

Wrestling with faith

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July 2, 2013

This is an excerpt from a recent keynote at a Mo-Ranch youth conference:

In J.M. Barrie's book, *Peter Pan*, every time a child says that he or she does not believe in fairies, a fairy drops dead. And then there was that wonderful bit in *Peter Pan*—perhaps it was just in the movie and not the book—where the children jump up and down and clap, and say “I do believe in fairies, I do! I do!” And then the fairies do not die, but they become strong and they fly!

This is how things are supposed work, right? Imaginary things depend on our imaginations. We learned how this worked in *Elf*. (Spoiler alert: I'm going to tell you how a movie from 10 years ago ended.) Santa could not fly over the cynical city of New York. It crashed in Central Park. It wasn't until everyone stood around the sled and believed before the faith of the people made Santa's sled fly. And Christmas was saved!

Well, I'm here to tell you that **God is not Tinkerbell and God is not Santa**. God doesn't need our belief-o-meter to be running on full for God to exist. God is love—a verb, a movement, an action. If you doubt God, God still moves, God still works, God still loves, God still loves *you*, and God can even keep working through you.

In fact, most spiritual leaders have wrestled with faith. Most of your pastors and most of the people that you look up to have questioned their faith and doubted God. It's just that when we do it, we call it fancy, poetic things, like, “The dark night of the soul.”

Doubt is even part of our training, in a way. In seminary they take apart our faith. They deconstruct it. It's not that the professors are nasty people, but they know that earth-shattering doubt will probably creep up on us while we listen to the heart-breaking stuff through which people have to go. And it just might be inconvenient if we start doubting our faith for the first time when people are relying on us. So we look at the terrifying things. The horrifying texts. The painful history. The wars waged in God's name. The times when religion has been used to oppress women or

enslave other humans. It can be an awfully scary ride.

Many of you will be going to college, and you'll be questioning things. You'll have religion teachers who are atheists, or you will have history teachers who will tell you things about the church that aren't so pretty.

Some of you will be going to trade school or straight into the work place and devastating things will happen to you and your friends. This life is beautiful but it is also fragile and painful. And sometimes those terrible things will draw you closer to God and sometimes they will lead you to question if God even exists. And that's okay.

Because God is not Tinkerbell. And God is not Santa. And we don't need to jump up and down and clap our hands and believe in order for God to do God's work.

Mother Theresa shocked the world because after she died and her diaries were published, we found out that she didn't always believe when she was serving the poor and orphaned in Calcutta. It seemed so odd, because we could see God because of her. We knew that God still moved in and among her. God's work of justice, mercy, and peace flowed. She still continued to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ, even when she wasn't sure about her faith.

And God is working in and among you. God loves you, even when you wrestle, question and doubt. God holds you like a mother holds a child. God smells the top of your head and is filled with so much delight that there is nothing you can do that will separate you from God's love.

You see, when we are part of faith, we step into a stream that has been flowing for thousands of years. Like the rapids in Mo-Ranch, that stream has been coursing for so long that it has carved out a gorge, moving all around us. God's love and those beliefs have been moving before us and they will move after us. And sometimes we are alive to the movement—we are awake to those refreshing streams, we can fully swim in its beauty, we feel it on our thirsty skin, and we know that our whole lives depend on that water. And sometimes we feel numb to it all.

Many of you stand in church each week and say some sort of Creed. It may be the Apostles' Creed, or another one. And there might be some mornings when you just can't make your mouth say certain words. And your lips might stop forming them.

But it's okay. Because we're stepping into a stream of faith and doubt. It has been flowing for a thousand years before us and it will be flowing a thousand years after us. Our doubt doesn't stop God from loving us. And the community around us will still be speaking. They can hold our faith for us. They will hold it, until the moment we wake up to it all.