

## World turned right side up: An atheist's story of finding God

I found God at the Dallas Love Field Airport when I was on a business trip. The trip had been a particularly trying and stressful one. As I was sitting at the gate waiting for my flight home, my mind was broiling with thoughts, reliving the day and trying to work through the challenges I had been faced with. I found myself sitting in my chair with my eyes closed and my hand resting on my forehead. I couldn't bring peace to my thoughts.



In an effort to stop thinking about these things, I picked up my Bible and began to read. I was still in the early books of the Bible. I was studying Christianity and [reading the Bible from the beginning](#) with a goal of supporting my girlfriend in her beliefs. Compromise is an important part of any relationship, and I saw this as a good place to try to meet her half way.

I was still struggling with the subject matter. But this time, I noticed something different. I noticed that, as I read, my head had become quiet and that I felt happier. I sat, staring at the same page for a long time trying to process this. Why should reading a book that I didn't believe and wasn't particularly enjoying make me feel happy? As an atheist, I had no rational answer for that question.

I grew up in a completely non-religious household. My parents don't believe, nor does my sister. My aunts, uncles and cousins all live without faith—only my Grandparents were saved. This never seemed odd to me. Never did I feel that anything was missing in our home as a child. I was blessed with a very loving family, and while my sister and I didn't always get everything we wanted, we never failed to have what we needed.

After visiting church with my mom as a teen, my youthful conclusion was: "Religion is weird!" I don't recall what it was I expected to find those first times I went to church, but I know I wasn't expecting it to feel so stiff and ritualistic. Something felt false. After a few weeks, my conclusion was that I wasn't really missing out on anything by not going to church. At an age where you start discovering who you are as an individual, I had firmly placed myself in the "agnostic" camp.

As I grew older, I began to notice differences between my religious and non-religious friends. My peers that were agnostic or atheist were noticeably more accepting of those who were different. I remember my beliefs began to change after one particular conversation with one of my close friends at the time. He was outspoken about his faith and one day we found ourselves in the middle of a

theological debate. I expressed my concerns and reservations which ended with him asking me, “Well what is it that you believe?” My honest answer was, “I’m not really sure.”

This answer was met with a scoff of disbelief and he quickly ended the conversation. I remember I could see his judgment in his face. I was a fool that wasn’t worth his time talking to. That conversation marked not only the end of our friendship, but the end of my agnosticism as well. From then on, if I were asked, I would label myself “atheist.”

At the airport that day, as my mind raced, a memory popped into my head. In my youth I had once attended a lecture by the world-renowned astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. A question someone had posed to him at the end of that lecture came back to me. At the time, the question had seemed exceedingly silly compared to the subject matter he had covered. The question was: “What do you think it would be like to meet an alien?”

What I can recall of Tyson’s answer was interesting. He said that we tend to imagine such an event as a meeting of equals. They would teach us some things and in turn learn from us—an exchange of ideas and cultures. This idea was silly to him. He asked us to consider that the difference between a man’s brain and a chimp’s brain is relatively minor, but what are the effects of that difference? From that difference stem advanced societies, skyscrapers, highways, art, music, the space program.

We can teach a gorilla sign language and communicate with him or her. We can probably learn from that experience. But is it a conversation among equals? What then would a conversation with an alien be like? They would have to be significantly more intelligent and advanced to reach us. Why then do we think it would be a conversation on our terms?

As I recalled this answer, I found myself asking, “What then would it be like to meet God?” Even as a non-believer, I could see clearly that if God existed and was the creator of all things, he would not be just a little more intelligent than us. He would be infinitely more intelligent.

In my youth and ignorance I would hurl challenges at God: “If you’re there God just make yourself known.” When I didn’t hear an answer—“Here I am”—I took that as proof of his nonexistence. But why did I think that communication would happen on my terms? Why wouldn’t it be just like what I found myself experiencing sitting at that airport? A subtle, yet significant change in the way I felt.

As I contemplated this, the sudden onset of peace and happiness in my mind, the revelation of this seemingly random memory from my past, I found that I did believe that this was it. That God had just reached out and touched my thoughts and that the end result was happiness that quickly turned into a flood of emotions and joy. I called my girlfriend to relay what had just happened, fighting back tears as I sat in that crowded airport. Tears that only a moment earlier I would have struggled to justify or explain.

After 37 years of being a non-believer, one day God was there. And it turned my world upside down—or right side up.

So what was life like as a new believer? In a word, confusing. In the beginning, I really struggled with my identity. After so long as a non-believer, who was I as a person of faith? Who did I want to be? All my role models in life had been either people without faith or people I looked up to despite faith. There was no one in my life I could model as that good Christian man I would want to be. In short, I didn't yet know enough about Jesus to look to him in those moments.

My relationship with the Word, on the other hand, grew very quickly. I devoured the gospels and Paul's letters in the New Testament. My struggles with the Bible were mostly gone. Where before I found everything to be confusing, I now found a wealth of interesting information about the world I was waking up to. And what a world it was. Everything was different. I couldn't rely on my prior knowledge of the world to justify what I thought about anything. Everything needed to be reevaluated against the newfound knowledge of a world created with purpose and intent.

My girlfriend, while thrilled with the fact that I had found God, was also, I think, a little overwhelmed with the prospect of potentially having to be my main source of answers about God and Christianity. She introduced me to her aunt who is a [retired officer in The Salvation Army](#). At that time, The Salvation Army wasn't the church we were attending. I knew absolutely nothing about it, but I couldn't have asked for a better person to speak with in those early days.

Her aunt was kind and well-spoken. The love she had for Jesus was so apparent in her words and her actions. What struck me most was that she had a way of challenging my thoughts that was so kind. I remember her posing this question to me: "If you want a healthy mind, you read books and study. If you want a healthy body you go to the gym and exercise. What do you do to take care of your soul?"

I couldn't answer her. When I was an atheist, I didn't give a lot of thought to the soul. But looking back on my life, I couldn't help but think about my battles with depression and the struggles I had to justify the source and cause. Could it be that I simply hadn't had anything in my life to uplift my soul?

As my faith grew, my girlfriend and I started to struggle with the churches we were attending. While the sermons were good, we didn't feel any sense of community with the people. My girlfriend, who had grown up in The Salvation Army, felt that it was time to go back.

I was pleasantly surprised at the experience. The people were very friendly. The Captains made us feel welcome from the first day. The church was also so diverse—so different from my youthful experiences of non-acceptance of those who were different. We couldn't have been happier with the church experience. We had found our home.

My girlfriend pushed me to start [attending Bible Study](#) to help with my seemingly endless list of questions. I'll never forget the experience the first time I attended. In my mind, I imagined that others would look at me and somehow just know that I was new to faith. I feared they would label me a phony and tell me I didn't belong. I knew these fears were irrational, but that didn't stop them from running through my mind. When I walked into the room, I found I was the first to arrive outside of the corps captain leading that day's session. To this day, I don't think he knows what an impact his simple kindness and small talk had in easing my mind.

That first session, I don't think I said a word. Instead, I sat, listened and absorbed. There were people in the session who I'm sure didn't have the same opportunities I had. Possibly who didn't have the same education—or even maybe the same career success. But what I saw and heard that day were people who were able to speak from the heart so passionately and eloquently in a way I could not. It was an incredibly moving and eye-opening experience.

It would take me a while to learn to be careful how I compared myself to others in this way—everyone has their own, personal faith journey to walk. But on that day, I realized that I was a child in this new world and had a lot to learn.

Since that time, I feel I've grown a lot. Each day I feel I get a little bit closer to God. That our relationship grows a little stronger. Things that were very difficult are starting to get easier. Praying was something I really had to work at. While I'm sure everyone has their own [struggles with prayer](#), it took me a long time to learn to speak to God from my heart. Hearing God also took some practice. I'm blown away by how often I feel God speaking to me, whether by revelation in reading his Word, or by conviction or correction. This is something I wish I'd had exposure to earlier in life. I still find myself getting very emotional when I feel God working in my life.

There are still things I struggle with. There are many times I have felt humbled before God. But submitting to God I find challenging. After so many years of valuing self-reliance, I find it hard to give things up to God. Letting go of the pride I take in my own achievements will take time, I think.

I also struggle with my relationship with my non-religious family. The person they raised and the person I have become are fundamentally different. It can leave me unsure how to act and struggling to ensure I don't backslide into old habits when I'm around them. As my faith grows, I find myself slowly changing. I understand better than ever the analogy of being reborn. The Bible calls for me to *put off my old self* (Ephesians 4:22) and to *put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator* (Colossians 3:10).

I thank God for continuing to pursue me in the face of my ignorance and skepticism. I'm grateful for his love and the gift of faith he saw fit to bestow on me. I'm thankful to him for giving me a wonderful partner who teaches me more about love every day. I'm thankful to him for bringing me to a wonderful church family, which I'm honored to be a part of.

I pray that I didn't hurt anyone in my ignorance or cause anyone to stumble in their faith. I would ask the forgiveness of those I judged harshly and whom I met with unkind words. I pray that God gives me the strength and the opportunity to help others who are struggling to find their way to him.

### **Do Good:**

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