

FALTHEIST

How an Atheist
Found Common Ground
with the Religious



CHRIS STEDMAN

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Foreword

by Eboos Patel

There is a moment in the middle of *Faithless* that nearly took my breath away. Chris is living in Bemidji, a small town in northern Minnesota near the headwaters of the Mississippi River. The nearest big city is Fargo, and it is several hours away. In the winter, the snow piles up so high he can't see out of the bedroom window in his garden apartment.

Chris arrived there hoping to escape his past where, as he writes, "I didn't run into ghosts from my former Christian life that reminded me of the years I spent hating myself for being queer and unable to change it."³ By the time he was a student at Augsburg College, Chris's disgust with religion had come to define him as deeply as his Evangelical faith once had. To a group of fellow students whom he knew to be believing Christians, he described getting a Bible verse tattooed on his leg as the single stupidest thing he'd ever done, deriving a peculiar pleasure from the offense he caused.

Chris had come to Bemidji because he wanted to live in a place where he could slow down and reflect, form deep relationships with small-town neighbors, and take the first steps down a career path of service. He found a job at a social services agency run by Lutherans (he notes the irony) working as a direct-service professional for adults with developmental disabilities. His closest relationship was with a man named Marvin, who couldn't talk and who could barely sign. He and Chris found other ways to communicate. Marvin would pretend to sock Chris in the jaw, and Chris

would fall down and bounce back with his dukes up and say, “This isn’t over yet, buddy,” sending Marvin into gales of laughter. Chris watched movies with Marvin, sat with him for hours just keeping him company, read to him from his favorite books.

One day, Marvin brought Chris into his room and placed in his hands one of his most precious possessions, his prayer book. He wanted Chris to read from it. Chris hesitated for a second. Perhaps he was reminded of all those nights he lay awake searching the Scripture for verses in the hope of finding one that would make him feel loved for what God made him. Perhaps he was reminded of the time when, in a drunken rage, he kicked in the glass panel of a church sign. But neither longing nor anger overcame him now. This moment was about what it means to be a friend, about expressing care for something Marvin values. Chris read Marvin a prayer. Marvin, normally tense, let his arms relax. Perhaps he sensed that some deep personal bridge had been crossed in his presence. He pressed his face tightly against Chris’s blue flannel shirt and kept it there for a long time.

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One struggles to imagine the late Christopher Hitchens performing that intimate act of mercy. Or Sam Harris or Daniel Dennett or Richard Dawkins or any of the other prominent so-called New Atheists you’ve likely heard of.

Chris Stedman is different from the atheists who wear that badge on TV (Bill Maher comes to mind). His atheism doesn’t hate God; it loves people. He is proud of who he is (gay, atheist, Minnesotan, heavily tattooed, staff member at the Harvard Humanist Association, writer), and he wants to create a world where all people are free to be proud of who they are—Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Sikh, atheist, wanderer, whatever. He believes that the atheist movement ought to be talking more about what it does stand for than what it

doesn’t. He believes energy spent disparaging what others believe is worse than wasteful; it’s toxic. His goal is to nurture a movement of Humanists who emphasize cultivating humanity, express it in serving others, and work with people of all faiths, in good faith, towards that end. Chris understands that we get there together or not at all.

Like all good personal stories, *Faithless* casts light on an important dimension of our public life. In this case, it is the growing chasm between believers and atheists. It was a chasm first opened by believers, who have mercilessly berated and bullied nonbelievers in ways antithetical to the values of respect, compassion, and freedom central to all our faiths. In recent years, a small, loud group of atheists have battled back, with choice quotes like this one from PZ Myers: “I say, screw the polite words. . . . Break out the steel-toed boots and brass knuckles, and get out there and hammer on the lunatics and idiots.”¹

There’s a set of religious people out there who are only too happy to return the same violent language, and probably more likely to employ the actual tactics.

The wider the chasm, the longer the bridge you’re going to need to cross it. This book is a piece of that bridge for our broader culture. And what’s more, there are tools and skills and stories in these pages that will be useful to bridge builders of all backgrounds.

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Here is another thing good personal stories do: help readers narrate their own lives alongside the life unfolding in the pages of the book. Reading *Faithless* brought back memories I had long buried. In one scene, Chris writes about being out on the town with a group of friends when they are verbally accosted by people shouting, “Fags! Repent!” Chris nods to his friends to keep walking while he stands on the street corner and allows the group to preach at him. He listens politely, joining in when he hears a Bible verse he

recognizes, and then asks if he can share his story. The men are a little shocked but as Chris has listened with such grace, they seem to think it's only fair to let him have his say. And so Chris speaks of his years as a Christian, his coming out, his undergraduate degree in religion, his becoming an atheist, his current graduate study at a seminary, and his internship at Interfaith Youth Core. The conversation tilts back and forth like that for a good part of the evening, and towards the end, one of the men thanks Chris for sharing his story, saying he has never actually met a homosexual before.

My story is nowhere near as brave or dramatic, but it was a small turning point in my life. I was in Seattle, passing through on a cross-country road trip the summer after I graduated from college, fully convinced that the world was sick and needed saving and that my righteous anger was the cure. In the Capitol Hill neighborhood, I saw an angry crowd gathered around an angry man reading angrily from the Bible and pointing dramatically to the ground. He kept repeating the words "Jesus" and "Hell" and the line "You are all going to hell!" The crowd skipped the Jesus part and just basically told him to go to hell.

Normally, I would have jumped right in, tried to out-shout my fellow shouters. But for whatever reason, I just watched this time. And when the crowd had thinned out, I approached the man and asked, "Doesn't Jesus say to feed people?"

He looked a bit surprised. Probably he was so used to being met by anger that even a hint of something different sounded strange. Finally, he said, "Every morning my wife and I buy a loaf of bread and a dozen eggs and fix egg sandwiches for the homeless guys in the neighborhood."

"Oh," I said. "That's good." I started to walk away.

My back was still turned when I heard the man say: "Son, thank you for being decent to me."

That was it. It's a small memory but an important one for me, one that taught me that there is always the possibility to coax a bit of gentleness out of even the most belligerent situations. It is a memory that I am grateful this book helped me recover.



There is a second memory that kept rolling through my mind as I read this, one that was brought back because the only response to a book as honest about life as this one is a bit of honesty with yourself. I remember the scene well. I am playing basketball with my friends. It is a beautiful day in the late spring of 1993. We are second-semester high school seniors in the suburbs of Chicago. We are on top of the world. I am joking about why I had chosen to room with my best friend from high school rather than roll the dice with the roommate lottery at the University of Illinois. The joke is this: "I don't want my assigned roommate to be a fag. What if he creeps up on me while I'm asleep?" Everybody laughs. I smirk a bit on the outside and feel a glow on the inside. It feels good to be the center of attention for even a fleeting moment.

It was one of many anti-gay statements I made growing up. For me, those statements didn't reflect a bigotry born of principle. They reflected a bigotry born of laziness and insecurity. I wasn't really afraid of getting assigned a gay roommate; I was afraid of getting assigned a roommate who didn't like me. Nerdy, skinny, brown-skinned, funny-name me. Getting to college and having my random roommate pick on me—that was a scene I could not countenance. And so I went the safest route, roomed with the kid I'd known since third grade, and scapegoated the cultural pariah I knew no one would defend. As I read about those years when Chris tortured himself because he was gay, I thought to myself, "I was one of the torturers."

I would like to think I am different now, that I have more compassion, more conviction, more courage. I would like to think that I at least try to identify common ground in the midst of conflict, that I am more likely to stand up for whomever the current cultural pariah is than seek a laugh at his expense. To the extent these things are true, I credit a single change in my life: becoming a more committed Muslim. Islam means to submit to the will of God, and I believe God is mercy and my Muslim-ness depends on whether I am merciful to those around me. Whatever compassion and conviction and courage I may have, I believe it comes from God.

This is a story that our culture's loudest atheists would scoff at. But when I shared it with Chris, he was eager to hear more. Whatever force or source strengthened and sustained my compassion, whether or not he believed in it, he wanted to affirm its presence in my life. That quality of listening and affirmation, of creating a space where, as Dorothy Day would say, it is easier for people to be good, that is Christ's gift, his grace note.

Those grace notes are woven through *Faithiest*. This is a book of light and music. Cherish the voice inside—smart, searing, playful, young and still emerging yet remarkably mature. Take a good look at the face on the cover, the one wearing that priceless “Is this really me? Holy cow, I’m so happy!” smile. It is the voice of someone nurturing a Humanism that seeks to build palaces of beauty and not just throw fits of rage. It is the smile of a man who will play an important role in American life and letters for years to come.

—EBOO PATEL
 Founder and president,
 Interfaith Youth Core

I

There's Nothing Worse Than a Faithiest

The chief deficiency I see in the skeptical movement is its polarization: Us vs. Them—the sense that we have a monopoly on the truth; that those other people who believe in all these stupid doctrines are morons; that if you're sensible, you'll listen to us; and if not, to hell with you. This is nonconstructive. It does not get our message across. It condemns us to permanent minority status.

—CARL SAGAN

I had never heard the word “faithiest” before, but I was pretty sure it wasn’t a compliment.

I blushed and ran my hands through my short coffee-colored hair—a nervous habit—and cleared my throat, asking if it was intended to be an insult.

“Yes,” he said without inflection. “There’s nothing worse than a ‘faithiest.’”

It was my first experience with the atheist movement, and for at least a moment I thought it might be my last. I’d been an atheist for a while, but I had hesitated to seek out a community of nonreligious people. I imagined that secular folks would be difficult to organize; that assembling atheists, agnostics, skeptics, freethinkers, and other nonreligious individuals would prove tricky because our

common thread—that we are *not* something—underscores only what we do *not* believe. But as I progressed in my work as an interfaith activist, I noticed that one of the things that actually made people good at it was a groundedness in one's own identity. That, paired with my longing for a community of common belief, led me to begin searching for an organized community of nontheists.

The brusque brush-off occurred at a reception following a public discussion organized by a nonreligious group; the topic had been how the nonreligious—more specifically, atheists, agnostics, and other nontheistic, nonreligious people—should approach religion. I had suspected that there would be mixed feelings about religion. After all, I knew of the popular atheist discourse on the subject, which cast the religious not only as incorrect about metaphysical realities but as standing in the way of social and intellectual progress. But I had also hoped that someone might offer a more balanced perspective on religion, locating within the beliefs, desires, and actions of religious people similar values held by many nonreligious people.

I had gone with optimism and excitement. At the time, I was both an atheist and an intern for Interfaith Youth Core, an organization that helps mobilize young people to change the public narrative on religion from one of conflict to one of cooperation by engaging in dialogue around shared values and collaborative action. Because of my work, I felt I was in a particularly good position to discuss religion in the lives of nonreligious folks. I pictured myself saying with a well-meaning grin, “Hey, I work with religious people every day and my atheism is stronger than ever!” I hoped I might even serve as a bridge between two communities that are so often pitted against one another, to offer my insights as a nonreligious person working in an interfaith environment.

That aspiration was quickly curtailed. Throughout the program, religion—and religious people—were roundly mocked, de-

cried, and denied. I'd arrived hoping to find a community bound by ethical and humanitarian ideals. Instead, I felt isolated and sorely discouraged.

Though I was disheartened by the event, I went to the post-panel reception, held at one of the panelists' apartments, because I hoped that if I spoke with more of the group members I'd find some people who shared my opinions or learn a bit more about why they believed differently than I did. Also, as a thrifty graduate student, free dinner and drinks were hard to pass up!

I walked in and instantly removed my shoes. The apartment was beautiful; the ceiling-to-floor windows allowed for a stunning view of Chicago's orange-and-white-lit skyline. The living room was impeccably clean. (I made a mental note to at least shove my dirty laundry in the closet when I got home.) I stood there and scanned the crowd; I was easily the youngest person there and unfashionably underdressed (nothing new there). Looking down at my feet, I noticed there was a hole in each of my socks. *Maybe I should've left my shoes on*, I thought.

I sat down on the couch, carefully balancing a mint julep in one hand and a plate of hors d'oeuvres I couldn't name in the other, intensely aware of how out of place I must have seemed. Next to me on the couch were a woman in her mid-forties with a shimmering peacock brooch and a man in his late thirties wearing a denim shirt and a tan corduroy vest. I introduced myself and asked what they'd thought of the panel. They raved: “Wasn't it wonderful how intelligent the panelists were and how wickedly they'd exposed the frauds of religion? Weren't they right that we must all focus our energy on bringing about the demise of religious myths?”

I paused, debating whether I should say anything. My “Minnesota Nice” inclination warned me to let it be, but I had to say something. So I started small, asking them to consider that diversity of thought and background fosters an environment where

discourse thrives, where ideas are exchanged, and where we learn from one another.

I was stonewalled: “We have the superior perspective; everyone else is lost,” said the woman with a flick of her hand that suggested she was swatting at an invisible mosquito.

As a former Evangelical Christian, these words were hauntingly familiar, and they represented a kind of sure-handed certainty and dismissal—a kind of fundamentalist thinking, really—that I’d hoped to leave behind with my “born again” beliefs.

Our conversation continued, and I offered up petitions that the positive contributions of religious people be considered with equal weight alongside the negative.

“I understand what you’re saying,” I said, trying to weigh my words carefully, “but how can we discount the role religious beliefs played in motivating the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi?”

“Oh, I get it,” the man jumped in with a sneer. “You’re one of those atheists.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant, but it didn’t sound like a good thing. I shifted my weight from one side to another—another nervous habit—and picked at an hors d’oeuvre that I thought might be some kind of cheese.

“What do you mean, ‘one of those atheists?’”

“You’re not a *real* atheist. We’ve got a name for people like you. You’re a ‘faithieist.’”

Not a *real* atheist. I’d heard words like that before—in my youth, when I was told I couldn’t be a *real* Christian because I was gay. Once again I didn’t fit the prescribed model, and I was not-so-gently shown the door.

Now, atheism is a bit different from Christianity in that atheism isn’t a belief system. It’s an identification marker that unifies a

minority of Americans who do not believe in God. But the implication was clear: you’re at the wrong party, kid.



The next day, I attended my weekly religion class at Loyola University’s Institute of Pastoral Studies, a Jesuit Catholic-run program for priests, nuns, and lay leaders. As the only self-identified nonreligious person in the class, I was regularly met with many questions. Once, a Catholic classmate cornered me in the elevator after class, proclaiming, “I’ve been dying to ask you about your atheism!” Yet it never felt like an affront—she and the others were genuinely (and understandably) curious.

Sitting in class the day after my botched attempt at seeking secular community, I realized that I felt more at home with my religious colleagues than with the atheists from the day before. I looked around the room, focusing on each individual face: here were people who believed in a God I had theorized away years ago, yet they felt more like kin than most atheists I knew. While my classmates felt that their religious beliefs were right, they not only tolerated my beliefs but also enthusiastically embraced and challenged them.

Even though many parts of the United States remain incredibly segregated, we live in the most religiously diverse nation on the planet, so one doesn’t need to be an atheist enrolled in a Catholic institution to know that many American citizens are by default required to coexist with people who believe radically different things. The question I found myself asking that day, however, went a step beyond that.

It was not, “Can religiously diverse people coexist in peace?”—because, with some notable exceptions, Americans generally manage to tolerate one another’s differences. It was, instead, “Can we

learn to seek out our commonalities instead of solely fixating on our differences?" This idea that it is worthwhile to make an intentional effort to find common ground is, to me, the difference between mere diversity and engaged pluralism. It is a question that our nation—in which a solid majority of Americans associate the extremists of 9/11 with all Muslims—is not close to resolving.¹

The challenge of engaged religious diversity—of intersecting religious difference—is one that atheists know perhaps more intimately than most. In a nation full of believers of all stripes, we are, in a sense, outliers. This is perhaps why so many atheists today ask for equal airtime alongside our religious neighbors—we want to be taken seriously; to be seen as equally ethical individuals. The unfortunate side effect is that many atheists demand this at the expense of talking to our religious peers in a way that affords them dignity and respect.

Several years ago, Harvard Humanist chaplain Greg Epstein wrote a book called *Good Without God*, and his thesis was a simple but important one: our society must move beyond the question of *if* one can be good without God to *how* this may be accomplished. I join Greg in wanting people to move beyond wondering whether I am a moral individual, but I also join him in a companion call to our own community: atheism must move beyond defining itself—both in thought and in practice—in opposition to religion. If secular Americans want to be respected in our religiously diverse culture, we need to recognize that there is nuance and complexity in the diversity that defines it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a forefather of modern Humanism, is often said to have written these lines: "That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

Although some atheists—myself included—may cringe at the "w" word, Emerson reminds us to be wary of casting our neighbors in a negative light. Negative fixations will color our worldview. It's not always easy, but we must endeavor to live up to our best principles—just as we hope the religious will.

I have been speaking with secular communities about the idea of engaged religious pluralism for several years, and the results have been mixed. To my great surprise I am condemned and castigated by a subset of my fellow atheists on a regular basis, though most of the dismissals haven't been as clever as "fatherist"; "insufferable moron" comes to mind as a recent example, and it is one of the few that I would feel comfortable reproducing here. (If you're curious enough that you wish to know more, I trust you know how to use Google.) As I encourage my fellow atheists to respect and reach out to people who are religious, I am taken aback by how often I meet resistance and criticism.

Yet I didn't always feel this way. Once upon a time, I might've joined the groups of atheists decrying attempts to build intentional bridges of respect and collaboration between atheists and the religious. That interfaith cooperation is an important aspect of the quest to advance social progress wasn't a conclusion I came to overnight. In fact, after I stopped believing in God, I spent some time decrying the universal "evils of religion." I wanted nothing to do with the religious, and I was sure they wanted nothing to do with me.

Leaving my Loyola class the day after my first atheist event, I stepped out into the cool, windy Chicago afternoon and thought back to my conversation with the man who had called me a "fatherist." The bird-brooched woman had abandoned our discussion quickly,

saying she didn't want to waste her time. The man and I had moved to the hall, grabbing more food and another drink on the way.

"Take Islam," he had said, leaning into a doorframe while I clutched my beer a little too tightly, the condensation running down my forearm to meet with the sweat that had just reached my elbow. "Now that's a violent faith. And don't try to tell me it's not, because I've read the Koran."

I thought of my friend Sayira, one of the most compassionate people I knew. Sayira was a young woman who was motivated by her Muslim faith to work for the economically disadvantaged. Sayira, who was close to receiving her black belt in karate. Sayira, one of the most gentle and loving people I'd ever met, repeatedly opened her home and her kitchen to anyone who was hungry. (And I am hungry a lot.) Sayira, a devout Muslim—and one of my role models. Sayira, who wasn't at all represented in this man's perception of Islam.

Clearing my mind of the conversation about Islam, I turned to face the overcast sky—the same direction I used to look up to in search of God—and recalled how once upon a time, in moments of contemplation such of this, I would direct a prayer up there. Years later, that notion felt alien, and so I looked to my feet to realize that I was standing in a puddle. (Waterproofing my Chuck Taylors hadn't done much to make up for the holes in their sides.)

I was not naïve then, nor am I now, to the atrocities committed in the name of religion around the world. I do not pretend that religion has not played a sizable role in a great many conflicts since people first began to conceive of it, or that it does not do so today. Historically, religion has been at the center of many atrocities—this is an undeniable, important fact. But I also know that at various points in history religion has been an enormous force for liberation. Religion has changed, reformed, and revolutionized the

world, and it will continue to do so as long as it is central to the human story.

I didn't always understand that religion—both religious systems of belief and religious communities and individuals—is dynamic; I once spoke of it in the same static, flat, blanket terms that I hear many atheists use today. It was actively confronting my immobile conceptions of religion—by meeting and getting to know people like Sayira—that forced me to deconstruct my stereotypes. Stereotypes that are bolstered when prominent antitheists (individuals who are not merely nonreligious but outwardly antireligious—I'll return to this distinction later in this book) such as PZ Myers say things like, "Come on, Islam . . . It's bad enough to be the religion of hate, but to be the religion of cowardice ought to leave you feeling ashamed."² It is no wonder that many in the organized atheist community follow suit, lumping all religious believers together and shaming them as a uniformly condemnable bloc.

I fear that some atheists are doing what I used to do in my antireligious days: engaging in monologue instead of dialogue. After years of dismissing religious people outright, I realized that I was so busy talking that I wasn't listening. I was treating religion as a concept instead of talking to people who actually lived religious lives. When I started listening, something interesting happened: I saw that my approach to religion had been distorted. I'd been thinking narrowly about the texts, not about some of their positive applications; of the one-sided stereotypes, not the diverse spectrum of beliefs and practices. It was only after I observed the actual actions of religious communities—and, more importantly, engaged with religious people and their stories—that I was able to see the benefits of working across lines of religious difference.

Now I see interfaith engagement as the key to resolving the world's great religious problems—and they are many. I want the

atheist community to join me, to share their stories and learn from those of the religious. And, most importantly, I want us to join with the religious in working to resolve the problems that afflict our world. Together, we will accomplish so much more than if we work alone or in opposition.

It took me some time to see this, and the years I spent alternately seeking a meaningful community and condemning religion en masse taught me a lot about why so many atheists struggle to approach the topic of religion with tact and grace. Being antireligious wasn't just a matter of opinion; it felt deeply personal. Before becoming strongly antireligious, I was a "born again" Christian struggling to reconcile the claims of that community with my same-sex attractions. And before that? I was nonreligious.

I've been on both sides of the divide and through my life experiences have developed some theories about why people of faith and nontheists struggle to relate to one another, and some ideas about how we might begin to bridge the divide.

I'd like to tell you my story because I think it matters. Certainly not more than any other story; we all have important stories to tell. I offer it up as a case study of sorts—an inside look into why one atheist struggled to find a healthy way to engage with the religious and why transcending our divisions is so important. In this time of polarization in nearly every area of public life, I want to share my story because I hope it will help build bridges at a time when we need more bridges than ever.



When I first started as an intern at Interfaith Youth Core, I partnered with a group of young interfaith leaders to volunteer for a summer in a Chicago soup kitchen. All of us served together and followed each shift with a conversation on what motivates us to do interfaith community service work. I learned a good deal about

Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Protestant ethics, and I got to share my nonreligious notions of giving back to the community. In the process, I was able to engage with the calls to justice and empathy of my religious peers—and in doing so, my own social justice ethic matured. I still have a *lot* to discover, but I have already learned so much from people with stories that radically differ from my own.

Volunteering in that soup kitchen, I felt warm—and not just because I was standing over a hot food-serving line. (You can ask the students I work with if you want more examples of my terrible, cheesy sense of humor—I'll try to turn it off for the remainder of this book.) It was an entirely different feeling from the one I had gotten at the atheist panel on religion. Our actions were constructive; we had gathered to *build* something, not to tear something down.

I want to work to build a world where oppression and suffering can be eradicated. I realize this is already a *slightly* demanding task, and I believe that it is rendered impossible if I endeavor to do it alone or only alongside like-minded peers. I know that tackling the world's many problems requires the broadest possible network of resources, so if that requires me to work with people on areas of agreement while knowing we disagree on other issues, it is a promising start.

Still, there is a process of deconstruction involved in interfaith work—we must be willing to grapple with our fears and with the unknown, and uncover the hearts of diverse human experiences. I think about it like I did the Minnesota corn I grew up eating. We shuck to get to the part we can eat—the part that nourishes and feeds us—just as in interfaith work we try to get past our differences to look for shared aspirations: our common goodness. But those husks can be recycled and used, too: when I was younger, my mom taught my siblings and me to make dolls out of the husks that remained after we had cooked and consumed the sweet corn

we bought at a roadside stand. Our differences don't need to be tossed aside; our diversity can be an asset instead of something to overcome. We can use our distinct skills and ideas to achieve our shared goals. The first step toward identifying them is sharing our stories with one another.

Sociologist Marshall Ganz writes, "Stories are what enable us to communicate [our] values to one another." Psychologist Dan P. McAdams elaborates on this idea, suggesting that the values we exemplify through story move into action and vision: "Narrative guides behavior in every moment, and frames not only how we see the past but how we see ourselves in the future."²⁴

What future will we imagine for ourselves and for the world? Is it a pessimistic narrative in which the religious and secular will continuously come into conflict until one triumphs over the other? Where religion is nothing more than a problem to be eradicated? In the words of IFYC founder and president Eboo Patel: Will we make of religion a "bomb of destruction, a barrier of division"—or can we make it "a bridge of cooperation"?²⁵

Perhaps we can make the latter happen, if we listen to more stories and act—together—on the shared values they communicate.



Achieving a more cooperative world will require a dramatic change in how both atheists and the religious talk about atheism and religion. The problems of religious fundamentalism are apparent, and have already been responded to by many individuals far more qualified to do so than I. But what of atheism's antipluralism voices, like Sam Harris, who has said that "talk about the dangers of 'Islamophobia'" (discrimination or bias against Muslims or those who are perceived as being Muslim, which is a widely recognized, well-documented phenomenon in countries like the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia) is "deluded"?²⁶

In a culture that increasingly asks us to check our religious and nonreligious identities at the door—to silence the values and stories we hold most dear—the "New Atheist" brand of secularism isn't helping. Although I believe that many New Atheist critiques of religion are correct and have helped many people find liberation from oppressive beliefs, some of these critiques have also often neglected to account for the full range of religious expression and have resulted in segregation that has parsed the religious and the secular into opposing camps. Religious and nonreligious identities are perhaps our most important social capital, for they signify our most central values, which inform how we act in the world. When we do not engage them, we lose out on something fundamentally important.

And people are resisting this enforced compartmentalization. For all of the gains we've made in the realm of scientific discovery, religiosity is still alive and well. Evangelicalism is thriving in many parts of the world, and fundamentalism is experiencing a radical surge. The 2010 Pew study on American Millennials—the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s—found that not only is "the intensity of [Millennials'] religious affiliation . . . as strong today as among previous generations when they were young" but that "levels of certainty of belief in God have increased" and that religious Millennials are "more inclined than their elders to believe their own religion is the one true path to eternal life."²⁷ Sociologists once predicted that religion would decline as a result of modernization, but precisely the opposite phenomenon has occurred. Some religious movements have remained steady while others have grown in recent decades, both in the United States and around the world, and sociologists have since retracted their predictions. According to Peter Berger, "Most sociologists of religion . . . [have] looked at the world and concluded that secularization theory—that is, the thesis that modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion—does not fit the facts of the matter."²⁸ Psychologist David M. Wulff agrees: "At

a point in human history when many thought that religion was on its way out, a casualty of science and rationality, we are witnessing a worldwide resurgence of fundamentalism, on the one hand, and a virtual explosion of interest in the 'new spirituality' on the other."⁹

With divisive religious fundamentalism on the rise, reactionary atheism that fixates on making antireligious proclamations is creating even more division. I believe that this so-called New Atheism—the kind that singles out the religious lives of others as its number one target—is toxic, misdirected, and wasteful. Disengaged or antagonistic atheism weakens our community's claim that an ethical life is possible without a belief in God, supplanting this with an alienating narrative that both distracts us from investing in community-building efforts of our own and prevents us from accomplishing anything outside of our small community. In addition, this militant, uncompromising antitheism inhibits people who do not believe in God from ever moving beyond articulating how they differ from the religious into the kinds of efforts that engender community building within and cooperation without. I do not believe it represents most atheists, but this perspective is currently the loudest and most visible one, speaking on behalf of atheists to the wider world and dictating the direction of the organized atheist community.

And so it is with this thought in mind that I begin to consider the lessons I have learned through my experiences. I'm going to do my best to tell my story honestly, but I haven't the best head for facts, names, dates, or anniversaries. (Ask my mom how many years she has received a Mother's Day card on time.) In other words, I'm a big-picture kind of guy; the details slip through the cracks in my floorboards.

Moreover, my mom swears up and down that several of the few vivid memories I've retained from childhood simply didn't happen. I'd like to believe she's wrong, but I fear she may be right. For example, she tells me that one day in community children's swimming

lessons I earnestly informed all of my water-winged classmates that my mom had gotten pregnant with me when she was in high school; she turned to the parents standing alongside her at the side of the pool and explained, red-faced, that I suffered the deadly combination of being a wildly imaginative storyteller and having a shoddy memory. I'm not sure they believed her, but if there's one thing my mom is not, it's a liar—I just don't always get things right in hindsight.

Still, I will endeavor to tell it like it was. I may shift a few names or dates along the way to respect the privacy of some, but the spirit of what I write will be as true as I can muster.

The truth I aim to communicate is a simple and universal one: that all folks, whether Muslim or Christian or Hindu or atheist, deserve equal dignity. I hope my story will illuminate the problems that arise when we dehumanize people because of their atheism or religiosity, and when we resort to negative rhetoric and name-calling instead of seeking to understand our differences.

Just as I've personally reclaimed "queer" from those who have used it in an attempt to discount the legitimacy of my identity, I now reclaim "faithleist." If such a label insinuates that I am interested in both exploring godless ethics and identifying and engaging shared values with the religious—in putting "faith" in my fellow human beings and our shared potential to overcome the false dichotomies that keep us apart—then I am all for it.

To build a strong society, my Humanistic ethics encourage me to engage. This is much more than mere atheism, which is only a statement about what I don't believe in. After years of witnessing the ugliness that arises when rejection-based beliefs lead to the rejection of people, I now seek out ties that will bind us together.

After learning the necessity of engagement the hard way, I've uncovered an essential truth—the fellowship I had been seeking all along was already around me: a diverse community defined by shared values rather than shared identity.

that interview was also the most overlooked. In a blink-and-you'll-miss-it sentence, Hawking offered an imperative call to action:

Q: So here we are. What should we do?

A: We should seek the greatest value of our action.¹⁷

Given that we are here, what will we do? What is the greatest value of our action? I'm not a scientist, but I believe the answer is as simple as seeking to understand the diverse people who are here with us, and working together to advance equality and justice for all.

8

Fact or Friction, Engage or Enrage

*I have made a ceaseless effort not to ridicule, not to bewail,
not to scorn human actions, but to understand them.*

—BARUCH SPINOZA

I've questioned the appropriateness of writing a memoir before reaching the age of twenty-five more than a few times. In many ways, it feels a bit silly, if not premature, to relish my past. I'm more concerned with questions of my present—occupying myself with thoughts of how I'm living in and contributing to the world around me—than I am with revisiting identities I used to inhabit or beliefs I've since renounced.

Yet surveying the trajectory I've taken offers some instructive revelations. First, there is a significant parallel between the certitude I felt as a conflicted, fundamentalist Christian and as a conflicted, antireligious atheist. Both represented my desire for certainty, but both came at the expense of others' humanity.

Second, my life-long search for meaning has been a journey of navigating identity. But for much of it, I didn't bring my full self to the table—first when I was closeted in the Christian community and, later, when I was biased against religious people because of the emotional injuries I sustained and my reluctance to broach the subject of religious differences in my relationships. Because I was

unable and unwilling to be honest about who I was, I was guarded. The walls I built didn't really protect me, though; instead, they inhibited me from seeing others as full human beings, and they prevented others from knowing me and challenging their assumptions about queer people and atheists. I looked for the negative to confirm my preexisting biases, instead of supporting and advocating for positive change or making sense of my own desires and values. And because I was always looking for a fight, for enemies to defend myself against, I had a difficult time seeing the good in those who seemed different.

The activism of my adolescence was defined by self-righteousness, such as when I camped out in front of a conference on anti-gay "reparative therapy" and shouted at those going in, high-fiving my fellow activists every time someone cowered or averted his gaze. I took a kind of pleasure in making people uncomfortable and tried to adopt the "I don't give a fuck" posture I saw others employ. If people didn't accept me for who I was—immediately, in totality, and without flinching—then they could go fuck themselves, right? It wasn't my job to coddle them into being tolerant or to make them feel okay about their inability to do so.

Over the years, I learned how to meet people in the middle or even further, and, all the more, to see people as individuals instead of members of categories I didn't belong to. Rather than casting those who disagree with me as steadfast adversaries, I have come to see them as complex human beings and our interactions as opportunities to learn and grow together. This shift in perspective has enabled me to make peace with the struggles of my past, and the activism-by-fist of my younger years has gradually transformed into an extended arm of invitation.

Directing anger at others can feel good, but I've found that a hangover follows. On the contrary, I've never regretted responding to intolerance with love. As Martin Luther King Jr. wrote:

The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. . . . Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.¹

He was only twenty-six when he partnered with people of all beliefs and backgrounds to organize the Montgomery bus boycott. As a twentysomething, I'm sure King entertained the question: "Who am I?" But when I think of how he lived, a larger question looms for me about Humanists and about all of us: "Who can we be together?"

Still, knowing your own story is the first step. As Alasdair MacIntyre said: "I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"² The question of self informs the answer of how one situates oneself in the world. But though the question of self may never be fully answered, the urgency of learning how to love one another is too great to put off.

I look at my life now and am astonished by how much has changed since the days I earnestly believed I was spiritually sick; that fearful eleven-year-old boy who went to church for the free pizza and because he was looking for somewhere to belong has developed into a young man who is comfortable enough in his own skin to take the risk of reaching out to others. Where there was once an uncertain, frightened, self-protective, and angry young boy, there is now someone focused on building understanding with the hope that someday no one will be marginalized because of who they are. These lives—the child I was and the, dare I say it, adult that I

am—feel disconnected in all the obvious ways, but they are connected by a thread of growth, a move from being guided by fear and anger to curiosity and empathy. The changes in my life, the shift from insecurity to balance, are the direct result of the understanding I have found from and with other people; from seeking, discovering, and creating spaces where I could relearn how to be myself, where I could introduce my authentic self to strangers after years of hiding, and where I could invite others to teach me about our differences.

For years I was blinded by my own anger, animosity, and resentment. It prevented me from seeing myself honestly, and from seeing and hearing others in their complexity. My indiscriminate desire to pick fights made me look for the worst in others and ignore the nuance. My defensiveness seized any opportunity to imagine myself under siege. That negative outlook—where everyone who didn't think like me was probably my enemy—became the lens through which I viewed the world.

I've still got a mean streak. The kid who lived to provoke my siblings, who once made a "suggestion box" out of an empty tissue holder in the middle of a high school math class for a bungling, ineffectual first-year teacher and passed it around the room—that occasionally rude rabble-rouser still lives in me. But I have found more productive uses for that energy, for my desire to challenge and change.

Similarly, the confidence I lost during the years I spent beating myself up for who I was has returned, but it is different now. It is tempered, it is cautious and protective, and I like to think it is humble. The toned-down nature of my confidence allows me to love in ways I couldn't before: to let things happen on terms other than my own, to trust in the potential goodness of others, to derive satisfaction from another's happiness, to reach out and try to meet people where they are. And in a universe where I believe meaning and purpose are not gifted from a divine source but are instead

collectively assembled by humans, learning to live alongside and love others—all others—is perhaps our greatest task.

I wrote this book because I want to live in a world where love is more commonplace, and the way I'm trying to do that is by working to advance the conversation on how atheists and the religious relate to one another. Sharing my experiences is the best way I know how to do that. There are many other stories I could tell from the years I've dedicated to this work—the atheist students I've met who sheepishly admitted they've never talked to their religious classmates about their beliefs; the religious students I've met who admitted they had negative stereotypes about atheists and vowed to challenge them; the people who are pushing religious communities into a pluralistic mindset; the allies all across Boston who work with me every day in interfaith solidarity to fight hunger, anti-gay and anti-Muslim intolerance, and other affronts to human dignity. But I know my own story better than any other, so that's where I've begun.

My experiences have led me to the conclusion that atheists and the religious need to find better ways to talk to one another, and they need to identify the areas of shared humanity that will enable mutually enriching collaboration. For the last several years, I've explored this with people of faith and with atheists. Although my advice on how to advance this conversation is limited, I can say with unwavering confidence that it is an endeavor worth pursuing, and I encourage others to try it for themselves.

That said, I've got a few ideas.



Religious pluralism is neither coexistence nor consensus. Interfaith Youth Core's Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer write: "Drawing from Harvard scholar Diana Eck, IFYC articulates religious pluralism as the active engagement of religious diversity to a constructive end.

Diversity is a mere descriptive fact; 'pluralism is an achievement' (Eck). We break this definition further into three essential components: respect for individual religious or non-religious identity, mutually inspiring relationships, and common action for the common good."³

Interfaith dialogue strives to usher in religious pluralism, and it is realized primarily through the personal stories of its practitioners. Storytelling aids dialogue because it is nonthreatening, because it prompts a mutual exchange of stories that help people bond, and because it allows people to talk about their identities in a way that feels safe. By grounding dialogue in individual experience, the listener is less likely to be offended by what might be alien to her or his own experience. Instead of provoking a negative response, IFYC suggests that this exchange can result in mutually inspiring relationships and common action:

In interfaith dialogue, it is far too easy to discuss topics that may put us at odds with our conversation partners. . . . If, however, we encourage participants to begin with a story from their own lived experience, it is often less threatening for listeners. While they may not have lived the same experience as the storyteller, it is unlikely that they will challenge the veracity of his or her own story. Instead, the storyteller is inviting the listeners to share in a piece of his or her own experience, even if it is grounded in different beliefs or values. The dialogue is therefore inclusive rather than exclusive and allows for a mutually appreciative encounter.⁴

As the above selection indicates, before one can become an active agent of engaging religious pluralism, an individual must be grounded in her or his own particular identity. This of course presents two intriguing questions: How might nonreligious indi-

viduals participate in a movement encouraging engaged religious pluralism that is rooted in particular religious identity? And why should we?

There are four primary reasons that engaging in interfaith work will benefit the nonreligious, which I will expand on below: we're outnumbered; we want to end religious extremism and other forms of oppression and suffering; we have a lot to learn; and we have a bad reputation and are discriminated against.

1. Atheists Are Outnumbered, aka the Pragmatic Argument

Whether we wish to or not, atheists are forced by proximity to engage with the religious. It seems implausible that any nonreligious person in America has strictly secular relationships. We're outnumbered. Though the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion is growing, atheism remains a minority perspective. More interestingly, American religious communities are undergoing some interesting shifts that, try as some atheists might, make it impossible for us to approach them as a monolithic and inert community that is strictly problematic.

As I noted in the first chapter, survey data demonstrates that religion is unlikely to lose its social influence in the conceivable future. Though young Americans are significantly less likely than older generations to claim religious membership or attend a religious service regularly, religion continues to permeate American life—it seems that the majority of the religiously unaffiliated still maintain religious or supernatural beliefs, while religious fundamentalism is experiencing renewed growth both domestically and around the world.

Though religion today looks very different than it has in the past, it isn't about to vanish from the face of the earth. And since people of faith are our neighbors, we ought to know them and their motivations. In giving them an opportunity to get to know us and

the stories of our experiences as nonreligious persons—and, perhaps more importantly, not forgetting to get to know them—we will begin to erode some of the divisions between the secular and the religious. By doing so we are likely, as IFYC suggests, to identify some shared values upon which we can act in interfaith solidarity. The interfaith coalition that led the American civil rights movement recognized that success would require respecting the many different reasons people come to the table to support a common cause. Unless we strive to understand people's religious beliefs and practices, efforts that hinge on solidarity will fail. Without knowing and understanding the spectrum of moral and religious beliefs that compel people to act, we will remain divided.

You don't even need to think that religion can be a positive force in the world to see the value in interfaith cooperation that includes the nonreligious. As citizens of a religiously diverse world, interfaith cooperation is a necessity in order to accomplish things that require a coalition larger than the community to which you belong—whether you wish to see religion come to an end or not.

2. We Want to End Religious Extremism and Other Forms of Oppression and Suffering, aka the Shared-Values Argument

One such common goal shared by the interfaith cooperation movement and the atheist movement is a proactive aim to end religious extremism. The interfaith movement is inherently rooted in an anti-fundamentalism framework. In *Acts of Faith*, Eboo Patel writes that “the twenty-first century will be shaped by the question of the faith line. On one side of the faith line are the religious totalitarians. Their conviction is that only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing, and belonging on earth. Everyone else needs to be cowed, or converted, or condemned, or killed. On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists,

who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together.”²⁵

Atheists and the nonreligious ought to see ourselves as having a lot in common with religious pluralists; likewise, religious pluralists are likely to see themselves as having more in common with us than with the extremists who also claim their tradition. In allying our efforts to combat religious extremism with like-minded campaigns occurring within religious communities, our efforts will be more effective. A Muslim speaking out against religious extremism will probably be better received by Muslim communities than a Humanist.

In *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India*, political scientist Ashutosh Varshney noted that the likelihood that inciting events will lead to widespread or long-term violence is significantly less in communities where civic ties across lines of identity differentiation were present. In populations where such ties were nonexistent, inciting incidents provoked extensive inter-identity violence. Thus, as interfaith cooperation asserts, invested relationships across lines of identity difference are essential for avoiding conflict.

One of the top priorities of organized secular communities is criticizing and combating religiously based oppression, and pluralistic religious communities can be among our strongest allies in this work. However, if we adopt a broadly negative approach to religion and religious communities, we may burn these bridges and lose the opportunity to count these communities as allies.

3. We Have a Lot to Learn, aka the Educational Argument

These mutual interests can never be identified if we fail to recognize that religious communities have a lot to teach us. In “E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the 21st Century,” Robert

Putnam wrote that diversity is important to building strong and sustainable communities. But, at least at first, people tend to “hunker down” with those very similar to themselves and gaze upon newcomers with suspicion. For diversity to flower, individuals must meet and learn from one another.

A quote from Carl Sagan appears at the very beginning of this book, and I’d like to think that some of his ideas permeate this work. The pragmatism, compassion, curiosity, and creativity that he modeled in his life and in his work inspire me to live a life that both acknowledges truth and prioritizes kindness toward others. As he once wrote: “Every one of us is, in the cosmic perspective, precious. If a human disagrees with you, let him live. In a hundred billion galaxies, you will not find another.”⁶

While I agree with that sentiment, I’d like to go a step further. I don’t want to just let those who disagree with me live—I want to go out of my way to try to befriend and understand them. Sure enough, some of my greatest insights have grown out of such relationships.

We can also learn from and adapt the best that religious communities have to offer, as Alain de Botton argued in *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion*. Some non-religious communities and individuals utilize so-called religious practices—for example, the Harvard Humanist Contemplative Group runs well-attended meditation sessions. There are Humanist chaplains. Humanist celebrants perform invocations, weddings, baby-naming ceremonies, and funerals. Some lift heavily from religious traditions, even if that just involves looking to the best practices of successful religious communities.

Furthermore, many religions have nurtured activists and anti-oppression movements. Many of history’s greatest advocates for the disenfranchised—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma

Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Msgr. Oscar Romero, and many others—cited their religious convictions as the primary impetus for their social justice work and launched their efforts in interfaith coalitions. And though some secular individuals cast religion as an inherently bad thing, it is not difficult to make a case that aspects of religion have been and continue to be a force for good in the world. There is a storied history of religious social justice, and we would do well to learn from it; religiously based social justice continues in great force today, and we would do well to join with it. This will require a willingness to learn from people, even if we think some of their beliefs are incorrect.

It is also important to remember that religious criticism is not the exclusive domain of the nonreligious, and acting like it is by adopting a “religious people versus atheists” mentality while painting all religious believers with a broad brush alienates allies in the important fight against dogmatism and totalitarianism. Criticism of religious beliefs isn’t a new thing; its legacy is as long as the existence of religion itself, and it rests on the backs of outspoken religious leaders like Martin Luther, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and even the biblical Jesus Christ. But they—like many religious critics today who work within their own communities—were reformers, not abolitionists.

Regardless of whether you find anything in religion admirable, it seems that, for now anyway, religion is unlikely to become irrelevant. And in a world where religious conflict is in the headlines on a daily basis and religious illiteracy is widespread, it actually feels increasingly relevant. The dangers of acting like it isn’t are clear: when fraught issues related to religion arise, being unable to contextualize them or understand their implications makes it difficult to know how to respond. Cultivating positive relationships between people of diverse religious and nonreligious identities not

only helps prevent conflict by creating invested relationships—it also combats ignorance by giving people the opportunity to educate one another about their beliefs and backgrounds.

4. We Have a Bad Reputation and Are Discriminated Against, aka the Necessity Argument

If we do not allow others to know us by intentionally engaging diversity, we lose an opportunity to ensure that our own rights are protected. More generally, the respectful relationships we establish with religious communities will also help us reinforce a positive public image for nontheists.

I have seen the dividends of this firsthand time and time again, and it has largely resulted from my work with people who claim not to know many atheists. Because we represent such a small sliver of the American population—and, as noted in the previous chapter, because we are often seen in a negative light—it is imperative that atheists make themselves known. A 2010 Gallup poll demonstrated something the LGBTQ community has recognized for some time: people are significantly more inclined to oppose gay marriage if they do not know anyone who is gay.⁷ Similarly, a *Time* magazine cover story that same year featured revealing numbers that speak volumes about the correlation between positive relationships and civic support; per their survey, 46 percent of Americans think Islam is more violent than other faiths, and 61 percent oppose Park51 (or the “Ground Zero Mosque”), but only 37 percent even know a Muslim American.⁸ Another survey released around the same time, by Pew, reported that 55 percent of Americans know “not very much” or “nothing at all” about Islam. The disconnect is clear: when only 37 percent of Americans know a Muslim American, and 55 percent claim to know very little or nothing about Islam, the negative stereotypes about the Muslim community go unchallenged.⁹ The same logic can be extended to

atheists—the fewer relationships we have with people of faith, the worse our image will be. By building coalitions and letting ourselves be known by the religious, we will deconstruct the stereotypes imposed upon us and ensure our protection and respect from others.

Based on my experiences as an atheist and an interfaith activist, I have confidence that building relationships of mutuality and respect will alter the negative public perceptions about atheists. As Abraham Lincoln once said:

If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that you are his sincere friend. Therein is a drop of honey that catches his heart, which, say what he will, is the great high road to his reason, and which, when once gained, you will find but little trouble in convincing his judgment of the justice of your cause, if indeed that cause really be a just one. On the contrary, assume to dictate to his judgment, or to command his action, or to mark him as one to be shunned and despised, and he will retreat within himself, close all the avenues to his head and his heart; and tho' your cause be naked truth itself, transformed to the heaviest lance, harder than steel, and sharper than steel can be made, and tho' you throw it with more than Herculean force and precision, you shall no more be able to pierce him, than to penetrate the hard shell of a tortoise with a rye straw.¹⁰

TWO MAJOR CRITIQUES

Since I started writing and speaking about interfaith work, I've read a significant amount of criticism of atheists participating in these efforts. From this writing it seems a large percentage of atheist interfaith opponents have kept their distance from interfaith work. I understand their hesitation, but I can't help wondering if

there is some disconnect when those who most heavily criticize the interfaith movement also seem to have had little to no actual experience with it. I could be wrong, but I'd be surprised if someone who had been involved in interfaith work would suggest, as PZ Myers did, that it "cheerfully and indiscriminately embrace[s] every faith without regard for content."¹¹

Almost every argument I've read or heard from atheists opposed to interfaith work employs two critiques, and they're directly related: that interfaith leaves no room for religious criticism, and that it by default excludes atheists because atheism isn't a "faith." Atheists' rejection of interfaith work seems to be due in large part to an underlying assumption that, in order to participate, everyone must bite his or her tongue and play nice, and that participation in this kind of movement lends our implicit approval to "faith" as a concept and rallying point.

Unsurprisingly, the idea that interfaith work requires significant tongue-biting makes many atheists very uncomfortable; it was certainly a concern I had before I started working in the interfaith movement. The irony of this worry is that the atheist and interfaith movements actually share a common point of origin: they both started, in part, as a reaction to religious extremism. Much like the atheist movement, the interfaith movement seeks to build intergroup understanding, encourage critical thinking, and end religiously based social and political exclusivism. The fundamental misunderstanding many people have is imagining that the interfaith movement is uninterested in combating religious totalitarianism and that it exists solely to maintain religious privilege—as an excuse to show that religion, in its many diverse forms, owns morality.

This concern couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, atheists participating in interfaith programs actually disrupt religious privilege by asserting that, for us, religious beliefs have little or

nothing to do with our ethics. But if atheists do not participate in ongoing interfaith efforts, we leave the field open for the idea that faith is the only driving factor that compels people to work for a better world. By opting not to participate, atheists leave the ground uncontested for people of faith to claim. But by showing up, atheists demonstrate that religion does not have a monopoly on morality.

In my experience, interfaith work exists to eliminate religious privilege by bringing diverse religious and nonreligious people into common work to build relationships that might deconstruct the kind of "us versus them" thinking that contributes to exclusivist religious hierarchy. It is a place to challenge and question but to do so constructively.

The success of such challenges is contingent on whether invested relationships exist between the involved parties. If not, disagreements run the risk of degenerating into shouting matches in place of reasonable discourse. Though in the United States atheists and the religious don't regularly commit physical violence against one another, it is clear that invested relationships across lines of identity difference are essential for cooperation and constructive intergroup communication, whether those groups are religious or not.

Whether engaging Christians around my negative experiences as a former evangelical and as a queer person, or challenging my religious peers to explain their beliefs rationally, I've found interfaith work to not only be a fruitful place for such conversations but, in fact, the ideal forum for it. I can fondly recall any number of incidents when I argued theology and philosophy with religious colleagues while doing interfaith work and how, later, they told me that they actually took my perspective seriously because we had built a trusting relationship. It made all the difference that I treated them as intellectual equals—as people with respectable

goals rather than just mindless adherents of some stupid religion. They had heard positions similar to mine in the past from other atheists, but the arguments had been presented so disrespectfully that they made no impact, and in some cases closed my religious colleagues to even entertaining such ideas.

This is precisely what interfaith work sets out to do: elicit civil dialogue to increase understanding, not stifle it for the sake of “playing nice.”

There is a related concern many atheists have about joining interfaith coalitions: that participating in this work somehow bolsters religious privilege. And, all the more, that some people will conflate atheists participating in interfaith work with the idea that atheism is “just another religion,” when some of the underlying values of a religious mindset are exactly what many atheists reject.

I can only speak from my experience here, but I have been invited to address interfaith conferences and groups many times, and I often open with this line: “Let’s get one thing out of the way—atheism and Humanism aren’t religions.” Not once have I had anyone disagree with me.

I fully acknowledge that the language of “interfaith” is imperfect, clunky, and can feel exclusive to many nonreligious people. But I think we should participate in interfaith efforts anyway. Interfaith is currently the most-recognized term to describe activities that bring the religious and nonreligious together for dialogue and common work; it is used far and wide by many, including the Obama administration. (When President Obama announced his Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge, he specifically highlighted the nonreligious as key stakeholders in this work.)¹²

I believe that change will come from within—that by participating in interfaith work, the nonreligious will broaden the meaning of such efforts and that the language used to describe them will

change accordingly. This has certainly been true of my experiences in the interfaith movement—when I first began, the language was often quite religious-centric. But in just a few years, it has shifted dramatically to include the nonreligious. One example is an interfaith organization I have collaborated with in Massachusetts that fights homelessness. When I first began to work with them, they went by the name Social Action Ministries. Soon, however, we began a discussion about their name. Before long, they decided to change it to Social Action Massachusetts. In a guest post for my blog about this decision, their coordinator, Caitlin Golden, wrote: “We don’t want to be just *interfaith*—our dialogue and our action will only be truly inclusive if they also include the voices of those who do not identify with the *faith* part of interfaith at all. This isn’t about ‘watering down’ the conversation to a lowest common denominator or pretending that we’re all in theological or philosophical agreement, but rather about creating the space for people of diverse identities to share the values that lead them to engage in social action.”¹³

To atheists concerned about being seen as “just another faith” and worried that interfaith isn’t an avenue for substantive discourse: I encourage you to give it a shot anyway, and be vocal about where you stand. I cannot begin to recount all of the times interfaith work has opened up a space for robust conversations on problematic religious practices and beliefs. In fact, it has been a hallmark of my experience working in the interfaith movement. Furthermore, it has allowed me to engage religious people about atheist identity and eradicate significant misconceptions about what atheism is and what it isn’t.

I regularly hear from atheists who are leading the charge for interfaith cooperation on their campuses and in their communities, and their experiences echo mine. They too have found that interfaith is expanding to incorporate them and that, when done

well, interfaith engagement doesn't require that people check their convictions at the door; it invites people to try to understand and humanize the other.

It's a worthy goal—a necessary one—and if the only thing keeping some atheists from participating is a disagreement with the term “interfaith,” then that is a missed opportunity.



“I still can't believe this is what I do for living!” I thought to myself as I walked out of the airport in State College, Pennsylvania.

I was met by the Reverend David Witkovsky, campus chaplain for Juniata College in Huntingdon and Campus Ministry intern Lauren Seganos. They climbed out of a blue car and gave me a giant hug. “Welcome to rural Pennsylvania,” said Lauren as the crisp April wind threatened to knock us over.

I was in the middle of my second speaking tour of 2011. That night, I spoke at a small church that was working toward creating a “welcoming statement” for LGBT individuals. I shared my current beliefs and work, and discussed some of my experiences as a queer person and a former Christian—experiences of being alienated from my church, of being physically assaulted by a group of men shouting Bible verses at me, but also moments of radical welcoming—and I listened to them as they detailed the struggle within their community around this issue. We learned a lot about one another, and I left feeling very encouraged by their desire to make their church a safe space for all people.

I kicked off the next day by speaking in a World Religions class about atheism, Humanism, and the religiously unaffiliated. After my remarks a student approached me, speaking in a small whisper: “I'm an atheist,” she said. “I feel isolated, and most of the atheist community I find online is largely about bashing religious people.

I've wanted to find a positive community, and I want to be open about my atheism. Thanks for starting this conversation here.”

Exchanges like that continued throughout the day—after a public discussion on Humanism that I facilitated, during meetings with students and staff—and when it was finally time for my evening speech on atheism and interfaith cooperation, the lecture hall was full to capacity. Students of all different backgrounds—Christians, atheists, Muslims, Jews, and others—had come together and offered questions, challenges, and their hope for positive dialogue, community, and action.

After my speech, a student who had attended nearly every event I was at that day came up to me and asked if we could talk sometime. I was exhausted from a full day, but I offered to meet him for coffee early the next morning before I had to catch a Megabus to Pittsburgh.

As the sun rose, we discussed the challenges of growing up queer in a conservative religious environment and of our shared hope for a world in which people seek out the good in one another. I tried to do more listening than talking and found myself hugely inspired by this student's optimism in the face of difficult life experiences. We finished with a hug and agreed to stay in touch.

Sitting on the bus that day, I felt more convinced than ever that interfaith work contains the potential to improve people's lives. I thought back to my meeting with the Juniata Interfaith Council the day before—to the atheists at the meeting who spoke about their commitment to inclusion and justice and about their desire to contribute to interfaith social action. By the meetings' end, we had identified concrete steps to create a Secular Student Alliance group for nonreligious students so that they too would have a community. The Campus Ministry office offered to support the students' efforts however they could.

There were a lot of atheist, agnostic, Humanist, and nonreligious students at Juniata who felt isolated—and now, thanks to the generous welcome of Juniata's Campus Ministry, they'll have a community of their own—and they've been affirmed as essential participants at the interfaith table. Now, there will be no empty chairs.

I still reflect on both the challenges and the hope expressed by the atheist and Humanist students I met at Juniata; of a retired Juniata religion professor who educated student after student about the world's many religions but who, as an atheist, never felt he could voice his own views and values; of religious students filled with love and admiration for their atheist friends; of the queer students I met with stories much like my own. I continue to be moved beyond measure by the people I encountered there, and by how bold the atheist and religious students I've encountered at Juniata and many other schools have been in their promise to work together.

Dialogue isn't meaningless—the humanization of the “other” elicited by an act of intentional encounter with difference leads to real change. Engaging in interfaith coalition-building efforts requires a certain level of vulnerability and humility; to be understood, we all must work to understand. To understand our privileges, our pasts, our prejudices, and what we each bring to the table in order to strengthen ourselves as a community and as a country, we must be willing to challenge the beliefs we have about those who seem different—and the result is often life-changing for all parties involved. Everyone I've met who has taken part in interfaith dialogue has walked away challenged, with a renewed sense of personal agency and a feeling of shared responsibility to bring about a more pluralistic world.

Communities like the one at Juniata, the community of Humanists and interfaith activists at Harvard, and the many others

I've encountered in my travels—where the mutual goals of love and service remain at the forefront of people's thoughts and actions—present a hope I long to see actualized in religious and nonreligious communities alike: for the sake of Humanism, and for the sake of all humans.

I looked out the window at Pennsylvania farmland, headed to another college for another speech, perpetually moving—but, for a moment, in the still and quiet of a softly rolling bus, I was filled with gratitude for the gift of the stories I heard, humbled by the commitment to inclusivity and action I had witnessed among Juniata's students and staff, and inspired to continue pushing for positive change.

I really can't believe this is what I do for living, I thought.
I doubt I ever will.

Afterword

I started this book with my childhood; I'd like to end where I began.

Whenever I get a little too proud or boastful or self-righteous about what I believe to be true about the world—and no matter how many times I try to adopt a humble and inquisitive stance, it's never too long before it happens—my mom recounts a story about me as a child.

It was my cousin Alex's birthday party and, after hours of party games and gift-opening, it was time for dessert. Enraptured by the excitement of the celebration, Alex ran up to me, his face covered in pink and orange and green, to share his joy with his one-year-older cousin.

"Isn't my birthday ice cream so good?!" he said, ecstatic.

Without pausing, I said matter-of-factly: "It isn't ice cream, Alex. It's sherbet."

My mom always laughs when she tells this story, adding that she is glad I'm lightening up a bit with age.

In my youth, being "right" held ultimacy. I valued precision and accuracy, and was sure to correct anyone I felt was "wrong." I thought I was doing people a favor by correcting them. Now, I strive to lead with listening instead of lecturing.

We can be dogmatically fixated on who is "right" and who is "wrong" or we can discern a way to live together in tension and ambiguity. Joining forces, we can buck the clash-of-civilizations

story that has come to define our world and dictate a new narrative—one that bridges the religious and the secular, rather than threatening the "other" with extinction.

By reaching out to those who see things in a different way, we have the opportunity to write a new story about religious difference. In the words of Native novelist and scholar Thomas King: "The truth about stories is that that's all we are. . . . Want a different ethic? Tell a different story."¹

It may sound overly simplistic, but I really do believe that the only way to begin writing this story is to tell our own and listen to those of others: to step boldly and defiantly across dividing lines of religious and nonreligious identity and share our experiences in hope that we might build understanding through relationships of commitment and cooperation.

I used to be afraid to speak out—for myself or on behalf of others. I was paralyzed by the fear that I wasn't old enough, that I didn't have the words, didn't know what to say, didn't understand communities I wasn't a member of, didn't know who I was, didn't have it all figured out.

I still don't have it all figured out. But there is one thing I know: in the face of innumerable, incomprehensible incidents of intolerance, hatred, and violence in this world over disagreements about the veracity of religious claims, the time is now to open up a dialogue. So I've started with the one thing I knew better than anything else: my story.

I've told mine—now it's your turn.

