

Tethered to Christianity: Back to my father's ship

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

I saw my father preach the other day. His hair is now white, and the skin on his face has loosened with age, but this is the same man whose face I saw above the pulpit throughout my childhood. He stood like a captain in the bow of the ship that he loves, confident that the vessel would rise and fall with his voice and break the waves of human need as it sailed to the promised land.

Emotion and energy rose in him as he warmed to his task, proclaiming the truth of his beloved gospel. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, but the man Jesus Christ, somehow both human and divine, died for us all. His death and resurrection forever shattered the power of death and brings righteousness to all who believe.

There is no guile in my father or in his message. He is not ashamed of the gospel, of the stunning foolishness of its claims or of the Gordian knot of questions that inevitably follow them. He is a true believer. He cares not a whit for American culture or his status in it. His greatest desire is to hear “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” at the end of his life.

Because of this, it is hard to place my father within any group or faction or political party. The New Testament calls us to proclaim the gospel so that others may repent and turn to Christ, so he does. In that he is an evangelical. The New Testament calls us to love one another regardless of the color of our skin, so racism never gained a foothold in his life; in fact, he was always rather innocently perplexed by it. In his youth he was known as a radical or a liberal or a nigger-lover. The New Testament calls us to care for the poor and needy, so he does. As a young man, he was not above smuggling food and blankets into Juarez, Mexico, when border regulations forbade his charity. Some might say that he is a social activist, but the label has no more meaning for him than any of the others.

My father is the most single-minded, dedicated Christian I've ever known. Whatever wavering doubts he has harbored and whatever personal sins and weaknesses he has struggled with have always been safely secured and stowed away in the hold of that mighty ship he steers. What is in that hold remains a mystery, for I have not been granted access to it. It's not that he is unaware or overly ashamed of what lies within him. There's just no time to focus on such things. There are funerals to do, and sermons to preach, and the sick to visit, and churches to guide toward health. There is work to be done for Christ.

Jung would say that my father participates fully in the myth of his people. My father and other Christians would wince at that statement, but Jung understood myth in a broad sense. I would say it this way: The Christian story is my father's only story, and he lives completely in that story. People like my father move history along by living within the reality of their stories. They are immersed in the plasma of human history, swimming through it, surrounded by it, making it happen.

This is as true an accounting of my father as I can give in a single, short piece of writing. I am his son, sired by the power of his commitment, and I bear the mark of it. I will never be free from the gospel he proclaims.

But that is only half of my story. For my mother was a woman that only God could have chosen, a true match with my father. She is a born mystic, a creative soul, a muser, a thinker and a wonderer. There is a primitive love within my mother that no church or creed can tame. Her gentle, dancing spirit is the only thing that could ever cause my father to turn the wheel of the ship. He knows, somehow, that if he does not change course when she rises before him on the foam of the ocean, that both his ship and his pulpit will shatter.

He still drives his ship toward the horizon, mind you, but she makes him tack to get there.

Someday I may write about my mother, though at present I do not feel equal to that task. There is much that is unknown about her. Much that she has kept to herself through the years. But I am her son. I was nurtured with the soft music of her voice, and I see the world with her eyes. I will never be free of her vision.

I was born on their ship at a time when the waters began to change and the sky to show dark color. My father bent his back and will to the task of holding the wheel straight and true. There was no doubt in his mind that this ship would carry us all to

that place over the horizon. And on this ship there was only one story to tell, the story of Jesus and the cross.

But I lingered near the rails and saw other ships on the sea. Some of them were beautiful and drew my eye and, at times, my heart. Commitment was bred strongly into me, but I simply couldn't hold onto our ship. There were too many hard questions with no good answers, too many things I felt I ought to believe but could not. In particular, I could not abide the idea that ours was the only story and that those on other vessels with other stories were bound for hell. Even as a boy I couldn't swallow that.

I disconnected from the Christian story somewhat and floated gently above our ship, though my father's tether would not let me float too far away. Rather than living within our story, I watched it from above, a floating wraith, only half present to the faith, at once liberated and broken-hearted. I was the Joseph Campbell of Christianity, in love with the story but outside of it.

High above the deck, I saw that there were even more ships on the ocean than I had imagined, and that they were good. My heart was filled with joy but also somehow broken. I loved the view, but something drew me back to our ship. I needed a story of my own. And I wanted it to be the Jesus story of my youth. And so I pulled myself, hand over hand, back down to my father's ship.

Of course there is no going back once you've lost your footing. You cannot reenter the story of your childhood once your feet have left the deck. The best I've been able to do is feed the story to others while I myself am never quite filled. I circle our story from all angles, looking for a way to be fully immersed in it again, but I have not found the way back.

I've learned to draw upon my father's commitment, which comes naturally to me. Does Christianity need me to preach? I will. Does our church need me to set up chairs and make ready for Sunday? I will be there before the sun rises. Every single week, year after year. Do I need to believe the story? Then I will find a way to believe. I will live myself into believing. I will love others until I believe. I will read the scriptures until I learn what it means to be poor enough in spirit to believe.

Do I believe the story of Jesus? Yes, in that you cannot drive me away from it; I simply won't leave. I'm having none of the darkness, even if I only live at the edge of the light. If belief is a hard and complex thing, also a unique and personal thing,

then yes: I believe.

I have been comforted by gentle and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ who have always made a place for me in the community of the friends of Jesus. And I believe that the New Testament defines faith and belief broadly enough to include even me.

The Gospel of Mark tells the story of a man who wanted Jesus to heal his son. Jesus asked him if he believed. He boldly said, "Yes." And then, his faith faltering, he cried out, "Help my unbelief."

That man is my patron saint.