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Finding Faith in the Academy: Religious Exploration as a High-Impact Practice for Quarterlife Students

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FINDING FAITH IN THE ACADEMY: RELIGIOUS EXPLORATION AS A HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICE FOR QUARTERLIFE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues for the inclusion of religious exploration among the commonly accepted list of high impact practices at institutions of higher education. In the last decade, colleges and universities have turned to high impact practices to bolster positive student outcomes in retention, graduation, campus involvement, and deep learning. In its basic forms, religion and spirituality have always been one way that humans have made sense of our most elemental questions: Who am I? What is the purpose of my life? At a time when faith and religion have become wedded to increasingly narrow ideological and political positions, student affairs professionals and educators are in a unique position to reclaim the meaning-making power of religious stories and help students examine their fundamental assumptions about their identities and purpose.

To this end, I examine high impact practices as transformational experiences, and discuss how both general religious literacy and individual religious practice transform a student's college experience and their life beyond. Using scholarly personal narrative, I recount my own quarterlife religious exploration and contrast that experience with what we know about how college students approach faith and religion today. Finally, I make specific recommendations about how to incorporate religious and spiritual learning in our curriculum and open a campus dialogue about faith and its role in the meaning-making endeavors of our quarterlife students.

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To Veronica and Maren, who keep asking me the big, hard questions and who never shy away from the answers. Lastly, to N, who is an answer all by himself.

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INTRODUCTION

> *"It is my position that, particularly in the academy, religion must find an educationally appropriate voice. This is not a voice that panders, promotes, proselytizes, or practices. Rather, it is a voice that students must explore openly for its narrative strength and weaknesses, just as they have with any other kind of "voice" in the curriculum."*
>
> *Robert Nash, Religious Pluralism in the Academy*

In 2018, PRRI, a nonpartisan organization that researches the role of religion and values in American public life, conducted a survey designed to examine American attitudes toward diversity and pluralism in the years following the election of President Trump. Among measures related to race and ethnicity, political party, and sexual orientation, some interesting (but perhaps not unsurprising) findings about religious pluralism emerged. Nearly a quarter of Americans seldom or never interact with someone who does not share their religion. Only about half of Americans who do interact with people from other religious backgrounds say that these interactions are somewhat or mostly positive. An alarmingly small percentage of these interactions take place at a school. Regardless of age and religious affiliation, a full 77 percent of Americans believe that Americans are divided over religion (Najle and Jones, 2019).

At the same time, as part of a widespread adoption of so-called high-impact practices, many colleges and universities have implemented programs and courses related to "Diversity and Global Learning." Diversity and Global Learning is one of eleven high-impact practices commonly acknowledged by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The AAC&U defines Diversity and Global Learning as follows: "These studies—which may address US diversity, world cultures, or both—often explore

"difficult differences" such as racial, ethnic, and gender inequality, or continuing struggles around the globe for human rights, freedom, and power" (Kuh, 2008). While one can certainly argue that religion falls firmly into the category of "difficult differences," the AAC&U makes no explicit mention of religion in this area.

Colleges and universities have been eager to promote high-impact practices as a remedy for ongoing challenges related to persistence, retention, graduation, and student involvement. However, the metrics we use to define and operationalize positive student outcomes often mask the reality that our students face on the ground. Our students have come of age in an era of high partisanship and divisive rhetoric. They often face significant mental health challenges that are exacerbated by high-pressure academic environments and a sense of social isolation in their campus life. Many face crippling debt in order to finance their educational endeavors, and a tough job market when they complete their degree. And in the context of all of this overwhelming background noise, they must still grapple with the same questions that have always troubled quarterlife students: Who am I? What is my purpose? What do I want to do with the rest of my life? What is my responsibility to other people? Which values are most important to me?

In its most basic forms, religion and spirituality have always been one way that humans have made sense of these elemental questions. We also know that religious exploration can be a transformative experience in a number of important ways. I hope to show that the transformative impacts of religious exploration align well with the goals of high-impact practices in higher education, and that religious exploration deserves its own category within the framework of high-impact practices. Given that only a small

percentage of Americans report interacting with people of different religious backgrounds at school, colleges and universities are in a unique position to reclaim the meaning-making power of religious exploration and make a significant impact with even small efforts to shift these numbers.

Methodology

To tell the story of the rise of high impact practices in higher education, I review current literature and research to investigate commonly recognized practices and their purported benefits for students. To examine the role that faith and religion already play in the contemporary student experience, I turn to a number of recent polls from the Pew Research Center and other organizations that illuminate the shifting religious identities of quarterlife students and the impact that those identities have on the way they interpret and move through the world. But most importantly, I rely on the method of scholarly personal narrative in order to construct an autoethnography of my own quarterlife religious exploration and compare it with the journey faced by our students today.

Scholarly personal narrative, a writing genre created by Robert Nash, aims to "investigate, present, and analyze the inner life of the writer in order to draw insights that might be universalizable for readers" (Nash, 2011). In spite of our attempts to erase or hide our own biases or observations in academic writing, scholarly personal narrative writing acknowledges that an author's experiences always inform their interpretations, whether they make this explicit or not. The four steps of scholarly personal narrative writing—pre-search, me-search, re-search, and we-search—allow writers to draw upon the

lessons they've learned in the own meaning-making journeys in order to connect to broader themes that can be generalized for their communities.

In short, scholarly personal narrative gives me permission to acknowledge exactly where I am at. I recognize my identity as a former Catholic, a spiritual seeker, a religious convert, and a non-practicing Mormon. I recognize that I write this thesis from my community in one of the least religious states in the nation, and I am both a student and staff member at a thoroughly secular institution. I recognize that I am advocating for religious exploration in a political environment in which religion is often wedded to a narrow, conservative agenda and is frequently wielded against others with differing beliefs.

Scholarly personal narrative allows me to share my stories, but it also forces me to confront and acknowledge the experiences of others. I recognize that not everyone has had a positive experience with faith, religion, and spirituality. I recognize the harm that religion has caused to abuse victims, LGBTQ individuals, women and many other individuals and communities. I recognize that many people find matters of faith and spirituality to be irrelevant to modern life, and in many cases to be actively detrimental. At no time do I advocate mandatory religious practice or affiliation.

Still, I believe that religious and spiritual communities can be an important place for us to confront "the danger of the single story," a phrase coined by the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009). In many faith traditions, our creation began with a story, and the collective stories that we tell—both about that creation and since that creation—inform our worldview, our relationships, and our moral conduct. These religio-spiritual stories still matter. They are not irrelevant, even though they may have been

hijacked by various agenda-pushers. Adichie notes, "Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity." I hope to show that providing opportunities for religious exploration and conversation on our campuses can lead to affirming, transformative experiences for our students that shape their college experience and have lasting impacts on their post-college lives.

CHAPTER 1: RELIGIOUS EXPLORATION AS A HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICE

Overview of High-Impact Practices

Recent research on college student outcomes has focused on the merit of high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008). High-impact practices provide marked positive outcomes for students across varied backgrounds, and may include both curricular and extracurricular interventions. To qualify as a high-impact practice, a program must generally include the following characteristics:

1. It requires significant time and effort.
2. It involves shared intellectual experiences with faculty and other students, rather than an individual effort.
3. It requires students to confront different perspectives and practices.
4. It gives students opportunities for frequent feedback on their progress and performance.
5. It allows students the opportunity to apply classroom concepts to real-world settings.
6. It creates conditions that lead to deep, lasting learning (Kuh, 2008; Tukibayeva and Gonyea, 2014).

With these characteristics in mind, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) recognizes eleven high-impact practices: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, ePortfolios, service or community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses or projects.

Since their inception more than a decade ago, colleges and universities have been quick to adopt many of these practices in an effort to boost student outcomes. Institutions of higher education have long sought the magic answer to the question of why some

students stay, persist, and graduate and why other students do not. Although high-impact practices purport to improve less-tangible outcomes like student engagement and deep learning, most colleges seem to be interested in their more measurable and monetizable benefits, like improved retention and graduation rates.

Do high-impact practices actually impact the metrics that colleges and universities focus on the most at the institutional level? This has been a difficult question to answer until now. While interest in high-impact practices goes back at least two decades, widespread implementation on college campuses is a more recent phenomenon. Longitudinal data regarding the impacts of high-impact practices is only now becoming more widely available as researchers turn a critical eye to their claims. One recent study of ten different high-impact practices at four-year public institutions found that they do not have a significant impact on graduation rates (Johnson and Stage, 2018). The study led *Inside Higher Ed* to run a story titled "Maybe Not So 'High Impact'?" (Vulbrun, 2018) and prompted George Kuh, the leading champion of high-impact practices, to issue a strong rebuttal arguing that how high-impact practices are implemented on campuses matters, and mere availability is not enough (Kuh and Kinzie, 2018). Colleges and universities have invested large amounts of money and resources into implementing high impact practices, largely on the recommendations of the AAC&U, so there is fierce resistance to the idea that these practices might not have the impacts that were promised. Still, there is an increasing amount of evidence that the silver bullet that many institutions were counting on to solve their graduation and retention issues may not be effective against the thorny and complicated problem of retention and graduation rates.

There is, however, a growing body of research that suggests that high-impact practices support the kind of less-measurable outcomes that directly relate to students' personal experience, like happiness, belonging, and later civic engagement. For example, a sense of belonging is critical to a positive campus experience for students, particularly for students from underrepresented groups. A recent study shows that high-impact practices had positive impacts on students' sense of belonging even after controlling for different student characteristics (Ribera, Miller, and Dumford, 2017). Another study shows that students who are involved in high-impact practices during college show significantly higher levels of civic engagement after college (Myers, Myers, and Peters, 2017). It is clear that high-impact practices are creating positive experiences for students that have immediate benefit in their campus life, as well as lasting impacts to their lives after college.

Higher education professionals frequently talk about the transformative nature of high-impact practices for students. In the next section, I'll talk more about the how religious exploration creates transformative experiences for students, and how these experiences align with our current understanding of high-impact practices.

Transformative Impacts of Religious Exploration

In this thesis, I consider religious exploration to have two main components: religious *literacy* and religious *practice.* In general, as higher education professionals, we are more comfortable talking about the benefits of religious literacy because this keeps matters of faith and religion neatly under academic wraps. Indeed, religious literacy—even when separated from personal religious practice—has numerous benefits for quarterlife students. The increasing need for broader religious literacy led to the founding

in 2011 of the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School, an organization that provides a number of resources for institutions that wish to implement curriculum related to faith and religion. The American Academy of Religion notes, "Training in religious literacy provides citizens with the tools to better understand religion as a complex and sophisticated social/cultural phenomenon and individual religious traditions or expressions themselves as internally diverse and constantly evolving as opposed to uniform, absolute, and ahistorical" (2018).

One only has to look at the current political and cultural moment to see the benefits that religious literacy may have in acknowledging and embracing differences, reducing political and interpersonal conflicts, and fostering a more informed worldview. In fact, one recent study found that religious fundamentalists and people who were highly dogmatic were more likely to believe fake news, and the inability to discern fake news was related to a failure to be actively open-minded (Bronstein et al., 2018). In 2008, a survey of employers found that they considered nearly 50 percent of college graduates to be not well prepared in the area of global knowledge and learning (Kuh, 2008). If one of the goals of higher education is to create engaged, productive citizens, then broad religious literacy curriculum is crucial to this endeavor.

Where higher education professionals are less sure of themselves is in the area of religious *practice*. Religious practice is seen by many to be an entirely private affair. For most institutions, the fear that offering opportunities for religious practice on campus would appear to condone or even mandate practice remains strong.

What do we already know about the impacts that religiosity has on student outcomes? A number of articles optimistically touting the resurgence of religion on college campuses in the first decade of the 2000s led to a number of fascinating studies about the role that religion plays in students' academic and social lives. (We will see in Chapter 3 that this enthusiasm was unfounded, with more current research showing a significant decline in religious markers among contemporary college students). Students who frequently participate in "spirituality-enhancing activities" (like worship, prayer, meditation, or attending services) participate more broadly in campus life (Kuh and Gonyea, 2006). They attend more campus events, are more likely to do community service, and are generally more satisfied with college than their peers. Some of the benefits of participating in spiritual practices carry over from earlier spiritual habits developed in adolescence to young adulthood. Attending weekly religious services or meditating daily in one's youth leads to greater life satisfaction in one's twenties, with young adults who were regular religious practicers being less likely to be depressed and less likely to engage in risky or unhealthy behaviors like smoking, using drugs or having a sexually transmitted disease (Chen and VanderWeele, 2018). Both in and out of college, people who attend religious services at least monthly are more likely to join other kinds of organizations, including nonreligious ones. Fifty-eight percent of actively religious people in the U.S. participate in at least one non-religious volunteer organization, compared to just 39 percent of religiously unaffiliated people (Marshall, 2019).

While the health and social benefits of religious practice are well established, how does religious practice impact academic achievement? One recent study indicates that

attending religious services once a week or more has a positive impact on students' grades and overall GPA (Mooney, 2010). It's important to note that students' self-reported level of religious observance did not have any impact on GPA—it didn't matter what they *thought*, it mattered what they *did*. In other words, it did not matter how devout a student considered themselves, or how weak their perceived beliefs, it simply mattered whether they actually showed up. This could be reassuring to many students who feel currently alienated from some aspect of their faith.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of religious practice to student success measures is the way that it connects students to *other* resources and indicators of student success. In an important way, regular religious practice seems to be a gateway habit to a number of other high-impact practices that research has shown to positively influence student achievement. While the benefits to students' health, wellbeing, engagement, and general satisfaction are well documented, more research is needed to close the loop between religious exploration's impact on these areas and their relation to academic achievement.

Religious literacy helps students understand members of their community, and religious practice helps them feel connected to that community. Both elements are necessary when we begin to consider religious exploration as a high-impact practice for our students. When students aren't tied to dogma but are still seeking meaning and connection through practice, this can open up interesting opportunities for religious exploration on campus. In the chapter to follow, I use my personal experiences with religious exploration during college to illustrate other ways in which this kind of spiritual

investigation and engagement has truly transformative impacts as well as significant challenges for quarterlife students.

CHAPTER 2: PERSONAL LESSONS FROM QUARTERLIFE RELIGIOUS EXPLORATION

Two years ago, I shuffled in to a seminar room at the University of Vermont in the late afternoon for my first class of the spring semester. A handful of students were already there, mostly English graduate students, chatting and joking around with an ease and volume that displayed their intimate familiarity with one another. The professor had not yet arrived, and as more students trickled in, I caught snippets of conversation that were laced with mild apprehension. Students asked each other: *Why did you sign up for this class? Have you ever read this book? This is going to be weird, right?*

I had my own apprehensions about our course, though at least I could claim to have previously read the text. We were enrolled in an English course titled "The Book of Mormon," and I am a Mormon convert. Sitting in that room felt like a small miracle in a number of ways. The course was a first-time offering by a professor of early American literature, who believes that the Book of Mormon is the most important literary text to come out of that time period. Mormon Studies is an academic discipline that has only recently gained traction and legitimacy, and as a non-Mormon, Professor Fenton acknowledged that she was an unlikely candidate to focus her research on this text. Additionally, on the face of things, there was absolutely no audience for this course at the University of Vermont. There are currently zero Mormon faculty, one Mormon undergraduate student, and zero active Mormon graduate students on this campus. Mormonism aside, Vermont is one of the least religious states in the nation overall according to a recent Pew Research study (Lipka and Wormald, 2016). Offering the course

and enrolling in the course took a leap of faith on the part of both the professor and the students. Could we continue that courage during the semester?

To start our class, Professor Fenton acknowledged the challenge of teaching the sacred text of another religion as an outsider to that community. She likened her task to walking on a tightrope. At that moment, I realized that I was doing the same, both in and out of the classroom. As I stated above, there are zero active Mormon graduate students at UVM, where I am currently a graduate student. While I identify religiously as Mormon, I have not been an actively practicing my religion for several years. The Book of Mormon was a text that changed the path of my life, and I hoped that the chance to study it in an academic setting would allow me a chance to see it with fresh eyes. To me, the best books are nearly living things, capable of growing and changing with you over time. Some well-loved books from our youth may not stand up to later rereading as an adult. Some books become richer and more poignant from the vantage of later life. Is it possible to return to read a book as if for the first time? To answer this question, I told myself that I would not disclose my religious affiliation in class. I hoped to blend in with the first-time readers and see if the words still spoke to me in the same ways that they used to do.

In many ways, the class had brought me full circle. The last time I undertook such a systematic study of religion, I was also in college, nearly two decades ago as an undergraduate. I spent my junior year of college studying abroad at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. While in Ireland, l was living with strangers and traveling solo, and I keenly felt the separation from my family and friends stateside. I was unenthusiastic about my studies and uncertain about my future. In the thousands of miles between me and my

loved ones, the normally quiet questions and doubts in my head grew louder until they crowded out everything else. I was in the midst of a meaning-making crisis, and I was ripe for thinking about the biggest, most basic questions of life.

Looking back at that time from the vantage point of middle age, I recognize that the questions that haunted me were the same questions that are shared by many quarter-life individuals. *Who am I? What is the purpose of my life?* After many years on the educational treadmill, earning all the right grades to be able to attend a top institution as a first-generation college student, I was burned out. Set adrift from my normal academic demands, I sought something more than just intellectual stimulation. For the first time in my life, I began to focus on the spiritual aspect of these questions of purpose.

Like many of my peers, I was deeply skeptical of organized religion. I had grown up nominally Catholic, with two parents who still bore the scars from their own Catholic upbringings. We were Christmas and Easter Catholics, only attending services on those two holidays, with an occasional church picnic in the summertime. My parents half-heartedly sent my brother and I to weekly catechism lessons for a brief time, but they were easily persuaded to drop the whole endeavor once it became clear that they might be called to account for their own absence in church. I did not understand the differences between the many denominations of Christianity, and I certainly did not think that any of them had a monopoly on the truth. My small, Midwestern community was not religiously diverse, so I had no exposure to non-Christian religions of any kind. Our Midwestern practicality also precluded any ideas of a spirituality that was untethered to religion.

But in Ireland, in a place where no one knew who I had been before, I was free to follow the promptings of my spirit in my search for answers. Unconstrained by the narrow identities that I had accumulated, life opened to new spiritual possibilities that I had not yet considered. But who would I be? And more importantly, what would I believe?

In *The God Who Weeps* (2012), Terryl and Fiona Givens write that the call to faith

> is the only summons, issued under the only conditions, which can allow us fully to reveal who we are, what we most love, and what we most devoutly desire. Without constraint, without any form of mental compulsion, the act of belief becomes the freest possible projection of what resides in our hearts . . .The greatest act of self-revelation occurs when we choose what we will believe, in that space of freedom that exists between knowing that a thing is, and knowing that a thing is not.

What we choose to believe reveals a great deal about us. Any sense that we make of our lives depends upon these core beliefs. Whether we believe that we are the sum of our biology, a cosmic accident, or created by either a punishing deity or a merciful god, we must choose some framework that answers the question of why we are alive.

Most quarterlife students arrive at college in a situation much like mine. They are living independently for the first time in their lives, sometimes far from home and family. The identities that they had so carefully crafted for themselves are stripped away in the initial anonymity of the college campus. These students are often building themselves again from the ground up. The selves that they reconstruct often center on their major, their dorm, their sport, their fraternity or sorority, or the first friends that they encounter. But none of these points of connection fully satisfy or speak to the spiritual yearning behind the question of "Who am I?"

Increasingly, colleges and universities have abdicated their ability and responsibility to students to be a place of self-discovery, in favor of training that is measurable, monetizable, and job-focused. Robert Nash and Jennifer J.J. Jang (2015) write:

> As university educators, we witness first-hand every single day the need for our students of all ages, who represent a multiplicity of identities, to have something coherent to believe in, some centering values and goals to strive for. They are on a quest to discover a meaning to live for. They, like us, need strong background beliefs and ideals to shore them up . . . The quest for meaning has the potential to unite, rather than divide, an entire college community, no matter how different its individual constituents might be.

Spiritual and religious exploration is fundamental to our meaning-making endeavors. Quarterlifers cannot settle their largest, most pressing questions without first defining the underlying spiritual framework that they choose to operate within. While I personally believe that religion and spirituality can play a key role in defining one's purpose, I do not presuppose that religious faith is the default mode. As Terryl and Fiona Givens (2012) write, "There must be grounds for doubt as well as belief, in order to render the choice more truly a choice, and therefore the more deliberate, and laden with personal vulnerability and investment. An overwhelming preponderance of evidence on either side would make our choice as meaningless as would a loaded gun pointed at our heads."

In this chapter, I will share my own story of quarterlife religious exploration and conversion. In doing so, I'll show that spiritual exploration is a critical task for quarterlife students *regardless of the conclusions they may reach*. This spiritual self-discovery gets at the heart of the fundamental question "What is the purpose of my life?" When this individual journey meets religious practice, it begins to speak to the question "What is my

responsibility toward others?" Understanding the basic answers to these questions from a number of faith perspectives is essential for making sense of current world events and our place in a global community. Religious literacy is one outcome of an educational model that focuses on the whole student, and to achieve this goal means reassessing the ways that we approach religion and spirituality on the secular campus. Lastly, I'll look beyond the quarterlife to consider the personal adjustments that may be required long after our first experiments in spiritual meaning-making have been concluded.

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In high school in the 1990s, I had a close friend who was Mormon. Kate was one of only two or three Mormon students in our 1200-student school. Like teenagers of every generation, we toed the line between loudly proclaiming our individuality and carefully blending in with our peer group. It was okay to be *unique*, but it was not okay to be seen as fundamentally *different*. Because of this, Kate often hid her religious affiliation and was reluctant to answer questions from inquisitive friends. We spent the years of our youth together crying over boys, worrying about deadlines, laughing over our own absurdity, and dreaming of our futures. Though we shared the most intimate parts of our lives with each other, I could not have told you anything about Kate's religious beliefs. To be fair, I could not have told you much about my own either, unless it was snarky putdowns of organized religion that I parroted from sources that I thought were cool.

Though Kate and I attended college on opposite ends of the country (she in Utah, I in Massachusetts), we kept in touch as best we could in between the demands of our new lives. Then one day, I received a call from Kate that sent me spinning. Kate was getting married. She had met a young man a few months ago—one that I hadn't met or even yet heard about—and they would be married that summer. Kate was 20 years old.

I was bewildered, and frankly disheartened. Marriage was perhaps part of the plans that we laid out for ourselves over Ben and Jerry's ice cream in Kate's childhood bedroom. But certainly not this soon. Could she have possibly thought this through? How would she finish college? Did she really even know this guy? How could someone make a lifetime commitment to another person at an age when an existential crisis could be provoked just by trying to decide what to eat for dinner?

In spite of my reservations, Kate moved forward with the confidence of a woman in love. She invited me to be a bridesmaid in her wedding, and I happily accepted. There was just one catch: Kate was to be married in a Mormon temple in California, and as a non-Mormon, I could not enter the temple and witness her ceremony. This was the first time in our lives that our personal relationship and Kate's religious beliefs collided.

That summer, at Kate's home in Wisconsin, her parents and I sat together around their kitchen table. They spoke to me about how dear I had been to their family throughout the years, and how embarrassed they were that they hadn't shared their religious beliefs with me before now. They invited me to learn more about their church, but they were clear that the choice was entirely mine, and that my response would in no way affect our continued friendship. These were some of the kindest, most generous people I had ever

known. I was delighted to accept an opportunity to learn more about them and their beliefs. At no time did I entertain the possibility that I might also learn something about myself.

For the next several weeks, with the help of my friend's parents and some eager young missionaries, I learned the basic tenets of Mormonism. We spent pleasant evenings sharing stories and talking about the answers to questions that I hadn't even yet thought to ask. My default mode of jadedness and sarcasm was met with good humor and earnestness. I was not used to talking with people who kept a straight face when discussing God's plans, and I marveled at their simple faith. At the end of that time of study and contemplation, I looked them in the eyes and said, "Thank you for sharing your beliefs with me. I am glad that this brings meaning to your lives. But this is simply not for me."

One month later, I traded the flat farms of Wisconsin for the perpetually gray and drizzling skies of Dublin. My short primer on Mormonism had awakened new questions in me about the existence of God and whether there was more to life than my current aimlessness. My loneliness as another face in the crowd of my new city brought my need for connection to a higher power into sharp focus. I was a girl in search of a spiritual home.

Having crossed Mormonism off of my list, I availed myself of every opportunity that was offered by Trinity College and the city to search for a satisfying spiritual practice. I met with Chinese students who taught me the principles of Falun Gong, a practice that combines meditation, exercises similar to tai chi, and philosophy. These students risked much in sharing their practice, as the Chinese government had that year declared Falun Gong a heretical group under its broad "anti-cult" legislation aimed at tamping down any group that they deemed a threat to the government. After leaving during the holidays to

visit their homes in China, many of these students did not return, and we feared for their safety. Their courage was a stark reminder that in many parts of the world, religious and spiritual affiliations have genuine consequences for their practitioners. I asked myself, what would I be willing to risk my life and livelihood for?

Later, I began to attend meditation sessions led by a Buddhist monk. He taught me the practice of metta bhavana, which is the cultivation of loving kindness. The practice begins by contemplating the self, then a close friend, then a neutral personal for whom you have no feelings at all (for example, the cashier at the grocery store), and lastly an enemy or a person that you strongly dislike. Each step is accompanied by a mantra of well wishes for each individual. Out of the four groups, one might naturally expect that it is most difficult to engender feelings of loving kindness toward your enemy (or perhaps in the case of particularly self-loathing individuals, the self). Curiously, in practice the most difficult person to feel loving kindness toward is the person to whom you are completely indifferent. Such a practice calls to mind the question from Christian scriptures: Who is my neighbor?

Around campus, I attended a number of philosophy lectures that introduced me to the great thinkers. In one memorable lecture, the speaker likened humanity to an airplane that is only ever used as a cart. We know for certain that our vehicle has wheels, so we use it travel by ground from place to place. But we don't realize its full potential—we never quite realize that it can actually *fly*. This idea caught my imagination, and I knew that this feeling of unrealized potential was important to my quest of spiritual meaning-making.

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"He who'd believe the plates of brass
Of Mr. Smith must be an ass."
--Marginalia found on a copy of the Book of Mormon, 1831

The story of Mormonism begins with a young boy named Joseph Smith, who lived in the early 1800s during the Second Great Awakening, a period of intense religious revival in America. New York state was a particular hotbed of revivalism, and dozens of different sects vied for converts in his town of Palmyra. Joseph was deeply confused about which sect he should join. He remembered a verse from the Bible that read "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him." With this in mind, he went to the woods to pray in private to ask God directly which church he should join. His answer, received in a vision, was radical and unexpected: none of the churches had a completeness of God's truth, or the full practice and organization of the ancient church established by Jesus Christ during his mortal life. The heavens were not closed, the scriptural canon was not complete, and there was a great work for this poor, uneducated farm boy to do. The answer he received set in motion a chain of events that has culminated in a worldwide religion with millions of adherents.

Quarterlife individuals like me at that time can easily identify with Joseph's feelings of confusion, yearning, and the sense that we lack the information we need to make the best decisions (though our feelings do not usually result in a brand-new religion!). Even though it is a time of life marked by possibility and potential, we can feel hamstrung by our unanswered questions about the purpose of our lives. Worse yet, quarterlife students may feel that they lack a guide that can help them find the answers they seek, since all they see are friends and classmates doing the same clumsy search for themselves. For religious

and spiritual-minded individuals, the temptation to take these concerns directly to God, like Joseph did, is strong. But without a fundamental spiritual base, we may not recognize the answers when they come.

As Avi Steinberg jokes in *The Lost Book of Mormon* (2014), "Happy people don't think about angels. And they certainly don't see them. As for holding extended conversations with angels, that's only for the truly, irretrievably miserable." While angelic visitations may not have been on my agenda, my remaining months in Ireland were a period of some of the richest meaning-making of my entire life. I believe this was possible precisely because this time was so personally difficult and humbling, removed as I was from family and friends, stripped bare of my other entrenched identities. My spiritual search was beginning to yield fruit, and my studies were combined with a nascent faith that began to open my mind to the possibility that my Mormon friends had been on to something after all.

I am embarrassed to say that I knew that I had found truth long before I had the courage to do anything about it. (I wish to be clear here: when I say "truth" or "true" in the passages to come, let it be understood that I mean to say what is true for me. I do not close the door on other religious possibilities, and I recognize the goodness of many different faith practices.) In fact, as the answers to my biggest questions began to materialize, I willed them away. As I made new spiritual discoveries, my desperate yearning turned to cautious excitement, and then quickly plummeted to anxiety and desolation when I realized the practical implications for my life.

Converting to Mormonism required nothing short of a radical life change for me. Frankly, I was terrified. I would never drink alcohol again, or sleep with a boyfriend. I would have to pay tithes, and spend my usually lazy Sundays upright in a pew. I would have to clean up my sailor's mouth, and remove my nose piercing. To a young college student, any one of these on its own could be a dealbreaker. Worst of all, I would be a Mormon, one of the misguided sheep I had previously secretly thought were deluded, with all of the cultural baggage that being a Mormon would entail. I could already hear the snickers from my friends and peers. I was coming to know a God of unfathomable grace and mercy, but this God expected things of me in return, things that I wasn't sure that I could give him. I suddenly wanted to unknow all of the new things I had learned, and give back every spiritual gift that I have been given. I pulled the breaks on my quest.

As anyone who has ever read any book or watched any movie can tell you, this never works. What is seen cannot be unseen. Life became like one of those moving walkways in the airport—you step on and keep walking, but even when your legs stop you're still being carried forward. I had a strong sense that a patient God still waited for me, and I cursed my cowardice.

My hands trembled as I dialed my parents' phone number. I needed to tell them of my intention to join the Mormon church, but I knew better than to expect support. As I mentioned earlier, my parents had both grown up Catholic, but they no longer practiced their religion in any meaningful way. However, even though various parts of Catholicism dissatisfied them, they lacked the religious imagination to seek another way. Their childhood religion was too ingrained. I took a few deep breaths. I knew that my decision

to convert would seem to come out of the blue for them, since they had not been around to witness my explorations and gradual changes. I mentally prepared for the worst.

I spoke with my mother first, and was met with silence. One thing I hadn't expected was how personally she took it, and the undercurrent of anger and betrayal that came from her. In imagining another way to practice religion, it was clear that to her I was rejecting my upbringing. Somehow, by choosing to convert to Mormonism, I was rejecting her. My father looked at it from a more practical standpoint. He considered it likely that I was simply a naïve young girl who had gotten in over my head, that I couldn't possibly actually want to do this, but I had made a commitment that I was trying to honor. He said, "You know this isn't like the army, right? You don't actually have to go through with it." Then he resorted to sarcasm: "You realize you're joining a church that's responsible for the Osmond family? I mean, think about that."

Soon my parents settled on an explanation for my behavior that has given comfort to parents from time immemorial: it was just a phase. In a few short months I would be returning home to the states, they told themselves, and I would forget about all of this nonsense. As I began to tell more close friends and family about my plan to convert, I learned an important lesson. In general, people expect you to be who you have always been. When you attempt to make any kind of a sizable change, people somehow manage to see it as a reflection on them. Newly sober people often talk about what a complicated act it is to just simply not have a drink while out with their friends, because inevitably their former drinking buddies see that choice as a judgment on their own behavior. People who

are trying to lose weight often find themselves unintentionally sabotaged by those who are closest to them.

But what is it in particular about religious or spiritual exploration or conversion that is so frightening and threatening to us? After all, college is often seen as a time of exploration of many other kinds. Popular media attempts to satirize the modern liberal campus as a place where students change their majors, their sexual preferences, and their political allegiances as often as they change their clothes. However inaccurate that perception may be, there is still a sense that college is an appropriate time to try out new ideas and new identities before one's "real" life in the "real" world begins.

Such permissiveness does not usually extend to religious exploration. One reason for this is simple: many sects and religions believe in the primacy and singularity of their truth claims. In other words, for religious adherents, there is one true church, and it is the church that you happen to already belong to. If you already belong to the one true church, what does it mean to for someone to walk away from it and choose a different path? Such a simple and personal act destabilizes the whole community. After all, if one person finds truth somewhere else, it becomes easier to consider that perhaps there's nothing exceptional about your sect after all.

Additionally, we unfortunately live in a time when organized (particularly Christian) religion has become synonymous with a narrow, conservative political ideology. This ideology is usually not well represented on secular college campuses, and it was not shared by me and my friends. While my parents' concern was faith and tradition-based, in converting to Mormonism my friends often believed me to be betraying my liberal politics.

In truth, I frequently shared this feeling. My conversion was threatening to them because it was seen as not just a religious act, but a political one as well. They did not understand my decision, though our conversations made me see how hungry they were to talk about their own faith and doubts. After living and studying closely together with eighty women in our residence for four years, it was surprising to realize how little we knew about each other's religions, and how seldom we actually talked with each other about the things that mattered to us most. This provoked some rewarding conversations, but I also frequently felt called upon to explain myself again and again to each new peer who had questions or had heard about my unlikely choice through the grapevine. I frequently felt like I was on display at all times, and that I had to be a model representative of Mormonism even at time when I was new to the faith and just figuring things out for myself. I felt that any screw-ups, no matter how small, would only serve as confirmation to my family and friends that I had taken the wrong path and would throw my whole religious journey into doubt.

When our closest associates can't be relied upon to initially understand a big life change, where can we turn for support? On our campuses, where can our students turn for this kind of counsel and aid? Usually, we must step outside of our own circle to find this, and seek a place that is connected to our new lifestyle. The newly sober person may visit Al-Anon, the dieter may seek out Weight Watchers. For a new religious convert, the only place to find this support is in the gatherings of the new religious community itself. Converting to a new religion is a bit like being dropped on an alien planet with no knowledge of the inhabitants or their customs and modes of communication. There is so much new information to take in. No one prepares you for the sheer amount of jargon to

learn, or the many embarrassing missteps you'll make in those early days. Without the strong spiritual foundation that long-time members of the community have, there is a real danger to new converts that they will not have sufficient context for some of the new information they are gathering, or they may be simply overwhelmed by it all.

My own transition into the practice of my new religion was indeed a bumpy one. I was baptized as a member of the Mormon church in April 2000 in Dublin, Ireland. Within two months, I left for my parents' home in Green Bay, Wisconsin to spend the summer working at a local paper mill to earn money toward my college tuition. Three months later, I returned to my college in Massachusetts for my senior year. In the span of five or six months, during a critical time in my religious development, I was part of 3 different congregations. Though I may have found my spiritual home, I was still as religiously unrooted as I was before.

This closely mirrors the experience of the students I encounter each day. As part of my work at the University of Vermont, I meet with students who are planning to study abroad to discuss their academic plans in their host country. I also frequently meet with UVM students who intend to take summer courses in their home states or countries, or who plan to spend a semester at a lower-cost institution to help defray the expensive cost of their college tuition. They are by far the most mobile generation of college students we have ever seen. A student who arrives on campus as a first-year student and then spends their entire four years at the same institution is increasingly becoming an exception. While more discussion is certainly needed about the economic exigencies that students face that

require this kind of institution-hopping, one welcome byproduct for students is their exposure to a variety of different modes of education, socioeconomic groups, and cultures.

As we shift our physical locations, it becomes difficult to maintain our sense of belonging to a community, even in our hyperconnected world. While spirituality is an individual pursuit, religion is by necessity a communal one. During the early days of my conversion, I lacked a home base for my religious practice. Luckily, my studies during my long journey had convinced me that this was the right path for me, and I moved forward with purpose. However, I had seen how devastating this lack of early support and connection could be for other new converts. We were like tiny, fragile seedlings, and any sudden cold snap or downpour could cause us to wither or be swept away.

Though my journey to Mormonism had led me through a number of other religions and spiritual practices, I was determined not to be a religious dilettante. Once we have chosen our path, I believe that it's important to have something personally at stake in the game. If we are to believe in a deity that blesses us abundantly, something must be expected of us in return.

Madeleine L'Engle, author of one of my favorite children's books *A Wrinkle in Time*, shared her perspectives on being a Christian artist in *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (1980). She speaks to the necessity of service from both a religious and artistic perspective: "Servant is another unpopular word, a word we have derided by denigrating servants and service. To serve should be a privilege, and it is to our shame that we tend to think of it as a burden, something to do if you're not fit for anything better or higher." As a writer, she recalls another author comparing writing to a huge lake, with

great rivers like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and many smaller drops trickling in. L'Engle says, "I have never served a work as it ought to be served; my little trickle adds hardly a drop of water to the lake, and yet it doesn't matter; there is no trickle too small."

I, too, found service to be an ideal way to both live my new faith and to learn more about it. Once I finally settled back on campus, I found myself quickly drawn back in to a world of classes, homework, deadlines, and administrative demands. All of my work was focused inward, and had no benefit to anyone other than me. One of the unique aspects of the Mormon church, however, is that it is a lay church with no paid clergy. Local congregations (called wards) are led by a local member of the church who is appointed for a few years to be the leader, called a bishop. The bishop receives no compensation for this service, and usually has a day job and a family to take care of in addition to his stewardship of the ward. (In Burlington, the current Mormon bishop is an insurance adjuster.) Likewise, all other local positions in the ward are staffed by volunteers. There is never a shortage of work to be done.

For the first time in my college career, I had something in my life that was focused outward instead of inward. Serving others helped to get me out of my own head, and connected me to the physical community that I belonged to in Massachusetts. Mormon scripture dictates that one of our responsibilities as members of the church is to "mourn with those that mourn, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort." As I shared the joys and sorrows of other members of the community, as I taught and was taught in return, I no longer felt that this place was simply a waystation on the track toward my real future life. I felt seen and validated in the circumstances that I was already in, not for my future

potential. I also could see the direct benefit that my service could have on the lives of others. As I lost myself in the work, I found the fully-realized spiritual self that I had been looking for. If one of the unstated goals of college is to "find yourself," I had certainly done so in an unexpected way.

Robert Nash and Jennifer J.J. Jang, quoting a poll of 76,000 students conducted by the American College Health Association in 2012, noted that "86 percent felt overwhelmed, 82 percent felt emotionally exhausted, 62 percent felt very sad, 58 percent felt very lonely, 52 percent felt enormous stress, 51 percent felt overwhelming anxiety, 47 percent felt hopeless and purposeless, and the rest felt functionally depressed" (2015). The pressure to perform and succeed combined with uncertainty about the future and mingled with financial and personal difficulties is a potent recipe for hopelessness.

I firmly believe that resources for religious and spiritual exploration have their place in the secular university environment to counteract the effects of these feelings of purposelessness, and to root out and eradicate their causes. Spiritual practice gives students a sense of a bigger picture and a long-term vision outside of the narrow focus and immediate stressors of their college life. As students participate in a religious community and learn to serve others, they find a place for themselves within a group of like-minded individuals who are working together for a common purpose. This combination of vision and connection to both a higher power and to other human beings can lead to deeply fulfilling answers to the kinds of existential questions that quarterlife students face.

Gordon B. Hinckley (2002) invited religious seekers to "bring with you all that you have of good and truth which you have received from whatever source, and come let us see

if we may add to it." Indeed, one of the thirteen articles of faith that define the core beliefs of Mormonism states: "We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things."

In my religious exploration and subsequent conversion, I put these invitations to the test. My spiritual suitcase was full of souvenirs from my travels. Joseph Smith was packed away next to transcendental meditation, the Buddha cozied up to Saint Augustine, the *Bhagavad Gita* rested comfortably next to the *Tao Te Ching*. My search for a religious home had certainly led me to believe many things, hope for endless things, and endure a fair number of things. I learned to trust in an expansive and creative God, a God who cared about my tiny triumphs and my secret shames.

I spent a number of fruitful years enjoying the company of Mormons in congregations in Massachusetts, Utah, Wisconsin, Connecticut, and finally in my current home of Vermont. My faith began to grow as I witnessed the transformations of others and put my own spiritual ideals into practice. Christian scriptures liken faith to a mustard seed, a tiny speck that grows into a robust plant with proper care. My plant may have looked more like the scraggly Charlie Brown Christmas tree at times, but I worked hard to nurture and sustain it. Eventually, I married a man who was not a member of the Mormon church, an unorthodox move that excluded me from certain blessings within the church. That's okay, I thought. I already have more blessings in my life than I could have imagined. And besides, wasn't my spiritual quest always a private and solitary pursuit anyway?

Eventually, our two small children began to join me at church on Sundays. Since Mormons do not practice infant baptism, there seemed to be no harm done and no lasting commitment required of my daughters from my husband's perspective, so he happily enjoyed a few precious hours of quiet alone at home while I wrangled two active children in the pews. At two years old, my youngest daughter stood up on the pew next to me during a silent portion of the church service, and cheerfully hollered, "Dammit!" as loud as she could while grinning broadly at the surprised faces of the adults. Her attendance often made it quite clear how much further I had to go in my total lifestyle makeover.

Taking my daughters to church should have been a simple thing. After all, families of any religious persuasion attending services together is so commonplace as to be unremarkable. However, by this point I was still frequently defending and explaining my religion to my relatives and close friends, not to mention my spouse. I felt a peculiar and tender joy to have two people (albeit small, rowdy people) so close to me share in my religious practice. At the same time, I had been so used to seeing my practice as a highly personal endeavor and following my own spiritual whims that I suddenly became hyperaware of the messages that were being passed from the pulpit to my daughters' ears. What were they hearing about their role in the world, and their relationship to a creator that loved them?

I believed, perhaps naively, that if Hinckley's idea that Mormonism could add to whatever truth and goodness you had already accumulated were true, then its corollary would also be true. I believed that whatever truth and goodness one had accrued could also add to Mormonism. In fact, the radical proposition of Mormonism is that the heavens are

not closed, and the canon is not complete. Not only does God still speak to mankind, but he speaks to all of us individually if we are willing to listen. But the trouble with opening the door to the notion of personal, individual revelation is that the door is open to everyone, and it cannot be closed again. While I still believed that the words I found in the scriptures were true, I became increasingly uncomfortable with what I saw as misapplications and misunderstandings of gospel principles. Additionally, as the church grew into a global organization with millions of members and began to exert tighter control on its message, I found there was less and less room for the other kinds of goodness that I had found outside of the church's boundaries.

This seems to me to the crux of the problem for many people who disagree with organized religion. Religions exist on both a macro and micro level. At the macro level is the institutional church or religion, usually with a leader or group of leaders who determine policies for the whole body and govern accordingly. But religion also exists at the micro-level, in the lived experiences of its members in individual congregations. At the macro-level, my religion began to be involved in political work that I disagreed with, and instituted policies that were hurtful to some members of the community. But at the micro-level, in my own tiny congregation, my religion was simply a ragtag group of people from all walks of life who cared deeply for each other and who were trying so hard to be the best people that they could be. Which one of these levels is the true state of the religion?

In *Preparing Students for Life Beyond College* (2015), Robert Nash and Jennifer J.J. Jang write, "We believe strongly that the deepest places where one's spirituality comes from is rooted in love, compassion, service to others, forgiveness, understanding, social

activism, patience, making deeper emotional contact with one another, and learning how to live peacefully and harmoniously in pluralistic communities of difference." Here, living within these "pluralistic communities of difference" may entail encountering and acknowledging a variety of different religio-spiritual practices with an attitude of openness and a desire to understand. But what if this community of difference exists within your own religious group?

In 2008, the LDS church joined other religious groups in lobbying for the passage of Proposition 8, a California state amendment banning same-sex marriage. While normally the LDS church professes to be politically neutral and encourages its members to vote according their own conscience, in this case the church appealed to its membership to support the passage of this amendment with their time and money. While the institutional church did not donate money to the cause, Mormon church members were said to be responsible for 33-40% of the total money raised in support of the amendment due to the encouragement of the church leadership. Since that time, the LDS church has published other information to clarify its positions in regard to homosexuality, and after a hopeful period which saw a softening in some of the church's stances, a new policy was instituted that further alienated the Mormon LGBTQ community. In the meantime, a 2016 study showed that youth who are 15-19 years old who live in states with large Mormon populations are at higher risk for suicide (Knoll, 2016). Anecdotally, the Utah press note that this corresponds to the reported increase in the number of suicides and calls to suicide hotlines among Mormon LGBTQ youth.

In 2013, Mormon church member Kate Kelly founded Ordain Women, a feminist organization that advocated for the ordination of women to the priesthood in the LDS church. While the ordination of women may have been the long-term goal of the group, it also served to jumpstart a number of valuable conversations about women's participation and visibility within the church. Though the church's response to this challenge of its authority may have been expected, the response of the membership at large was not. In online forums and public interviews, other Mormons called these faithful women arrogant, ignorant, wicked, selfish, and downright evil. Amy Cartwright, a Mormon woman from Canada who participated in the Ordain Women group, spoke of how difficult it was to see the important contributions that women made to the church while knowing that ultimately her opinion was "unwanted by so many in our faith community" (Stack, 2014). In June 2014, Kate Kelly, the founder of Ordain Women, was excommunicated from the LDS church. I thought of the many times I had prayed for my young daughters, that they would grow up to be strong and fearless and unafraid to use their voice, and I cried.

Though much is made of the rapid yearly growth in membership of the Mormon church, there is evidence that we are indeed losing our children over the cultural issues in which we've placed ourselves (in my opinion) on the wrong side of history. These issues have proved divisive amount the general church membership, and for many like-minded Mormon friends these issues have provoked a crisis of faith and have spurred some to part with the church entirely. In times when you need a spiritual refuge the most, it is demoralizing to find this "community of difference" divides the church more deeply than you thought.

Many other faithful but dissenting Mormons have written moving and poignant pieces about their choices to leave the LDS church. Some have also written about why, in spite of the struggle and the heartbreak, they choose to say. Christian Harrison (2016), a gay Mormon man, writes the following: "As a gay man who understands that my orientation is a gift and not a curse, I've often been asked how it is that I could possibly be part of a Church that so thoroughly misunderstands who I am and my value in the eyes of my Father in Heaven. It's hard, I say. I pray for change . . . but I also pray for patience. I was born gay . . . and I chose to be Mormon. And being Mormon is a choice I make every day. It's not always an easy choice—but it's mine. The Church is a work in progress. Just like me." I honor his words and I echo that being Mormon is a choice that I have made. But my spiritual explorations have taught me that there are other choices out there that I can make, and I may make a different choice yet again tomorrow.

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Occasionally, when I'm feeling particularly disheartened and ungenerous about my spiritual process, I wonder if my parents were right all along. Maybe this was just a phase. I often wonder what special characteristics certain people have that allow them to stay rooted in a single spiritual practice. When I first converted to Mormonism, each day brought a new spiritual discovery, and I felt a hunger to learn as much and as quickly as I could about my new faith. A fire burned within me, visible even to strangers. As my practice unfolded over the years, the things that seemed miraculous became mundane through familiarity, and doubt and frustration found their way through the cracks in my faith. I grew older, and my quarterlife worldview—with its black-or-white, all-or-nothing,

life-or-death attitude—shifted to a more nuanced outlook on life. At the same time, my core adult beliefs solidified. I knew what I stood for. I knew on which issues I had room for compromise, and which boundaries could never be crossed.

While I still identify religiously as Mormon, I am not currently an active member of my church. (Mormons define themselves by activity, with "active" members regularly attending Sunday services, holding a "calling" or job within the church, and participating in other weekly meetings and responsibilities. A person is said to be "inactive" when they do not participate in these things. The term is particularly apt for Mormonism, which is a religion of doing and not just being, and the word "inactive" implies that one could return again to activity at any time.) To be clear, I continue to believe in the vision of a deity and the purpose of life that is laid out in Mormon scriptures. I have found a God and felt called by his power. But what happens after that? What happens when you choose your religion, but it doesn't choose you back? Under what circumstances can you imagine staying involved in a religion in which you feel spiritual community on a local level, but feel utter social and political alienation at the institutional level? How is it possible for two people to read the same spiritual text and arrive at such drastically different conclusions about its application? What does this say about our ability to reach any sort of truth at all?

These are the kinds of midlife questions that may replace the more basic quarterlife questions of "Who am I? What is my purpose in life?" The religio-spiritual answers that we find to these quarterlife questions may need to be revisited, revised and sometimes discarded in the midlife and beyond, and new answers sought for the new circumstances in which we find ourselves. This doesn't mean that our initial meaning-making efforts have

been wasted, or that there is no point to seeking spiritual answers to these questions at all. In fact, I continue to believe that faith communities can be some of the most valuable places to find the compassion, opportunities for service, forgiveness, understanding, and deep emotional contact with others that Nash and Jang speak of. At their best, faith communities can also teach us how to live respectfully in our "communities of difference"—even when that community exists within one's own faith.

Too often, we have wielded our religious beliefs as a weapon against each other, and our stories become muddied by our bad-faith efforts (no pun intended) to seek a common ground. Religion and spirituality become both the sickness and the cure. While religion may be able to respond to crisis, I also believe that it can *provoke* crisis—a productive crisis, in fact. This kind of crisis involves the friction and cognitive dissonance that results when our daily, lived experience does not match our fundamental moral beliefs, or match our vision of who we are meant to be. For some, this crisis may lead them to disconnect from their long-standing religious practice in search of other answers. For others, it may refocus their attention on their spiritual needs and reenergize their relationship with a deity. In either scenario, the results are welcome, as they bring the peace that comes from a realignment of one's beliefs with one's actions.

Perhaps the greatest lesson I have learned in my spiritual exploration, subsequent disappointments, and enduring quest is not about my relationship to God, but about my relationship with others. Marvin J. Ashton (1992) writes, "Perhaps the greatest charity comes when we are kind to each other, when we don't judge or categorize someone else, when we simply give each other the benefit of the doubt or remain quiet. Charity is

accepting someone's differences, weaknesses, and shortcomings; having patience with someone who has let us down; or resisting the impulse to become offended when someone doesn't handle something the way we might have hoped. Charity is refusing to take advantage of another's weakness and being willing to forgive someone who has hurt us. Charity is expecting the best of each other." It is true that this is maybe a lesson that I could have learned a number of other ways. But my connection to a deity allows me to view this responsibility in a more poignant way. After all, if an infinitely patient creator is willing to overlook my numerous faults and inadequacies, I can be reasonably expected to do the same for others.

The Greek word agape is often used to distinguish this kind of love—charity, or Godly love—from philia (brotherly love) or eros (sexual love). Agape is a transcendent kind of love, an unconditional love that is not subject to the same whims as philia and eros. It is my belief that all three kinds of love are necessary for a fulfilling, meaningful life. When our quarterlives are spent in search only of the latter two forms of love, we miss out on an important source of connection, support, and centering as we weather the dramatic ups-and-downs that seem to occur almost daily during these tumultuous years.

"Christian love is not romance, affection, and sentimentality. It is transgressive, a love that disturbs and destabilizes as much as it binds and connects . . . Love unplugs us from our original organic communities (families, circles of chosen intimate friends) in order to inscribe us within a larger community," Jacob Baker (2011) notes. What this kind of love does not do is provide or produce certainty. A desire for certainty was the ultimate goal of any number of my quarterlife questions. Now, as I enter my midlife, certainty

seems neither possible nor even desirable in the face of life's vagaries. I do not find this idea disturbing in the least. Instead, it allows me to do exactly what Gordon B. Hinckley counseled all along: to collect what goodness I could find, whatever the source, and find other things that can add to it. The spiritual work I had done in my quarterlife years created a foundation that I am continually adding to, which gives my life a spiritual richness that I would not have gained otherwise.

In the Bible, the apostle Paul tells Timothy, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." Numerous other Christian scriptures testify of the notion of "enduring to the end." To many, myself included, the word endurance here connotes a continual struggle, something that one must slog through to reach one's goal. People have to endure a root canal, or a 12-hour shift at work. We don't have to endure a day at the beach, or a pleasant visit with a friend.

But perhaps a more fruitful way of thinking about spiritual endurance is in the context of the endurance training that athletes go through for a long-distance event. Endurance athletes build their stamina gradually, and their training involves days of fast, short bursts of activity as well as days of longer, slower, sustained effort. Equally critical to their training and wellbeing are days of rest. These athletes know the expression "It's a marathon, not a sprint" in both figurative and literal ways.

As we run our spiritual marathon, so too will we experience days when a certain insight knocks us off of our feet, or an unexpected blessing appears at a critical time. We will also see days when we curse the skies, plead to be heard, and question everything. More often than not, the days will simply pass without much more than a hurried, rote

prayer at the end of it. However, when we weave spirituality and religious practice into the fabric of our life, we begin to understand and appreciate the daily effort to maintain a connection with a higher power so that we are able to call upon that power in the times that we need it most. Keeping the faith—whatever faith that may be—means holding on to the hope that our lives have meaning beyond our imagination, and that we are worthy to take part in the richest experiences that life has to offer. I can think of no more important lesson for us and our quarterlife students to learn.

CHAPTER 3: THE PATH FORWARD: CURRENT TRENDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Millennials, Generation Z and the Middle Way

It has long been a truism that young people are less religious than older people—we tend to skew toward religion as our days become numbered. While the spiritual experiences and faith backgrounds of our current students may share some similarities with my own quarterlife religious exploration nearly two decades ago, evidence suggests that Millennials and the current Generation Z may some have unique characteristics in terms of faith and religion.

Much has been made of a recent Pew Research Center study that shows that the fastest growing religion in the U.S. is "none," and the statistics are clear that to a large extent, Millennials are driving this phenomenon (Pew, 2015). Along with Generation Z, they face crippling student debt, a world where homeownership is largely a dream, alarming news about climate change, and an environment in which they largely cannot afford to marry or raise a family. It is not surprisingly then that they are concerned about social justice, and they are no longer willing to fight the same culture wars that their parents have been fighting to the neglect of more pressing concerns.

In 2018, the New York Times invited young evangelicals to comment on the relationship between their faith and their politics just before the bruising midterm elections (Dias, 2018). They received 1,500 responses (from all states except Alaska and—tellingly—Vermont). Alexandra Beightol, a twenty-two year old from Florida, described how her parents pulled her out of Smith College, my alma mater, after she confessed to rethinking the anti-gay theology of her church. She remembered thinking, "God is going

to have to forgive me. I am not going to die in this culture war." Curtis Yee, a twenty-two year old from California, noted, "It's been frustrating to see people in my church community not engage, particularly on those issues which the Bible seems to speak about directly, like racism and sexism." The respondents paint a picture of a generation whose political views are not as tightly wedded to their religious views as their parents, and who demand that their faith traditions engage with issues of social justice and inequality.

These young adults are increasingly finding a middle way between devout observance and religious denial. For some, this may mean taking aspects of their faith that they find redeeming without feeling obligated to accept all of the trappings of their religion in a wholesale way. For others, this middle way has become an entirely alternative path. An illuminating study titled "How We Gather" describes the ways in which young adults like our students have turned to distinctly non-religious organizations to fulfill the same basic functions that religious membership used to provide (Thurston and ter Kuile, 2015). Researchers Thurston and ter Kuile examined ten organizations—including CrossFit, SoulCycle, and Juniper Path—and identified six common themes that have helped these organizations begin to supplant traditional religion for their participants. The six themes—community, social transformation, creativity, personal transformation, purpose finding, and accountability—are an appealing blend of personal improvement and social responsibility, and the language used by these organizations is frequently evangelical. In discussing the findings, ter Kuile noted, "These things are actually religious. [We] should treat these institutions as religious options that people find. That's a difficult thing to hear

if you are a church or for other denominations. At the same time, it's exciting" (Layman, 2015).

Though I am no longer a quarterlife individual, some of my own recent crises of faith have occurred in the same social environment in which our students are steeped. I offer the following personal experience to shed light on the some of the difficult issues our students face as they attempt to find a spiritually satisfying practice that also aligns with their political and social worldviews.

Why I Leave

"Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn."

Matthew 13: 24-30

Allow me to re-introduce myself. I am a tare—at least, that is likely how I would be seen by many of my co-religionists, and indeed by other Christians of various denominations. As a group, we are extremely fond of the Biblical parable of the wheat and the tares found above. In this story, tares are weeds that are introduced into the master's field. As the young plants begin to emerge, the tares are left to grow with the wheat until the harvest. One LDS writer says the following about this story: "The point of the parable is that only God knows which people are wheat and which people are tares. We don't

know, and until the harvest, we can't know. We are not charged with separating the wheat from the tares, and when we try to do so, we are usurping God's job and doing it poorly to the detriment of [our people]" (The Exponent, 2018).

But this doesn't stop us from trying. In fact, I think it may be our favorite pastime. We are so quick to label others who have different politics, ask different questions, or sin differently than we do. And of course we do this utmost certainty that we are the righteous wheat who will reap a marvelous reward on that harvest day.

Where perhaps we may have done this judging more silently in the past, the anonymity of the internet has brought our hypercritical impulses out in the open. Several months ago, the hashtag "sifting" was trending on Twitter, with many Mormons using that forum to discuss recent changes in church policies and the attendant criticism that the church faced from some of its own members. A sizable number of Mormons declared that these controversial policies were simply doing the work of God, sifting out the weeds from the true believers. For those who questioned them, the message was clear: You are not one of us. There is not room for you here. Any questioning of the status quo is dangerous, and cannot be tolerated.

It is true that many Mormons spoke out eloquently in defense of those whose faith was suddenly on shaky ground, and many encouraged people to follow Christ's example in loving one another. But the loudest voices kept up their drumbeat of judgment, exclusion, and rigid obedience at all costs. Had I encountered this online discussion earlier, it likely would have marked a turning point for me away from my church. But as it stood,

it simply deepened my disappointment. You see, I had already allowed myself to be "sifted" several years ago.

* * * * * *

"Don't go." Those were the first words out of my bishop's mouth as he sat me down in his small office. He had called me in to talk after hearing about my recent difficulties. My husband had an affair, and our marriage was ending. In the face of my obvious distress, the bishop began to tell me how many divorced women he had seen leave the church, and how important it was that I wasn't one of them. I knew that I wasn't just a number to him, but I was still struck by how tone-deaf our conversation was. What I needed was genuine emotional and spiritual support, and what I got instead was an admonition to be sure that my actual life didn't get in the way of my church participation.

I knew my bishop to be a good hearted man, and I don't fault him for his response. After all, Mormon bishops are laypeople, volunteers who have no formal training in counseling or pastoral care. In fact, Bishop Benson was an insurance claims adjuster by day. I am sure he was as uncomfortable in this situation as I was. I found myself trying to assure him instead, smoothing away the awkwardness as best as I could. I told him that I wasn't going anywhere, and in that moment, I didn't intend to. But our brief conversation opened up a crack in my spiritual armor that had been threatening to break open for some time. I wondered why so many divorced women walked away from the church. Was it the constant rhetoric about the importance of families? Were they seen as damaged goods? What messages were being sent that led to their decision to walk away? What support was missing that made their continuing practice unsustainable?

Like many other religions, Mormonism is organized in a patriarchal structure. All worthy male members hold the priesthood, a power which is intended to be used in the service of the congregation. Still, this lends men in the church an authority that women lack. LDS author Kristine Haglund (2018) has written powerfully about the structural sexism of the church, noting that as a matter of bureaucratic fact, a functional Mormon congregation can be constituted without women. "Structural sexism communicates damaging messages, even when it is not motivated by chauvinism or misogyny," Hagland notes.

As part of my assigned responsibilities at church, I taught a class of nearly a dozen teenaged girls. The curriculum of the class was mostly set by the church, but there was some latitude in the way that I presented the material. As I began to ponder the messages that I was communicating to them, I grew disheartened. Hagland writes, "[T]he goodness of the individual men in my life—my dad, my Sunday School teachers, my bishops and Stake Presidents—had sheltered me from the effects of a sexist structure." But I didn't want these girls' spiritual lives to be subject to the benevolence of individual leaders. I wanted them to have spiritual power and authority of their own. Teaching them brought me to an important realization: I wanted that for myself, too.

In this case, as in so many areas of our lives, representation matters. Yes, I saw many women performing important work and critical service in my congregation, but it was always under the direction of a male priesthood holder. I saw women ministering to each other with great care and compassion, but then have to call upon a man to provide an official blessing. I was raising two growing daughters who I encouraged to be kind, strong,

and responsible. I had grown so accustomed to certain church practices that they no longer raised an eyebrow for me. I was able to justify things in my grown-up mind, and trust myself to parse things in the right way, but I couldn't trust that my girls would be able to do the same. I began to examine our church experience through my daughters' eyes, and I found it sadly lacking.

And then came Kate Kelly. Kelly, a human rights attorney and Mormon feminist, launched the group Ordain Women in 2013. As its name makes clear, the group promoted the ordination of women to the priesthood in the Mormon church. More broadly, the existence of the group led to important conversations about the role of women in our faith. Even women who were not ready to advocate for ordination for themselves nevertheless began to identify some of the small, pernicious cultural practices that restricted women. Why didn't Mormon women wear pants to church? Why didn't women offer prayers during the churchwide General Conferences? Why couldn't a woman be the president of the local Sunday school? Women began to question "the way we've always done things" and started examining our history to see when and how some of these practices became justified. In ways large and small, women began to demand increased visibility—not the visibility that comes with being placed high on pedestal, but the kind of visibility that comes from having real power in an organization.

In 2014, Kate Kelly was excommunicated from the church. Even though I already had one foot out the door of my faith, I was heartbroken. I recall breaking down in tears when I heard the news. High-profile excommunications seemed like a thing of the past, not something that happened in the modern, more progressive church. Kelly's

excommunication signaled a sharp departure from recent rhetoric that assured believers that there was room for everyone in big-tent Mormonism. Mormon social media was divided. Many members cheered the results, and were quick to tell Kelly not to let the door hit her on the way out. Others quietly grieved as another small piece of their spiritual foundation fell apart. The church's decision was extremely painful to me, but it was the heartless responses of so many of my co-religionists that proved the fatal wound. How could anyone cheer when one of their fellow believers leaves the church? How could they *encourage* it?

Issues surrounding women in the church weren't the only reason I left. "Were I ever to leave the Church, it would (very likely) be over social issues," Kevin Barney, a blogger and lifetime Mormon who was descended from early Mormon polygamist pioneers on both sides of his family, has written (2015). His fear is well founded. In the years that have followed Kate Kelly's excommunication, the church has faced growing criticism—both internal and external—for its introduction of harmful policies regarding LGBTQ members at a time when Utah's suicide rate for LBGTQ youth has soared. The church has also found itself in the midst of controversies regarding its earlier history of racism and its current handling of sexual assault claims. In response to these claims, many individual church leaders have counseled patience, openness, and forgiveness. But at the same time, the institutional church has responded with further retrenchment. In a cold interview with the Salt Lake Tribune (Stack, 2015), one church leader declared that the church doesn't "seek apologies, and we don't give them."

My personal religion is one of loving my fellow man, and I believe that there is room enough for all of us in our faith, no matter what point we may be at in our spiritual journeys. I believe that this love, fellowship, and care is at the heart of Mormon faith—but it's in the practice of it that we fail. These are the questions that preoccupy me now: Why do we insist on making our common table smaller and smaller? Why do make God's job harder by circumscribing his power?

* * * * * *

Robert Nash (2001) writes about six types of religious stories that we tell ourselves about our faith and our religious identities. He identifies one of these stories as that of the wounded believer. I believe this characterizes my current religious disposition in part. However, for many, this narrative is often marked by a struggle to justify belief in a loving God in the face of so much pain and suffering in the world. My flavor of the wounded believer story is directed not at God, but rather at my church. I simply cannot bridge the gap between the marvelous doctrines of love, compassion, fellowship, and forgiveness that we espouse, and the ignorance, judgment, and exclusion that we actually practice.

In this sense, my wounded believer narrative collides with another one of religious stories that Nash identifies: the activism narrative. "Religio-spirituality makes the most sense . . . whenever it tells a story of human rights and social transformation; whenever it invites believers to criticize existing structures of power and privilege," Nash writes about this narrative. *This* is the gospel I believe in, one that challenges us and our human limitations and constructs. *This* is the example I take from Christ, casting out the

moneylenders in the temple, speaking with prostitutes, communing with the outcasts. This was the promise that my religion gave to me upon my conversion.

Mormonism's entire premise is a radical reenvisioning of Christianity. Instead of the limits on scriptural canon that are imposed by other faiths, Mormonism promises more of everything—more scripture, more revelation, more knowledge, more of a personal relationship with a loving God. Its founder, Joseph Smith, was murdered by a mob while imprisoned in Illinois. The Mormon people are the only group in the United States to have an extermination order issued against them by a state government. Our history is exactly one of human rights and social transformation. It is exactly about dismantling existing structures of power and privilege. Our religion exists only because of the work of activists and pot-stirrers. Joseph Smith wrote from jail, "We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion." As the church becomes more mainstream and its power increases, it fills my heart with sorrow to see it replace the old harmful power structures that it fought against with newer, shinier, but equally problematic structures.

Twice a year, the LDS church holds a weekend-long General Conference with sessions that are broadcast to the church around the world. This is a time to hear counsel from church leaders, conduct church business, and receive updates on new initiatives. This October, I watched some of General Conference from afar. For the first time I felt more like an anthropologist than a believer, studying the behavior, translating the symbols. The speakers were mostly all older, white men, with just a few women and even fewer people

of color. One of the leaders, Elder Oaks, gave a talk that reaffirmed harmful perceptions about the place of LGBTQ people in the church. In a session intended for women, church leaders encouraged women to embark on a 10-day social media fast—right before the critical midterm elections. They did not ask men to do the same in any other session. After a while, you start to think this can't be a coincidence anymore. They *mean* to be doing this.

I used to think that the idea of the church being run by literal elders was a selling point. (The current president of the LDS church is 93 years old.) They were experienced, they had seen so much of the world and of life, and had plenty of wisdom to impart. But now I see the ways that they hold onto the past, and can't connect with their current membership. Milennials are leaving the church in droves, and Mormon parents are struggling to transmit their religion to their children. These men cannot answer the new questions that face our young people. Increasingly, I find that they also cannot answer the questions that have arisen for me as a woman who is approaching middle age.

For a long time, I thought I could change the church from the inside. This was extremely naïve. Like any large international organization with many layers of power, no one could hear me from my place in my small congregation. The only people I would be preaching to would be the local members, who are a motley group of people who are simply trying their best to be good and do good. I know that they would accept me however I am. It's the institutional church that I have such difficulty with, and their policies trickle down to local congregations in slow, insidious, and sometimes hidden ways.

Recent polls show Americans leaving organized religion in increasing numbers. Some have welcomed this shift toward secularism, thinking that it would lessen the broad cultural conflicts that we have over issues like gay marriage and abortion. But as a recent article in The Atlantic notes, our growing secularism is also making our partisan fights more brutal: "As Americans have left organized religion, they haven't stopped viewing politics as a struggle between 'us' and 'them.' Many have come to define *us* and *them* in even more primal and irreconcilable ways" (Beinart, 2017).

This idea used to be enough to keep me in the church. I wondered what my church would look like without people like me, people who are invested in finding a middle ground and who want to make space at the table for everyone. It turns out that it looks just like a church whose members will happily have conversations about sifting the wheat from the tares, with utter certainty that they are the wheat. The thing is: I don't feel like a tare. I'm not sure I'm the wheat either. Sadly, I will no longer be there to find out.

Case Study: The Book of Mormon as Literature

After sharing the difficult experiences and hard questions I grappled with in the previous section related to my continued faith journey, I wish to highlight an experience that occurred directly in the context of a higher education institution to show how religious engagement and exploration in the academic sphere can affirm our students' personal experiences and help them to ask old questions in new ways. In Spring 2017, I had the opportunity to participate in a course on the Book of Mormon that was offered by the English department at the University of Vermont. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the fact that the course was offered at all was a small miracle, and it came at a time when I was

interested in revisiting and re-examining the text that had been at the foundation of my religious conversion. This course serves as an excellent case study for the kind of religious exploration for which I am advocating, precisely because its subject matter is viewed with such open skepticism by both non-religious and religious people alike. In theory and on paper, the course had the potential to be a disaster, but through both the enthusiasm and careful guidance of Professor Elizabeth Fenton and the willingness to engage on the part of my classmates, the course became a model for how faculty and students might approach complicated religious issues in the classroom.

By all accounts, ENGS 330 "The Book of Mormon" appears to be the first literature course outside of the state of Utah to investigate the Book of Mormon. In an interview about the course with Joseph Spencer on behalf of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (2018), Elizabeth Fenton talks about the leap of faith that it took to offer the course in the first place. Other academics had warned Fenton that the book has "no value for nonbelievers" and was not appropriate for academic study. Additionally, the master's program in English at UVM is fairly small, and students have limited time in which to cover their specific academic interests, so an extremely niche course on the Book of Mormon would be a tough sell. Lastly, UVM is a secular, liberal university, and students were likely to be wary or disdainful of the subject matter.

Instead, the seminar was surprisingly the top choice of students in the program among several other potential topics that had been proposed. The class got off the ground in large part due to the existing relationship between Fenton and her students. The faculty/student relationship is critical to the success of a course like this one. Because of

their previous interactions with Fenton, students knew that they were in good hands during the semester, and could trust that the classroom experience wouldn't go off the rails. Fenton notes, "That was one of the best parts about this experience: the students were never skeptical about the project; they were all in from the beginning."

Another element that was critical to the course's success was finding an approach that did not require students to assess the truth claims of the text. The class prioritized reading the actual text of the Book of Mormon first without critical commentary so that students could begin to form their own sense of the book without interference. Fenton writes, "My goal was to talk about the text—not an idea of what the text must be, given its history, or a caricature of its claims. In those first few weeks, I was willing to go wherever the students wanted to go, as long as they were talking about the text itself."

Focusing directly on the text helped to limit student impulses to try to litigate the "truth" of the subject or to discuss the appropriateness of belief in such a text. Grounding the discussion in respectful but still critical inquiry allows students to gain traction with the material regardless of their own religious tradition or lack thereof. Fenton shares her admonition to students regarding respectful discussion: "You don't know what the person next to you believes, and you definitely don't know what that person's grandmother believes." Simply by enrolling in the course, we were implicitly agreeing to take the Book of Mormon seriously as an object of academic study, and my classmates consistently held up our end of the bargain. Still, having a faculty member model respectful discourse in the classroom and being explicit about this expectation for students can go a long way in setting the tone of the course.

My personal experience in the course was eye-opening as both a higher education professional and as a non-practicing Mormon. In many circles, I had grown used to hiding my religious affiliation because disclosing it even in casual conversation would lead to incorrect assumptions about my beliefs, my political views, or my personal outlook. Additionally, I was already no longer actively participating in my church in any meaningful way, and I wasn't sure if I could or should claim affiliation any longer. This course seemed to be an excellent way for me to approach the material again with a fresh, more mature set of eyes to see what, if anything, I still found meaningful or rewarding in the text.

Though Professor Fenton was aware of my religious background from previous conversations, I decided that I would not disclose my religious affiliation to my classmates during the semester. I made this decision for a few reasons. First, I felt that identifying my religious background to the group would effectively put an end to my personal quest to approach the text as a first-time reader before it even began. Second, as the only Mormon in the course, I did not want the responsibility of being the "model" Mormon. My fellow students did not know any Mormons, and did not have any previous exposure to the Book of Mormon itself. Given my own shaky status within my faith, I did not want my example to be the first and likely only contact that they would have with this religion. I certainly did not feel like a representative Mormon. Additionally, I worried that if my classmates knew that I had a connection to Mormonism, that I would be required to be an "expert" in all things related to the church, its history, and its scriptures. Just a few questions from them would have made it quite clear that I was no expert at all.

Third, I wanted to be taken seriously. I was there to examine the text critically, just as they were, and I worried that my status as a believer would negate any claim to objectivity that I might have. To me, critical inquiry of sacred texts and faith traditions means that they are being taken seriously as a subject worth studying, and this is unequivocally a good thing. Sometimes I am not certain whether we think that believers are fragile or that faith or religious institutions themselves are fragile, but I believe that all of them should be able to withstand scrutiny.

As it turns out, any apprehension that I had going in to the course was unfounded. To their endless credit, my classmates were uniformly kind, respectful, and legitimately engaged with the material. They had no reason to believe that they needed to monitor or carefully choose their language in our classroom discussions to avoid offense, and yet our conversations never deviated from our mutual good faith efforts (no pun intended) to engage with the text on its own terms. Overall, the course showed me what can be possible when faculty and students take a leap together, encounter new and complicated religious texts and histories, and set a tone of respectful inquiry and engagement. It remains one of the highlights of my academic experiences.

Recommendations

In my disclosures regarding my own quarterlife religious exploration, I have attempted to describe some of the common themes that emerge for college students in their meaning-making journeys. I also identified areas where I lacked campus support mechanisms for my ongoing religious study. In the case study for my course on the Book of Mormon, I outlined a successful example of the kind of collaboration between academic inquiry and religious exploration that can create a transformative educational experience for students. With these examples in mind, I suggest a number of recommendations that can elevate religious exploration in the campus environment to kind of high-impact practice that can have positive and lasting effects on students' college experience and their life beyond.

To incorporate religious exploration within academic settings, the American Academy of Religion advocates "encouraging student *awareness* of religions, but *not acceptance* of a particular religion; *studying* about religion, but *not practicing* religion; *exposing* students to a diversity of religious views, but *not imposing* any particular view; and *educating* students about all religions, but *not promoting or denigrating* religion" (2010, emphasis theirs). Though their advice is intended for K-12 educators, its application to higher education is just as relevant. This guideline serves as an appropriate touchstone for any responsible approach to facilitating campus engagement with issues involving faith, religion, and spirituality.

The recommendations I offer below are directed to faculty and student affairs professionals who seek to create curricular and extracurricular opportunities for religious

exploration for their students. In some cases, these recommendations offer practical ways to broadly increase campus engagement with religious issues. In other cases, the recommendations focus on fostering the kind of campus climate that can sustain the difficult but rewarding conversations surrounding religious diversity. I recognize that variables like campus size, student demographics, and institutional types may make a difference in how institutions may be able to operationalize these challenging campus conversations. Nevertheless, all types of institutions and student populations may benefit from the recommendations below.

1. *Get buy-in from campus faculty*. We know that the more that faculty place value on an activity and communicate the importance of student participation, the more likely it is that students will participate in an activity (Kuh 2008). Faculty have an important opportunity to set the tone for campus conversation regarding religious matters, particularly because ideally many of these conversations are likely to occur in the classroom. This can be a daunting prospect for faculty in a number of ways. The majority of faculty members are not trained in religious studies, and are likely to come from academic environments that were just as reluctant to engage with religion as we are now. They may be worried about disclosing their own personal views or beliefs, and they may worry about managing the potentially volatile discussions that religious matters can foster. These are legitimate concerns, and not to be dismissed lightly.

When institutions implement other high-impact practices, they frequently offer faculty support their curriculum efforts. For example, when the University of Vermont

implemented a university-wide Foundational Writing and Information Literacy course requirement, it also revitalized its Writing in the Disciplines Program. The Writing in the Disciplines Program works with departments and individual faculty members to identify how intensive writing can be used to achieve learning outcomes across a wide variety of majors. The program offers workshops, individual consultation, planning resources, and a faculty working group that collaborates and shares information throughout the year. A similar campus resources for faculty members who are interested in incorporating elements of religious literacy into their coursework would be invaluable, and may reassure faculty that they are not alone and unsupported when thorny pedagogical problems inevitably arise.

2. *Don't outsource religious discussion on campus to the "experts."* While colleges and universities certainly can and should provide opportunities for students to hear from visiting scholars and invited guests on important topics, institutions should not rely on these experts to be the sole source of engagement with religion to which students are exposed. Token engagement through high-profile but infrequent events is not sufficient. If we are to normalize engagement with religion on campus *and* do so in a way that directly impacts a student's experience, these conversations should be happening in our classrooms and residence halls and anywhere else that students, staff, and faculty interact. Relegating religious matters to the realm of the experts prevents students from feeling like their diverse individual experiences are valid or relevant to the campus discussion, and does not allow for the kind of interpersonal connection and inquiry that these kinds of conversations require.

3. *In fact, eliminate the idea of "experts" altogether*. This statement, though provocative, has a simple explanation. Recall that one of the reasons I wished to conceal my religious affiliation from my classmates was to avoid being seen as representative or even the model version of my religion. In part this had to do with my shameful sense that I didn't even know enough about my own faith to be able to adequately answer the questions of my classmates. In my personal, academic, and professional experiences throughout the years, I have seen how this concern is shared by many people across many faiths and cultures. As fewer and fewer young people remain meaningfully affiliated with the religion of their families—even when they might still identify themselves as part of that religion—it creates a significant gap in the knowledge of their own faith traditions. In short, not only do our students frequently not know or understand the core beliefs of other faiths, they often do not even know the core beliefs and practices of their own.

Just as the majority of faculty members do not have formal training in religious studies, neither do our students. Neither faculty, staff, nor students should be expected to assume the role of an expert in campus activities related to religious exploration. Relieving the pressure to automatically know everything about your own faith tradition can eliminate much of the anxiety that students may feel in these kinds of discussions. It can also allow them to feel more comfortable in asking the kinds of basic, elemental questions that can spark productive inquiry.

4. *Build elements of religious exploration into existing high-impact practices.* The methods and goals of religious exploration are well aligned with many of the high-impact practices recognized by the AAC&U. Writing is a powerful tool for meaning-making, and

incorporating curriculum related to religious literacy into a writing-intensive course can facilitate a deep exploration of students' attitudes and experiences with faith and religion. A learning community based on religious exploration would be a productive opportunity to examine a specific topic or a variety of traditions through the critical lenses of different disciplines. One of the most natural and fruitful opportunities to combine religious exploration with another high-impact practice may be in the area of service learning or community-based learning. Visiting local churches, mosques, synagogues or other faith-based institutions allows students to see their classroom teachings come to life. Since religious groups are also frequently involved in local charity and relief efforts, students may have a chance to put their values to action in ways that directly benefit their immediate communities.

5. *Come at the idea of religious exploration obliquely*. While the previous recommendations have focused mostly on curricular interventions, extracurricular opportunities for religious exploration may be even more important for true student engagement. However, given how frequently Americans are admonished not to discuss religion even with those who are closest to us, it's no surprise that not many people will jump at the chance to discuss religion with strangers outside of the classroom.

The Interfaith Center at the University of Vermont has come up with one novel approach to this problem. The center holds monthly student-run "Dinner and Dialogue" events that focus not on a particular religion or practice, but rather on a general concept. One recent event focused on the topic of gratitude, and another focused on the idea of compassion. Centering discussion around a general topic rather than a specific belief or

practice is effective for a couple of reasons. First, topics like these are relatively easy concepts on which to gain purchase, regardless of one's religious background. Every student has an experience related to gratitude that they can share with others. Second, it is important to recognize that religious believers do not have a monopoly on things like gratitude, or joy, or compassion. At their core, these are neutral concepts. Framing conversations around basic concepts like these allows students who are religiously unaffiliated or even anti-religious to share the ways that they understand and experience these concepts outside of a faith tradition.

6. *Make a campus commitment to moral conversation*. In order for productive religious exploration to occur on our campuses, and in order for it to truly operate as a high-impact practice for student success, it must take place in an environment that already committed to constructive engagement with differences. Robert Nash's six principles of moral conversation serve as an important guideline for this practice. They are as follows:

> 1. Declarations of belief are not necessarily conversations about beliefs.
> 2. All views in moral conversation deserve at least initial respect.
> 3. The golden rule of moral conversation is a willingness to find the truth in what we oppose and the error in what we espouse, before we presume to acknowledge the truth in what we espouse and the error in what we oppose.
> 4. Either-or, all-or-nothing thinking is always a threat to destroy moral conversation.
> 5. In matters of religion, we do not live in reality itself. We live in stories about reality.
> 6. Moral conversation is not without internal contradictions, however, as its basic premises tend to lean leftward toward a liberal-postmodern view of the world. (Nash, 2001)

Moral conversation requires generosity. It means being comfortable living with contradictions and finding a home in the nuances and the gray areas. This is critical work

for our students in their own meaning-making journeys during their college years. It is also extremely difficult work. Learning to abide by the precepts of moral conversation in the relatively safe environment of a college campus can act as a foundation for students' civic engagement and personal development after college. We can certainly engage in moral conversation without reference to religion and spirituality. However, as Diane Moore, the founder of the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School notes, "Religions are embedded in all dimensions of human experience and can't be isolated in a so-called "private" sphere of faith" (2018). In other words, our beliefs about faith, spirituality, and religion spill into our daily interactions and color our life experiences whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. When we combine opportunities for religious exploration with the guiding framework of moral conversation, we give our students a powerful tool to understand and embrace difference and make them fully engaged partners in their campus communities and beyond.

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