

Losing It: Ex-Christians' Stories About Their Lost Faith

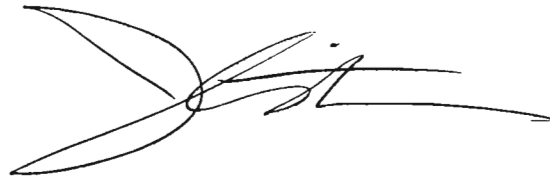
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jill Christman', with a large, sweeping flourish on the left side.

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Abstract

Results released in 2009 from the American Religious Identification Survey showed that the number of U.S. citizens who identified as atheist or agnostic had nearly doubled in the past seven years, growing from 1.9 million in 2001 to 3.5 million in 2008. Even though most Americans still claim some form of Protestantism, churches are seeing a widespread decline in attendance; a survey performed by Lifeway Research, part of the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, showed that seventy percent of Protestants age 18-30 drop out of church before age 23.

I am one of those Protestants that dropped church before my 23rd birthday – or rather, was, as I am now an atheist. The process of losing my faith is one of the most stressful, intense, and significant experiences I have ever had. My story is not a simple one, but I have heard Christian speakers at my former church and other places give simplistic reasons for why people leave the faith: they want to live “sinful” lives, they are just angry at God, et cetera. I don’t think people who have left their faith deserve to have their experiences so watered down and trivialized, especially by individuals who have not had similar experiences – and as our nation is becoming increasingly secular, I think it is important that this phenomenon is recorded on an individual level, so that we may better understand the complex reasons behind why some can no longer believe. I put together three audio pieces, each around ten minutes long, combining my own narration and interviews from three individuals who renounced Christianity between the ages of 18 and 25 in a *This American Life*-esque style that tell the complicated, faceted, honest stories of how they lost their faith and who they are now.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Jill Christman for advising me through this project and helping me tell mine and others' stories with more clarity and heart. Her encouragement to me not just during this project but over my senior year has been invaluable.

I also want to thank my interviewees, who all so generously shared their stories and were vital to making this project a reality.

Artist's Statement

In August of 2010, after almost two years of intense doubting, active questioning, and emotional stress, I decided I could no longer be a Christian and became an atheist. This decision came after a decade of sincere dedication to Christianity, the latter years of which I served as a Bible study leader, one-on-one mentor, worship band performer, and paid intern for a campus church.

I cannot overstate how emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually difficult this two-year process of questioning was. For a long time, I could not be honest with myself about doubts because I had previously committed to leadership positions that required I represent a solid, no-matter-what-God-is-good faith. I could not be honest with myself because I knew leaving the faith would cut me off to almost everyone I considered close friends, as almost my entire social life existed within my campus church. But most importantly by a landslide, I could not be honest with myself about doubts because a decade of sermons and books and Bible studies taught me that being too honest, or thinking too deeply, could send me to the worst imaginable suffering forever – and that I absolutely *deserved* to be sent there by the God I played songs about every Sunday, following the same one-four-five progressions on keys while vocalists sang about His mercy and love enduring forever.

Doubting was for me, and I think usually is, a solitary process. Finding others who are or have gone through the same thing is difficult; losing faith still seems to be a fairly rare experience, especially among the truly devout and not merely nominally religious. And even those who have experienced losing faith don't always want to talk about their experience, since it is often difficult and carries negative social repercussions. Studies such as the American Religious Identification Survey I mentioned in my abstract, however, are showing that the experience of losing faith is becoming less rare; more and more people especially are identifying as specifically atheist or agnostic. I think, from a historical perspective, recording the thoughts and feelings of those who have renounced their faith is worthwhile.

But it should come as no surprise that my reasons for taking on this project are personal as well; I wanted to invest time into other people's stories because I believe they are worthy from a fundamentally human perspective: this event happened to this person, it changed them, and therefore it is worthy of attention. I am still trying to believe this about my own story, to accept that the process of losing faith is legitimately difficult, maybe even traumatizing, and worth someone's attention. That there is a reason I think about the past two years of doubting and questioning every day, sometimes for hours. That there is a reason that I could write just as truthful an artist's statement that would only say, "I'm just doing this to cope."

I had some vague idea of all three of my interviewees' stories before I interviewed them, enough to know it was worth my time asking to interview them. I am glad that their stories are so different, that I had the privilege of them willingly sharing such emotionally loaded memories, in one case two hours' worth of them, for me to cut down into ten minutes, to try to take what I've learned from earning my little bachelor's degree in creative writing and not do what they've been through a horrible injustice. I think there's a lot of usefulness in the ten-minute format, of getting across a lot of information quickly, of telling a story in a manageable length of time, but I feel like the whole interviews themselves are absolutely worth hearing so I have included them in this binder as well.

One of the biggest challenges I faced putting this project together was finding places to record that would give the tracks good sound quality. I think this was especially a concern for Lindsey's interview, as she talks quickly and with extreme shifts in volume; Sam and Joe speak more slowly and at consistent volumes. I could not record these interviews in a studio, as I did not have access to one and had to travel four hours to sit down with Joe.

I hope with this project I have gained a little more knowledge of what it means to tell stories, especially ones not my own, in a format that goes off the page. I hope this can serve as a resource to people who are in the process of questioning or renouncing their faith, so they know they're not alone, that what they're going through matters. I hope this helps me in whatever process it is I'm going through now, to help me understand how to keep moving forward without faith but with honesty, understanding, and appreciation of the insight gained both from my experience and listening to others' experiences.

Transcript: Lindsey's Story

LAYNE: My first interviewee was Lindsey. Lindsey grew up with a strong Catholic background – her uncle is a priest, affectionately referred to as Father Uncle, her mother held, as Lindsey said, “a very complicated Catholicism,” and her grandparents have a pew in their basement for praying. Her grandfather is so devout, in fact...

LINDS: So, he'd do these very ridiculous Catholic things like my – my aunt at one point got married and he refused to walk her down the aisle because it wasn't a Catholic wedding.

LAYNE: And Lindsey herself was raised with the whole Catholic shebang.

LINDS: I was raised with that, like I did my Sunday...Catholic...whatever, being confirmed, went through the whole thing – I have a saint name but I don't remember what it is.

LAYNE: Church involvement early in life is a factor all three persons in this program have in common, one I do not, raised as I was in a religiously neutral household with a mother of vague non-theist persuasion and a pseudo-Jehovah's Witness father. I searched out Christianity in my early adolescence, identifying as a Christian at twelve years old, claiming an undefined, simplistic breed of Protestantism and not yet attending church regularly. Lindsey says she did not actively claim Christianity, or “come to Christ” until high school while attending a friend's Presbyterian church.

LINDS: I, at one point, stood in front of the congrega – congregation and like, said like, you know, “This is when I gave my heart to Christ,” was in this moment, and it was this very – I was on this band trip, and we were in Georgia, and we were looking up at the stars and I gave my life to Christ. You know, it's this very, like – rapture, like, you know, emotional but also very intellectual experience and you know, like I, you know, I dunno it's very much like – I was never in, like, a Pentecostal tradition or anything like that, but you know someone I'm sure was shoutin' like, you know, “PRAISE THE LORD” and you know like, it's very – it's very dramatic when you come to Christ, it is, like you're being reborn, and you're coming to your – you know, this dynasty of – it's...it's huge, like the...you feel like you're starting over and like, that you're coming into your own true...self and like, I felt like I had found who I was, and it was this very...it was huge. It was huge, and now looking back on it, I'm embarrassed.

LAYNE: Like, Lindsey, I would have an intense intellectual and emotional experience I interpreted as God moving in me that would redefine who I was, or saw myself as being, though it came almost three years after claiming Christianity. I was also looking at stars, and thought that incredible sky must be a reflection of a paradise to come, where every tear would be wiped away from our eyes.

This experience, which was the start of my deeply emotional and spiritual connection to Christianity, was also strongly connected to my identity as a female. I've been called tomboyish, and a lot of times I'm brash, sarcastic, assertive – not the sort of traits associated with “feminine” women. But in the grand Christian narrative, because of my faith, ultimately, I was a princess, a beloved bride of the King who would come to save me – and this was a role I treasured, because it meant that the final verdict on me was not “flawed” or “too fiery” or “not ‘feminine’ enough” but “accepted” and “pursued” and “beautiful.” But Lindsey's gendered experience of Christianity was much different.

LINDS: Christianity for me was very masculine in a way that I don't think I realized before, but like, that was kind of my only interaction with men, for a while, in a way I'm not gonna get from here on out for the rest of my life, which in a way is kinda sad but also kinda great. Lemme get into that!

LAYNE: It began with losing a relationship and looking for guidance.

LINDS: Like I was, sort of in that middle point of high school, like my – my mom, my mom – is a, is a lesbian and she had broken up with her partner, um, who was sort of, sort of like my other mom but sort of to a lesser degree, sort of like my other stepmom, it's sort of a relationship that isn't, sort of reflected anywhere else, um, but it was sort of – kind of like an aunt, kind of like a – anyway, like, she, they had split up and I wasn't really allowed to talk to her and so it was just sort of like, this aspect of my life had just fallen out from under me, and so I was sort of...groping around trying to find adults to sort of replace that in a way that...is difficult, because you know, where you do – you know, if you're in high school, where do you run to adults other than like, teachers, who you, you know, already have, and there has to be a distance sort of required, and, professionalism – and then, you know, anyways, so I ended up um, going with my best friend to like, church. I had – I had given up my life to Christ and I didn't entirely even know what that meant in the beginning.

LAYNE: From there, Lindsey started attending her best friend's youth group and picked up devotional habits: getting up two hours before school to read the Bible, keeping a journal about what she read, and meditating on the Word. And through this group, she gained an important mentor and friend.

LINDS: My, my youth pastor became this very important figure in my life who was sort of like my dad/older brother.

LAYNE: Lindsey felt a significant connection between her youth pastor and God, strong masculine relationships that offered safety and protection in an unstable world.

LINDS: Having that like, that sort of older brother/uncle/dad figure, and then also having this you know, eternal God, this you know, 'I will never leave or abandon

you,' you know, like that's – it means something. Like especially for, like, my parents were divorced, like I didn't – you know, like I was gay and didn't know it yet, but like, you know, like, I wanted some sort of masculine figure to be important.

LAYNE: But she eventually realized she was fighting a futile battle against her sexuality, one Christianity had no room for.

LINDS: I had tried for years like, not to masturbate and not to, you know, flirt with women, and uh, [laughs], I was getting nowhere.

LAYNE: And her relationship with God could not withstand honesty with herself about her own identity.

LINDS: I had this, this moment in college and which is when I had my Christian falling away, um, where it was like, 'You know, I'm brainy, I'm unable to sort of not question things, I'm unable to you know, not be attracted to women, I can't control this, sort of, you know, whatever lust – and even if I'm not dating someone, I'm still, you know, like I'm still masturbating too much for a normal woman. I'm still, you know, too concerned with *that*, and so it was just like, 'This is who I am; shit, what do I do now?' And, it was just sort of like, you know, the Fa – the, the Father God figure that has always said, "I will never abandon or forsake you" was just sort of gone.

LAYNE: This realization led Lindsey to questions similar to ones that swam in my own doubts: wouldn't God know he'd left some people unable to reach him simply by who he'd made them to be? That he knew they'd be abandoned, the losers in a horrible coin toss of saved and unsaved? And was Lindsey one of the unlucky ones?

LINDS: You know, the dichotomy of "chosen" is that there have to be some that are spurned. Like, there just have to be and then, for like, there were like – oh my gosh, that summer when I was coming out I was just so obsessed with this idea like, 'What if I was one of the spurned?'

LAYNE: Lindsey came to see Christianity as a place in which anyone that was "other" could not be welcomed. She came out to her youth pastor, looking for help, which didn't exactly prove helpful.

LINDS: You just, you can't be...and the word isn't really "liberal," just "other." Like, you can't be "other" and fit inside of Christianity. And like, I tried, I really did, and I remember going to my youth pastor and being like, "I'm gay, what now?" and he being like, "You *can't* be gay," and I was like, "Oh, well...wuhhhh, ahhhhh! Uhhhhh!" Like you know, like, that's, this is some, you know – 'You *can't* have brown hair.' Gwaaaaah, okay.

LAYNE: And Lindsey's relationship with him also eventually dissolved.

LINDS: I realized after a while, like, "I'm just not gonna make time for you, because I am sick of having this conversation of like, you know, like, 'Weeeeelll, what else are we gonna talk about other than the fact that I'm not Christian anymore?' You know, 'cause like, had I run into you we would have talked about like, "What's Jesus doing in your life?" And if you're unable to ask that same question, which is just, "What are you doing in your life?" like, without framing it around Jesus, like, I, we can't – you know like, we're not gonna talk about it. Like, you know, what else, *what else* do you talk to people you haven't seen for a while other than, "What are you doing in your life?"

LAYNE: A loss which she knows was not just hard for her.

LINDS: My youth pastor also lost, you know, like, what, what was I, some sort of daughter, younger sister figure? Like, you know, that's an important relationship too and like, he would've lost that, and I'm sure that that, you know, was a significant loss and I'm sure that he still prays for me and that's his way of coping with it.

LAYNE: And although Lindsey says the experience of living as a Christian for a time did ultimately improve her as a human being...

LINDS: I did go through it, and, you know, it gave me some identity problems but like, I also had to walk – work through them, you know, it's sort of – you know, it strengthened me, it really did.

LAYNE: ...my asking her about whether Christians, in a sad, patronizing way, expect her to return to the fold garnered this not as positive reaction.

LINDS: [frustrated yell] I'm still frustrated, I'm still frustrated! Like, I am not some child throwing a temper tantrum where I'm gonna come right back to Mommy and Daddy. Just Daddy in this case, but you know, [laughs].

LAYNE: I asked all three of my interviewees to give a statement as to why they don't call themselves Christians any longer, a sort of declaration of non-faith. Here is Lindsey's:

LINDS: I am uncomfortable calling myself a Christian anymore because...I feel like I was part – I was, I was too "other," and I, I don't know – I didn't fit the mold for being the hero in this very dramatic, you know archetypal, over-arching plot. Like I just, I didn't fit it, and, you know like, it's sort of this like, myth story, like and if you're unable to be the hero you don't have a place in it.

LAYNE: The narrative mindset Lindsey gave reflects the emotions I felt coming out of Christianity; it hurt deeply to lose my ingrained identity as a citizen of Heaven, beloved of God. But, as Lindsey said,

LINDS: You go on. You, you really do. Like, it's traumatic, and it sucks, and I would not suggest it -

LAYNE: But, you do go on.

Transcript: Sam's Story

LAYNE: Like Lindsey, my next interviewee tried hard to stay strong in the faith, but found Christianity did not allow him to live life as his honest self – and also, that the Christian god seemed anything but loving. This is Sam. Sam's family wasn't actively involved in church until he was around ten years old. He and his parents moved from Wisconsin to Indiana to be closer to family, where they started going to church. Sam's father was involved with the youth group and became an elder in the church, and Sam was put in a confirmation class.

SAM: So yeah, when I was a kid it was important to my parents but we didn't really do much at home with it; there was never like, Bible readings with my parents, or – we didn't pray before meals, I don't know, never – I don't know why we didn't do that stuff but we just didn't do it very often.

LAYNE: He isn't quite sure how he felt at the time...

SAM: I mean, I was just kinda doin' it.

LAYNE: ...but knows his involvement with Christianity has never been entirely stable.

SAM: So I – I've never actually, I guess, felt that secure of an attachment to the whole thing.

LAYNE: Like with many teenage Christians, there were conflicts for Sam between beliefs and hormones – and, like Lindsey, Sam wondered if there was really anything wrong with fulfilling his sexual wants, though he did not have to deal with a so-called "sinful" sexuality. He knew what he was told he should feel guilty for, but wasn't sure if what he was told was true.

SAM: Like one time, I was sneakin' over to my girlfriend's house when my parents didn't know about it, when I was in like eighth grade, and I got caught. And then, I remember sitting at the table and my parents being mad at me, and I remember distinct feelings of like, 'I should feel guilty about this,' but wondering if I really did, um, and maybe – you know, like, 'Do I really feel bad about this or just think I should?' And – that's kind of been a common theme in my life. So I guess...I don't know, the main associations, emotional associations I have – and maybe this is just because of my perspective now, but – are guilty feelings, like I, you know, like every other young man I went through pornography and girls and all that stuff and had all these mixed feelings about, you know, 'This isn't what they say I should be doing at church,' and so I feel bad sometimes but then just pissed off other times, like, 'Who are they to tell me what I should be doing?;

LAYNE: But alongside the ambivalence and negative feelings, Sam found emotional security in the youth group and gained leadership positions.

SAM: I went to a leadership training with my previous church at the end of high school, and we went to New Hampshire for like a week and did all kinds of leadership training stuff. Everybody was always telling me what a great leader I was, and every time I – sometimes the youth worship band would lead worship at church, at, you know, at the bigger service, and so then everybody would tell me how awesome I was there, and that I was a really great leader and I – you know, I dunno. So yeah, I got built up a lot in that sense of people saying – thinking that I was going to be a great leader or whatever in the church, yeah.

LAYNE: Sam's doubts started in college at an unusual place: the gym.

SAM: I got real into like, exercising. Really liked exercising, thought it was awesome, did it a lot. And uh, if you're not familiar with the Christian world, uh, whenever you like something a lot it's probably an idol, so you have to start worrying about if it's an idol or not [laughs], and um – so anyways, I worried about if I was idolizing exercise.

LAYNE: Sam, the analytical sort, usually was able to answer any questions he had to his satisfaction – at least, well enough to eventually forget the question. But this issue pestered him, and grew.

SAM: I know this sounds like a little thing, but I got really, really anxious about it, um...and I couldn't decide, and I quit exercising for a period of like, two or three weeks, but just felt worse and so went back to it, and then like – for the longest time like, I just got fixated on it: any time I would read the Bible, any time I would go to a church service, I would just be thinking of ways in which this applied to my particular problem.

LAYNE: Sam's anxieties didn't stop at exercise, either – they spread, made him wonder if the rest of his life was similarly not dedicated enough to God to please Him.

SAM: 'Well, what am I – what am I doing here at college? Why am I at a university learning to get this degree? Shouldn't I be doing something important for God? Shouldn't I be, you know, living in the slums or going to Africa and converting everyone?' or something, you know? Um, so, and then I, you know, got worried about things like entertainment, like you know, 'Oh, even PG-13 movies, they swear a lot and there's a lot of – sometimes there's nudity, and you know is that bad?' and –

LAYNE: And so, for a short time Sam became very strict with himself about – well, virtually everything. But this did nothing to assure him that he was right with God – in fact, anything but.

SAM: And so that eventually led up to this um, about two weeks of extreme depression, like just, um – like three or four nights in a row, I...just cried for hours, um, thinking that I was going to Hell. I couldn't get it out of my head that I was gonna go to Hell.

LAYNE: Sam's fears didn't go away after those agonizing weeks. For a year he experienced moderately severe depression as a result of his anxieties, often not eating or being able to sleep, and feeling tired as a result.

SAM: And they say exercise is one of the best things for depression, so – but that was worsening my anxiety and hence my depression.

LAYNE: His doubt in Christianity started here, in response to a God that seemed to oppose his living a fulfilling life.

SAM: And I know this is a long story, but this is the process, this is what happened that made me...that made me first start to question, because I started to think, 'Well who is this God that doesn't want me to live the life I want to live?' And the first time I phrased it in such words like that I felt like I was arrogant or selfish or like, 'I'm not supposed to say those type of things to God,' or whatever, you know, but the more I thought about it the more it made sense.

LAYNE: He did what he could to protect his mind from the anxieties Christianity caused. But Christian counselors were unwilling to step outside theological boxes, and his own research proved exhausting.

SAM: I would um, sit on the internet and read articles about things that I was worried about written by Christian scholars, you know or whatever, like, 'Is this okay? Is that okay?' or you know, 'What should you be doing with your life?' and all those things. And I would read for, you know, debilitating amounts, you know, eight hours a day, you know, for a week. Um, and I would be tired and irritable, I couldn't focus on any of my relationships, I couldn't focus on my wife. She was getting depressed because I couldn't even maintain a relationship.

LAYNE: And, like I was during most of my doubting, Sam was still leading small groups and playing for his campus church's worship band.

SAM: It was...pretty awful. You know, I would go to lead this group and feel...just bad. Um, not bad like I felt guilty, just – just weighed down, you know, it's just so much.

LAYNE: The morning of the last time Sam ever played in the worship band was also one of the last straws in the process of his losing his Christianity.

SAM: On Sundays before the service we would all sit around and talk about our lives, and then pray, and – me and another guy really opened up and I was crying

even a little bit talking about like, 'I just don't feel like God is real. You know, it just doesn't occur to me like it does to some of the other people in the church.' And um, a woman gave a like, comforting talk, at first, you know like, 'Wow, I really understand that, and that's okay,' and blah blah blah, and then she said, 'But, um, you know, I kinda wanna say as a – – she calls herself a prophet, not in the future-telling sense but in the "You speak God's truth!" you know, which – anyways, so she told us, you know, "I kinda wanna tell you guys though, you know, you gotta keep on keepin' on you know. You gotta press on sometimes when it doesn't feel right, you know, you gotta – you've gotta um, continue doing the things you know are right, you know, keep walking with the Lord even when you can't feel Him and you know, you gotta just keep goin' and eventually it'll get better,' and blah blah blah, you know, and all these things. And at first – I mean, I just, I just felt offended. I was like, 'Fuck you.' You know, like, I don't – "Thanks. That really helped.' Um, and then second of all, I felt like – 'Well that sounds a lot like brainwashing.'

LAYNE: And he now no longer calls himself a Christian for this reason:

SAM: I've never done anything or prayed about anything and seen it happen that I couldn't have just made happen on my own.

LAYNE: And this one:

SAM: Simplest explanation is that people's beliefs have evolved over time to this monotheistic god. And I don't see any compelling reason to step outside of that simplistic explanation.

LAYNE: And this one, an idea that also contributed to my losing faith:

SAM: To me, if God's up there dividing people into goods and bads and some people are going to Hell forever, I don't want anything to do with him anyways.

LAYNE: Sam said leaving Christianity brought relief and contentment.

SAM: A lot of it was kind of joy, you know, um, looking at the world and feeling like, 'This is my home and that's okay.'

LAYNE: And some excitement, but was also overwhelming, a little scary, and somewhat isolating. I was enormously relieved but terrified when I realized I was no longer a Christian: what came next? How did I tell the Christians in my life? And who was I now that this once-vital part of my identity was dead? There is no music or service or blessing or baptism for this transformation. Christianity is a congregation; leaving it is a lonely venture.

SAM: So yeah, a lot of it's been figuring out, 'Well what do I want from life?' and 'What do I think is right and wrong in life?' You know, I mean – and that's been hard, I don't know. It's always been defined. So, [laughs,] um, yeah. I don't know.

So in some ways that's kind of exciting, it's kind of cool, like, 'Oh, I can explore.' But in other ways, I bump into my relatives and my loved ones still being Christians and I don't have another group, you know, I don't have another group that wants to do this with me. I don't have another group that wants to go these places with me.

Transcript: Joe's Story

LAYNE: My last interviewee was Joe. Like Sam, Joe was an active leader in his church, but ultimately found following the Christian God unacceptable. He didn't have a personally significant encounter with religion until college, when he was invited to a "house church," a Bible study of about 20 people, mostly college students. There, he encountered something he'd never seen before:

JOE: A significant number of people all talking seriously about their lives. And uh, first of all I had never really done that, at all, and then to see twenty or more people talking about something together – it was very shocking, and I became very anxious, because [laughs] that would mean if I wanted to be part of the group I had to start sharing things about *myself*. And I had never done that to anyone. Ever.

LAYNE: Joe was surprisingly willing to open up, but took a while to admit that he wasn't religious. The house church meant a lot to him, because not only did people genuinely care about him, but was also always willing to offer constructive, practical assistance to help him get through any struggles he had.

JOE: Which was very meaningful to me, um, as I said, because I had never experienced that before.

LAYNE: Joe did eventually become a Christian, finally a real member of the church group. At this point, he didn't need to be convinced; just asked.

JOE: I just kind of did it because someone brought it up and asked me if I wanted to do that, and I was like, "Okay." It was actually very...foolish of me, I think, but it did result in me being like, officially part of the group now.

LAYNE: The acceptance he found in church would be enough for him at the time...

JOE: Uh, I – I was baptized in a freezing cold lake the next morning, and then I announced to everyone at the church that I had done so. And, you know, everyone applauded and I felt really good about myself. Um, and as I said, it made me confident because it seemed like I did something meaningful.

LAYNE: ...which, starting out, was about all the reason he had.

JOE: I...had never read the Bible before. Which was, you know, the source book of everything I just accepted – had never read it [laughs] – so I started reading that [laughs], so [laughs], so I could get used to what I'd just swallowed [laughs]. Um, [laughs], and more so than that, just, I mean – it's a big book with a lot of words so I wasn't that patient.

LAYNE: But he eventually became engrossed in the Bible, comparing the ideas and actions of the group he was a part of to the Scriptures.

JOE: I started reading the Bible, *religiously* – heh heh. And, I started going to a number of Bible studies per week; I was attending at least two for a couple years a week, sometimes more. So really the – the goal was for me to understand, if I could, understand everything that I should be doing in order to be a good person.

LAYNE: Within a year of his conversion and baptism, Joe was approached about serving in leadership positions, including leading small groups and playing guitar in the worship band.

JOE: There were two reasons why I was excited about that: one, is that I was still uh, engrossed in what people thought about me, and if I was in a position of leadership then I would be looked up to, and I would be someone that people could come to with questions and I could be like, you know – I could try to be this wise figure to them, and help them with their – their troubles. That was selfish, but I also – it was, it was at war with point number two, which was that I genuinely did care about people and wanted to help them.

LAYNE: The responsibilities that came with his leadership roles distracted Joe from any thought as to why he should be a Christian in the first place for nearly two years.

JOE: There was no time or room for me to really question the foundation, at all, it was just – ‘Now, we’re gonna go from zero to sixty in five seconds, and then maintain sixty for a very long time.’

LAYNE: But during his time in church, Joe had three experiences that shaped his future doubt. Joe found that the New Testament offered a tangible reassurance of faith; the Holy Spirit, one member of the three-part Trinitarian God of Christianity, is said to manifest in believers through various gifts, among them, dream interpretation, prophecy, and praying in tongues.

JOE: If I – if I have a way to know that the Holy Spirit is in me, and exists at all, and is in other people, and I seem to know people who have had said experiences, I want to have those experiences too.

LAYNE: So he went to a couple different prayer sessions with the aim of praying in tongues.

JOE: Several people prayed over me, and sometimes a friend of mine, uh, to be as they said, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” um, which meant then, once I was filled with the Holy Spirit, I should be able to speak in tongues. That’s just what happens if you are filled with the Holy Spirit. It follows that you can, and *should* even, speak in tongues. It was very clear the way they outlined that to me. And, they prayed to me, some of whom were speaking in tongues while praying to me, and I became very

nervous because then they asked me, "Go ahead, pray now, and you can pray in tongues if you're filled." And I didn't know what to do; I sort of tried to pray in tongues. They just said, "Open your mouth and start trying to like, move your mouth, and the Spirit will take over." And nothing happened.

LAYNE: After a year-and-a-half, Joe tried to receive the Spirit again with a group of Christian strangers. God didn't show up. He tried every day on his own for the next two weeks, multiple times a day, and nothing. His second experience was Leadership Training, a five-day program in the Colorado mountains during which the small group of participants practiced isolation, silence, and three days of fasting in the hopes of meeting with God.

JOE: Um, on the third day of fasting I was so weak, and I was really, really trying to make something happen, really trying to pray to God. I didn't even know what to pray for, just to ask Him to come here and talk to me about something, and just – say hi. [laughs] That simple. And nothing happened.

LAYNE: The third experience happened on a mission trip to Jerusalem, during which Joe and the rest of the travelers played music in the street and talked to people about Jesus. They also visited the Western or Wailing Wall of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, a very holy site for adherents of Judaism.

JOE: I went there with a group of people and we all tried to treat it very seriously, and everyone but me seemed to have nothing but amazing things to say. Like I went up to the wall and I touched it and I prayed, and it just sort of felt like I was forcing myself to do something. It was like, "Dear God. Well – I'm at this wall. I'm not really sure if walls matter that much to you. But I'm here. See ya."

LAYNE: Joe stayed involved with church his last year of college, even though he had amassed a lot of disillusionment about Christianity.

JOE: It was selfish, I guess, that, that last leg of college and still being part of the church, it was selfish for me because I still wanted to be liked by people. It was kind of like that, that last period of my life where it really mattered to me what others thought of me.

LAYNE: But the doubt fostered by these experiences, and thinking about Christianity and religion in general, led Joe to leave church shortly after college. Around this time he stopped identifying as a Christian; about six months later, he became an atheist.

JOE: Faith, in and of itself, is bad. Because faith in and of itself relies on denial of information gathering. It has nothing to do with that; it has everything to do with just telling yourself that something is there. It doesn't matter how you get to that point, at all; all that matters is that you say, "This is there." So one moment you could say, "There is nothing in outer space." The next moment you can say, "Well,

there is a giant Cadillac that is five hundred million miles long that is just flying through space, and it shoots things with lasers sometimes.” And all you have to do is say, “Okay, I believe that,” and then it becomes true. That’s what faith is. It has nothing to do with looking through a telescope and finding a black Cadillac floating through space, shooting things occasionally with lasers.

LAYNE: The God he once worshipped he now sees as downright evil...

JOE: And if – if it wasn’t enough for Him to send people for eternity to a place of suffering, he also at times killed people outright for doing one bad thing, or struck them with plagues, or you know, caused them to have leprosy, or – just caused human suffering in this lifetime. [laughs] It’s too much for me to even fathom how – how people don’t just look at that and say, “Wow, I – that’s terrible. God is a bad thing. God is way worse than any human being. God is worse than Hitler.”

LAYNE: But has hope for how the world can be changed through human reason.

JOE: I can have an ideal to end world hunger – and, you know, it’s not gonna happen – but if you examine such a thing with more practical means instead of just praying to God to end world suffering, it seems possible now. Though still such a big problem to solve that it probably won’t happen. But it makes things possible – in fact, denouncing there being a God gives me more hope that world suffering will end.

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Lynsey P. Law
Print Name

[Signature]
Signature

4404 Douglas Dr.
Address
West Lafayette, IN

5.30.2012
Date

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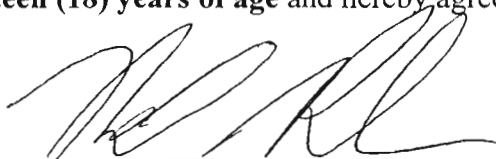


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Rick Barker
Print Name

Address


Signature

6/4/11
Date

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Joe McHugh
Print Name


Signature

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3/12/11
Date