The Dawn of Faith

July 13, 2015 By Jay Squires

The events about which I write today will seem fantastical to some, most likely imagined or conjured. They are the truth as I experienced it. From my youthful discovery of my mother's humiliation at the hands of her church and my college years of learning and despise to the growth of my relationship with God that left unanswered one critical question, this history tells my life's most important tale. Please keep an open mind and consider the effect on me. Then consider for yourself.

The Path to God

In 2012 I hit rock bottom. I was hospitalized near death. I was stabilized then shown the door, unable to walk with important bodily functions working poorly or not at all. My mind was shot. I remember none of that time but when I came to I sat back and evaluated where and who I was.

I did not understand my situation. I was able to sense that I was in bad shape and the fact I was alive was incongruous. I am a smart guy and I wondered how I made it.

Certainly professional medical care played an important role. Nonetheless I could not shake the thought that something else was at play. What could it be?

I was never a religious man. I was not grounded in it. My exposure was intellectual. College comparative religion classes and the "History of Ancient Israel" were my basis for any consideration of God or heaven. I did not disbelieve in God. I simply ignored him and kept him from my mind. This was not unusual in my hyper-liberal gay rights crowd. God was not mentioned at movement cocktail parties.

My mind improved to where I could attempt a logical analysis of the problem. What it yielded shocked me. Thesis: I should be dead. Antithesis: I am alive. Synthesis: A miracle occurred.

This idea did not haunt me. It obsessed me. It would not leave my mind. I continued my analysis. If a miracle occurred, what caused it? With my amateur training in metaphysics I could conceive of only one force that could perform miracles: God.

I decided I could have been wrong in my decades-long disregard for God. This thought fit well with my pressing need for support. I was bereft and the idea that God saved me pleased and heartened me. But I did not know what to do with this idea.

I knew that if one worshiped God one must obey His laws. As an attorney who defended criminals I was not naturally obedient. Then there was the fact that I had no clear idea what God's laws were other than the point that we all were called to love one another. I decided that if there were other laws I would learn them. The commandment to love was a direction I wanted to meet, especially since I understood the obligation to be reciprocal.

I also knew believers prayed to God. It is comical today to remember how much thought and angst went into the form of my prayers. Was I addressing God properly? How long must I wait for an answer? If I forget to say "amen" is my prayer for naught?

Despite these mysteries I began my conversation with God. I followed no doctrinal script. I simply chatted. As I regained my steps God was beside me on my walks through my leafy neighborhood. The roads were sparsely traveled and I walked in the street's middle, to guard against my constant weaving. I spoke to God of many things. I thanked Him for the beautiful days that brought me joy. I told of my growing hopes for health. I thanked Him for each improvement in my gait and for my strength that increased each day. In time I talked about my nascent plans for my future, for when I awoke I had none.

My prayers, if they were prayers, were informal, in the first person. To me it felt like God was a friend sitting next to me at our favorite bar, sharing pints and discussing the day's news.

The days passed and God entered my mind often. He became a constant conversational partner. No, I never heard Him speak. In my mind I imagined several possible responses to my queries. This led me to evaluate each, finally settling on one that felt right, that felt holy even. God became my friend in fact.

I believed then and do today that my relationship with God played a critical role in my recovery. Remember that I was alone, facing the assimilation of a deadly disease. As we all have I was digesting the anger, fear and shame accompanying this particular diagnosis. My life was in ruins and I desperately needed to rebuild. God became my architect. What more can one ask of his creator?

Confusion and Doubt

I joined a church, the Metropolitan Community Church, the nation's leading LGBT-focused denomination. I found the people there to be genuinely caring and welcoming. They took me in unchurched and taught me the ways of a worshipper. It was a wonderfully diverse congregation, an exciting thing in a city still struggling with the scars of a conflict one hundred fifty years before. My friends at MCC made me a home and a place when I felt I had lost both.

God and I continued our conversation through the summer and into the fall. In December the time came for me to be baptized into the church. Baptism places one requirement on the baptized: He must confess that God's son, Jesus Christ, is his Lord and Savior. I did not know if I could do that.

In my life I never had a problem with God. As I have written I simply ignored Him until I came to know Him. However, I had important difficulties with Christ.

When I was a child of seven or eight I learned a terrible bit of my family's history. My mother's first husband was a naval veteran who suffered from terminal multiple sclerosis. After caring for him for

years in the family home she chose to divorce him, I believe with his blessing. My mother had three children and without a husband her life and theirs would be uncertain,

She met my father at his post at Fort Benning, Georgia. I cannot say what occurred during their courtship, but in July, 1960 they married. With this act my mother committed an unpardonable sin.

Her local Catholic church learned of her marriage and began the process of excommunicating her for the sin of marrying while her husband lived. In the eyes of the church she was an adulteress. Her motive to care for her children did not matter. She was convicted and forever barred from the sacraments of the church she had followed since girlhood. My mother was angry and devastated, to my young mind with just cause.

My heart hardened to the Catholic Church and I matured.

I attended school at the College of William and Mary. There in my freshman year I first acted on the thoughts that had crowded my mind. With experience and practice I came to know who and what I was.

Early in my sophomore year with the example of a friend I took my first tentative steps out of the closet. At the same time my world view was expanding as I grew into my studies. I eagerly researched the history of gay America, which was surprisingly well-documented at W&M (or on consideration perhaps not surprisingly). In these books and magazines I learned of those who hated me.

Their variety was terrible but one constant held: Each hater, individual, corporate or congregational based his bias on the Bible, and specifically on the teachings of Jesus Christ. I was then as unfamiliar with Christ as I was with God. This allowed me to too easily apply guilt by association and to accept what I now know was the haters' heresy. I believed Christ hated me and so I hated Christ.

I graduated from W&M and from law school and began my career. Soon I became involved in the battle to secure equal rights and respect for gay people. In time I led this movement in Virginia. We worked to nourish congregations so they would come to respect us. This only increased our allies. It did not reduce our foes. I was constantly met with hate that flowed like a fetid stream. My heart was hardened indeed against Christianity and its embodiment Jesus Christ.

When I began to speak with God my hate diminished to doubt and confusion. Christ I knew was considered God's son. How could the God I love spawn a being who hated those I consider to be also God's children, my LGBT sisters and brothers and me?

I faced this doubt and confusion as my baptism approached. In the service I mouthed the required words while in my heart I at least doubted and perhaps disbelieved. It seemed I had committed a grievous sin, perjuring myself before God.

Another Miracle

I continued as I had, talking to God. But now I asked about Christ, seeking enlightenment on the subject of my oath. I learned little more before I journeyed in mid-December to my definition of paradise, Key West.

I needed this trip, badly. Nearly a year had passed since my diagnosis and while I had accomplished remarkable things my disease was still in charge. My T-cells hovered barely above my starting point. My viral load remained in the high tens of thousands. I felt well, surprisingly so, but it did not feel real. I needed to rest and recharge and to do this I needed to be away from Richmond where I had suffered the damage that afflicted me.

I arrived in Ft. Lauderdale and by chance scored a white Mustang convertible, an auspicious chance. I dropped the top and headed south on Route 1.

I had visited Key West before and knew what to expect on this ride. Motor vehicle travel to Key West flows over an amazing route consisting largely of bridges spanning small islets crossing the Florida Keys. The longest bridge is seven miles long and it was there I accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.

I gained the Seven Mile Bridge and drove into the sea. I flew over brilliant green water. Soon the land receded behind and none was visible ahead. Alone I leapt the waves, paradise over the horizon.

I spoke to God as I drove. I thanked him for the beautiful sky, the warmth and the gentle breeze. Gulls laughed as I passed. I saw fish jumping in the sea. But the beauty faded. I began to consider those doubts and fears that plagued me. I became morose; in time I cried.

I had no warning. I felt a push on my chest. My lungs gasped for air. I felt lightheaded and made to pull over when the thoughts came. *Jesus. Christ. Savior. Love*. I slowed the car and others whipped past. I steadied the wheel and breathed, deeply.

I knew what I must do. I knew what I must say. I said it, there on the highway divorced from land with only the sea, the source of all life, beneath me. I confessed.

My words were loud, nearly a scream. "*I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior!*"

With those words I became a Christian. The doubts that had troubled me, the remnants of the hate that was decades old, left my mind. My mind was clear and behind it I felt a new presence. This was my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Soon I arrived in Key West and began the experiences I wrote of in "On the Streets in Paradise." When I left Key West I was comfortable with Christ as my savior, as the guide for the life I longed to build. Since that day Christ has been in my life every day, in my speech, my thoughts and my prayers.

My acceptance of Christ has changed my life. I learned of the teachings of three Christian churches. Each is different, but each shares one common teaching: God, through Christ, loves *all mankind* without reservation or distinction. This unconditional love has sustained me through trial after trial. These trials continue today and I know they will be a part of my life forever. I do know, though, that at the end all will change. I will not be rewarded, for reward is not what a Christian is due. I will be welcomed and accepted by a God who loves me for my striving to be and do good, no matter my failings. My God loves me and I love him. This has become my model of a perfect world.

I do not proselytize and I do not yet preach. I wish that each person will find his truth, in the

teachings of the world’s faiths or in his own. I pray that humanity will find the will to love rather than hate. I pray that the powerful will aid the weak. My faith in Christ teaches that good will triumph each day, somewhere, and in many places. I work to have good triumph where I am. This is a suitable task for a life.

Jay Squires is a native Virginia and resident of Richmond. An attorney, entrepreneur and movement leader he has been involved in the most significant events in Virginia’s incomplete journey from hate and bigotry to a Commonwealth where all are welcome.

In 2012 Squires was diagnosed with AIDS and today the focus of his activism centers on his writing as a blogger for POZ.com, one of the nation’s leading online resources for people living with HIV/AIDS.

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