



I am the only child of two loving parents. Mom was a Hispanic Catholic and Dad was an intellectual atheist. I was always thinking and questioning.

My parents said the first word I spoke was, “why.”

They didn’t really have answers, but they never made me feel guilty for questioning things.

I never got satisfying answers going to church with Mom, or from any person of faith. On an intellectual level, religion and church just seemed like a cultural practice. When I was nine or 10, I announced to my parents that I didn’t believe there was a God, and that I didn’t want to waste an hour on Sunday going to church as if there were.

I went through some difficult experiences in my early teens — it was a rough, dark time (as evidenced by my suicidal writings). I believed that truth was dead, God had never lived, life was filled with pain and death was the end of life. I thought of myself as just a realist at first, but then emotion added fuel to the atheism fire.

Once I hit high school I was an argumentative, adamant atheist. I was good with words, and unfortunately debates are often won by skill more than truth. I argued that if there is a god or are gods that hold power, then why isn’t that god or those gods using that power to prevent pain in the world?

I WAS A TEENAGED ATHEIST

by alicia britt chole as told to scott abbott

We moved to a new town my junior year and I encountered, for the first time, faith that caught my attention. On the first day of school, two girls — Shawn and Christy — wanted to greet the newcomer. They introduced themselves and announced that they were Christians, but they had no idea what they were getting themselves into. I just turned to them and asked, “So do you want a cookie? Keep your faith to yourselves.”

But they ignored that and decided to be my friend whether I liked it or not. The girls repeatedly invited me to church, and gave me Bibles until I had a stack at home. They tried to talk to me about their faith, but didn’t have any answers for my questions. It was frustrating that people believed so strongly in things they explained so poorly. In the end, though, it turned out that what I really needed wasn’t answers. I needed something that would touch me much deeper — past my mind.

Shawn and Christy gave me the present of presence. They intended to be my friends and were very active in growing that friendship — lunchtimes, studying and going to each other’s houses. Just like God was with them, they were with me. They got close enough to me long enough that, because God is, His realities started echoing through their humanity. Something deep inside of me awakened.

Eventually I was drawn to them — still annoyed — but drawn. Still, I wrote papers about the foolishness of faith and threw them on Shawn’s desk, and she would go home crying. I had anger inside about God not ending pain in the world, so I was brutal with any person of faith.

I graduated high school with my life unraveling — I realized I didn’t have total control. Six weeks before going to college, I visited an old friend and her mother, who walked with Jesus. My friend’s mother, out of pure mercy, told me who God is. She said, “God’s always known your name. He’s counted every tear. He’s always been with you. He’s calling you, and He’s drawing you.” She invited me to church, and — maybe because Shawn and Christy had worn down my resistance — I gave in.

As soon as the congregation (which seemed to average 899 years old) of this tiny church lifted their voices in worship, it was as if my whole existence was suddenly interrupted. A presence surged through me as if I

were standing under clear, clean, powerful waterfalls. There was no doubt that this was Jesus. It was overwhelming to me that God, whose existence I denied, still wanted me. I felt enormous, unconditional, purifying love. I didn’t know theology, but right then and there I knew Jesus lives, He is God and He loves me.

I contacted my high school “missionaries,” Shawn and Christy, to let them in on my awakening. Then I went to college and God immediately put me in touch with Chi Alpha Ministries, where I was taught for four years by the campus pastor. Through our weekly meetings, she anchored my incredibly emotional experience in the unchanging Word of God. Ever since, God’s presence has been a really precious gift for me, but the Word of God is what has been the compass and anchor in my life.

If Jesus lives in you, the greatest thing you can offer an atheist or freethinker is faithful relationship. Through proximity, God will shine through you, and there is something about the presence of Jesus that can awaken anyone.

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