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The Day I Heard

It was late afternoon on a warm, clear Saturday. The sky was blue and the sun was shining. Our house did not have a garage, but in the center of the back of the house there was a four foot by eight foot storage closet where I stored the lawn mower and other yard supplies. I needed to clean and organize this storage space and I knew that this was a great opportunity to get this task off my list of things to do.

My son, Chris, was six years old and loved to play outside, so as I headed out the side door of the house onto the driveway Chris was right behind me. As we came outside Chris immediately noticed that Paul was outside playing across the street. Paul was five years old and he and Chris loved to play together. Chris quickly asked if he could go across the street.

We lived in a modest neighborhood filled with three bedroom starter homes on Birch Run Lane. Birch Run Lane followed a straight path between two main arteries that drove into the neighborhood and on southward coming from a major five-lane road that ran parallel to Birch Run Lane. With the straight shot and quick access, Birch Run Lane was a favorite “cut-through” for many people in the neighborhood avoiding the traffic on the major road. The speed limit was 30 miles per hour, but with a straight road the impatient cars making the quick trip through the

neighborhood would go well over the speed limit, easily as fast as 50 miles per hour at times as if our street was a drag racing track.

Paul and Chris loved to play together. When Chris asked if he could go across the street we repeated a ritual that we had started within the past year as he and Paul had the opportunity to play. He and I walked to the curb. We looked to the left and then to the right as I again taught him that he needed to stop, look both ways and then cross the street. Because of the traffic on our street the rule we had was that he could not cross the street by himself. He was learning the lesson well and could tell me what he needed to do before he crossed the street. All was clear and across he went to play with Paul.

I headed to the back of the house to begin the task of cleaning the storage closet. I pulled out the lawn mower, shovel, bucket and other obstacles so I could get clear access to the shelves and the many items that had accumulated. I had spent close to a half-hour arranging, cleaning, organizing and throwing away empty containers that were no longer useful.

As I worked diligently to complete the clean-up, suddenly I heard, "GO TO THE FRONT OF THE HOUSE!" The voice was loud and the tone was urgent. I was startled by the command and filled with adrenaline because of the desperation in the command. Whether I heard it with my ears or as a message in my mind was not distinguishable. The voice was not mine and there was no one around me. It was clear, loud and crucial in tone and nature. With the

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command ringing in my ears I dropped what I was doing and quickly walked toward the driveway on the east side of the house.

As I came around the corner of the house and looked across the street I could see Chris. He was walking directly toward me, looking down at his cupped hands as he made his way toward the street. I did not know what he was looking at in his hands but later found that he and Paul had found tadpoles behind Paul's house and Chris had scooped up some water with a few tadpoles to show me. He was excited to let me see them so he held his hands tightly together, focused on his hands, watching to be sure he did not lose the water or tadpoles.

With Chris walking toward me, looking down into his hands, I wondered what he was looking at as I continued to walk down the driveway. As I began to come out from between my house and the neighbor's house, I saw to the east a car coming toward us. The car was flying down the street, well above the speed limit, as was often the case when cars cut through the neighborhood.

I looked at Chris and saw he continued to walk toward the street, straight toward me, his eyes fixed on his hands and his pace not changing. I looked to the left and the car continued toward us at a very high speed, I looked at Chris; he continued to walk toward me and was almost to the street. I looked at the car moving in a blur, almost at our house. "CHRIS, STOP!!" I yelled.

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Startled, Chris stopped right on the curb and the speeding car flashed past him within two or three steps. My adrenaline was rushing and my heart pumping. I didn't know what to think. I was shaking and in shock about the course of events. I ran to the street and looking both ways told Chris to cross the street. I was filled with fear for what could have happened, joy that he was saved from injury, and concern that he did not look before entering the street. I looked at the tadpoles in his hands while telling him to always look both ways when he approached the street.

It was clear to me, had I not come around the house and intervened by yelling to Chris, he would have been hit by that car and gravely injured. It took quite awhile before I could calm down from this miraculous series of events. I could not think clearly about what had happened for rest of the day. But one thing was clear; I heard God or His Angel and that voice saved my son! That day I did not encounter any pretense, any theology, any hierarchy, any law, or any doctrine. What I experienced that day was RAW GOD.

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God revealed himself to me in a way I did not expect. On the day Chris was spared I was twenty-nine years old and at a point in my life where I was seeking to know God in a way I had never known him in the past. My desire to know God was a recent turn from a very different attitude I had held for ten years. Although I had told God I wanted to truly know him, as a result of my lifestyle and philosophy of the previous ten years, I had many doubts and uncertainty about who God is. This uncertainty and doubt was based on a construct I had built in my mind to contain God, but when I experienced RAW GOD this construct was shattered. But why did it take me twenty-nine years and to this point in my life to see God in a different dimension?

I grew up in church. My parents had started attending a small Missionary Church when I was only a few years old and I attended church throughout my elementary and teenage years. I attended Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday evening and any other special services. My father was a milkman on a wholesale route making deliveries to restaurants, small groceries and other small businesses. It was hard, physical work having to move forty pound cases often five at a time and the hours were long. He left before the sun came up and often did not get home until the sun was setting. My mother started working full-time at a children's daycare when I was eight. With their schedules, my sister

and I in school, other than a few neighborhood friends, church was where we had friends and community.

My first significant spiritual experience came when I was ten years old. Our church was having a revival with a very dynamic evangelist preaching the revival. I cannot tell you which night of the revival it was, nor can I tell you what the sermon was about. A friend and I spent the service playing chess on a small wooden chess set I had, not paying any attention to the sermon. At the end of the sermon the evangelist made a dramatic call for people to come and be saved. With his plea I was greatly convicted and knew I needed to respond. It felt as if my heart was going to come out of my chest as I made my way to the church altar and asked to receive Jesus. I was filled with joy as my eyes burst with tears. I remember well at the conclusion of that evening, standing at the front door of the church as people exited to go home, holding the door open for all as they left with each giving encouraging and loving words to me.

Eight years later, in my first year of college I faced a decision. Would I go the way I had as a teenager, return to the church and pursue a life that I had found to be confusing and unfulfilling or would I go the another way and experience the world while embracing the philosophy of the world? I made a conscious and deliberate decision to turn my back on God, the church and the religious beliefs of my parents and I set out to define my own rules, make my own path and go the way I thought was right.

What happened from the age of ten until eighteen to impact this decision? At the age of eleven when I was asked,

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‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ my answer was ‘a Preacher’. I went to church regularly and attended all the functions for the youth. I studied my Bible and was involved in activities such as Bible Quiz that required memorization and study of the Bible. I went to Youth Camp every summer and remember going to the altar numerous times to rededicate myself as I searched for God’s purpose in my life. Yet with all this, when faced with the decision, looking at what was offered behind me and what I envisioned in the world before me, I choose to walk into the world. Why did I make this decision?

Why Do Youth Drop Out of Church after Turning 18?

Cathy Grossman in a USA Today article stated, “Seven in 10 Protestants ages 18 to 30 — both evangelical and mainline — who went to church regularly in high school said they quit attending by age 23, according to the survey by LifeWay Research.” (Grossman 2007) What were the reasons cited in the survey by those who left the church? They included:

- Wanted a break from church: 27%
- Found church members judgmental or hypocritical: 26%
- Moved to college: 25%
- Tied up with work: 23%
- Moved too far away from home church: 22%
- Too busy: 22%
- Felt disconnected to people at church: 20%
- Disagreed with stance on political/social issues: 18%
- Spent more time with friends outside church: 17%
- Only went before to please others: 17%

For me, from a pragmatic perspective, it was not that I left home because I went to college locally. I was kept busy working a part-time job on Sunday. I did feel disconnected from the people at church, although this had been building over the months before I made my decision. I can also say I went to please others and ultimately wanted a break from church.

In response to this survey, Dr. J. Lee Jagers stated, “In my opinion, young people leave the church after high school because they have become too accustomed to everything around them (including church and God) fitting into their comforts and values rather than yielding and submitting to higher standards that might not be comfortable. In addition, young Christians are not challenged to think, but rather to have fun and enjoy superficial relationships. They are allowed to get away with a self-centered consumerism without being challenged. Sadly, they don’t see many good examples of deep faith in the older generation. Perhaps that’s why discipleship and training are lacking. Young people are highly capable of sacrifice, dedication, deep thought and selfless devotion to ideals. I think the local churches ought to be tapping those qualities and anchoring them in the timeless truths of scripture to unleash the zeal and dedication that is possible with young people. Bottom line, however, is that godly zeal is a manifestation of the internal work of the Holy Spirit, so it’s not a matter of our striving but more what we allow the Spirit to do in and through us. Ultimately, we all (old and young) need to work toward a yielded connectedness to the person of a living God.” (J. Lee Jagers 2007)

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I can agree with a number of the points that Dr. Jagers notes in his response to this survey and see his point as I think of why I left the church. For me, I can identify three key reasons why I left. These are World View, Confusion of Youth and Stale Religion.

Stale Religion – No Life

The focus of the church I attended was to learn the Bible and have faith. There were many activities and opportunities to learn more about the Bible. From my perspective, beyond knowing the Bible there was not an active effort to teach young people to know or experience the living God as I grew up. The focus was evangelism and living a good life. The faith that we were encouraged to have seemed to me to be faith in faith as heard from others, not a living, dynamic faith growing from a living relationship. This is not to say that some or many of those who taught me through these years did not try to teach me how to develop and grow my faith. I acknowledge that it is possible that much of the problem is how I looked at what I heard and reduced it to a rational, educational view rather than a personal relational view.

My focus was on learning about or educating myself in the Bible in much the same way I was learning in school. With this educational focus there was a direct comparison and competition concerning where and how I became educated. Sure I had felt the tug of the Holy Spirit in my heart each time I went up and rededicated myself at numerous summer youth camps, but this was not maintained

by a study of the Bible in a rational, educational way and I knew no other way.

A lack of focus on the study of the Bible was not the problem. Sunday school and youth activities all had a focus on learning more about the Bible. The message I heard was to have faith. But it seemed to me this faith was faith in the faith being taught and was not a faith to be grown within me. If faith was rooted in the knowledge that one could obtain, then the ration of time spent on study of the Bible versus study of secular topics tilted heavily to the secular thanks to public school.

With this focus on study, I found that my view of church and religion was reduced to rules, laws and axioms that were discovered through study. These rules began to dominate and lead me to adopt the view that there was no place to meet God personally. As these thoughts of a rule based religion grew, the extension in the rational mind was that religion was about rules, morals, standards, and actions taken, not about a relationship.

My look then at faith was not one that distinguished a religious faith as one I needed to develop as my own. This view of a stale faith contrasted with the constant challenge given in school to learn more to propel myself and, in essence, grow a faith in myself.

Confusion of Youth

A view of religion as rules is exacerbated by the confusion of youth. The process of puberty experienced by every adolescent is wrought with fear and confusion. For each of us, our body is changing, growing, hormones are being released that cause our body to grow, mature and our emotions to be raw. There is no easy way to navigate the changes of puberty. One result I experienced, as all other teenagers also face, is the confusion that is part of this time in your life.

As an adolescent there are many question one faces. Who am I? What am I going to do in life? Am I normal? Will I grow? Do I look ugly? Self-confidence is not a by-product of adolescence and it is not typically encouraged by your peers because they have the same doubts. With the challenges of physical change and the uncertainties each one faces, it is easy to see how the teenage years become focused on the physical realm. What I can see, touch, taste and experience physically. Discussions about emotions, feelings, why we react the way we do were not encouraged or explored. To further complicate these issues, sexual development causes feelings, emotions, reactions and attractions that are frightening, confusing, and exciting all at the same time.

As I look back at my childhood and teenage years, I am not certain of when I actually became aware of myself. What do I mean by this? I mean an awareness of what I believed, what I wanted in life, why I wanted it and where I was headed or what purpose I had in my life at that time.

Self-awareness is moving beyond doing what you are told or expected to do to the point of doing things because you have decided they are best for you.

I do have many childhood memories, but they seem to be encased in a fog of time and nonspecific activity. Probably the first key memories that brought my consciousness to life are those times I thought a girl “liked me”, the first time I held hands, the first kiss. These significant emotional or perhaps hormonal, responses created significant memories as marker events of life. The day I went to the altar at ten years old is another example of a marker event. The day I became a newspaper boy at 11 years old was a significant event where I had to make a commitment and decision, but the hundreds of days I delivered those newspapers only found significance in surrounding events as the work was a pulse that droned through life.

These feelings of doubt and wondering who you are, feeling like an adult but acting like a child is also faced as you leave high school and go to college. At this passage you become an adult in the eyes of the law and can legally make decisions you could not make before. You are treated differently in the college environment with freedom to make choices about going to class, going to parties, dedicating time for study or wasting time with more freedom than ever experienced in high school. Of course this includes the freedom to fail, as long as you paid your tuition.

For me, I had broken up with my first serious girlfriend right before going to college, which added to the drama. This relationship started at seventeen years of age and lasted

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for a year and a half. Although the comfort of being loved and having someone near was soothing, I was too immature to understand the jealousy I would experience or the confusion of promises kept or broken.

Church had not prepared me for these changes and was actually the place where I experienced much of the confusion of life. My leaders may have tried to tell me and warn me, but I did not hear if they were talking. I was too busy consuming life in the confusion of youth.

World View - Education

As I reflect on why I chose to reject God at eighteen years of age, the largest contributing factor was the world view I had begun to develop through education. At eleven, the answer to the question, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ was ‘a Preacher’. At fourteen it was ‘a Doctor’.

I was very interested in science and science fiction. In seventh grade I had a science teacher who sparked my interest in science and especially in medical science. As my interest grew and I went through junior and senior high school, I grew to adopt what I would call the “Star Trek” view of science and the world. This view says that all knowledge is obtainable through study and discovery and can be explained by natural phenomena. This philosophy is humanistic, rational and centered on a natural explanation for all events and is known as Modernism. As this view of the world grew in my mind it was supported and promoted by many if not all of my teachers.

My education led to an adolescent view that I had more knowledge than my parents and understood the true nature of the world more than they. As a humanistic, rational, natural thinker I could not see anything in religion other than a construct to comfort the ignorant. The rules of religion existed because the feeble minded were easily deluded and could not think for themselves. Contrast the learning of religion with the learning of science and science was the hands down winner in my mind.

The Decision

My decision came in the middle of my first year in college. Many changes had occurred. New school, new challenges, new friends, new job. All of these came as I was transitioning from high school and feeling like I was now an adult. As my life began to change I was faced with new temptations and experiences I had not seen before. The day came when I was faced with a decision. My excuse for missing church was work and after the Christmas season I was laid off so I had no excuse. The door was open. I could return to the routine I had followed through my teenage years at church. I looked at what I had experienced and knew from my past and then looked at the new opportunities and what I believed could be and made my choice. ‘No thanks God, I need to test life’ was my attitude and I consciously turned to find my own way.

This decision put me on a path that both widened my experience and narrowed my view. In many respects, I walked away from the life I had known as I grew up. I saw

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and did things I had never experienced. Yet at the same time my world began to narrow to what I could see and want. I became my own god. This led me to a path away from God and then a return to God and the RAW GOD experience involving my son. As I look back and consider the path I followed, I can see a pattern of markers that I passed. I would name these markers No God, God Is, Find God, Know God and Hear God.

More than two decades after that eventful day when I experienced RAW GOD, I can say that the markers beside life's path often appeared more than once. Along the path I have learned a number of keys to finding and knowing God. These keys are summarized by RAW GOD. They are:

Receive the Word

Anointed Thoughts

Witness of the Spirit

Go to Others

Observe Life's Lessons

Dreams, Visions, Prophecy