where the thunder sounds like God is giving a standing ovation—I rushed into my parent’s room. Completely bypassing my mom, I followed the snoring over to my dad’s side of the bed. I pulled at his arm, and he jerked to attention.

“What’s goin on?” He asked while looking around wildly, unable to see me in the darkness.
“Daddy, I’m scared. The storm’s too loud.”

Without hesitation, he blindly reached for me in the dark and I flung my five year-old-self at him. He picked me up and made a cocoon for me in the middle of the bed. Once I was placed in the nest made of my parent’s arms and legs, I knew I was safe. Anything bad would have to go through my dad before it got to me, and Dad wouldn’t let that happen.

“Is that better, Baby Girl?” Dad whispered to me.

“Yes! I think this is how it should be forever.” Dad was quiet for a moment, and I wondered if he had fallen back to sleep. Looking back now I wonder if Dad was trying to decide if this was an appropriate teaching opportunity. Two weeks prior to this storm, my great-grandmother had passed away, and I think he was trying to find ways to explain where she had gone and what had happened to her.

“Well it can be like this for now, but what will happen when me and Mama die?”

“That’s easy Daddy! I’ll just be buried between you, like this!”

“Well, what about your husband? He might not like that plan very much.”

“Well he can go find his own grave!” My dad laughed so hard it woke my mom.

When I think about the six-year-old version of myself, I get sad for her. She had no idea that something so solid could gradually be swept away, or that she wouldn’t see it coming. In that moment, there was no reason to predict that my dad and I wouldn’t always be close. It was impossible to imagine that we would make up two halves of a cratered relationship so large it could be seen from space.
A few months after that phone call, I continued to be affected in unexpected ways. Anyone who knows about daddy issues probably could have anticipated that I would be more sensitive during Father’s Day and that I would get weepy during the father/daughter dance at wedding receptions. What I had not anticipated was that my ongoing problems with my dad would start impacting my spirituality. Ever since I was a little girl, religion was a comfort. When I became too old to crawl into my parents’ bed after a nightmare, I would frequently lull myself back to sleep by reciting scriptures. I believed that the verses which I had carefully tucked into my memory would keep harm away.

Then—as distanced myself from my dad—it felt like the scriptures weren’t trying to console me, but damn me. Every verse seemed to house a command to love wholly, forgive freely, and let charity abound. Each passage reminded me of my own
shortcomings, my faults, and my ego. From the things I read, I knew that God wanted me
to honor my father, yet I had no concept of how to bring honor to a person I couldn’t
stand to be around or speak to. It began to feel like my inability to love my own dad
freely would stand in the way of me ever loving anyone else. If I couldn’t manage to love
someone who I was biologically connected to, how could I expect to love a stranger?
Was I cutting myself off from love because I couldn’t make peace with my dad?

I held onto that question and struggled to know how to honor my father for a long
time, and as I continually couldn’t find a course of action I felt like I was failing God. But
one day in February, after several weeks of self-imposed distance from spirituality, I
decided to go back to my roots and pick up the New Testament again. I didn’t have
anything specific in mind, so I just flipped through the pages and waited for anything to

I skinned for a while, and then experienced the thrilling moment of having read
something several times but only just beginning to see why it matters. The latter part of
the story describes Jesus’ efforts to get to Jarius’ daughter before the young girl dies, and
as Jesus passes through the bustling streets of Galilee a woman touches his clothes. She is
unnamed and is described only by having an issue of blood for the past twelve years. This
woman could have been old, young, fat, thin, beautiful, feeble, gentle, or harsh. There is
so much we don’t know about her because she was defined entirely by her ailment.

I began thinking about what a modern example of this story would look like.
While there are many people all over the world who are suffering from blood diseases
and disorders ranging from difficult to terminal, I wondered if there were other
applications for an issue of blood even when a person was physically healthy. Perhaps
one modern equivalent of an “issue of blood” isn’t a physical disease, but the debilitating pain caused by the choices of our family members—the ones we share blood with.

Upon piecing this together, the unnamed woman’s story became my story in a very profound way. I realized that I was also afflicted with something troubling in my veins, and much like her, I was beginning to define myself entirely by my issue of blood. However, I found hope in the idea that this didn’t have to be permanent. If I could figure out how to metaphorically touch Jesus, then I could find relief.

This idea motivated me to start calling my dad more than ever. I was convinced that if I gave him a chance, then we would find something in common or we would be able to work through our issues. Unfortunately, nothing had really changed. Every conversation between us was like two untrained dancers attempting an intricate Viennese Waltz. We stepped on each other’s toes, we were constantly offbeat, and we never seemed to be making any progress. At first, I thought I was the only one who felt this crippling awkwardness, but when Dad asked if we could start using email as our primary form of communication, I knew that we were on the same page. For once.

As my plan failed, I felt defeated. I went back to the New Testament again, hoping for more guidance, and felt chastised as I read Paul’s famous discourse on charity in Corinthians 13. He leaves no uncertain terms when he says, “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.”
I couldn’t be mad at Paul for his candor, because he’s Paul—candor is kind of his thing—but it felt like every Biblical figure had a megaphone and was simultaneously shouting a chorus of, “Becca, you suck!”

This feeling of spiritual failure wounded me, and in an attempt to avoid any more pain I found myself, again, retreating from my spirituality. Later I realized that my withdrawal is another interesting connection between myself and the Biblical woman with the issue of blood. Part of the reason why she was in the streets that day when Jesus passed by was because the Law of Moses taught that coming in contact with blood made someone ritually unclean. Until a purification process had been completed, a ritually unclean person wasn’t permitted to participate in religious ordinances at the temple and synagogue. Though my issue didn’t prohibit me from attending my church services, my struggles to love my dad made me feel uncomfortable in spiritual environments. I felt disqualified from a fullness of peace, and isolated from my fellow believers.

However, now that some more time has passed, I’ve decided that I am not resigned to a destiny of spiritual distance. Slowly, I am learning how to maintain my religious convictions and deal with my imperfections without letting them define me.

It started with going back to Corinthians 13. I tried to figure out what Paul meant by saying a person without charity is “nothing.” At an elementary level “nothing” just means not-a-thing, right? So, was Paul simply pointing out that without charity he was not something? For a while I worried that he meant that without charity, he was not good or valuable. After all, how much worth can nothing have? I later changed my mind about this when I re-read Jeremiah 1:5 where God says, “Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb, I sanctified thee.” I’m sure
there are many ways to interpret this, but for me this verse meant that before a person ever had a chance to not show charity, God had already interacted with them. If God left his fingerprints on me before I had ever displayed my ineptitude, could I really believe that I was without value? No. He sanctified me before I ever made my grand entrance into mortality, and he gave me value before I ever made a choice about charity. This train of thought led me to believe that when Paul says, “Without charity I am nothing,” he means that without charity he is not complete. Without charity, he is a work in progress. Without charity, he is still unfinished. Suddenly, that didn’t feel so damning. I can accept that without charity I have not become who God wants me to be. I can accept that I still have work to do. After all, isn’t everyone unfinished?

Prior to my relationship falling apart with my dad, I didn’t have a clear definition of charity. I believed that it was a higher, Godly love, and I usually associated it with forgiveness. Now, after months and months of flagellating myself for not being able to forgive and forget my dad’s choices, I am slowly learning that forgiveness doesn’t have one shape. There are different types of forgiveness. Some people can give forgiveness to the undeserving, without condition, like the person who is able to forgive the drunk driver whose choices led to the death of a loved one. At this point, I am not one of those people. Maybe someday I will be. I hope so; I greatly admire that.

But in the meantime, I’ve decided that another type of forgiveness is when you can look at someone who has hurt you, yet not wish them any harm. When I think about my relationship with my dad, I know that I have no desire to hurt him. That’s why I didn’t call him back after he told me he wasn’t coming to my graduation. That’s why I won’t tell him how much I miss the man I thought he was. I forgive him enough that I
don’t think he deserves to experience the fullness of my wrath/frustration/pain, but I don’t forgive him enough that to let him be close to me. I don’t do this to be petulant or to make him suffer slowly. I do this out of self-preservation. Sometimes you have to give yourself permission to leave a toxic situation. For now, that feels like a victory. Or, at least, a situation I can live with.

Since I’ve realize this, I started asking myself more what it means to love someone like God does. As I’ve ruminated on that question, a new definition of charity has started emerging for me. In this case with my dad, I think the best way I can be a charitable Christian is to realize what he is and is not capable of, to see his weaknesses and motivations, to view him complexly and holistically and not try to change him into who I wish he was. I don’t think he ever wanted to hurt me, but I also don’t think he has the capacity to see beyond himself. I recognize that about him now, and by doing so I have realized that there is no hoop that I could jump through in order to have an ideal relationship with him. I don’t hold him at fault for something I don’t think he’s capable of doing.

Maybe this isn’t true charity, and maybe I am simply justifying my behavior to suit my sinful nature. Both of those are very real possibilities. But I know that one of the effects of the Holy Spirit is peace, and for the first time in ages I am starting to feel that regarding my father.

It feels good.
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