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An Atheist's Prayer
Mixed Media

For the longest time, religion has been a mystery to me, both why people choose to follow it and how I have perceived it. I grew up in a Unitarian Universalist church in New Hampshire. I mindlessly (or forcibly) went with my family most every Sunday. We later moved to India -- I had never seen anything like the temples there. As a nine-year-old I had no grasp of what religion really was -- or what it meant to me. But I knew I found those temples and the people practicing inside them mesmerizing. My project explores how my experiences in religion have shaped my perspective.

My sculpture represents the ways in which my understanding of religion has grown. I collaged experimental etchings and stencils onto a door I had found. My experimental etchings include imagery of the church I attended as a child and a self-portrait. It also includes the repetition of the phrase "An Atheist's Prayer" which is displayed on the bottom left of my door and behind most of my etchings, where it is less illegible. This stylistic choice depicts what this phrase means to me or would have meant to me. I came across this phrase in an article, a story of a woman who works as a hospital chaplain -- she was asked to pray with a family who was losing someone. As an atheist she believed her prayer would be dishonest but found that she really found connection in the family while doing something so important to them. I believe this was what I had found in the temples in India and played an important role in my understanding of religion.

I Never Knew Religion



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This paper will explore my relationship with religion and, more specifically, how my experiences have impacted my perspective. I will share how these experiences with religion have led me to become more disoriented with the whole idea of it.

I never really knew religion. I knew the place my parents would take me to on Sundays. I knew the people there, their warm faces, but I never knew religion. I knew how to shake my neighbors' hands when we were told to or how to pretend I didn't know my sisters and shake their hands instead. I knew not to lay down in the pew when I was tired. I knew the excitement I felt when it was time to go downstairs and eat the dessert laid out for us. I didn't know religion. I knew how to make my sisters smile while I belt out in song louder than the rest. I knew when I grew out of the coloring books, when it was time to listen. I never knew their stories.

The church served as a community; it provided me with love and respect all those years I had spent in it. I had never doubted their values, but I could not find certainty there. I was terribly confused. Confused why these people were here with me, I remember convincing myself that their parents had them go too. As I got older, I never felt the need to be back there for the congregations. It was the people I needed to be there for.

I have felt plenty of doubt with religion. It can be a dangerous thing when it is built to uphold people of power and privilege. Religion can come with hate--I've seen that, we have all seen it. That is the religion I will never know. The one that condones such evil acts. The ones whose followers act out of selfishness. The religion I've learned to understand is changing with the world; it is not acting out of selfishness. This is the only religion I hope to know.

I. A Feeling Misplaced

My sisters and I had spent a great part of the last two years at home, like anyone else. Once we began to do almost everything at home my mom would join Unitarian Universalist congregations, which is the church I grew up in. I'm not sure if it was because it was easier to attend from home in pajamas or because she needed faith. My mom worries like no one I have ever known and with a global pandemic killing more than 70,000 people, she needed hope. I knew everyone was looking for faith or any kind of hope, so I sat with my family and watched with them.

I knew why she went when I saw how it put a soft trusting smile on her face. In a world where I spent my day with my eyes glued to a computer, I met my family in the living room on the weekend to hear more advice on how to stay safe or how to have hope. I didn't know religion on those Sundays. My sisters encouraged my maniacal laugh, they danced to the choppy songs coming out of the TV as my mom sang them. I felt like a child, standing in church belting songs. I knew this feeling— it was human, hard, and incomparable.

On those Sundays, what I knew most was my family. It was what I knew better than I ever had before the past two years, but I had misplaced the feeling of their real expressions. I felt distant as did everything else. We were so far apart it felt hard to believe that this would bring us closer together. I was constantly looking for something to hold onto on those Sundays, something that would change, to give me the hope that these people had. How could something so familiar to so many people be so far out of reach for me? I share the beliefs of the people inside that screen, but the only thing that felt familiar were their faces. The songs they sang had no words. The words that came out of many of the speaker's mouths were gibberish. The silence we shared was loud.

II. How Do You Touch Something That Isn't Yours?

I was eight when my dad was offered a job at an American Embassy school in New Delhi, India. I wish I could remember more of it than I have, but memories have always been distant for me. I think I took away the beautiful parts of it. There were so many beautiful smells. I can't forget the smell walking out of the Indira Gandhi airport. There was so much movement around me but all I could know was the smell. I'm sure it was the pollution, but everytime I stepped out of that airport I felt at home again. I thought this is what religion feels like to some people, maybe when they step into a church, a temple, or synagogue, they feel the same thing I felt outside of that airport. This was something I could understand, the church could feel this way to me. Some days it would be a heavy and cold walk to church, other days it was like a dance; intricate and special, like the bustling of the airport in New Delhi.

It was in my second year there that my family took our trip to Nepal. Two weeks backpacking and it was utter hell for a whiny third grader, bribed by bits of a chocolate bar every inch of the way. The towering Himalayas made up for my lack of enthusiasm. Being the white New Hampshireite I am, Nepal was unlike anything I had ever seen before--I was consumed by a whole new world. The Boudha Stupa in Kathmandu was one of the very few things I haven't forgotten. My family sat in a cafe and looked out on the Stupa, I was completely engulfed in this massive mandala. People of all walks of life stepped in and out of that temple, yet they all came

there to do the same thing. So I watched the tiny people pray from above, wishing I knew what they were thinking, wanting, or needing.

Seeing these people at that moment, I had never wanted something more--not because I



wanted reason or purpose, but because I was a third grader watching the most astonishing practice I had seen in my life. I wanted something like that in my life. I thought I needed that, but this wasn't mine, so why did it touch me?

The connection I felt for something

so foreign to me caught me by surprise, I would question it easily and doubt my fascination with it. Then when I remember shaking hands with my neighbors, belting songs, or listening to stories I know I am left with the same feeling this temple has given me. These parts of the church left me warm like the tiny people felt to me, but I still didn't know religion. I knew tradition and love.

III. “The Mystery of it All” - Dad

I have never known what to say when asked if I am religious. I think I have grown into a place where finding myself in a place of tradition feels comfortable. I used to say I was a Unitarian Universalist. I believed in their principles, but it doesn't feel right to put myself in a category. Then again, to me this isn't a category, and in their very principles it is stated that we are all searching for our true meaning. I wasn't bound to a set of rules to follow. Though I still felt like this was still putting a name to something I couldn't describe myself.

I realize now that experiencing the beauty in spirituality and faith from many walks of life, that I can trust the beauty of these things, but I may also leave them untouched. I have met so many of these peaceable practices and I have trusted the beauty in them. I have not trusted religion. For some of the things that sprout from it are historic, some don't turn with the world and I can't find beauty in this. So why can so many of us find beauty in a corrupt place, a place built for power?

While writing this paper I looked at the Unitarian Universalist church's website, to help my understanding of what it had meant to me. I came across a weekly message; "An Atheist's Prayer" written by Sally Fritche. She is asked to pray with a family as a hospital chaplain, she worries that because she is an atheist the words she speaks won't have meaning. She finds herself having a significant connection with the family: "Every prayer, even an atheist's prayer, is an articulation of connection, a willingness to invest ourselves deeply in the lives and beliefs of our fellow human beings." (Fritche)

This reminds me of the beauty I saw in the Stupa that day, I couldn't understand the connection I felt with a practice that wasn't mine. Having had the opportunity to see the contrast in religion has shown me so much, yet I continue to be perplexed by the whole idea of it. I used to hope that moments much like the one I had at the Stupa would help categorize my beliefs and values. Understanding now that I could find connection in a religion that I don't practice, I am comfortable saying I do embrace the mystery of it all.

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