

Why I Came Back

Love does not categorize. – Irma Zaleski

WHEN I WAS A FRESHMAN in college I abandoned my faith. The students in the Christian organizations were no less prone to backbiting and foolishness than anyone else. In fact, their claims about being *not perfect, just forgiven* made them look all the more spiteful and ridiculous. Of course I never got to know any of them personally. Not my crowd. Fancying myself the calm reasonable sort, I adopted the point of view that the whole Christian thing was probably not correct. I didn't feel angry; I was just taking a good look around, and *God made the world good then we fucked it up so God sent Jesus to die for our sins and if you dont believe it then too bad for you* seemed, on balance, a fairly unlikely explanation for life, the universe, and everything. So I just let it go.

And in fact, I wasn't angry at all. I was just young. Which is to say, I was obsessed with appearances. And so I changed my appearance. I grew my hair out past my shoulders and wore torn-up jeans and abandoned my shoes. I played in extremely loud rock bands and hung out with guys who smoked a lot of marijuana. We spent a lot of time sitting in clouds of yellow smoke and listening to Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention. And this leads me to the real reason I avoided those Christian students. It was not an issue of reasonableness, but of identity. My real problem was: They dressed like my mom always wanted me to dress. Everything neat and clean and tucked-in. You got the idea that their theology had the same characteristics. That's how I saw them because that's how I wanted to see them. It granted me exemption from having to take them seriously. It gave me a free pass to engage fully in my new mission: "finding myself."

Nothing wrong with that; searching for one's identity is a fully praiseworthy activity. I recommend it heartily. So I looked around for awhile, and when I transferred to Furman University after my sophomore year I was still on the hunt for my skittish and evasive self. And at Furman I had some help. A number of Baptist students offered their assistance. I didn't even have to ask for it. I recall one conversation in particular. I was sitting by myself at a table in the student center when David walked up. He was a friendly fellow who

reminded me of Radar O'Reilly from M*A*S*H.

"Hi Paul. May I sit down?" he asked.

"Sure. Have a seat, I said.

We chatted for awhile. I knew what he was up to. He was known for helping people like me and I was anxious to get down to business. Starting it myself was not an option, so I waited. Eventually he began.

"Let me ask you a question," he said.

"Okay."

"What do you think is the bigger sin: stealing a pen, or murdering a child?" This was a new angle. It took me by surprise.

"Uh, the murder?"

"No, that's not right. It says in the Bible that all sins are equally reprehensible before God."

"That's crazy. I don't believe that."

"But it's true. It's in the book of..."

"That's not what I mean," I countered. "Please don't start with the Bible. Start with the actual three-dimensional world. Join us. It's nice and colorful out here. The consequences of the murder are huge. Think of the parents' pain. They would be scarred for life. No one cares if you steal their pen."

"God does."

"Maybe. But not as much as he cares about a child's life and a family's happiness."

"Any stain on you is unbearable to God," he said.

"Too damned bad for me."

"No, see, that's where Jesus comes in..."

It went on. I eventually got fed up and left.

This kind of conversation is not helpful for anyone. And the reason is not because he was pushy, or because I was sarcastic, or because our logical jumping-off places were miles apart. It was futile because it was not grounded in a relationship, and it was hurtful because

it fed our disconnection. In our insistence on winning an argument we regarded one another as functions, not as people. We hid behind each other. We were both too young to see it. I was a just a poor lost soul in his fantasy world, and he was just a convenient religious nutjob in mine. So long as there were preposterous Christians like him, I figured, I could keep my distance from anything that went by the name of God, and I could do it with integrity.

My distance remained until September of my senior year. That's when I met Elizabeth, a Christian I could not laugh at. And it didn't matter how she dressed or what her theology was, because on the day I met her, sitting in the same room where I had spoken with David a year earlier, she looked directly at me and did not see a poor lost soul or a physics major or a freaky rock musician. To this day I don't know what she saw, but there was not the vaguest whiff of an agenda. This immediately shut down the rather prominent smartass component of my persona. You should know how frightening that was. I longed to be her project, but her interrogation of me was wordless. I panicked. Over the next six months she stood still, waiting as I skittered frantically toward her and away from her and back, over and again. It was painful for her, but she held out. In the level gaze of her love I eventually calmed and in June of the following year we were wed in a traditional Christian ceremony.

Not long after our discussion about pens and murder, David's theology underwent a transformation. So far as I know, reason and its disciples had nothing to do with it. Instead, it was the Appalachian Trail. He hiked every one of its 2,160 miles, solo, and came out a changed man.