

“Seasoned with cussing and hard questions.
An engaging, inspiring treat.”

Eric Wilson, *NY Times* bestselling author of *Fireproof* and *Samson*



An Unconventional
Memoir

Josh Roggie

P R A I S E F O R

Shame

“If you are tired of books full of pat answers, easy solutions, and sanitized language, look no further than *Shame*. Josh Roggie tosses aside all expectations of a Christian memoir and gives an honest, funny, and fresh take on how a Christian childhood informs one’s life as an adult. In deconstructing the shallow religion of his youth, he finds a much deeper belief based in mystery and wonder. Do I agree with everything he says here? No. And that’s a good thing. There is room for differences in Roggie’s account, a quick-reading book that could as aptly be called *Grace*. It’s a book seasoned with cussing and hard questions. An engaging, inspiring treat.”

Eric Wilson

NY Times bestselling author of *Fireproof* and *Samson*

“Roggie’s work is a hopeful, transparent, and timely read as our nation seeks to call out the unhealthy ways of toxic masculinity. Prepare to learn much from his vulnerability and be drawn into the loving embrace of a God who only squeezes us in closer in times of shame.”

Meggie Lee Calvin

Bestselling author of *I Am My Own Sanctuary*

“What does it mean to grow up a Christian? Does faith change as we get older? If it does change, is that good or bad? Josh Roggie writes a very personal story that is both funny and heart-breaking as he explores these questions. His story stays true to a Christian’s experience. It reflects what it’s like to go from being told about God and what to believe, to making your faith your own.”

Toby Morrell

Host of the “Bad Christian” podcast

“I found myself reliving so much of my past in this book by Josh. He has painted a beautiful picture here of what shame and guilt is at its worst, but more importantly how we can be freed from the bonds of it. It reminds me it’s fine to fail at new things so long as I give myself permission to try new things. I loved every minute of this—and the soundtrack alone is worth the price of entry.”

Seth Price

Host of the “Can I Say This in Church?” podcast

“Shame is a prison that keeps us hiding in plain sight from the very people around us who can help love us into freedom. In this beautifully-messy memoir, Josh Roggie shares his powerful true story of finding himself and letting his true voice be heard—curse words and all. As you read this heartbreaking and hopeful book, allow the courage and vulnerability poured out on these pages to infect your heart and nudge you out of the shadows and into the light of day.”

Jason Elam

Host of the “Messy Spirituality” podcast

“Josh’s book, *Shame*, is great! It’s both vulnerable and funny, and should prevent any honest person of faith from being able to put it down. I hope every single Christian who has lived with guilt and shame reads this book. I believe it will go a long way toward helping them heal.”

Matthew Distefano

Bestselling author of *Devoted As F*ck*

“*Shame* covers an abundance of topics from swearing to sex, body image to bullying, always keeping the focus on how shame can drive us away from others and from God rather than drawing us closer. Roggie doesn’t hold back in talking about his own experiences and how that has shaped and molded him and his faith. It’s an honest and sincere presentation of Josh’s life that he invites the reader into—to listen, to learn, and to just simply share. And there’s power in that kind of story, I think.”

Josh Olds

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The following memoir reflects the author's present recollections of experiences over time. Some names and characteristics may have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated.

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An Unconventional
Memoir

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Foreword

When I was growing up in the church, my pastor would take an extremely risky move by inviting members to “testify” to what God had done. Don’t get me wrong, now that I am a pastor myself I find incredible value in shared stories and meeting each other as a community in our successes and failures. The problem and risk was found in those who often took that moment as an opportunity to awkwardly over-share their struggle of the week that would be better worked out in conversation with a friend rather than front and center during a Sunday morning service. Shortly thereafter, the discomfort would increase as a braggart seized the mic next and proceeded to wax poetic on how pious they were that week; or even better, share their opinion on the hot political issue of the day. It was brutal.

But, and this is a big “but” (ha!): On occasion, a pure testimony would occur, a moment where someone was able to communicate what God had done in their life with no hint of soapboxing. And it all seemed worth it. The testimony would be a perfect blend of vulnerability, humility, and desire for connection mixed well into a brief (key word) story informing the congregation on the journey their brother or sister in Christ had been on, and relayed how the community could better pray for

or celebrate them. Those moments were beautiful; beautiful in the transcendent, aesthetic sense when Christ is encountered and the church as a true community is crystallized and validated, if only for a moment.

What Josh has done with this memoir/testimony/freestyle on his life and God falls into the category of pure testimony. He invites the reader to trek with him through a lighter conversation on swearing, the confusing world of theology while maturing into adulthood, and the heavy journey he and his wife have lived through infertility. Gracefully straddling the fence between genuine witness and over-sharing, the comedy and insights make every page, every story worth your time.

As a pastor, I accept the challenge put forth by William Willimon from his book, *Pastor*, to be a voracious reader so as to sharpen my own work as a wordsmith and communicator. This pulls me into a wide range of genres, including but not limited to theology, philosophy, or literature. The one genre that I perhaps appreciate most is the biography. I love a good biography, whether it be Chernow's *Grant*, McCullough's *Mornings on Horseback*, or Eberhard Bethge's magnificent tome on Bonhoeffer. The best biographies reveal a truth lost in the drudgery of day to day life—they shed light on how our lives tell a story.

Not everyone is going to live a life befitting a 1,000-page book set to be a *NY Times* bestseller decades later, but we can all tell a story like Josh's: a story that is raw and reflective and peace-seeking through the chaos of life and searching for beauty in the midst of tragedy, and loving better those that we care for. This book invites us to do just that, and for that reason it is well worth the read.

Josh Roggie

I have known Josh for coming on 20 years. I lived some of these stories with him and yet was surprised at how much about him I did not already know. I learned how I might better share my own story with others while reading this. I appreciate the honesty, humor, and insights offered throughout this book. Josh is the kind of member I would love to have at my church. The church is strengthened by shared stories because it is just that: a collection of shared stories.

The collection may include stories of creation, stories of redemption, or stories of a failed white rapper turned philosopher/author as we have here. It all belongs. Josh is quick to point out his lack of qualifications as a theologian, philosopher, etcetera; but where he *is* qualified is in the most important area: authenticity. This is his story, and in a move that is equal parts brave and vulnerable, he has shared it so that it may be our story as well.

I am honored to have been asked to write the introduction for this book, and I hope it will not be the last time that Josh finds himself slumming for a Foreword writer such as myself.

Here is to you, Reader, and your journey with Josh. What story does your life tell?

Rev. Matt Codd

Lead Pastor, *New Hope Community Church of the Nazarene*

Prologue

“God’s Gonna Cut You Down” by Johnny Cash

It was a Friday night in 2007. I couldn’t tell you which Friday night, because I spent many of them the exact same way.

I had a job delivering hoagies and cheesesteaks during the lunch rush, which meant I didn’t have to be to work until 11 a.m. and was off by 2:30 p.m. I would spend a relaxing afternoon playing Xbox or maybe taking a quick nap. My friends had various jobs, too, and were also in college classes (a move I had declined to make up to this point). Sometime around 7 p.m. or so, we would all meet up at Lazerquest. If the name doesn’t give it away, you should know that this place was awesome. There was an arcade out front complete with typical games like Time Crisis, Cruisin’ the World, and always something with zombies.

But the real action was the laser tag. They had a two-story arena with dual towers and mirrors to boot, to add an extra layer to the mayhem. Sure, sometimes there were birthday parties for 4th graders, but my nineteen-year-old friends and I had a blast.

We took it very seriously and would many times be dripping with sweat by the end of the match.

The night would be far from over, though. Next, we would all pile into our cars and drive across town to a specific Village Inn that we really loved. It didn't matter that there was another Village Inn literally right next door to Lazerquest. We had *our* Village Inn. There was this awesome manager named JB that would seat us where we requested. The table had a bronze plate screwed on it, labelling it "Booth 32", and we demanded that it be reserved for us every Friday night.

It's Village Inn. They don't do reservations. But the booth was always open and we rarely ever had to sit elsewhere, so you tell me. We ran the show there. We would do silly things like send "complimentary" pitchers of water to other tables if there were pretty girls sitting there. The waitress would point over to our table to let the prospective ladies know who would do such a kindness. We would sheepishly smile and turn appropriately red as we did know it was silly. Despite the cleverness on display, I can report a big fat zero in regard to the odds of getting phone numbers in return. So, single guys, don't bother. Ladies, you could probably get away with it. Guys are desperate even when they try to play cool.

We would also bring poker chips and cards and play Texas Hold 'em for a few hours. JB would play a hand with us here and there and would bring a pitcher of soda out to us when he would lose that hand. It suddenly occurs to me that we likely would have had more success with the pitcher of a refreshing beverage shtick had we sent over some fine Coca-Cola instead of water.

But the greatest part of the night was when I would order dessert. If it was a new waitress, she would always look at me

with equal parts skepticism and disgust, with a hint of humor sprinkled in, and something I would like to think of as jealousy for my chutzpah. Which is ironically about the same amount of items in my custom dessert platter. Even better, the veteran waitresses knew it was coming because I was a regular. I called it the “Triple Decker”. I would explain it to the waiter as something like this: “You start out with a nice slice of the NY style cheesecake as the base. Yes, you heard me, the base. Then I need a cut of the Triple Berry, ‘cause it’s the best pie Village Inn offers. Heat it up and put it directly on the cheesecake slice. Finally, let’s get that a la mode, ‘cause pie without cream is un-American.”

If it sounds over the top, you’re not wrong. But I kid you not, that was literally one of the things I talked about most at that stage in my life. I was genuinely excited about it and felt that I had created something. It became the story I told friends when they were back in town for Fall break from exotic places like Texas and Idaho. I went from AP English classes and varsity sports and graduating high school with a 3.8 GPA to opting out of college and living for these “wild” Friday nights.

Life was dull, to say the least. And we actually did this routinely, almost every single Friday night, for months on end. Teachers and adults and youth pastors tell you lots of things when you are a senior in high school. The world is your oyster and all that bullshit. And then, one night, you come to the conclusion that your greatest post-high school accomplishment is a special order of heart disease with a side of diabetes.

Add in that I had been raised a Christian and didn’t really feel a single thing about faith, except the same dullness. I didn’t bother to put much thought into my faith. The Christian faith was the way I was raised and was the way I would live, there was

no question about it. Go to church, don't swear or drink, fall in love with girls (and only girls) as long as you don't touch them, don't touch yourself either, etc.

I had a plethora of sins that I was struggling with, and every day seemed like another lost battle in a never-ending war. I'll delve into these things some more, but at the top of the list was that classic example of lust and the isolation that often accompanies it. I thought I was all alone. Then, a revelation came into my life. It started with MySpace. Don't act like you're so young that you don't know what MySpace is, you're not kidding anyone. However, if you truly are too young to remember, it was *the* thing before Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or whatever the kids are using these days. The days of MySpace are long gone, but it was like having your own website, complete with your song of the week and custom background.

I had a friend and frequent Friday-night-hang buddy named Aaron. One night, I got a notification that he had written a new entry on his MySpace. I don't remember what the title was, probably something generic about a Bible verse he had recently read. Sounded kinda cheesy to be honest, but he was a friend and a good writer, so I took a chance to spend my next five minutes reading it. He started his post out with a reference to James 5:16 from the Bible:

“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”

My friend then went on to briefly but unambiguously describe his addiction to porn and his desire to stop looking at it. And he asked for prayer and accountability from anyone who would take the time to read his confession. He was writing from

the computer in his parents' basement where he lived, but he didn't want to be alone any more.

Let's be honest, that's kind of an awkward thing to talk about, particularly in the Christian world. You aren't supposed to look at porn, and if you do, you damn well better not talk about it. That's a good way to get kicked out of the twenty-somethings group or be asked to step down from your Sunday School teaching role. It doesn't matter what sins everyone else is struggling with behind closed doors, yours being known means that you are out.

Fortunately, my thoughts weren't quite that self-righteous from the get go. I didn't turn into Bible Man and tell him he was going to hell if he didn't stop this disgusting habit. However, my response was its own absurd degree of shallow. I could have thought about how I wasn't alone and somebody else, a good friend in fact, had struggles similar to my own. No, my thoughts were more along the lines of: "How the heck are you going to get a date now? Seriously, there is no way in hell a girl is going to date you after you just shared what your mind is like. They are going to think it is disgusting and so are you."

How many different ways was I being stupid and immature? It's clear that I didn't have many thoughts of ambition and goals outside of finding a girlfriend—that's never a good place to find yourself. And I thought it was likely more effective to pretend you are perfect and don't have any major problems rather than reach out for help on something so personal. I was ignorant.

Aaron's life story has gone quite well from there. I don't remember the exact time frame, but a couple years after this he

started dating an awesome woman named Brittany. They started doing these great ministry activities together to grow and help others. I was even best man at their wedding and delivered a short little speech and everything. Since then, they have become frequent foster parents and board game aficionados. And they seem truly happy.

So, there was something to his idea. Clearly, a lot happened from his confession all the way to marriage, but I had to believe that bringing his struggles to the light had an effect. I would guess that it was still difficult, but something changed, too. It wasn't just him against the world in a dark basement. Porn was no longer a secret and he was no longer isolated.

Which brings something to my attention even as I write this. Why was it news to me that Aaron was dealing with this when I read that post? We were pretty good friends. Around this time, I would have considered him one of my best friends. We went so far as to buy a townhouse together when it was time for us to each move out of our parents' houses. I was the best man at his wedding, for God sakes! In my best man research, I found that one great potential speech would be to reference speaking the same length that the groom could last in love making. At which point, I would promptly end the speech with a mic drop. I *should* have done that instead of the nervous, incoherent mumblings I had improvised. To be fair, his parents likely appreciated reality more than the joke option, but it was still not my best work. If ever I get a chance to toast at his 20-year anniversary, I will be better prepared.

Despite having a relationship where I would eventually consider making a sex stamina joke at his wedding, I still didn't ever have the courage to talk with him about this addiction. We had deep conversations about God and philosophy and if pacifism is really a calling of Jesus. We would engage in heated debates about the rules of time travel and whether or not the Loch Ness monster could possibly exist (I'm not sure I'm a Nessie believer, but I refuse to accept that it is not even possible. And my logic is right.).

But we would never discuss anything personal such as the things we were truly struggling with. And certainly, never porn addiction. It's really not that hard of a puzzle to piece together. Whether it is explicitly stated or not, church people are taught not to share their darkest secrets. Premarital sex, extramarital affairs, lying, cheating, stealing, gluttony, drug addiction: there are some ugly, messy parts of our lives. Christians are supposed to be the saved ones who don't do those things anymore.

And yet, the Bible is pretty clear that everyone sins and falls short. Furthermore, bringing Jesus into your life doesn't make sin magically stop. Life change is supposed to happen with Jesus, but there are still shitty parts of our past and present and even our future. These are things that we feel shame about. It is an affront to God... right?

Shame is a weird thing. It's this feeling where we feel sorry about the things that we have done. And yet, it's not a constructive sorrow that we feel. Quite the opposite. It's usually more debilitating or scarring or identity-robbing. I will always be "a failure, an adulterer, filthy mouthed, a faithless and scrawny little kid with no self-confidence." I have been all of those things at one point or another. I don't want to be controlled by them anymore.

I had this idea to write a book about myself. I've got some funny stories, and some messy ones; a lot of the stories are both. As I started, I realized that many of these experiences had made me feel less than I am, distressed by embarrassment and guilt and yes, shame. But years after reading Aaron's blog post, I have been inspired to follow his example. I am no longer going to carry these burdens alone and I hope that modeling this will push you to do the same.

You'll notice that there are a lot of stories in here about growing up in a conservative Christian household and coming through the fray still a Christian. That's a part of who I am, but I promise I will not try to convince you to believe what I believe. I have no interest in that. I only aim to share who I am. That being said, you will likely get to know me more than you had ever planned. Thank you for taking the time to read the thoughts and events that left me at my lowest and would ultimately guide me through the stages of life that made me into who I am today.

All the Dirty Words

“Scissors” by Emery

My parents were raised Mennonite. If you're not familiar with that term, many people like to assume it's similar to Amish. Turns out that the Amish were founded by Jakob Ammann in 1693 after he tried and failed to reform the Mennonite church of that day. So apparently the comparison holds some water. However, Mennonites remain their own distinct denomination with a wide scope of worship and doctrines across the globe.

Where I was raised in upstate New York, they were definitely very conservative, a culture somewhat to itself though not isolated to the culture around them, and not really into the frivolous things of life. Their doctrine included pacifism, baptism, communion, and specific gender roles in which women were expected to cover their heads. To this day, many of my relatives continue to live by these guidelines. I can't say I know all the ins

and out of their doctrine, but their stance on swearing is pretty easy to assume with no risk of making an ass out of you or me. I was raised in this for the first few years of my life.

I vaguely remember the first time I would use a vile, dirty word. I suspect my mom remembers it in no uncertain terms. When I was about five years old, I would ride the bus home. My school was a private Mennonite school that used the bus system from a local public school. Yeah, I rode the bus with all those public school hooligans. I saw and overheard a lot of things. Things like girls with low-cut shirts and filthy mouths and guys describing in more vivid language who they wanted to bone. Things I was curious about and likely to echo when I got home, apparently.

When I was five years old, I came home one day after school and asked my mom, “What does fuck mean?” As far as I can tell, I was legitimately curious. Maybe I had an inkling that this might be a bad word and I could “get away with it” by acting inquisitive. I was that type of kid, so it is definitely possible that I was trying to exploit a loophole to rock the boat. Whatever the case, I legitimately didn’t know what it meant, so that part of the equation is accurate. But there’s only one way to find out.

To say my mom was upset is a bit of an understatement. Her oldest little angel said THAT word. My mom wasn’t one for corporal punishment, but there was no way she was going to let me walk away unscathed, either.

So no beatdown with a belt, just a good ol’ fashioned taste test of an exquisite bar of soap. Yep, she washed my dirty mouth out with soap. That was something that was done back then when you said something inappropriate. Have you ever tasted soap? Not got it in your mouth a little in the shower. I’m talking

tasted it because a bar of Ivory soap was sitting on your tongue like a Jolly Rancher.

It's fucking gross. I don't remember the flavor. All flavors of soap are gross. But I can forgive my mom for this if she forgives me for saying fuck again.

That would not be my only run in over foul language with “the law” that my parents yielded. When I was in middle school, I played soccer. At this point, I was going to the public school with those very same hooligans I mentioned from the school bus. They were the ones that taught me fun words that changed my diet to soap. Clearly, I wouldn't have ever heard these words otherwise; in all likelihood, my virgin ears would still be untainted to this day. We didn't watch many movies or television so I think my parents may actually have believed this way. But now I wasn't only attending a public school, I was playing sports.

I had never played soccer before, but it seemed like a really fun thing to do. This was the first time boys soccer was introduced at our school. It was exciting to be a part of something new with my friends, even if I had no experience or knowledge of technique. I was a scrawny, short kid whose mom wouldn't let him sign up for tackle football. Plus, I was really fast. Seemed like soccer would be my ticket to a better social standing.

My best friends went to another school nearby and they played football, but I was playing soccer. My mom wouldn't let me play football, because she was afraid I would get hurt. I would later talk her into letting me play in high school. The first day of tackling drills, I got hit squarely on the chin and with the

help of a mirror could see sinews of my skin desperately trying to hold my face together. I only needed six stitches, but I guess there was some validity to her concerns. But in middle school, soccer was the only option I was allowed to entertain during the fall season.

This sounds like I regret soccer, like I hated it so much that I must have cursed out my coach or had a huge blow up with my parents. Wrong. Soccer is awesome. I loved every minute of it. It was so much fun. If you've never played it, then don't knock it. It's not for everyone, but it was one of the most redeeming parts of my middle school experience.

While on the team, I remember a conversation I had at my church with one of those football-playing best friends, Matt. My family had since left the Mennonite church and started attending a Nazarene church. If Mennonite is one step above Amish, then this church we were going to was one step above Mennonite on the conservative scale.

One time, we did a youth-led service for Sunday morning service and the 60 congregants who regularly attended. My friends and I picked out a song by 38th Parallel called "Higher Ground." They were this incredible Christian band with back and forth rap/rock vocals akin to Linkin Park. It's a travesty that they never blew up the way LP did. We picked the softest song 38th Parallel had, but it was still vetoed by the pastor. There were electric guitars in the background. Not heavy riffs or crazy solos or anything, mind you. Just that there were electric guitars at all was the problem. It was "too heavy." Instead, one of the absolute softest songs by DC Talk, titled "Red Letters." No "wild" guitars and loud drums to speak of.

While at this very same church one Sunday, I felt compelled to explain to Matt why I didn't play football. We were in the

church's gym, hanging out after the service. Maybe I felt some shame around not being able to play football, or maybe I was just talking the way kids do without any real motivation. I told him, "I don't want to get my ass kicked." That was the reason I didn't play football.

He kinda looked at me in surprise, and I know I turned beet red with embarrassment. Or shame. Or whatever makes you turn red when you said something that might get you in trouble. I did what any self-respecting 12-year-old would do. I begged him not to tell anyone that I said "ass."

The funny part is that I would bet anything Matt was swearing sometimes, too. It's even funnier to say it that way. Like we were all secretly doing drugs or something. "I think he was probably on the swears. That kid is troubled."

But that's what it felt like. Like it was the end of the world if my parents found out. If I got caught, one could only wonder what fresh hell would rain down on me. I wouldn't eat soap ever again, honesty be damned.

It feels kinda silly doing a whole chapter on swearing. For most people, swearing is a non-issue. It's the communication equivalent of discussing the value of McDonald's. Should you eat it all the time? Hell no. But indulging every once in a while isn't going to hurt anything, and occasionally it could even be a real good time. That's my perspective anyway. If you want to eat McDonald's all the time, I won't judge you.

But for Christians it's a big deal. Or at least it used to be. I feel like it's becoming less of an issue. I know the biblical arguments about Paul saying not to use vile words or obscenities or crass

jokes.¹ I also know the arguments that can be made for it about Paul calling his life shit before he found Jesus.

“Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as REFUSE, in order that I may gain Christ.” (Philippians 3:8, RSV, emphasis mine)

Other translations replace “refuse” with “garbage” (NIV), “rubbish” (NASB), “dung” (KJV) and so on. You won’t exactly find the word “shit” in any Bible you pick up today, I would expect. However, the argument goes that shit would be the modern equivalent of the profane Greek word that he used, *skubalon*. I’m not a Greek scholar and won’t pretend to be. But the argument is out there either way, for that and other verses. From where I’m sitting, it looks like the apostle Paul swore!

There are lots of things in the Bible that don’t need to be taken literally. It’s not that hard to figure out that some of it is clearly metaphorical. Ask any ultra-conservative Christian their thoughts on the Songs of Solomon, and they will stammer their way through an explanation about how it is about God’s love for his people.

“Your stature is like that of the palm,
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.
I said, ‘I will climb the palm tree;
I will take hold of its fruit.’”

(Songs of Solomon 7:7-8, NIV)

That sound like anything other than some solid foreplay to you? And yet, the Bible often gets treated like it is only a literal book designed for rule making.

1 Colossians 3:8, Ephesians 4:29, and Ephesians 5:4.

Another example comes to mind. For a while, I was into rap music and even wanted to pursue the art of being an emcee (more on this later). I wasn't into really good rap music, mind you. I wasn't allowed to listen to that stuff because of all the vile language, of course. But some of the songs used the word "fool" in them.

Seems pretty mild, really. There are a lot of things I could call someone that seem much worse. Things that would make you cringe. "Retarded" used to be a word we threw around no different than jerk or tool. It is rightly accepted nowadays that that word should not be said, because it is offensive to the mentally handicapped. Growing up in the 90's, I don't think I ever got in trouble for using it. It was no worse than telling someone they were being dumb. But fool was another case altogether. Because the Bible is very clear about it. Matthew 5:22 states, "And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

That's pretty straightforward. It gets worse. That line is in red in the Bible, which means it came straight from the mouth of Jesus himself. I don't know about you, but if you care at all about the Bible, it seems like the red words should probably be considered the very most important. And yet, I don't think that's really what Jesus meant. He frequently talked in parables and metaphors and talked a damn lot about what was inside the heart and how to treat other people. He didn't seem too concerned with rules.

When I was in 9th grade, I would find new ways to hurt people without using swear words. My parents had made the decision to move the family from upstate New York

to Colorado. I was pissed, to say the least. This wasn't exactly a family decision up for debate, but I put together an argument for why we should stay. My parents joke that I was always the lawyer of the family. I plead my case adamantly.

All my friends are here.

Our band, Addicted, is thriving. (Side note: You can't call it a band if you sing other bands' music together and play no instruments among four members. It's not any truer if you write dozens of songs, but only have the lyrics. Those are poems at best. And they were not good. R.I.P. Addicted.)

They have much better syrup in New York. I mean, do they even have maple trees in Colorado?

Really, those are the only points I can remember. They were tenuous at best. As you might imagine, we ended up moving to Colorado. So, I threw a fit of epic teenage proportions. I told my parents I hated them and they were being so selfish and didn't care about me at all. I told them when we got to Colorado, I would stay in my room all the time and would probably end up killing myself.

I was being entirely authentic, though obviously melodramatic. In my enraged state, I really thought that I would succumb to depression and want to kill myself. I don't think I said a single swear word *at* them or even in their presence. That was a line in my head that was "inappropriate" and I would never cross it, because... soap, right? Swearing would have been a sin. Instead, I told them that I hated them. For days on end, I reminded them that they might as well kill me now and save us all the grueling trip.

I was terrible. Swearing wouldn't have made those things any worse. The things I chose to say were cutting into their hearts without me using a single "bad word." I could have just quietly

muttered that it was bullshit and walked to my room and never said anything on it again. That would have been a lot *less* offensive and cruel than the non-cursing words that I did use.

But I knew what I was doing. I *wanted* them to *know* the offense that I was feeling. I wanted them to hurt like I hurt.

Sometimes we feel shame because of the things that we do to other people. That's how I felt about the way I treated my parents for moving me to Colorado, all because I couldn't see how much better this move was going to make my life. Other times, I think we feel shame over the things we do only because of how we are treated after we do them. Are we internally ashamed over what we did or shamed by those around us?

When I was a junior in high school in Colorado, we had an assembly on the last day of school. It was a small private school, and there were about a hundred students in there. Near the end, the faculty opened up the stage for any student to come up and say what they had learned that year about life or God or whatever was on their mind.

It was a fine idea, I guess. But it was the last day of school, damnit! We just wanted to get out of the building and hit summer hard. I had visions of video games all night and the occasional pool parties where there would be girls in bikinis. And yet here we were, with an assembly bent on taking an eternity to end. Several students took their turn going up front, saying how they felt closer to God since dating so and so, or thanking all four of their best friends for helping them through the hard, indescribable times at a middle-class Christian private school, or whatever other bullshit was on their mind.

That's no disrespect to anyone who did speak that day. We were in high school, pretty much anything I would have had to say would have been drivel, and that's okay. It's high school. Somehow, after a handful of students, I ended up on stage alone holding a microphone. I had been sitting there in the pews (we met in a church sanctuary) and had something wriggling at the forefront of my mind. I had something that needed to come out. I was nervous. My palms were sweaty, knees weak, arms heavy. Ready to drop bombs. (There weren't enough Eminem references in my first draft).

I looked sheepishly down at my toes and cleared my throat, "I learned a lot this school year. It was a good year (pause for dramatic effect). You are all dismissed, have a great summer!"

Turns out, I did learn a lesson that day. It's hard for a dozen teachers to stop 100 students, especially on the last day of school. Everybody left the building.

That's a little bit of a badass moment for a small, Christian school. Everybody thought it was hilarious, and I felt really good about myself. I was getting pats on the back from the upperclassmen and cute girls were thanking me as I walked passed them in the hall.

My decision was completely validated until my English teacher caught me on my way out. She was an awesome woman nearing retirement and one of the first people to fervently encourage me to write. If you hate this book, I wouldn't *exactly* say it is her fault, but her efforts were definitely one of the earliest inspirations to stick with it. She was a wonderful teacher and did her best to direct me in learning the craft.

That day, however, encouragement was not on her mind. She gave me a very motherly look and said, "I'm very disappointed in what you did today." That's all she said. She didn't rip into me or

try to punish me into next year. She just said that one statement that we all know are about the worst words anyone can say.

I wouldn't have felt bad at all about what I did. At the stage of life I am currently in, I again don't feel bad about it. It was hilarious. I remember it fondly as this rebellious thing I did that started a movement; even if that movement was a short-lived exodus that really only gave us an extra 20 minutes of summer.

Of course, just because I don't feel bad about it doesn't mean I was right. In reality, there's a strong argument for my teacher having the correct perspective. Truthfully, I don't think it was a big enough deal to be right or wrong and I'm guessing very few people in the room that day even remember it happening. I do know that I did feel bad because of the way I made Mrs. Powell feel. She was representative of how some others felt, too. Her disappointment left me feeling ashamed, even if briefly so.

Shame is a versatile feeling, with close cousins found in guilt and embarrassment. Shame is a response to something that is morally wrong or not up to standard for one's cultural or societal standards.² Though I know my mom didn't want me to carry shame through the years, she was using shame as a mechanism to teach me that swearing did not align with our culture's standards. When I cursed in front of my friend, I found myself feeling distressed at having done something morally wrong. It's true that I didn't want to get in trouble, but I specifically didn't want

2 I found this article by Neel Burton to be very helpful: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-peek/201408/the-psychology-embarrassment-shame-and-guilt>

to be exposed as being less than the expectations of my family. I felt that I failed the code.

Guilt is typically associated with feeling as if one has done something bad, rather than feeling as if they can be defined as bad. When my English teacher pulled me aside to correct me, she was not intending to shame me but her words were made to make me feel guilt for something that I previously thought was a good thing. While this feeling is distinct from shame, the realization of feeling guilt from hurting others can lead to feeling shame. For example, when I told my parents that I hated them. I followed all the “moral” rules that I understood, but when I saw that I hurt them I later felt guilt (for having done so) and shame (for being the type of person who would do such a thing).

Whereas shame is a responsive feeling towards one’s moral status and guilt is tied to a feeling of a wrong action, embarrassment is tied to the image we want people to see when they look at us. When something happens that doesn’t align with that image that we want to project, we feel embarrassment. It is not related to right or wrong. This is (one reason) why someone instinctively stops picking their nose when someone else catches them. They likely feel no shame about who they are as a person or true guilt for doing something that should be considered amoral, but they are briefly embarrassed to be thought of as “gross.” However, there have been moments in my life where I felt so deeply embarrassed by my circumstances that it evolved into feeling ashamed as my self-image was at risk of being lowered.

At this point, I feel no guilt over swearing. For years, I thought it was sinful and would think that if I swore again I could go to hell. But I no longer believe words carry more weight than God’s grace. Rather, I am more careful about what I am communicating and the intent behind that communication. I also feel no

shame about this, as most people in my world have come to similar conclusions that swear words are not inherently hurtful and hurtful words are not always swear words. I do sometimes still feel embarrassment, such as when I may slip up and say a word that makes my parents uncomfortable (I may be an adult, but I'll still do my best to honor their rules), but that is a rarity and the feeling is fleeting and dissolves quickly. There is no long-lasting shame.

In many ways, I am prepared to feel embarrassment just by the release of this book. I am quite proud of it. But you, the Reader, are going to become acquainted with me in deeper and more uncomfortable ways than everyone save for my closest friends. I am going to reveal all of the different ways in which I have felt and experienced things that fall under the all-encompassing umbrella of feeling ashamed. And it turns out swearing was ultimately a small aspen in a forest of fucking Redwoods on the journey of addressing my shame.

When I Was A Shadow

“Seventy Times 7” by Brand New

I was a minor god at kickball. On the hallowed blacktop of Beaver River Central School, I defined the game for the next generation of ballers. By the time I was in fifth grade, I had a solid kick, a lightning fast sprint from base to base, and the quick-snap vertical to jump over any fast balls intended to get me out. *The Sandlot* was actually based on my life, they just switched it to baseball for a wider audience. I thought you could impress girls with kickball, but in hindsight that part never really panned out very well.

Turns out it also wasn't enough to be popular and not get your ass kicked by bigger kids. Once again, kickball just wasn't mainstream enough.

The best and worst times were during recess. We would all go play outside. I was actually relatively athletic, despite my small size. If we played kickball, I was golden. Not only was it fun,

but I felt like a peer and not a victim. It was the other days that were ugly.

Recess sucked on the days where there wasn't a game to be had. I would find myself roaming the outskirts of the playground, typically alone since I didn't have any close friends at school. I have to admit, I don't remember any specific traumatizing moments. It's more like a montage sequence, but instead of the hero pumping iron he frequently finds himself the test subject of one of his "buddies" trying out new wrestling moves on him without his consent.

I have no idea how many times they would usher me over and use a wide range of WWE moves on me, including the "Stone Cold Stunner." If you're unsure of what that is, the Internet will tell you that it's a move in which you hold the opponent's jaw on your shoulder in an overhead face lock and then drop to the ground in a sitting position so their jaw takes the brunt of the impact on your shoulder. I will tell you that it apparently is a move in which I get my ass whooped in a variety of ways.

I would plead for them to stop, to give me a break today, to leave me alone for once, to start up a game of football instead; and they would go ahead and pummel me anyway. I also remember hitting my head more than a few times so maybe the occasional concussion eased the pain, or at least the memory. I didn't know what to do to stop it. All I could do was take it and try to minimize the damage done, whether through submission or humor.

Growing up, I was the little guy. It was bound to happen. My Dad clocks in at about 5'7", and my mom hovers around 5'

flat. If you look at my uncles, I think *one* of them *might* hit six feet. Most all of my cousins are smaller, too. And if they do have any size, they got it from the other half of their genes and not the half that I share.

Not that all small kids get bullied, but it is a stacking of the deck to begin with. I was a bit of a mama's boy in a family that held some scars from domestic abuse—which meant no fighting in the house. I had a younger brother, but my mother was adamant that we wouldn't ever rough each other up. Add in that I was embarrassed by the way I looked and was shy and meek as a method of camouflage to blend in and I never really learned how to stand up for myself.

Suffice to say, I never really had a chance to be a towering force roaming the streets of school. I tried everything I could to disappear in the crowd and not be noticed. That's tough to do when you're in a small school in a small town. There's not much to hide behind. So, I was bullied. For a long time, by several different people.

I don't think my parents knew about it. There weren't usually visible signs of bullying on me like cuts or anything. Most of my bruises were covered by clothes. The "beatings" I took were often psychological as much as they were physical. Many of my memories of the scuffles are more me pleading for them to leave me alone rather than lasting injuries. But even if my parents had seen the signs, I guarantee that I would have lied about it anyway.

I definitely never told them a single word about the whole thing. I wanted to be self-sufficient and it seemed as if they had enough troubles of their own. Around this time, my parents had some marital problems that led to a lot of arguing. Thankfully they were able to work through those issues a long time ago,

but overhearing it as a child from the next room over made it feel eternal. My disposition is very much a peacemaker—I'm an enneagram 9 for any personality test nerds out there. It likely stems to some degree from these circumstances.

Sometimes, I would leave my bed and go to where they were, trying to convince them to stop arguing. Other times, I would lie awake for hours hearing their muffled words through my bedroom door. I was the oldest child in the house, and if anyone was getting us kids through this, it was me. That was how I saw it, anyway. I put all the weight on my shoulders, whether or not my siblings expected me to. I don't know if they even really remember this stuff since they were younger than me. At any rate, mum's the word.

I also didn't want anyone to know, because getting bullied is extremely embarrassing. People act so surprised when a victim says they were ashamed to tell someone. But most of the time, a response is likely to be an answer for what you are doing wrong that is causing the bullying. It's probably not intended that way, but what does it sound like when I say, "You need to do this, this, and this." It may even be right advice, but the wrong tone can make it sound like chastisement.

Not to mention what might happen if my parents went to the school and they tried fixing it that way. I'd probably get bullied more for running to mommy and daddy and a teacher than for my big teeth and skinny body that was already inspiring the physical and verbal torment. It seemed like it would only make things worse if my parents were in the know on it.

At its core, the feelings of isolation were key to the success of the people bullying me. I needed to know that I wasn't alone, but everything about my experience suggested to me that it would be best if I didn't seek out help. Had I found help, it

likely would have ended sooner and hopefully would have left less scars. Instead, it was a common thread running through my earliest years all the way through middle school and would even occasionally provide flashbacks in early adulthood.

As far as I can recall, the bullying started when I went to a Mennonite school for my elementary years. One of the main principles of Mennonite beliefs is that of pacifism. This is really an important tenet in all of Christian tradition, but one that tends to be forgotten and disposed of by Evangelical American Christianity. If you've never thought about it, but consider yourself a Christian, then now is a time to start studying it. It's a complex topic and Jesus talked a lot about it, so you can't just gloss over and ignore it. An excellent starting point for research is "Fight: A Christian Case for Non-violence" by Preston Sprinkle.

For our purposes, the simplest definition of pacifism will be to live a non-violent lifestyle where one does everything they can to harm no others.

At that time, the people I went to school with were Mennonites. Most of my church experience growing up was Mennonite. My cousins are almost all Mennonite. So, it's anybody's guess how I managed to find myself getting bullied in this environment. I am getting shoved around and pushed and pinched by a bunch of pacifists!

In truth, it's really not that hard to figure out. At the end of the day, boys are assholes. I'm sure there is proof that the same can be said of girls, but my worst hurts were at the hands of boys in those days. With boys, it's hard to discern the difference

between bullying and just roughhousing, especially at that age. I guess there probably isn't a clear definition. Maybe once the roughhousing seems to target a specific person and stretches beyond that person's ability to endure it.

I was the specific person, for sure. And I constantly felt anxiety around if it would happen again today. I even remember seeing somebody else get bullied, and then a couple days later, that dude that was the victim was bullying me instead. He was passing on the hurt to the next person a rung below him. I didn't pass it on; the reign of violence ended with me. I don't think I was brave, I think I was weak. Or maybe scared.

Whatever the case, I didn't take the bullying upon myself because of my pacifist beliefs. Kids don't think that way. Even if I had believed in that methodology, there are different forms of non-violence, such as: justified war pacifism (certain situations require violence to resolve), self-defense (pacifist except when in self-defense of myself or other people in need), etc.

That's a simple way to put it and falls short of the weight and complexity of those concepts. But there were arguments that meant that I could have defended myself even if I did want to be a pacifist. This is not an argument for or against pacifism. It's just a story of a kid who got beat up a lot.

I was a kid who got beat up by Mennonites. I vividly remember being scratched, punched on the legs, bitten, etc. Again, it's not just roughhousing when the same people are doing it to me repeatedly, and I'm not retaliating in any way.

It only got worse from there. For unrelated reasons, I went to a public school when I was in the 4th grade. I went from being

the small, defenseless kid at a tiny Mennonite school to being a small, defenseless kid at a bigger public school. It was a defining moment, the time where I needed to set my reputation. You've seen the movies. Find the biggest, baddest dude on the first day of prison and beat his ass in front of everyone to set your rep. I'm no expert on prison, but I don't know if it works that way. It *might* have worked in the 4th grade.

Either way, I didn't do it. I don't clearly remember when the bullying started again, but it seemed pretty immediate. Some of the kids bullying me on the school bus (remember it was the same bus system for both schools) were now my classmates who I saw all day. And new people joined in. I was picked on for wearing pants that were "high waters," meaning cut too short on the legs. They were holdovers from the Mennonite school uniform. So, I finally talked my parents into buying me a couple baggy pants, and then got made fun of because they were K-Mart brand.

My two front teeth were bigger than most and stuck out some, so I got called "Bucktooth" a lot. That one stung for a real long time. My parents wanted to give me braces to correct my overbite, but I gave them so much pushback, because it would be the pants all over again. I knew how to hear "Bucktooth," but I didn't want to be "Tinsel Teeth" next. I got braces eventually, and I'm glad I did, but I literally fought them for weeks on end with tears streaming down my cheeks.

The older I got, the more cruel it became. Once you get to the age of changing clothes in the locker room for gym class, you're in deep shit. The thin veil of security found in clothing is no longer promised. These times made the wrestling moves from recess seem like a cake walk. They would snap towels at me, especially trying to hit me when I was naked. I would hurriedly try

to put my clothes on my wet body because there was no time to dry off, sometimes still so wet that my hair would freeze outside while waiting for the bus. If I didn't get out in time, a few of them would gang up on me and trap me in a corner and try to drag me to a toilet for a swirly.

Have you ever been dragged by a small crowd of guys stronger than you to a toilet so they can dunk your head in the bowl and flush the water down on you? I pray to God you can say no, because it was nightmare-inducing. The whole time they are hooting and hollering and laughing it up while you are literally begging them to stop. They keep talking about how they can't wait to give you a swirly. Maybe someone even left a dump in there for you to catch on its way down. I truly hope you have never experienced this—I have felt that fear.

I pushed back and struggled with everything I had. There was no way in hell I was going to live through a swirly. If I didn't suffocate, I knew I would drown in embarrassment when my classmates next saw me. I must have resisted enough during those times, because I never had the experience of them actually getting me into the toilet. Or maybe the guys were just loud mouth idiots and not strong enough to lift me.

At any rate, I'm thankful to never fully experience that. But it was still terrifying, never knowing if they were going to come at me again. Add in some other typical tactics, like wedgies and getting shoved into lockers, and it was a nightmare pretty much across the board. This lasted almost all the way through 7th grade. This was not one time, but literally dozens.

There was another time when we went on our school field trip at the end of the year. It was always somewhere pretty cool, like a trip to a water park or a planetarium. This particular year, the trip was to a local campground with a creek, open fields to

play in, and an overabundance of hotdogs. Doesn't sound too exciting, but it was upstate NY and there wasn't exactly a lot of options and SHUT UP! It was awesome.

Until at one point some friends (by friends I mean that gray area where you see a lot of overlap with the people you spend time with and the people who bully you) and I got the bright idea to start throwing rocks at each other. I mean, throwing them the way you would throw a baseball: wind up and let it rip. And not even pebbles, but nice, long rocks that are thin and smooth. These are the type you use to skip rocks on the water. We found the flat sides made it so they could slice through the air in unexpected trajectories.

And one sliced through my ear. It didn't cut it off by any means, but it was a nice gash. My so-called friends begged and begged me to tell the teachers that I fell. This was my one chance to bust the same people that pushed me around and tried WWE moves on me, but instead I told a very unconvincing lie. Convincing enough, I guess. Nobody ever pushed me on it. Maybe the teachers looked at me the way someone might look at a battered spouse with a black eye after they say they just fell down the stairs. I wasn't bullied, I just fell a little.

This whole time that I was being bullied was in the 90's. It was before any of my peers had cell phones and we didn't have access to internet outside of school research projects. Even at home, we only had dial up internet which was so slow that it was nearly unusable. I was fortunate in this way, because it meant that my tormenters had no access to continue the agony when I wasn't at school. Times are different these days.

It wasn't until 2014 that there was even a uniform definition for bullying on the federal level. The Center for Disease Control and Department of Education pieced together an overarching definition of unwanted aggressive behavior, observed or perceived power imbalance, and repetition of behaviors or high likelihood of repetition.¹ These definitions allow for various modes and types of bullying despite changing technology. And the stats of those affected are staggering:

- The 2017 School Crime Supplement (National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice) indicates that, nationwide, about 20% of students ages 12-18 experienced bullying.
- The same study indicates that among students ages 12-18 who reported being bullied at school during the school year, 15% were bullied online or by text.
- About 49% of children in grades 4–12 reported being bullied by other students at school at least once during the past month.
- The following percentages of middle school students had experienced these various types of bullying: name calling (44.2 %); teasing (43.3 %); spreading rumors or lies (36.3%); pushing or shoving (32.4%); hitting, slapping, or kicking (29.2%); leaving out (28.5%); threatening

1 This definition and the following statistics can be found at <https://www.stopbullying.gov/media/facts/index.html#stats>.

(27.4%); stealing belongings (27.3%); sexual comments or gestures (23.7%); e-mail or blogging (9.9%).²

- Cyber Bullying happens across all mediums of technology including social media, text messages, online video gaming, etc.

These numbers can both be alarming and disconcerting, but I see a silver lining in there, as well. We are not alone. If you are being bullied, you are not the only one. It's not only children, but adults also experience bullying and there's no shame in that. Know that you will not be treated this way forever. There are ways out of this. There are numerous resources out there available to you to know what to do next if you are being bullied or if you are concerned that someone else may be a victim. You can find a phenomenal starting point at the website: <https://www.stopbullying.gov>.

I did not have these resources growing up. I falsely perceived that I would need to resolve this on my own. It was causing all sorts of insecurities in me. I had big teeth and a scrawny body and was weak. I dressed weird and talked weird (since I didn't regularly swear). I won't feign manliness; this all hurt deeply. I was very adamant that I wouldn't cry when being bullied and that effort continued when I was at home by myself. I still cried at times, but I felt shame even when I was alone because I

2 Bradshaw, C.P., Sawyer, A.L., and O'Brennan, L.M. (2007). "Bullying and Peer Victimization at School: Perceptual Differences Between Students and School Staff." *School Psychology Review*, 36(3), 361-382.

thought this meant I wasn't a man. I eventually learned that this was all wrong.

I started to figure out more of who I was around the end of 7th grade, the time when most kids start to figure some of that stuff out. I bleached my hair blonde (it was the late 90's, it was actually cool then). I used hair gel to make it spike up every which way. I wore these obnoxious parachute pants that were blue-tinted camouflage. And I truly didn't give a fuck what anybody thought for the first time in my life.

And the bullying stopped. I'm not sure I outright caused it to stop, but it did either way. And a couple other weird things happened through this time. I was more respected by my classmates and participated in some extracurricular activities. I didn't have a girlfriend, but they started paying more attention to me. But it wasn't all good things. Another thing I remember is that I started to pick on and make fun of other people.

There's no excuse. I may have been bullied, but it doesn't give me permission to make fun of others. I never physically picked on people (see the above if you need to know why not), but I definitely joked on people. I pride myself in being quick-witted and I certainly used my super powers for evil at times.

I remember a specific boy in our class who was super awkward and dressed really weird. I don't know if he was special needs or not, but I would say there is a reasonable chance that he was and was just socially capable enough to be in the standard classrooms. Never bully anyone, but especially not a special needs peer. I have no idea what I said or if it was something that he even got wind of. It doesn't really matter. I do know a friend and I were definitely mocking him. It was a terrible thing to do. I remember my teacher lecturing me after class on why it was

wrong, and the flashbacks I had of getting picked on more than solidified why I would be leaving this kid alone from now on.

I would crack jokes and have some good laughs, but I tried to never again contribute to any bullying. I hope that I succeeded in that and didn't contribute to some other kid's bully chapter in their life story. Wouldn't that be some terrible irony?

8th grade was a good year for me. My braces were taken off and I definitely felt some more confidence from that. I no longer felt the need to cover my mouth when I talked in class and I would raise my hand instead of only speaking when the teacher made me. I was also starting to grow a little. I never would be tall, but I was becoming more athletic in build and was a solid basketball and soccer player. I started becoming actual friends with some of the athletes in my class. They picked on me some, too, but it was more in the way all teammates take jabs at each other. I would verbally dish it back some and we would all laugh.

The talk of swirlies and Stone Cold Stunners all but stopped. I wasn't one of the cool kids, but I hung out with some of them, so I was part of the gang. Unfortunately, the bullying probably trickled down to someone else, but I wasn't a part of it. I would eventually run into other problems, like girl problems, but bullying became primarily a thing of the past.

The key was to stop giving a shit what other people thought about me. Sometimes that can be a bad thing. It's okay to care for your reputation, and it's a good thing to let people close enough to you that you value their opinion. For me, no longer caring was exactly what I needed. I stopped worrying so

much about everyone else's opinions and started to have a little confidence.

But I found my escape through vulnerability, which is the answer to this problem. Vulnerability is what it takes to talk to a leader or peer about the ways we are being hurt. Vulnerability is what it takes to be yourself and dye your hair and wear whatever obnoxious clothes you genuinely like. Vulnerability is what will make someone see you as a person and not an object for their aggression. It may not always create an immediate solution, but it will open your eyes to who you are and you will find that being the victim is not what you were designed for. And people around you will sense this, too.

Granted, I overcorrected and decided for a long time that I wouldn't make myself vulnerable in front of anyone. *Why give someone enough power to let them speak to your identity?* I chose to be the only one who could define my identity. And that would cause a whole slew of other problems. But I needed to see the value in being vulnerable with myself before I could understand what it meant to be vulnerable in front of others.

III

Holy Shit

“The Restless” by The Matches

There are a lot of childhood memories driven by the scars of shame and disappointment. If it were an art form, I feel somewhere along the way as if I have become an expert at living absolute masterpieces. For a while, I thought I wanted to be a rapper. In case you didn't notice, you're reading a book by me rather than listening to a dope track with sick flows over bumpin' bass. I guess things don't always go the way we think they will and, many times, that seems to be when shame abounds through its ugly cousin: embarrassment.

I remember my first semi-sorta girlfriend in middle school giving me her phone number as we went separate ways from church camp. I'm not exaggerating when I say I lost that little slip of paper not five minutes later. I didn't have a cellphone to just punch it in then, so it was written on a note that fell out of my pocket at some point.

More importantly, I didn't give up my super awesome bucket hat that I wore inside out. She desperately wanted to keep it

as a way of remembering me. A token of our liking each other (love is such a strong word for middle schoolers to be throwing around). I said no. It's probably fair to say that this was not true love. I felt pretty bad about the whole ordeal. It seemed like a real douchebag thing to do, even though losing the number was a genuine accident.

I felt embarrassed that this could have happened to me, and I also felt guilt as I hoped that this young lady didn't think I never intended to call her. I absolutely did like her, even if it was never likely to have a lifelong impact. This was uncomfortable, but there's certainly another level. If there is one thing that is potentially more embarrassing and shaming than anything else, it's the moments of bodily function mishaps and bathroom necessities.

When I was about eleven or twelve years old, I won a pair of tickets to a Christian music festival. It was called Kingdom Bound in Darien Lake, NY. It's a music festival at a Six Flags, which is a massive theme park complete with roller coasters and way too much fried food. So even if the bands suck, it's a win. But they didn't, not by a long shot. It was essentially a dream lineup for adolescent me.

Relient K, John Reuben, Skillet, Grits, and DC TALK!!! If you want a brief lesson in late 90's Christian music, then start the list here. If you want to maintain your sanity then I might recommend you continue reading. Some of that music did not age well. That's just what I was into then. Some of it has since lost my interest, but at the time it made me feel as if Christian music could be as good as secular stuff.

In a weird turn of events, I didn't really have a way to get to this music festival. I had won these tickets on my favorite radio station. My parents were not able to attend, so I was bringing one of my best friends with me. But even in upstate New York, two 12-year-olds obviously weren't getting away with driving a few hours from home. Somehow, my parents got hooked up with another local church and we just jumped in and rode with them.

In hindsight, this was a very bizarre circumstance. This was not a church we attended and I don't believe it was from within our denomination. Meaning that I'm not sure we even knew anyone at the church. My mom had called around to the local churches to see who was sending a group of teens and may have a couple open seats in their bus. I doubt there was much of a vetting process outside of this very simple criteria. I guess it's lucky this is an embarrassing bodily fluids chapter and not an "accidentally stumbled into a cult" chapter.

Long story short, it was profusely hot that summer. The concert was in the middle of July, and I didn't have any parents telling me what to do. That seemed amazing, but it turns out I was ill-prepared. Sometimes you need an adult around, just to tell you to drink a cold glass of water instead of another Mountain Dew.

I'm sure the food was far from gourmet, too. One night, the group we were with had a huge pot of meaty spaghetti sauce and was ladling it onto English muffins and topping it off with mozzarella. It was awesome. It was also indicative of the nutrition levels the week held. As far as memory serves me, I didn't eat a single vegetable the entire week. I don't remember what exactly was on the menu, but we were spending our time exclusively at a theme park and a campground, so you do the math.

The lines for the rides were ridiculously long, too. It was this huge event and it was Six Flags, so every ride had waits over an hour-long.. We stood in line for a couple hours to go on the Superman Ride of Steel roller coaster, which was one of the highlight attractions of the park. The park attendants occasionally pulled out a hose and used their thumbs as makeshift sprinkler heads and sprayed everyone in line. And there was rejoicing by all.

So, I'm standing in line somewhere in the park, and it's hot, and we are under the sun for hours on end. Relief is scarce and water more so. The food is leading me to repeatedly...break wind. I'm doing it as politely and quietly as possible. It would be embarrassing if someone around me heard it. I'm basically doing everything I can to not draw attention to myself. It seems to be working, although I notice that some of these farts are getting increasingly uncomfortable. I come to the realization that I should probably find a bathroom soon. Probably right after this awesome ride, in fact.

I start to let out another one and come to realize that I might be in trouble... have you ever seen the Ben Stiller movie *Along Came Polly*? There's a part where Ben Stiller and Philip Seymour Hoffman (R.I.P.) are at a party, and Hoffman suddenly runs up to Stiller and says we have to go *right* now. He goes on to explain that he has sharted, which is when you think you're going to fart and a little shit comes out.

I was an independent middle schooler who didn't need adult supervision because I was a man, damnit! And in the middle of Six Flags, I definitely had just sharted myself. Not just a little bit, either. It could only be described as diarrhetic. Fortunately, there was no trace of evidence *around me* (other than a stench, I'm sure). Look, I know it's crude and disgusting and all those

other things. I'm not exactly bragging here. I was so embarrassed by it that I have literally only told a handful of people this story.

The only commentary I can add is that I think I owe my friend big time (Bryan McGillvray, you are a gentleman and a scholar). That was, without a doubt, the most embarrassing moment of my life up to that point, and I don't think a single word was ever muttered of it. He didn't even make fun of me then, let alone spill the beans when we got home. He didn't need to. I already felt so much shame around it, because it was such a disgusting, childish thing to have happen. We grabbed an adult chaperone (who was essentially a complete stranger since we didn't know anyone from this church) and he graciously bought me a pair of swimming trunks as I threw away the tainted remains. And I literally never told this story again. "I sharted" isn't exactly the best icebreaker in most circles.

Embarrassment seems to know no boundaries of age or timing. When I was in high school, I talked myself onto a road trip with a couple friends. A married couple and a few of the teens were going to visit their former youth pastor. The drive from Colorado to Washington runs something like 17 hours, and they had an extra seat in the van.

We need to take a moment to set the stage a little here. First off, I absolutely did not invite myself on this trip—I was asked to tag along because I was homeschooled and thus my schedule was open. I was good friends with twins Matt and Terrance and it just made sense that we would visit their former youth pastor together, even though I had never met him before. This happens to be the very same Matt Codd who wrote the foreword to this

book. He told a lot of truth in that opening, but don't bother asking him about this trip. He will say that he clearly remembers me inviting myself, which I assure you is an outright lie.

Matt and Terrance were two years older than me and, being twins, looked very similar to each other. They were about 6'4" and 140 pounds soaking wet. They seemed to have an impenetrable confidence despite their goofiness, and their humor and laughter knew no bounds. They were not mean people, but their brand of building kinship was definitely everyone in the group laughing at each other and cutting up. Long story short, they were some bony-ass troublemakers, but great friends.

All that to say, it was just a bonus that the only other teen on the trip was a girl named Lisa, who I happened to have a nearly debilitating crush on. Not enough to do something crazy like invite myself on a road trip across half the country, of course, but it was certainly a crush of notable levels.

The adults leading the way had a toddler with them, and mom was pregnant again. They were nice people and personally invited me along the week before venturing out. Why wouldn't you last minute invite a teenager you have known for six months on a 17-hour road trip to visit a youth pastor he has never met? I don't see a need for further speculation about the reasoning behind my presence. It all seemed like a golden opportunity to see somewhere new, create new memories, and confess my absolutely genuine and not-at-all exaggerated undying love. As I said, it was a long trip. A lot could happen, right? And damn, did it ever.

My memories of the outgoing trip to Washington really only include snippets of a visceral nightmare. It was summer time and there were seven of us crammed in a van. With all the heat, along with the high of being on a road trip, I didn't pace myself very

well on the beverages. The last story was a matter of dehydration, but there would not be a repeat scenario. I have no idea how much I drank or even what I had gulped down. All I know is, an hour or two passes since our last stop, and I have to go to the bathroom to point of nearly bursting. Look outside and see that we are in the middle of Wyoming with no bathrooms in sight.

Seems like a fairly run of the mill story so far, right? Wrong. For whatever unclear reason, we don't at any point pull over so I can just take a leak on the side of the road. I don't have an answer for that. I guess maybe I was too timid to make demands about what the state of the van was about to become. And obviously, with the toddler, pregnant mom, and girl crush in the car, an empty bottle was not a viable solution.

When running from North to South, a straight line through Wyoming is approximately 276 miles long. We were in the car for about 4 hours and 15 minutes in the state of Wyoming. The sudden urge to pee had started in the first hour of this leg of the trip. Do you know how many rest stops there are on the highway in Wyoming? I didn't count, but I feel confident in saying that over those 276 miles there are about maybe three *fucking* bathrooms!

So that's the pickle I found myself in. And it gets better. At this point, I am sitting between Lisa and Terrance in the back of the van. Why in the hell did I have to be sitting next to anybody, let alone her? The embarrassment of sitting next to the girl is obvious. I am not only in a lot of discomfort, but I am at this point visibly sweating. And not "it's seasonably warm, I may need to move to the shade" sweating. Nothing short of extreme hikes has since caused me to sweat so badly. Have you ever smelled a high school freshman who has clearly sweat all the

way through his less than adequate deodorant? I'm sure it wasn't roses everyone was catching a whiff of.

To top it off, Terrance did what any good friend would do: he started poking me in the kidneys. Not tapping me or mimicking a joke, but forcefully pushing his bony six-inch finger into my bladder as hard as he could. I had no hope of stopping his prodding. Any loss of focus on keeping the dam closed would have been the end. I had one bathroom mishap at a theme park, there was no way in hell there would be a repeat of any sort, especially not in front of a girl that I was convinced I would likely someday marry.

There were a lot of other embarrassing moments on that trip, and not all of them were mine. Fortunately, I did manage to summon superhero degrees of willpower and managed to not piss myself in the middle of Wyoming. But that girl and I never did date. I think that can probably be traced back to this moment where I was literally sweating urine out of my pores.

Contrary to my own assumptions, bodily mishaps don't end when you become an adult. When I was about 20 years old, I finally got my first grown up job. I was a custodian at Focus on the Family—yes, *that* Focus on the Family. There's tons of commentary that I could add here. I'll actually restrain. Despite my “unquestionably liberal leanings” at this stage in life, I was quite conservative at the time. You could maybe even argue that around this time was when my so-called liberal ideology started to develop. Causation might be a stretch, but there is certainly correlation. So congrats, James Dobson, your organization started my sad and disturbing descent into... progressivism.

I was there for three years, and neither hated it nor loved it. If you ever wanted to know more, you could just ask me. But for now, let's leave it at Focus on the Family being a very flawed place that manages to also do some good things—you could probably describe a lot of places that way. I got to know some salt of the earth people along the way. It's also the first time anyone had ever told me about universalism, which is a doctrinal theory that all humans will eventually be saved by God and none will be condemned to hell. I was introduced to that by a co-worker and certainly not any "official" material the organization provided. It was refreshing to see people with wide ranging thoughts still fall under the umbrella of Christianity.

One night, we were all at our lunch break. I was a nighttime custodian, so "lunch break" was actually a late dinner that was around 8 p.m. I felt noticeably sick that night, but for some reason decided I was going to rough it and get through this. I was raised in that "keep your nose to the grindstone through everything" sort of way, so I probably didn't want to take time off, even if it was paid. That's a great perspective, but I'd recommend using sick time when you're sick. I was practically quarantined, as all my coworkers intentionally sat in the other corners of the room. Near the end of break, I started to feel everything in my stomach lurching.

I made a run for the bathroom, though it was hardly running. I made a split-second decision to run right past a trash can in the room and head out into the hall. Get to the bathroom and everything will be okay. It would be embarrassing to throw up in a trash can in front of everyone. Good plan, except no more than two steps out of the break room, I started to gag.

I'll spare the gory details for my sympathetic vomiters out there, but my attempt to stop it from happening by holding

my hand to my mouth definitely didn't work. I fell to my knees like the movie *Platoon* and started throwing up on the hallway carpet. The security camera in the corner of the doorway caught the whole thing.

The best part of this episode: who do you call in a public place when something needs to be cleaned? You guessed it, the janitors. So, they made me clean it up myself; those cold, heartless bastards at Focus on the Family. James Dobson himself stood over me and threatened my job when I took too long. He smirked at my sickness and embarrassment and laughed when I couldn't stop myself from being sick again.

Okay, maybe not. One of my co-workers graciously took care of it for me. I went home and rested up and felt fine in a day or two. I really appreciated that somebody who wasn't my mom would do that for me. Nobody even brought it up when I returned to work.

Even so, there's not exactly a graceful way to come back from that. Because of the gracious way they all handled it, I don't carry it to this day as a social scar. It's a funny story, but damn, I would have liked to have looked a little more like a grown-up and less like a dumbass kid who can't even manage to get to the bathroom before being sick.

There isn't really a cute way to wrap these stories up with a pretty bow and push them out, showing you how I'm actually an incredible man and deserving of your respect. That's really actually the point. There is nothing worthy of a pedestal to be found in this chapter.

Nobody is perfect, and a lot of terrible things happen to people all the time, whether due to their decisions, the decisions of others, or just bad luck. And that's okay. It gets ugly when we try to hide these things and pretend that they didn't happen because we don't want to tarnish our reputations.

By all accounts, these episodes could and should have been cause for great pain and embarrassment and shame. It was the ways that people around me responded that freed me from those possibilities. Bryan could have come back and told his brothers and everyone else that I needed diapers after I sharted myself. My coworkers could have made a running joke out of me throwing up in the hallway, asking security for a copy of the tape. Even Terrance, despite being kind of a dick, could have made a more intentional effort to further sabotage my opportunity at love. Instead, he called me after that trip didn't go as planned with the girl and told me it was okay and that we would have to do more things like that with just the guys.

Sometimes circumstances allow us the power to free people from their shame before it ever materializes.

Is It All Dead?

“Typical” by MuteMath

Christianity is a bizarre, complex religion that invokes a lot of different thoughts from different people based on their own experiences, backgrounds, places of origin, etc. Allow me to take a moment to define Christianity, at least based on the way I was raised.

There’s this big ass book with all of these rules that must be followed at all times. The book is too large to actually read, but a couple times a week a pastor (who is most certainly a man) will tell you everything you need to know. You’ll find him in an old, run down building (or maybe a fancy, modern one these days). He will likely “teach” you by focusing on all the rules you broke more so than teaching the content itself.

The gist of the book is that somehow a white Middle Eastern guy named Jesus lived a long time ago and died and probably came back to life and that makes it okay that you did a shitty thing last week and the week before and so on. But you’re only safe if you ask him to forgive you of these shitty things. And only

if you ask for forgiveness *after* doing them, because they can't be premeditated. And only if you're sincere. And it all needs to happen before you die.

If you were to die before having a chance to say sorry, then you're screwed. If you confessed before sinning and then messed up, the confession was disingenuous and you are screwed. You better be confessing immediately following any acts of sin, or you are screwed. It's also an unforgivable sin to have tattoos, drink alcohol, vote Democrat, or be against the death penalty (the same thing that ironically got Jesus killed). And don't even get me started on those homosexuals.

If we're being honest, this doesn't sound very interesting and certainly has a limited appeal. It definitely doesn't sound like the foundation to a meaningful existence framed by the freedom of Jesus's teachings. It sounds more like a cult summer camp, complete with weird campfire songs and some odd-looking Kool-Aid that is passed around the circle with each of us drinking from the same cup.

For some people, Christianity can be hurtful. For me, it became boring.

When I was a kid, I loved going to church. I would ask my parents if we would "get to go" all the time. Are we going Sunday morning? Sunday night worship service? Wednesday night for Kids group? The all church game night this Friday? I was passionate about being there as much as possible.

But was I really passionate about church itself? I remember thinking the music was a bit boring. And it was hard to stay awake for so long with someone just talking at you. I remember

walking swiftly (never running!) out of the sanctuary as soon as service was over and hanging out in the church's gym. Or rushing out to my parents' car after service, cranking the dial to 10 on some almost-cool Christian music while my friends hung out with me.

Things became more serious when I was in middle school. I remember going to a church camp for the first time. It was really exciting to be in a large group of people worshipping the same God with music more attuned to younger ears. The fact that there was a drum set and a speaker system meant that this place was absolutely rocking compared to my normal church experience. Not to mention, camp food—this was before the theme park incident so I only saw the junk food as good in the eyes of the Lord. But the thing I remember clearest?

The Holy Spirit “shakes.” There's some *Christianese* for you. This is something that isn't very unique, based on conversations with other people. Here's how it happened for me. The camp had several sessions or services where the band played, and there was a sermon, and I think every single one of them had a “coming to Jesus moment” where you were brought to a literal crossroad. You either confessed to Jesus your need for forgiveness or denied the need and essentially implied, “I'm good,” and continued to live your heathen life until you died. At which point, you were rolling the dice on your eternal destination.

It's pretty easy to make the right decision when said in no uncertain terms such as these, eh? Naturally, when one of the services had a response time, I went down to the front altar area to pray. I'm not sure what the sermon was on. Probably about how we all need Jesus 'cause Hell is hot and swearing is sinful. It was middle school camp, which basically meant it was very little about who Jesus is and much more about fire insurance.

Whatever the case, I was praying whatever was on my mind and I remember that I felt this sensation in my stomach and chest. I started to tremble a little, as if I had a slight shiver. It was like time stopped, though it certainly didn't last more than five seconds. How to describe the feeling... have you ever been in a shower with two shower heads? You can put one shower head on hot and the other on slightly cold. It's a pretty awesome sensation to turn them so you experience both washing over you at the same time.

It was like my soul was feeling this awesome warmth while a bucket of cold water was poured over me. I did my best to hide it, but I also cried. I conspicuously wiped my elbows across my eyes, stood up, and walked back to my seat. I don't think I told anyone what I experienced.

Was that the moment the Holy Spirit came into me? Yeah, maybe. Was I dehydrated under the hot summer sun and hungry because lunch was hours ago? Probably. Was I just caught up in the moment and confused by the spectacle around my twelve-year-old self? That's almost certainly true. It could be one and not the others, or it could be all three. Either way, I got the shakes, so my faith was confirmed as real. That's what somebody later said about these types of experiences. It couldn't possibly be that I was afraid of a Hell that sounded much worse than the Hell I was already living while being bullied at school. I thought I finally got my "Get out of jail free" card.

That moment could have been one of the most defining moments of my life. Instead, it felt weird and maybe even scary. And it wasn't even the most memorable part of camp that year. My favorite parts were actually capture the flag, winning an annual 5k race in record time, and hanging out with pretty girls. And a buffet at every meal. Those are the moments that I

remember clearest. The shakes were more like an obscure movie you recall from your childhood only to find out that your buddy saw the same movie. You thought you were the only one who had a personal, authentic connection to that movie, but it was actually just a product of emotional manipulation and some intentional production.

Youth group was the same shit in a different setting. I loved the youth group I was going to in Colorado Springs. But in truth, most of my favorite moments had more to do with fun and goofing around rather than life change. I had some real close friends, but it all lost my interest when they graduated high school and left (they were a couple years older than me). If anything, I may have turned out a bit jaded by the whole thing.

I'll own it. Some of it was me just being a teenager and not really knowing who I was. I struggled with who I wanted to be (cool, hot, smart) compared to who I actually was (awkward, lonely, uncertain). And some of it was the bullshit of the pressure placed on us to have the right answers and to not do the wrong things. If you can memorize the passage from Song of Solomon the 7th chapter, then you're in. Obviously, not that actual passage. Song of Solomon was treated like Biblical porn. It's in there, so we unfortunately can't delete it, but we're going to ignore it as much as possible.

That altar call business I described at camp was still being done at every major youth event and Sunday morning service. And I think I went up and prayed at pretty much every single opportunity. If I had a dollar every time I got saved I would have been able to make this a movie instead of a book. Then I realized something. It was the same people down on their knees next to me at damn near every altar call. It was one of two things:

1. We were all just doing what we were expected to do.

Lift your hands when singing without thinking about the words you're saying. Go down to the front and kneel and confess every wrong thing you've done since the last time. Turn around and hug the people around you, praying for your soul in whispers and hallelujahs. Walk out and repeat next week.

2. We were all scared for our eternal life.

Dear God, I am going to sin this week. I don't have the courage to not smoke or stop looking at porn or not kiss my girlfriend or all of the above. Don't let me die before I can repent of my sins.

Okay, there's nothing wrong with this. Oh wait—yes, there definitely is!

I think that most everybody around me at that time had great intentions. Several of them are truly Godly people. It becomes a problem when the goal is to create these grandiose, emotional moments and no life change happens. It's manufactured and fake. Or when the only way you can convince someone that your religion is right is by telling them they are doomed to death if they choose any other option.

That is not Christianity. If it were, I bet Jesus would have had way more violent, hardcore moments where he would have called fire down to scorch the earth around the Pharisees or taken the sword from Peter's hand and sliced through Judas himself. Instead, he did the opposite. His badass moments included taking the sword away and healing the injured attacker. His rebellion was to bring peace in the face of crucifixion rather than return the favor of violence.

But I was never taught that about Jesus. Church was the same song and dance over and over again. And it was all dead. It was

empty. I couldn't feel anything in this. I became immune to the fake highs and the fake lows that were supposed to trick me into feeling God. It worked for a while, but once my mind realized what was happening, it all went numb.

Just like summer camp, my fondest memories of youth group included activities with no spiritual focus at all. In its place, the itinerary included basketball, rock concerts, and more pretty girls. I didn't talk to many other teens a whole lot about Jesus, but I remember passionately telling them about the new music I was listening to.

And I felt so much shame and guilt around this. I saw through the thinly veiled propaganda and that made me feel like an outsider. I believed that God was real and Hell was real. But I didn't buy into the system that was built around them. I thought that there had to be a way to experience God, but I couldn't find it in all of this. Maybe it wasn't the system that was broken. Maybe it was me that was broken?

This really makes a very good point that we shouldn't ignore. Despite my ignorance and brokenness, I still kinda turned out okay. It gets a little shifty over the next couple years, but I landed on my feet just fine. People want to act like you can't find your own way; if you start wandering, you're likely to choose the path to the gates of hell. Everyone calm the fuck down!

Turning out okay had nothing to do with my Bible memorization or the prayers I muttered at the altars all those times. It had nothing to do with hymns that I couldn't delete from my memory no matter how hard I tried. Or terrible metaphors that demonstrated a woeful ignorance of physics: there was a

skit done one Sunday in which a Christian stands on a stool and another person who is symbolic of a non-believer stands on the ground next to the stool. They grip each other's hands and the Christian does everything she can to lift the heathen from the mire, but sadly it is much easier for the person on the ground to pull the Christian down. The idea was that we should really ponder if God would consider it wise to be friends with non-believers.

Here's another idea. Maybe the Christian shouldn't be standing above anyone, but instead should be down in the muck with everyone else. Like when Jesus gets accused of hanging out with drunkards and partiers. He was building relationships that pissed off the religious of his day and seems to continue to have that effect to the present.

As if Jesus knew what he was about, the thing that brought me through it all was relationship. I know where you want me to go with this, but I can't faithfully do so. I'm not talking about a relationship with Jesus. That's just not true to what happened with me at this stage in my life. I didn't feel like Jesus was literally "there with me" in my darkest of times. I wanted to feel that way, but it never really happened. In hindsight, I can see how God was working in my life, but it wasn't always so obvious along the way.

The relationships that got me through the tough times were friendships. Some of them were with Christians. Some of them were with non-believers (*gasp!*). Good people create good friendships, even if they don't agree with you on everything. I didn't need my friends to believe all the same things as me, I just needed someone to be there when I felt like I was all alone.

I didn't need a sermon or an altar call or worship music. No judgment if that has worked for you, but I needed someone to

be present. If we want to make a difference in people's lives, we should stop preaching at them and start living with them. It's not a Christian's place to point out anybody's sin if they don't know that person, have an understanding of their story, and have the trust of that person to thoughtfully critique their lives.

If my best friend seriously told me I was sinning with how I managed my money or with the vocabulary I used, we would need to talk that out. If a complete stranger did it, they don't know shit about me.

The pressure to evangelize in that way to strangers creates cycles that only manufactures shame for both parties. The accuser feels shame if they don't call out other people's sinful lives because what kind of Christian wouldn't do everything they can to save someone from Hell? And if the Christian does speak up and the person doesn't repent, then they must have done it wrong. The accused feels shame over the supposed sins they've done that they can't overcome or they feel embarrassment over being harassed by someone who doesn't understand them.

Instead, let's use the Jesus model and share some food and drink with the people we care about. Let's become friends. Not projects, just relationships. Let's talk about whatever comes up organically. If that's Jesus and the ways to live a better life, great. If it's music or sports or the best Mexican restaurant in town, then also great. But let's not bring undue shame on each other, especially because of bad theology.

At this point, I would imagine that several readers think me a heretic doomed to hell. That's a damn shame that you would consider someone a heretic just because they believe

something different from you or used a couple words that made you uncomfortable. In fact, this is yet another way in which I have found myself feeling shame. For some time, I felt a deep shame over my beliefs, because I felt morally wrong by the standards of the church culture I was a part of even as I knew I was pursuing Christ.

That's really absurd, considering the heritage of our religion. If you know much of Christianity, you have likely read the New Testament. After Jesus died and ascended to heaven, he left behind a rag tag group to carry on the legacy. And it all went to hell quickly. Peter (and others) wanted to make it so anybody that joined this new movement had to adhere to Jewish laws. Some of these laws became unnecessary, such as the dietary laws. Eventually, it was revealed to Peter that maybe even circumcision was not necessary. But there were many who refused to accept this change.

Circumcision was a requirement to be a Jew. Problem was that Jesus brought a message for everyone. Who in their right mind would want to give up their current beliefs, get their dick sliced, and then get ostracized from their family? Doesn't sound too appealing, and it wasn't needed to follow Jesus. His message was that "God so loved THE WORLD."

So, Paul comes on the scene and basically wrecks it by petitioning for this to be let go by the early church. Circumcision is something that was done for generations. It was absolutely necessary to be included as a follower of God. It was similar to traditions we have today, like baptism or Communion. If somebody were to suggest these things should be released so that nobody need do them anymore, they would be crucified faster than Rob Bell (you may recall that he became a popular punching bag among Christian evangelicals when he wrote a book called *Love*

Wins that posits the absurd notion that Jesus wants everyone to get to heaven regardless of their beliefs. The audacity!).

So, Paul and Peter and everybody else have a big powwow called The Council of Jerusalem, and it is determined that circumcision is not needed to become a Christian. Paul was being a real heretic there, and could have felt deep shame—I bet the establishment tried to taint his reputation by suggesting that he was well intended but sadly deceived. Instead, his theology was determined to be closer to God’s plan than what the establishment already held. And now nobody needs to have their penis cut to be a Christian.

There was a status quo, a requirement that was previously universally accepted. Paul and Peter and James (the brother of Jesus who acted as a trump card at the meeting) wanted to let as many people into Christianity as possible. This is what my life was missing. I wasn’t taught that God could reveal himself to me in ways out of the tradition. I didn’t know that I could explore things outside of what was “written in stone” to learn the truth of Jesus.

As I got older, I realized I really shouldn’t be bored with Christianity. I became bored as a coping mechanism to cover my shame for being different and to cover my guilt for not understanding God the same way as the people around me. It followed me everywhere I went and I heard the same sermons ad nauseam. I believed in the Bible, but was unsure about the things I had been taught. It didn’t feel real anyway, so I might as well push back some and learn.

The best thing that could have happened to me did. I started to ask questions and research answers through books. If reading is not your thing then check out audio books, Ted Talks, podcasts, and interviews: whatever answers your questions. Just

don't back down from asking them. For me, I read books that were controversial in Christian circles. I found myself suddenly excited again and interested in the things I thought I knew.

I found that Rob Bell's aforementioned *Love Wins* actually wasn't heretical in any way. How is it heretical to ask questions about the reality of hell and why it might break from traditions? I hate the idea of people going to hell; help me understand the purpose of it in God's plan. The questions Bell asked were also the questions I was asking, and I have a feeling neither of us hold much fear of Hell and we are both still trying to figure things out.

More importantly, maybe I'm *not* trying to figure it out. Maybe I don't think about hell at all anymore, because it seems like God is more concerned with how we as Christians should bring heaven to earth. Maybe the ones destined for hell are the ones who bring hell to others' lives by peddling sex slaves or through buying products made with slave labor. Have you recently purchased a smart phone, a t-shirt, a movie, or cheap food? Then it's likely you've benefited from slave labor, as have I. Thank God there is grace for all of us.

Soon after, I also read *The Bible Tells Me So* by Peter Enns. For so long, I had issues with the Bible and the ways it contradicts itself. Even the birth of Jesus is told in four different ways that directly contradict each other at times. There are ways to explain this, explanations that have been provided by preachers and professors for generations. There are also interpretations that approach it from the perspective of being written by multiple authors for multiple audiences. That creates a different version of the same story. If my audience for this book you are reading now was my mother, I would have sworn a lot less. If I had written it to be a New York Times bestseller, maybe I would have cut out

all the heavy religious stuff. I wrote it for myself and for you, so my approach changes, and the details remain truth but serve a different purpose.

I continued this habit and found books on homosexuality in relation to Christianity. And then I read some material on racism. I found content on sexism and arguments for women being preachers (something the churches I grew up in would never have approved of). I stumbled upon resources that debated if pacifism should be a requirement of a Christian. I read time and again that materialism and greed were the sins holding many of us back from the life that Jesus came to provide. My eyes were being opened as I continued to search for truth.

I once read an article about a history teacher who wouldn't assign students homework directly related to specific historical events. Rather, the assignments would be focused on research methods. Instead of doing a paper on the invention of the printing press, she would have the students pick their favorite invention that was at least 50 years old (a student might pick the guitar, for example) and they would do a paper on how the item they chose came into existence. As they learned the methodology, then they could better understand how to learn about the printing press when that information was needed. Learn the methodology of how to ask questions about God.

God is truth and truth is God. If we believe that God is the Creator and the all-encompassing Being then there is no truth out there that can exist apart from God. So, feel no shame over your inquiries. Feel no guilt or embarrassment over the things that don't make sense to you. Ask the question, no matter what

it may be. And if you're not sure there is a God, still seek truth. Truth is universal.

Was it evolution and not creationism? Is it okay to be affirming of gay people? Does music have to be a certain way to be "Christian?" Do I need to be baptized, and if so, which method is the proper one? Did Jonah really get swallowed by a whale or was that just a metaphor? Remember, if nobody had ever asked questions then Christians may still require pantsing to check who is a part of the kingdom. But the questions were asked and were pushed and were not dropped.

This is the way I found freedom from shame over doctrine and theology. The good news came when I recognized that ALL truth belongs to God. We don't have to be afraid of studying things that run contradictory to what we think is true right now. If challenging facts arise that disprove what we believe to be true, then it is not the truth that has changed but instead our understanding of what is true. I expect that there are things still in me that I am missing or ignorant of. Hopefully they will be revealed to me this year, or next or someday much later in life. That's the point: it's a journey towards truth. And wherever truth leads, I hope to follow.

It's challenging to determine what truth is, because it is not synonymous with facts. Facts are sterile and can be proven empirically; truth can exist in fiction and hyperbole and is sometimes difficult to prove. You can feel truth. What I do know is that all truth belongs to God and truth is not boring or shame-bringing. Truth transcends life.

It would take many more years for me to further comprehend this, and lots of heartache that would arise from my own misunderstanding of God. When you lose faith in your heritage, you may lose faith in God and find yourself feeling ashamed. For me,

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the shame I felt would lead to many more regretful moments in my story. But the truth of Christianity is that God is always for you. Even with this realization, it would take a longer journey for me to finally let the shackles of shame fall off.

Acknowledgements

I feel like I should thank every single person who has touched this book and offered feedback, listened to me ramble and mumble my way through a brief description, or even just offered generic encouragement to not give up. It has all meant a lot and encouraged me to get to this place of sharing it with the world.

I would like to thank some people by name. If I have forgotten anyone, that is my error and not an indication of the ways in which you have contributed. My bad.

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Shame

midst of sharing the most shameful and embarrassing parts of my life and for being a safe haven when I need refuge from it all.

Thank you, dear Reader. I appreciate you taking the time to read what will likely be the most personal material I ever share. There will be more in the future and it may be poetry or a novel or another memoir or who knows what else. I appreciate your support and hope that you may continue to find your path to freedom.

The Soundtrack

If you weren't paying attention, here are the songs that got me thinking about each chapter. You should absolutely take the time to look up these songs. There are some gems in there. And yes, they are generally of the punk/rock/hardcore persuasion. Many of these artists are my favorites because they write the most sincere, genuine, heartbreaking music I have ever heard. It will be well worth your time looking them up.

1. "God's Gonna Cut You Down" by Johnny Cash
2. "Scissors" by Emery
3. "Seventy Times 7" by Brand New
4. "The Restless" by The Matches
5. "Typical" by MuteMath
6. "Gasoline" by Brand New
7. "Last Chance to Lose Your Keys" by Brand New
8. "The Third Way" by The Classic Crime
9. "Na Na Na" by My Chemical Romance
10. "Slave to Nothing" by Fit For a King
11. "Our World is Grey" by As Cities Burn
12. "The Weight" by Thrice
13. "I Never Got to See the West Coast" by Emery
14. "First Father" by Silent Planet
15. "In Between" by Beartooth
16. "Deathgrip" by Fit For a King



For more information about Josh Roggie
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Shame is a sickness that festers in the soul. When left in isolation, it runs rampant—attacking our spirit, reshaping our identity, and dismantling us to our very core. We've been pressured by society to present only our best attributes, but weaknesses, guilt, and pain simply don't go away when ignored.

In *Shame: An Unconventional Memoir*, Josh Roggie doesn't just reveal the guilt, disappointment, and embarrassment that has been present in his life—he seeks to overcome it through wit and abundant oversharing.

From being born into a puritanical household, to dealing with bullying throughout school and heavy doses of anxiety, he reveals the foundation that would define his longest-lasting pains. By including stories on infertility, ever-evolving theology, and even masturbation, he makes it clear that no topic is off-limits.

Shame is for anyone who has wondered what it would feel like to be known, despite all the things that they've done or that have been done to them. It's time to realize true freedom by bringing shame to the light, where it will wither and die.

“A very personal story that is both funny and heartbreaking.”

Toby Morrell, host of the Bad Christian Podcast



Josh Roggie has been writing since his teenage years when he had aspirations of being a Christian rapper. He has long since released that dream and focused on honing his writing craft to develop stories of all kinds that would inspire challenging questions. He lives in Colorado Springs with his wife and two cats.

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