

Excruciating evangelism

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July 8, 2013

I saw the stranger across the crowded room. My eyes were drawn to him like a dog to a raw steak. He looked lonely. I could tell that he needed a friend. I smiled broadly at him. He smiled back, and that was my cue.

I walked over to him. My words oozed with kindness as I asked, “If you died tonight, would you go to heaven?”

For some reason, it always ended awkwardly after that.

“Witnessing” was the most excruciating thing I had to do when I attended a fundamentalist Bible school. But, I did it because I had a deep, abiding concern that a person might spend an eternity in suffering if I didn’t save him.

Witnessing was when we would confront people (usually complete strangers) and tell them 1) they were going to hell, 2) Jesus made a way for them not to go to hell, and 3) if they accepted Jesus into their hearts, then they would not go to hell. In order to seal the deal, to get them to make a decision to accept Jesus into their hearts, we would have them pray the “sinner’s prayer” with us.

I never actually got as far as praying with anybody, but I kept swinging, hoping for an eventual homerun. It wasn’t because I wanted evangelical bragging rights that I kept trying. Grief burdened me. In my dorm room, I looked out my window upon the vast city thinking, *We are all going to die. Most of us will burn in hell for eternity.*

In my imagination, it was as if a plague had overtaken Chicago and I walked down the halls of the Intensive Care Unit of Cook County hospital, amongst the blood, urine and bowels. I was completely alive and healthy because I held the vial of life-giving medicine.

I had to offer that cure—no matter how awkward it felt, no matter how embarrassing—because they would *die* without it. If they didn’t accept it, then so be it. I couldn’t force it on them. But I had to try. Any decent person would tell them that the vial existed.

I thought about this as I prepared for my Evangelism class. I liked the professor. His name was Dr. Fisher—which was ironic. He also had a dry sense of humor that he employed to make fun of the whole evangelism thing. He was committed to it, no doubt. But he also understood that evangelism was much easier to do when you didn’t take yourself too seriously. He would be very explicit about the dread that we would feel when we set out.

One day Fisher exhaled and handed a student a stack of papers. “Could you please pass these out?” She placed each one on our desk as Fisher explained our assignment. “As you can see, this is a graph. I want you to fill it out by the end of the semester. It has spaces for a name, some demographic information, and some religious background stuff. This will be your tool for talking to people.”

An anxious noise of shifting and sighing flooded the room.

"I know. It's terrible," Fisher said while shaking his head. "You take an Evangelism Class to *talk* about evangelism, and here I am going to make you actually *do* evangelism," his nostrils flared a bit as he looked up to the ceiling. "Fill the graph out. And I don't want to see your mother's name on this graph. You have to *go out and talk to people*."

The bell rang and the uncomfortable class became even more restless. "Alright. You can go," Fisher said dismissively.

As I strolled out, that thin paper suddenly weighed fifty pounds. There were ten spaces for ten strangers. I exhaled deeply and tried to conjure up some of the concern that propelled me when I imagined my secret vial.

That evening, Brian and I took the elevated train out to O'Hare airport. We were not yet dating, but he wanted to go out, so he accepted my invitation to go witnessing. The (pre-9-11) minimal security allowed us to get to a gate without actually having an airline ticket.

I spied a young woman looking friendly and approachable. She stood behind an information desk counter in a barren part of the airport. "Hi. How are you?" I asked, "Would you mind taking a survey? I'm doing research for class. And I promise. If anyone else comes up to the counter, I'll leave," I said raising my hand as if taking a scout pledge.

Technically, I needed to fill the graph out, because I had to turn it in at the end of the semester. It was a survey for a class. But in reality, it was not for any sort of academic research as I was leading her to believe. I hated lying, but it wasn't as bad as the bogus Gallup poll that Campus Crusade made us pretend to conduct.

"Sure," she responded with a smile.

"Okay," I said, getting my pen in the ready position. "What's your name?" She told me her name as I scribbled. "I see you're female," I said, laughing too loudly as if I said something clever. I checked the F box with the dutiful determination of a regular census taker. "What about your religion?"

"What?" Confusion clouded her face.

"Do you have any sort of religious beliefs? Do you go to church or anything?" I asked, while something in my vocal chords tightened.

"Oh. No, I don't go to church. I'm more spiritual," she explained as she pulled out a small forest green velvet bag that hung around her neck. I hadn't noticed the pouch because it was perfectly color coordinated with her sweater. She carefully spilled six different crystals, each about a half an inch in length, onto the counter as she explained, "There are energies that fill the earth. I wear these because they have different properties that I need for my spiritual journey. Some of them bring healing. Others help keep my chakras in line."

"Really?" I looked at the beautiful array of crystals, as she began to explain what she felt with each one. I stood amazed, listening to her talk about the vibrations in each rock.

"Wow. What do you do with them?"

"I hold them and use them to maintain emotional and spiritual balance."

"May I?" I asked, pointing to pink glassy rock that looked like it came from the set of a Superman movie. I held the crystal in my hand, trying to feel something. Nothing. I closed my eyes. I rubbed the stone. Nothing. Then, I realized that she must be a part of the New Age movement. We read books about New Age, as Shirley MacLaine

popularized it. We knew how it would seep into our culture and churches and metastasize like a ravenous cancer. But as I stood there and listened to my new friend talk about the energies, auras and crystals, I realized that she was the first person I had actually met who believed in it.

She didn't seem very threatening. Eccentric, maybe. But not dangerous.

I began to ask her questions in order to test out what I had read in my books about the New Age Movement. Then I suddenly remembered the survey. I needed to fill that out. "Do you believe in God?" I asked.

An actual traveler came up to the desk and I remembered my promise, so I quickly said, "Oh! I'll let you go. But, it was good chatting with you." My heart sank. I was so curious about her beliefs that I never shared my faith with her. I left without much of my graph filled out, feeling like a failure.

"Well, she almost converted me!" I reported to Brian. But then I got serious, coaching myself, pointing out my flaws. "Okay. I need to start telling people what *I* believe. That's the whole point of this, right? I have such a hard time doing that. It's just so interesting to hear what *they* believe."

Brian looked at me from the corner of his eye, "You know a lot of people just fill those things out."

"The graph? You mean they cheat?" I asked with shock.

He shrugged. "*I* would never do such a thing. Of course." His eyes shifted from side to side.

I walked along the gate areas and saw a businessman in his mid-fifties. I breathed deeply, smiled broadly and said, "Hi. I'm taking a survey for a class. Can I ask you a few questions?" The words came out easier this time.

"Sure," the man answered. He put down his *Chicago Tribune*, and Brian started wandering a bit, while keeping me in sight. "What's your name?"

"Bob White," he said.

"Hi Bob, I'm Carol Howard," I said as we shook hands.

"Bob, could you tell me what your religious tradition is?"

He smiled with one half of his mouth and asked suspiciously, "What kind of class is this?"

"Oh," I said, while blood rushed to my head. "Well... I'm a student at Moody Bible Institute."

"Ah. Moody," he gave a knowing nod.

I was caught. He knew the survey was a scam.

"I'm Methodist," he answered succinctly.

"Do you believe in God?"

"Ye-esss," he nodded, lifted his eyebrows and gave me a sideways glance. "I said *I'm Methodist*." He said it slower this time. "Methodists believe in God."

My heart sank, even as I smiled. *This one was going to be tough. The hardest people to save are the ones who think they're saved already.* "Oh, okay then." I glanced down at the next question. "So, Bob, if you died tonight,

do you know where you would spend eternity?”

“I would spend it in heaven. Because Methodists go to heaven too,” he said and an amused smile spread across his face. He still talked slowly, clearly patronizing me with each syllable.

It worked. I felt childish. “Oh. Okay,” I said again. My forehead started to glisten. I wrote “heaven” down on my clipboard, and my mind raced. *What should I do? What should I ask him? How am I going to tell him that he’s going to hell and he needs to invite Jesus into his heart? He can’t be saved. He’s Methodist. They baptize babies. He was probably victim to pedobaptism himself. How can I tell him how wrong he is?*

Bob was waiting for the next question. But there wasn’t really anything else on my sheet to ask him. He said that he believed in God and he was sure that he was going to heaven. I tried to find something that would lead to further discussion. I could tell him he had a nice tie. But he didn’t. I looked at his fingers and wrists. Was he wearing any jewelry? A school ring? A watch? Anything? Nothing.

In my chagrin, I began to doubt myself. *Maybe he’s not wrong. Maybe I’m the one who’s wrong. Maybe he is going to heaven. And if he is—that would mean that I could put an end this excruciating interview.*

I decided to take his word for it.

“Well, Bob, I think that’s it. Thank you so much for talking with me. I really appreciate your time.”

“No problem,” he sighed, shook his head, rolled his eyes, and went back to reading his *Tribune*.

I walked away and hit my brow with the palm of my fist, breathing, “Idiot. I am such an idiot.” In a moment of self-consciousness, I wondered if Bob saw my forehead flagellation, then I thought, *Who cares. He already knows I’m an idiot.*

Brian saw the cue and started moving back toward me. “What happened?” he asked once we were out of earshot.

I looked up in hopeless desperation. “You say that people cheat on this graph?”