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Seeking the faith of a convert

by Brian Harper

Young Voices

Editor's note: Brian Harper is a new Young Voices columnist. A 2011 graduate of Marquette University, Harper has lived and worked in Peru, South Africa, Italy and the United States. His writing has been published in America magazine, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, CounterPunch, PolicyMic and various other print and online magazines. His work is available at www.brianharper.net.

I never knew my maternal grandmother's father, but my mother told me three stories that shaped my view of him.

One involved his being mugged by a hitchhiker to whom he had offered a ride. I think my mom related this tale as a warning against good-natured but borderline foolish benevolence.

The second dealt with him calling my mother his favorite granddaughter named Sheila.

The third was that he converted to Catholicism. I cannot remember the religion from which he shifted.

For some reason, I always saw stories one and two as byproducts of story three, as though his changing religions somehow informed the way he went about all other activities in life.

My mom liked to say her grandfather had the faith of a convert. She also used this expression to describe my paternal grandfather, who converted from the Baptist faith to the Lutheran church. The implication was that there was something richer, even holier, about a convert's spirituality, whatever that spirituality may be.

I was always intrigued by this idea of a convert's religious ideology being definably distinct from someone else's. In my grandpa's case, the kindness, honesty and sheer goodness with which he lived out

his work, relationships and faith were evident. With my great-grandpa, my understanding was that the steadfast commitment he made to his newfound religion made it impossible for anyone to mistake him for a nominal Christmas-and-Easter Catholic.

I do not know whether or not he was a daily Mass sort of guy, but I am pretty sure he saw his faith as more than a Sunday obligation. I am convinced that the twinkle-in-his-eye, kindhearted friendliness he was said to demonstrate to family and gadabouts alike was not only part and parcel of his religion, but also partly because he had come to a new faith later in life.

I have often found myself envious of converts, regardless of the ideology to and from which they make a change. As a cradle Catholic who was baptized when he was 2 months old, I have never really known what it is like to live without my religion. Going to Mass each weekend feels as routine as slapping my alarm clock in the morning; it is just something I do.

If this is even remotely an obstacle, it is obviously not a problem without solutions. Like my relatives before me, I could convert to a new faith. Over the years, I have toyed with this idea. Although I have left many stones unturned in my experiments visiting congregations of other denominations, I have been fortunate to visit a number of other churches, always to be welcomed with generosity and open arms. I did not even need to leave my home to learn about the Jehovah's Witnesses; on several occasions, they came right to my front door. When I was in a Peruvian hospital, two complete strangers stopped by my room to tell me about the Seventh-day Adventists and sprinkle some of their spirituality into my health regimen. Nice as they were, their pitch did not heal me.

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Leaving religion altogether is, of course, another option. This, too, is something I have tried on for size. After all, it is difficult to imagine just how heroic one's devotion would have to be to never experience pangs of doubt or certain nagging questions: "Surely, they can't expect me to believe this. The bread actually becomes his body? Over and over again each week? And how about Moses? All he needs to do is slam his staff, and the water does his bidding?"

Despite the beauty I discovered in other traditions and the uncertainties I found in my own, I hesitated whenever I considered leaving Catholicism. In a strange way, I was very sympathetic to people who desired some kind of religious conviction but, after much internal wrestling and examination, felt the unanswerable questions called for too large a leap of faith to get there. No matter how much I wanted to know what it was like to adopt a worldview entirely on my own terms, indecision and uneasiness coalesced into a dithering that left me unable to make my own jump from the Catholic ship. For some reason, it felt like home.

I have thought a lot about a possible source of my longing to be a convert. Some of it could be endemic of my generation. We seem to have such a profound fear of boredom that we undertake a near-constant searching for something -- anything -- that is new or exciting.

Part of it is also a genuine yearning to explore the mysteries and inconclusive questions that inevitably arise in any religion. When one faith does not provide quick or easy answers, it is natural to feel inclined to explore elsewhere.

I imagine much of it also comes from an overemphasis on the grandiose moments of religious life. Whether it is Moses coming into contact with the burning bush or Saul hearing Jesus speak on the road to

Damascus, the Bible often presents conversion as a momentous and decisive occasion. It is tempting to worry something is wrong if our faith is characterized more by small, immeasurable moves than big signposts announcing something new has come to town.

I have come to see, however, that expecting this sort of climax is pretty unrealistic. Even if it does come, it is certainly unsustainable. Moses did not get a burning bush each time he stepped outside, and Saul was not repeatedly struck by a blinding light.

Whether one reads these stories literally or not, what is admirable about their characters is not that they had such intense encounters with a spiritual power, but rather that their response was to change their lives, not only in a moment but each and every day.

I am sure my grandfather and great-grandfather's situations bore some similarities. Deciding to convert was not a fix-all means to altering their lifestyles, but a decision they needed to make time and time again.

This is true for all of us. Every day calls for a conversion of sorts. For some of us, this may mean changing our church. For others, it might involve discovering a better way to practice a lifelong worldview. The opportunity to let our beliefs take form and transform our lives, however, is available to converts of all kinds.

[Brian Harper is a writer, musician and community outreach coordinator for a small business. His work is available at www.brianharper.net.]

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