

My Story

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Looking back on my life now I see that all the troubles and the pain all the successes and failures and everything that I did, it was all arranged by God. Every time I struggled and faced the dark abyss of hopelessness, even in my absolute denial of God – He was always there. He was teaching me, moving me, preparing me, for the time he would bring me to Him. His lesson was long and painful. It continues to be difficult, but now there is light and hope, where before there was only darkness. I pray for God's continued healing and teaching. I pray for the light of the world to reach us all.

Growing up...

I sometimes say “I was born and raised an atheist.” But that’s not quite right. My mother was raised in christian family, (the daughter of a methodist minister) and took me to church when I was young, for which I am very grateful now. My mother also taught me to love and that is the greatest gift. But back then when we went to church, I thought – this is weird. Who are these people talking too? Where is this Jesus character that everyone is supposed to love? And why? Even though I felt the power of the Holy Spirit, especially in the singing of hymns and in worship, I just didn’t get it. Sometimes the sermons made some kind of sense, but it all just didn’t seem necessary.

Now there’s my father – He was born to Jewish parents who were were not very religious. I think he went through his bar-mitzvah and that was the extent of his religious life; he was basically an atheist. I took my atheist approach to life from him. (Which isn’t to say that my father is a bad man – I think perhaps he comes closer to God than many people who go to church every Sunday.) My father taught me to be analytical, non-judgemental, fair, and critical. If I have any wisdom it is partly from him. My Grandmother Helen would tell this story:

Your father came home one day early from second grade; his class had gone on a field trip. When I asked him, “what happened, where is your class, why aren’t you with them on the field trip?” He answered, “I don’t know, they got lost...”

So I probably inhereted some of my (perhaps misguided) independent spirit from my father.

But in the end I think my parent's lack of a spiritual life together is what led to their divorce. I don't know, this isn't their story. But I think that was a spiritual crisis. At that time I was ten years old and the pain of that event overwhelmed me. I think at that point I lost all faith and all hope. My struggle with my parents did not end there, because my father soon remarried, and I rejected Lydia, the woman he married. She took me as her own son and did her best to love and care for me, but we just didn't understand each other. I didn't know how to relate to her until very recently, by God's grace.

So my relationship with my parents, including both my mothers, has been difficult. I carried the pain of those events of my childhood with me for a long time. Only through a miracle of Christ have I found a way back to my parents. And even though our relationship isn't perfect, I love and respect them deeply now and I am committed to improving our relationship.

Seeking God...

To me, the central aspect of my life is this: I've spent my whole life seeking God, saying, "God where are you?" But being an atheist, I asked the question in a way that denied God – I wanted to know: "what is the purpose of life?", "Why?" and also "How?". The "How" was, "How do you find joy," how do you find purpose and meaning in life? God was calling me all along, but I didn't know it. And I sought long and hard and alone after God – and God worked to reach me, bringing unbelievable grace and miracles into my life. But I was unable to see those miracles until now.

I read literature and poetry; I studied philosophy, mathematics and science in college. But I didn't find lasting meaning there. I joined the Peace Corps, traveled to Nepal and suffered mightily and in vain, searching for meaning. I studied Buddhism and Hinduism. I had great hope that I would go off into the mountains and meet great spiritual monks and wise men, and do great works and service and learn the truth finally. But I returned empty-handed and spiritually hopeless. Still I was convinced, God is not real: God is a psychological manifestation, a social construct, a myth. Just look at the world's religions – how could there be one God? How could one religion be "right"? For the most part I surrounded myself with friends who felt the same, but God was absolutely not willing to let go of me.

Even before that, God was calling me. He made my best friend in high school a Christian. A man I look up to this very day. In my high school days I thought to myself, wow, I want to be like Luke – This is an amazing guy. And look at his family! What an wonderful family. (My mother, Elaine, recently said, "wow, the Hunts are like saints, I wish I were more like that.") But the truth is we are all equally capable of sanctity; but we have to begin to walk in the light of God, we have to let go of what WE want and start to find out what GOD wants. We have to let him in, so he can rework us and change us into something that is useful to him.

But I denied for more than 15 years that the miracles taking place in this, my best friend's life, had anything to do with Christ. I believe now that it had

everything to do with Christ. I used to think, how can I be a Christian? Look at my life and circumstance. I wouldn't fit in. It's too late for me. I wasn't raised that way. It just won't work – I'm an atheist, doubter, skeptic, critic, analyst, REALIST, I'm special, I'm different, I am ALONE – that's me, that's what I AM, that's my lot, there's no way I can get rid of all these ugly things that are part of me!

Crisis...

So when I was 28 years old, God brought my life into crisis. The time had come and he was calling me. My life had been in steady decline for over 3 years, starting with my trials in Nepal. In Nepal I faced a loneliness and despair that threatened to overwhelm me – I faced hard depression. The whole two years I spent in continual illness. But on the surface I was fine – I needed to keep up appearances. I sought after pleasure, I used alcohol and drugs to try and kill the pain. I tried to justify my existence by the service I was trying (but failing) to do. I wanted desperately to reach out, but I didn't know how. I was afraid.

I had a girlfriend there, and we were a “good couple”, I was told. But I was blind then. She was another gift from God – another call. And another refusal on my part to see. She said to me once, “Aaron, you must have faith.” But I refused to see, I was caught up in the sensuality of our relationship, and was too proud to look for God. There is still pain in my heart from that relationship and it's bitter conclusion. Only through the forgiveness of Christ Jesus have those wounds begun to heal.

Faith

“Faith”, She said to me,
“you must have faith”
But the words passed right through me –
Empty.
My eyes were blind, My ears were deaf,
My heart was very cold.
For what I was waiting, I do not know.
At that time God had other plans for me.
I know now, only this:
Faith it is enough.
It is all I have.

Speaking of relationships with women brings me to the darkest corner of my life. The part I denied existed till very recently. The part that is very hard to admit to. I'm amazed at people who can say: “yes I have this problem, this is me.” That takes courage and faith. And that is another miraculous way that God was working in my life – through exposure to AA and Al-anon. Here are amazing people who have the courage to admit: “I am powerless over this disease, I am an alcoholic” and by the grace of God alone they can begin to live again. And so by the grace and power of God I can say to you today – “yes, I am an addict” – addicted to sexual gratification. It's not socially acceptable.

It's not something that you admit too. But I have too. And I know how many others suffer in silence. I see the spread of pornography and it's boom on the Internet and it pierces my heart. I see it's power to destroy, how it does damage, in different ways, to both men and women. Only by faith has God begun to set me free from this addiction. I've begun to be able to relate to and respect women, to understand a little how sexuality works, and how my desire is really desire for healthy relationships. Seeing this is another miracle of Christ. Christ can heal us even at the root of our very nature as human beings.

And if you're not living in Christ and you are suffering I know exactly how it feels. You can come up with a million reasons why you can't commit your life to Christ. Because the reality of committing to Christ is that you've got to turn around and look square in the mirror. You have to face yourself, and look at yourself through the lens and the reality and the light of Christ. You have to take a long and unflinching look at *reality*. That's where God is – the ultimate reality – the bottom line. And Christ demands that you *change* and that you begin anew, that you stop living a false life for a false self. He demands that you do it now, that you give up *everything* for him. That is the scariest thing there is, perhaps more so than death. Mark Twain said, "Most people would rather die than change... and they usually do". So we come up with reasons we can't come to Christ. This is precisely the reason that God so often works through *crisis*. Because God wants to be with you. He cares for you so much He is going to make it possible for you to reach him... when the time comes.

Which brings me back to my own personal crisis. I moved to Santa Cruz for purely selfish reasons. I wanted to pursue pleasure, just to try somehow to escape from the interior fear and loneliness and despair that was eating me inside out. I wanted to surf and I wanted to find a girlfriend. I wanted as I had always done, to keep running. Going back to grad school seemed like a good excuse and a good waste of time. I was a firm believer in wasting time, because I didn't believe that life had a purpose. And so I lived a sinful life. I lived selfishly for myself. And yet I still had amazing friends, who lived whole lives (Steve, Tom, Kris, John, Olivier, Vilma and many others). And I was closer to my friend, Luke, and we had a chance to rebuild our friendship. And thanks to him in many ways, I am here today. But that's getting ahead of it.

First I had to spiral down to the bottom, to the place where you see your own death, the death of your soul, which is ultimately your physical death as well. On the surface it didn't look like anything was wrong. Because I could not admit that I had difficulties, I lived a lie. I pretended that I was fine and doing well and having fun and life was great. But the reality was dark. I was addicted to pornography on the Internet. I had recently hurt my back in a car accident and I could not do what I love to do, I could no longer surf. I couldn't walk without pain. My classes at UCSC seemed empty and meaningless. My relationship with my parents was tense and strained, I didn't want to be around either of them for very long, I talked to them rarely and didn't respect or trust them. I couldn't think of anything meaningful to do with myself. Despair was threatening to swallow me whole. I knew it was the bottom, the end. I felt like I was dying. It was then that I had no choice but to finally give in. My will was

finally broken; I admitted that I had to CHANGE, either that or die. And so I am here to witness to you one of Christ's truths: the wages of sin are death. Of all Christ's truths my own experience convinces me of that. But at the time I didn't know what to do. Some friends, Leah and Morgan, suggested a tape on yoga for my back, so I got that, and it began to give me time to rest and to meditate and to be. It gave God a place to start working in my life.

Towards the light...

At that time I even read part of my Bible – the Bible my high school friends (Tony Somero, Faith Watson and Laura Lucht) gave me with the inscription: “Aaron, don't give up until you find what your looking for”. It was dedicated with a verse, Corinthians 4:13: “I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.” What an amazing gift. I'd kept this Bible around for over ten years without once looking at it seriously – and now God was calling me through it. I actually liked reading the book Ecclesiastes. I thought it was grim and dark and it had the ring of truth to it. It reflected some of the darkness I saw in my own life; so I could relate. But I still denied God – even though it was obvious that He was working in my life. I was finally on the road to meet him, even if I didn't know it. I still wanted to run away from God.

I thought that I would try to find peace through Buddhism. I picked up a book by an author I'd read in Nepal and liked, Thich Nhat Hanh. This is a truly amazing man; his writing is inspirational and moving and I see the truth and voice of compassion in his work. I read his book *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*. It is a wonderful book. God used this book to open my heart, because it had become so cold that it had to thaw out slowly.

Please Call Me By My True Names

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow-
even today I am still arriving.
Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.
I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.
I am a mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.
I am a frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.

And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.
I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.
I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.
My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.
Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.
Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up
and the door of my heart
could be left open,
the door of compassion.

– *Thich Nhat Hanh*

I was studying the philosophy of the Buddha – a man, not a God. I could handle it because it was a philosophy and didn't talk about God. It didn't confront my atheism. And it opened my eyes. For what seemed like the first time in my life I breathed. For the first time I saw a sunset, a sunrise. I saw the clouds. I heard birds singing. I saw flowers and trees and life everywhere. I started writing poetry. I realized that there was a path to healing. A path to joy. There was a right way to live. This is what the Buddha taught. So I focused on Buddhism. I read from Hanh's book every night. I did yoga in the morning. I started to feel better. Everything seemed to be going great, but I wasn't there yet. I was just getting started. I still denied God. And so God would bring me into crisis yet again...

At that same time I started to read my Bible. My Bible has the words of Jesus, the gospel, in red and that's what I read, mostly just the red. It was incredible. Jesus spoke with words that convicted me absolutely. The truth in his words rang out like hammer blows on steel, like thunder amid quiet stillness. I was amazed that the Buddha's teaching called on people to live in ways that were similar to the ways that Jesus called for. I felt that God's truth was real. Even though there are many religions and many faiths, there is only one Reality,

one God and one Truth. I came to the conclusion that God created the Buddha and he created Christ. As He created each of us. I thought that He did all of this with a purpose, though that purpose was beyond our discernment. I still don't understand the relationship of Christianity to other religions. But I do know that religion itself as a formalism, as a mere practice, leads nowhere. Jesus had this to say: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

Only the Christ Himself, the Holy Spirit, his love and light, has the power to reach us and change us. I also know that the truth is available. It is only in the conveying of it, and distorting of it, in the fallible words of men, and more so in our own failure to understand, and our denial of the word of God, that the truth is so often lost. It was then that I finally felt God. Just a glimmer of his light reached me, but I was eager to meet him.

Commitment to Christ...

One thing that struck me Hanh's Book was that he called on us to hold on to the traditions of our faith. I felt God was saying to me: "you are not a Buddhist; your path lies where it began, with Christ." So I started to go to church with my friend Luke. I always felt like the pastor was speaking to me directly, with the voice of God, that his sermon was exactly what I needed to hear. It was a miracle. When I doubted that Jesus could love me, I heard a sermon at the Monterey Peninsula Church by pastor George Meyer and he said "Jesus is with you wherever you are in your walk; he is walking with you." So many times I heard amazing sermons. And always I wept. The tears began the cleansing of my life of suffering, pain, and sin, the washing away of my false self. So many times I read the gospel of Christ and was moved me to tears. But still I had not committed my life to Christ. There was so much doubt. So much worldliness. So much darkness in my soul. Still I trusted myself more than God.

It wasn't until I fell in love with a woman (again), and had to let go of her, realizing it wasn't God's will for us to be together, that I understood that I had to commit my life to Christ. I had to let Him take charge of my life so that I could begin to come out of the darkness and not stay stuck in the cycle of longing, desire and despair. Reading the philosophy of the Buddha helped tremendously, but it wasn't until I openly cried out to God to save me, that I begged him to take my life, that I really started to change. I read more of the Bible, but I still struggled with parts of it. It called on me to join a community of believers, (Hanh's book called for me to do the same thing.) This was very hard. First off I was stubborn; my instinct is to resist God, to say, "I can do it MY WAY." But more than that, I was afraid of people. I was "sensitive" and easily hurt so I didn't want to reach out. I wanted to go through life with minimal encounters, minimal pain, just hiding in myself. I also thought that I wasn't good enough, that I couldn't possibly be accepted. The darkness and the sin and everything that had stained my soul, I didn't want anyone to see that. I was ashamed. I'd lived a lie, a false life for so long. I felt that God couldn't

possibly love me, I'd gone against Him for so long. But I'm here to witness to you today, that God's love is vast. It is beyond what any of us could possibly imagine. God wants to embrace you. The other thing was that I didn't want to choose. I didn't want to say "yes I commit my life to this." I wanted a way out, a back door. Basically I was afraid.

But God gave me just enough courage, and I was inspired by amazing Christians that I know (including my sister Lili, my Grandma Findley, My aunts and Uncles: Helen, Cecil, Margie and Dick, the Hunts, my friend Tad, many folks in my mother's family). So I went to two churches in Santa Cruz, wonderful churches. I visited the methodist church in Santa Cruz because I thought, "Oh, I'll be comfortable here, this is just like my Mom's church." It was a wonderful sermon and a awesome group, but it wasn't right for me. It didn't pull me in. I went to another church up on the hill, thinking "Oh, this is a nice looking church," but it wasn't right either. I was trying to put God into my own box, find him where I wanted to find him. But all along I had been walking past this plain unassuming church right next to my apartment, with a ratty bus out in front. I somehow got the feeling, this church has the real deal going on: it's nothing fancy, just a church. It seemed like they were probably focused on the inside, not the appearance. That scared me. I thought to myself I can't go in there - they'll know me right away. They'll see who I am! But God told me to go. I was afraid to go, but I thought, "OK, this is the house of God, I'll be welcome here." And it was wonderful. I saw people I new, I felt God's love, I heard an awesome sermon; pastor Jason spoke about peace. A peace I needed. I saw a UCSC student, Jeremy, who had been in one of the classes that I was a TA for, and I was embarrassed because I felt that I hadn't been a good teacher. I felt guilty. But Jeremy just smiled, shook my hand, and gave me a flier about a program called Real Time.

I was pretty nervous about going to Real Time. I really didn't want to go, but I knew I had to go. God was telling me to go. So I went and I was pretty nervous. But because of the kindness, love and power and majesty of Christ reflected in all of these young people in sincere and devout prayer, I was tremendously moved. I met Sean Lomax and Pastor Roger and they really reached out to me. I went again. I was amazed that the members of this group did so much of the work in presenting, I was amazed at their expression, commitment, passion, and creativity. I was amazed at the work that God was doing in them, his light that was shining through them. Pastor Chris spoke once as a guest speaker and he spoke about sexual maturity. It was the very message I needed to hear. It was wonderful and I loved going to real Time, it was awesome. But I still didn't know how to say "Jesus, I commit to you!" I struggled and prayed and wept, I suffered from spiritual pride. I didn't understand going to the altar, I was embarrassed, and again I was afraid. But I went. I went three times. On the third time I felt empty, and then I felt whole. I finally knew what it was like to have Christ standing in me. I was finally committed to Christ. The blessings since then have been overwhelming. I feel that my ability to love, to give, and to serve have been increased by God. I am not immune to doubt, to fear, to weakness and sin. But I know that Jesus is with me now, he is bearing

my burden. He said:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32)

I also like this quote from William Blake: “we are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love.” We are here just long enough to know Christ, who is love, who is true, universal, and transcendent – an awesome God.

Someone asked me recently, “how did you get converted?” I couldn’t answer, because the question no longer made sense to me. From his point of view, Christianity was only a form, a doctrine, a religion, something you decided to do, or could be talked into doing. But Christ doesn’t live in a church building. He lives in peoples hearts. You can’t so much “convert” to Christianity by your own will or another person’s. I didn’t choose Christ as much as he chose me (though when I knew him I chose him), nor did anyone choose Christ for me (though I saw Him in many faces). God allowed all of it be. By His grace He allowed Christ to come into my heart. And there is nothing for which I am more thankful.