Holy Water and Riding Bikes

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I wouldn't call myself a particularly religious man. I've had my moments, but I can only take so much before I get turned off by the entire organized phenomenon. I'm sure this requires some explaining, so I'll do my best.

The closet thing to a beginning would be the day my parents met, courted, fell in love, etc. My mother came from a predominantly Irish background while my father had mostly Polish heritage. Because of this I was deemed a Catholic. Of course, I had no choice in the matter, but I suppose that is just part of being a kid.

This meant I had to be baptized, though they waited till I was about eight to go through with it. I remember learning of the upcoming event and I thought about scenes where Jesus was baptizing men in a river, possibly the River Jordan, which sounds more like a movie star's name than any kind of waterway. I envisioned myself getting dunked in the mucky creek that ran through my town, being held under while old tires and empty tin cans floated by, occasionally hitting my head. It did not seem like anything terribly exciting and the most I'd get out of it was a couple of leeches stuck to my forehead, sucking the life out of me while I had the privilege of entering a new, spiritual existence.

I often wondered whether God might make an appearance and congratulate me, or if afterwards, Jesus would show up and we could play some Legos together.

“Hey Jesus, check it out. That’s you!” I would point to the Lego guy attached to an elaborately made cross I spent an hour on. A couple of Lego guys would be standing in front of the cross dressed in ancient helmets and breastplates and one would be brandishing his spear, jabbing it into Jesus’ abdomen. A crowd of people would encircle the scene, throwing vegetables and the like. Plastic vegetables, naturally.

“Wow, it is me,” he'd say. “It looks so real. You really captured the essence of the moment. Do you remember why I am on that cross?”

“Look out, Jesus!” I would yell, feigning surprise suddenly. “Bigfoot is out of control!” And a cool monster truck I built the week before would appear from behind me, thundering in, knocking the cross over and squashing everybody in sight. Jesus would look at me and start to laugh.

The possibilities were endless.

Normally, we would attend mass on Saturday nights because there were fewer
people and we could be more inconspicuous as my mom had divorced and remarried, which was frowned upon by the Catholic church. She would fetch my brother and I playing video games or riding our bikes and I dreaded the sight of her at 5 o'clock on Saturdays. Sometimes I would try and hide but my little brother would always rat me out. He was an enormous tattle-tale, and never hesitated to use this to his advantage.

“Go get ready and change your clothes. Both of you. We’re late for church,” she would say.

“But I don’t want to go,” I would plead. “Can we skip this time? Please?”

“Get dressed. We’re going.”

Occasionally I would go as so far as to throw a fit, crying, kicking, and biting in protestation but that only made her angry.

“Dad doesn’t have to go. Why do I?”

“Because.”

I hated that answer. And she always used it.

My father never went with us and he never told me why. Naturally, I was jealous of him, as it seemed a grave injustice that the head of the family did not have to go to church and I did.

I never should have been in that sacred building in the first place. Often I would take out a pen and a notepad and draw pictures of battles—epic, panoramic landscapes of death in every way an eight year-old could imagine, including everything from guns and swords to missiles and flamethrowers. Drawing or reading a book was the only way I could endure the sheer boredom of mass. It kept me occupied from the sermons that I could not comprehend, the standing-sitting-kneeling like it was holy aerobics, or that god awful singing that hurt my ears. I hated having to reach out and hold some stranger’s hand, feeling their sweaty palms or inhaling the smell of Ben-Gay from the old couple sitting next to me. I hardly ever thought about God or Jesus or sin and to tell you the truth, I didn’t want to. One of the only redeeming things was that I got to sip off the wine, which I knew wasn’t really Jesus’ blood, because if it were, why would the congregation be drinking it like cannibals? And I thought lying was supposed to be considered a sin. Hypocrites.

On the day of the baptism I awoke under a divine light piercing through my eyelids with its brilliance. I opened my eyes and realized it was a giant flashlight two inches from my face. My brother thought I needed some help waking up. I would get him back later. It was a typical morning.

We headed out to church and were greeted by Father Bill. Walking into this church was like entering a cave. It was rather dark and impeccably silent, not the perfect place for what was supposed to be a joyous occasion. Remarkably, there was a complete absence of smell, as if building resided within a vacuum separate from space and time.

Family and friends had gathered in the church, and I thought baptisms were kind of like birthday parties, only a little holier. I got to dress up in a crazy white cloth instead of a birthday hat. Rather than play pin the donkey I got to play hold the white candle, and instead of swimming I get splashed with water. I couldn’t wait for the presents afterwards.
I still have that tall, white, slender candle that was supposed to be symbolic in some way. It sits in a green, cardboard box, eerily reminiscent of a cheap coffin, enclosing the token of a past that has long since died and been forgotten.

We stopped going to church after my mom's father died. I don't think she lost faith, but the death caused her religious fervor to dwindle. This was fine by me. No more catechism Wednesdays or sitting in a sweltering pew, waiting for the final hymn to end so you can barge out of there like you were heading to a pool party. No more horribly tasting wafers or dividing up your Saturday nights. I was free.

Time passed and I began to develop a natural distrust for authority and institutions. I had officially become a teenager. I prided myself on rejecting the spoon-fed religious crap that I had been fed my whole life, and wore my discarded unbelief like a Medal of Honor for everyone to see, openly criticizing anyone who appeared to take Christianity past silent belief. I mocked the kids that prayed around the flagpole every morning. They were nothing more than sheltered imbeciles who hadn't enough sense to open their eyes and think for themselves.

"I want to break up with you," my first serious girlfriend had said.
"Why?"
"You don't believe in God," she said, as if she pitied me.
"You've got to be shitting me," I said, staring at her in disbelief as she sat on the other side of the car. We were parked in some random spot. Apparently, she had felt the need to pull the car over. Seconds passed. "So?"
"It means everything to me," she said. She seemed cold and lifeless, like this wasn't the girl I had known for the past six months.
"And I don't mean anything?"
"You don't understand."

She was right. I didn't understand, and we split up that night for what appeared to be the most worthless of all reasons. Either she couldn't stand being with a heathen or the selfish girl didn't want to be alone in heaven. I realized soon after that I had underestimated the power that religion holds over people, and I also knew that no matter what happened in the future, I would continue to encounter and deal with religion and its effects, even if I didn't believe in the Christian God myself.

An ornate stained-glass window lay in the background while my parents and godparents stood behind me as Father Bill tilted the pitcher. My head was lowered towards the drain and I was expecting something fantastic. As the baptismal water struck my forehead, I did not see God. I did not see Jesus or suddenly understand the meaning of life, or even feel an overwhelming spiritual or holy presence. I merely smiled, and that was it.

Occasionally, I still attend church on Easter, though no one accompanies me. I'm not sure why I really go. Maybe I go to feel good about myself, or maybe to pay respect to the man that was supposedly resurrected that day. I'm not really sure. I don't believe like everyone else there believes, but the important thing is that I go.