Ascending Lives

It was about a week and a half before final exams. I sat, frowning, in front of my computer screen. I was facing the one possibility I had never considered. I couldn't quite grasp what exactly I was supposed to do.

A couple weeks earlier, an Orthodox Jew entered the chatroom of an religious community I had joined recently. We followed the Torah but believed Yahshua (AKA Jesus) was the messiah of the Jews and Gentiles. Most people in the community were attempting to learn Hebrew or consulted Hebrew concordances on a regular basis. Our interest in understanding the Hebrew scriptures in their original language and in following Torah law is why he stopped by. It was a reasonable question, that he should ask us where in the Old Testament scriptures was proof of the Messiah. I chatted with him and found him completely sincere in his desire for truth. I thought that showing him proof that Yahshua was the messiah would be an easy task, and decided to present it in the form of a PowerPoint presentation.

This PowerPoint presentation was what I was staring at despondently when my fiancé at the time gave me a call. I immediately cheered up, but inevitably we would have a conversation about our shared faith. The deathblow came unceremoniously-

"Melanie, I found something today in the scriptures that confused me..."

"... Matt, there is no God."

"Woah, now Melanie! Don't be ridiculous! I didn't finish what I was going to say!"

"It doesn't matter." My mind ran wild.

When Matt and I first met, we had both been attending Southern Baptist churches. In our churches we became convinced that the Bible was the true word of God and he and I took this to heart. We were such a well-matched pair that it seemed it could be nothing but divine intervention could have brought us together. Sharing scholarly temperaments, we tirelessly examined and reexamined the scriptures. For the year we spent together, learning God's will through reading biblical texts, praying together, and fasting was our sole passion. We began to have a much more thorough knowledge of the text and the writings of early Christians than our pastors, and our interpretation of the text became radically different from theirs. We sadly decided that they were heretics and unrepentant sinners, and we would continue to find that it was so in every new community of Christians we attempted to join. It was very stressful to think how few people were making it to heaven, but expected, given, "…small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it. (Mat 4:14)"

Matt's words, "…something today in the scriptures confused me", released a tempest of memories upon me. I remembered a slide show of all my previous convictions, and the struggles

I had went through to change other's convictions. I could not help but notice that the results of prayer looked unusually similar to results of reason, and that "progressive revelation" looked suspiciously like having formed more logical relationships between different passages and scriptures. And lastly, the determined effort to understand God's will looked the same in me, in Matt, and in all the heretics and sinners. In order to claim that truth came only to those who truly tried, I would have to assume aspects about a person other than what I observed from their behavior. It seemed unfair to consider them liars, when I expected my own testimony to be believed. I could come to no other conclusion that all the revelations, spiritual experiences, and supposed purification had all been imaginations in my head.

In what seemed like an instant, my evaluation of my experience went from being that of a believer to that of a non-believer. For the first time since I had converted to Christianity, I found myself unarguably the heretic. I was struck by the sheer inability of my reasoning to shift to belief on command and the sincerity of my non-belief. I had prayed, studied, and passionately loved myself into a conviction about the non-existence of God.

Now I know how it feels to be the one disbelieved and considered the heretic. The closest of my friends and mentors, including Matt, have belief systems that cannot allow people to have experiences like mine. Those who should know how much I cared about my faith now believe, to different degrees, that my deconversion did not happen as I said it did, a mixture of intellectual and emotional evidence against the existence of God, but because I loved sin (most cited being pride) or faked my love of God all those years.

It seemed all I had heard about as a Christian was about how atheists could never truly be happy, about how it was by the strength of God only that we could do truly good deeds, and about how through God we could heal our loved ones. Yet, during my time as a Christian, I had never fully forgiven my mother for a fight that had led to her moving out of state. Something about not caring whether I was "holy" to some outside judging force helped me realize that I had been a jerk all those years. As a Christian, I suffered from suicidal depression. I had often prayed to be released from the depression, but it turns out that it all but disappeared with the passing of my teenage years, which happened to be during my time as an atheist. The subject of many a tearful prayer and fast was my Dad's crippling pain in his hip and constant flu-like illness. He was absolutely miserable with pain, yet still labored selflessly as a plumber for his family. Worse still, he had never prayed for salvation and had nothing but hell waiting for him in the afterlife. I prayed for him to get better- so that he would feel better and have proof of God's goodness. He started taking some vitamin supplements about a year ago. He now walks without a crutch and recently ran for the first time since the accident that crippled him.

The point here is not to claim the ineffectiveness of the Christian religion. My point is that despite reporting these experiences, many faithful look lamentably at me, "knowing" I cannot be truly happy and cannot truly believe there is no God. They believe what I used to believe about atheists, and to believe my account (especially in its entirety) would contradict tenets of their faith. Their knowledge of my honesty, introspectiveness, intelligence, and truth-loving nature is suddenly no help to me, though I might be trustworthy on any other subject.

I believe that people are sincere in all that they think they believe. Like a rock climber, we base our beliefs on the holds we find in reality. We test each hand for strength and security, using it to move to the next hold. That day I grabbed for a hold that was not secure and fell. I took a different path up, whether I might have been happy trying again in the same direction I will never know, but I am satisfied with the direction I took.