

Atheist: A Biography

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Luke was born into a moderately religious household. His family spent each Sunday morning rushing around the house amid a flurry of curses and arguments trying to get everyone ready for the Sunday School and service at the large Baptist church down the street. When Luke was older, he also went to the Wednesday night youth group this church had. But outside of that, religion wasn't any great percentage of his day-to-day life. His parents never prayed before meals, there was no religious paraphernalia around the house, and the most frequent invocation of God was in front of the phrase "damn it".

There was one time, though, that for some reason, Luke remembered his entire life. During one period when he was about 6 or 7, when his parents were fighting a lot, Luke found himself needing his father for something shortly after a particularly loud argument had concluded. His mother was in the washroom, loudly banging the doors to the washer and dryer as she changed loads. Luke walked into his parent's bedroom and found his father on his knees beside the bed, knuckles clasped as if he would die should he let go, muttering quiet pleas within breaths taken between violent sobs. Luke stood there wordless for about 30 seconds watching this, until his presence was felt by his father. His father looked up and saw Luke staring at him with wide eyes.

What Luke remembered most about this moment was not the fight, nor the fact that his father was praying, but rather the look on his father's face after Luke had found him praying. It was a look of shock, anger, intrusion, embarrassment, and shame, as if Luke had found his father masturbating or having sex with a woman other than his wife. Luke felt an equal measure of shame over having witnessed this display. It was that mutual sharing in the shame of praying that stuck with Luke for years to come.

It was a year later that Luke decided to walk down the aisle one Sunday and "accept Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior". He had been sitting in the service, comparing the colors of the stain-glassed windows and tuned in at the very end of the sermon long enough to hear the pastor's plea for individuals to respond. As the music began, people started walking to the front, most of whom getting on their knees and praying around the "altar". Luke looked up at his father and asked what they were doing. His father said that most of them were going down to pray and some were talking to the pastor to say that they wanted to become Christians. Luke asked his father why he never goes to pray. His father responded that he didn't need to be in front of anyone else to talk with God. He asked his father why these people were "becoming" Christians if they had gone to the Church for a while. Weren't they already Christians? Luke was told that going up front helped some people feel like they were "real" Christians. It was helpful for them to have a time and date on it all. Luke asked his father if he'd ever "gone up front". His father said that he had, but couldn't remember when or how old he was.

Luke then said he wanted to go up front. His father looked down at him, puzzled, and asked him why. Luke told him that he wanted to be a Christian. After asking Luke several times if he was sure, and receiving answers in the affirmative, Luke's father and mother finally took him down up front. Luke remembered distinctly that, upon their arrival, the elder they talked to--the same one who always greeted them at the same door each week--had to ask how to pronounce his father's name several times. This was so that when the music had concluded, he could take the microphone and tell the whole church about the decision Luke had made. Luke did not know this man was going to do this. He just wanted to become a Christian; he didn't want everyone to know about it. Wasn't it good enough for God to know? The elder apparently disagreed and the gleeful announcement was met with applause from the congregation and some statement about "heaven rejoicing". Luke's face, hot with embarrassment, spent this time buried in the arm of his father.

Luke grew up telling friends he was Christian. Upon his entrance to middle school, he began going to the Wednesday night youth group at the church. He learned each week

about how he was supposed to "witness" to his friends and keep coming to church. He learned how he was supposed to wear W.W.J.D. bracelets and not curse. Luke remembered the Thursday morning at school, the day after the youth group handed out these bracelets to the students. He had forgotten to wear his, and as he saw his youth group acquaintances proudly brandishing theirs, Luke distinctly recalled that he felt bad about forgetting his. He wanted to be a good Christian, and he didn't like disappointing Jesus or his youth group "friends". Later that same day, Luke said "fuck you" when a friend teased him for his recent haircut. Luke did not feel bad about *this*. In the moment, this discrepancy of conscience surprised him, but he paid it little mind.

During this time, he began internalizing the idea that he was supposed to read his Bible and pray. He tried to open the book up several times while he was at home, but he didn't quite know where to start nor what the strange words meant. He tried to pray, but didn't know what to say and how to shake the feeling that he was simply talking to himself. Eventually, after months of occasional attempts, and feeling really bad about his failures, Luke figured God was doing okay even without him doing these things and was probably happy enough just knowing that Luke was on his team and believed in him, and so he didn't let this shake his conscience anymore. The relief from the guilt was a welcome reprieve.

Middle school turned into high school, and Luke's awkwardness turned into some semblance of a social circle. Girls started to take notice of him, and the air of hormonal pubescence was palpable in the halls of the school. He "dated" a few girls for a few weeks at a time, learning the sting of temporary social isolation after a "break-up" and learning how his body responded to the touch of a woman. He remembered the voice of his youth group leader popping into his head the first time he touched a girl's breast. He was greatly annoyed at this but quickly pushed it out of his head and enjoyed the moment. Reflecting on it later as he masturbated, Luke realized he did not feel bad about having touched the girl's breast and, in fact, felt a certain sense of freedom doing so.

As he progressed through school, Luke found within himself a love of books and language and that he actually enjoyed the homework for his English classes. He started signing up for the advanced classes at the school and spent much time with students who had much life in them and were always looking for a good discussion. They would sit in classes and, save for the occasional annoying student, most of them really *wanted* to be there. They were excited about learning language and literature and the history behind the text and the author.

Luke was a junior the first time he chose on his own not to go to church one Sunday. His parents asked him several times if he was sure, and upon his frequent insistence of not wanting to go, they relented and went without him. He felt bad. He slept in a little bit, made some cereal, and read. He loved the quiet way the sunlight struck the countertop in the kitchen and how the windowpane shadows graced his book pages, confusing his pupils as to whether they should be dilated or not. He loved this Sunday in the empty house much more than he did when he was at church. He ended up not feeling bad.

Nevertheless, habits are habits, and Luke found himself back in church the next week, hearing the long Southern drawl of the silver-haired oracle. Luke thought of the Odyssey, which his class had recently studied, and remembered the part about the sirens when Odysseus's crew had to put the wax in their ears to keep from being seduced by the siren's lying call: their call promising life, but leading unto death. He wondered what that siren song could have sounded like. He imagined this pastor as a siren, with Luke tied to the wooden pew as Odysseus. He wished he had some wax to complete the picture.

Luke continued going to church most weeks, though his Wednesday night attendance began to wane. Those weeks he did go to the youth groups, he would sit there, looking around, seeing no one interested in the lesson, and he would wonder why he should be. While the leader was talking about some verses, Luke would stare at the pages of his Bible, not at all knowing what these words had to do with what the leader was saying. He became more and more sensitive to the weight in the room during every lesson; that

weight that sat thick in the air, testifying to the unspoken understanding of everyone present that nobody cared about what was going on. No one wanted to be there. No one was listening. No one was engaged. Nobody gave a damn in any way that affected them beyond their impatient ever-growing inner-tension while they sat in this room that night.

Luke had his first taste of alcohol in the summer between his junior and senior years. It was a beer at the party of a girl he liked. He hated the taste of it, but enjoyed the ease at which it set him, and how it helped him enjoy the evening. He recalled a recent sermon he had heard about alcohol and wondered if the pastor had ever done this sort of thing when he was Luke's age. For some reason, Luke doubted it. Luke said to himself that the pastor grew up in a different time. He wondered if the pastor felt bad for having ever drank alcohol. He wondered if the pastor wished he could drink. He wondered why God cared about drinking. He wondered why, with all the passion with which the pastor spoke, Luke felt no prick of conscience at all over this indulgence.

Graduation came, and Luke decided to go to a college a couple hours away from his home. He decided he wanted to become a high school English teacher. It was during his freshman year that he met Katrina. They immediately were drawn to one another and felt that connection that one instinctively knows is rare and is worth pursuing. They began dating, and in the first few months of their relationship, the greatest hardship they faced was the fact that their names did not easily flow when said together (as in "lukeandkatrina"). After a few months of dating and having explored most nooks and crannies of one another's bodies, they decided that they would take one another's virginities.

The night was scary, awkward, and sloppy--but fun, nonetheless. There were no fireworks. Their bodies made weird noises when pressed against one another, and they underestimated how sweaty two bodies became when friction was placed between them. It was new; it had the excitement of discovery, rather than that of sensuality.

After they both had concluded this foray into this new realm, they laid next to each other in the bed. Luke's heart still beat quickly--not because he was still sexually excited, but because he felt he had gone through something dangerous and come out the other side unscathed. He had the image of a tunnel of fire behind him, having traversed it with nary a singe nor ash upon him. It was his first, clearest, most definitive moment of coming to the conclusion that his religious leaders had been *wrong*--not due to mere differing opinion, nor to mere preference or perspective. They were flat-out, objectively *wrong*. This was no evil thing he had just done. Sure, it was nothing like the pornography he would indulge in now and then, and it was definitely not *sensual* in any conventional sense--but it wasn't soul-destroying. On the contrary, he actually felt more *alive* now than he ever did in church. He did not feel bad; he did not feel guilty; he did not feel shameful.

Luke and Katrina's relationship would continue for another six months. They became better and better at sex with one another. They learned just what the other person liked and how their bodies responded to certain touches and sounds and movements. It was fun and vibrant and life-giving.

During this time, Luke would go to church with his parents whenever he was home, but when he was at school, he found himself preferring that quiet and beautiful solitude that secular Sundays brought him. He still believed in God, but felt that God wasn't nearly as concerned with things like church attendance and sex as Luke was told while growing up. He figured that when he was older--when it was time to pick this back up--he would start doing the church thing again, and would take his kids to church just like his parents did. After all, it had given him a good moral framework from which to work off of, and he was always trying to not be an asshole to those around him and help whomever he could. But, for the time being, at least, God was fine with him taking a break.

Once Luke and Katrina had been dating for nearly ten months, Katrina started acting distant. Luke would never know this (nor would he understand, even if he did), but she had woken up one morning and, simply and inexplicably, no longer felt for Luke what

she had previously. She did not know how to respond to this, and spent a couple of weeks seeing if she could shake this feeling. She couldn't.

Luke had been trying to reach out to Katrina for these two weeks. Sensing something was wrong, he began to over-compensate by calling and texting repeatedly each day, begging Katrina to meet. The tension in his chest growing ever tighter, he started crying himself to sleep, assuming the worst was to come. This worst came on the second Saturday of that two week period of Katrina's unrest. She finally asked him to come over, and he was there in ten minutes. She said something about not feeling like she was ready for as serious of a relationship as this was becoming. Luke asked why. She tried to manufacture answers to justify her feelings, and Luke tried to explain each of these answers and why they were no reason to end their relationship. These not being the real reasons for her departure, and her having no better answer to offer, she only grew in her frustration and they ended up alternately yelling at one another and crying.

Eventually, Luke realized her mind would not change. He stopped talking, and as his grief turned to anger for just how fickle her heart was, he left her apartment with a muttered fuck you in response to her plea to still be her friend. He cried himself to sleep. That next morning, Luke went to church.

He sat in the back. More than ever, he felt so far on the outside of something of which everyone else seemed to be so deeply a part. He watched arms up-raised, smiles outstretched, eyes shimmering and damp against the strange spotlights the church used to illuminate the dimly lit school auditorium. He did not stand when the pastor asked all the new people to stand. He did not greet anyone during the "get-to-know-you" time, nor was he himself greeted. He wore his grief on his face, and it was apparent to anyone that to talk to Luke would be an endeavor to both scale an emotional wall and stand beneath an emotional weight of pain on the other side, and no one wanted to do that.

And so Luke sat there. He didn't know why. Well, he sort of did. He knew he didn't want to hurt anymore. He knew that people went to God when they were hurting. Somehow, God was supposed to answer this moment and make things at least *tolerable*, even if not *better*. But Luke was frustrated that all he could do was sit here and hate the church service. The music was shitty, the pastor didn't have a clue, the smiles were all fake, the sermon was a joke, and these people oozed naiveté from every pore.

He looked around and wondered, if there actually *was* a God up there in the first place, how did *this* become the way humans *genuinely* thought they were to respond to that fact? Was God up there, pleased with this? If so, then was Luke looking in the right place for any needed relief? If not, why the fuck was God doing nothing to control his believers? Wasn't the idea of there being a "God" supposed to be something bigger than us? That's why Luke was trying to turn to him for help, right? To lose himself in something bigger; to transcend his shitty feelings; to rise above the pain. But there was nothing. Looking around, there was nothing either in Luke's heart nor in the room around him that made *any* sense if there really was a God. Well, at least a God that *gave a fuck*. How *could* there be a God and Luke still be able to stay in his own head and heart? Why was it so much easier to experience this transcendence in books, poetry, art, sex, the body, and a Sunday spent at home, tracing lines of sun on aged leaves of the classics?

Luke left during the altar call. As he emerged from the double-doors, he remembered his own time that he walked down the aisle--he couldn't remember exactly when it was. He remembered his father saying that he didn't need to go up front to be with God. He remembered the sweat marks left on his father's jacket when Luke's face finally emerged once the embarrassment had passed. He remembered the shame. He remembered his father praying--the feeling of guilt.

As he reached his left arm out to open his car door, he saw his watch and it brought to his mind the W.W.J.D. he received at youth group and never wore. As Luke sat in the driver's seat, he stared out into the bright Sunday morning, imagining all the souls still

sitting in those pews singing the same chorus for the fifth fucking time, refusing to stop until *someone* walked up front. Luke felt sorry for whatever poor bastard made that decision. A strange alchemy began to take place in his heart. Thinking of the bracelet, the youth group, and Katrina's body, he realized that every *religious* thing that he had ever missed or messed up in, he felt *so guilty* over. But at the same time, all those forbidden things that weren't *religious* by nature, when he did them, he felt *no* guilt. In what world was it okay that a human was supposed to feel like shit for *both* not wearing a fucking bracelet *and* having sex? What God would care so much about a bracelet that he would torment a child's conscience for *that*, but not for saying the word "fuck"? Why, in all of Luke's endeavors to please this God, did *religious* things only ever bring him pain and guilt, but all those "forbidden" things--things that were "supposed" to bring about pain and guilt--why did they only bring him joy, friendship, community?

Luke drove home with his mind going so fast. He was tired. He stumbled into his room and into his bed, falling asleep. He woke up two and half hours later and noticed the dried salt stains on the pillow cover left over from his tears. He saw that he still hadn't put away his picture of Katrina on his bedside table. He felt the bubble of tears rising in his chest again. He looked on the bottom shelf of the table and pulled out the next-to-the-last book in the stack--the Bible.

He closed his eyes, wanting to pray some sort of request to God for Him to do *something*; Luke wanted to express *some* sense of desperation or need or pleading, but the words did not come. Giving up, he simply opened the book. He casually flipped to Numbers and just found lists of people's names. He wouldn't find God there. So he kept going. He went to Joshua and just saw stories about battles. Proverbs had, well, a bunch of proverbs. He read the beatitudes in Matthew, which were nice, but nothing revolutionary that he hadn't heard a million times. First Corinthians had some weird thing about prophecy and tongues that he hadn't heard about in sermons growing up. He read that for a couple of minutes, but more out of curiosity than anything else. It was hardly where some God would meet him. The book of Hebrews was nearly incomprehensible--the grammar was so weird and unnecessarily difficult to parse. Third

John was some weird random letter that made no sense to be in the Bible. And Luke had heard enough sermons about Revelation to know he would not be flipping there.

Luke wondered what the point of the Bible was, if someone could go cover to cover and not see God? Wasn't it supposed to speak comfort? Aren't Christian supposed to read the Bible when they're hurting? Isn't that supposed to make this tolerable, at least? Wasn't there supposed to be encouragement, at least?

Luke couldn't pray. He couldn't read the Bible. He couldn't go to church. He didn't know what to do. The system of reality that had been sold to him was one in which there was a God who cared about us and met us and was close to us and loved us and met us and comforted us when we needed it. That was hardly the reality that Luke seemed to be living in right now. How could the world that his church teachers inhabited growing up be *so* different than the world he was seeing and living right now? None of this made sense.

Luke finally came to the conclusion that this brief attempt at turning to God in the midst of the deepest pain of his life was going nowhere. He would turn to the even more old-fashioned route: he called his friends and they went out drinking. After two weeks of speaking blasphemies against the woman he used to love and odes of affection to many bottle-bottoms, Luke was feeling his inner-tension lessen. Summer was coming, and with it, the higher skirts and shorter necklines had encouraged him of the prospects ahead.

Luke continued college. He gave only occasional thought to God. Every once-and-a-while he'd maybe try and pray or maybe try and open his Bible, but these moments always seemed like endeavors to step *out* of reality and not *engage with it all the more*. He couldn't help but wonder if the same impulse driving his sparse attempted returns to God were the same drives behind the cravings of former drug addicts. Why should he have to escape reality to deal with reality? He began to learn healthy ways of calming himself in stress, like exercising and eating better. These "cravings" waned further.

His other main religious pondering arrived during his pedagogy classes. There came a particular day when he couldn't shake the feeling that the particular teaching method being offered seemed much more like crowd control and indoctrination than "true learning" and "discourse". After pontificating this for a few minutes with his immediate neighbors in the class, a certain phrase the teacher said while demonstrating this technique reminded Luke of one of his old Sunday School teachers. His head began spinning a little bit as he started drawing connections between this controlling and indoctrinating teaching technique and the teaching materials he grew up with in church. The rest of the class faded from Luke's attention as he searched his mind for what bits of himself were the results of these moments. He felt he was doing intellectual surgery to excise something cancerous. He was surprised this negative of a picture popped into his head.

Luke began writing more poetry as his college years went on. He dated a few more girls, as well. These two facts met at frequent junctures through his time at school, they became his access to all that he was raised to think he was to find in God: beauty, transcendence, and a grounded meditation and experience of the ethereal. These were the meeting places of whatever humans through history had called "divine" and whatever humans refer to as "real life". His relationships became fertile ground for his writing career, and he even was able to publish several poems in a couple of magazine across the country.

He graduated and eventually began his first year teaching High-School Advanced English. He loved it. It reminded him of those years in this very class, inciting discussion and watching wonder, awe, and maturity spring forth from the minds of these kids.

One day, during a lesson on *The Scarlet Letter*, Luke found himself expounding on the historical source of the story in such a way that painted the church in a very negative light--more negative and passionate than he expected. The class seemed a little surprised at home *personally* Luke seemed to talk about the subject. A student raised

their hand and politely asked if they were allowed to ask Luke what religion he was. The back of Luke's tongue instinctually reached towards to top of his mouth to begin to form a hard "C", but he couldn't move further. The sound was caught in his throat. His mind would not let him say "Christian". Puzzled, he told the student that he couldn't answer the question because it was a public school and the conversation continued.

But Luke pondered this on his ride home. Why, even after all this time of not doing anything characteristically "Christian", had his knee-jerk reaction been to call himself one? Admittedly, over the past few years, whatever sense of a token "God" that Luke had given any regard to was far more Deistic than Christian. What was he now? Was he a Deist? What would be the benefit of being a Deist? Well, one was able to hold onto the good parts of there being a God, Luke supposed.

But, what were those benefits? Luke couldn't think of any. Any potential answer he started coming up with, his mind answered with how Luke had experienced that benefit to a *greater* degree the *more* he disregarded God and just *lived life*.

Life. Luke pondered this. Everything that word implied--vitality, freedom, expansiveness, excitement, and joy--had only really *ever* been experienced by Luke in art, poetry, wine, and sex. Why was Luke so deeply and instinctually holding on to the necessity of some Being up above? Luke, for the first time, he believed, allowed himself to actually wonder: was this God a non-necessity? Was he superfluous? Gratuitous? An *extra* thing or accessory tacked onto an otherwise beautiful existence to simply justify its beauty? Was humanity itself not beautiful enough? Was not morality in and of itself not beautiful enough? Was the creation at hands of artists or the words at the pens of writers not beautiful enough? Was life simply not "enough" without there being some God?

Luke had to reject this. As this thought overtook him, a thrill began to shutter in his heart, an expansiveness grew in his chest. A sense of freedom began to overtake Luke as the image of wings expanding behind him formed in his mind. The wings of Icarus? Or the wings of an angel? He didn't know yet. All he knew was that, for the first time,

perhaps, he felt that life was not the property of some being that would be imposed upon him. Luke himself would live life. It would not live him.

And so for the first time--the first of *many* times to come--Luke let himself say out loud:
"I am an Atheist."

And I can't wait to see him again.



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