

MY TESTIMONY
By Sandy Swartzberg

I have always believed in God in some fashion. My parents, however, were both agnostics. My father was nominally Jewish, but his family really practiced no religion. Probably the first time he was in a Temple was when he went to a Temple singles group with his friend, Burt Thompson. My mother had had a fairly strong Jewish upbringing. She knew Hebrew and had been Bat Mitzvahed. At one point, my grandfather, Samuel Poses, had been president of a synagogue.

However, the killing of six million Jews during World War II in what became known as the Holocaust, left my parents angry, especially my mother, at God.

In fact, when I began asking questions about God at a very early age of around 3, my parents were stunned.

The first time I ever remember hearing the name "Jesus Christ" was just before my fourth birthday from one of the neighborhood kids, Timothy Patwell, who had just started Catholic Sunday school. We were living in Bergenfield, New Jersey and I was playing in my backyard near our milk box when Timothy Patwell came over with a large rock and threw it at me, saying: "You killed Jesus Christ." The whole thing stunned me and I ran up to our back porch into the house crying for my mother, demanding to know who was Jesus Christ and who had killed him.

My interest in God continued, and later that year I made my first trip to Temple in New York City. The rabbi at that temple, Dr. Kaplan, was one of the most famous Jewish philosophers and theologians of the 20th century. He was already well into his 70s when I went to Temple for that first Rosh Hashanah.

As I was brought up the center aisle of the large temple, Rabbi Kaplan was splendid in his white robes with a long white beard and a large white hat and was standing on the bema. As soon as I caught a glimpse of him, I yelled out in a clear voice: "Look, Mom, there is God." This sent the congregation into screams of laughter.

I continued to be interested in God, but my parents' interest in both God and Judaism waned. We occasionally went to Temple on the high holy days. Neither my brother nor I were Bat Mitzvahed. When I turned 13, we were living in India because my Dad worked as an anthropologist.

I continued to struggle with my quest for God during a very difficult adolescence. I read many books about the history of the Jews. I also continued my interest in other world religions, especially Christianity.

My grandfather had a whole shelf full of literature about Jesus. I became so knowledgeable about the differences between Christianity and Judaism, that in my high school world history class, I taught the Jewish portion of the curriculum. The main lesson I seemed to have learned is that many Jews had been killed by Christians trying to force them to convert to Christianity.

In my twenties, I continued to be a seeker looking for comfort beyond the material world. I learned transcendental meditation, which helped quiet my mind.

In 1977, I graduated from law school and moved to Milwaukee. I started going to Temple once a year.

In August of 1981, I got married to a woman named Karen, who had already had a daughter named Katie, who was seven at the time of our marriage. We discussed religion, and since Katie was already being raised as a Christian, we agreed to continue to raise her as a Christian. The only stipulation that I put on this agreement was that if she was going to be raised Christian, I really wanted her to have a strong religious background. We started attending church at Kenwood Methodist Church across the street from the University of Wisconsin and were fairly regular church-goers. Still, I continued to maintain my Jewish identity by going to Temple on the high holy days and reading the works of Jewish philosophers and theologians.

Also in the 80s, I started spending more time with Karen's family, who lived mostly out of state. They were a very religious group. However, there were certain strains of intolerance from other people mixed in with some of their Christianity. I was attracted to their belief and I was deeply conflicted because I felt I was betraying my Jewish identity. I had read enough to know that millions of Jews had been killed instead of being forced to convert to Christianity. My going to church and partaking in other Christian activities were in some ways satisfying, but I also felt deeply disloyal.

Nevertheless, I began questioning where the obvious commitment to Jesus came from. For the first time in my life, I began to see Christianity and Jesus as two distinct entities. I began praying to Jesus saying: "If You intend for me to convert to Your way, please give me a sign." I prayed this prayer more often as the 80s turned into the 90s and the difficulties in my life grew.

In church, I continued to maintain my Jewish identity, and at one point I started going to Temple more frequently. I translated the word "Jesus" in church into the word "God."

In the 90s, my life became more and more difficult. Each new year seemed to bring an additional challenge. My oldest daughter entered her teenage years with all its stresses and strains. My marriage seemed to get progressively more difficult as the stresses and strains mounted. My younger daughter, whom we had adopted as a six-week old baby, had progressively more emotional difficulties. My love for both my daughters was incredibly strong, and so was the pain when they had difficulties. My younger daughter had increasing emotional difficulties as we went through the 90s and into 2000. My love for her made coping with her difficulties all the more difficult. I knew underneath her emotional storms was a wonderful human being, but I did not know how to reach her.

In the early 90s, I began to have health challenges. In January of 1993, my wife noticed a lump on my back. When I went to the doctor, I was diagnosed with a melanoma, which, if had not been caught in time, would have been fatal.

Then in 1995, my business started to have trouble because my ex-partner, with whom I was very close, stopped working. Eventually, he had a psychotic breakdown and after much travail and a lot of money, he left the business.

During the period of time of trouble with my ex-partner, I began to pray earnestly, and I felt a response from God. In church, our excellent pastor at that time, Dick Jones, began to give sermons that seemed to speak to my heart. I continued to go to Temple, but did not find a welcoming comfort in God.

Around the time of September 11, 2001, all of my troubles seemed to reach a crescendo. My father died two weeks before September 11. I began to experience multiple health problems, including inability to sleep and an incredible itching and burning sensation. These conditions eventually drove me to the Mayo Clinic.

Worse, the situation with my daughter also began to come to a head.

I cannot describe what a difficult period of time this was. I felt as though my heart was being ripped out of my chest. I prayed, but did not feel an answer was coming.

When things were at their worst, a miracle occurred in my life. On a Wednesday morning, I received a phone call from David Lake. It was a business call, but David heard the pain in my voice and asked me what was going on. I talked to him on the phone for probably a half hour. At the end of the phone call, David invited me to attend a men's Bible study with him the following Saturday. My brain said: "You are not a Christian. This is going to be very intense Christianity. You don't belong there." As I was thinking about how to politely refuse David's kind offer, I heard my voice say: "I will be there."

To say that I was in a state of shock at what I had just said would be an understatement of my reaction. I thought about calling him back, but there was a strong voice inside my head that said: "Try it; it's only an hour."

I met David early in the morning with several of his friends in a restaurant before Bible study. I remember my first day clearly. I clung to David like he was my life preserver in a storm.

From the first day, I knew I had entered sacred space. The energy and caring in this Bible study group was like nothing I had ever experienced before. Gradually, I began to share my wounds and found a love and acceptance that I had hungered for my entire life.

Gradually, I began to believe. Jesus stopped being a mascot of a group that had persecuted the Jews, and slowly became to me a living presence in my life. When another crisis occurred with my daughter (thankfully, the worst but final crisis), Richard was there with a helping hand. His book, which detailed his own travails with his child, became a lamp in the darkness.

I stopped clinging to David. In fact, David's responsibilities changed and he could attend less regularly.

Going to Bible study became the highlight of my week. I still had challenges. I am less conservative than many people in Bible study, and of course, more knowledgeable about other religious traditions.

Nevertheless, the central truth of Bible study, which is the living presence of Jesus Christ in my life, became more and more a reality which dwarfed any other concerns.

Finally, once Sunday during the time that our men's group was studying the DEVOTIONAL CLASSICS book, I dropped my wife off at church and parked my car several blocks away. As I was walking along Marlborough Avenue, something wondrous happened. I first felt it in my feet. My legs had a bounce that I had not felt since I was a little boy. Then this wonderful feeling traveled up through my legs, through my body and into my heart. I looked out at the world and the world was clear and sharp in a way that it had never been before. I was filled with an incredible deep knowing. I knew better than I knew my own name that Jesus was who He had said He would be. I knew, and know now, that Jesus is my Lord and Savior. At that moment, all doubt had disappeared and all I was left with was, and is, Jesus as the central reality in the universe. The words from John 1:14, **“The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth,”** became my central reality.

I walked into church and my wife wanted to know what was happening to me. I whispered to her, “Jesus is Lord.” The reality and the sharpness eventually faded and the mundane world partly returned.

Since then, I have never been the same person again. I have daily conversations with Jesus; He comforts me when I am conflicted; He counsels me; He is my best friend.

When I go to Bible study, and many other places, I want to shout, “Jesus is Lord.” I still have a life full of difficulties, like everyone else, and challenges, but when I remember that I have the ultimate best friend, counselor and God, my life is better in ways that cannot even be described in words.

Some of you may be in this Bible study for the first time today. I want to tell you that I have never been in a place or with a group of people in any church, Temple, or anywhere else where the Holy Spirit is more present. I invite you to come and partake. Sometimes the study is hard and the concepts are challenging, but whether you understand the reading or not, this is the place to come because the Holy Spirit lives among us, and just being here with Jesus is the ultimate blessing.

I want to thank Richard Cobb, David Lake, and all the other people in this Bible study who are helping me find the ultimate gift. Jesus is Lord!

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