

From the Bahá'í Faith to Porn to Alpha to Jesus

God has been faithful all during my winding journey to complete surrender.

EMILY ARMSTRONG | OCTOBER 19, 2015

I always wanted to be self-made. Raised in Caledonia, Ontario, I was identified in third grade as gifted, and from then on was keenly aware that I should “act smart.” I only participated in things I knew I would do well, and did my best to control all factors that could sabotage perfection. If I got a 93 on an essay, I demanded that the teacher tell me how I lost 7 points. For group projects, I asked my classmate to bring only the presentation board—and brought a backup board just in case. By age 17, I saw myself as a teenager who had everything under control.



Heading to college in London, Ontario, I was eager to be a grown-up. And the ultimate marker of my new independence, I thought, would be joining the Bahá'í faith. A local assembly met in Caledonia, and some of my closest friends were raised in Bahá'í homes, so I was already familiar with the faith. I remember leaving Bahá'í events buoyed by the leaders' optimism about the future: no more war, poverty, or racism. One language, one currency, and equality of the sexes. It sounded perfect.

The Bahá'í faith grew out of Islamic culture in 19th-century Persia. A merchant, Sayyid Ali Muhammad, claimed to be the long-awaited Báb (“Gate”) to the knowledge of the twelfth Imam. Just before the Báb was executed, he appointed one of his followers as his successor. The new leader's half-brother would declare himself Bahá'u'lláh (literally “the glory of God”).

According to the tenets of the Bahá'í faith, all major religions before 1863 were founded by “Manifestations of God.” So Adam, Noah, Krishna, Moses, Abraham, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and the Báb are all manifestations, with Bahá'u'lláh being the final and complete manifestation. The most appealing belief to me: a new order led by Bahá'í leaders that would usher in world peace.

Since I had managed to be so good at everything else, belonging to the religion that ensured perfect order seemed the right step. But I quickly found myself falling short of its requirements. I struggled to pray the long, obligatory morning prayer. I skipped ceremonial washings because I didn't understand how to perform them.

It didn't help that I had started dating a non-Bahá'í a few months after joining.

About a Boy

Aaron was a friend who identified as a “hostile agnostic.” I quickly learned that spending time with him was way more fun than prayer and chastity. I tried to manage my dual commitment to God and to someone who found the Bahá'í faith strange. But the more serious our relationship became, the greater the gap grew between what I should have been doing (praying, reading scripture, fasting) and what I was in fact doing (showing up to class late wearing Aaron's shirts). So I became indifferent to spiritual matters, abandoning the pursuit of “holiness” to do whatever seemed right.

After graduation and two years of living with Aaron, I was still living without an anchor. I decided to take greater control of my life by becoming debt-free. With delusions of paying off loans quickly, I started working on the tech

side of the Internet porn industry, populating websites with ads for porn sites. The company behind the scheme promised absurd amounts of wealth—with only one hour of work a day!

I plugged away at the job for about four months, only slightly bothered by its moral aspects. Since the pictures already existed, I reasoned, if someone was going to profit, it might as well be me. As it turned out, I never made a single penny. The venture was a way for the company to add a revenue stream, enticing people who would never buy porn files with the promise of cash.

Around the time I abandoned the stint, a former classmate invited Aaron and me, now engaged, to attend Alpha, a course exploring the basic teachings of Christianity. Our friend had just become a Christian, and even though we thought that was strange, we didn't want to hurt his feelings.

I thought it would be good for me to read the Bible again. And that's when weird stuff started to happen to us. After our leaders welcomed us to "the ten-week Alpha course," I made a face at Aaron. Ten weeks?! But we kept going. We learned that no human can enter God's presence by working hard enough or being morally good enough—but that in God's mercy, Jesus gave up his life on the cross so that we may be saved from the wrath we all deserve.

After the Alpha course, our friend continued to evangelize us. But Aaron still didn't think much of Christianity. Several months later, he decided that if he was going to make fun of Christians properly, he should read the Bible. I had read the Bible and participated in youth group as a teenager, but seeing Aaron come home with one, I thought it would be good for me to read it again.

And that's when weird stuff started to happen to us.

Facing Terror

Over several weeks, I received a preponderance of "unknown number" hang-up calls. Aaron and I would wake up in the middle of the night, scared to leave the room. Aaron started waking up with scratches on his body. At times, we both felt like there was someone else in the house.

One night I woke up to see Aaron half-risen from bed, like someone was pulling him up by his left shoulder. "Go away," I whispered. I shut my eyes and tucked deep into the covers, wishing that the terror would stop.

Later Aaron would tell me he didn't turn to me. But I saw him turn over and look at me. Only it wasn't his face. I screamed and pressed my face to the bed. I was going crazy; no, I was already crazy. I was going to die here in this room from fright, or end up in a psychiatric hospital.

But in that moment, despite the terror, I understood that Jesus was my hope.

So there in the bed that I shared with Aaron, I pleaded with God to save me. I already knew that I had to repent: of trying to be holy through a faith that promised perfection; of helping to sell online pornography; and ultimately, of relying on myself.

As I prayed in repentance, the fog I cowered under lifted. There was a sudden clarity: *Yes, this is true, this is real—Jesus really is the Son of God.*

Then I waited to see what Aaron would do. Would he turn to Christ as well? Would he go back to sleep as though nothing had happened? I worried that I might have to say goodbye to my fiancé, that we might be on different paths from here on. Though it was only moments, it felt like eternity—and then Aaron asked Jesus to save him, too. And we were free.

Continuing to Surrender

And we lived happily ever after? Not really. Thanks be to God, the demonic oppression ceased. But converting to Christianity proved inconvenient and downright offensive to some friends and family. Some people assumed our

change meant we thought we were “better” people. We also had to figure out how to own a house together and not have sex again until marriage. God gave us a gracious pastor who led us through that quagmire.

Since getting married, Aaron and I have seen the traditional wedding vows play out in real-time. We’ve faced seasons in which we had to humbly rely on the financial generosity of others. We’ve welcomed three beautiful children, but also lost a baby to a miscarriage during which I almost died. I developed epilepsy in 2012, which has meant I often cannot rely on my own body and brain.

Even so, there’s so much in the Christian life that gives me joy. When our 5-year-old sees a piece of garbage in the street and declares, “I bet that person isn’t going to heaven” (true story), I remind her that access to heaven has nothing to do with being good and everything to do with God’s goodness. I know that when I pray, God hears me, because he responded to my prayer the night he saved me and has continued to provide for us through the years. I can see how much he loves me when I reflect on the experiences he has led me through, slowly, sometimes painfully shaping me into his image.

And I no longer have to strive for perfection, because Christ is my perfection. Even though I don’t always like it, his grace is sufficient, and I would be foolish to disagree.

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