

Spring 5-13-2017

Anthem: A Reflection on Goodness and What It Means to Be Catholic

Alyx Staiano

University of Wyoming, astaian1@uwyo.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.uwyo.edu/honors_theses_16-17



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Staiano, Alyx, "Anthem: A Reflection on Goodness and What It Means to Be Catholic" (2017). *Honors Theses AY 16/17*. 21.
http://repository.uwyo.edu/honors_theses_16-17/21

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Honors Theses at Wyoming Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses AY 16/17 by an authorized administrator of Wyoming Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact scholcom@uwyo.edu.

University of Wyoming

Anthem

A Reflection on Goodness and What It Means to Be Catholic

Alyx Staiano

Honors Program

Senior Project

Anthem: A Reflection on Goodness and What It Means to Be Catholic

In my Intro to Non-Fiction class my sophomore year here at the University, I wrote a piece about learning to love the people in the world who are the hardest to love. That story has stuck with me for the past few years because I felt like I learned so much about myself as I was writing it. It started out in a completely different way—I was emotional, trying to deal with losing one of my only friends to his needy girlfriend and alcohol. I was writing about a moment I'd recently had with him when I felt the most lost and helpless. It was amazing how easily the piece morphed into an analysis of myself and this defining part of my life—trying to be good. I learned how to love your neighbor, not from the events of the story, but in writing about them. I wanted to recreate that again.

When I first decided on my topic, I was just discovering that I wasn't very happy. I knew I wanted to talk about my Catholic faith, and I knew I wanted to focus it around how I was struggling to find my stride in it. I loved being Catholic, I just wasn't sure I was living it right.

I spent the summer reading books about Catholicism. Some were autobiographies, some were guide books. And I thought that reading them would not only support this project, but would also make me stronger in my faith.

I mention in my piece that this summer was hard on me. I was away from home, working a job I didn't love. The books worked for a while, but life isn't that simple. Instead of finding a solution so that I could end my story with a nice, tied-up, perfect ending like the one for class, everything got more complicated. I got more unhappy. The direction of my paper got more muddled.

Writing, even after the semester started and I was back home with the familiar, became really hard. Each of the little scenes I wanted to talk about were not enough to explain the complexity of my unhappiness. The farther back I went in life, the farther away I got from the problem at hand. That thing I was expecting to find out about myself so I could solve everything, didn't happen. And every time I sat down to write about myself, I felt worse about who I'd become. The piece had become unclear. There was no end goal, no solid finishing theme. It didn't tie together the way my story had in my non-fiction class. But maybe that was the point.

Over the summer and this semester, I read a couple different autobiographies of Catholic Saints and Christian writers, including *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*, *Dakota* by Kathleen Norris, and Saint Augustine's *Confessions*.

Of all these works, I found Thomas Merton's to be the most inspiring. Though he was not born and raised a Catholic, and I am probably not destined to be a monk, I connected with Merton's struggle to find happiness. Merton grew up with very little religion, and in his early adulthood, he tried to find happiness in the materiality of the world, mostly in knowledge, his writing, and drinking. But once he realized his restlessness, he searched for peace in religion, which he had found somewhat from his father's influence as a kid. He tried a couple different Christian religions, but it was that Catholics that really moved him: "What a revelation it was, to discover so many ordinary people in a place together, more conscious of God than of one another: not there to show off their hats or their clothes, but to pray, or at least to fulfil a religious obligation, not a human one" (Merton 227).

Merton is able to put it to words better than I am. This is one of the best aspects of Catholicism. The word catholic means universal. Everything we do is in unity. Our prayers are

said together. Every mass around the world is saying the same things in different languages. I wanted to capture this in my writing, this idea of community. But I soon realized I couldn't, because I hadn't let myself feel this way in my church. I hadn't become part of their community. I didn't know how to explain that peace and connection when I was stopping myself from being a part of it. But this isn't about me trying to sell Catholicism to anyone, except maybe myself. This story is about me trying to understand how I fit into these graces. It's about me wanting to feel inspired by them again.

Merton eventually became Catholic, but he still felt a calling to something more. When he was asked not to become a Franciscan monk because of sins he'd committed in his past, he gave up on that calling. But the call never left him. He joined a Trappist monastery instead, where he finally found peace and happiness.

The most inspiring part of this story, which I'd like to share, is when Merton returns to the Trappist monastery to become a monk. He had been to the monastery once before, before he had tried to become a Franciscan. The Trappist Brother who opened the door to him asked him if he was there to stay. Merton said no. When he returned years later, the same Brother opened the door and asked again if he had come to stay. Merton said, "Yes, Brother, if you'll pray for me." The Brother replied, "That's what I've been doing...praying for you" (Merton 408). I don't quite know how to explain the selflessness of praying for someone else, but I felt it then.

Kathleen Norris's *Dakota* was less of a biography, and more of a reflection on the people living in a small town in South Dakota. She filled in some of the spaces with her own reflections on religion and life. Though Norris's book didn't influence my paper as much, there was one line from it that stuck with me. Norris is having a breakdown when a clergy friend of hers tells her to pull herself together and write it out. Norris then says, "You don't know what you're asking," to

which the clergy friend responds, “That’s what Jesus said to his mother at Cana” (Norris 106). It’s passages like this one that get me thinking about my own life. Even if it had nothing to do directly with my paper, it inspired me to write my own lines that might, one day, get someone thinking. We’re all trying to find something in our lives, and even the best of us doubted Himself.

As I read the books by Merton and the two Saints, Teresa of Avila and Augustine, I found it most interesting that they took a similar attitude on their reflections of themselves. Merton spent much of the earlier part of his book talking about how sinful he was, but maybe more shocking was Teresa’s view of herself. She constantly insisted that she was so wicked, yet she wouldn’t describe exactly what it was that made her wicked, other than it being from her worldly desires. Wicked is such a hard word. I couldn’t understand what it was that could make Teresa of Avila so bad.

Teresa wrote, “I guarded against committing any mortal sin—and would to God I had always done so—but I paid little attention to venial sins, and that was what undid me” (Teresa of Avila 36). I completely understand what Saint Teresa was saying here. Mortal sins are not really a temptation for people who are so aware of their moral compass. It’s a lot easier to know that a mortal sin is wrong, and it’s a lot harder to go through with it. I think we can all agree that most of us cannot justify murder. Venial sins, though, those are the little details. Tiny thoughts, like vanity, selfishness, anger, jealousy. They slip through the cracks, and soon you have a mountain of them, enough to block out the light. And I think in some ways, these sins are worse because you know they are wrong, and still you are so weak that you let them keep happening. I feel the worst when I think about all the little things I’ve done wrong over and over again.

I believe that Saint Teresa wanted so badly to be good that anything she did wrong, any little thing, seemed like a huge stain on her perfect record. That is how I feel at times. All the times that people have told me I'm nice and kind and helpful get blocked out by the times I say something mean about someone or I let myself be angry over something so trivial.

There are a few important elements to the genre of creative non-fiction. Phillip Lopate outlines these elements in his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. Non-fiction essays tend to have a conversational tone, an element of honesty, and a moment of self-discovery. "Some vulnerability is essential," Lopate states, "The personal essayist is not necessarily out to win the audience's unqualified love but to present the complex portrait of a human being" (Lopate, xxvi, xxix). For the reader to connect to the piece, the writer can't be up on a pedestal. Like any character, they need to be relatable, which means acknowledging their sins.

The issue I had with Saint Teresa's writing was that she did not admit her "wickedness." Wickedness is probably too dramatic a word to use for the sins she may have committed, and while I understand why she felt so terribly about herself, it was also difficult to read without knowing specifically what those sins were. That sounds bad, wanting to peer into her private life, but like Lopate said, "some vulnerability is essential." In order for the reader to understand and feel connected in non-fiction, you need to open the door a little bit and let them look inside. The hardest thing in the world is to admit all your sins to people. But for them to accept your story, maybe even for them to like you, you have to share those faults. Sometimes, it's the most flawed character that we enjoy the most. Being able to admit your sins might make you more of a hero than the "perfect character."

This means I have to admit that I struggled with this characteristic of non-fiction in my story. I know I've done wrong, but telling everyone about it in a way that won't make them dislike you is even harder than it sounds. I found myself wanting to defend my faith instead of talking about all the ways I was practicing it wrong. And there are so many complexities in life that you can't narrow it down to just one thing, just one sin. For me, it has been a combination of my priority of school, my reluctance to be involved, my prejudice of others, even just laziness. I can't sum these up into any one event, and they won't all be solved in one revelation either. Faith is a constant process. The work will never be done. So maybe this story won't be either.

That brings me to what I believe is the most important element of the creative non-fiction story—self discovery. In the first piece I wrote in my Intro to Non-Fiction class, I had the perfect moment of self-discovery. I saw my friend in a moment of vulnerability, and I realized, despite all his faults and all the ways he'd wronged me, I still loved him. And that kind of love, when you want the absolute best for someone, is the strongest force in the world, and the hardest to understand.

At first, I worried this essay did not have a moment of self-discovery, except that moment as I was writing that I realized I was doing a lot of things wrong with my faith and still not doing anything to fix it. When I first thought I'd reached the end, even as I was finally collecting some of my thoughts, I had no solid solution. I couldn't tell you, "Here's what I did to find peace." It was still happening. I was, and am, still working on it, and I'm not sure I will ever have a neatly wrapped up ending for something so complex as a life. But that's okay. I don't think every non-fiction piece ends with a lesson, but they all have a take away.

It took me until the very end to realize what I was writing about. It had morphed back and forth around this idea that there is a way to be good, and I needed to figure out what that way

was. That is how my story starts out, because I have believed that for the longest time. What I now realize is that, because we are all different people, we are each going to find different ways to practice our faith, even if that faith is the same. What I do will not be the same as what my brother does, or my neighbor, or my priest. Even within Catholicism, which is thick with traditions and practices and rituals, we will all have our own way to serve God. It maybe not be clear what I have to do, but it's something.

Works Cited

Augustine, and R. S. Pine-Coffin. *Saint Augustine Confessions*. New York, Penguin Books, 1983.

Kelly, Matthew. *Rediscovering Catholicism: Journeying toward Our Spiritual North Star*. Cincinnati, OH, Beacon Publishing, 2002.

Merton, Thomas. *Seven Storey Mountain*. Harcourt, Inc, 1998.

Norris, Kathleen. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. Boston, MA., Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993.

Teresa of Avila. *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*. London, Penguin Books, 1957.

Anthem

Good

I have always wanted to get into Heaven. That's really the only option, right? The alternative is so frightening, I don't even think about ending up there. When someone dies, we always say they're in Heaven. We need that comfort. We need to know that there is something to look forward to, to not be afraid of. It's not just going to be fire or ice or whatever Hell ends up being like. But to get to Heaven, we have to be good people. Maybe just good enough.

It's funny, because I don't even think about the possibility of not making it into Heaven. I assume I'll make it there someday. We don't have to be perfect, because all of us are probably going to spend some time in Purgatory anyway, cleaning up and washing away our sins so that we are worthy to enter the kingdom of God. But I have always been more concerned about being good. I think that's different than what it takes to make it into Heaven. I believe in a merciful God who wants to forgive us for our sins, if we too want to be forgiven. Being good, purely good, however, is a different call. Maybe like the one that calls people to Sainthood. That kind of holiness isn't perfect either. Even the best Saints have sinned, but that doesn't keep them from being beloved Children of God.

Goodness is about love and kindness and peace, even if you stumble through those things. But I have grown up differently. It's nothing my parents have taught me, because they are loving, kind, peaceful people. Somewhere along the way, I got it in my head that goodness is like my grades in school. Even if you only need a C to pass, I won't accept anything less than an A. You don't need straight A's to be a smart, hardworking, dedicated person. But I can be so hard on myself because I know I can do better.

Being perfectly good, never messing up, never hurting anyone, always doing the right thing for every person you meet and don't meet, is absolutely unrealistic. I know that, just like I know that I don't need to get straight A's for my parents to be proud of me or for me to succeed in this world. But I still won't accept anything less.

Navigating

I am a cradle-born Catholic. I attended Sunday school from the time I was in Kindergarten until I was in eighth grade, and Mass every week until I left for college. I didn't know about much outside of the community of the little Catholic church I grew up in. I never talked about religion with my high school friends, except enough to establish we were all Christian with good Christian morals, and I knew they didn't go to the same church as me. Once, my cousins took me to their church. I was really young, and I remember being confused as to why it was happening in a school gymnasium. I remember hanging out behind the bleachers and watching a green laser light show while the band played really loud rock music. It didn't feel like church.

Everything gets a lot more complicated when you grow up. I went to college at the University of Wyoming, left the simplicity of my close hometown community and my mother's explanation of what it means to have the grace of God. I met people who didn't have any religion at all, and that was almost simpler than meeting the ones who did. Non-practicing Christians don't dig into the details of faith. In fact, because I was religious, they tended to leave me alone about it, probably to avoid a conversation where I tried to convert them. I found that sometimes, it's the other kinds of Christians who make things complicated. Because, even though you technically believe the same thing, the little details can tear you apart.

When my brother became a student at the University of Wyoming the year after me, I made myself a promise to become more social, make a few more friends, and be a lot less lonely. Many of his high school friends were attending the University as well. I'd grown up with most of them, and I knew this was my chance to make some real friends, not like the ones forced on you in the freshman dorms. I decided to go along with them to the Christian Navigators worship service so I could get to know them better.

I cannot remember where the prejudice started. I have always felt strongly about my Catholic faith, and maybe I went in looking for differences. Maybe it happened after I'd heard what they had to say. Maybe it was my natural resistance to large groups of people who would expect something from me for being there. Whatever the reason, I put up a wall between me and the Navigators on that first night. Something felt out of place, and like I said, the details will tear you apart.

The Navigators met in the Agricultural Building Auditorium. It was a pretty big crowd, and they all knew each other. Small clumps formed in the aisles, divided into genders. I waved to a few people I recognized from classes. Following my friends, I took a seat by the front, on the left side, second row from the stage. As more and more people filtered in, I felt pushed closer and closer to the stage, like I was being shepherded front and center.

A little after 7:00, some guy approached the microphone, thanked us all for coming, and introduced the band on stage. It was made up of a couple of students, one on drums, one on guitar, and a lead singer also with a guitar. They immediately jumped into song, and the words appeared on a projector screen above their heads for the rest of us to follow along.

It was nice to be singing, and the songs were pretty catchy, but there was also something off about it. I couldn't explain it, other than the mind numbing pounding that grew in my head

from singing the same lines over and over and over. *How great is our God, how great is our God, how great is our God?* It was not just different from what I knew. I felt misplaced by participating.

I didn't belong that night, or any of the nights after that when I tried to participate in their worship. I wondered briefly if it was something wrong with me. Maybe I wasn't as connected with God as I wanted to be. The music, the speakers, none of it resonated with me. I didn't agree with what they were saying, though it should have sounded right. And as I looked around me at all the people with their hands in the air and their eyes closed, singing at the top of their lungs, I could see it pounding in their souls. Instead being inspired, I laughed at them.

Different Way for the Same Faith

My brother, Nick, and I are close. We are just a year and a half apart, we go to the same school for college, and we live together with a couple of friends from our high school. But we are so different. Nick loves being involved with people. He loves spending time in groups and making commitments and volunteering for activities. His faith stays strong because he surrounds himself in a community of people who want to help him build it.

So, I watched Nick grow deeper and more committed to Catholicism while I shrank away from the community he found his place in. Because of it, I believed I was practicing the faith wrong, or at least not as fully as I was supposed to.

This fall, on the phone with my mom, I told her I didn't feel inspired to do the things Nick did, and I didn't know how to inspire myself to be a good Catholic like him. I told her I felt guilty about it all the time, but I didn't know how to fix it.

My mom stopped me. “Alyx,” she said. “That is Nick’s way of doing things. Of living his faith. It doesn’t have to be yours.”

The Basics

I think I’m good at doing the basics of Catholicism. My first memory of church is kneeling in the pew with my mom during the 5:00 Saturday night Mass. It was just the two of us. My brothers were young enough that they stayed home with my dad. I brought my favorite Barbie with me, and she sat in the corner of the pew in her fancy dark velvet dress. I was not tall enough to see over the top of the pew in front of me when I kneeled, so I would sit back on my feet and watch behind me for my Barbie. She sat perfectly still, never fidgeted, never looked away from the front where the altar was. Her focus was in the right place. I wanted to be perfect like that.

After a while, my mom decided my dad could no longer use my brothers’ ages as an excuse not to go to Mass. We started going to the 11:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings, following the religious education classes that began at nine.

The religious education classes consisted of memorizing prayers and completing the questions in each chapter of our workbooks. Of course, we hated it. It was like having extra school on the weekends. The readings were long and boring, and I don’t remember any of the theology I might have learned at the time. I don’t remember most of the prayers either, except for the big ones like the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be, and strangely, the Hail Holy Queen, which is the prayer I struggled the most to memorize.

The Hail Holy Queen is my favorite prayer now. There’s this line at the end of the prayer. It goes, *Oh clement, oh loving, oh sweet virgin Mary. Pray for us oh holy Mother of God, that we*

may be worthy of the promises of Christ. I think those are the most beautiful words. Being able to ask someone else to help us become worthy, become good. With that, how could we not find happiness?

We had our First Reconciliation and First Communion in second grade. Reconciliation is the sacrament of forgiveness, where you confess your sins to the priest and God acts through him to forgive you, to wipe the slate clean and start fresh. For my First Reconciliation, Father Bob came to our house and I sat with him on the couch in our living room while the rest of my family waited in the basement. I confessed my grave eight-year-old sins, like how I picked on my younger brothers and I had lied to my parents a few times. Maybe I should have. As penance, Father Bob told me to pray this prayer every morning, and he wrote the prayer down on a piece of paper for me to keep beside my bed.

I felt wonderful when the whole thing was over, and Father Bob was drawing the sign of the cross in the air above me. It's an amazing feeling, the first time to realize you've been forgiven for all your past sins. I don't remember what the prayer was, but I kept that slip of paper by my bed, and looked at it every morning to say my penance. I thought I was going to have to say the prayer every day for forever, because Father Bob never gave me a time frame for me to stop. That weighed me down, thinking about all the confessions I would make in my future and all the penances I was going to have to do for the rest of my life, building up and building up.

After a few weeks, I forgot all about the prayer, and it would be several years before I would go to confession again.

First Communion came shortly after First Reconciliation, because we needed to be clean of sin before receiving the body and blood of Christ. My grandma sewed me a new dress, made of silky ivory and silver fabric. I wore my hair down and veil over it.

I liked the rituals of Communion. For instance, you fold your hands together on your way up to the priest so that the hand that you accept the Host with, generally your non-dominant hand, is under the palm of your other hand. That way, when you get to the front of the line, you just rotate your hands and suddenly the non-dominant hand is on top and your dominant hand is cupped below it to make an altar for the Body of Christ. The priest places the Host in the palm of your non-dominant hand, and you use your dominant one to put it in your mouth. Catholics used to believe you couldn't chew the Host because it would bleed in your mouth—since it is Christ's body. People have stopped thinking that, but sometimes I wonder about it, holding that bread, that body, in my mouth. If I bit down and tasted blood, would it be a miracle or an omen?

After that, we had six more years of RE classes, then in eighth grade, we got Confirmed. The Sacrament of Confirmation is the final stage of becoming a member of the church. As babies, we get baptized into a faith without knowing it, but Confirmation is where we choose, as adults, to follow the Catholic faith. We finish our Religious Education program and go through a whole ceremony. We are anointed in an oil called chrism that has been blessed by a bishop. We choose a family member or friend to sponsor us, and a Saint to inspire and guide us in our lives.

It's funny though, because a lot of times when Catholic kids get Confirmed, they stop coming to church. They think it's over. They've gone through all the steps and achieved their certification. Everything that was required of them has been completed. My mom told me I could stop going to church when I stopped living under her roof. Until then, I would be going with the family every Sunday. Honestly, I thought about it. Church was boring, an obligation. I almost wished I had the freedom that my peers had, the choice not to go anymore. It wasn't because I didn't like the Catholic faith. I didn't know anything about any other faiths to make a decision like that. I just felt it was a waste of time, and I wanted to sleep in one more day of the week.

But this story isn't about me leaving my faith. That's probably what you typically hear from a kid who grew up Catholic. I've heard a lot of former Catholics, young and old, tell me about how they got out as soon as they left home. Some found other sects of Christianity better suited for them. Others decided on no religion at all. Mostly, it was because of the rules, the staunch, unchanging beliefs in these rapidly changing times. They said they faced judgment, a lack of acceptance of their individual needs. I am sorry for them, sorry that that is the Catholicism that they see. I was blessed enough to grow up in a loving community and a loving family. Judgment is not what Catholicism, or any other Christianity, is about. But neither is giving up on tradition—at least for Catholics. Some things aren't supposed to change.

I haven't left the Catholic faith. If anything, the older I've gotten, the stronger my conviction has become that it's the right path, the true path. This story is about my inability to live up to the expectations I set for myself to live this faith. For me, goodness was to never mess up, never hurt anyone. It was being friends with everyone in church and participating in everything they offered—Bible studies, woman's groups, weekly meetings, choir, volunteering to read the scriptures during Mass. All the things my brother does, and I just don't feel called to do. I felt shame in not being able to live up to that. I needed to find a different way.

The Neon Party

Within the first few weeks of starting college, I realized being a good Catholic no longer meant just going to church on Sundays. All the things you thought you were prepped for, the things you were taught to do, become a lot more real, and a lot more difficult, when you actually have to do them. If someone needs help, you actually have to help them, because you're an adult now and everyone knows you can.

At 10:00 at night on my nineteenth birthday, I sat on the steps outside the Laramie Plains Civic Center with the first drunk person I'd ever taken care of slung over the steps next to me. This night goes down as one of the worst birthdays I've ever had, second only to my 21st birthday, which I don't want to get into.

The drunk guy was someone I'd met from the dorms, a friend who lived on my floor. He'd asked me to drive him and his car home at the end of the night. He'd parked several blocks away at a house where he'd "pre-gamed," before coming to the Neon Party his fraternity was putting on at the Civic Center. I was already having a terrible night before he'd shown up. I wasn't comfortable in big crowds, my other friends had disappeared somewhere, and some guy had awkwardly asked to grind with me. When I told my drunk friend I wanted to leave, I only got him as far as the edge of the building, where he'd slumped down on the steps outside an empty doorway and passed out.

I knew nothing about how to take care of a drunk person, except what the University's online Alcohol Edu class had taught me. I couldn't let him fall asleep, so I propped him up into a sitting position and forced him to talk to me. He was angry about it, but I didn't care. At the time, it was the worst birthday I'd ever had.

The party had a rule about students under 21 not being able to return if they left—something about preventing them from going to get drunk and coming back to the party (not that it had stopped my friend)—so I thought I wouldn't be allowed back inside to find my other friends and ask for their help. Plus, I wasn't sure I could leave this guy passed out alone on the sidewalk. To make everything worse, we'd left all our phones in the car.

I was scared, stranded, lonely. Oh, and then it started to rain. By the time my friends found me, it was 11:30 at night, I was cold, wet, and tired, and I'd spent the last hour and a half fighting with a drunk person.

This was the kind of stuff you were supposed to do as a "good" person, helping the helpless, caring for the poor. I was proud of myself for that night, even if it was terrible. It was one of many deeds from my freshman year that I considered made me holier.

My freshman year, I struggled a lot with establishing my sense of morality among friends who didn't have similar beliefs. I'd met these girls because they lived on the same floor as me in the dorms, and it's easiest if you can just make friends with people closest in proximity to you. None of them were Catholic, or specifically religious at all, but we got along okay at the time. I was the goody two-shoes of the group, and though it was a lonely role, I wasn't willing to give it up to fit in better. See, goody two-shoes includes the word "good" in it, and I'd accepted that as my identity. I'd promised myself it would be my identity.

Earlier on, the day of the Neon Party, I was set on not going. Because I had a natural aversion to crowds, I'd planned to spend my birthday alone in my dorm room...until I'd put it like that and decided a frat party was better than spending the night feeling sorry for myself. I quickly scrambled to find an outfit and met my friend Hailey in the bathroom to shave our legs. We filled the tub in the bathroom halfway with water, and sat on the edge together.

"Hailey," I said, knowing all my friends were going to realize how pathetic I was when we got to the dance and wanting the chance to defend myself. The night was already weird for me. I'd never shared a moment shaving legs with a friend before, if that's even what we were

yet. “I don’t exactly feel comfortable grinding when I’m dancing...I’ve never really done that before, and I don’t want to tonight. I hope that’s not a problem for you guys.”

Hailey smiled sympathetically while I stared sheepishly at my legs. “Of course that’s not a problem, Alyx. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.” I was glad to hear it, but I still didn’t feel like I’d explained myself.

“Thanks,” I told her. “I was just nervous. I know I can be sort of...” Sort of what? Innocent? Ignorant? Lame? Goody-goody? None of those were the words I wanted to use, but I was sure that was how she saw me. “You know... I don’t want you guys to be embarrassed by me.”

“Oh Alyx, no!” she laughed, which made me feel silly anyway. “I promise we won’t feel that way! You don’t have to dance like that. We’ll make sure you don’t have to.” She smiled so kindly at me that I felt bad for thinking she’d judge me. It was probably a lie—that she didn’t feel that way—based on what I learned spending the rest of that year being her friend, but at least she made me feel good at the time.

She paused for a moment, staring down into the tub. “You’re such a good person. You don’t do bad stuff, but you don’t judge the rest of us if we do.”

I would later realize what she said, after the big crowds, and some guy trying to grind with me, and the two hours sitting with my drunk friend in the rain. That I was a good person. That she recognized I wasn’t judging her. I hadn’t thought about it that way. This wasn’t about being good or bad. I was more concerned with what was going to help me fit in, though I wasn’t so desperate I’d do anything.

I’d heard those words before, just a few weeks earlier from a girl I’d met on a camping trip before the semester started. She’d asked me questions about Catholicism and I did my best to

answer them. I guess I hadn't judged her either, or tried to force my opinions on her. So she told me I was good. I was happy, same as when Hailey said it a few weeks later.

It didn't become my goal until months later when the same drunk friend from the night at the Neon Party said it to me. He was sober this time. "You're such a good person," he said. "I wish I could be like that."

That was probably what ruined me.

After those first few week of college, I knew who I had to be. These people saw me as "good" because I was kind and I hadn't strayed from the morals I grew up learning. I knew I couldn't mess that up and risk them seeing me any differently. I'd set their expectations high, and I was afraid if I made a mistake, they'd find a way to hate me.

Skipping Church

I decided before the day my parents dropped me off at college that I would attend Mass every Sunday. That's part of the easy basics of being Catholic. Go to church on Sundays, confess your sins once a year, observe Holy Days of Obligation, genuflect in front of the Tabernacle...

It was easy enough at first. Like I mentioned before, my friends had set me up to be this ideal of "goodness" and I knew I couldn't disappoint. My roommate said she was Catholic, but she only came to church with me once. I was proud every time I walked back to the dorms after Mass, and she would still be asleep. There was the proof I was still doing the right thing, even if others were not.

But doing what everyone else isn't doing is lonely. And each week that followed, I got less and less inspired to go to church, and more and more busy. My friends were not church-

goers, and that made it harder for me to keep going on my own. As the year wore on, my attendance became less consistent.

Those Sunday mornings I slept in, I always ended up on the phone with my mom, confessing my sin to her like I could somehow justify it. She always told me it was okay, that even she didn't make it to church much in college because the only Mass time they offered was at the same time as lunch in the campus cafeteria. I should have felt better, but I didn't. I was supposed to be "good" like everyone had told me. I knew better, and I was skipping anyway. I had no other excuses.

Despite the guilt of not getting to church every week, I still felt somewhat holy my freshman year of college. Not saying I felt righteous in comparison, but most of my friends didn't have the same morals as me. They drank, smoked weed, slept around, and were kind of mean to each other. I knew, at least, that I was doing the right thing. I didn't dislike them for doing wrong, but it was nice to know that I was still "good" in comparison. It would be harder to see my flaws when theirs seemed much bigger.

There were moments, though, when they tried to use my religion against me. Once, they asked me what I would do if I had a kid that was born gay. I had just entered the room, and all their eyes turned to look at me, as if they believed I might give some hateful, prejudice answer, as if I might tell them I wouldn't love my child as much.

I missed a beat, only because I was so taken aback that they believed I might be so cruel. "Of course I would still love them," I finally answered, though they hadn't asked me that. Their eyes still stared, waiting for further explanation. I sat down before I continued. "Being gay isn't wrong. It's technically acting on it that makes it a sin. See, Catholics don't believe in premarital sex, and the sacrament of marriage is only between a man and a woman. So, because

homosexual people can't be married in the church, the sin they'd be committing would be premarital sex. It's not a sin just being gay." I paused one more time, staring back into the eyes around me. "Of course I would love my child," I repeated. "It's my kid. I would love them no matter what sins they commit. I've sinned too."

I was pretty proud of my answer, believing I came out of the situation looking more kind and strong than I did before. At the same time, I was angry that they thought they could try to trap me like that. I didn't share my religion with them. I never preached to them or tried to make them go to church with me. I simply refrained from doing the things I was uncomfortable with, and refrained from judgement when they were doing those things anyway.

Unfortunately, this life was almost easier than the year that followed. I may have been alone in my morals, but it's a lot easier to battle with people who are on a different team than you. When I started attending the Navigator meetings my sophomore year, it got a lot harder to understand who I was. Essentially, we believed that same thing, but the details ended up making a huge difference.

Where It Is in the Bible

I woke up late one night, the second semester of my sophomore year, to find three people sitting in my living room discussing religion. One was my roommate, who'd established this tendency to invite people over late at night while I was trying to sleep. When I'd talked to her about it, she apologized profusely, baked me a batch of cookies, and did it again the next night.

I lay in bed for a little while, growing steadily angrier at the sound of their voices. It was 11:00 pm, and I had to be up for work at 4:30 the next morning. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I got up and stormed out to confront them. Morgan, my roommate, was sitting out

there with two friends of ours—well, one friend of mine, and one that I'd grown to dislike over the course of this semester. Thomas was a friend I knew from high school. He lived in the dorms with my brother. Morgan was also a friend from high school in my brother's grade. She'd transferred from Montana this semester, which was why she was living with me.

The other guy was named Mason. My brother and his friends had met Mason in the dorms during first semester. He was great at sports, could sing and play guitar, and was an avid Navigator. Once his initial charm wore off, I'd found him to be proud and hypocritical. While very involved in his Christian religion, he picked fights with the non-Christian people he met, and pointed out, judgmentally, all the things my brother and his friends did wrong, when they "weren't being very Christian."

So, when I found the three of them talking about religion, I couldn't help but jump in. Thomas was Catholic like me, but both Morgan and Mason were non-denomination Christians, both very involved in Navigators, and both a little hypocritical. As frustrated as I was that my roommate had brought this loud conversation to our house at 11:00 on a school night, I was still curious enough that I had to sit down and listen.

I started out wanting to hear what they had to say—the differences between Catholicism and non-denomination Christianity—but I realized this could be an opportunity, a chance for me to valiantly defend my faith. Of course, I couldn't hold my tongue.

"Actually, we believe in Purgatory. And it's not a punishment," I said, jumping in. "I know the name sounds bad, but really it's just about becoming clean before you can get into Heaven."

I never should have left my room. I should have plugged my ears, shoved my head under my pillow, and gone back to sleep.

“Where is that in the Bible?” Mason struck. I’d forgotten how argumentative he could be.

“I’m not sure,” I answered nervously, feeling my control on the situation slip away. “Let me see if I can look it up.”

The Navigators had become unbearable to me. Possibly because I found my Navigator roommate to be hypocritical in her call to Christ. Possibly because Mason was stuck up and confrontational when it came to religion, and also he’d been at my house until two a.m. every week this semester, trying to date Morgan. And possibly because, when I went to their meetings, I found those speakers to be phony as well. No one there was honest about their faults.

I hastily retrieved my computer and sat back down to research. I found a few Catholic websites all saying the same thing. Unfortunately, I knew it wouldn’t be enough of a defense for Mason.

“So the word ‘purgatory’ isn’t actually in the Bible. But the book of Revelations says ‘But nothing unclean shall enter Heaven.’ That’s what Purgatory does for us.” I perked up a little bit, feeling like I was about to contribute something valuable to the conversation. “I like to think if it like how you take a shower before you go to church. You get cleaned up and dressed nice out of respect—”

“But wasn’t Christ’s sacrifice enough?” Mason interrupted. “He died so we wouldn’t have to carry that sin. Why would you second guess that?” He looked at me accusingly, and I felt like I bore all the faults of all the Christians that came before us.

Like I said, I should have gone back to bed.

“It’s not like that. We all still sin and we can’t have that with us when we go to Heaven.”

The discussion moved from Purgatory to Reconciliation to the extra books Mason accused us of “adding” to the Bible (it’s the opposite—Protestants took those books out). I had to

defend every little thing, and it felt like Mason believed it was my fault personally, as a representative of the Catholic religion, for everything we disagreed with.

I got so angry, I blurted out something I never should have. “Catholicism has so much more to help deepen your faith. They aren’t limitations, they’re ways to help you along the way. It’s more deep to me, while the yours seems more shallow.”

I think I literally saw flames burst into Mason’s eyes. I should have gone to bed. I should just have gone to bed.

I immediately regretted the words. I apologized to Morgan later, telling her that wasn’t what I meant. That simple and complex were the words I meant to use. But that wasn’t true. That’s exactly how I felt. Their Christian group seemed shallow to me. I wasn’t sure how or why, but that’s just how it felt. I shouldn’t have said something like that, though. Besides, we were on the same team, both believers in Christ. I realized I wasn’t any better than Mason, attacking those who didn’t believe the same as him. It hadn’t stopped me. The worse Mason got, the more I judged him, him, my roommate, and all the other Navigators who preached perfect Christianity but didn’t follow through on it.

Quiet Moments

Before Mass starts, you have the chance to kneel in your pew and pray. Ever since high school, I’ve started that time off the same exact way. I pray an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and a Glory Be, mostly because I can’t think of what I want to say right away. In high school, while I was surrounded by my family in our pew, I would be reminded to pray for them. I’d think about each one of them and what they needed, then I would pray they’d get that. For my parents, it was usually a stress-reliever. For my brothers, it would be strength and guidance when they were

having a hard time with school. Then I'd pray about my friends' troubles and the people in the world I didn't know who needed help. I prayed for myself last, trying not to seem as selfish. If I needed anything, it would have to come after everyone else.

Now I start with myself. If I remember, I'll tack on something at the end for someone I know who is struggling. But I start by saying, "God, help me to be less selfish, to be inspired to do good, to not be so angry, to not talk bad about others. Help me figure out what I need to be doing, so I don't feel so bad that I'd doing everything wrong. Please."

Andrew

The greatest lesson I ever learned was from my alcoholic friend, Andrew. I met Andrew the first week of our freshman year, back when he was still hopeful about his educational future. One night in his dorm room, he told me his life story. He'd struggled with alcohol and drugs in high school, resulting in a car crash that ended his potential hockey career and delayed college for a few years while he figured out what to do with his life. This was his new start, his second chance, his opportunity to change. He said he could see I was good, and he wanted to become like me.

A few weeks later, the Neon Party happened. I'll never get out of my mind the image of him puking all over his shoes.

Sometimes I look back at that year and marvel over the draw I had to Andrew. It doesn't make sense, even now when he has his life finally coming together. I was, am, the opposite of him. Careful. Shy. Solitary. But I believe too, we were both restless, both unsure about who we were and desperately looking for guidance. He claimed he wanted to be more like me. I wanted to make him more like me. The whole year, we rode a roller coaster, but from two different ends

of the train. Whenever I was up, he was down. When I came down, he went up. We never figured it out.

He sounds terrible, based on the little I've told about him. But he made me laugh when he was around. And he recognized my quest to stay moral, never pushed me to change that. I guess I was flattered by how highly he thought of me. And once, he deviated from his usual rap music to play me a country mix he'd made because he knew I'd like it. He used to call me a diamond in the rough, because he thought I was a diamond among all the rough people in the world. I told him he got the saying wrong, but he said he still believed that. He was the real diamond in the rough. Beneath all the mistakes was someone with a bright future. I just didn't know what I could do to fix him.

A couple months into our sophomore year, Andrew left for rehab. I'd lost track of him since school had started. He'd found a girlfriend who'd monopolized a lot his time, and he spent the leftover time at the bar. A bigger problem appeared, deeper than just his addiction. He became self-destructive, hopeless, lost. And I wasn't there to help anymore.

He told me he was leaving three days in advance. I was surprised to hear from him, and even more surprised to hear he was leaving. The night before he left, he asked me to come over, and we took a walk around the neighborhood surrounding his house. For a while it felt normal. He described, in dramatic detail, all the wild things going on in his life. I told him he was crazy. Then he dug into the minor details of my life and made me feel like I was important to him again.

It was the end of October, so at the end of our walk, we sat in my car outside his house to escape the cold and his roommates.

“I’m really nervous,” he told me, bowing his head shamefully. I’d heard countless times how he wanted to change, how he hated what he was doing even though he couldn’t seem to stop. And every time, I believed him, because I wanted it to be true. I wanted more than anything to see him become the perfect person. He always disappointed me, and yet, I bounced back each time to help him. It didn’t make sense.

“It’s okay to be scared,” I answered him. “It’s actually a good thing that you are. It means that you care, that you do want to help yourself.”

I took his hand and looked him sincerely in his eyes, as if I could say the words forcefully enough for him to believe them. “I want to tell you my favorite Bible verse. It goes, ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.’ Think about it when you’re scared. You aren’t going through this alone. Your parents are with you, Abi is with you, and I am with you. If you ever need anything, you can call me.”

I liked that verse because of the power of the words “shadow of death” and “evil,” maybe more than for its meaning. But I thought it would help him.

He told me he’d call me the next day, on his way to the rehabilitation center in Estes Park. He never did. Our friendship only worked when he could see me in person. Despite everything, I only wanted the very best for him. I loved him. Better than the love when someone says they’ll “take a bullet for you.” Chances are they’ll never have to put that promise into action. It was the kind of love where I’d suffer every day for him. Love enough to give my time, energy, and thoughts simply because I could. The kind of love that God is always telling us to give to our neighbors.

The problem was, it had been so easy to love Andrew, flawed and broken and lost, but I could not seem to find room in my heart for the Christians from the Navigator group. Their sins—hubris and hypocrisy—seemed worse.

Luke 18

There is a Gospel reading. In it, a Pharisee and a tax collector are praying in the Temple. The Pharisee thanks God that he is not sinful like the tax collector. The tax collector prays in the corner, asking God to be merciful to a sinner like him. We learn from this story that the Pharisee, though not a sinner, is not the justified one because he brags about his righteousness. But the tax collector, who humbles himself before God, will be raised up.

I felt the strongest about my Catholic faith that year I spent with the Navigators. Because of them, I began to dig into the details of my faith. Why was I Catholic, and not any other sect of Christianity? What made Catholicism so special?

This was good for me in so many ways, but it was also so bad because I started making enemies out of people who were supposed to help me become stronger. I had become righteous because I thought I was better than the Pharisee.

Grace

One Wednesday, the spring of my sophomore year, I went to the Navigator's meeting with my friends, looking for a little guidance. I spent the whole time arguing with the speakers in my head, pointing out where their words contradicted my faith or where their beliefs were lacking. I thought I would feel good going to those meetings, because it gave me a chance to

confirm why I believed I was right. Those arguments in my head helped me establish what I believed as a Catholic and made that faith stronger. But I was doing it all the wrong way. My assurance came from anger, when it should have come from love. Instead of being inspired to do good, I left the meeting feeling like crying. Outside the auditorium, Navigators were pushing people to sign up for Bible studies.

I high-tailed it out of there before they could catch me, tossing a wave goodbye at my friends. I had no way of kindly explaining to the Navigators why I didn't want to read the Bible with them—the *wrong* Bible, since the Protestant Bible had been changed from the version that Catholics still used. I already had a hard enough time sitting calmly on Wednesday nights. I knew I couldn't handle discussing the meaning of Bible passages that wouldn't sound the same as the one I was familiar with. Instead of accepting a learning opportunity and a chance to make friends, I ran off to solitude.

I got to my car and turned the key. I could have just gone home, curled up in my bed, and broke even more over how broken I was. But my ego had me all fired up about how the Navigators were wrong and Catholicism was right. I needed to prove that what I believed was right, and not just because I was being some judgmental hypocrite.

I drove to the church, pulling up in the dark where I felt like I was still hidden. The walkway was dimly lit, so I ducked quietly inside and around to the right, away from the lights and the voices coming from the church hall on the left.

The Newman's Center was a little progressive compared to what I was used to with most traditional Catholic churches. Instead of two rows of pews leading up the altar, the seating took the shape of a fan, putting everyone a little closer to the front and forcing them to look at each other as a way to build community. The other difference about this church was the location of the

Tabernacle. Instead of it being at the front with the altar, it had been placed in a little adoration sanctuary in the back, where you could go sit quietly and pray in front of it.

Normally, I didn't like that the Tabernacle wasn't up front with the altar where you could see it during Mass, but now I was glad for the benefit of this quiet, peaceful corner. I snuck to that dark corner because I knew no one would accidentally find me there. It was lit by a lone candle, but there was still enough darkness to hide me. There were three rows of chairs, and I took a seat in the middle of the first row, closest to the Tabernacle. I could barely see it reflected behind the glass in its case, so I can't really tell you what it looked like. Besides, I kept my head bent most of the time, staring at my feet scrapping the carpet.

Everything was so quiet. I was almost alone.

"God," I whispered, still staring at my feet. "Help me. I don't know how to feel."

I sat there a while and thought. Not everything was a direct prayer, but I tried to send all my thoughts up to Heaven where He might hear them. I thought and I cried. And as soon as I cried, this feeling came over me. It was so subtle, I wasn't sure it was real. I just felt, somehow, that everything was okay. Even though I was lost, even though I felt alone, I was at peace.

Nick

My freshman year of college, I had a hard time going to church by myself. I wasn't comfortable with making new friends—and that probably would have made the difference. But for the time being, I attended alone, and I didn't like that. My younger brother started school at the University of Wyoming the following year, and suddenly, my family was partially back together. I had someone to sit with when I was at church, a familiar hand to hold during the Our Father prayer. I picked him up and drove him back to the dorms every Sunday morning.

Something was still missing though. Church was the extent of our participation in our Catholic faith. Actually, Nick was much more involved with the Navigator's weekly activities. He went to every meeting, participated in the Bible study, even considered going on the large missionary leadership retreat they advertised each year. He had made more friends there and it was a much bigger group to socialize with, but I worried that he would start to lose sight of our Catholic teachings. These Christians believed differently. I'd decided it was because their take on Christianity was too easy. All they had to do was sing happy songs and read the Bible together. There was no growing, no changing, no strength in it. I worried Nick didn't see it.

I pushed to get him involved in the Catholic activities with me, trying to remind him how special our faith was. And by the next year, when the Navigator craze was over, he did become more involved. Way more involved.

That is who my brother is. He is social and adventurous, much more so than I am. Soon, he was a part of every activity the Catholic Newman's Center offered. Catholics on Campus meetings, the Brotherhood group, Bible study, the SEARCH Retreat, choir, even just hanging out in the church hall to study. Suddenly, I was the one left behind. I attended Mass on Sundays, and the occasional Catholics on Campus meeting. People asked my brother, "Why isn't Alyx here?" It was usually because of homework, or really it was my anti-social personality. But either way, I felt guilty every time I skipped out as soon as Mass ended. I needed to avoid the questions, the pressure to participate in things I was afraid I had no time for.

Heavy on Your Heart

School has always been my weakness. At my first church retreat, my sophomore year of college, Father Rob asked us to confess during Reconciliation by answering this question. “What is heavy on your heart?”

A lot of people cried harder than me that day, but I found myself crying over how screwed up my priorities were. I had this beautiful faith that gave me unlimited chances for happiness, but I wasn’t taking any of them. Instead, I devoted my time and thoughts to school and stress and grade point averages (or one grade point average, in particular.) I wanted to change. I wanted to be better and happier. I promised to participate in more groups and make friends with these people I’d gotten to know better in two short days.

I did not change. I have not changed. Even now, as I write this story, exploring all the things that I have come to be unhappy with myself over, I have refused to change. In fact, I stress about the grade on this project enough that I leave church as fast as I can on Sunday evenings, skip the community meals, and avoid the group activities because I “need to spend time on my project.” My project of self-exploration. My project of self-discovery over just the thing I’m running away from.

I have come a long way. I have met people with no religion at all who didn’t try to change me. I have met people who have judged me for my differing Christian beliefs, and I have judged them back. But none of those challenges have been as difficult as this one, learning to live with myself, to find the balance between good and good enough. It’s been even harder than accepting that I was the hypocrite all along. How do I resist my fears, ignore my natural inclinations, and let go of the things I believe I need to be happy but are just stressing me out? Why am I so afraid of becoming a part of this community?

It took being away from them to get over my prejudice of the Navigators. Once I was not constantly fighting their claims and living with their hypocrites, I stopped being angry at them. And looking back now, the whole thing seemed silly. I was so desperate to change who they were, as if their hypocrisy came from their particular Christian denomination.

Yet, here I was, a “good” Catholic, acting worse than the Navigators ever did. At least they were actively involved in their faith. They were growing, despite what I had believed before. I was stagnant. Now I asked, what inspired them to be so involved? What inspired my brother and the other members of our church? What wasn’t I getting?

All Time Low

I hit my low two days before I broke up with my boyfriend.

We were riding in his car. He was changing lanes, perfectly capably and perfectly safely, but I gasped at the cars coming up beside him and snapped at him to watch out. He panicked, thinking I’d seen something he hadn’t, but when it turned out he’d had plenty of time, he took a low, deep breath and sighed.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” he said. The sound of disappointment in his voice stung me so much, I felt my insides crumple up and harden into a wall of defense.

“Right. Sorry,” I snapped, turning to look out the window. I was angry the whole way home, and I barely spoke to him.

I’d done this defensive crumpling a lot recently, and the yelling at him to pay attention to the road, as if I didn’t trust his driving. But it wasn’t just his driving. I kept losing my temper with him over things I did wrong. I had no patience for the guy who spent all his time being

patient with me. I got upset. Not at him, but at myself, for becoming this person I hated. I broke up with him two days later.

How can I explain why I ended this relationship? I am convinced it had something to do with my faith, or my lack of it. I knew I wasn't happy, and I blamed it on the relationship. Maybe I felt unworthy of his love, knowing I was so flawed. But that sounds like a cliché from a movie. Or a pathetic excuse. In the spirit of admitting my sins, I think I just wanted an easy way out of my discontent. Instead of changing my spiritual habits, my negative attitude, or anything about myself, I changed the things around me.

But it was hard, because it was going to end up hurting him, and I knew hurting people was not the way to be a good person.

The summer before my senior year of college I took an internship with an accounting firm in Casper. It was the farthest away from home and the loneliest I'd been since I first moved to Laramie for school. The drive was only about two and a half hours from Laramie and four hours from my parents' home in Colorado, and for some reason that distance seemed impossible.

I had been dating Schuyler for seven months at that point. He was my first real boyfriend, since I don't count the one innocent relationship I had in high school. He had been working as an intern in Gillette for the summer, so he came down to help my parents move me in to the room I'd rented the weekend before I started my job. My family was just coming off a weeklong vacation in Yellowstone.

Once they left, I never stopped crying. It didn't really make sense, since they weren't going to be that far away, and this was a temporary situation for the summer. I was afraid, though. And I had no support system in that town, just phone calls and texts. I was regretting my

decision to take the job in the first place, to branch out of my comfort zone, to try another town for a summer. Schuyler drove me all over town and up and down Casper mountain until I stopped crying (as much). I have never known a more patient, caring, selfless, and loving guy in my entire life.

So, why did I leave him?

That summer sank me. A combination of a new place, a job I didn't like, maybe a fear of growing up. Probably some other things too, but the point is I wasn't happy.

In my parents' kitchen, one weekend I was visiting home, I broke down. My parents were on their way to bed, and as my mom hugged me goodnight, I started crying.

They stayed up with me for a few hours, talked me through it. I told them I wasn't happy, and I couldn't figure out why. We worked through my stress about school, my desperation to get good grades, my anxiety about getting a job I like once I graduated. I didn't feel like we'd covered everything. I'd always been overly-stressed about school. It didn't explain why I was sad.

Finally, we got around to talking about Schuyler, and I admitted I wasn't sure about my relationship with him sometimes.

"Do you think you want to marry him someday?" my mom asked. My dad stood silently by. He wasn't great with the emotional stuff, but he stayed to support me.

I gave myself a minute to think, though I already knew the answer. "I don't know," I told her. "I just...don't know."

Once I said it, a huge wave of relief ran through me. Finally, someone else knew I had doubts. I hadn't known how to say it for the longest time. But I was finally free of my terrible secret.

Eventually, my mom told me I probably needed to break up with him. If I didn't know how I felt, I owed it to him to tell the truth. He didn't deserve to be led on like that, and if I waited, it would only get harder.

Like I said, it was just a pathetic excuse. And whether or not breaking up with him was the right thing to do, it was a huge turning point in my life. I'd never had to hurt someone like that before, and it was the worst feeling in the entire world. I'd rather be broken up with a thousand times than to break another person's heart like that again.

And when I was over, things didn't get better. I thought without him, I'd find myself making more time for church and all those activities I'd put off doing because I "didn't have time." I didn't do them. It had nothing to do with Schuyler, and my leaving him was just a pathetic attempt to wish away my guilt.

Anthem

One Sunday in Mass, the priest quoted a song by Leonard Cohen, something about all of us being cracked, but that's what lets the light in.

I tried to think about myself in that way, and I pictured an old vase that was just covered in cracks. They spider-webbed out from each other in swelling patterns so there was barely a whole piece of clay. Father Rob went on to say that those cracks may have been caused by others or by ourselves, but that brokenness meant we needed God. And I thought how few of my cracks were caused by other people. In fact, most of the cracks came from me because I cracked myself more by trying to cover the breaks from other people.

Catholics have this tendency to be self-deprecating. The worst we feel, the more we think God accepts us. If I really am as cracked as I believe, I should have a lot of God's light inside me

by now. But since we also like to hide those cracks, we patch them up so no one knows they exist, and consequently, shut out the light. I must have smeared a lot of shame into the breaks in my vase, because I feel pretty dark.

Andrew, Part 2

Almost two years after he first left for rehab, I met Andrew at the McAlister's on Grand Avenue in Laramie. He'd been living in Denver for the past year with his parents, looking to move out soon. He was working a management position with FedEx, was making good income, and was sober for several months now. After all the screw ups, depression and anxiety, and failed second chances, his life was finally getting on track. More on track even than mine.

I didn't understand what had happened. I was supposed to meet with him, impress him with how much I'd grown, and make him feel bad about neglecting our friendship for the past few years. We hadn't spoken in six months, or physically seen each other in more than a year. He barely asked how I was, other than to establish I was graduating with my undergrad this spring and staying at Wyoming to get my Master's degree in Accounting. We spent more time talking about his new job, his new girlfriend, his new apartment, his new success. I was left feeling young and lost, which was usually how Andrew was supposed to feel.

Some things hadn't changed. Even if he was several months sober, he still seemed wild and rebellious. Maybe still a little impulsive. But my draw to him was gone. He'd been absent from my life for so long now. It was hard to remember those moments when he'd been vulnerable with me. It's harder than you think to share your sins with people. We didn't have that anymore.

He used to be someone who made me feel like I was good, maybe because he did so many bad things. I realize that maybe I didn't feel that love for him anymore because he was no longer seeking my approval. He no longer thought of me as his "good" influence now that I was absent.

It was good to see him, and I was glad he was doing well. But with that part of my fight over, I was still left with something missing inside myself.

Not Catholic

The first thing Schuyler said to me as I was breaking up with him was, "Is it because I'm not Catholic?" I felt like I'd been slapped—not that he'd slapped me, but maybe that I'd slapped myself. Had I been so judgmental, so pushy, that he felt like I'd expected that of him to make him stay with me?

I reacted quickly, assuring him that wasn't it at all—and it wasn't. There was a multitude of complicated reasons, mostly internally directed, that I was ending the romantic part of our relationship. I'd never thought that I couldn't marry him (if I'd known I wanted to) if he never wanted to become Catholic. There are a few rules that go along with that. We'd still have to get married in a Catholic church, go through the whole premarital counselling thing, and he'd have to agree to raise our children Catholic. Those are no small things, especially the last one, but I wasn't afraid of that with him (had I actually thought I wanted to marry him).

"Because," he continued, "I do kind of like some of the stuff about the Catholic church..." He trailed off. I knew what he was trying to say. That he was open to becoming Catholic...if we stayed together. While it broke my heart, I was kind of glad to hear it. Part of me, a very selfish part of me, was happy that I'd proven the goodness of the Catholic church to

somebody, showed them that there was depth and meaning to this faith and made them consider converting. I shoved that thought away at the time, because it wasn't about that right now. Even now, I kind of hate that I initially thought of what he said in that way.

He'd been trying so hard to become part of my family, pray with them, go to Mass with me. I hadn't been sure if Catholicism was on his mind. Sometimes when I talked to him about it, he just stayed silent. I thought he was trying to end the subject, but he must have been processing it. Sometimes in church, I used to imagine he was there with me, and I'd try to figure out what he would have been thinking, hoping he would have been inspired.

I don't know if it's because I liked the idea of us being Catholic together or the idea of me inspiring someone, anyone, to love the Catholic faith too.

Faith

Here is what I love about the Catholic faith. Where others see strictness and structure, I see guidance, help. I see strength in prayer when I do not know what words to say, and I see community because millions of Catholics all over this world are praying the exactly same words as me. "We believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth..." I see beauty in 2000 years of tradition, in knowing that I'm doing the same things the Disciples did following Jesus's death.

For my 22nd birthday, I asked for a crucifix and a rosary from my parents. I hung the crucifix on the wall beside my bedroom door, right above the light switch. I have to look at it every time I leave my room. It's made of a deep red cherry wood, and when I see it, I think of my family. The rosary is made of blue glass beads and held together by gold links. Though I've

promised myself I will say the rosary every day, I haven't, and I regret that. I've heard people find peace in that kind of rhythmic prayer.

To pray a rosary, you say fifty-three Hail Mary's. There's some other prayers breaking up those Hail Mary's, but you only say those five or six times each. My mom told me that when she can't sleep, she says the Hail Mary prayer. One night, recently this year, I found myself lying in bed, stuffed full of feelings, and unable to sleep. So I started praying Hail Mary's. I know the prayer so well now that I can whisper the words while I'm thinking about other things. I think that might be the point of those prayers, the ones you memorize. You can meditate while you say them. They clear your mind. *Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

I realized that clarity as I was praying, thinking about my life, thinking about how I wanted to change. Before I knew it, I was crying wildly, trying to understand why it seemed so impossible to fix myself. I guess God likes to let me cry to help show me I'm having a realization. When the flood ended, I got up and grabbed my rosary, climbing back into bed with it tucked in my hand. I said fifty-three Hail Mary's. One for each bead on the five sets of ten, three at beginning. Fifty-three Hail Mary's. Then I drifted off to sleep.

It was a step forward. The next day, I knew I was a little better. A little more fixed.

Tuesday Nights

I don't want to admit that my spiritual health is in a state of desolation. I read that in a short article in one of the church bulletins titled *Spiritual Health* by Clare Stockbine. She writes, "Desolation, a state of being spiritually unhealthy, is the space in which we are turned away from

God. We feel cut off from community, we are exhausted, we have little to no greater vision.” It seems extreme to say I am turned away from God, but I do feel cut off from community. I feel exhausted. My greater vision seems too far away to reach for.

But this is my fault. All this time, I’ve been feeling unhappiness, but I haven’t tried to fix it. I love my faith, but I haven’t put the effort into it that I know I should. Part of my unhappiness comes from the guilt I feel every time I skip Mass or don’t participate in the community building activities. I’m losing out on friendships and love and belonging. That push is easier said than done.

This semester, I am taking a class on governmental accounting. On Tuesday nights, most of the class meets up for the professor’s office hours to work on the continuing project we have for the semester. I usually arrive early and leave late because I spend a lot of that time helping others get caught up on their project.

It’s nights like that that give me purpose, that make me feel like I am filled with so much goodness and selflessness that there is no reason to feel bad about myself. On those nights, I give myself to all those other people, people I’m friends with, and people I’m not. And I feel silly for all those times I pretended to say I hated other people, because how is that possible when I want so badly to help them? It has nothing to do with religion, and yet it does. Just because the church didn’t set up the opportunity doesn’t make it any less worthy.

I can’t say I am receiving no benefit for myself, since isn’t teaching the best form of learning? So maybe my actions aren’t so selfless. But I love seeing the looks on their faces when they finally understand. They light up. Somehow, they look grateful...to me. I never feel more myself than in those moments.

This is what the Christian faith is about, for Catholics, for the Navigators. Happiness comes from serving others. So does goodness, I think. I catch a glimpse of it when I'm working with my peers. That must have been what my mom meant about finding my own way of living me faith. I'm nowhere near a church, and there is no priest present. But love is there, and that is the faith.