

## VIEWS

/

### TESTIMONY



Samantha Blythe

## Maze Runner to God

Wrong turns and dead ends punctuated by unexpected grace.

**Samantha Blythe/ SEPTEMBER 9, 2015**

*We started to publish this delightful testimony as a serial, and then belatedly realized that the narrative flow was lost in breaking the story into parts every other day. Here now is the full version with just one page break. The piece is much longer than our usual fare, so you may want to print it or save it to your favorite online reader after you've read for a bit. It is still organized by the phases that Samantha describes. Enjoy. –The Editors.*

### The Formation Phase

*There was a life, phase after phase,  
Which oft felt like running a maze  
But no matter how odd, 'twas all planned out by God,  
to Whom be all glory and praise.*

One of my earliest memories is of my five-year-old self, coming home from school a few months after my parents divorced. There was a goldfish in a bowl on the kitchen counter, with a note saying something like, “I thought you might like this. Love, Dad.”

I hadn’t seen my dad for weeks, and I don’t think the slimy little guy or gal was much consolation. I remember having to flush it down the toilet a few weeks later. I watched the dead orange body spin in the whirlpool as it was consigned to its watery grave. I’m sure that must symbolize something deep, because I’m using it to begin this memoir.

Within the next year or so, my dad remarried and moved to Florida, and so I was shipped off on a plane alone to spend summers with his new wife; my dad was a workaholic and I usually saw him only on Sundays.

Upon returning from one of these grand vacations, I was picked up at the airport by my mother, and with her, a man I didn’t know. The first thing I said to her was, “He’s ugly.” Little did I know that this ugliness was more than skin-deep. What I also didn’t know was that this man had been her first husband—and was soon to become her third. And so, he was my first stepfather.

The hardest thing about having a stepfather is not so much the man himself (although that can certainly be unpleasant) but the new way your mother relates to you. She loves this new person and assumes you should love him too. Even if he is actually a complete jerk, it gets downplayed while she tells you he really, really cares about you.

**The second hardest thing was walking into the basement and finding a whole room dedicated to my step-dad's pornography collection.**

As you can imagine, for an eight-year-old, this was a goldmine for curiosity. It was also a landmine that blew up anything left of an innocent childhood, and the shrapnel exploded far into the future. There are still shards of it stuck in me today, 35 years later.

In a way, I have *Playboy* to thank for inspiring me to create my very first self-published zine. In between the centerfolds and all those scholarly articles that men often use to justify their subscriptions, there are comics depicting fun sexual escapades between folks like Santa and one of his sexier elves—while saggy-bosomed Mrs. Claus looks on with pursed-lipped disapproval. I

tried my hand at a little soft-porny booklet and mailed it off to some boy I liked who lived in another state. Understandably, his mother sent the thing back to my mother, who then proceeded to get angry with me for “doing something like that.”

I am sure my mother was embarrassed and mortified, but I don't remember any worried questions or concerns about why her little nine-year-old girl had already begun a career in adult publishing. I am not sure if she knew I had discovered *The Basement*, but the current issues of *The Magazine* were always left on the coffee table in plain sight, so it shouldn't have been much of a surprise. But still, I don't remember there being any indication that it was anything, outside of something bad in me, that brought that cute little comic into the world. This was my most shameful secret for many, many years.

This happened not long after Mom, Stepdad, and I packed up and moved from New Jersey to Southern California. Yes, I spent a lot of my childhood at Disneyland.

One day, when I was in fourth grade, I was pulled out of class without any explanation and given all these weird tests. They turned out to be IQ tests, and I found myself in a program called “Mentally Gifted Minors.” But being mentally gifted did not help me much.

My mother's marriage was already disintegrating, and I remember sitting outside her bedroom door, listening to her beat a pillow with a baseball bat. This was a technique she'd learned in therapy that was supposed to help her deal with anger. It obviously didn't work very well, because soon she read something called the *Modern Witch's Spellbook*, and tried to kill my stepfather using honest-to-goodness magic. A dead spider impaled on a pin sat in this glass jar on our kitchen counter for a while. I'll never understand why Stepdad didn't ask about this strange addition to the decor. He didn't die, but they did get divorced. Maybe the full-dress “black death spell” would have been more effective. That way my mother could have collected the life insurance, and I might have been spared being a latchkey kid when I was tossed into the Institution of Public Evil known as junior high school.

I guess it was good to be without a “father figure” for a while. I was considered weird in school, and was actually booed when chosen to be a cheerleader. I didn’t have many friends, and my so-called “best friend” was a person I now consider to have been a literal psychopath.

She was even more hyper-sexualized than I was: she did actual sexual things at a young age, instead of just reading about them in her mother’s copy of *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)*. During the summer between seventh and eighth grade, my mother worked, and my friend and I were left alone in the apartment with a plumber who was doing some work in the bathroom. One of those days, he took my friend in my mother’s bedroom and did some work on her, if you know what I mean. She was very proud of this, but I never told my mother. I figured she wasn’t quite ready for *My Daughter’s Inappropriate Sexual Debacles, The Sequel*. Besides, I thought I could have somehow prevented that from happening; that it was my fault it had happened at all.

**I knew all about hang-ups at that tender age, but now I see them as little seedlings of grace that prevented me from making some choices that would have taken my situation from bad to worse.**

I don’t blame my mother for all this, but I admit that I was always confused regarding my moral agency and where my worth (if I had any) came from. When I look back I can see that my “conscience also [bore] witness,” and my “conflicting thoughts” both accused and excused me, but I didn’t understand how or what was happening (Romans 2:15, ESV). My incoherent childhood made it impossible for me to tell whether something really was wrong, or I’d just developed a phobia or “hang-up” about it that kept me from doing it. I knew all about hang-ups at the tender age of eleven, but now I see them as little seedlings of grace that prevented me from making some choices that would have taken my situation from bad to worse.

The Psychology Phase

*There once was a gal whose psychology,*

*She liked to expound chronologically.*

*Her ego, her id, all the things that she did...*

*Could they be explained theologically?*

In 1984 I was a sophomore in high school, and I found myself in the psychology and philosophy classes of a certain middle-aged anti-war Deadhead. I was madly in love with this teacher and would regularly leave roses on his doorstep and even occasionally write him love letters. All his classes were exactly the same. Even though they were ostensibly different subjects, their most accurate name would be Self-Centeredness 101, which led seamlessly into Advanced Self-Centeredness. I aced all those classes, and in fact have gone on to take a doctorate in that subject. Everyone sat together in a big circle with the teacher and rapped about things—not like, Yo, We’re Rappers—but in that good ol’ fashioned consciousness-raising sense; we Shared What We Felt. If we actually were rapping about it in today’s meaning, it would go something like this:

Let me tell you people what I feelin’ today,  
I got my fat jeans on and it give me dismay.  
No one understand me, not my mom or my dad,  
I hate this dumb stupid school cuz it make me feel bad.  
I ain’t got no love and my life is a bore,  
I got this big huge zit no one gonna ignore.

Now, maybe some other people were deeper than that, but even though I have always been considered highly intelligent (remember those IQ tests?) that was more or less my mindset.

**Sometimes I feel like my life has been One Big Primal Scream, and it hasn’t cured me yet. I’ve recently been contemplating a big piece of really dark chocolate instead.**

Despite those shallow tendencies, I read books like *The Primal Scream*. Primal therapy is a kind of psychotherapy that assumes we can get past our neuroses by facing up to the pain in our childhood and seeking cathartic release from it. Sometimes I feel like my life has been One Big Primal Scream, and it hasn’t cured me yet. I’ve recently been contemplating a big piece of really dark chocolate instead.

One of the hallmarks of these classes was the use of The Hot Seat, where one person would be called to sit in the center of the circle, silently listening while others told them “honestly” anything they thought about them. This was certainly nerve-wracking when you were the one in

The Seat, but when not, our young and cruel natures reveled in it, our smug cattiness clothed in the guise of constructive criticism.

Once the teacher told me I was “grounded” but did not explain what that meant. I took it as a positive statement about not being flighty, but a friend thought it meant I was “stagnating.” I’d never considered the word “grounded” in relation to myself, except when my parents had announced, “You’re grounded!”

During this period, I also studied Orthodox Judaism in some depth. When I visited my father in the summers, I would get books at the library about Jewish laws and rituals, and fantasize about keeping kosher and lighting the Sabbath candles. It was all very *Fiddler on the Roof* in my little fantasy. I came from a secular Jewish family whose Judaism consisted of (1) not going to work on the High Holy Days and (2) talking, quite loudly, about how We Were The Chosen People. That didn’t have much religious significance except to signify that we had chosen not to believe in Jesus as anything but That Man Who Caused Us All These Problems. We also felt some sense of superiority to other people in general, which usually manifested in conversations like this:

“Did you see that guy doing X (insert just about anything that annoys you here)?”

“Yeah, he’s an idiot. Obviously *not* one of the Chosen People.”

So, most likely, we thought we were superior to you. And you. And especially to you, Christian.

**Any Christian symbol was really frightening to me, especially a crucifix. I had no idea there was any link between the Jews and That Man.**

Any Christian symbol was really frightening to me, especially a crucifix. I had no idea there was any link between the Jews and That Man, other than the vague idea that his followers were always trying to kill us and/or forcibly convert us by torture and then make us eat ham as proof of our conversion.

The only contact that I had with actual Christianity was this guy in high school who looked like the stereotypical Christian—clean cut, carrying a Bible, and constantly telling any unbeliever in his path that they were going to hell unless they accepted Jesus as their personal savior Right

Now. He also carried an awl just in case he convinced you to say the Sinner’s Prayer, in which case, he then had divine permission to poke another hole in his soul-winning belt.

But seriously, I thought he was nuts, and I felt as if he was speaking to me in another language. *Sin* and *salvation* were just not in my vocabulary. He was certainly not properly “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you,” nor did he “do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15, ESV).

Oddly, during this time I had crushes on celebrities who had The Jesus Look—you know, the one in all the films and paintings. Think Barry Gibb in all his 70s, white, satiny glory.

Despite things like humiliating Hot Seats and annoying, moralistic Christians, high school was a big improvement over junior high. I had somehow managed to ditch the psychopath friend and found a few nerdy, yet otherwise normal companions. We discovered the joys of truancy and would spend early mornings drinking bad coffee in various breakfast joints, or sitting in the back of a red El Camino driving down the 101 Freeway until we reached the fabled Sunset Grill, made famous in song by that former Eagle, Don Henley. We saw Bruce Springsteen in concert during the Born In the USA tour, and endured all kinds of youthful traumas caused by overly dramatic love affairs that never managed to fill that void caused by the Absent Father.

**I lay with my head in my friend’s lap and tried to Become One With The Universe. The Universe obviously did not want to merge with me, because I continued on as my separate little self.**

I went with a friend and her enlightened hippie-ish dad to hear Indian guru Paramahansa Yogananda speak in a clearing that was probably like those used by Jesus when he spoke to people. I lay with my head in my friend’s lap and tried to Become One With The Universe. The Universe obviously did not want to merge with me, because I continued on as my separate little self. That was okay, because I really liked listening to “Breakfast With the Beatles” on KMET radio every Sunday, after late Saturday nights running around in my bra and underwear at the midnight showing of Rocky Horror Picture Show.

When I got into junior college, there was another teacher almost exactly like the one in high school, only shorter. I was madly in love with him, too. His favorite phrase was “Be here now.” I ignored this dictum, and would daydream and write lyrics to Bob Dylan’s “Tangled Up In Blue” while in class, but my 18-year-old pseudo-Bohemian Self thought the phrase was oh, so deep

(and my middle-aged, jaded-Bohemian self agrees, and is always hoping to live by that philosophy one day).

At that time, a friend and I were trying to experience the cool Starving Artist Life by living in these studios that were actually not supposed to be lived in. A bunch of other minor rebels lived there, too, and since we didn't have enough money for real food, we all felt appropriately hip while we tried to cook ramen noodles in our microwaves. Plus there were no kitchens, no hot water in the single sink, and just one bathroom at the end of the hall.

One of the most interesting pieces of bad art I created at that time was a black, white, and red ink drawing of flames licking up, with reaching hands at the end of each flame. Definitely trying to make some deep statement about Hell, that place in which I absolutely did not believe. But I digress.

There were some real writing assignments in that teacher's class (no Hot Seat or equivalent to take up time), but there was still a lot of focus on psychology and "finding your own truth." For one assignment, I wrote part of a short story about a woman who places a personal ad, looking for a man who would like to conceive the Messiah with her.

But why in the world did I have such a fascination with The Messiah anyway? Of course, I knew that we Jews were still waiting for him/her/it, but the majority of us saw the whole thing as an evolutionary concept rather than as a person—a kind of societal enlightenment, Hundredth Monkey thing. The Hundredth Monkey Effect is the theory that if enough people start believing an idea (or, more literally, enough monkeys learn to wash their sweet potatoes), then there will be a spontaneous consciousness-shift and everyone will suddenly start wearing Birkenstocks or Occupying Something or (insert your favorite possible utopian situation here). I was a good flower-child type and believed that if we just gave peace a chance, everything would be great and that would be the Messianic Age.

Of course, I tried to convince myself that I was already peaceful and enlightened. It was Those Other Folks—probably Christians—messing with the utopian energy.



## I Am Woman Phase

*There once was a gal with a theory,  
That life as a woman was dreary.  
Because of a plot that those cruel men had wrought,  
But now of that theory she's leery.*

My psychology phase overlaps with this one, but I consider this to be a distinct phase, which lasted about four years, from the time I was 20 or so, until some time after my first child was born. During this phase, I considered myself a feminist; I was intrigued with the differences I saw between the sexes and the diverse kinds of lives women led. I read magazines that were Woman-Focused, like *Mothering* and *Lilith*.

*Mothering* promotes natural birth and parenting, while *Lilith* is a Jewish feminist journal. In some Jewish folklore, Lilith was the first woman God made to be with Adam, but she refused to be subordinate to him and hightailed it right out of the Garden. After she went off to seek her own destiny, God fell back on Plan B—which involved performing some minor surgery on Adam so he could create barefoot, pregnant, use-me-as-a-footstool Eve.

I found the whole thing inspiring, and in fact had a real fascination with the Creation story as told from weird, humanistic, and feminist perspectives. I even made some mixed-media art based on this theme. I was intrigued with knowing exactly what it meant to be “like God,” to know good and evil, and then to eat from the Tree of Life. Of course, I thought it was all metaphor, but I’m sure I saw it the same way Eve did. I was excited. I wanted to be God, myself, and I especially wanted to escape the grave.

I instinctively understood the Fall and felt the yearning the Apostle Paul writes about, the groaning to live in the world as it could have been. But I thought all that was metaphor too, so I just listened to Joni Mitchell sing about going back to the garden. Of course, her garden was the creepy, LSD-dusted field of Woodstock, which didn’t appeal to me even then, but this song still managed to float me up into a warm-fuzzy, Messianic-Age bubble.

Around this time, I became interested in publishing my own zine. I wanted to have some kind of collaborative women's journal that would be A Forum for Various Viewpoints and Lifestyles. The title was *Of Woman*, but the publication never materialized. I still have the original cover design I made, pre-personal computer. The image is attached to a board with real adhesive, covered by a clear overlay with the title in rub-on lettering. It looked pretty good for my very first layout, if I do say so myself. I circulated over 100 detailed questionnaires as pre-publication research, and I received interesting replies from mostly liberal, feminist women. These still reside in my Box of Important Papers to Grab in the Event of a Fire.

With this project I was trying to be all things to all women, and I assumed that because I was a woman, personally, I had to focus on women, generally. I was also young and insecure and uncomfortable looking at my own life in comparison to the lives of other women. I had so little life experience; I was trying to do great things and be wise before my time. I had not yet learned to start small and be faithful in little things.

**I figured when I looked within, I'd find a warm and inviting loft—a little bit funky, a few candles, some wall-hangings. But it was more dank and dungeony; not the kind of place where you want to hang out.**

I was caught up, as usual, in seeking Personal Fulfillment, and I often thought any lack I was experiencing in that area was because I was “not getting my needs met” in my marriage. At the tail end of this phase, I moved out for a few months and lived in a little studio apartment, trying to be the self-supporting artsy type who only needed to look within to find fulfillment. Of course, that failed. I always figured that when I looked within, I'd find a warm and inviting loft or something—a little bit funky, a few candles, some wall-hangings. But it was more dank and dungeony; not the kind of place where you really want to hang out.

People did like to hang out at my real home, though. Not that studio, but the little house in Pasadena I shared with my husband. I had a few groups of friends, and several times I hosted discussion salons, which I had read about in the *Reader's Digest* of progressive thought, *The Utne Reader*. I mailed out invitations with questions to be discussed. Young and old, stodgy and eccentric came together to debate such issues as whether animals have rights. A tall, somber conservative stood and said with a straight face, “If animals have rights, let them petition for themselves.” The vegan goddess-worshipper audibly gasped. But after the talk, we all

gathered to break bread, and it seemed like, like a community—until everyone left and I fell into a depression because I felt like a fraud in my intellectual posturing.

I read *The Mists of Avalon* for the first time. It's a wonderful novel; a retelling of the Arthurian legend from a feminist viewpoint. In books like this, it is usually assumed that the true experiences and strengths of women have been deliberately suppressed by patriarchal cultures and religions, with the Biggest Bad being—you guessed it—the Church. In this kind of thinking, there is a big focus on sexuality being a divine manifestation in people. It's a big turn-on to think that every time you jump in the sack with someone you're being a god or goddess and participating in the co-creation of the universe! So as you can imagine, a faith that sets limits on sexual expression is considered oppressive. I assented to this intellectually, but always felt like something must be wrong with me because I wasn't exactly the poster child for the sexually uninhibited.

Still, I bought into the Divine Feminine stuff to some extent, looking for “meaning” in archetypal women's roles like “Maiden, Mother, and Crone,” or the three fates in Greek mythology—a trinity in which one woman spun the thread of life, another measured it, and a third cut it off. I thought that was really cool. I never seriously pursued any pagan religious practices, although I dabbled in tarot cards, even attempting to make my own deck with images from my psyche. These are also in the Box of Important Papers.

I belonged to a Reform synagogue, complete with female cantor. My husband and I also attended the University of Judaism in Los Angeles for a few semesters. We took the class that was intended to aid in conversion to Judaism. This was during the time when I swore I would never be a Christian, although my husband sometimes said he wanted to be one. Neither of us had any idea what Christianity meant. My husband didn't really want to be Jewish, but we had a real desire for religion, or rather, the belonging that came with religion.

Of course, I still thought that all paths led to God, but Judaism was my heritage and it was where I was comfortable—plus, there was this cool alternative side to it that spoke to my Inner Radical. I loved the Passover Seders that likened the Exodus to various modern liberation movements, but

I had no idea of the true meaning of the Passover, and certainly no inkling that it had anything to do with That Man.

### I Am Natural Mother/ Libertarian Phases

My next two phases began when I was pregnant with my first baby. There was still a lot of feminist/Mother Goddess stuff in my childbirth preparation class, and still quite a bit of complaining on my part towards my husband after the baby was born. I was convinced he was not sharing “equally” in the childrearing and housekeeping, and once I even made a chart that tracked how much each of us did. Of course, I conveniently left out the fact that I did nothing to earn money. I wish I still had that chart in my Box of Important Papers. I could look at it and remind myself that I used to be even more self-centered than I am now.

However, the true focus of this phase wasn't my egalitarian marriage (or lack thereof) but the world of natural birth, breastfeeding, and alternative parenting. I even did coursework to become a Certified Childbirth Educator and taught one full class and one private class.

I was *not* a good teacher. I don't think I ever fully grasped the material, and I didn't have the strength to bear burdens for my students. I let one of the women down when her husband abandoned her during her pregnancy. She expected emotional support from me, but because of things going on in my own life, I'd spent most of my energy trying to keep myself out of a padded room. That experience taught me a lot about my weaknesses and personal limits, and I am still learning how to say “no” to things (even stuff I wish I could do) because I know I won't be able to handle the demands.

I also learned that everything that interests me is not necessarily a vocation. There are only so many hours in a day and so many minutes in a year—525,600, to be exact—a trivial but somewhat moving fact I recently learned while watching the musical *Rent*. But even though I had no moneymaking future in that field, home births and homeschooling have been foundational bedrocks in my life for almost 20 years. When I first learned about government intervention in these private areas, I took the next step in my journey. This opened the door for me to trip and land face-first in the next phase.

*There once was a thing called The State,  
That filled a young woman with hate.  
“Liberty! Rights!” she would shout through the nights,  
Till the Lord caused her fear to abate.*

This phase has two distinct parts: the Constitutionalist/Conspiracy Theorist and the Libertarian/Anarchist. I am not out of this phase, and don't think I ever will be. There were a lot of other psychological and experiential things going on at this time, and remnants of past phases were being refined or “phased out,” but the one constant between the previous two phases and this one was my regular consumption of *The Dennis Prager Show* on KABC radio in Los Angeles.

The first hint I had that a religious person need not be an idiot came from Dennis. He is an observant Jew, and long before he had his popular national show, he hosted a little Sunday evening program called *Religion on the Line*. Every week a Jewish rabbi, a Protestant minister, and a Catholic priest would join Dennis on the air and spend two hours answering religious questions from callers. Sometimes they would throw a Muslim imam or Mormon clergyman into this mix for added interest. I wish I could hear this show now that I know something about theology; I'm sure I would find it enjoyably annoying. The clergy on that program agreed much more often than they should have, considering the very real differences in the actual doctrines of those faiths.

**I was beginning to understand that all paths couldn't possibly lead to the same God, but I was also cooking up my own weird spiritual stew.**

I remember there was a lot of what Francis Schaeffer called “God Words” being bandied about. God Words are things people say that sound spiritual but actually have no real content about God at all—basically, a lot of ephemeral stuff that allows folks to cobble together the kind of God they want to hang with. I was beginning to understand that all paths couldn't possibly lead to the same God, but I was also cooking up my own weird spiritual stew: Start out by putting some Underdeveloped Libertarian Philosophy in a pot with so-called Judeo-Christian-American-Moral-Values; add a dash of Know-It-All, toss in a few God-Words to spice it up, and voila, you have the meal I lived on for the next few years. Needless to say, I now find it pretty unappetizing, like the last thing you eat before a bout of the stomach flu.

Dennis was the first non-liberal person I was ever exposed to at any great length. He was also my initial exposure to logic—not that I’m an impressive logician today. It was on his radio show that I first heard the assertion that the existence of objective morality depended on the existence of a moral God, a theme I picked up again later, in my reading as a baby Christian. Listening to his show also forced me to face the cracks in my feminist facade. Dennis is big on the fact that men and women are different and that those differences are not societal. I also believed that but was not sure how to square it with my enlightened ideas about gender.

Listening to him was like waking up, or getting my memory back after someone bashed me on the head and stole my purse. Of course, there was the time that he compared nursing in public to urinating in public, and the time he talked about the widespread need for cesarean sections. I was a bold Public Breast-Feeder, a Homebirth Mama, and an in-your-face Tasmanian Devil, so both those assertions made smoke come out my ears. I called him on air to disagree with him. This was terrifying, but I gained valuable experience from expressing myself in a public forum. I don’t think I did it very well, but it was the first time I faced the mournful truth that someone I deeply admired could be wrong, and it hurt.

Those years with Dennis were an extremely important and formative period. My very first zine (a single page, printed on both sides) was dedicated to him. I mailed him a copy, and he called me on the phone and invited me to sit in on his show one day. In my Box of Important Papers is a photo of me, looking all smug while Dennis and I stand with arms around each other, like we’re good buds. I never listen to talk radio anymore, and in fact would rather scrub bathtubs than listen to Dennis today. But at that time I thought I’d arrived, and that my 15 minutes of fame was right around the corner.

During this time, I became reacquainted with an old friend from high school who was a libertarian. He lent me his videos of Milton Friedman’s PBS series, *Free to Choose*, and I was hooked! Who knew that it was possible to have roads, mail delivery, and even schools without the government providing those things! I would watch these videos with a friend while nursing the baby in the middle of the afternoon, a time when most stereotypical mothers were watching their soap operas.

**I somehow became interested in the fringe liberty crowd—the militias, the conspiracy theorists, the get-back-to-the-land-with-yerr-guns-cuz-the-government's-comin'-after-you types.**

The next segment of this phase blends together in my mind. I somehow became interested in the fringe liberty crowd—the militias, the conspiracy theorists, the get-back-to-the-land-with-yerr-guns-cuz-the-government's-comin'-after-you types. I subscribed to the New American, the conspiracy publication of the John Birch Society. My husband and I even tried to opt out of the tax system—as a matter of fact, we've only been back in the tax system for about eight years. My zines during this period were nothing but ranting propaganda for my limited understanding of liberty issues. The letters I wrote to friends were equally obnoxious. Those zines and letters are in my Box of Important Papers, and when I re-read that stuff, I find it amazing and humbling that I still have any friends left from that time. My articles had titles like “Why the State Cannot Prevent Men From Being Schmucks Through Legislation.” This was a rebuttal to a friend's article about what a man's legal responsibilities should be to a child he fathers out of wedlock. I still agree with my own conclusions, but am grateful that I'm a bit less bombastic now. I was totally paranoid—not that I was imagining things that weren't actually happening, but rather in having no faith in a power greater than that of the Totalitarian State.

After this, I was most fascinated by The Voluntaryist, a small publication that is totally anti-statist and for a completely free market society, to be brought about by “neither bullets nor ballots.” So yes, anarchist, although not of a socialist bent. Editor Carl Watner does an awesome job writing well-documented articles about non-government solutions to everything from the postal service to criminal justice. Even the Constitution is too much government for Mr. Watner, and I tend to agree with him. After reading years of The Voluntaryist, I've never been the same, and in some ways it has informed my understanding of the Christian faith, even though it's a secular publication.

We lived in Southern California during all these phases, and in the summer of 1996 we left our rental house, my husband left his job, and we traveled across the country in our bumper-stickered Volkswagen bus. If you saw us on the road, you definitely knew that we were against the New World Order. We thought we were looking for a place to buy land where we could have a generator, a well, and an arsenal of assault weapons, but we never found it. Instead, we returned

to the LA area and lived with my mother and stepfather for about nine months. If you've ever lived with a parent again as an adult, you will appreciate that assault weapons would have occasionally been welcomed during this arrangement. I had an upside-down American flag hanging from the window of our room, and I continued to be obsessed, angry, and obnoxiously opinionated.

Little did I know that I would soon be changed from the inside out by the Real Power in this world—he who grinds earthy governments and hearts of stone to dust.

### The Pre-Christian Phase

*There once was a gal quite adept,  
At avoiding what she should accept.  
She insisted her soul was in her own control,  
But soon she saw God intercept.*

During our last six months in California (we had decided to relocate to Texas), I had a few experiences that I consider to be the beginning of my regeneration. Now if he weren't all-powerful, one would think that God somehow needed more time to soften me up, because I was definitely *not* on his team. The main reason I am a Calvinist is because I know I would never, ever have “chosen” Christ and definitely did not think I needed a “personal savior.” I was a blasphemer who truly hated Jesus Christ in his real person (although I could handle “scholarly” depictions of the so-called historical Jesus). I was totally ignorant about the Christian faith, but was still very comfortable pointing out all that was wrong with it.

One afternoon I was out for coffee with a Christian friend—a *newly* converted Christian friend, you understand, because I would never have actually made friends with a Christian. Anyway, I was listening to her and trying to be tolerant or whatever, and we started talking about how God will forgive any sin. Any sin? That was just not acceptable to me. I mean, what about murderous dictators? I wasn't an atheist, someone who didn't believe in an afterlife, but I just accepted what is probably a common delusion among people—the idea that when you die, everyone you love will be with you in The Good Place—except Hitler and your ex-husbands or \_\_\_\_\_ (insert the name of whomever you really hate here).



I remember her calmly telling me that yes, the blood of Christ is sufficient to cover every sin. Of course, the whole concept of the blood of Christ freaked me out. Like almost all Jews (and probably most people today) I thought all the blood sacrifices for sin—the slain animals in the Bible, the virgin with her heart cut out on some Aztec mountain—were just primitive religious rituals to appease some angry God who didn't even exist. We humans had grown out of all that, and there was no sin, only mistakes. No wrath, only a Benevolent Universe waiting to help us create our own reality. Anyway, I thought I was being so open-minded by listening to her, but I was unaware that it was a truly momentous occasion: the first time I ever clearly heard the message of God's grace.

Soon after that, I was at the post office in Pasadena. I found myself talking to a homeless man who hung out there. He talked to me about Jesus and it didn't get my blood anywhere near the boiling point (I wonder at what temperature blood boils?). When I left he said "God bless you," and when I told my husband about it later that night I cried, because I felt like I just didn't want to be so selfish anymore.

Later that week I went thrift shopping with a friend, and I found a beautiful hand-embroidered tapestry with a Christian-type verse and Jesus on it. It was only \$7.95, and I wondered what kind of nasty children would give Mama's loving handwork to the thrift store after she died. The thing just drew me in. I picked it up and put it back three times, because I was still reluctant to buy anything with That Man on it. But it seemed like it represented purity or something, and I wanted some of that in my life. I think I saw it as a talisman—like it was holding power—which of course is horrible theology. I know that even in good theology there is debate over whether depictions of Jesus Christ in human nature violate the second commandment. I don't think so, partially because God used this piece of work to draw me to himself.

When we were getting into our U-Haul to begin our journey to Texas, our friend's Christian neighbor asked if she could pray for us. We agreed. When we arrived in Texas, a woman at the campground asked us, out of the blue, if she could pray for us. We agreed. Understand that even a year previous to this, the very thought of a Christian wanting to pray for me would've sent me

right through the roof—I mean, how insulting to be seen to be as someone in *need* of prayer! But here I was, meekly accepting it. It was weird.

**As I read, I had this awful, sinking feeling that I was confronting the Truth--and I didn't like it.... But I knew that I was facing something I had wrongly mocked and denied all my life, and my mouth was finally silenced.**

The real weirdness, however, came one night in that campground when I was awake in the tent while everyone else was sleeping, with no book but the Bible to read. I'm not even sure why we had this Bible, but since I am one of those people who always need to be reading something, I found myself reading Matthew by the light of a propane lantern while my family slept on the blow-up mattress.

As I read, I had this awful, sinking feeling that I was confronting the Truth--and I didn't like it. I was mortified because I knew I would have to eat my words and tell my Jewish family that I was now One of Them. I'm not kidding; that is almost like telling your family you're one of the pod people in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I didn't have one of those freeing experiences you read about in conversion stories, where the joy of the Lord suddenly bursts forth in a person's heart. I don't think I understood most of what I was reading, least of all the idea of sin and sacrifice. But I knew that I was facing something I had wrongly mocked and denied all my life, and my mouth was finally silenced. I am sure many people appreciated the peace and quiet.

The Early Christian Me Phase

*There once was a gal who was changed.*

*Her life it had been rearranged.*

*Now God was the center, she sought Him as her mentor,*

*But she oftentimes still felt estranged.*

My first year in Texas was spent getting used to the fact that I was now a Christian, and it was not an easy transition. I didn't know any Christians and learned what I could by reading back issues of *Christianity Today* and *Moody* magazine from the small-town library. I discovered C.S. Lewis, who was a great help to me in the beginning. Finally, I met a Christian neighbor who was also a Scrabble player like me, and in between games I was finally exposed to church and Bible studies.

Being a rebel in general, I was very distrustful of the institutional church, and the whole Christian life thing was still strange to me. My friend introduced me to Keith Green and the pre-Catholic John Michael Talbot, and I loved and worshipped with this music—but I found I couldn't use the term *Jesus Christ*. It couldn't pass my through lips because it would get stuck in my throat and wouldn't come any farther. Years later I read a book by Zola Levitt that listed the major stumbling blocks for Jews when it came to Christianity, and at the top of the list was That Name.

**Being a rebel in general, I was very distrustful of the institutional church, and the whole Christian life thing was still strange to me.**

So, I found myself looking into the Messianic Jewish movement. Despite the fact that my mother had always told me it was impossible to be a “Jew for Jesus,” there I was, a Jew for Jesus, and I figured that meant I had to seek out others and worship in a Jewish manner. I read the Jewish New Testament and talked about Yeshua and occasionally attended a Messianic synagogue. They carried their big Torah around and kissed it just like Jews do in regular synagogues, and that struck me as odd. I was certainly no theological giant, but I sensed that the focus wasn't quite right.

I finally gave up on that, and my only Christian fellowship was an at-home Bible study with my husband and our Independent Fundamentalist Baptist friend. She was King James Only, but my husband and I used NIVs, and we studied at least five books of the New Testament verse by verse—including the book of Romans, which presented its own problems for me in the thirteenth chapter:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority but from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil (Romans 13:1-4, NIV).

Although I was now a Christian, I still had my idol, and that idol was Freedom and Ultra-Limited Government. The idea that the Evil State might have some part in God's plan did not make me happy, to say the least. For some reason, after we finished Romans 12 we were not able to meet together for many weeks, but the change of plans always came at the last minute—I lived week-to-week in unhappy expectation of having to read and discuss that passage with others, because I knew that my rebellion of heart would not stand up to scrutiny, and I wanted to keep it at least propped up, if not actually on its feet.

I didn't realize at that time that I could have my belief about what the best kind of government was, but that I could still be subject to the government I found myself living under. Being subject does not imply agreement, but it does assume that God controls all things, a doctrine I hadn't yet grasped. The zine I made at that time now seems to me a record of two struggles—the first being the relationship between the Christian and the State, the second the relationship between husbands and wives—both issues of authority. The bottom line was that I was just very rebellious and controlling in my spirit, and it took many hours of prayer and reading before I could understand these issues from a different perspective.

This rebelliousness against authority in general also kept me outside the visible church for years. I had never even considered belonging to the Institutional Church—at first, because it was filled with Gentiles and then because, well, it was an institution, so it must be bad because it had officers who held authority and expected you to give money. Because of this hard-headedness (I mean, reluctance) my husband and I had a long stint in what we called a house church—which, of course, had no officers, collected no offering and had no statement of faith or confession. We would take communion with bread I'd baked, sing praise and worship songs with guitar and tambourine, while whoever felt "led" would speak.

I was becoming more well-read in theology and saw that most of the people in this group with us were of the Pentecostal "speaking-in-tongues" variety, which they kept under wraps for quite a long time. After a few months, discussion became more and more focused on who might be the antichrist. Most meetings degenerated into a chaotic mix of unintelligible tongues. After a time, Husband and I thought there might be some problems with this, but no one wanted to talk theology, because "theology divides."

The issue that bothered me the most was the assertion that there were Spirit-Filled Christians (who spoke in tongues) and Non-Spirit-Filled Christians (who didn't). At one point I was accused of "grieving the Holy Spirit" and was treated to a thinly veiled "prophecy" that some calamity might befall me. I wasn't struck down by lightning or anything, and we left that group without reconciling, which was very uncomfortable. It was several years before we had any more contact, but I finally received an apology from the person who had pronounced my malediction. That experience, in addition to becoming acquainted with Reformed thinking through the books of R.C. Sproul and Francis Schaeffer, effectively removed my aversion to the Institutional Church.

**We liked the name of one denomination nearby—the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Envisioning a place full of men with long beards (we assumed that went with the term Orthodox), we attended the service the following Sunday.**

So, if we were no longer opposed to attending church, we still had to find one. We had no idea how to do that. One day I just got the bright idea to look in the phone book, the literal paper one. We liked the name of one denomination nearby—the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Envisioning a place full of men with long beards (we assumed that went with the term Orthodox), we attended the service the following Sunday. When we arrived, most people were clean shaven, and we were blessed to see a married couple take their vows of membership—something which would have ruffled our individualist feathers not long before, but which we now found beautiful.

When I first laid eyes on the pastor, my inner Jew-dar started beeping loudly.

I turned to my husband and said, "He's Jewish."

"No, he's not," my husband replied.

But sure enough, after the service I was chatting with someone and discovered that the Jew-dar was working properly and had, once again, correctly identified a Jew—in this Christian pastor! How exciting it was for me to be in a non-Messianic church with a pastor who was also a converted Jew. I felt like God was showing me again that the veil of separation between Jew and Gentile was gone for good.

When we were invited to the pastor's home for Easter a few weeks after that first visit, I told my husband, "At least we won't have to eat ham."

Remember, ham is the evil meat which, when eaten by Jews, Inquisitors see as proof-positive that their, uh, conversion efforts have been successful. Of course, this is just a weird fantasy of mine, and I do eat sausage and bacon—but I still had a good laugh at myself when the pastor's wife pulled a big, crackling ham out of the oven. I realized that not all Jewish Christians carried the same baggage I did.

### The Titus 2 Woman Phase

This phase began just a few years after I was converted. I needed to find some other weird obsessive thing to replace my Crazy Inner Libertarian. I read some controversial books by Mary Pride. The first time I picked them up, my Residual Feminist threw them against the wall way *before* she finished reading. These books focus, in a pretty narrow way, on the author's opinion about the biblical texts on women's role. There is a lot of talk about being a Titus 2 Woman, a Proverbs 31 Woman, a Keeper at Home, and all that. These books were great to shock me out of my more fanatical feminist thinking, and I responded to their radicalism. I obviously do better than most people with extreme ideas—I take them all in and spit out the bones, which sometimes takes years. Now, I'm definitely in the spitting out part of the process on this issue. See that big pile over there?

**I read some controversial books by Mary Pride. The first time I picked them up, my Residual Feminist threw them against the wall way *before* she finished reading.** When I finally made it through Mary Pride's books, they almost became my Bible. I belonged to all kinds of Virtuous Woman sites online, and I read real paper publications like *Patriarch Magazine*. For a while, I wanted to move to Virginia and be part of R.C. Sproul Jr.'s "community." They were really into the whole Father as Prophet, Priest, and King thing, and it would have been a great Christian substitution for the militia compound surrounded by gun turrets that I never got back in my paranoia phase.

The problem was that my own husband had absolutely no desire to do that. He didn't buy into the patriarch stuff, and wouldn't have known how to be one even if he did. After a while I thought it was almost humorous that nearly every woman interested in all that had a husband

who wasn't. Of course, that would probably be good ammunition for the Godly Christian Family folks, who say that today's men are "feminized," and not the manly specimens they would be if they were just more faithful and more committed to that most Manliest of Men, Jesus Christ.

I have seen so much discontentment arise in the hearts of wives who read about seemingly perfect families on the Internet, and then see their own good-enough husbands as lacking beside this or that Super-Spiritual-Leader-Husband—you know, the one who not only works to support the family, or better yet, already has plenty of money—but puts that money toward an impressive library of leather-bound first editions of the Puritan classics. Those make such a great background for those family photos when everyone is perfectly groomed and dressed in similar fashion, an important component in Christian family solidarity.

This husband also begins a family-centered home business, attends homeschool conferences, takes the family on trips to Williamsburg to celebrate America's Godly Heritage, never misses twice-daily family worship, and never appears tired, discouraged, grumpy, or lacking in faith in any area. In addition, he perfectly models Christ for his modest-yet-stylishly-dressed, submissive wife. I am not bashing anyone in particular here, but really, this stereotype has a life of its own. In fact, it's like a zombie who feeds on contentment rather than brains.

I got into blogging during this time, right before the Mommy Blog craze really got going. Someone who started when I wrote a book a few years ago that has sold at least half a million copies. I bet she spent less time than me worrying whether she was Being The Woman God Wanted Her To Be (according to the Godly Family Subculture), and instead spent time writing. I spent time writing, myself—I have a foot-high stack of all the stuff I wrote during my blogging years in my Box of Important Papers. But I still struggled with guilt if I was doing anything that wasn't directly related to improvement in the Wife/Mother/Homemaker area. There were too many times when I practically fell into despair thinking that my personality needed a complete overhaul--that very personality which God, by His Very Own Word, knitted together when I was still in my mother's womb.

I am glad to have left behind a lot of the naggin' ways that characterized my younger days as a wife, and I have gone through long periods when my focus is indeed on learning to be a better

housekeeper and cook—but where my “better” falls on the scale of someone else’s “good,” I’m really not sure. I’m not constantly teaching little moral lessons from the Scriptures, and I have been known to yell and/or be pretty sarcastic in my “child training.”

**I rarely deep-clean anything, am pretty much an ‘unschooler,’ am not always “consistent” in disciplining my children-- plus I drink lots of coffee, stay up late, and am definitely not up at the crack of dawn having my quiet time.**

My house usually has an underlying order, but it is often messy because it is full of books, art supplies, and other tools that get a lot of use. I rarely deep-clean anything, am pretty much an unschooler, am not always “consistent” in disciplining my children--plus I drink lots and lots of coffee, stay up very late, and am definitely not up at the crack of dawn having my quiet time. But I am home all day with many children (five to be exact, from age 22 down to 4). And my 73-year-old mother also lives with us, so that makes me a member of the so-called Sandwich Generation. Never mind that I don’t even *like* sandwiches, and I certainly don’t like the idea of playing the part of the icky, processed meat.

I am a fairly well-read and (obviously) opinionated person. Does being submissive mean I can never disagree with my husband about anything? Does it mean I should never even want to think and talk about “issues,” but rather I should always be busy doing domestic work? Should I do everything on a schedule, since “there is a time and a season for every purpose under heaven,” despite the fact that I hate a highly scheduled life? Should I buy a pre-packaged Bible-based curriculum to use in homeschooling my children, or send them to a Classical school, since that seems to be the most current consensus of what constitutes a “Christian “ education? How clean does my house have to be to please God, anyway? Is it a sin to have a ring of grime in my bathtub? Should I necessarily be reading something by Elisabeth Elliot rather than a medieval murder mystery or a book of essays about free-market economics? Where is that fine line sewn, the one which merges God’s will for us in his Word, and his will that he planted within our own personality?

**For so long I didn’t understand that I need to be gentle with myself and not fall into perfectionism—if I were perfect, I wouldn’t need a savior.**



I sometimes felt like parts of me were dying, and with solid investigation I discovered that the Titus 2 Woman was the culprit. She's been trying to use poison (the so-called woman's weapon) for a slow, not easily diagnosable cause of death. Her accomplices are the Dreaded Inner Critics (in no way related to the actual Holy Spirit) whose legalistic voices whisper that we would be sooooo much more pleasing to God if we only did this activity, or were more like that obviously highly sanctified individual over there. For so long I didn't understand that I need to be gentle with myself and not fall into perfectionism—if I were perfect, I wouldn't need a savior. The Titus 2 Woman can think about that as she languishes in the prison cell I created for her in my mind.

I don't think anything that is traditionally women's work is demeaning or inherently servile, and I know that things have to be functional on a basic level, or the environment is too chaotic to live and work in. And I love to work in my home when that is coming from a creative place. But there is a cyclical, futile quality to the narrowly-defined "biblical" wife-and-mother life that can be stifling to the point of suffocation, for me at least.

I was wondering the other day exactly what it means that Christ's yoke is easy, and his burden is light? Does that mean if I feel beaten down and discouraged a lot that I'm not hitched up to the right cart? I'm not renouncing roles or any of that, but I don't believe that God would have me put so much time into something that brings me so much discouragement when there are things I do that are both meaningful to me and a blessing to other people. I need to learn to let any truly unnecessary work go and/or finally start delegating—then I can move on to do other things.

*There once was a gal whose mentality,  
Tended towards split personality.  
Alter-egos she juggled, and constantly struggled,  
To maintain just a base functionality.*

It was in this phase that I first began identifying what I call my Alter-Egos. I saw that my varied interests, neuroses, hobbies, and obsessions seemed to line up well as distinct personalities. Usually one is Ruler during a particular phase, and then she is somehow deposed (always peacefully, so far) and another becomes ascendant. Sometimes there is a parliamentary system in place that they all participate in, it just depends on the political climate.

The first two that I became aware of were Bohemian Housewife and Eclectic Domestic—I published three zines each with those titles. Fit Femina, Aging Artiste, and Midlife Mama have a little clique of their own. Loser-Lady and Self-Improvementista are fraternal twins, and they are the latecomers in one sense, but they have been lurking around in the bushes for a long time, peeking in at the windows and gossiping...they are such busybodies! An older gal called Chronicler Crone has contacted me and said that she will be moving in with us soon. It's a good thing we are all pretty low maintenance as far as makeup and stuff, because we only have two bathrooms.

I see my overarching conscious Self as their therapist. I sit on a chair with my notepad, nodding my head and showing detached interest when one of them comes in for an appointment, and sometimes we have a group session. When appropriate, I make objective, nonjudgmental comments and pose questions like “And how do you feel about that?” Sometimes they argue amongst themselves, but it never goes all Jerry Springer.

They are amazingly good friends considering that they are so different. I think it's their common faith that holds them together—not to mention the fact that they share eerily similar backgrounds and, well, the same body. They don't always take my advice, and sometimes they shine the analyst's light right back in my face. I hate that, but it usually turns out to be a good thing. My therapist persona sometimes goes into overdrive and gets just a little too comfortable looking in at the fray of teeming humanity from the closed-circuit television in my hermit cave, when I really should be participating.

I'm not sure of the official meaning of Revelation 2:17, “I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it” (NIV). But I know that in other contexts, God gives people new names when he lets them in on at least *a bit* of the future he has planned for them. Jacob wrestled with God before he got his new name, but I am sooo done with wrestling. I have named every one of my Alter-Egos so far, but I still don't know the real name of my Primary Self. I do know that whatever her name turns out to be, what she ultimately wants is to hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

The Aging/Fitness Phase

Even when I was young, I had a melancholy attitude about life. I have always been aware of the swift passage of time, the impermanence of everything and the inevitability of the grave. This led me to some morbid habits, like reading really gruesome crime novels where I could stare those stark realities right in the face, preferably on the autopsy table. This naturally macabre focus has not exactly become worse as I've gotten older, but it has become more personal. At 46, I very likely have fewer years ahead than I do behind, and the bloom of youth has definitely faded from my cheeks.

**One day I looked in the mirror was mortified that the equivalent of 30 boxes of butter were attached to my body in various unattractive configurations.**

I didn't lose most of the weight I gained with Baby Number Two, and one day I looked in the mirror and admitted that I needed, as quickly as possible, to get rid of about 30 pounds. I was mortified that the equivalent of 30 boxes of butter were attached to my body in various unattractive configurations. The process of losing that weight has led me to consider how I want to age, since I can't control the fact that I *am* aging. There are various health problems in my family that I would like to keep at bay if I can, and I would like to be strong and active into my later years—but I have to be honest and say that the sin of vanity has played a large role in my fitness quest. I am constantly struggling to continue on the quest itself, while leaving the worldly motivations in a ditch somewhere along the road.

*There once was a gal who worked out,  
To prevent herself growing too stout.  
Weights she did lift, and her fat it did shift...  
Which it won't if ya just bum about.*

Most people focus on food when they want to lose weight, but I started by reluctantly resigning my long-time membership in the Exercise Haters of America Club. I had always despised exercise for its own sake, and was that kid in school who came panting in last when they made you run the track. As a hermit by nature with so many kids at home, I had no desire and little opportunity to go to a gym, so I turned to the world of home fitness on DVD.

That industry has thankfully improved and expanded since the days of Richard Simmons and Jane Fonda, so much so that I have about 230 workout DVDs. I lost the weight I'd gained and more, and was pleasantly surprised to discover that I loved to work out. I started as a person who had one set of 5-pound weights and knew exactly two moves to do with them. Now, I often hold a 30-pound dumbbell in each hand, and if I hear the words P90x even whispered anywhere in my vicinity, I run up and start monopolizing the conversation. I am pleased to have transformed my flat-as-a-pancake rear end into something more resembling a scone that rose a bit in the oven, but not as well as it might have if the baker had put in the right amount of baking powder.

**I believe in the sovereignty of God in all things, but I don't appreciate that he has ordained the very placement of those rolls. I wish he would have consulted me about that.**

But it's annoying that working out hasn't been a magic bullet to shoot me full of eternal youth and amazing loveliness. The Christian Me struggles because I know that "charm is deceitful and beauty is vain," and that "the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" is what is precious to God. I still stand in front of the mirror sometimes, bemoaning what remain of my fat rolls. I believe in the sovereignty of God in all things, but I don't appreciate that he has ordained the very placement of those rolls. I wish he would have consulted me about that.

Of course, it's obviously my mind, rather than my body, which needs renewing. I also have to remind myself that no matter how fit I get, my earthly body is already beginning to leave behind the things of youth. I see how God uses that fact to help me loosen my grip on the things that are passing away.

All this is different from my natural morbid focus, as it is not about death per se, but rather about accepting that life itself is a process of dying—all the losses, large and small, that we experience every day are part of the letting go process. The loss of a friendship, of our waistline, of the sweet years of childbearing, of babies as they become small children, small children as they grow to adults, of our dreams as we realize that God has other plans for our lives—relinquishing all these things prepares us for the ultimate relinquishment.

Sometimes that strikes me as so sad, other times as terrifying, and then finally, I'm just awed by these great forces of life and death which we cannot control, and I see the dark beauty of it all. I

remember that I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, and that we already have eternal life in Christ, even while we groan in these failing bodies waiting for the final destruction of death and the newness of all things.

#### The Midlife Crisis/Television Phase

*There once was a gal getting older,  
And life seemed to give the cold shoulder.  
Her angst it did grow, in fact did overflow,  
And 'twas years till her spirit felt bolder.*

When I was 39, I had my first panic attack. I have only had one other since then, but two panic attacks in one life are two too many. The attack was in response to my trying to be a perfect hostess to friends (including their six children) who were staying with us for a few weeks. It was super hot in the kitchen, and there I was, still trying to make a full meal for everyone. I opened the refrigerator and found that something icky (like raw chicken juice or a huge jar of pickles) had spilled all over everything and was, in fact, dripping into the vegetable drawer and also onto the floor. I joined the contaminating liquid on the tile in front of the open refrigerator, and then I basically just shut down. I was shaking uncontrollably, sobbing, rocking back and forth, and hyperventilating. I couldn't move and couldn't say anything except, "I'm sorry," over and over again.

**I felt like a total disappointment because my husband's bacon wasn't cooked exactly to his liking. I would apologize repeatedly for it, like I had broken his priceless Ming vase or something.**

About six months before that experience, the zippers had started to pop on all the suitcases where I'd been stuffing my unwashed and wrinkled psychological wardrobe. The garments fell out, and too many of them bore messages like "I Had a Totally Crappy Childhood and Have Been Overcompensating Ever Since, and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt." I have spent so much of the past 5 years vacillating between feeling guilty and being angry. I would feel like a total disappointment as a wife because my husband's bacon wasn't cooked exactly to his liking. I would apologize repeatedly for it, like I had broken his priceless Ming vase or something.

Then my Inner Radical Feminist would put up her fist and want to say, “Cook your own stupid bacon then. You’re a grown man.” I would be making myself a cafe latte, and my husband would walk into the kitchen and I would give it to him. Then five seconds later I would feel totally depleted, unnoticed and unlovable, wondering why no one ever gave me their latte. I served and served and served (not all that well, logistically, but I got an A+ for effort) and became more and more and more resentful. I felt like a resentful kitchen appliance that made both overcooked bacon and lattes.

None of this is a criticism of my husband, per se. He’s a sinner like everyone else, and I’m sure he sometimes does look at me and see Kenmore stamped on my forehead. But he is a kind man who has always taken wonderful care of us. I’m not all that competent in wifely tasks, not all that beautiful, not all that special in any way, and I didn’t believe I could be secure in a relationship with a man if I didn’t have some exceptional qualities or fulfill my “role” in some uber-impressive way.

**I had always thought that being an example of service would teach others to serve, but in my case it simply taught them how to be served.**

So I tried too hard to prove myself worthy of love, but by doing that I allowed both my husband and the kids to see me as Mamappliance—which is not even one of those fancy types like a Vita-Mix or Kitchen-Aid, the ones with a seven-year warranty—just some cheap foreign thing that needs to be replaced every few years. I had always thought that being an example of service would teach others to serve, but in my case it simply taught them how to be served.

I became confused because theologically, I knew I didn’t deserve anything. I know Christ was taken for granted, unappreciated, misunderstood and totally drained dry by the neediness of everyone around him, and I know the last will be first and all that. But I was lonely. I was depressed, and even near despair a few times, which is not like me. Nothing in my life seemed likely to change, so I found myself caring less and less about trying to make anything better. Let me tell you, my alter-ego, Self-Improvementista, practically wasted away for want of a good scheme of betterment for herself, the children, the marriage.

I eventually felt I somewhat less guilty and less angry, but that was because I was feeling less in general. “It doesn’t matter” replaced “I’m sorry” as my mantra. I didn’t understand why I

couldn't just pull myself up by my own bra straps, but I knew I should be grateful because really, my life was pretty cushy compared to, well, probably 80 percent of the world. I mean, here I was, with all this leisure time to contemplate my psychological angst instead of having to \_\_\_\_\_ (insert difficult thing most of us in the US don't have to endure). So, I would add on a little more guilt because I had enough mental currency to throw these luxurious pity parties, complete with cupcakes, hats and those little kazoo things that pop out when you blow into them. Unfortunately, no one was really interested in coming to these gatherings, including myself.

My spiritual life was obviously in the toilet at this point, and the plumber is still, only now, managing to fish it out of there. I appreciate Anne Lamott saying that the main prayers of her life are "Help me" and "Thank you." This may seem like simplistic theology, but is it really? These prayers show our utter dependence on God, and our gratitude. I will admit that "Help me" was uttered much more frequently than "Thank you" during this period.

One annoying manifestation of my lack of gratitude was boredom. I was just plain bored. I'd always been a big reader, but I couldn't find any books that held my attention, so I started watching television shows, a thing I had not done in about 15 years. In fact, I had spent a good part of those 15 years complaining about the so-called "plug-in-drug" and feeling superior when I was out walking in the evenings and saw that blue flickery light through other people's windows. I would smugly ask myself or my companion, "Don't they have anything better to do with their time?" I was unaware that I was about to enjoy a feast. I sat down and ate my own words, enthralled in front of a blue flickery light all my own.

*There once was a girl known as Buff,  
Who with demons enjoyed getting tough.  
With her stake she did thrust, turning vamps into dust...  
But she loved a few, strangely enough.*

It all started with Dexter. At the grocery store, I saw his face on *Rolling Stone* magazine with the subhead: "He's Got a Way With Murder." That intrigued me. As soon as I got home I rushed online to read about him, and I was hooked before I ever watched the first episode, which I did that very night. When you contemplate *Dexter*, you delve into all kinds of questions about identity, trust and redemption, as well as wondering just what kind of person you are because you

love him so much. Once, when I was wallowing deep in the mire of Swamp Midlife Crisis, I was crying for some reason and I told my husband, “I feel like Dexter is my only friend.”

I honestly think I could write a theological dissertation called *The Little Dexter Who Lives Inside Us*. Before you gasp in horror, think how you (and I am talking to Christians) have this cognitive dissonance in your life, with the desire to sin existing simultaneously with the desire to be free from sin. And we try to justify the wrong we do by thinking the other guy is doing something worse. We all have secrets we would be mortified if anyone knew; It’s only Dexter’s adoptive father who knows the truth about him, like how God is the only one who knows the whole truth about us—of course, the metaphor breaks down because Dexter’s father was pretty screwed up himself.

After I had watched a few seasons of *Dexter*, I added *Six Feet Under* to my television platter. I morbidly enjoyed the death aspect, but I also saw myself in every one of the weird characters—most especially the somewhat repressed and martyr-ish mother, the insecure and artistic younger sister, and the womanizing-yet-spiritually-and-psychologically-seeking older brother. For some reason, this show helped me to develop compassion for people. The final six minutes of the final episode is a montage of each character living on, and eventually dying. It just reminded me that “...you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:14, ESV). You never know when you wake up in the morning whether you will run yourself over with your own car that day, or maybe you might be chopped up by a huge kneader, if you happen to work at a bread factory. But these characters drove home the heaviness of being human in a universe without God. Here they were, facing death every day, trying to comfort people with platitudes, because they had no real answers.

There were a few shows after *Six Feet Under*, but none of them stabbed me through the heart with a pointy stake until, yes, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: I was way past the point when I might have thought it was sinful to watch a program about demons and vampires, but I’d always assumed that with a name like that, it had to be a Very Stupid Show—certainly far below the caliber someone with my cultured taste and lofty intellect expected from their television viewing. But my oldest daughter watched and loved it, and she wanted to show it to me. So I let myself be drawn into Sunnydale, which is a strange and wonderful place.



**The clouds broke apart and the light shone down; I saw the program's brilliance, and I immediately wanted to put aside my hatred of educational institutions, enroll in college and master in Buffy Studies.**

At first, I wasn't sure if I liked it. Then I liked it fine, but it didn't seem like more than a fun diversion. The episode that hooked me was early in Season 2: "Ted" had Buffy's divorced mother dating a man who was awful to Buffy whenever he had the opportunity, and who later turned out to be an evil robot. And then it all clicked, that so much in this show was metaphor, and I saw that Joss Whedon was telling the story of my childhood—the awful stepfather, and the mother who wouldn't believe a word against him, because he's "such a nice man, really, and he wants you to care about him just like he cares about you." Yep, the exact same speech you heard from me here was happening to Buffy! The clouds broke apart and the light shone down; I saw the program's brilliance, and I immediately wanted to put aside my hatred of educational institutions, enroll in college and master in Buffy Studies. Buffy Studies really exist.

This show perfectly encapsulates and/or envelops the past few years of my life, so much so that I can divide my life into a BB (Before Buffy) and an AB (After Buffy). I love all the deconstructed archetypes in the characters—you wipe so many tears of laughter from your eyes that it takes you a while to see it, but the Scoobies and Friends give you a glimpse of your own boring life as part of the mythic story. I can see myself watching the musical episode in season six on my deathbed, hopefully surrounded by all my children, in between Scripture readings and prayers. I watched the entire thing again with my husband, and looking at the very first episode when everyone was so young and carefree is like looking at a picture of myself from years ago, when I didn't know what life had in store for me. By the end of the series, Buffy has gone from a fresh-faced teenager to a young woman who has aged far beyond her years. All her loves and losses, all her choices, and all that was thrust upon her show on her face, just like they do on mine.

One thing that aged Buffy so much was being all alone in her responsibility—she was tired of the whole slayer bit, you know, being the "...one girl in all the world, a chosen one, blah, blah, blah." I see now that I have put a similar pressure on myself for years—the pressure to be always *doingsomething*—something for someone, something productive, or something impressive. If that kind of thing is exhausting for Buffy with her slayer powers, you can imagine

how tired it makes me. But eventually Buffy finds a way to share her power so that the slaying is no longer a burden that rests on her shoulders alone.

As I emerge from the vale of midlife crisis, I want to spend more time just Being Here Now. That means less time slaying imaginary demons and being burdened by unnecessary guilt. I have enough actual guilt to deal with, thank you very much. I want to step back and wait to finally see where My Own Thing intersects with God's Thing For Me—you know, the “good works, which God prepared beforehand, that (I) should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10, ESV). I think I may be on the verge of finding out what those are.

Hopefully, (and I say this in the most reverent of ways) those works don't include dying an early, painful, and extended death in order to be a good example of faith in suffering—I know God would provide the strength for me to do that, if need be, and I know that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. But I would like a few more years to process and perhaps share (in some wildly creative way) all the convoluted insight that God has lovingly knocked into my head during the last miserable few years.

#### The (Ongoing) Artist Phase

*There once was an aging artiste,  
Who hoped, before she was deceased,  
To paint some good things, and make writing that sings,  
Leaving no artsy impulse unleashed.*

I guess a lot of Christians have a life verse from the Bible, but I think the life verse for my Inner Artist has always been from *Letters to a Young Poet*. I can totally picture myself having a latte with Rilke and complaining about my life, saying I don't have time for all my creative endeavors because I have so many household duties, etc., and he would sigh, and look at me with great compassion and say, “If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for to the creator, there is no poverty and no poor, indifferent place.” He would know I have never really grabbed the artistic bull by his or her mixed-media embellished horns and, well, run with it into the china shop of my life. You know what they say about bulls in those places.

But I do have a small but diverse body of my creative work going back to my teenage years, as well as lots of journals from those long-ago phases. Some are half-filled, others complete, and almost all contain detailed commentary on my never-ending inability to reach the self-actualization level in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. I am sure I noted exactly *which* of my needs weren't getting met, and exactly *who* wasn't meeting them.

This is probably not an actual phase, since I have always had the creative impulse and made various types of art. I have tried and rejected embroidery and crazy-quilting, making greeting cards, rubber stamping, and FIMO® jewelry. I sporadically make rag dolls, with my favorite being a well-endowed breastfeeding doll, complete with latch-on baby. I hate to sew so never enjoy making dolls, except for stitching on their always-odd-looking faces. I have made a few for specific people and have had a lot of fun and some success trying to make the doll look like them. One day I would like to make dolls as a ministry. Maybe for cancer patients who have lost breasts or hair, or even for people who have lost limbs. Maybe for women in battered-women shelters or girls rescued from sex trafficking; the dolls could be silent company for them.

After trying so many things over the years, I have finally found the kind of work I most like to do, and what I do well. I continue to write, layout, and publish my own paper zines—there have been about 3 titles so far, corresponding with whatever phase is current. One of the earliest was about 16 pages total, and the most recent hit a full 100 pages, and came with a mini-zine filled with my limericks. I hand-bind blank books and use them for art journaling.

The best thing is that I now have the confidence to try new stuff (like making actual paintings—ranging from mediocre to bad) and not be totally mortified that the final products look like what they are: the work of an amateur. One of these days I want to get back into hand-copying, illuminating, and binding at least *parts* of the Bible (a project I have started and abandoned a few times) and I also want to get over being intimidated by drawing comics so I can use them to immortalize weird moments in my life, like a graphic novel where I am the superhero (more likely anti-hero), for lack of a better term.

My Minion of Narcissistic Positivity keeps insisting that once I no longer have small babies to tend, I will begin my long and respected career as an author and art journal instructor. No doubt promotions will be starting soon for my book (not this one) that is part memoir, part zine, part art-journal workshop. The money will start rolling in. Interviews with me will be sought by both Christian and secular media (most notably, *The Utne Reader*). I will be famous in a few interesting niche demographics, earn enough money to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others, but will be unrecognizable in public. My healthy radiance and fitness and middle-aged-yet-funky fashion sense will show through in all photographs of me. I will be the first Christian zine-maker to speak at ComicCon, and Joss Whedon, James Marsters, and Amber Benson (of *Buffy* fame) will seek me out and tell me how much they love my work, plus, they all came to faith after hearing the orthodox, yet creative, and culturally relevant presentation of the Gospel in my book.

Now the arch-nemesis of the Positivity Minion will interject his/her rebuttal. This Naysayer will sadly remind the audience of my poor track record in business and teaching situations in the art/craft/writing area. There will be warnings about how I can talk the talk so much better than I walk the walk, as far as being a writer, a Christian, an artist. It is certain I have pulled the wool over the eyes of anyone who thinks I might have any wisdom or talent at all, in any sphere of life. And not to be rude or judgmental, but really, I look like crap. My hair is always frizzy; no matter how much I work out I am still 10 pounds overweight; and my face has this exhausted, haggard look that is only accentuated by the lines in my forehead. Photos of me that might be included with any publicity will be a visual reminder of my absolute loser-hood.

A while back I made a page in my visual journal of a Bible study—one of my first attempts to join my faith and my art. I have thought a lot over the years about what it means to be a Christian and an artist. One of my favorite books is Chaim Potok's novel, *My Name is Asher Lev*. The theme of the book is what responsibility the artist has to others and what responsibility he has to his art. This is played out by pitting Asher Lev's artistic expression against his Jewish community and family, who, as a whole, distrust art. He makes a painting using the image of a crucifixion, because he can't find the right symbols for what he wants to express within his own tradition. As you can imagine, that didn't go over very well in his Chasidic community,

especially since it was his mother on the cross. The conflict is not that pronounced for me, but in my writing, especially, I struggle to balance truth with love.

**I still live by the 5 (or so) Bad Habits of Unproductive Visionaries, and I can't imagine myself suddenly changing when my baby is six or so.**

I worry that even when this season of life is past, I still won't buckle down and do the work to get something like the art journaling workshops off the ground. I've read *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* at least five times—I totally geek out when I tell someone about it (because I think it is So Right On) but I still live by the 5 (or so) *Bad Habits of Unproductive Visionaries*, and I can't imagine myself suddenly changing when my baby is six or so.

Have you ever vacationed in the Land of Structural Tension? It's not one of the most relaxing destinations. Structural Tension is that no-man's-land where you find yourself when you want to get from one place to another in your life. It is the wilderness in between Here and There. It's foggy, or there are sandstorms, or lots of brush you have to clear with your machete. You can't get a clear picture of the landscape, and it makes you nervous. You consider turning back because it looks like too much work, it might even be dangerous—do you have what it takes? You think about the Donner Party, and don't know if you want to risk your Tender Inner Artist having her dreams cannibalized by reality. Then you gaze solemnly into the future and see yourself on your deathbed, and you think about that inspiring quote you saw on Pinterest that said something about regretting things you didn't do more than things you did, and you step bravely forward and soon reach the Shore of There so much stronger, and ready for any challenge. At least, I hope that's what happens in my case.

The Integration Phase

*There once was a life, halfway gone,*

*What conclusions its owner has drawn!*

*What will come next? She is somewhat perplexed.*

*But she has a great God to lean on.*

Liberal-Christian-with-Dreadlocks Anne Lamott says that we all have themes that run through our lives, showing up again and again. Author and speaker Natalie Goldberg concurs: “Get to

know your obsessions.... Ask yourself, what monopolizes my mind? Be honest and ride that passion, whatever it is.” I was glad to hear some interesting people say this, because after a while I start to find the landscape of my mind unutterably boring, like when you drive through miles and miles of flat, empty land. And if you are anything like me, you always have to go to the bathroom really bad when you are on car trips, and there is no place to stop—or yes, there is—but it’s one of those disgusting gas station bathrooms or the kind of rest stop obviously frequented by serial killers.

**Stuff from my past phases has been coupled together like railroad cars, making one long train that chugs along down the track of my life.**

But I have finally accepted that God has given each of us our particular lives for his own reasons, and how can we speak except from our intimate knowledge of those lives? Of course, sometimes we need to learn how to shut up, but for the times when speaking is appropriate, 1 Corinthians says, “For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him?” (1 Cor. 2:11, ESV). So, that’s a confirmation that we’re all pretty unique, and no one except God knows about us unless we tell them.

All the stuff I haven’t discarded from my past phases has been coupled together like railroad cars, connected in a different order each day, week, month, or year—making one long train that chugs along down the track of my life. Sometimes I feel like I’m the engineer, totally in control. Other times, I’m a passenger enjoying a scenic ride in comfort. Every once in a while I’m chained up in the caboose. As I’ve struggled to control the barreling locomotive (I mean, strived to integrate it all), I’ve learned a lot about myself and about God.

From the Formative Phase, I retain permanent custody of a very wounded inner child. There are times I think she has given me a touch of PTSD, because I freak out if I hear most music that was popular between about 1973-1977. My heart starts pounding in my chest and I am sure my always-low blood pressure must go up. I realize that some folks think the age of Captain and Tennille was disturbing for it’s own sake, but I think it’s the associations in my case. It was weird (but freeing) when I acknowledged that my childhood actually *was* somewhat traumatic; it made me feel better about being so strange. The Inner Child and I go out together every once in a while to do something safe and healing, but fun. Not miniature golf, since that’s one of the things the

odd adults in her life took her to do. I also consider the Inner Child to be the source of most of my insecurity and feelings of unlovability when it comes to the opposite gender, which has played itself out in too many vexatious ways throughout my life.

Obviously, the Psychology Phase has never ended. I still think we should seek to know ourselves and what drives us. When I make time to sit down and journal, I ideally want to make it through to what Natalie Goldberg calls “First Thoughts,” but I don’t know if I have ever done so. “The aim,” writes Ms. Goldberg, “is to burn through to first thoughts, to the place where energy is unobstructed by social politeness or the internal censor, to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it thinks it should see or feel.” To get there you have to write your way through Monkey Mind, which is just the state inside a living brain pretty much all the time—lots of fleeting thoughts, restlessness, inability to focus, fluctuating emotions. You have a brain, you know what I’m talking about.

The Gospel basically proclaims that we are a mess, and is the Monkey Mind proof of that or what? I once heard the well-revered Christian Elisabeth Eliot say (and I paraphrase) that if you spend your entire time of prayer just bringing your wandering mind back to the task at hand, you have succeeded. I am sure Adam and Eve did not have Monkey Mind, pre-Fall, and they definitely didn’t have sub- or unconscious minds either, because there was nothing they needed to repress. But we now have mixed motives, righteous and sinful desires at war within us, pride and self-loathing simmering together in the stew of our human experience—plus we bear the scars of our own and others’ sins. Unfortunately, that makes things less than perfect, which is irritating if you are a perfectionist—which most of us seem to be, deep down.

**I would like to see my future psychological musings focus more on distinguishing the (sometimes drunken) chatter of the monkeys from the voice of God.**

I don’t think the mining of my psyche has been all that deep, despite the many years I’ve spent excavating with picks and chisels. I still keep so many of my feelings behind a barrier, like that glass in limos and police cars that blocks sounds between the front and back seats. I’m the driver, so I know the little buggers are there, but I can’t hear them unless they pound really hard. I would like to see my future psychological musings focus more on distinguishing the (sometimes

drunken) chatter of the monkeys from the voice of God. I probably need the megaphone version of that, rather than the still and small option. But The Right Voice always reminds me that I can expect more positive neural pathway development when I get to Glory, and so not to be too discouraged. Until then, Aging Artiste will probably take what I have learned and try to create something that will help others make some peace with his or herself, while learning to trust God more.

The Libertarian Phase is also ongoing—in fact, I get more radical all the time in my anarchistic tendencies. I would favor the abolition of all state education, state licensing of the professions, minimum wage laws, state postal and road monopolies, trade barriers, all welfare and redistribution financial programs, discrimination legislation, immigration controls, and the list could go on. What I have thankfully left behind is the all-consuming fear and hatred I had of the state.

I would probably still have it if I focused on those things like I once did, but now I have my trust in the sovereignty of God. I don't participate in the political process, and trust him to raise up princes and bring them down without any help from me. I know he stands above all earthly powers, and, in fact, he laughs at their puny schemes (according to ). I once saw a *Far Side* cartoon where someone was on *Jeopardy*, competing against God. Needless to say, the homely little guy is just standing there, hands on his hips, looking annoyed, because he didn't have many (read: zero) points. That's pretty much my current assessment of the players on the world stage.

I know I have never done enough for others, in the way a good Voluntaryist should. The Voluntary Society would indeed be the kind of mess statist liberals insist it would be if everyone were as uninvolved as I have been in most community service or ministry-type situations. I have participated in service within the church—I've cooked meals for postpartum ladies, cleaned the church, and I even designed a death card that I have adapted and sent to just about every brother or sister who has found themselves bereaved. Despite not being a neat freak, I mentally assent to the injunction, "Let everyone sweep in front of his own door, and the world will be clean." But some people don't even have a broom, and I want to become more involved in helping them. My Inner Perfect Christian has always had visions of the orderly life of service that The Real Me



could never sustain—you know, Thursdays at the nursing Home, Faith-Based Art Journaling get-togethers every third Monday and \_\_\_\_\_(insert scheduled Give-Of-Thyself activity here).

I eventually saw that the armature for my “community involvement” (meaning anything outside my own family, from across the street to across the world) would have to develop organically, like the very, very few other positive life changes that have stuck over the years. Instead of planning, I just need to look for opportunities that resonate with me. Not saying I will never help anyone if the Resonation Factor is just not there—it’s too easy to woefully assert that something is not my spiritual gift and so justify not doing much. But if I followed even half of the little nudges I feel towards particular people or organizations or situations, I would eventually have many more Good Voluntaryist Points racked up, more people would have a teeny-tiny bit of life’s burdens alleviated, and maybe I will eventually find that I gave Jesus a cup of cold water when I didn’t realize it, or learn that I entertained angels or something.

**I have kept all the Natural Mothering stuff, except most (not quite all) of the smug judgmentalism I used to display towards those un-Natural Mothers.**

For a while, I thought that not much remained from the I Am Woman Phase, but I was deceiving myself. She and the Titus 2 Woman (when she gets out of prison, of course) share an alter ego. They expend so much energy dealing with each other that they don’t have time to cause trouble, and they both have qualities that can be helpful in small amounts. I have kept all the Natural Mothering stuff, except most (not quite all) of the smug judgmentalism I used to display towards those un-Natural Mothers. I have been pregnant eight times, had three miscarriages, delivered five children at home with no drugs, and nursed for a total of thirteen years *so far*. My heart would love to keep having babies until I am too old to have any more, but my body is too tired and my mind needs a chance to start re-growing the Lost Brain Cells of Motherhood. I can’t bring myself to do anything permanent to my fertility—time will take care of that soon enough. But for the first time in about 18 years, I am trying to avoid pregnancy rather than actively trying to conceive. The psychological lava from that fact runs into the Aging/Midlife Phases.

Dealing with small babies and toddlers is the experience that has given me the clearest glimpse of what our relationship with God is really like, even though that fact is commonly forgotten amidst busyness and other temporal concerns. “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Isaiah 49:15).

All those nights when the child training books tell us our babies should be sleeping but instead they (and we) are wakeful, all the times when the little ones just want us to pick them up and hold them (when we think we need to be doing something “productive”), all those things they need from us that they ask for with complete confidence we will provide it (although we don’t always feel very adequate for the task)—those moments make a flawed but true picture of the love God has for those who are in Christ. What we do imperfectly for our children, he does perfectly for us. He never slumbers nor sleeps as he watches over us, underneath us are always the everlasting arms, and he has given us all things in Christ. Most mothers probably remember reading this little poem when they were in the exhausting throes of childrearing:

*The cleaning and scrubbing will wait till tomorrow,  
for children grow up, as I’ve learned to my sorrow.  
So quiet down, cobwebs. Dust go to sleep.  
I’m rocking my baby and babies don’t keep.*

That may be the bittersweet truth for us as parents, but we really are God’s babies forever. He can even personally orchestrate the collusion of molecules that make every cobweb on the planet, blow out the dust from our hearts and minds, and still be the most flawless Father. He would never just leave one of his children high and dry, with nothing but a goldfish that’s destined to die young.

Love, it has been said, flows downward. The love of parents for their children has always been far more powerful than that of children for their parents; and who among the sons of men ever loved God with a thousandth part of the love which God has manifested to us? I’m not sure who said that, but can I get an amen, people?

From my earlier Christian stages, I have kept my love for Francis Schaeffer—I love Edith too, but I haven't wanted to revisit her books because they are so wrapped up in the Titus 2 Phase. I have discarded my interest in Jewish Christianity—in fact, it totally irritates me now. It also irritates me that because I am a Christian, I would not be granted citizenship in Israel despite being born of a Jewish mother. I mean, the Nazis wouldn't care that I had been baptized.

We have been members of the same church for twelve years, and have been blessed to see how God works through the Big Bad Institutional Church. We have had the opportunity to help and be helped by the Body of Christ, and have also experienced situations where we learned how to bear with one another despite disagreements, misunderstandings, and anger. At first, we honestly felt like throttling those “,” but as we have grown in sanctification, we occasionally remember that throttling does not fall under the heading of bearing with someone.

One thing I miss from my earliest Christian stage is the youthful exuberance of my faith. I'm sure that someone converted at an older age would still have that kind of experience for a while, but in my case it corresponded with my actual youth—I was about 27 at the time—which means I was generally less jaded. My theology was terrible, but after I got over the whole Oh Crap, I'm A Jew Who Believes In Jesus period, I had one of those On Fire For The Lord periods. But I definitely feel like my faith has reached a point (unfortunately not the mature point) where I need a new perspective—not on God, but on how I think it should impact my life, but it just *isn't* right now. I remember that the dry periods have a purpose too, but I know I need to take a fresh look at things.

The Aging/Fitness phase seems frivolous amidst all the angst, but it was important for me to consider my dysfunctional relationship with my physical self, which has definitely benefited from a few sessions on the therapist's couch in between weightlifting workouts. It has been encouraging to see that I can develop this whole new “skill set” even at my advanced age, since it is likely I will need to develop a lot more of them before this life thing is over. The blessed idea that my body is something that serves me (and through me, God and others) and helps me to live more fully has indeed been a revelation.

Being brainwashed by pornography at such a young age is crippling; I have lived most of my life under the deluded (though often subconscious) belief that the female body (and by extension, the

woman inside the body) is only worthwhile to the extent that it properly scratches the sexual itches of men. I would still love to look like Ernestine Shepherd someday: a 74-year-old bodybuilder who has a nicer figure than I had at 24. Thankfully, I have 30 years to get in that kind of shape, because those 90-day infomercial programs never deliver.

During the Midlife Crisis, I admitted that even though God knows everything about me before I tell him, I'm rarely honest with him, not talking like I would any trusted friend. For me, it's too easy to have only the reverence part down, which can lead to distance, aloofness, and cold, stilted prayers. I am sure this unwillingness to admit to God what I am going through existentially has a part in my struggle with Hyper-Calvinistic-Stoic-Que-Sera-Sera type thinking. I know God is there and that he is sovereign. But I don't always maintain a heart-level belief that my relationship with God goes beyond Creator and Creature. Despite the fact that one of my chief ends is to enjoy him forever, I am not spending all that much quality time with him. Instead, I maintain a respectful distance and stiff-upper-lip acceptance about my inner and outer life, like a good Creature should do. I'm like Carson in *Downton Abbey*, saying, "Very Good, Sir."

I'm tired of feeling like I'm in a time-loop, with the same thing (my life, basically) happening again and again, always reacting with the same negative and/or fatalistic attitude. I want to break the pattern, stop the loop, and just move on, *dude*. The other day I looked up the definition of the common saying, "It is what it is," and read that the phrase implies a sense of hopelessness about a situation, as opposed to the other common saying, "It's all good," in which the speaker is "trying to rise above whatever problem exists, without expressing their underlying negative emotions."

**So my motto could easily be "It is what it is, and it's also all good," because while I feel depressed quite a bit, I never quite lose sight of my eternal hope.**

I have always had a surface optimism (the companion to my surface extrovertedness), but it has often been buried under discouragement. So my motto could easily be "It is what it is, and it's also all good," because while I feel depressed quite a bit (and more hopeless than I used to feel about much change being possible), I never quite lose sight of my eternal hope. I want to learn to say "It is what it is," without the hopeless undertone, because really, that's the truth about life. Wherever we are right now, is where we are. God knows we are there, and he is somehow using it all for our good. We might be fatter than we like. We probably don't do everything we think a

“good parent” should do. We very well may be sporadic in our Bible reading and have a dirty, sticky kitchen floor. And this doesn’t mean we shouldn’t strive to lose a few pounds or clean our floors more often, if that is important to us, but we don’t have to hide from him or from ourselves, even if What Is really sucks right now, even if it sucks because of our \_\_\_\_\_(insert negative tendency we cannot seem to shake).

I have thought a lot about what it means to be at peace, because I have (obviously) rarely experienced it inside, and circumstantial peace never lasts. There are always the nagging background whispers; the reminders that life will always be as shifting sands beneath our feet, because there is evil in this world, and with evil comes hard times, sadness, and grief. Like Joni Mitchell sings

Everything comes and goes  
Pleasure moves on too early  
and trouble leaves too slow  
Just when you're thinking  
You've finally got it made  
Bad news comes knocking  
At your garden gate  
Knocking for you.

How can we be at peace when we know that is the truth?

One morning a blessed vision came to me, a vision of putting the baby down and being able to drink a cafe latte without worrying about anything happening to them. The children could run with scissors, climb into that abandoned refrigerator, or put forty grocery bags over their heads, and it would all be jolly good fun. It was the first time I ever got a glimpse of what eternal peace might be like. I carry so much worry in both my conscious and subconscious minds—always aware that my heart could be broken at any time. To let go of that fear is the most restful thing I can imagine. But I find that it is hard—okay, impossible—to place my heart in the hands of God and trust that he knows what he is doing.

Maslow's Pyramid of Needs isn't just psychobabble. The needs are real, but it's impossible for them to be fulfilled in this life. So we compensate by perfecting all the little qualities that can make life such a dramatic soap opera—including, but not limited to: manipulations, temper tantrums, pity parties, anger issues, passive-aggression, and various co-dependencies. We distance ourselves from others in all kinds of ways so that we can't be hurt by them. I am an expert at that, with Olympic quality talent. Or we work to become super-competent so we won't have to admit the irritating fact that we absolutely do not have it all under control. We can even develop what seem to be positive character traits on the surface; mild-manneredness and other admirable qualities can be easily used to avoid necessary but uncomfortable interaction with, yes, other people. The ones we are called to love.

The solution is to allow ourselves to be marinated in the Gospel. I have been a Christian for almost 16 years but I still have not allowed God to seal me into that Ziploc bag and poke and prod me with the tenderizing truth that all I need is faith in Christ's perfect life and atoning death. Once I get sufficiently steeped in the knowledge that I am eternally secure in Christ, I can better stand up to the smoke and heat on the barbeque of life. Not a scary "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" situation, but rather a "Tough Steaks in the Hands of a Great Pitmaster."

My basting sauce has been a mixture of all the sadness and disappointments and unfulfilled longings in my life—a concoction that would taste really bad in the hands of a less competent chef than the Lord—but of course, he makes it work. One of the most difficult lessons of my whole Christian experience has been learning to accept that there are all kinds of morsels on his grill, each with their own special sauce. Sometimes he makes kabobs with odd combinations, ones we wouldn't choose.

Or he puts us so close together on the grill that we are actually, gasp, touching! The clean shaven, short-haired Republican next to the tattooed Democrat, next to the denim-clad homeschooling mom of seven, next to the working mother who has only two kids and takes the pill to prevent any more from coming along. Too much forced togetherness like that makes us tense, even at a supposedly relaxing barbecue.

I was not aware that I had passed through so many distinct phases, and for most of my life I wasn't aware that, minus a soundtrack, my life (and probably yours) is like a weird indie movie

—or better yet, a TV show with five seasons, a wacky and diverse cast, mixed critical reviews and a steadfastly loyal, albeit small, fan base. And God, yes, God himself, the King of the Universe, is the writer, the director, and the show-runner.

Some people - and I am talking about Christians—hate the idea that every move, every choice, every bleedin' circumstance in their lives was foreordained (I mean choreographed, to continue in the television metaphor). It makes them feel like chess pieces or puppets with no volition; plus it makes it difficult to recite with any gusto that poem about being master of your fate. But I find it comforting and also awesome (literally inspiring awe) that God would actually cast me in a life. And especially, that he would cast me in The Life, you know, the Eternal Life. Because let me tell you, I did not give an impressive audition. Obviously, for many years I didn't even know I was auditioning for anything. But I still got the casting call one day, right out of the blue.

It's usually not until I go back and write or make some art project out of my thoughts that I truly process things, and seeing the whole thing in terms of Story is both theologically accurate and psychologically powerful. Just like looking back at that first season of Buffy, when I re-watch the episodes of my own life on DVD, I see the truth of CS Lewis' words from *Out of the Silent Planet*:

A pleasure [or trauma, or seeming drudgery, or moment of unglimped import or ironically humorous and mythically resonant happenstance] is full grown only when it is remembered. You are speaking...as if the pleasure were one thing and the memory another. It is all one thing.... What you call remembering is the last part of the pleasure... You say you have poets in your world. Do they not teach you this?

I have not written much poetry, but I think I might have a poet's heart. This is one of my more successful poetic attempts (for me, anyway) to capture the human condition:

*"Life is a tapestry," some have said.*

*(Carole King, meet Edith Schaeffer).*

*But tonight, life struck me as a soup pot.*

*A stainless steel pot filled with water.*

*Add roast chicken bones,*

*Soggy celery,  
Half a red onion,  
Tomatoes past their prime,  
Cracked baby carrots,  
Possibly some spinach.  
And of course, bay leaves and rosemary.  
These same ingredients used  
again and again for soup never  
yield the same brew.  
Perhaps the proportions  
are different,  
Depending on what you had  
in the refrigerator.  
Or you used that new kind of bullion.  
Either way, that soup is what you will  
have to eat  
Whether it is what you expected or not.  
You can add homemade egg noodles.  
You can add matzo balls, potatoes or corn.  
It is the same, yet different.  
Just like every day you are alive.*

Whatever the metaphor—tapestry, barbeque, television program—I know that God is behind it all, “and I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in (me) will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6, ESV). Because of this promise, I know that The Christian Me is not a phase, but rather my eternal blessing.

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