



GIVING

Resurrecting a Spirituality

UP

of Love and Wonder

GOD

Sarah Henn Hayward

Giving Up God

Resurrecting a Spirituality of
Love and Wonder



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Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.

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This book is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections and information gathering of experiences over time. Some of the names of individuals or institutions and their characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated.

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This book is dedicated to all the seekers, the curious, the believers and the doubters, the embracers of the mysterious, the bold and brave who aren't afraid to question the status quo, who aren't afraid to question everything. This is for the wonderers, the wanderers, the wild and authentic humans brave enough to live into their own truth.

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Introduction

WELCOME, READER. I'M SO HONORED that you are here. Before diving in, I want to be clear about the message of this book and my intentions. This book is the story of my faith journey in reverse, beginning as an earnest, devout, born-again Christian and evolving into an atheistic poetic naturalist, or maybe a Christian atheist, or simply an agnostic. I am certainly no longer a Christian in the classic sense of the word.

My journey was lonely, so I wrote the book I wish I'd had to help me walk through it all. As you will discover, I am a massive bibliophile and look to books not only for entertainment, but also for knowledge, growth, and assurance that I am not alone in my views. I know atheists I could turn to for guidance, but they don't come from such a strong faith background and can't relate to the grief I am experiencing. I know plenty of progressive, forward-thinking Christians, but they can't relate to completely walking away from any concept of a Higher Being. This book is niche to that specific formerly-faithful, now seriously-questioning person who isn't quite sure where to go or what to think. My goal is to be a source of comfort and camaraderie for anyone who had a deep faith and has left it behind.

This book is *not* trying to convince anyone to join me. That has been one of the gifts of leaving my faith. I no

longer have a constant, underlying compulsion to change everyone's mind and behavior to match my own. Being an evangelical, Protestant Christian meant I always had converting others on my mind, even as I became more progressive. In my earlier Christian days I tried to steer conversations with unsuspecting neighbors and nonreligious friends toward Jesus whenever possible. My neighbor Matt was over one day when we were nine years old, and as we were heading outside to play, I trapped him in the mudroom with a passionate explanation of the love of God. Leaning up against the washing machine, I teared up as I sold my story while he looked on like a deer in the headlights.

As my faith grew and changed, I stopped believing in the effectiveness of hostage witnessing or knocking on strangers' doors to talk about God (as I was forced to do while in Campus Crusade during college). I gravitated toward St. Francis of Assisi's philosophy to "preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words." I stopped trying to convert people to Christianity at any and every opportunity, but I still wanted to impact folks' spiritual lives and inspire them to change.

I thought my worldview was right and that of others was wrong and needed to change. I felt responsible for bringing about that change. It was exhausting and a little scary. I constantly worried that I wasn't doing enough.

Not only was I afraid of allowing my loved ones to end up in hell, but I was constantly worried that I wasn't living my life in a way that would truly please God. Jesus had harsh words when people asked how to follow him: sell all your possessions, leave your family behind. I had a closet

full of clothes and a (small) bank account balance. I wasn't dedicating every minute of every day to the service of my Lord. Was I a disappointment to God? In the Bible, Jesus told a terrifying parable involving sheep and goats. Both groups were caught off guard when Jesus praised the sheep for feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisoner while he banished the goats to eternal fire for neglecting to do those things. Jesus said serving "the least of these" people is in fact serving God directly, and neglecting to do so would result in separation from God.¹ Was I doing enough to avoid being a goat?

Then, in 2005, I received an email from my college pastor that I held onto for years. I had written to ask him to spell it out for me specifically: how should *I* follow God in my daily interactions? I fretted that my life felt too normal; I was just going to church, going to class, reading my Bible, and hanging out with my friends. Didn't I need some sort of ceremony, some way to obviously dedicate each day to God?

My pastor's response basically told me to relax, that God would put people and opportunities in my path as he* saw fit, and that I could simply go about living my life. That response was my hall pass. I kept it for years, craving permission to live my life as it happened without the threat of God leering over my shoulder and judging. I didn't entirely

* A side note on pronouns: I will be using different pronouns for God throughout the book to coincide with my changing views. The God of my childhood and early adult years was very much male, so I'm using he/him/his when telling a story from that time. Since my idea of God expanded and I realized that the God of the Bible professed to contain both the male and female image and even used female analogies to describe themselves, I avoid pronouns or use they/them for God.

trust my pastor's advice, not yet. I kept worrying that I wasn't living a radical enough life for God. I didn't feel comfortable taking each day as it came until I stopped believing in religion altogether.

It has been a massive relief to feel that evangelical pressure slide off my back. Without the threat of eternal damnation for unbelieving loved ones hanging over me anymore, I'm allowed to let others live their lives however they choose without it affecting me. Without God constantly watching from the eaves, I can stop agonizing over how to win God's favor each day.

I do not begrudge anyone their faith. Whatever motivates anyone to live a healthy, fulfilling life sounds great to me! My aim here is not to get Christians or any other people of faith to renounce their beliefs and agree that I am right. I *am* a firstborn child with a thriving ego, so I do love being right, but I am honestly not concerned with that anymore as far as spirituality or religious beliefs (or the lack thereof) go. I am still open to changing my mind. I have not landed in an immutable new philosophy or theology, nor would I want to force my current worldview upon anyone else.

If anything I say here makes you question your reality and think new thoughts, I truly hope that your faith is strong enough to handle it. If you are already questioning every last thing down to the nature of the universe, then you might find some relief hearing my story and knowing that you aren't alone. Regardless of what you think comes next, most of us agree that we only get one life to live on this planet. Let's make the most of every moment.

My Testimony

A PERSON'S TESTIMONY IS THE story of how they came to be a Christian. The best testimonies were artfully delivered, sharing their story in the most dramatic way possible. I—a pious goody-two-shoes for the first seventeen years of my life—was always jealous of the bad boys who hit rock bottom before God saved them. They got to have fun before dramatically walking away from all that to become good. Lucky! I was born bowing my head in prayer and holding a devotional. My fun times came later as gradually, over the last twenty years, I began to challenge my rigid views. I tiptoed further and further away from the land of my beliefs to eventually arrive in an entirely new territory outside of religion altogether.

I was raised in the evangelical church by Christian parents. They both came from religious families, but neither one took it too seriously in their youth or felt that they had a personal relationship with Christ (the backbone of the evangelical experience). My mom had her born-again conversion moment while attending Central Michigan University through a friend who was involved in Campus Crusade for Christ. Engaged to my dad at the time, and with the fervor of a fresh convert, my mother tried to get him to “pray the prayer” as well. He was not thrilled but agreed

that they could pick out a church together for the sake of unity in their marriage. Sometime later, a powerful altar call experience at church compelled him to go all-in for Christ. He became the parent who woke us all up by obnoxiously belting out “How Great Thou Art” in the morning. My parents are genuinely grateful for their faith—it gives their lives purpose and value. That’s the faith they passed along to me.

The concept of original sin—that everyone is born wretched and sinful and is worthless on their own outside of Christ—was not a driving factor in my brand of Christianity. I always held onto the fact that God first created humans and said “it was very good.”² Believing that the Creator of the universe knew and loved me personally gave me a strong sense of worth, a high regard for my value in the world, and a deep knowledge that I am lovable and loved. I believed that God—who made everything and knew everyone—cared about my life specifically and loved me for being me, despite my flaws. I believed it when I was told that Jesus sacrificed his life for me and erased my sin. Not that I couldn’t commit new sins—because, of course, “none is righteous, no, not one”³—but that Jesus’s sacrifice made it possible for God to forgive me for whacking my brother and gossiping with friends from school and love me anyway.



MY LIFE WAS DRASTICALLY IMPACTED, spiritually and physically, when I was nine years old. I underwent a routine physical before attending summer camp, and the doctor

discovered a hump on my back, diagnosing me with scoliosis. X-rays revealed advanced curvatures that made an “S” shape in my spine. “S for Sarah!” I used to proclaim. Not only did I have scoliosis, but I had an additional and unrelated spinal problem called spondylolisthesis (try saying that at nine years old!), which was even *more* severe. A section of my spine was slipping forward off the column of vertebrae, threatening to crush the vertebra below and potentially sever the spinal nerves at that level. I was young enough to assume what was happening to me was a somewhat normal occurrence, and I didn’t get too worried. I did get upset when my ballet and gymnastics careers came to a screeching halt and when I was put in a back brace for twenty-three hours a day, seven days a week. My torso was wrapped in rigid plastic and metal to attempt to stop the curves from getting worse.

I *hated* the brace. The stiff plastic didn’t breathe, making me constantly sweaty, and it was bulky under my clothes. Most of my shirts ended up with little holes where the screws from the brace wore them out. I tried to make the most of it and would taunt boys at school into punching my belly, claiming I did one thousand sit-ups a day and had abs of steel. They only fell for that trick once.

Entering junior high school, when everyone is desperately trying to fit in, and comparing my bulky torso to the other girls’ lithe bodies was painful. I stared at their backs in class and daydreamed about what it would feel like if my back were so straight and smooth. I certainly had my pity parties, lamenting the discomfort of how I both looked and

felt. My parents were as supportive as possible. Whenever I'd cry about my circumstances, my mom would look so pained and express her wish to trade places with me. But I was learning to deal with the fact that life isn't always easy, a useful lesson that would come in handy again.

My parents kept signing me up for as many normal activities and sports as I wanted. Anything involving too much bending and flexibility was out, but I played tennis and softball and was even on my school's cheerleading squad, wearing my brace under all my uniforms. My doctor did not love this fact. He listened skeptically as I begged to do all the activities I wanted to do and my mom fought hard to keep my childhood as "normal" as possible. He took some real convincing to approve of the cheerleading squad. We reassured him that this was not the athletic stunts-and-tosses version of cheerleading but in reality more of a glorified clapping section for the school basketball team. He granted his begrudging support.

One summer my family vacationed at a fancy KOA campground in the Appalachian Mountains that had a pool. I had to put my back brace on over my bathing suit—twenty-three hours a day, remember!—and was quite embarrassed about it. As I was swimming and sensing people staring at me, another little girl entered the pool with the help of her mother. Looking back, I can see that she likely had cerebral palsy; her limbs were awkwardly contorted. She wasn't verbal, but she was clearly having a fantastic time in the water, happily grunting and smiling with her whole face.

Watching everyone's eyes swivel over to her and stop staring at me made an impression. I felt humbled, realizing that while I did look different, my brace was normally able to stay hidden and didn't interfere with every aspect of my life. The experience gave me a healthy dose of perspective and taught me to stay positive and make the most of my situation, handling life as it came.

Dealing with scoliosis never caused me to question God. Being so young, I wasn't asking any hard questions of God yet. I kept praying that I would be cured, not thinking much of it when my curvatures continued to advance. There's a verse Christians like to quote when life is hard: "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability."⁴ I trusted that God would either fix me or make me strong enough to handle my struggles.

Though I wore the brace for three years, twenty-three hours a day (basically only taking it off to shower), my curvatures continued advancing and became frighteningly severe. The slipping spondylolisthesis kept advancing as well. My doctor determined that I needed surgery as soon as I hit puberty and had completed my major growth spurts. Imagine the excitement of waiting for your first period with the added awareness of highly invasive, risky spinal surgeries right around the corner! Weeks after I turned twelve years old, two major surgeries were scheduled.

At the time, I attended a small, Christian private school, and the school ran a 24-hour prayer vigil for me during the operations. I was under the knife for over ten hours while the surgeon—after being harassed by my mom into doing

both surgeries at once—fixed each of my issues in one sitting. Afterward, I recovered in the hospital for over a week, quickly learning to walk and use the stairs again with the help of physical therapists. My room was flooded with cards, balloons, bouquets of flowers, and visitors from school and church. I received so many get-well cards that my dad hung strips of double-sided tape from the ceiling with cards stuck along them. Columns of well-wishes from ceiling to floor.

I was thrilled to have the surgery because it meant I was finally out of the brace. The brace was Enemy Number One. I was nervous the night before surgery—I recall running up and down the hallways of the hotel near the hospital with jittery energy—but I was completely on board for this permanent solution. With the added bonus of missing school and all the presents I received, surgery felt like a party after suffering from the brace for so long.

My recovery was smooth and swift; I got up to walk within days and moved around well with no major pain or limitations. Visiting my recovery room, my surgeon saw the outpouring of love and prayers from my Christian community. He mused, “There might be something to this prayer stuff. I wonder if God had a hand in your rapid recovery?”

I don’t recall feeling a lot of pain (although I did have full access to a morphine drip) and overall, my experience was a pleasant one. Since I had to recover on the spinal floor and not in a pediatric unit, a kind nurse wheeled down a TV/Nintendo cart for my room so I could try out new games and systems that I didn’t have at home. I got to miss

school. I received presents and positive attention from everyone I knew. One friend's dad even gave me a pair of diamond-studded earrings for handling the whole thing like a champ!

The experience reinforced an internal belief that was developing in me: being a good person, praying, and asking God for what you want worked! I had a serious problem, but it never felt too scary. I successfully responded to surgery, and to this day I haven't suffered from back pain more than any other person. I felt loved and cared for by my community and by God himself. In my bubbled-off little world, God was good, suffering was alleviated if you prayed and asked him for help, and things worked out for the best.



AS I ADVANCED THROUGH JUNIOR high and into high school, I encountered a unique phenomenon that had taken over Christian culture in the early '00s: purity culture. An early clash of ideas between my parents' attitudes versus purity culture showed me there may be other ways of living besides what I was being taught at church. Purity culture was a popular campaign that churches taught to my generation of Christian girls. We were explicitly told that we were responsible for men's actions and that our choices to hug them chest-to-chest, wear revealing clothing, or act even a little flirty would tempt them to lust and commit sin. The concern was not over our safety and welfare, but rather over protecting men and boys from committing a wrongdoing. The church staff routinely talked to the girls in my youth

group about our clothing, our actions, the power we held over men, and the responsibility that came with that. We were instructed to only give “side hugs,” to never wear spaghetti straps, and to never, *ever* show cleavage, and I internalized that message completely. I was a gatekeeper to stop men from sexual sin.

Being treated like a walking stumbling block made me very nervous about sexual assault. Getting raped was a deep-seated fear of mine. Like many women of my generation, I always looked over my shoulder while walking alone, often holding my keys between my fingers in a fist grip to ward off any potential male attackers. It never even crossed my mind that a man could be or should be held accountable for his own actions regardless of what I was wearing, or saying, or doing with my body.

My parents grew up during the '60s and '70s with relaxed sexual morals and the prolific presence of drugs, and they'd had their fun. As a result, they weren't super uptight or overly controlling in the way that many of my contemporary Christian friends' parents could be. My parents maintained even keels and never got sucked into the unhealthy, shame-driven, manipulative behaviors typically seen in church. Although I was boy-crazy, I did not have any game and did not know how to get a boyfriend. My mom encouraged me to start wearing makeup, and she even tried to get me to loosen up over not ever tempting a guy. She did not observe or understand the pressure I was under during the height of purity culture. Instead, my mom let me know that if I wore a shirt that was the slightest bit sheer

and the outline of my bra was a teensy bit visible, that was okay. After all, everyone knew I was wearing a bra anyway, right? But *no*, I thought: a boy could see it and be tempted to want to see more, and I could not be responsible for that!

My dad was a healthy contrast to purity culture as well. He never acted like many of the other dads at our church. He wasn't overly controlling or possessive of me. He didn't jokingly display the shotgun on our mantel when a date came over to pick me up for a school dance—which definitely happened to friends of mine. His unspoken subtext let me know that he trusted me. I never had an official curfew because my parents trusted me to call them if I was going to be home later than expected. They trusted me to use my brain, to be able to read people, and to make my own choices. My dad let me go on dates without needing to interview the guy first.

When I eventually started dating, he never grilled any of my boyfriends, a fact that bothered one guy I dated in college. Nick got to meet my dad when he picked me up to take me back home for a school break and the three of us went out for lunch. My dad is outgoing and gregarious, and he spent the lunch chatting with my boyfriend over sports and tales from his own college days. Nick later told me that he was offended—to him, my dad's failure to rigorously question him meant my dad didn't take our relationship seriously!

Without the rigid behavior code of purity culture being reinforced at home, I started to relax a little and to question the inflexible interpretation of "Christian behavior" I was

taught. My parents knew what life was like and what teenagers were like. They didn't try to stop me from living, and I trusted them and their judgment. I started picking and choosing which church rules to follow. The first rule to break was concerning alcohol.

My closest friends and I decided that we needed to know how we handled alcohol before going away to college, so we concocted a plan. None of us had fake IDs or helpful older siblings, so we gradually pilfered small amounts from my friend's dad's liquor cabinet over a period of weeks so we could practice drinking. We planned a group sleepover at Amy's house as our inaugural drinking party. My first taste of alcohol was a nasty brew of cognac, scotch, and God knows what else, which promptly swirled around my stomach and straight into the toilet. I came home the next morning and told my mom every gruesome detail, including how Amy's mom came to the bathroom to check on me as I was throwing up and I winked at her profusely, letting her know "my medication" (for what?) made me nauseous, nothing more. My mom was grateful that I had spent the night and warned me not to be stupid and drive drunk. No huge overreaction, no punishment. My parents discussed safe drinking habits more around the house, and that was that.

A few months later, I tried marijuana for the first time, intending to spend the night at my friend Amber's house. However, the decision to smoke was a spontaneous one after I had "practiced drinking" with a few beers. The combination of beer and pot made my head spin in a way that

I did not enjoy. I slept it off in Amber's room while the party raged on, woke up at 3 a.m., and drove myself home, feeling sober enough. My mom used the opportunity of my being away all night to escape my dad's snoring by sleeping in my bed, so when I crawled in at 3:30, she was there and could smell the stank of pot in my hair. More exasperated for getting woken up than anything else, she admonished me for driving while under the influence and made me promise to be smarter. I realized that it was fun to break some rules but felt convicted to be more careful.

Growing up in an evangelical church during the height of purity culture meant I picked up weird shame complexes about drinking, swearing, and sexuality. After I started drinking those few times my senior year of high school, I guiltily quit on several occasions for prolonged periods. It took me years to get to reach a comfortable, healthy place with drinking. I remained vigilant against swearing. Swearing was a barometer for me, proving if someone was a "real Christian" or not. Real Christians—for the record—didn't swear. I was the most rigid around sexuality, rarely getting into tempting situations and always stopping things before they went too far. I never did more than make out with guys out of a fear of becoming "tainted."

Thankfully, my parents never enforced these messages at home. My mom's secret favorite word was *shit*. My dad was open about his previous drug use. My mom was completely honest about her sexual history prior to my dad. She blew my mind when she said that she didn't feel tainted and used, haunted by past sexual encounters and unable to

enjoy intimacy with my father. That is what I was taught to expect at church in too many cheesy examples of flowers with all their petals picked off and “giving away the milk for free.” My mom’s confession laid some of the first tiny cracks in my rigid understanding of the way things were supposed to be.



MY UPBRINGING—WHICH WAS INHERENTLY religious—molded my character in ways I am still proud to own. My parents instilled an ethic in me to be generous and to ask how I can help bear another’s burdens. They took my brother and me to soup kitchens on major holidays, supported mission work, and donated to charities in addition to giving to the church. Our family valued a strong work ethic, a humble attitude, a kind heart that stood up for others, and a sense of fun and enjoyment from life.

We took epic vacations across the country in our pop-up camper, turning me into an avid nature lover from a young age. We spent summers exploring the South Carolina coast, the Appalachian Mountains, the Colorado Rockies, and the canyons of Utah and Arizona, and my dad annoyed my brother and me by gushing over the beautiful scenes we would encounter—“You just don’t appreciate this the way I do!”

My mom was a constant source of fun and amusement, bending over backward to provide a happy, loving childhood for me and my brother. She chaperoned my seventh grade school trip to Springfield, Illinois, which made a detour to Hannibal, Missouri, to see Mark Twain’s boyhood home. We

took a steamboat ride on the Mississippi River while there, and my mom startled hilariously at the blast of the steam engine while being filmed for a school project. She promptly won over the hearts of everyone in my class. My mom signed me up for piano lessons and sports teams, carted me around, and made sure I had friends and playdates. She sat through an entire Hanson concert with me and my friend Erika in the late '90s—now that's love! She gave me the massive, priceless gift of a stable, loving childhood.

The faith of my childhood didn't burn me, though I know lots of people whose faith filled them with shame and told them their very bodies were dirty, wrong, and immoral. That wouldn't allow them to enjoy themselves without feeling guilty. That stressed them out to no end with the threat that a fiery eternity must be in their future because the gift of grace was unbelievable. I know that people have suffered immensely under the name of God; have had religious leaders prey upon them, take advantage of them, and abuse them; have been gaslighted and manipulated in horrible, shameful ways. I completely understand why those folks ran far away from Christianity at the first chance they got. Christianity has made lots of enemies. My departure has been more intellectual than personal, as I will share in detail in the pages to come.

I always took my faith seriously. I've read the Bible cover to cover several times over. I maintained a daily journal practice from junior high through college in which I studied the Bible and prayed to God, writing out all my thoughts, feelings, requests, and questions. I've pored over

chapters, ruminating on them and analyzing them. I memorized verses and participated in Sunday school, Awana, youth group, and Campus Crusade for Christ. I shared my faith and witnessed to strangers and friends. I've read hundreds of Christian books and Bible studies. I went on a mission trip to Canada the summer before high school. In high school, I preached on stage to my youth group. During college, I led small groups and mentored younger girls through Campus Crusades. I joined a leadership board for the church I attended while in graduate school. I never swore, never kissed a boy until college (wouldn't want to lead them on), and certainly never had sex.

For a long time I followed Christianity while living my life, meeting new people, and enjoying a wide variety of experiences. Over time, however, I began to rub up against uncomfortable inconsistencies. The smooth, unmarred, surface-level faith I had confidently—if naively—skated onto in my youth eventually wore away to reveal bumps and cracks.

It was precisely because I took my faith so seriously and obsessed over it so much that I eventually asked too many questions, ventured way out to where the ice was thin, and fell into the abyss.

About the Author

Sarah Henn Hayward is a writer, a voracious reader, a deep thinker, a curious learner, a nature lover, a brave adventurer, an Enneagram 7, a former Christian, a doctor of physical therapy, and a loyal friend. Her blog at sarahhennhayward.com highlights the books of marginalized communities, and she is active on Instagram as @shaywardwrites. She lives in Spokane, Washington with her husband Dan and her two children.

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