Publisher’s Letter

June 1, 2000 By Brad Peebles

I was saved when I was 12. One Sunday morning at the Augusta Road Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, while the choir and congregation sang hymns that filled the minutes after the sermon, I got up from my seat and walked to the front of the sanctuary where our pastor, Marion Hare, stood waiting. I told him that I wanted to accept the Lord Jesus Christ into my life as my personal savior. In a focused whisper, Rev. Hare asked me if I believed that Jesus died on the cross for my sins. I said I did. And it was done.

My entire life had led up to that moment. The short but intense sum of my years pushed me forward, compelling me to participate in a public ritual that I didn’t fully understand and to affirm facts and beliefs that were a mystery to me. That day in church, my mother was so proud of me that she cried. And for a time, I wanted to become a Baptist preacher, if for no other reason than to make her happy.

I believed that being saved would make everything better. I knew that I alone did not have the power to cure my mother’s cancer, end my brother’s drug addiction or rid myself of homosexual thoughts, but if I were just a better Christian, maybe God would punish us less. Or—eureka!—I would at least understand the meaning of life, the reason why bad things happened to good people.

Because I had a sense of being gay from as early as I could remember, asking God to make me not gay was a constant prayer. But if He didn’t, I reasoned, it was ultimately meant to be. I now recognize that I was lucky—at home and at church—in that I was not subjected to any extreme religion-based homophobia. Our church was strikingly liberal for what (Baptist) and where (South Carolina) it was, largely thanks to Rev. Hare. He embodied and taught Christian ideals in a way that was inclusive rather than divisive. The message was about love, not hatred. I was aware that for many in the churches and families around me, religious beliefs were entangled with misogynistic, racist and homophobic views. But my own experience of religion was a good one. Church allowed me to feel OK about both my good qualities and my imperfections, to accept my humbling humanity.

I’ve only recently begun to reflect on the faith I had as an adolescent. I rely a lot on my Christianity, even as uncertain as I am. I struggle with it because God, the concept, is so abstract, so unexplainable, so intangible, and because I am so far away in years and experience from Him. I need the psychological safety net that a belief system provides, but I question my ability in that regard. Looking back on being born again, I realize now that it wasn’t so much what I believed in

as that I believed.

Living with HIV makes me painfully aware of the temporary and fragile nature of my body. It causes me to reflect on all the mistakes I've made and on the imperfections of my acts. I am easily overwhelmed by all that. In my darkest moments, I take some comfort in believing that God will never put more on me than I can handle. That I'm up for the challenge of living with this disease and not alone in facing it. And that the more time I spend conflicted about who I am, the more anger and self-pity, shame and regret I layer onto my being positive, the more I avoid taking my drugs or treating HIV as I need to, the less time I spend living. I haven't made up my mind about going back to church, and no, I don't plan to start reading the Bible again. But I'm thankful for the feeling of confidence and reassurance that comes from that leap of faith, and I want more of it.

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