

The Backroad Christian

A Memoir (of sorts) by

L D Bembenek



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DEDICATION

For Pat ~ I miss you.

For our kids and their kids ~ You are, simply put, my heart.

Melissa, Eli, Grant and Wade, this is for you.

*“For I have given you an example, that you also
should do just as I have done to you.” John 13:15*

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FOREWORD, FIRST THOUGHTS & FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Foreword by Linda Rutherford

Denise and I met in fifth grade. I immediately took to her electric personality, and we became part of a small group of friends who were inseparable. Trips to 7-Eleven for Slurpees, weekend sleepovers, roller skating at Josey Skateland and learning to play pool in her game room filled our younger years. Her house was the first in our neighborhood with a Beta machine, and we were obsessed with renting movies whenever possible (some we definitely were not supposed to watch at our age). Our sleepovers were also filled with Ouija board challenges, games of “light as a feather, stiff as a board” and boy talk.

We were constantly together, at and outside of school. “My Mom can take if your Mom can pick up” became a near-daily mantra for our group, whether we were going to the movies, the mall or just hanging out at each other’s house.

As we grew up and learned to drive, we took turns burning gas in our 1970s and 1980s well-used cars to cruise Forest Lane in Dallas on Friday or Saturday nights, meeting up with friends, eating fast food and looking to get into some innocent trouble like taking a drag from a cigarette or piling more than the legal limit of people into one car. Looking back, I’m just glad there was no such thing as cell phones and social media. What happened in the 1980s, stayed in the 1980s.

We had each other’s back. We shared everything back then. Together we “ruled” student council in high school – she as class president and I as her trusted partner and class VP. We got to decide prom themes, senior class events and our class song. Among our high school cliques, we were known as the “brains that drank,” which was some sort of Purgatory

between the popular kids and the bunch that smoked and did drugs. We were excited about what came after high school, if a bit nervous about what the future held. The freedom of going away to school was something I remember us both being beyond ready for (and yet, we weren't really). We kept in touch during the first few years by writing letters (yes, with actual paper, stamps and envelopes). We would make a point to reconnect during holidays, never skipping a beat with our friends and routines.

I remember being thrilled when she left her college program in Nacogdoches, Texas, to join me for junior year in Lubbock, Texas, and continue her education. Again, we were inseparable. We lived in an off-campus apartment together, and we both worked at the college newspaper. It seemed like we spent every waking moment together, but looking back, I had no clue how much she was struggling. Sure, there were signs here and there, but my 20-year-old brain didn't have the capacity back then to take in what was happening nor the smarts to know how best to help my friend.

One day, she just disappeared. Packed what she could from our two-bedroom apartment, left school and her job at the newspaper and went home. It's been nearly 40 years, but I remember being angry. I made the incident all about me – leaving me in a lurch and on the hook for an apartment lease I could not afford, leaving a job I introduced her to and leaving our friendship, in a sense. It took months, but I finally stopped mourning what I thought was a friendship lost and told myself I simply couldn't have “fixed” her and that the best thing to do was to let her go.

Many years later, we would both be invited back by a former high school counselor to recount to a group of high school students our friendship, what happened to it and why and how we found our way back to each other. In a way, our friendship journey took the same back roads Denise describes in her religious and spiritual journey.

As you'll read in the pages that follow, Denise dealt with (and in some ways is still dealing with) more than her fair share of challenges and setbacks. But she digs deep to share vulnerable stories about lessons learned, grace uncovered and God's light that helped illuminate the path when it seemed like the roads were too dark to safely pass.

Religion is still something we can fervently debate (I'm still not a fan of what I call organized religion), but there is no denying the God and AA-led wisdom in the "mile markers" that have guided Denise to the peaceful, centered place from which she now operates. Enjoy this read – it has tough moments for sure, but it's also sprinkled with a wicked sense of humor and prose that isn't afraid to wink at you once and a while (let's not take all of this too seriously!).

I have my friend back in this season of life, and I thank God for that.



First Thoughts by Jennifer Mendenhall Futrell

I spent a lot of years knowing a lot about God without feeling like I ever *really* knew Him. I grew up in church, followed the rules, checked the boxes, went on to a conservative Christian college, and tried really hard to be "good." Then life happened. I couldn't keep it all up... Somewhere between disappointment, failure, questions, and seeing some of the uglier sides of Christianity, I stopped going to church. I still wanted God; I just had no clue how to approach Him in my messiness.

Reading *The Backroad Christian* feels like sitting on a porch swing with my favorite former teacher, listening to her tell me about life, faith, and all the shit she's learned along the way. What impacted me most was her willingness to be so real about the road that got her here.

Denise's story reminded me that the Bible (and life) is full of messy

people who question, fail, screw up, and keep going & that faith doesn't require me to have it all figured out either. It's a journey. "Progress, not perfection" is apparently a lesson I still need at 34 just as much as I did at 13, sitting in her seventh-grade English class.

I finished her story with plenty of questions but also feeling more hopeful and more willing to keep seeking God in a way that feels real and simple.

And that *is* exactly what I needed.



First Impressions by Elizabeth Bertuca

An alcoholic and a divorcee-pastor walk into a Panera... Okay, that's not how the story starts, but it did happen once (twice?).

Denise is no stranger to the scenic route. In fact, her road to redemption is beautifully authentic and painfully raw. It's a brutally honest, guttural, sometimes hilarious journey that's been hard lived, hard fought, and well won.

We first met a few years back when she began attending the church I was serving in. I quickly learned that this lady was for real. She was an honest, straight-shooter, and she never pretended to be someone she wasn't. In my line of work, these are the people I gravitate to – the ones who are open and honest and don't change themselves around me because of my position or title. After all, I'm just a regular person. And she (maybe for the first time in my profession) recognized me as such. And she likes me this way. (She told me so).

I'll never forget the day (after my own life had turned upside down) that we met for lunch. I was broken and scared and lonely and betrayed and the definition of "a shell of a person". I describe this time in my life

feeling like ash that was dissolving more and more each time the wind blew – a pain she understood. We met at Panera (see, I got us there), and she greeted me with a hug of someone who not only understood my agony, but saw *me*. And then she whispered a very colorful version of “he’s a jerk” into my ear. She’s right. He is.

The thing about Denise, although brutally honest, she’s never brutal. To be brutal would suggest judgement, and judgmental is the opposite of my friend. Her honesty is more a comfort – it’s a “I got you,” “I get you,” “I see you,” “I’ve been there” kind of honesty where you truly believe her. It’s an honesty and understanding that can only be acquired after personally crawling through the trenches.

It’s the kind of comfort you feel at the end of a long day when the air is cooling and you breathe in a big, satisfying breath before plopping down on your patio furniture and finally resting. It’s like smelling the familiar scent of your grandpa’s workshop after he’s been gone for years.

Never once has she been fake or insincere. Never once did she make me feel crazy or irrational. Instead, her real, deep relational honesty connected with me in ways I was too afraid to speak out loud. In a season where I was terrified of being messy, of being looked down on, being discredited, of feeling like a phony, she saw me the same as she always did – as a person. Her ability to speak truth into my life when I was being hammered with lies, and her ability to show me “life after *insert traumatic event*” are God-given gifts of the greatest, gentlest kind.

The pages of this book are filled with experience, despair, pain, wisdom, one-liners, hope, sass, words I had to google, and an always-pointed direction at a redeeming, loving, merciful, and just God. With a humble look at her past, she connects with anyone who has ever stepped out of line, beaten their own path, felt heartache of the deepest degree, lost hope, found hope (lost hope and found hope again), bargained with

God, cursed God, or learned the hard way. With fists raised or knees on the ground (and as you'll read, sometimes both at the same time), she "never stopped talking to Him" (at least for very long).

To you, the reader, may the words on these pages echo, awaken, reach down and connect into the deepest parts of your soul. May you understand and know that although the road you take (or are thrown onto) might be full of twists and turns and potholes and boulders, this God that Denise describes and clings to is never hurrying you along. Instead, like her, He is willing to meet you in your mess, sit with you for as long as you need (because He sees *you*), and finally, when you're ready, take your hand and guide you through.

What a privilege it is to introduce you to my friend, Denise.

A DRASTIC CHANGE OF COURSE

“It’s actually pretty damn simple, Denise.”

(Pat Bembenek, circa Thanksgiving 1992)

Pat and I had just finished Thanksgiving dinner at my grandmother’s house and were headed home early to beat the weather coming in. Deciding to take a shorter backway home, we were on a dark, four-lane blacktop highway when a North Texas ice storm slid in (iykyk). We’d been having one of the religious-slash-philosophical discussions that were fairly common in the early years of our marriage. Pat and I talked (he would have said, “debated”) a lot. Coming up in different backgrounds, environments, religions and generations (Baby Boomer vs. Gen X) with the steps and principles of Alcoholics Anonymous as common ground, we found ourselves involved in many philosophical, moral and religious discussions. Generally, both of us enjoyed our talks, but that night I could tell I was seriously getting on his nerves.

He was focused on the road, hands gripping the steering wheel, spitting rain freezing as soon as it hit the windshield, on-coming headlights bouncing off the asphalt in the wet darkness. I was pushing a point about some religious “must” that I don’t even remember when he just kind of threw his head back against the rest and sighed, “It’s actually pretty damn simple, Denise.”

Pat swore but rarely at me, so he definitely had my attention. Justifiably irritated, he continued, “I believe there is a God, and it’s not

me. I believe in a higher power, a creative intelligence that designed all of this shit. I believe that Jesus Christ is His son, and that He came to earth to save us from ourselves, that He died on the cross and rose again and that He did all of that to show us just how f***ed up we are and to give us some sort of example of how we are supposed be. What I owe Him for all of that is to be as much like Him as I can humanly be.”

And there it was. The truth. That single, I’m-ending-this-discussion-now explanation of my husband’s simple faith changed how I thought. About all of it. Everything.



I was raised by working class parents who talked about Jesus Christ and attended church somewhat regularly, but for the better part, they didn’t push religious doctrine on either my sister or me. They were both believers who taught us to ask questions and to think for ourselves but also to be aware (and wary) of false gods, false teachers and false promises. They also showed us, pretty much on a daily basis, what integrity, grit, work-ethic, common sense and loyalty looked like. Neither would have been mistaken as poster children for the Southern Baptist mentality, especially when it came to changing attitudes about women and people of color.

My mother was a businesswoman in the 70’s. Smart, stubborn, strong and absolutely convicted about women’s right to equal pay for equal work, she bucked both the system and expectations and challenged attitudes about the traditional role of women. And my

Daddy? He was the handsome and charming mix of cowboy and intellectual match who challenged her, supported her and had her back for 52 years. He would proudly tell people that Mom was one of the first women to wear pants to work in downtown Dallas. He wasn't far off the truth.

Our parents introduced us to Christ as young children by way of the First Baptist Church, a beginning that has most definitely evolved, expanded and amalgamated with other influences along the way. Over the years (and there have been plenty), my understanding and faith have been shaped by many things. In my younger years (really, throughout my life), of course my parents were influential, but there were also other Christians - some who attracted me, others who scared the hell of me and a few who actually repulsed me. Then, there's the Bible. "It is a fascinating book" (said to me by a young man who was growing into his own faith, and I couldn't agree more). Let me qualify that I am in no way, shape or form a Biblical or religious scholar, but I've read and studied the book enough to find hope, direction, comfort and wonder in its pages. It has been and continues to be a light for me. The cool thing is, the more I read the Bible, the more convinced I am of its divinity, its history and its purpose which has not always been the case.

Pat Bembenek, Alcoholics Anonymous - the people in the rooms and *The Big Book*, the steps, principles and promises were each and all just as significant in helping me find my way along this spiritual journey as anything else. Throw in a fascination with how cultures and generations interact and influence each other, a love of history and the

evolution of the English language, classic and modern literature and growing up in a household of prolific readers (seriously, my parents read 2-3 books a week), a love of and respect for nature, a cursory understanding of psychology, a habit of self-reflection, an independent and often reckless spirit that was the bane of my mother, a gratitude list email circle that went on for several years, and you can probably see how a personal relationship with a God I actually understand has taken anything but a conventional route.

Returning to my backroad moment of truth on that dark, cold, wet highway, everything I had learned or believed about Christianity up to that point shifted. It all became much more personal. A single statement said in a moment of frustration over a discussion that was on the verge of full-blown argument turned out to be the single, most powerful and most impactful thing that I've ever heard and something I have repeated often. There simply was no more debate.

So, what is *The Backroad Christian*?

In a nutshell, it's me. I am the backroad Christian, but I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one. The term came to me a few years ago when I was talking with a couple of former students turned friends (who were both well aware of my fondness for driving backroads) about our faiths – really just about faith in general. I was trying to describe how, in my opinion, our faith can be shaped by our environment, but more so, it's a reflection of our examples, our experiences and our internal moral barometers. I shared how I'd always felt my faith was different from many of the other Christians I have met and know(n) – that the peace and understanding I have

in God that I feel so connected to and comfortable with at this point in my life is really the result of so, so many backroads.

I really do have a thing for backroads. My mother was fond of telling people, especially if I was running late (which was most of the time), that I rarely took the straightest route anywhere. It's true. Admittedly, I have found myself lost in some pretty dark, lonely, and scary places on those backroads, but then, the real journey (in my humble opinion) is about finding your way out of those places; it's about the views and the valleys, the people and the places; it's about the off-the-beaten-path enjoyment, and it's about the lessons you learn along the way.

On a literal level, *The Backroad Christian* is a collection of sometimes humorous (to me, anyway), frequently obvious, usually unsophisticated sayings, stories, quotes, observations, and reflections that I've found to be simple truths throughout my life. None of them are original; all of them have made a difference to me in some way.

This little collection of excerpts from life looks back on lessons, ah-ah moments and personal experiences that have guided me, often changing my direction, my mind, my heart and/or my behavior – much like mile markers on an unfamiliar road. More often than not, they are hard-earned wisdom (I use that term loosely) that comes from actually learning from the consequences of my own actions and choices.

From my days in AA, I developed a habit of reflection (it's an essential component to getting sober) – of taking a step back and looking at my actions and separating them from the actions of others, of recognizing my part in a situation and realistically identifying what I

can control (myself) and what I can't (everything else) and taking responsibility for my stuff and letting others deal with their own crap (sorry... stuff).

For me, writing things down – lists, journals, letters I never intended to send, emotional regurgitations of anger and frustrations, prayers for my family and friends, dreams, plans, lessons, gratitude – provides clarity. Seeing my thoughts and feelings in black and white allows (forces?) me to identify, define and disseminate the non-stop recycling of ideas, thoughts, hopes, to-do's, fears and prayers that tend to keep me up at night. It is also a tangible go-to when I can't remember something, which seems to happen more and more frequently. Writing things down, no matter what I'm dealing with or going through at the time, has always helped me separate the reality from the fears, the needs from the wants and the priorities from the time-sucks. This book is, in many ways, the result of that habit.

And, because writing things down has been so elemental to my own journey, I've included space throughout this book for your own journey notes. There are no rules or study questions or points to ponder – just space for your own thoughts, ideas, lists, doodles, prayers, hopes and/or plans. It's your space. You get to decide if and how you want to use (though I really hope you do.)

Metaphorically speaking? Driving backroads is seriously my preferred method of getting from one place to another. I come by it naturally. My family has always loved road-tripping. There's actually an art to it, but I'll save that thought for another book.

History fanatics, my folks often planned road trips around historic routes. From Sherman's march to the sea, to the cattle drives, the Colorado gold rush and the Oregon trail, we pulled an RV all over the U.S. exploring backroads and out of the way places. It was before the days of GPS and cell phones or even Mapsco books. We experienced some really cool places with little more than a bunch of foldable maps (in the days of stopping at each state's Welcome Centers to get a new map), a willingness to "check it out" and mile markers to let us know how far we'd come and if we were going in the right direction.

Today, in a society that is vastly different from the 70's and 80's of my childhood, it feels like we are focused so intently on getting to our destination that we miss the journey. So, on one level, *The Backroad Christian* is a story about a woman who took the less-traveled paths and found a road to peace; on another, it is connection and encouragement for anyone who may have experienced a less than straight and narrow road to redemption (or grace or mercy or salvation or peace - you choose). At its foundation, *The Backroad Christian* is a gift from my heart to yours. I hope you enjoy the journey.

RURAL ROUTE ONE

A Bumpy Road to God, Faith & Personal Truth

A profoundly religious man lived in a beautiful mountainside village overlooking fertile verdant fields rolling gently to the sea. Believing he was blessed by God to live there, he prayed and praised God daily, sure in his knowledge that God would always protect him. Unknowingly, the centuries old community had grown and thrived in the shadow of a long dormant volcano.

One morning, the ground began to rumble and shake as smoke plumed from the mountain's crest, and the air flowed hot and pungent. The authorities issued orders for the villagers to evacuate immediately as people scrambled to escape the impending devastation. Standing on his front porch, hands raised, the man prayed for deliverance and praised God for his power and mercy. As he was praying, the man's neighbor sped by in his truck only to stop and throw the passenger door open and holler, "Get in man! That thing's about to blow!"

A little irritated at having been interrupted during his prayer, he yelled back at the neighbor, "I fear not. The Lord God will protect me." Shaking his head in confusion, the neighbor shrugged and sped off.

The mountain top began to spit ash and crumble as tremors rocked the house, sending large cracks up the walls. A rescue team in an armored vehicle patrolling the village streets for stragglers saw the man still on his porch praying. Stopping, they implored the man to leave. "Sir, you need to evacuate now. The lava has crested and is flowing toward the village. You must leave now!" But the man waved them on, saying, "I trust the Lord God will deliver me."

The sky turned black, and lava snaked down the mountainside, raging fire

devouring everything in its path when a helicopter spotlight shone brightly on the praying man, and the pilot shouted through the loudspeaker. “Grab the rope, Dude! This is your last chance! The whole town is about to be destroyed!” Again, the man waved them away, shouting back, “The Lord God is my refuge. He will save me!”

Moments later, the top of the mountain blew, showering fire and burying the village and the man in molten rock and magma. The next thing he knew, the man heard a warm, familiar voice coaxing him to open his eyes. Blinking awake, the man recognized the beloved face of his Savior and immediately knew he was in Heaven. All around him were sounds of joy and praise as golden light engulfed him. As the memory of how he came to be there flooded back to him, the man suddenly frowned, seeming confused. Noting the bewildered look on the man’s face, God asked, “You obviously have a question, my son. Do not be afraid to ask it.”

Nodding, the man turned to the Lord and wondered, “Father God, I lived my life preaching Your Word and declaring Your power and glory. To the very end, I professed my faith. Why did you not save me?”

Laughing out loud, God shook His head, grinned at the man and said, “Well my son, I sent a truck, an armored car and a helicopter with a rope. What else were you waiting for?”



I was baptized the first time (there were a few) when I was in first grade. I had spent the night with a school friend, and we went to her church the next morning where the Sunday School teacher convinced me to get baptized in big service. I didn’t fully understand what getting baptized meant, but I do distinctly remember two things about that day - that my little six-year-old heart was filled with excitement and joy and

eagerness for Jesus, and that when I told my mother, she was royally pissed. She wasn't mad at me but that an adult she didn't know in a church she didn't attend allowed a very young child to be baptized without a parent present. Looking back, I completely understand my mother's reaction, but then I just remember feeling like I had done something wrong. It wasn't the last time I would feel that way about Church.

When we were young, my mother took us to church – most Sundays anyway. She would dress us up in frilly, itchy dresses and shiny patent leather shoes and cart us off to Sunday School. I remember fidgeting with the scratchy fabric and being shushed while sitting in big church, and I remember being fascinated with the big, beautiful pipe organ in the choir deck. We attended Sunday School and sang the songs and learned the Bible stories, and I believed – in Jesus, in a God who loved me and died a horrible death on a dirty cross for me.

That much I have always carried with me, and I can't honestly say that I've ever not believed on some level in God since that time. Sure, I've questioned. I've doubted. I've argued and bargained. I even shook my fist at God and said, "We're done." But I've never not believed.

On one particular Sunday, a guest pastor came to speak at our church. It was the first sermon I had ever heard on hellfire and damnation. I was maybe 10 or 11, but I remember walking out of that service convinced that I was going to hell and that there was no way I was ever going to be good enough to make it to Heaven. I was terrified and cried on the way home with my mother trying to reassure me, saying, "That's not the way it works." The sermon was so antithetical

to the God that I knew, and I just didn't understand. I couldn't reconcile the two versions of Christ I was hearing about. It was the point when church became something different for me. It became a place that judged and condemned, and I didn't fit. More importantly, I really didn't want to.

Into my teens, we continued to go to church – sometimes. My mother and sister were more connected than I was; I remember finding it hard to fit in. I just didn't. The final straw with the church of my childhood came on a Sunday in 1984 when I was 18. The upcoming Presidential election between Reagan and Mondale would be my first time to vote. I was informed, excited, and ready to fix the world. The sermon that day was on voting your convictions, and according to our Pastor, if those convictions did not point us firmly toward a particular political alliance, then he advised we seek guidance in prayer. I didn't like that very much. I for sure didn't fit.

From then to now, I have attended several churches and found friends and community, but I still have a hard time buying into much of the conventional doctrine and ideology that I learned growing up in a First Baptist Church. Even as a kid, the Jesus who loves me that I learned about in Sunday School just didn't jive with a God that so many “Christians” seem to believe sanctions racism, misogyny, fear and hate (imho). To be sure, I've attended and visited many churches where I felt the power of God's presence, and I've also been to a few that left me feeling much like that teenager who just didn't fit in. If I'm perfectly honest, I am not much of a congregationalist to begin with. I'm intelligent enough to know it's a childhood deal. I also know that I like

sleeping in on Sunday mornings (especially if it's raining). I've gone to churches that move me, inspire me and make me eager to know more about Christ, but the getting up and going part isn't always easy. It took almost a lifetime, but I did finally find a church home – a community where I fit. It's made a difference – a big one.

I've never had (still don't) a problem believing that we, as in all us humans being, came to exist because of an intentional desire of an omniscient, creative intelligence of the universe - that there is something larger who designed all of this, and that there is more to it all than what we see, experience and understand. I think one of the reasons it took me so long to find a church that I connected with is because I seriously had problems reconciling what I knew about the history of the Christian religion(s) and the judgement and arrogance of some people who call themselves Christians with the Jesus I came to know and love in my childhood. It definitely presented a conundrum for me for many, many years.

What I have found, though, is that Christ doesn't make it too hard for anyone who seeks Him to actually find Him. (My mom told me that, once.) In fact, He will pursue us and provide a way for us if we are just thismuch willing to open our hearts and minds to His grace and love. And, just like with the man in the story, you never can tell who He's going to send or how He's going to show up.



“It was only a matter of being willing to believe in a Power greater than myself.”

(The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill’s Story)

“Jesus said to him, ‘If you can believe! All things are possible to him who believes.’” (Mark 9:23, ESV)

Hi. I’m Denise, and I’m an alcoholic. I was just the other side of twenty-four when my cousin tricked me into going to my first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

A teenager of the 80’s, let’s just say that I spent my later teens and early twenties ‘partying my ass off’. Coming out of high school at the top of my game, president of my class, high honor student with a 4.0 grade point, my plan was to conquer the world – and to do it my way. Actually, my plan was to get a degree in Forestry, become a park ranger and go live on a mountain in a national park somewhere and write books, but you know – choices. It didn’t quite work out that way. What I actually did was jump around to different universities, changing majors, partying, trying to figure out just where I fit in and what the hell I wanted to be when I grew up.

Somewhere in my junior year of college, I dropped out and went to work bartending. School wasn’t doing it for me, but bartending in the Dallas Blues music scene fit pretty dang good. I met some really interesting and talented people, and the music - man, oh man – the music! Yeah, it was pretty cool. I was independent, young and hot and smarter than the average bear, not to mention self-absorbed, prideful,

and 10 feet tall and bullet-proof.

I jumped into the bar community with both feet, and while I never drank while I was working (I had standards), any other time was fair game. Money was plentiful, and the booze and drugs flowed freely. Alcohol, drugs and men became my gods of choice, and the Jesus of my childhood became little more than a nagging conscience that all three did a decent job of drowning out, at least early on.

Then it stopped being cool. I began to choose boozing and drugs over family, friends and work. I did things and said things that I still regret. I hurt and alienated the people who knew and loved me the most simply because I couldn't face the concern in their eyes and didn't have the energy to reassure or argue. As I slid further and further into the depths of alcoholism, I found myself more than once sitting at the bar, surrounded by people I knew, worked with and generally liked, feeling completely and totally alone with only my drink and my ego for companionship. God was nowhere to be found. He certainly hadn't answered any of my drunken prayers. I figured the Jesus who loved me as a child had had just about enough of me.

Then AA was there. They say that when the student is ready, the teacher will appear (I'm not exactly sure where I heard that or who "they" is, but I've found it to be true.) That teacher showed up one weekend in the form of my cousin, Gina. I went to visit her in San Antonio, and she convinced me (actually, she didn't give me much of a choice) to go to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting at her roommate's home group. It was an open speaker meeting. We sat in the back of the room where she conveniently placed herself between

me and the door. I remember the room was packed, and it was hot. I was uncomfortable and not just a little irritated, but I swallowed my complaints and began to listen as a much older man described what it was like to be me, how it felt to live in my skin and feel my feels. He shared a story about what alcohol and drugs had given him and what they had taken away, and then he talked about a Higher Power, a God that he understood and had a personal relationship with and how the steps of AA had restored his life, his family, his career and his sanity. Then we stood and held hands and said The Lord's Prayer. And something clicked.

Something connected in that meeting - something that made me want more of what those people had. It was kind of like church but not. It wasn't about being good enough or holy enough. It was about believing that something greater than me could restore me. Maybe it was the confidence and contentment that seemed to flow out of that speaker or the feeling in the room when a bunch of drunks held hands and prayed together, but I have since come to believe that it was God pursuing me. One thing was for sure is that for the first time in a very long time, I felt like I belonged.

Back home I found a meeting that became my AA home group, and I began to (what John at that group often said) participate in my own recovery with the same energy and commitment that I had participated in my alcoholism with. I went to meetings, got a sponsor, read The Big Book and began working the 12 steps. My life began to change for the better. My relationships with my family and friends were restored. I prayed to the Jesus who loved me so much when I was a kid and not

the one that told me I should vote a particular way or that I was going to hell because, let's be honest, I was never going to make the righteousness cut.

I picked up the Bible again somewhere along the way, and I slowly started reading it with a willing heart. I struggled with some of what I read and a lot of what I heard, but I began to see myself in the stories.

In one story, a grieving, desperate father pleads with Jesus to heal his son, saying, "If you can do anything, please help him." (Mark 9:22) Like that man, skepticism and uncertainty and shame had clouded my faith, and I, too, needed an attitude adjustment. Jesus does that when he calls the man out and says, "If you can!" (I can just see him raising his eyebrows and looking at the man like, "seriously?"), but then He delivers the promise, and it's a doozy. "All things are possible for one who believes." The really cool thing about this scripture is what happens next. That broken, jaded, doubtful, anxious, man looked at Jesus and saw a power greater than himself, and he did believe.

A couple of millennia later, a bunch of drunks, with their steps and their principles and their sayings and their stories and their experience, strength and hope showed a broken, jaded, doubtful, shameful, anxious young alcoholic the exact same thing – that a Power greater than herself could restore her if only she was willing to look and see and believe.



“Religion is for people who are scared of hell; spirituality is for those of us who have been there.” (Pat Bembenek)

“If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” (Galatians 5:25-26, ESV)

I made this religion-vs-spirituality statement to a group of teens in a Sunday School class I taught several years ago. I offered up the idea that a spiritual relationship with God, in my opinion, is more important than religious doctrine and that religion, in and of itself, is not what saves us. One of the kids in my class really had a problem with that statement. She argued that religion is essentially the rules that God sets forth in the Bible and following them was how we are supposed to live a righteous life. Her arguments had merit and were worth discussing, but her resistance to any argument against it stopped the discussion dead in its tracks.

I’ve always encouraged open discussion, putting things in context and critical thinking in my classrooms (seriously. Ask me about teaching Lincoln-Douglas debate on nature-vs-nurture in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to a bunch of 7th graders. Incredible.), and this girl was making excellent points and supporting them with scripture. She contended that spirituality was actually the devil’s way of confusing people and keeping them away from God. Well-spoken and home schooled in a Christian home, she certainly knew the Bible better than I did. Over the years we’ve known each other, I have learned a lot from her, and she has grown into a young woman (whom I love fiercely and

trust implicitly) who has become a dedicated servant to Christ, but in that particular instance, she had confused the word “spirituality” with “spiritualism,” which was likely akin to witchcraft in her mind. The discussion quickly slid into a debate on semantics instead of a discussion on how Christ pursues us even in the dark places.

She was so intent on making her point that day and so absolutely sure of her own “rightness” that she completely rejected the input and discussion from the other kids and even from me. When the discussion broached explanation, clarification or counter-opinion, she just couldn’t get past the word. She dominated the conversation, arguing with anyone who disagreed with or challenged her, and more importantly, she wasn’t listening to what anyone else had to say. I could literally see her preparing arguments in her mind instead of trying to understand what the other kids were contributing to the discussion. As I watched, each kid, one by one, tuned out and turned off.

Isn’t it funny how our point of view, experience and understanding of a particular situation, person or idea accounts for so much of what we believe at any given time in our lives? The thing is, all of those things tend to change and evolve the longer we walk this earth. From her limited experience and 16-year-old point of view, religion was the sustaining force of her childhood and the one true and correct way to worship God. Really, though, don’t all religions believe that to one extent or another? The problem that day wasn’t her conviction (which I admire) but her refusal to listen to what anyone else had to say. In her fervor to drive her own points home, she didn’t see that the original statement meant something entirely different to each of the rest of us.

I know this (now) young woman well, and she definitely has experienced her own trials. The “hell” that Pat referred to, though, was exacerbated by a religious upbringing that was governed more by rules than by a personal relationship with Christ. It’s a concept that was completely foreign to her and one she had no experience with at all, but that day, she was adamant that her answer was the only right one. During that class, I saw in her something that I have seen in a few older, more life-weary Christians who seem to want to be heard more than they want to listen and, sometimes, answer a question they haven’t taken the time to fully understand. I’ve known them both inside and outside of church – the ones who seem to be more concerned with declaring rules than sharing the hope, joy, mercy and grace of God, which seems to make Pat’s point.

Pat and I met at a Singles in Sobriety dance in 1990, and from that point, he became my best friend and then my husband and father of our kids. Our marriage and life together were anything but a smooth road, but we loved each other “warts and all.” The most humble, kind, honest and genuinely good person that I’ve known (except for his kids. His kids are like him), Pat died in 2011 after a decade-long battle with a degenerative spinal condition, unimaginable pain in his back and legs, botched surgeries, debilitating depression and a heart-breaking addiction to prescribed opioids. Pat’s journey isn’t for the faint of heart, but his story is so much a part of mine that this entire endeavor would be little more than a thought without him.

Pat would throw out this line quite often. It was one of his personal truths. The sixth son and youngest boy of seven kids born to parents

who were, frankly, tired by the time he came along, he grew up in a large Catholic family and not-so-jokingly referred to himself as a recovering Catholic.

It was one of the things that connected us from the get-go – the disenchantment with organized religion. Pat’s experience with the religion of his childhood had taken him down a disillusioned path that landed him squarely in the rooms of AA where they encouraged him to rethink the whole God idea. Pat’s moment of clarity (that’s what AA-ers call that life-changing moment when you realize that what you are doing is actually what’s killing you) had come at a much darker point for him in his journey than mine had. He had lost his kids, withdrawn from his family, and all but given up on life when the solution he chose to deal with his depression and addictions landed him in lock-up treatment and eventually into the rooms of Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous.

Pat was five years sober when we met, and he was actively involved in AA – speaking, chairing meetings and serving on committees. Like me, he had found a place where he fit. He often shared his story from the podiums and around the tables of AA – about a hell that a God he was coming to understand and rely on more and more had dragged him from. Pat frequently said that he felt like this (life on earth) is hell, and that his faith was what kept him going when he really wanted to give up. I don’t know that I believe the same, but I’ve certainly lived through circumstances and times that felt like hell.

“Religion is for people who are scared of hell; spirituality is for those of us who have been there.” It’s a statement that reminds me that

religion did not conquer the darkness and depravity that go hand-in-hand with alcoholism and addiction and depression and pain. Doctrine certainly didn't provide a way out. A set of rules was something God and I both knew I would break, and being preached at turned me off just like it did the kids in that classroom. What did lead me out of the valley was more than religion. It was a lifelong and deeply personal journey to grace.

I think that's what Paul was saying when he encouraged the church at Galatia to disregard the Judaizer's legalism and doctrine and to remember that the gift of salvation through Christ cannot be earned - that living by the Spirit changes the follower from the inside. Seeking an honest and personal relationship with a God that I truly understood has resulted in a spirituality that didn't just take me to a different level, it opened up a whole new plane of understanding and gave me a way of connecting and communing with God that has, over the years, become the solid ground on which I stand.

And that's a good thing, because when the bottom fell out of my world many years later, it wasn't religion that showed up on a back porch with a shattered, chain-smoking, drunk, angry, grieving, shameful, guilty, snot-slinging mess. It was the God I knew.



“There is a God, and it’s not me.”

(from the rooms of AA)

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

(Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV)

This little beauty of a truth is one of those that pops into my head fairly frequently, and its power is invaluable. Such a clear and simple statement, I have used it as both a mantra and as a prayer. I’ve also used it as a ‘Nuh-uh’ to others’ expectations because if I’m not God, then you ain’t either.

I mean, of course I’m not God. We would all be in trouble if I was. That’s for sure. Then again, how often have I tried to control a particular situation, person, or plan? What about those times when getting my own way came at the expense of others or the times when I relied solely on my own understanding of things before opening my mouth or making a decision? There have been plenty of times when I, convinced of my own rightness and authority, have sat my butt firmly on a pedestal watching over and directing the people in my life and then (surprise) being resentful when they didn’t recognize or appreciate my wisdom. Playing God not only gets me in trouble, but it also hurts the people around me.

When I was teaching, one of my middle-school students approached me about participating in our school’s gifted and talented program. A big, friendly, athletic, funny, rambunctious, quick-witted,

hard-to-manage kid, he was confident and loud and smart. When he approached me, I encouraged him to focus on other areas and that the gifted class may not be for him. At least that's what I think I said. The saddest part is that I didn't remember that conversation again until another teacher (and a good friend) brought it up when we were reminiscing about students. She told me this kid had shared with her what I'd said and how much it had upset him. That young man, by the way, went on to score the highest ACT score in the history of the school. I think about him every now and then, and I wish him well. So many times, I've wanted to apologize, but that would be for my benefit, not his. Telling him I'm proud of him would, frankly, be an insult, but I do hope he knows that I know that I failed him as a teacher.

Heard in many, many AA meetings, "There is a God, and it's not me" is one of those absolutes that reminds me, one – there is a power greater than myself, a God who is actively involved in my life, and two – I have absolutely no power over anything other than my own actions. It's both a disclaimer and reminder of His supremacy and my own powerlessness at the same time. It's also one of those realities that is often difficult to accept and can be accompanied by fear or worry or desperation or overshadowed by arrogance and pride. When the absolute truth of it sinks in, though, I am removed from the center of my own little universe and, more importantly, from yours.

Recognizing that I'm not God means that I have to concede that not everything is about me, which, ironically, requires that I identify what actually is about me – my actions, my intentions, my words and my plans. Looking at those things is not always easy for someone who

lands firmly on the independent, slightly stubborn, usually self-reliant, occasionally self-serving side of things, but I was encouraged in AA to take stock, to inventory my own behavior and make amends where needed. It's called 'keeping my side of the street clean,' but as someone who wants to fix things, I have to be aware of offering up suggestions of how you can keep your side of the street clean, too (a little thing my kids find somewhat annoying), but I'm working on it.

From my days in AA, I developed a habit of looking at my part, oftentimes accepting responsibility for way more than what was actually my doing or in my control. People-pleasers and mothers tend to do that as well as anyone who has survived a narcissist, an abuser or a control-freak. Breaking the cycle of codependency or victimization is difficult at best (and so much more complex than I'm giving space to here), but when I recognize that am I not God in my world, then the next logical conclusion is that I'm not God in your world either and vice versa. Accepting the simple truth of "there is a God, and it's not me" brings me one step closer to accepting that God is also not you, and for anyone who has been caught up in a toxic relationship, it is a step toward freedom and healing.

There are, of course, those people who either refuse to or are incapable of taking a look at themselves or their actions at all. You know them; they are the ones who blame their circumstances on other people, who couldn't care less how their actions and inactions impact others or who refuse to take responsibility for the damage they leave in their wake. The tragedy isn't that they make mistakes. We all do. It's that they don't learn from them because they can't fathom that the

problem could possibly lie within themselves.

They are the entitled, the blissfully unaware, and the grown-ass adults who act like children. In my humble opinion, those folks are best left to their own devices and to be avoided as much as possible. I also have to remember not to BE that person, because there have been too many times over the years when fear, self-involvement, pride or arrogance have kept me from taking a peek at myself.

Pat Bembenek's short version of this saying was, "It's not me." He would often say it in response to a compliment or when sharing his experience, strength and hope. He always gave God the credit and treated others with the grace that he had been given. I think that's what Paul was getting at in his letter to the young but growing (and somewhat volatile) church at Ephesus when he reminded them, "Hey, y'all need to get off your high-horse. You aren't the ones doing all of this. It's God. It's your faith in Christ that makes it possible, not anything of your own doing." Paul and Pat both understood (and professed and taught and modeled) that grace is lived out through our faith.

I pull on Paul's writing a lot, which is a little ironic because for years, my cursory understanding of his guidance seemed to go head-to-head with my own views, especially on women's rights and responsibilities. In different lights, though, views change and knowing there is a God isn't the same as knowing who God is. It is a jumping off place, though.

In my old age, I've come to seriously appreciate not being God. It is a huge relief, and recognizing that little fact reminds me that I have

little or no control over other people and most circumstances. Powerlessness doesn't equate to helplessness, though, and knowing who He is reminds me that I do have power over my own actions, my own choices and my own words. What I don't have power over are yours.