

## **Previous Title: How my past informs my spirituality**

### ***New Title: From One Fellow Traveler to Another: Expand your horizons. There's so much to unlearn.***

Christianity has long been equated to a race. . .a marathon. And, it surely is that.

However, the race analogy has become somewhat of a trigger for me spiritually, emotionally, and mentally. Winning a race implies to me that I must beat someone else. The prison of comparison is often my home. I do a good deal of studying personalities. Not because I think they are the be all end all. But because they can help me see to some degree the prisons/boxes that I consistently build.

I'd like to play you a song by the pop rock band, Creed. I have no idea what their true intent was when they wrote this song, but it came to mind as I considered what I'd share today.

It's titled My Own Prison. I've asked Dave to share the lyrics with you on his screen. Would you follow along as we listen?

This song resonated with me 20 years ago when I first heard it, because it articulated my spiritual journey up to that point. . .a wayward Lori reflecting on her proverbial life of sin and realizing it had led to a prison of her own making.

20 years later the lyrics still speak to me, but for a slightly different reason.

My earliest childhood memories (at church, at school, and even at family gatherings) involved feeling like I did NOT belong, did NOT measure up, did NOT have what it took to do life. I was inherently defective (in my case because of my black race, highly sensitive and melancholic temperament, working class family, non-religious father, and less than ideal appearance and IQ). And, so I found some ways to armor up. . .to navigate life. . .

Interestingly enough, studying the Bible, confessing my sins of omission and commission, changing in some visible and practical ways DID NOT remove all of the armor of my own prison.

Church membership, activity, and affiliation have benefits, but they also have stifling limitations if you allow them to stop you from growing.

To be candid, I have always felt a bit out of place at church – any church. What I now realize is that from childhood until now church has often been the riskiest place to be spiritually honest. What do I mean by spiritually honest? I mean it's not the place where I feel safe to reveal what I write in my journal, wrestle with in my darkest moments, or discuss with my therapist.

Over the past few years, I have begun to slowly make peace or surrender to the idea that I may always have a challenging relationship with "the church – whatever church it is." While I would not necessarily call it a love/hate relationship, there's tremendous anxiety, disillusionment, and shame wrapped up in my heart and mind when I think of church. For me, the resounding messages in my head when I think of church are these:

- 1) I must have "the answers" to the situations, circumstances, and people that lead a person to cry out, "Where is God? Is there a God? How could God allow this? What does God want of me? Am I going to heaven? What happens when I die?"
- 2) Asking questions and making room for others to do so signify a lack of faith and a foolish pride in my own intelligence.
- 3) The Bible is far more stone than it is bread. Using it to identify all of the ways I don't measure up or trouble the Spirit is the path toward righteousness and connection with God.
- 4) There are super-humans living up to God's perfect standard; I just need to do and be more to be on that level.

During our first meeting, Kevin referenced a book "The Sin of Certainty" I can't recommend enough. It was as if the author Peter Enns had been in my head. I found his perspective honest, refreshing, and therapeutic. He captured so powerfully why church can often be a lonely, scary place – the place where questions are frowned upon and certainty about one's own beliefs is equated to strong faith and conviction.

Enns writes: "Correct thinking provides a sense of certainty. Without it, we fear that faith is on life support at best. . .dead and buried at worst.

And who wants a dead or dying faith? So **this fear of losing a handle on certainty leads to a preoccupation with correct thinking, making sure familiar beliefs are defended and supported at all costs.**

How strongly do we hold on to the old ways of thinking? Just recall those history courses where we read about Christians killing other Christians over all sorts of disagreements about doctrines few can even articulate today. Or perhaps **just think of a skirmish you've had at church over a sermon, Sunday-school lesson, or which candidate to vote into public office.**

**Preoccupation with correct thinking. That's the deeper problem.**

It reduces the life of faith to sentry duty, a 24/7 task of pacing the ramparts and scanning the horizon to fend off incorrect thinking, in ourselves and others, too engrossed to come inside the halls and enjoy the banquet. **A faith like that is stressful and tedious to maintain.**

**Moving toward different ways of thinking, even just trying it on for a while to see how it fits, is perceived as a compromise to faith, or as giving up on faith altogether. But nothing could be further from the truth.**

And so my path for quite some time has been about becoming curious about different ways of thinking and being, trying it on for a while to see how it fits. This one of the few spiritual practices that has given me LIFE in recent memory.

To open things up for our discussion, I thought I'd share some nuggets of wisdom from another book that I've found life-giving from my favorite Franciscan priest Richard Rohr. I tried to pick thoughts that I think capture why we have been drawn together. We can spend the rest of our time together unpacking one or several of them.

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"Sin happens whenever we refuse to keep growing." {Isn't sin about missing the mark? What does growth imply?}

"As we mature, people have less power to infatuate us. But they also have much less power to control us or hurt us." *{We seem to love hero worship, even in spiritual circles. Why is that the case? Why are mature people less infatuated in general?}*

"True spiritual elders do not have strong and final opinions about everything, every event, or most people, as much as they allow things and people to delight them, sadden them, and truly influence them." *{Such generosity of spirit: the wise person knows how much he doesn't know. Law school taught me how much I didn't know.}*

"There must be, and, if we are honest, there always will be at least one situation in our lives that we cannot fix, control, explain, change, or even understand. For Jesus and for his followers, the crucifixion became the dramatic symbol of that necessary and absurd stumbling stone."

"The bottom line of the Gospel is that most of us have to hit some kind of bottom before we even start the real spiritual journey." *{Isn't this true several times during our journey??}*

"Yes, transformation is often more about unlearning than learning, which is why the religious traditions call it "conversion" or "repentance." *{Hence the title of my talk today. How dangerous a path we're on if we can't unlearn?}*

"What some now call 'emerging Christianity' or 'the emerging church' is not something you join, establish, or invent. You just name it and then you see it everywhere- already in place! Such nongroup groups, the 'two or three' gathered in deep truth, create a whole new level of affiliation, dialogue, and friendship..." *{When Kevin invited me to this, I said I had no desire to join a church or church hop. This is why.}*

“Setting out is always a leap of faith, a risk in the deepest sense of the term, and yet an adventure too. The familiar and the habitual are so falsely reassuring, and most of us make our homes there permanently. The new is always by definition unfamiliar and untested, so God, life, destiny, suffering have to give us a push--usually a big one--or we will not go.” *{I read that we have two journeys – one where God calls us to go another where he calls us home. They will always be scary.}*

“We can save ourselves a lot of distress and accusation by knowing when, where, to whom, and how to talk about spiritually mature things.” *{This has been a hard, tough lesson to learn, and why I attend this group with trepidation. I know the people in my life I can talk to about these matters, and I can count them on one hand. In fact, Rohr suggests that’s how it will be as you begin to mature.}*

[Verse 1]  
Court is in session  
A verdict is in  
No appeal on the docket today  
Just my own sin  
The walls are cold and pale  
The cage made of steel  
Screams fill the room  
Alone I drop and kneel

[Verse 2]  
Silence now the sound  
My breath the only motion around  
Demons cluttering around  
My face showing no emotion  
Shackled by my sentence  
Expecting no return  
Here there is no penance  
My skin begins to burn

[Chorus: Scott Stapp, (Mark Tremoti)]  
And I said ohhhhhhh  
(So I held my head up high)  
(Hiding hate that burns inside)  
(Which only fuels their selfish pride)  
And I said ohhhhhhh  
(All held captive, out from the sun)  
(A sun that shines on only some)  
(We the meek are all in one)

[Verse 3]  
I hear a thunder in the distance  
See a vision of a cross  
I feel the pain that was given  
On that sad day of loss

A lion roars in the darkness  
Only he holds the key  
A light to free me from my burden  
And grant me life eternally

[Pre-Chorus]  
Should have been there  
On a Sunday morning  
Banging my head  
No time for mourning  
Ain't got no time  
Should have been there  
On a Sunday morning  
Banging my head  
No time for mourning  
Ain't got no time

[Chorus: Scott Stapp, (Mark Tremoti)]  
And I said ohhhhhhh  
(So I held my head up high)  
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