

Chapter 1 – Enter My Mind

Back in senior year of high school, listening to jazz while chilling with a Bible, notebook, and a pencil gave me a thrilling, sexy sense of freedom. At that time, I felt like I was journeying into the world of freedom, self-ownership, and exploration of the Holy Book, the Bible.

I felt like I had the freedom to discover the world and the Bible. I felt they belonged to me. I would later realize these were gifts from God and that it was my job to treat them with honor and respect, in turn. I wanted to correctly understand universal truths and interpret the Bible according to the mind of God. What I began to discover is that I have the mind of God, meaning that latent in my soul was the correct interpretation of God's book. If I could only access the truth tucked away into the recesses of my heart.

I began my current trek into the caverns of my ever beating heart with my mentor in 2016. He showed me that my desires are good. But that's not the end of the story. There is also a very real enemy. This enemy's name is Satan. I recommend The Epic by John Eldredge who simply outlines the story of the Bible and how the conflict between God and Satan shaped history. His teaching about the enemy didn't resonate with me because of my upbringing in a white, upper middle class, secure, moral, non-Christian family. There was no need to fear a mythical being who want to eat babies alive. That is the silly, paranoid talk of tin-foil wearing Fundamentalists hiding under rocks. Besides, the world is free and much better off because of science and progress, not because of religious brainwashing and misguided ignorance.

So because of my safe upbringing, there was no need for a belief in the devil. Thankfully, I was able to see otherwise when I listened to the experiences of my mentor, his family, and other Christians. In addition, from what many have reported in their near-death experiences, Satan exerts some level of fear and control over people.

Now many of you who are more scientifically-minded are scratching your heads as you read this. You wonder how I can be so gullible as to believe in all of this fairy-tale religious clap-trap. Let's not remind you of your stunning arrogance and refusal to examine the mystical experiences of religious people throughout millennia.

Essentially, my beliefs about the supernatural stem from my re-interpretation of everyday life. In other words, I am not normally compelled to be a religious person but I choose to do so in order to better explain why things happen the way they do. For example, I can either label the evil in the world around as a mere by-product of natural deterministic processes or I can believe that the emotional depth of evil can only make sense in a world where there is a supernatural battle between good and evil. I think the issue is not a lack of knowledge concerning the supernatural but a numbness that overtakes us all when we hear horrific events take place. We think to ourselves but don't say out loud "Oh, that's not my problem."

It's not that we don't believe evil and darkness exists, rather we don't want to experience it up close and personal. The delusion is that we think we haven't.

I want to offer a different perspective to you that will undercut this naïve assumption of ours. What if the bad things that happen in this world such as murder, rape, betrayal, utter lack of generosity and empathy, self-centeredness, and wrath are behaviors that we all engage in from time to time. The question is why do we do these horrible things? I would like to propose that our inner self, call it the mind, soul, or heart is the cause behind our actions. Therefore, bad behavior comes from an inner self that either is evil itself or is contaminated by evil. Nobody would like to think that this is the case but how else are we supposed to explain evil.

You may tell me that humans are basically good and that our motives are basically good.

I ask you to define “good”.

You may say that we want the best for others. But is this really the case? What do you actually do for others? You may say that you help others at work or school, that you give to charity, and occasionally help at the soup kitchen. Well, good for you. Just another question. Why?

Don't tell me that you do it because you are a good person. That is a reductive answer. My question is deeper. What emotional reason do you have for blessing others? Let me give you a non-exhaustive list of possibilities:

- You like helping others
- You like the positive feedback from those you help
- You want society to function with the help of good deeds
- God told you to do it
- You want the reputation of being a good person
- You fear that if you don't, you will be a bad person
- You want to feel good about yourself.
- (Fill in the blank)

I'm not here to give you a “gotcha” statement to make you feel bad like a lot of religious people like to do. For me, I think none of us really know what motivates us at the core. So why do I ask these nosy kind of questions?

I want to find out the kind of people we really are and our purpose in life. According to culture, we choose our own destiny and purpose. In other words, our purpose is entirely subjective and arbitrary. This simply will not do. Maybe a need for objective purpose is why people believe in God/gods in the first place. So if we attempt to discover our purpose, I believe we will come back to where humanity started: religion.

Well, if the God or gods do exist, then why don't they just tell us what to believe and do with our lives. Wait a minute, this is exactly what religions have been trying to provide us for thousands of years. The question is who is right. Religions contradict each other on very basic theological points.

Some might point out that they could all be right and wrong to varying degrees. While this appears logical on the surface, what they don't realize is that their argument is in of itself a religious claim just as daring as any other religious claim.

So if there's so many religions, why even try to discover which one is right? How are we supposed to know which one is true? We don't and that's the beauty of it. Remember, if there is a God, He/She would tell us all the answers. What you may not see here is that it doesn't matter what religions you try out, it's your final choice that matters. God appears to be patient.

Chapter 2 – Trust the Process

It doesn't matter if you are inconclusive or wrong somewhere in your spiritual journey. The process is what matters.

So, what's the process, you ask? Is there an objective way to get to God?

What if I told you that maybe there is no process, per se? What if God is extremely obvious? What if God is so obvious, we actually take Him/Her for granted and call God something else? What if God's name is not "God" but something else?

What if our desire to personify everything around us is a symptom of some deeper truth: we personify reality. We call it the Universe, Life, God, etc. We ask questions of it such as "why did this happen to me?", "what should I do with my life?", and "do I matter?". We desire a relationship with this supernatural entity.

Well, if this entity created you and me and furthermore gave us a consciousness and a desire to personify the self-same entity, perhaps it is because this entity is a personal entity.

Let this sink in: God is personal.

Put differently, God cares about you. You exist and God wouldn't make you unless He/She had a plan for your life.

So why isn't this taught to us?

I refer back to the enemy, Satan. Maybe, if there is an enemy to God, then that enemy will not want us to believe that God exists, that the enemy exists, that God cares about us and can be trusted, and that we matter.

If the enemy succeeds in the task of getting people to believe his lies, then he can ultimately bring chaos into the Universe and ruin God's plan.

I don't want to elaborate too much on Satan because he's the bad guy of the story. Let's focus on the good guy, God. Who is God, anyways?

I'll tell you who I think He is personally and I'll let you judge for yourselves where I speak the truth. Okay?

God is...

- The supreme essence of good, love, light, life, truth, hope, faith, kindness, grace, patience, and humility.
- Trinity composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as argued by the early church councils (200-900 AD)
- Father who loves all of his creation and offers freedom to all conscious creatures to accept or reject Him and His blessings.
- The Son who was in contact with humans throughout scripture and tried to show the way to God through Himself. He was the Ultimate Human, the Chosen One. He was resurrected after His crucifixion and ascended to heaven, where he currently resides.
- In place of the physical, human presence of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is given to guide and comfort us in every second of every day of the year. God never leaves us.

Chapter 3 – How Did I Get to Know God?

Let me tell you my story from the beginning...

I was born in Chandler, Arizona on December 12, 1994. I currently reside in Chandler in my cozy apartment.

I was born with some unique biological conditions that has always made me feel like I was a special person and strikingly different from anyone else. I have moderate-severe hearing loss in both ears. I have Horner's Syndrome and heterochromia (two differently colored eyes). I also had low growth hormone which means that I was destined to be short... really short, like five feet, zero inches short.

Fortunately, I turned out a-okay (a proud six feet tall). Some people don't turn out okay with the kind of conditions I had. There are reasons why I turned out okay (mostly due to my awesome parents), but they are not the focus of this book.

The important thing is that my hearing impairment and other conditions significantly impacted my childhood growth and experience. Strangely enough, I was never bullied as you would expect if you have watched Hollywood movies depicting unusual kids getting beat up by insecure bullies. I respected others and got respect back. I generally did what was asked of me and I pleased my parents, family, and teachers. And yet, I was desperately lonely. Thinking about this makes me want to cry and yet I must tell you the rest of my story.

Despite what may sound like a subpar childhood so far, it was actually pretty smooth. I enjoyed watching Disney movies. Lion King and Mulan were my favorites. I played and watched basketball. I visited with my extended family quite often and that was my favorite part of my life. I played videogames like an addict. I mostly played NBA videogames. The real spark of my childhood was my creation of an imaginary world called Animal World.

Animal World was like a microcosm of the world that I wanted to be a part of. The characters were animals and toys that lived in a geographic region (my room and occasionally other parts of the house), had different species, different roles based on the story I decided to play, and different personalities. More than just staving off boredom, I developed a certain way of thinking about the world. Since I was the god of Animal World, it felt natural to believe in a God. Also, I felt that the world was incredibly diverse, with many different people-groups and personalities, interests, and skills. I imagined entire sub-worlds of politics, intrigue, and romance as a kid. The “Cat” kingdom was ruled by King Richard the lion and was king of the world because he was the biggest animal. He was a step below the god, Nick. The other kingdoms were the “Dog”, “Reptile”, “Bear”, and “Toy” kingdom with their respective rulers. There were wars between the animal and toy kingdoms. A “story” could easily last as long as 10 hours which was a reflection of my attention span. I thoroughly enjoyed it because I was completely enraptured in my fantasies and systems I created with the power of my mind.

You probably wouldn’t believe me if I told you that I did this until I was a senior in high school. I stopped because I felt that when I would move to college, people would ask me what my hobbies were. And me? I couldn’t tell them that I played with stuffed animals. I felt too embarrassed and ashamed. This theme of embarrassment of shame constituted a big part of my life and probably yours too, if you stopped long enough to reflect on it. I call this the disease to please: people-pleasing. You and I make ourselves feel better by doing what others people want us to do. We crave people’s compliments. We will do well to steer clear from this 10-headed monster as it will lead us to feelings of darkness and worthlessness when we feel like we are not given the treatment we feel we deserve.

The question is how does one avoid people-pleasing. How did I avoid people-pleasing? To be honest, I didn’t and I still struggle with it.

Before my freshmen year of college, I saw Toy Story 3. The movie resonated with me. The way the characters and toys took on a life of their own and have emotions was something I tried to create as a kid. The movie makes me tear up a little bit and the music does not help one bit at all. Ha.

Interestingly, my interests in depth, complexity, feeling, meaning, systematic rigor, diversity of taste, and sheer awesomeness transferred to music. And that’s how I started to listen to jazz fusion, progressive rock, symphonic metal, and so on. My desire for complexity and systematic rigor was something I once again transferred to my career interest in my senior year of high school. I wanted to become an industrial systems engineer. Retrospectively, this was a **big** mistake. That is an understatement. I was terrible at math and science. I thought engineering was the way to go because I was academically competent in high school (in the top 3% of my class of 600). Boy, that was pretty dumb thought for a smart cookie. I did not know what I was getting myself into.

Chapter 4 – College

I decided to go to Arizona State University. Freshmen year was hell at certain parts for reasons I will not explain. Sophomore year was better but kind of lonely even though I hung out with more

people than I ever did in my entire life. Junior year was way better. I met my mentor (none of the names of people in this book will be disclosed), met my current group of friends, figured out what I was passionate about in my life, and increased my confidence so that I could do public speaking. I also switched my degree to industrial/organizational psychology with a focus in user experience. For those who don't know what any of that is, the short answer is that I do web design now.

Where things got really interesting is during my senior year when I finished my education and got a job in web design (or UX design for those of you who know what that is). I realized that the corporate career-lifestyle is another beast to be tamed. The truth is that my dreams lied elsewhere. Passion for the other-world, people's hearts, and their relationships with God took a backseat in my life. I barely touched on my passion except in my home church. I felt like there was a man inside me repressed, yet ready to explode.

Chapter 5 – A Pit-Stop on the Way to the Future: My Religious Upbringing

As a kid, I was not raised with a religious upbringing by my parents. However, I respected and desired it as a kid because I went to church and Bible summer camp occasionally. My parents took me and my sister to a Unitarian-Universalist church sometimes. We would go to church for Easter or things like that. We would go to my grandparent's Catholic Church for Christmas Eve. My grandparents took me to Catholic Church and awarded me with compliments and trips to McDonalds for McFlurries.

But the real deal of my childhood was going to my aunt's church where I would attend a kid's class and learn about Bible stories through felt boards, animated movies, songs, and picture books. The peacefulness and surrealness of church stuck with me. Later, I would learn that the "peacefulness" was actually God's presence.

When I was in fifth grade, my family moved to northern California near Sacramento, which was far away from my family. I was in a completely new environment. School was much harder in California. My addiction to videogames flourished where I had no friends. I would watch a lot of TV and play intramural basketball. Yet, I felt alone. But I had my Bible and I would read it every night. Actually, it was more like I skimmed it until I got to my favorite parts, like David and Goliath, Solomon, the prophets, Jesus, and the church of Acts. Have you ever read that book?! I had no flippin' clue what the hell Paul was saying. Reading Paul's letters and the Book of Revelation made me want to give up on the Bible, so I would just read the factoids and maps in the kid's Bible. The stories of the Bible kept me going.

My favorite event all year was Camp Yavapines in Prescott, Arizona which is a large cabin-based camp in the forest. The mornings are awesome because of the dew, light chatter of other "campers", and easy smiles of friends and family. The afternoon classes, community service, and hikes provide me with fond memories. The nights were usually more serious with serious sermons, serious discussions, and serious sniffles. I felt like a great burden was placed on my soul to tell others of the sobering, scary truths that I was learning. Fear tickled my heart, but I was crying, not laughing in response. I couldn't get why people would choose to go to their peril

for rejecting Jesus, the Bible, and what Adventists taught. I felt like I needed to be more dedicated to God.

I soon found out about the long-gone prophetess of the church, Ellen White, a woman nearly looked upon with awe and fear amongst Adventists. She had such a deep relationship with God. She went through so much physical suffering and had the very difficult job of giving the 19th century American church a stern repudiation for their sins. She developed a personality as a mother amongst her followers. Her teachings are held onto by the Adventist denomination until this day.

I wanted the same connection to God the prophetess had so I read her devotional which I liked because of their profundity. But I also despised the sappiness and overlong reverent names she would call God. I just wanted the facts. I just wanted others to get on board. I joined an Adventist online discussion board and vigorously participated.

After being on the site for a year and a half or so, starting from the beginning of my high school junior year, I came upon a discussion which changed the course of my life. I was arguing with someone of much greater wisdom and doctrinal understanding than myself, which led me to seriously doubt the entire Adventist faith. The man, who I began to see as a hero who saved me from a life full of legalism and false teachings, taught me his perspective on the Bible. I believed that Ellen was only partially right but there was a lot she missed.

To this day, the doctrine this man taught I still believe. Such teachings include the full sovereignty of God in the creation of good and evil, the gift of faith (instead of faith as something produced by me), and the restitution of all things which, of course, means that everyone single person who has ever lived will someday fall in love with their Heavenly Father. God has the power and desire to save everyone from evil, therefore He will. Simple. Obvious. Biblical.

Due to my Biblical training with this Bible teacher and my reading from others online (who, again, I will not name), I learned to read the Bible much more typologically. I questioned any and all doctrine except for the literal, inerrant scripture.

Near the end of my senior year of high school, I had to make some big decisions. Major? Career? Religion? Friends?

I spent most of my time studying the Bible and wanted a position of power in ministry where I could preach. Naturally, I felt like I could preach in an Adventist church since that was what I was familiar with. And I actually did that a few times and I really got a kick out of it.

One problem. By this point, my heart had departed from Adventism entirely. I was sure, though, that I wanted to get a degree in ministry and be a preacher. Yet, I totally had dismissed “regular” churches full of nominalism and immorality, or so I thought. Because of this dilemma, I thought I would have to pursue a normal career like engineering and have a secure life like my parents provided for me. Ministry would have to be pushed off until later.

In my freshman year, I attended an Adventist church and participated as much as possible. I felt like no matter if I disagreed with Adventists, I would still be part of the church.

Freshman year was scary. I came across people of all different religious or non-religious stripes and their behavior shocked me, a prudish Adventist. I vowed to never be like the other ungodly students. In fact, I made another vow which I believed has affected my life profoundly.

Early in my freshman year, I was devotionally reading Genesis which means that I was mapping the stories of the characters onto my life. So when I read about Abraham starting a covenant with God. I wanted to mimic Abraham by making a covenant with God to start off my collegiate life.

Little did I know that the Abrahamic Covenant was not one that Abraham formed with God's help (as I interpreted it then), but one that God made with Abraham without Abraham's help.

Anyhow, I would still strive legalistically to do the right thing, have enough faith, and avoid masturbation like the plague! I would find any preacher to confirm my point-of-view and my legalistic lifestyle. Most of those preachers were popular Reformed pastors which you can easily find on the Internet. I pursued fear-and-obedience preaching.

I met some new people who happened to be Christians. I hung out with them at dinner and joined their Bible study. One of them attended a non-denominational, college-aged church. So when I attended the church, I begrudgingly crossed my arms and refused to sing during worship. I didn't want to contaminate myself with these half-breed so-called Christian idolaters. I only went because my friends seemed excited about it. I did not feel comfortable with the sappy pop Christian music, female emotional outbursts of tears, and easy-on-conscience sermons. I thought "to hell with these people, where is their respect for God's holiness? Aren't they ashamed of their sin?"

During my sophomore year, I finally confessed my disbelief in Adventism to my family (which was terrifying), my Adventist youth pastor who I had long known, and to my Adventist friends through the cowardly medium of texting.

After that, I didn't go to church for a while. I quit religion. I stopped talking to God. I focused on schoolwork. I believe that was a time of soul purification.

A month went by. I felt like it was time to give Christianity a try again. I never lost my faith but I just needed to emotionally unplug for a while.

Then in an act of irony, I started attending the church I so angrily left the previous year. I thought that if I was going to give Christianity a chance, I would need to go a regular, non-denominational church.

It turns out it was not a regular church, but an underground charismatic church. I joined a small life group that was under the umbrella of the church. I joined campus outreach where we would pray for people to get healed. I was scared to death to do any of this but I followed along behind my more courageous friends. The church was all about "hearing God" which was not a novel

concept to me because it was a common charismatic practice (and still is) and I knew quite a bit about prophecy by this time as I have always had a strong desire to prophesy. What I didn't realize was that conversation with God didn't have to be Christian formalese with "Lord" marking the beginning of every sentence.

I maintained skepticism about all of these church's practices including spiritual gifts which I thought were silly. I would play along with the others in church and small groups. If God still did the kind of things He did in the Book of Acts, then maybe, I could do some pretty cool stuff like get words of knowledge like knowing people's credit card numbers. I wanted to know how to interpret the gibberish that people pretended to think was tongues. But most of all, I wanted to see and record miracles on camera to have tangible proof of God's existence and tell everyone I knew. The possibility of these things excited me more than cynicism could contain me. I hung out with these people just so I could witness God's power. I was extremely disappointed. I heard plenty of crazy stories of healing and words of knowledge but I never experienced or seen any of it. I was pissed.

I went to a conference with many youth in similar types of churches in San Diego, away from the church's homebase in Tempe, AZ. I expected that if God wanted to heal me, he would do it here in front of all these people and my life would finally have meaning and purpose. I would be that guy with the testimony of "ears popping open". No such thing happened. But something else did.

Through the loving perseverance of a friend, I began to explore this thing called "God's Presence". I think I may have exaggerated when I thought I felt the so-called presence of God. But if what I experienced was really His presence, then it's not as dramatic as people make it out to be. I would later realize that my issue was that I wasn't given the best understanding about God's presence. For the reader's information, regardless of your religion, you and everyone in the world experiences God's presence. Christians should explain that it is a very normal thing. If they don't, new believers who are more objective and black-and-white (like me), will be extremely frustrated. I speak from experience.

God's presence is equivalent to any emotional experience where one feels deep contentment, peace, belonging, security, ecstasy (not the drug), acceptance, or (insert deep, positive emotional experience). I guarantee that most people have experienced it at some point in their life. It is not magical or life-transforming but it is deeply-satisfying for the time it lasts. The only difference between Christians and others is that Christians know the truest, deepest source of their joy. And because of that, they can continually access the source of their pleasure, whether in good or bad circumstances. It is, in fact, the elixir of the Christian life.

The secret of this elixir is not its elusiveness but its plainness. We know when we have found and tasted it, but the problem is that expectations for how to experience it are misguided. One does not procure the elixir by chanting Bible verses and praising God on the top of their lungs. Rather one must drink the elixir by opening their heart. I had not learned to open my heart until my junior year of college.

Because I could not really experience God's power in the way I wanted to, I tried a different flavor of Christianity: the intellectual kind. I delved into typology, different denominational

beliefs, church history, and doctrinal minutia. None of this satisfied me. So I ventured into studying New Age (never embracing it), Gnosticism, “positive thinking”, and other magical philosophies.

I thought that life could be manipulated by the words I spoke over myself (never with any success). I started going to Word of Faith church and became an active member. I kept a distance from anyone, fearing personal connection, and being found out that I am a Universalist who deeply embraced mysticism (though being a spectacular failure at knowing how to practically apply my beliefs).

Then one Saturday morning in the summer of 2015, God woke me up by saying the name of a person. I was not aware of who this person was until I googled them. This person was a preacher of an unfamiliar theology called New Covenant theology, more popularly known as Hyper Grace theology. I listened and still do listen to his Saturday teaching which was like Saturday cartoons for me. I looked forward to them with anticipation. I read a book from him about the history of the supernatural in church history. This book pricked my interest in miracles again.

The most important doctrine I learned from this wonderful and hilarious preacher (if this doesn't give away his identity, I don't know what will as there are very few funny preachers) was this: my sin nature died on the cross with Christ. I no longer am bound to sin. It is impossible to resurrect the old tendencies of desiring sin. Believers only have a new nature. They only desire to do what is right. I no longer had to perpetually worry about guilt and following religious rules.

I felt like my faith was rejuvenated! Yay! No more boring religious practices. All of that is unnecessary to have a good relationship with God. Because of Jesus, we automatically have the same relationship that Jesus has with God. You and I are the most important people in the entire universe, the children of the living God who loves his children unconditionally. Nothing we can do will deter him to think worse of us. God is a very happy God and does not want to torture any of us with religion. God loves us and there is nothing we can do about it!

So I attended a conference where the preacher was the sole teacher. The whole time I was looking for one thing, as you can guess by now: my deafness to be healed. The Word of Faith church could not heal my ears. The charismatic church in college could not heal my ears.

Sadly, this preacher's congregation could not heal my ears either.

“Could I ever get healed?! Why did this have to happen to me again? Screw my life! I guess I'm stuck this way. I thought that maybe God wanted me to suffer for the kingdom or that He had some other “grand” purpose. Ever since then, I've slowly started to resent God but I wouldn't easily admit it.

All the nonsense excuses people gave me for why I didn't get healed include the following:

- Healing doesn't exist anymore. It happened in the days of Jesus and the apostles. Now, we don't need miracles because we have the Bible instead.
- I didn't pray hard enough for it.

- I didn't want it enough.
- Because I didn't claim that I was "healed". In other words, if I just say "I'm healed" enough times, then it will really happen. This is name-it-claim-it garbage.
- Because I wasn't seeing myself as a child of God and asking for healing in a childlike way, with full expectation that I would get healed.
- Because I lacked willpower to make it happen.
- Because I didn't feel worthy of the healing.

I think I got to be so jaded yet I still desired to be a good Christian, so I turned my emotions off more than ever.

Near the middle of my junior year, I was invited to an on-campus Christian group (different than the lifegroup I mentioned before). I was confident in my abilities as a Christian know-it-all so I wasn't afraid of other Christians. The other people in the group were sitting in chairs in a circle in a living room of the leader's house. This self-same leader is also my current mentor. They started with a quirky icebreaker which was to be expected. Then they started this unique kind of prayer called Original Design.

The way Original Design works is that an individual gets prayed over by other individuals who pray specifically for how God sees the target individual. People in the group are asked to turn off any mental distractions by asking God for any words, pictures, or Bible verses to come to their mind. Then a note taker in the group jots down what others in the group say. A moderator makes sure that the information develops into a coherent, concise image that illustrates positive ways that God sees the target individual. The moderator also asks the target if the image resonates with them. Can the target associate with any of the images put forth? After several attributes have been assigned to the target, the moderator declares that these attributes were actually how God made the individual and that is the way they are supposed to be.

I volunteered to go first and strongly desired that something new and meaningful would happen in my life. I was able to connect with the attributes that were assigned to me as a result of the Original Design prayer. I knew I found my group of people.

I would then a build a repertoire with the counselor (who I will call Johnny Bravo which you know is not his name and, no, he looks and acts nothing like Johnny Bravo; I just really like the name Johnny Bravo; this is an extremely bad grammatical sentence so I will terminate it now.)

I very slowly and suspiciously began to tell of my life. To this day, Johnny is still finding out more about me, though I speak more freely now.

During the second half of my junior year, I stopped attending the Word of Faith church and attended the Thursday night group that I just mentioned. Mr. Bravo, to my delight, started challenging me to be more honest about my intentions and my past struggles and fears. He asked me to journal which I vigorously refused but now profusely write like there's no tomorrow. As I write this, it's 2:31 AM on a Thursday night. I'm going to hate myself in the morning. Oh well.

As it turns out, I wasn't supposed to be vulnerable. I was supposed to resist like every other rebellious evangelical youth that pretended to have it together, so my honesty came as quite a shock.

I was tired of playing God's games. I felt like I was more serious about life than God was. I don't care that you think I just wrote something sacrilegious. That's because it is and quite frankly my dear, I don't give a damn. I was tired (and still am) of being a scared evangelical who plays church so I could make it into heaven someday.

I was tired of the bullshit. I wanted the truth. What does God want from me? According to theology of grace which I believed, God wanted nothing but relationship with me. But what in the world is a relationship with God supposed to mean? I can't see Him and He doesn't seem to talk back to me like a normal human.

Besides, I thought to myself "I'm not one of those ewey-gooey, manzy-panzy, hyper-social, emotional guys. Those guys make me sick. They must be effeminate or something. I'm all about accomplishing goals. I'm not an insecure freak like all of those people who are always talking about how much God loves them, how much God just wants to cuddle with them." The thought of that made me totally embarrassed about being Christian. I thought "man, atheists don't have to deal with this gross, emasculating belief system. They can just focus on doing whatever they want and pursuing their ideas without emotional interference." I liked the sleek and clean fact-based approach to life. An emotional, navel-gazing, heart-focused person is useless to society because they are so self-preoccupied that they can't deal with the difficulties and responsibilities of life.

Funny thing.

Really funny thing.

You know, God has a twisted sense of humor. I became the very damn guy I hated so much.

I had no idea up until that point that the only way one can be happy is by having a heart in the first place. My entire adolescent/adult life was spent trying to be happy using my intellect. I could never relax. Everything was an intellectual challenge to be solved. Emotions were generally unnecessary. Life was all about picking something that one enjoyed and kicking ass at it.

The very thing I chose to excel at, theology, was choking the life out of me. I couldn't get any further. I had discovered seemingly every nook and cranny of the Internet about theology (trust me, there's a lot of fascinating stuff out there) and yet my thirst was not satisfied. The only way I was going to get deeper into my area of expertise was by getting to intimately know the subject matter: God. And God seems to only speak during Original Design prayers, when others pray on my other behalf, and when I "forced" it to happen. What I mean by "forced" is that I would use random number generators, random word generators, CleverBot (google it), the time on the clock, and about any possible circumstance to show me what God wanted me to do. Other times, I would have "conversations" with God. I would write down how I felt about something and

whatever the first words that popped into my head I wrote down. If they seemed like something God might say, I assumed it was Him. If it seemed off, I scratched it out. But there was a major problem. None of these could ever really substitute for God Himself speaking to me. And any time where I claimed God was speaking through me, I lied. I just spoke the first thing that popped into my mind. There was no emotional attachment to any of this stuff above unless I psyched myself into it. I still do some of this. Judge me if you must. Be my guest. Go ahead. I really don't care what you think but I feel bad about it.

So if I had been making it up all along, then I was screwing myself. I was very scared. My entire religion was built on lies that I had told myself. Not only did I make my life all about religion, I didn't have much of a life outside it. So if I became an atheist, then my entire life up to this point would have been a lie. I would lose all respect for myself.

The crux of the issue was my deep suspicion that God wasn't real and that atheists were right all along. I spend days and nights going back and forth in my head about whether I was really a Christian or an atheist. My spinning head literally made me ill. I kept my inner struggle to myself. I didn't want to commit to either side and tell anyone until I was completely sure about what I believed. I broke this vow a couple of times and usually told people what I thought they wanted to hear to make them sympathetic to me.

Mr. Bravo was sure that my intellectual/existential crisis was really a cover up for deep emotional hurt. I didn't buy it. I thought that if God doesn't exist, Johnny's point is moot.

My senior year of college consisted of the same sort of struggle where I felt completely bi-polar. I couldn't decide what was true. If God existed, I wanted Him prove Himself to me. If God didn't exist, I had no way of verifying, nor did I really want to know the truth. If God didn't exist, then my entire life was a lie and I would have to give up my study of theology completely.

Agnosticism didn't work for me. I needed a clear-cut, black and white answer. That's the kind of person I am. I need certainty. I need a cause to fight for, something I can prove others wrong and myself right. I'm still convinced that this is my personality.

You may be wondering how I resolved my crisis. Here's the incredible answer you are all looking for that will solve all of the world's problems. Here it is: I didn't. My crisis is ongoing. And life goes on, anyhow.

I call myself a Christian Atheist. I need proof of something supernatural. I don't have it. Therefore I'm an atheist. But wait, I can't shake this feeling that I need God, whoever or whatever it is. And if I'm gonna talk to God, it might as well as be the Christian one since that's the one I'm comfortable with.

Meanwhile, I trust Johnny. Thankfully, Johnny is a very patient man who has not turned me away even when I've not been on the best of terms.

I joined the men's group that Johnny and several of his friends joined. We talk about fears. We talk about the hard stuff. No need for me to give details. This is personal.

I gave up my right to intellectually investigate truth. I was exhausted. I realized that life was meant to be lived, not gripped onto by the cold, dead hands of a philosopher.

Now, I try my best not to get lost in intellectual pursuits. I still introspect. I can't help it.

Whenever I feel the urge to smack an atheist or Christian in the face with a frying pan, I remember my own confusion and try to calm down. I just wish others knew that life is not a matter of debate but of experience and relationships.

I should remark that my relationships with others have dramatically improved as a result of becoming heart-oriented and aware of the emotions of others. With the opening of my heart, I experienced pain and joy to a greater degree. I do not regret this.

Who knows what the future holds?

Maybe I will be a prophet and bring life to people and I'll get healed. This is my dream.

Maybe I will find no answers and life will suck and I will play church when I miss fellowship. This is my nightmare.

Chapter 6 – The Future

Let's just say hypothetically that all my dreams come true and that this God stuff is true.

I don't want to go into the future alone. I am not just referring to having a soulmate/wife.

What I really want is to live life with others, to enjoy others, and to be known well by others, in good times and bad. In particular, I want to be with a group of people like a family. And no, I'm not just referring to having kids.

I want to be around others who are of the same mindset and lifestyle, a church, to be more precise. But I don't want to be part of any church. I want to be part of a small group of believers who are like family and go through the ups and down of life together.

I don't want to be alone.

You know who else doesn't want to be alone?

Jesus. That's why Paul the apostle made such a big deal about the marriage of Christ and the church. It is a symbolic gesture of how Jesus is the invisible best friend of all true Christians. Am I one? I don't know.

I consider myself to be part of the church. Whatever my hypothetical future holds, it will involve the church.

From a historian's standpoint, if I want to project the church future, I need to know its past. I will give a brief lesson on church history to demonstrate what I think is the way of the future for the church. And remember, I've done a lot of studying, so don't think that I just pulled this information out of nowhere.

There are 3 branches of the church. One is the Biblical branch which has to do with the intellectual aspect of faith. We believe the truth as presented to us through scripture. The second branch is the supernatural which corresponds to how God's power is shown in my life whether it is through miracles or life transformation. The third branch is the traditions of the church. Traditions and passed down teachings provide depth, meaning and legacy. It provides an emotional connection to those who have come before us.

I will next describe the four phases of church history in terms of these branches. The four phases are the early church era (or patristics which means founding fathers), Catholic era, Reformation era, and Modern era. Things started out extremely well. The Catholic Church almost entirely corrupted the church. The reformation started the recovery. Now we are simultaneously seeking restoration of the early church as well as progress in the church for the future. There is the possibility that the church in the future could rise above the early church in every way and be ready for the Second Coming of Jesus, which is our great hope.

The early church passionately interpreted and defended scripture. They defended the humanity and divinity of Christ. A list of some of these writings that we still have today are Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Minucius Felix, Athenagoras, Theophilus of Antioch, and many more. The early church also experienced many miracles and survived heavy persecution and martyrdom. They fully operated in the spiritual gifts, experienced ecstatic joy and visited the third heavens (Charismatics know what this is), and lived lives of decency and character. Finally, the early church had some traditions including the sacraments of the Lord's supper, baptism, marriage, confession, Presbyterian leadership, five-fold ministry, Lord's prayer, listening to saints, scripture reading, fasting, assembly on Lord's Day, and eagerness for the Second Coming.

As you can see, the early church thrived. It is my goal to have any church that I'm a part of engage in the above activities, seek spiritual gifts, live lives of integrity and passionately defend a scriptural worldview. Although, I want to go one step further than that and pursue relationship with God and to be emotionally connected to others. Unfortunately, the next chapter of church history strayed far from the early church.

The Roman Church replaced a scriptural worldview with their own doctrine, inviting in such filth as pagan festivals, Gnosticism, legalism, papal deification (of sorts), indulgences, salvation by works, and other undignified doctrines/practices. Thankfully, the Reformed church did away with many of these but hadn't completely finished the job and has left the job to us in this era.

In addition, miracles seemed to come to an end in the Roman era, with the exception of strange incidents amongst Catholic mystics. The grand issue of the day was that power no longer directly from God to the believer but from the state to the church. The average believer-peasant was kept out of the loop without even so much a Bible! The only evident power was in the Inquisitions and Crusades. Sheesh!

The Roman church did seem to excel in one area and that is in traditions. The traditions seemed to act as a way to connect believers to, wait for it, Mary. After all, God is too holy for individuals headed to purgatory. Mariology suggested that Mary was the in-between humans and Jesus or God. Let's not forget about the pope's mediator-position. I think the key thing to learn from this nightmare is that church and government don't mix well. I think we would do well to wait for the Coming of Christ before we rule and judge the world.

Let's move onto a slightly less depressing era, the Reformation. They trumpeted sola scriptura from the rooftops. This means that they stressed the teachings of Paul in the New Testament over all other knowledge they come in contact with. The compelling theology of the day included salvation by grace through faith, God's absolute sovereignty, double predestination, Calvinism, Lutheranism, Wesleyanism, and many other denominations.

The Reformed folks believed power was most centrally located in the conviction of the soul by the gospel proclamation. This is seen most prominently in the Great Awakenings in the United States which bolstered the idea of America as a Christian nation.

The shadow side of power in the Reformation period were the bloody wars between Catholics and Protestants by proxy of the state. The most notorious scene in Reformed history was the burning of Michael Servetus by John Calvin for rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity.

Paul warned of this in 1 Corinthians 8:1 "Whereby knowledge (doctrine) makes arrogant, but loves edifies". It's pretty obvious that if you kill someone that you don't love them, even if they disagree with you or live a lifestyle that you hate.

Anyhow, another area where Reformed folks generally did well is in the area of traditions, where they largely returned to the traditions of the early church. However, they never really got the point of these traditions which is to establish emotional connection with others believers and God. Traditions still acted as a means to show one's disposition towards God. In other words, while faith was necessary, traditions were often added in small print as part of the doctrinal statement. This led to the severe fracturing of the Protestant church into the thousands of denomination we have today.

I frame the Modern era as the period of time between the late 1800's to 2017. I know a lot has happened in this period but I see a few trends. I will project the future where I, a millennial, will participate as much as possible.

Doctrine has largely lost its meaning in the postmodern era due to younger generations rejecting much of the tenets of the faith and losing trust in churches and ministries. Regardless of the reasons, the damage is done and little can be done to revamp the church's tarnished image.

One may argue that doctrine is still important because the Bible says it is important. I would argue that this is only true in the sense that the doctrines inform self-identity and character. The intellectual form of truth that carries some weight in this generation is the narrative. People don't

think but they get on board with whatever feels right for them. The same holds true for me, in my experience.

Progress can be made by retelling theology in story format, not to merely entertain but recruit people hungry for a new story. Some people want a new life. They are tired of a culture providing death, decay, and depression. For these people, theology must appeal to emotions. The systematic theologian, such as myself, must put on a new wig and perform a jig. I kid but I affirm the need for evangelicals to emphasize the arts, creative expression, introspection as well as social activism. Youth seem to be attracted to these kind of things.

One of the many things I'm thankful for in recent Christian history is the explosion of Pentecostal and Charismatic practices. In addition to spiritual gifts, we can engage in practicing God's presence, hearing God, Original Design prayer, intercession, spirit worship (whatever that is), five-fold ministry, SOZO prayer, and so many other crazy, weird, and cool practices. This is clearly a return to the embrace of God's power. We don't just believe that God is all-powerful but that He would like to show off in our lives if we ask Him to.

As far as traditions go, we seemed to have thrown out Baby Jesus out with the bathwater. In our disgust with triteness, we seemed to have lost our weirdness. I'm not saying that we should do traditions, just because. Rather, we need to explore what made us unique as Christians. Why did we stand out in days of the apostles?

If we want some help recovering our origins, look no further than the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Episcopal Church. We may not need to be decked in gold and long, somber cloaks and beards like Dumbledore but we can learn a thing or two from these guys who have tried to keep some sacred traditions.

As for me, personally, I want to teach and prophesy to the next generation. I want to witness miracles and lose my status as an atheist. I also want to see people transformed by the goodness of God, if He or She even exists. I want to be humble and teachable but strong enough to resist people-pleasing. Really what I want is what we all want: peace, happiness, meaning, family, love, respect, and all that jazz.

Will you come on this adventure with me?