

Montgomery 1

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Do College and Religion Mix?

"Laura, are we going to church on Saturday evening or Sunday morning?" Before I went away to college, the question was not if, but when, my family and I would attend weekend church services. Additionally, as a Catholic school student from pre-kindergarten through high school, I participated in weekday services and religious study. It is safe to say that practicing my faith was a daily occurrence, as natural and expected as brushing my teeth first thing in the morning or eating dinner every night. I assumed it would always be this way. I even recall saying that when I moved to college, I was going to find a church that I liked and go every single weekend. That was before I left home, however. By the end of my first year in college, I was shocked to realize that I had only attended church three times. Why did this happen? How could I have let my church attendance lapse to almost nothing? And did this mean I was no longer religious? Over the following summer, back at home, I gave these questions serious consideration. I realize now that a combination of newfound independence, extracurricular activities, academic pressure, and an unrestricted social life all contributed to my putting religious commitments aside. I also realize that although I took a break from my practice, I never lost my faith.

That first year at school was a real test, however. Granted, I often thought about going to church and, many weekends, even planned on going. I knew that life worked better when I felt a spiritual connection to God, and that Sunday church only took up

one hour a week. I even read a statistic in my philosophy class that alarmed me: according to Chris Burdette of the University of Central Florida, 50 percent of those who start out religious fall away from it during college (qtd. in Jacob). I heard that and something inside my stomach clenched. I did not want to be part of that 50 percent who lost touch with their religion; my religion was the most important aspect of my upbringing. Nevertheless, I had let my church attendance lapse.

As I think about it now, I realize that my religious upbringing--and my sudden freedom from its demanding routines--may have been part of the problem. Arriving at college for my first year, I was suddenly independent. Independence can sometimes mean getting away from societal and familial expectations. Colby Raly, a college senior, did a study on university students and religion and found that "participants who were forced to attend church when they lived with their parents tended to stray from their religions when they went to college" (qtd. in Flandez). I was never actually forced to attend church, but as I said, attending never felt like an option, either. As reluctant as I am to admit it, I think that one reason I did not attend church regularly last year was that I was enjoying, for the first time in my life, not having to. It was a totally new experience to not plan my days, especially my Sunday mornings, around attending service. I felt free, and I did not want to give that freedom up for anything.

Another reason I let my church attendance lapse was due to the many activities I was involved in, and for the most part, they were all activities I loved to do. I was in the honor society, a community service group, the swimming club, and the school choir. Each one of these activities was beneficial to me in many ways, but together

they were quite time consuming. I was busier my first year in college than I had been at any other time in my life, and unlike in Catholic school, church service was not exactly scheduled into my days! Church would have been yet one more activity to fit in. Many days I felt I simply did not have the time. I also felt like I wanted to participate in these new and exciting activities.

All of these pursuits, of course, came on top of my schoolwork, which was by far the most time-consuming aspect of my college life. With eighteen course units in five courses, I found that the week sped right by: an essay due one day, a midterm due the next, and heavy reading assignments due every day. I felt a constant, heavy pressure to do well for many reasons: I knew how hard my parents had worked to send me to college; I knew that my future career depended, at least in part, on my getting good grades; and I was genuinely interested in learning. But all that learning took time! Many nights I would study until I literally passed out with my textbook on my chest. For the most part, I put studying and good grades before religious activities, even when I felt my spiritual side craving attention. Doing well in my courses was my first priority.

And, as much as I do not like to admit it, my newfound social life was a close second. The biggest distraction--and biggest temptation--for me last year lay in socializing. After years of strict curfews and rules regarding whom I went out with, where I went, and what I did, I suddenly enjoyed a new freedom in meeting new people, hanging out, and going to parties. Fatimah Jackson notes that the social aspect of the college environment "can also present challenges to religious beliefs. The worldly and immediate lure of parties and drinking can often distract people from larger religious goals" (qtd. in Flandez). I never did anything last year that I am

ashamed of; the worst I can say is that I spent too many nights in a row, too many weeks in a row, staying out very late. But Sunday morning services became totally out of the question when Saturday night parties became my normal routine.

By the end of my first year in college, I had lived as an independent adult for the first time, participated in new activities, achieved solid grades, and made many great friends. But I realized something else: I was not entirely happy. I felt exhausted from the year and confused about who I was. I had strayed so far from my religious practice that it took a little while before I realized what was wrong. It all hit me when I returned home for summer vacation and returned to church for the first time. Sitting in the pew during a Saturday morning service, I felt the absence of God in my life like a hole in my chest. I made a vow to do things differently my second year at school.

I am now in the middle of my second year, and I am happy to say that I have found a balance between my life as a college student and my life as a Catholic. I have found a church that I like, and I usually attend services there once a week. I will admit that there are times--exam period, for example--when I do not make it to church. But those weeks are now the exception. What feels especially good is that, having spent a year away from my religious practice, I have returned to it not because I had to but because I wanted to. I experienced for myself the emptiness and confusion that creeps into my days when religion slips out. Finding time for spirituality does not need to take time away from my activities or studying, or even from parties. Finding time for spirituality can help me deal with the stress of all of these things, and even help me decide which distractions I want to give into--and which I don't.

Montgomery 5

In my philosophy class this quarter, we have been discussing definitions of spirituality. The one that means the most to me is by Patrick G. Love and Donna Talbot. They say that “spirituality is an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development; the development of a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community; and the process of deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life.” According to this definition, the college experience can definitely be a spiritual one. Even when college took me away from my religious practice, it was helping me to develop internally and to come to a greater understanding of my beliefs, morals, and values. Ultimately, these developments led me back to my religion, the place where my spirituality is continually refreshed.

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