

Spirituality Autobiography

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Spiritual...? When I was a teenager I associated being spiritual with falling/rolling on the floor and screaming "HALLELUJAH". A couple of years ago I started to realize the word spiritual/spirituality

can mean many different things for many different people. There was a time I assumed being spiritual or having a sense of spirituality only meant one of two things. Either you were a fan of Jesus or a demon worshipping yoga practitioner. Insert “laugh out loud” here. I just love these moments of self-reflection... moving on. Now I’m 27 and well refined with all sorts of knowledge. Before I share my spiritual autobiography I will share one insight I experienced that opened my eyes as well. Dating websites! Of course as believers in Christ, highly spiritual beings, it’s a priority to find someone who is equally “spiritual”. Therefore, when a guy's profile says “spiritual” swipe right thinking to myself, “Yes! A spiritual guy.” Jokes on me because his spirituality focuses on worshipping the rocks that tilt differently each hour of the day. Enjoy my story!

Picture this; it’s a Friday church service. The music is loud, the church is shouting and running around the room. The drummer is hitting the toms as if his life depended on it. The singers are belting so loud the window should break. Then you look at the front row and right under the seats you see little children miraculously sleeping through all the noise. My dad was the man on the drums, my mother was belting her lungs away, and I was one of those precious kids napping through what could’ve been the end of the world. I used to be able to sleep through anything, I wish that was still true today. I grew up in the church. If I didn’t already know I was born in the White Plains hospital during the blizzard of 93’, I would’ve assumed I was born during the revival of Tabernacle of Praise in Bronx, NY. My parents were heavily involved in the church therefore my sister and I didn’t have a choice. When I was 9 we moved upstate to Middletown, NY. We found Christian Faith Fellowship Family Church, now Family Church NY. Thank God!

CFFFC changed my life. I never saw church as “fun” until we started attending this one. They were, still are, beyond intentional about teaching children & youth the truth of Jesus while making it so much fun. I enjoyed going to church so much that as a punishment, when I didn’t behave in school, my parents would keep me home or have me sit with them instead of being with my friends in youth services. How cruel. During Wednesday night and Sunday morning services my friends and I would hang out and learn about Jesus in what was called the Teen Center. Along with other students in grades 6th-12th, we

would come sign in, hang for about 15 minutes playing video games, eating and chatting. "Chosen." This was the name (still is) of our Youth Group along with the theme song that would play whenever it was time for service to start. Youth services were 15 minutes of praise & worship followed by a 20/30 minute sermon. The night would either end with more hangout time or an extremely fun game. It was in this Youth Group where spirituality and my relationship with Jesus started to become my own.

Youth retreats were always my favorite event to attend as a teen. I can recall so many encounters where God met me on my face and I would promise to never sin again only to go back to school the following Monday forgetting my re-commitment. 9th grade was one in particular. On this New Years weekend, my best friend (Lisette) and I spoke in tongues together for the first time! It was quite the encounter. So good that Monday morning I went to school and got suspended for drinking alcohol from a plastic bottle during lunch. Clearly, that encounter was impactful. This event was a turning point for me. I realized the people I surrounded myself were not the best and part of me was so enticed by that spiritual encounter and craved more. Throughout the rest of high school I became heavily involved in the Youth Group and all the church was doing. Lisette and I got involved in every play, dance show, activity you name it. Everyday I thank God for her. Then and still today she has been my accountability partner. Whether it was a supernatural or secular encounter, we had each other's back and pushed one another closer to God as best as we could.

I fell in love with Jesus as a teenager and that love continued to grow into my adult years. However, I still enjoyed living my life as it was. As a young adult I was pretty reckless. Some days I still feel reckless. What would we do without the immeasurable love of Jesus. I would serve him and still live for this world, but I'm not perfect. After graduation, I attended the community college in my town for about 3 years. During this time I was still involved at church; on the worship team, directing 2 of the choirs, and I eventually landed a full time staff position. Music was and has always been my way of hearing from the Lord and expressing my heart to him. A year after finishing community college I left Middletown and came to Nyack to study Music in Worship. I wanted to be a worship leader. I was 22 years old and only spent one year living on campus. That year began a time full of crying nights (thank

God for that single room), going to most of my classes either hungover or more drunk, and just running from God. Now let's think about this. I applied to attend Nyack Christian College to become a Worship Leader. You would think that I would've been running full force after God and all He had for me. Instead, I entered a depression, I drank and ate enough for 2 people, I hid from Him (but can I actually hide?), and threw myself into a soul swallowing environment. I started working as a waitress at Dave & Busters, also known as Slave & Bust-Ass, the nickname speaks for itself. My own personal nickname, The Devil's Playground. The most toxic and worldly influenced people I've ever surrounded myself with, God bless them. Let me just clarify: I still loved God and I was very aware of His presence and hand still very active in everything I was doing and partaking in. I should not be alive today. His grace is sufficient. PERIODT. As my teens would say, and yes with the "t" at the end.

My second year of Nyack I had moved into a semi-basement apartment and was a part-time nanny for a lady I served with at a local church. I should backtrack a little. Before my first year ended I started an internship position as a worship leader at a local church. The thing I wanted to do was finally happening, however, the secular lifestyle was happening just as equally, maybe even more. Throughout my second year of undergrad, I worked as a waitress, an administrative assistant for the Nyack music department, interned as worship leader, nannied part-time, and was part of the Nyack chapel team all while living the same lifestyle. I knew something needed to change but part of me didn't want to. Even as I sit here typing this paper and reflecting on the journey, I can't help but thank God for His never ending mercy and handing over my life. I should be dead... 10 times over.

At the end of my second year I took leave from the restaurant job and landed a summer job at Beulah Beach Christian Camp. I truly believe this was all God-Ordained. The way everything came together and happened was nowhere near my scope of planning for that summer. I had planned booze cruises, beach trips, summer concerts all for it to not even happen. Thinking about it now, I can't help but laugh. I remember one night, I was sitting on my bed browsing the internet and watching tv, when I felt led to look up Christian summer camps. Something to know about me: I am not (was not) an outdoorsy person. I am not (was not) one with nature nor am I (still not) a fan of bugs. However, for some reason,

my "Yes" was like an automatic response. That night I typed in google search "christian camps in the US". I clicked on the first result and the link took me to a large blue map of the US with red dots indicating where camps were located. The first state I clicked on was North Carolina. In my defense, I used to want to live in NC so I figured it was a good choice. Unfortunately their camps website was not that appealing. You know the saying "first is the worst, second is the best?" Well my second click was the best. Ohio, Beulah Beach Camp. If you get a second, check out their website. I'm sure you'll want to go too. The second I got to their website I knew that's where I would go, if I was going to go anywhere. I applied that night. Wasted no time. The same night, a friend I used to work with at Dave & Busters sent me a Snapchat. Josh Schoch. My absolutely favorite co-worker from the restaurant. Josh was the only other person at my job that believed in Jesus, he also attended Nyack as well. Josh had quit and moved to Ohio with his wife to work at a camp at the end of the previous winter season. Do you see where this story is going? That night, Josh had sent me a picture of my online application with the following caption, "I won't even read this. You're already hired." HEY GOD! My first summer (I worked 2 summers & 2 winters. That's how much I loved it.) at Beulah Beach changed my life. I can say without a doubt, summer 2017 was a turning point in my life. I had said yes to an experience that was nowhere in any interest of mine and in return the Lord graciously met me there. I encountered my sweet Jesus in ways like never before and was constantly reminded of his mercy and endless love for me. I knew changes had to be made in my life. When I came home at the end of summer I cut off certain relationships I knew were toxic and unhealthy. I officially left the restaurant and ran fast and hard after the heart of the Father.

It's now 2020. I currently work as the Assistant Youth Director of Family Church NY, alongside Youth Pastor, Joshua Smith. Fun fact, this is the same youth group I grew up in. Working with Josh, a different Josh, has been fun, exciting and challenging. I've known Josh since we were children so coming alongside him was the easiest Yes. Working with Joshua, this past year, has been a pruning season. Honestly, I believe every season is a pruning season when it comes to our spiritual walks and journeys. That being said, another thing to know about me is I'm an Enneagram 8. If you do not know about the enneagram personalities, the 8 type is known as the Challenger. I am very strong-willed, assertive,

protective, decisive and I like to be in control (I'm getting better at this one). I recently read this statement in a book called *Captivating*. "A woman who is controlling cannot invite others to rest, to be known. They will feel controlled in her presence. It won't feel safe there" (Eldredge, pg. 139). Um, wow. I've never had a problem working under someone, however, working with Josh was a struggle. Probably because he's 4 years younger than me. I had to learn and I am still learning to let go of control and being okay with things not going my way. This journey of "release" began after my first summer of Beulah and it's been ongoing since. As his assistant I had to learn and become okay with decisions and circumstances not going the way I want them to. There's a quote from *God, Improv and the Art of Living* by MaryAnn McKibben Dana, that I love which speaks so directly to this position. In this segment, Dana highlights how as improvisers, we are always to agree even when we disagree. "This means that the characters may experience conflict, but the players are grounded in the same reality. We don't have to see a partner's offer as a good thing, but an improved life depends on acknowledging the offer honestly. That's the Yes that's required" (Dana, pg.20). Mostly Josh and I see eye to eye however recently we did not at all and so I had to remember what I was reading in this book about improvising and really applying it. Furthermore applying it to everyday living as well as counseling practices.

If you're anything like me, then you know the stress that can occur when a plan or situation does not go as intended. So how are we supposed to respond? Yesterday my friends and I went tubing down the Delaware river. I planned the whole trip; ropes for tying us all together (16 people), 3 inflatable coolers full of drinks and snacks, and told everyone to bring their own sandwich. The amount of improvising that occurred down that river was beyond expected. I'll tell you this, we lost half the food. It's a naive mindset to think we can control how events in our lives will play out. However, how we respond to these unexpected events can shape and structure what's to follow. I think it can be common for many clients, and I say this because I've been this client, to come in stressed and emotionally charged negatively due to the circumstances that have ruined or vastly changed our expectations. We live in a world where it's almost possible to have anything and everything when and how we want it. I'm starting to believe this plays a role in why we, as humans, struggle so much when our schemes don't play out the

way we envisioned them to. What would it look like for us to be open to the unexpected? What would it look like for a client to respond to the unexpected in a less reactive way and move in an improvisational way in finding a well put outcome? Improvising is almost like being in the unknown... Cue Elsa. If you haven't seen Frozen 2 then go watch it or the joke was a failure.

It takes courage to step into the unknown without a guarantee of success, a plan, or even a net. It will change us, touch our vulnerability, reveal our brokenness. The key for the improviser, then, is to see the brokenness not as a threat or a cause for shame, but as a source of strength. When we're willing to be broken in interesting ways, we allow ourselves to be part of a larger, unpredictable story.

Dana, MaryAnn McKibben. Pg. 51

I get excited when I think about my future as a counselor. When I first started this journey, I would tell everyone how much I wanted to be a Christian counselor. There's so much more I could have included in talking about my spiritual journey and because I have experienced so much I can't help but want to help and guide others. Everyone's story is of course different. However, I believe that it is our real life experiences that can help others lead to their breakthroughs and reach the goals they're after. It's my life experiences that made me want to redirect from Christian counseling solely to being a counselor who is a Christian. I know without a doubt that my spiritual beliefs will continue to help me in being the best counselor the Lord has called me to be. I think of Colossians 3:14 (English Standard Bible) when Paul wrote, "...and above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony". It's my heart's desire to portray a love so powerful, that could only come from him, to all people who cross my path, especially my clients. I believe clinical relationships and rapport will follow suit.

References

Dana, Maryann McKibben. (2018) *God, Improv, and the Art of Living*. Eerdmans.

Eldredge, John & Stassi. (2005) *Captivating: Unveiling the Mysteries of a Woman's Soul*. Thomas Nelson books.