

Evangelical Confessions of a Diehard Liberal

written by Nancy Hightower | January 26, 2017



It's not an exaggeration to say I was groomed from the womb to be a soldier in God's spiritual army, to take whatever battle wounds dealt to me in our war against sin. My grandparents had been missionaries in Tanganyika Territory, Ethiopia, and Kenya, and when I visited their house as a child, I would sit on an elephant foot stool and listen to how they ministered to all those lost tribes who, in their view, unknowingly served Satan. When I was seven my father went to work for televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye's PTL Club, a talk show format that brought pastors and performers together. PTL could stand for a number of things: Praise the Lord, People that Love, or even People that LIVE. It grew into an empire fairly quickly during the 70's and 80's, becoming a worldwide cable network, and amassing 2300 acres of land to make Heritage Village, which would house chalets, a palatial hotel, mall, and even a water park. We went there just for retreats at first. Meanwhile, at the church we attended, I had Bible drills that helped sharpen our memorization of scripture. We sang victory songs about Noah building an "arky arky" and how Joshua fought the battle of Jericho (both songs are about massacres, by the way,—one of the world, the other of a city). No matter how bad the trial or tribulation, believing in God meant that you'd eventually win.

While my father worked for PTL, my mother was drawn to the pentecostal teachings of Kenneth Copeland, Jerry Savelle, Kenneth E. Hagin and Norvel Hayes. Here the world was still divided into the saved and unsaved, but now there were subgenres of sin, with a corresponding demon. There was the demon of lust. The demon of worry. The demon of sickness. These demons had to be watched for, casted out, and constantly resisted. If you were sick, you didn't have enough faith. If you were stressed out, you were sinning, because God didn't give you the spirit of fear, "but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind," (II Timothy 1:7). I was told this verse over and over again at

bedtime by mother when I refused to sleep in a dark room. Even a nightlight didn't sufficiently put to rest my midnight terrors, and I usually prayed long into the morning hours for God to forgive me for being scared. While worry and fear were bad, anything sexual was worse, and homosexuality was the gateway sin that would lead to the breakdown of marriage and society as we knew it. We guarded ourselves against possession by the "renewing of the mind," and constant scripture memorization. The scriptures highlighted promised health and wealth if we guard ourselves against sin, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this world's darkness, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

I was taught through these lessons that Christianity is a religion of resistance. It creates a rhetorical armor that regenerates and recalibrates in response to whatever is defined as *enemy*. At the baseline of this paradigm, of course, is Satan and his demonic kingdom, but the earthly evidence of such evil falls in line with the current evangelical rhetoric: abortion, any sexuality outside of heterosexuality, and Islam, which was out to destroy both Christianity and the state of Israel. These abstract beliefs rooted in fear became the baseline of my life. They were abstract because I didn't have any Muslim friends and if anyone was having homosexual feelings, they knew to keep that to themselves. The only women I saw talking about abortion were on the televangelist shows, explaining how they had sinned greatly, how their baby must have suffered when it was murdered, but that God had forgiven them.

Such clear boundaries were drawn around our encampment, but these lines didn't encourage a feeling of safety, since within these Christian enclaves, there was also a grotesque kind of ritualized sacrifice that morphed into an uncanny call and response. The missionary grandfather who told me so many fabulous stories about saving the lost was also a pedophile. After making popcorn balls and watching Lawrence Welk, my grandfather would take me up to their peach painted guest room and molest me. I was around five or six at the time, and don't remember how many times these "sessions" happened or for how long. I can only remember moments in perfect detail: the color of his towel after he dried off from a shower; my Raggedy Ann pajamas that were pulled down or lifted up. There was also the teacher at the private Christian school who convinced me to write a paper describing in detail the physical changes my body was going through when I was eleven. I wrote about everything, from the pimples I was battling to the new body hair cropping up in places. I wanted to make an A and didn't realize my mistake until my mother saw the graded paper. Then again, my mother was her own version of religious madness. She left my father when I was twelve to join her lover in Texas. While there, they fell into the believing the urban myths about Satanic rituals in daycare centers, and began to question my possible involvement with the occult. For five months, I was kept up late into the night and interrogated about this conspiracy, with my mother tape recording many of the conversations. They wanted to hold me accountable for everything I said. They wanted to make sure I was serving Jesus and not the devil. She sent me back to my father just as I was beginning to crumble under their delusions.

Was anyone ever brought up on charges? No. I never had to see my grandfather again, nor did I visit my mother after she sent me away. The teacher went on teaching. I went into therapy. The evangelical church is an army—its job is to keep marching and gain territory from the devil. It doesn't have time to care for its wounded, and it plays Russian roulette with its concept of grace. Perhaps this is why it helped elect a man who boasted about grabbing women's pussies. My grandfather liked to lick them. I write this down to bear witness.

I write this down as confession, because when you are taught to compartmentalize your life into dismissible fragments, you find yourself applying that spiritual and psychological fragmentation to others in the most judgmental way. I believed that one couldn't be a practicing homosexual or in the GLTBQ community while also being a *good* Christian. When the pastor of my church asked for my opinion on gay elders, I said it shouldn't be allowed. I was getting my PhD at the time. I considered myself an intellectual. I had worked with many gay men in my early twenties, men who made me laugh when I was fighting severe depression. I remember my department manager would come into the filing room where I worked and, looking playfully stern, would say, "My office, ten minutes. I'll wear the teddy." I loved him. What I failed to understand, over and over again, is that by withholding grace from him and others, I withheld it from myself.

Freedom from this intricately braided rhetoric doesn't come easily; sometimes it is won through introspection or therapy. And sometimes, God will just knock you on your ass. A few years ago at a writing convention, I was cornered by a man who kept inching closer while he talked. I was desperately wondering how I might extricate myself when suddenly one of my transgender friends stood in between me and the man, arm extended as if to usher me out of the room. "You have an early day tomorrow," he said, much too loudly. "You should go to bed." I didn't understand what was happening until another friend took my arm and pulled me physically out of the corner. I later learned the man had been groping women—many of them. In that moment, my transgender friend physically enacted and embodied grace and protection in a way that so many other upstanding, scripture reading friends, parents, and pastors had failed to do for me. It should not have taken such a heroic and sacrificial act for me to see him as a person filled with holiness, but I was so thankful for what that moment did. My friend thought he was just saving me from a predator. He never realized he was simultaneously springing me out of a spiritual prison.

There are other beliefs I am working through. I recently messaged a former student on Facebook to apologize for persuading her not to write about transgender rights to use the bathroom of their choice back in 2010. I began to ask why the church cherry picks its laws from the Bible to subjugate certain groups while empowering others. The church as a body needs to acknowledge that the United States has never been a Christian nation, has never really followed the path of Christianity, no matter what is printed on our money. This country was built and nourished on the blood of the stolen and enslaved, the cheated and forgotten. We have not even begun to understand what atonement would mean as in terms of radically restructuring our current

economic system that at its very core is predatory, racist, and sexist.

As long as the evangelical church tries to make the Bible look like the GOP, it will continue to be seen as a zombie religion, capable of nothing more than cannibalizing the intellectual heart of America as it marches forth over the bodies of the broken. My body and mind were broken a long time ago by those within the church. I'm not sure whether I will ever fully be healed, but still, I believe in redemption. More liberal and centrists Christians are becoming advocates for those whom the evangelical right has persecuted—women, people of color, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, sex workers, etc. But those Christians must also mobilize effectively like we have never seen before. Now is the time for a new, radical call and response between the left and right ventricles of the church's heart to get it beating once again, or it will finally become the monster it has been so long labeled.