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The Odd One Out

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“SAY YOU BELIEVE IN GOD.”

I looked in disbelief at the kid who’d just snatched my backpack. I’d known him since first grade, and he’d earned his reputation as a cocky prankster. We were 13 now. But we were friends, classmates... Scholars’ Bowl teammates, for Pete’s sake. This was a joke, surely.

“Say it! Or your backpack’s going in the highway.” He mock-threw it toward the 5 p.m. traffic in front of our high school, and I lunged for it, grabbing a strap. We wrestled over the $10 Wal-Mart bag for a few moments before he begrudgingly released it.

“You’re going to hell,” he said, turning away.

My public life as an atheist began like that, a petty brawl over my backpack and my soul. Until earlier that week, I had kept my views quiet, and when you’re raised atheist in small-town Alabama, that’s generally a smart move. Long before I reached the broad-minded halls of Iowa State, before I’d seen an Ask-an-Atheist booth or dared to believe atheists had their own student groups, I waged a solitary war with fundamentalists in my public school. Lines were drawn and factions formed, and my formative years were defined by the conflict. I’ll tell you my story, with one caveat.

This is not a condemnation of Christianity or the South. This might be a condemnation of high school bullies, though that doesn’t ring true, either. I gave as good as I got. What I can say is that I dove into the battle by choice—I could have stayed underground indefinitely if I’d wanted. By 8th grade, I’d mastered the art of throwing evangelists off my trail. I’d grown my hair long, past-the-butt long, and a two-foot braid on a Southern girl is a pretty good indicator she goes to church somewhere. It was Pentecostal camouflage.

When pressed, I told the First Baptist kids I belonged to Bonny Brook Baptist (or vice versa), and as those were the predominating churches, neither side batted an eye. But I grew tired of evading invitations to lock-ins and youth groups, and I’d almost bitten my tongue through in science courses. So when asked one day why I never showed up to before-school prayer rallies, I answered honestly.

Curious classmates peppered me with questions about my beliefs, and in my initial giddy openness, I typed and distributed a paper outlining evolution. It quickly earned me the rather-witty nickname “Campbell’s” for a reference to primordial soup. The paper also earned a condemnation and private fireplace-burning by a local pastor, whose daughter had handed him a copy. Independent study periods were transformed into impromptu debates, which I didn’t mind, one-sided though they were. I spoke openly (and rashly) about faith as mass delusion. I chopped off my hair at the shoulders. I felt finally, gloriously free.

It was short-lived. After the novelty of debate wore off and their conversion arguments failed, the intimidation efforts began. Trailer-park kids took a...
direct approach, chucking fistfuls of acorns and gravel in parking lots or taunting me in locker rooms. Upper-crust students were subtler. They preferred ostracism and stare-downs, although they weren’t above ambushing me between classes for an informal exorcism.

I’d walked into a trap one day while leaving gym class with my best friend—one moment, we were chatting and walking, and the next a flurry of arms had encircled me. A group of my most-vocal persecutors had linked hands and were sending up prayers as I pivoted, searching for a break in the human fence.

“Lord Jesus, release the demons of disbelief from her soul...”

“Save her, Lord! Free her to receive your love and grace...”

“Leave her alone!” Lauren screamed from outside the circle. Students were stopping nearby to watch the demented game of Red Rover, but the area was strangely devoid of authority figures. I ducked underneath their arms and ran, the group still shouting behind us about hellfire and damnation. We hurried to our next class together, watching over our shoulders.

“They like to call themselves Christian, but they’re not,” Lauren said consolingly. “If you ever want to see what else Christianity can be, I’ll take you to St. Luke’s.”

She was Episcopalian, so she knew a little of my situation. Non-majority denominations – Catholics, Episcopalians, Mormons – weren’t generally recognized as Christian, but they banded together and slid past with minimal witnessing. As the lone atheist in my school, I was an unknown entity. And nothing is feared and hated like an unknown.

Not all fundamentalists agreed with my treatment, I should add. There was internal dissent. Two sisters stand out in my memory: One was a ringleader in the conversion effort who organized students to pointedly bow their heads in prayer for me during lulls in class. The other was disgusted by this and quietly approached me to apologize.

Those who pursued me throughout high school were a small, vocal subset. I responded by being insufferably snarky—we battled it out through smugness.

Student A: “You’d better repent now, before there’s a horrible car accident.”

“Got it. It’s on my to-do list.”

Student B: “Who here believes in God? Raise your hand... yep, that’s everybody. Guess you’re wrong.”

“Everybody used to believe the world was flat. Try again.”

Student C: “Guess what? God still believes in you!”

“Wow, great motto. Are you making T-shirts?”

I brought a lot of it on myself. We cycled viciously: They tormented me, and I antagonized them, until eventually we settled into a long haul of mutual cold-shouldering. I got the hell out when I could. My high school days were compartmentalized, stuffed in a box with my other musty nostalgia. I don’t often think about them.

But when the weather warms and the Ask an Atheist booth appears outside Parks Library, I can’t help but remember. I watch believers stop for a sparring match, Pascal’s wager rolling off their tongues, and I see easy smiles from students manning the booth as they formulate their responses. Debates are spirited but civilized.

I’ve watched these exchanges for three years now, wondering silently. What are their stories? Is it easier here? Harder? I spied on them from a Caribou bench, but couldn’t bring myself to approach. It would have been almost traitorous. I’d caught religion after leaving the South, you see. I felt like a reverse-Judas, betraying my own people for faith. After doing that, what right did I have to ask them anything?

No right at all, probably. But I’ve never been one for unanswered questions. This year, my last year... I’ll ask.

**ISU ATHEIST & AGNOSTIC SOCIETY**

Meetings: Monday nights at 7 p.m. in the Memorial Union Campanile Room

Club email: isuaas@gmail.com

Ask an Atheist booth: Wednesdays outside Parks Library in fall and spring; in the MU West Stairwell during cold weather