

'God lets me start over'

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [July 28, 1999](#) issue

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*While Anne Lamott was on tour promoting **Traveling Mercies**, we had a chance to talk to her about the book and her journey to the church.*

How does it feel, after writing *Traveling Mercies*, to be asked to talk about God?

It feels great, though at the same time I'm always confused about whether I'm bringing people to him or scaring them away. I worry that because the book is irreverent, and because there's swearing in it, and because it's about my gravely imperfect heart, I will convince some people that I'm not actually any kind of Christian and scare other people away by how accepting I believe and understand Jesus to be.

Your readers know that humor is very important to you. Do you think God must have a sense of humor?

I'm hoping. I'm doomed if he or she doesn't.

Could you talk about your entry into church life? As you describe it in *Traveling Mercies*, the music of the church played a big part, perhaps a bigger part than its message.

I always believed in God, but I didn't at all believe in Jesus. It was the music that I first heard at this little flea market in Marin City that kind of beckoned me to church. And when I walked in, I was both blown away and quieted by the beauty of the singing—which was some old black spirituals and some traditional Presbyterian hymns. I felt enveloped, soothed and invigorated by it at the same time. It was really quite a while after this that I had the conversion experience that I talk about in *Traveling Mercies*.

Life didn't change instantaneously for you after your conversion to Christianity. Nevertheless, you do talk of a "before" and an "after."

When I experienced Jesus' presence I didn't want to do anything about it. I just hoped it would pass and that would be the last of it. When it didn't, when I really felt in a kind of hound-of-heaven way—though I've always described it more as an alley-cat-or-deserted-kitten way—that Jesus was always around at my feet, I still tried to get rid of him. And when finally I said he could come in, it was still a while before I quit drinking and using drugs. My life was still a mess. But I felt that maybe the worst was over.

You mention in the book that Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* made a big impression on you in college and confirmed your faith in God. It's an odd book, in a way, to have that sort of effect, since it's about Abraham trusting God even though that meant being willing to sacrifice his son. Why do you think the book encouraged your faith?

I just understood what Abraham felt about the world—about how little it had to offer that could make any kind of long-term difference. I was a person who had a lot of success early in life—socially and as a student and tennis player, so I knew how thin it wore, and that you needed more. Reading about how really hopeless Abraham understood the world to be without God's promise of companionship, meaning, direction and redemption—it just rang a bell. It's like that line: the soul rejoices in hearing what it already knows.

I got what the Old Testament writer was talking about in capturing Abraham's dilemma. Abraham knew that he was never going to understand this nonunderstandable mystery of our lives, so in the face of that he made a decision to jump, to start swimming in that cold water of God's will.

What's the aspect of Christianity that is most offputting or the hardest to understand for the people you know who aren't Christians?

A lot of people I have known were brutalized by their Christian childhoods. That includes my father, who was raised in a very strict Presbyterian missionary home in Tokyo. I know it really hurt and scared him to be raised a Christian. It seemed to be a religion that was about saying no, and about a God who crossed his arms and would have things only one way.

A lot of the people I know renounced Christianity at a pretty young age or whenever they didn't have to go to church anymore, and now they've found a relationship with God that is so broad and ecumenical that I don't quite know what it means.

Do you see that as an opposite religious danger—being too broad?

I just think Christianity is so rich and profound. The dogmatic, judgmental, televangelist presentation of Christianity has scared so many people away and made them feel like they must be doing such a bad job that they should just cut their losses and get out.

I don't have a relationship with a God like that. I have a relationship with a God who is so tender and so willing to keep letting me start over. It's like that old Christian saying: God loves us exactly the way we are and he loves us too much to let us stay like that. That's really been my experience. I can't blow it so badly that God doesn't still love me—and I can also feel in me the stirrings of wanting to get a little bit cleaner on the inside and a little bit quieter and a little bit less self-driven.