

My faith journey

I find that people are puzzled that a scientist like myself, who also has had to deal with suffering at the coalface, could be a person of faith, a Christian. Let me summarise that journey, including why I am still a Christian, not just how it came about.

Young years

Although neither of my parents attend a church, my self and my brother and sister were 'pushed out the door' on Sunday mornings to attend Sunday school to get 'a moral education', like about a third of the children of my generation. We did complain, but our parents would have none of it. We got the impression they enjoyed having their Sunday morning free of us annoying kids. In addition, again like everyone from my generation, at school we were taught the Bible in Scripture classes and our community activities e.g. Anzac Day remembrance services, always had sermons and hymns. It was assumed that religion was just a part of our lives, just like loyalty to the Queen. I remember being exposed to a 'child evangelist' who told us the story of crowns of righteousness and asked us to put our hands up if we wanted these crowns and thus wanted to be converted. As someone who was already thinking like a scientist I reacted badly – why would you put your hand up to follow this stuff when you're just a child and don't really know – you really have to listen and then work things out for yourself.



Siblings were sent to Sunday School for a moral education

Teenager

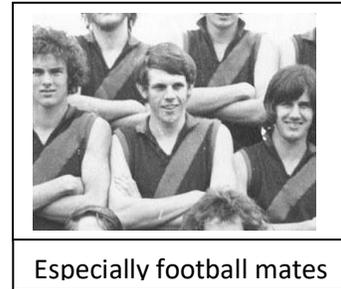
When I became a young teenager, I could have dropped out of religion altogether, as many do. It was all kind of boring. But there was some inner radar that had me interested, something a bit compelling, just enough belief to stick with it, but not enough to become committed. As this young teenager I lived the life of a normal Australian kid, playing sports, chasing girls, getting into harmless trouble and I doubt that any of my friends would've ever known that I was still a reasonably regular Sunday school attender. Then just when I might otherwise have dropped out, a new pastor arrived. His young wife looked at this group of around 6 to 8 young teenagers and pulled us out of the Sunday school environment (which I think we were all about to run from anyway!) and began to meet with us on Sunday mornings in her living room. The key difference in her approach was that she did not teach the Bible ('David killed Goliath' etc) but began to talk about things that mattered in life, things of relevance to us e.g. relationships, the world around us, different ways of thinking etc. This, combined with her compassionate and engaging personality, kept us interested. I found it increasingly compelling to think that Christianity might actually be a choice that was relevant to real life. I have since found out that she was a bit surprised that I continued attending, given my diffident attitude, but to be honest it was her honest discussions combined with her obvious love and dedication (which at times included picking me up from football matches that I had used as an excuse not to attend!) that I found compelling.



I was afraid my friends would reject

University years

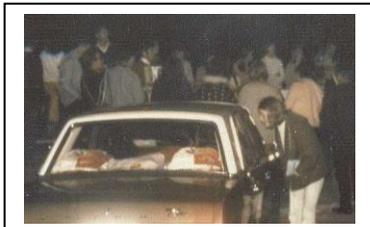
In my first year at University I was still living basically a double life. I was 'reading around' the issues of faith and religion, trying to learn and understand as much as I could, but remained frightened of becoming committed. My biggest fear was that I would become one of those boring, unattractive Christians with no social skills and being laughed at and dismissed because of it all, especially by my football teammates. I was a bit of a 'people-pleaser' in those days so I am sure those in the church would have formed a more positive view of my level of commitment than I really felt from within. I guess I didn't have the courage to be honest. I remember having lunch on campus with a group of fellow medical students one day, and one of them left the lunch table early saying he had to attend a Christian Union lecture. I distinctly remember laughing at him as he left, or rather laughing behind his back after he left, thinking how strange it would be that somebody would make such a commitment to listen to religious discussions during the University week. But I continued to read and become informed. In doing so I was suddenly confronted with a harsh truth – *you're either in or out*. You can't live gutlessly on the edge. You need to choose and that choice would require commitment, one way or the other. So, at the age of around 19, after wrestling with this challenge, I remember one night standing under the moon at the back of my parents house agonizing over what to do. Although the attraction of Christianity was great I feared enormously the rejection of my friends whom I assumed would laugh at me and reject me. But I realised that I needed to make a bold choice. So I committed myself to being a Christian, despite this enormous fear. I recall praying to God saying 'I am in, but this is going to cost me, so don't let me down'. I think I shook my fist at Him, but I might be imagining that. Interestingly, many years later, my older son Simon was confronted with the same challenge when he was about 16 years of age - he did not make the same choice at the time that I had made.



Especially football mates

Being a Christian

I spent the next five years being a totally committed Christian. I read the Bible intensely and joined a mission outreach group that met at the beach on Saturday nights. We would sing and play guitars and talk about Jesus to anyone around who arrived in cars or walked along the path. I was bold in doing this. I also joined a holiday outreach group, joined our local church youth group and attended Bible studies. They were heady days.



Beach Group



Beach Mission

Emerging challenges

Although all of this initially helped me, I ran into two problems. Firstly, in the youth group I ended up in leadership and the problem with leadership is that it's hard to avoid the sense of being a 'talking puppet', saying what you think *should* be said rather than what you really want to say about how you feel and worry about the questions that need answers. I was taught that I needed to be a shepherd of the sheep and yet I gradually felt like I was performing. The second problem occurred when attending Bible studies. Some of the individuals there began to tell me what we did or didn't believe in our denomination. For someone like me who came out of his mother's womb hardwired as a questioning scientist, that seemed ridiculously dishonest and anti-intellectual. If that were so Baptist would inevitably beget Baptists, Catholics beget Catholics, Presbyterians beget Presbyterians and Atheists

beget Atheists, none having intellectually defensible positions and arguments could only come from dogma. I could imagine aggregation happening socially, to enjoy a family/community life, but to create theological tribalism seemed ridiculous to me – why wouldn't each individual there search with an open mind for their own understanding. This led to enormous feelings of inauthenticity, and a feeling that the church was only interested in answers, not questions.

Searching for authenticity

From early October 1974 I became unsettled about myself and my faith and began a journey of experience and authenticity. I left Perth and headed to the highlands of Papua New Guinea to work as an intern in a surgical unit for 3-4 months, during which I nearly died in three motorcycle accidents and was almost killed by a crazed local who burst into my room at night and held a knife to my throat. After that I backpacked across Australia, worked for some months back in Perth and then disappeared backpacking again overseas. For the next few



years I backed packed or drove or bussed through Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Afghanistan, Iran, England, Wales, Ireland, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Scotland, Canada, USA, South Africa, Zimbabwe and probably some other places that I have forgotten. But it is not the places I visited that made the difference, it was ongoing my search for authenticity. In my desire to run away from the frustration of dogma, I virtually dropped my Christian faith, pushing it over like one would push over a house of cards and

began trying to think for myself. I was reading the 'God is Dead' literature plus quite a bit about philosophy and the other religions. But most importantly, I was trying to find myself. That sounds like a cliché, but in my case it was true. In later years when describing it, I said that I felt like I was a sugar cube that was dropped into a hot cup of tea and was dissolved. The sugar was still there i.e. who I was, but it was so dissolved in family, friends, a narrow western culture and received set of dogmatic beliefs, that I couldn't really see it clearly and didn't know how to find it. I gradually began to get some clarity on who I was and build up my own thoughts on life and belief, with an open mind. I was free to make my own mind up.



The story of 'Twink's map'

In the mid 1970's, Dr Bryan Parry and his wife Twink and their three children were working in a mission hospital in Manoram, central Thailand. They had the sort of commitment that would take a whole family away from their comfort zone to work with the poor to ease their suffering. Bryan was a surgeon. The work was busy. I talked to Bryan recently about some of the things that happened in their time there.



Bryan and Twink Parry and their children in Thailand

A disillusioned visitor

Whilst they were there they were once visited by a long haired, bearded backpacker in faded jeans. He had been traveling through Asia on a journey of 'self-discovery'. He told them that although he had been a Christian for six years, he had become disillusioned by what he saw as the failure of the church to engage with

key questions such as 'how can a loving God allow suffering?', often quite fairly posed by his friends and himself. When people suffer they are told that 'it will all OK in heaven so just pray for patience', or 'everyone can be healed if they have enough faith', 'suffering is all due to Original Sin and the fallen world' or even the notion that 'all sufferers deserve whatever they are going through', making it indistinguishable from primitive superstitions. He said he felt that blind faith alone was never enough to understand this life. He was told 'it was better to show more faith and pray more'. It was enough to create disillusionment.

Freedom to search for answers

So he decided to leave home, put his career on hold and start thinking and living free of dogmatic and interpersonal constraints. He began to travel the world by himself, searching for an authentic truth, beliefs chosen via questioning and careful open-minded consideration rather than by tribal dogma. By the time he left for his trip he had stopped going to church, dropped his faith, and was reading the 'God is Dead' literature. He happened to visit the hospital in Thailand where the Parrys were working.

During an evening meal that he shared with Bryan and Twink, their empathy must have made him feel listened to because that conversation unearthed his concerns and his smouldering anger and frustrations, emotions that he said he often kept hidden in Christian circles for fear of losing acceptance. They listened to what he had to say and then in response suggested that the best place for him to go was a Christian community they had stayed at in Switzerland known as L'Abri. After the meal Twink drew a small 'mud map' on a scrap of paper to help him locate it because it was hard to find.

The young man then continued his backpacking trip through Asia and ended up in England. For the next few years he continued his personal search free of the spiritual, social and intellectual constraints of church dogma and belief - the sort of search in which disillusionment can grow and ultimately destroy faith altogether.



Backpacking

But two years later, after spending several months backpacking around Europe, he finally committed to visiting L'Abri and began to head in that direction. He had kept Twink's mud map for those two years and had carried it around Europe in the bottom of one of the pockets of his backpack. He eventually reached L'Abri using Twink's 2 year old map.

Honest answers to honest questions

His time at L'Abri changed his life. He entered the commune as a 'disillusioned, questioning



young man', the very sort of person the community was established for. He spent his days working, studying, discussing and arguing. He listened to thoughtful Christians dealing with complex questions like human suffering, especially the founder Dr Francis Schaeffer. He thrived questions were encouraged. He left with the feeling that although Christianity was not crystal clear on some issues, it stood on a solid, rational, reasonable foundation, whether considered from a philosophical, psychological, sociological, historical or biological perspective.

Authentic faith

Because of this experience, his Christian faith was restored yet was different, more thoughtful, more authentic, more personal and more solid. All of this underpinned and changed the way he lived his professional and personal life from then on. He had moved from myth and dogma to a position of personal life-changing conviction, and a sense that issues like suffering could be examined thoughtfully and rationally.

This was in large part due to Bryan and Twink's encouragement and Twink's mud map.

Two years after sketching that map on a scrap of paper on their kitchen table, Twink Parry and her children headed out from the hospital with other team members for a Saturday picnic. Bryan stayed behind at the hospital because he was on call for emergencies. A truck smashed into their bus, instantly killing Twink, her daughters Becky (5) and Adele (2) and nine others. Bryan was devastated. It is hard to imagine the level of suffering he felt.

Their sacrifice and suffering have since inspired many. There was certainly at least one young backpacking foreigner whose forever changed partly as a consequence of their willingness to discuss difficult issues and offer encouraging advice.

When I heard about that bus accident and the deaths of Twink the girls I felt terribly sad. And I am weeping now as I write this story, because, if you hadn't guessed already, that young backpacker was me.



life

and

Twink Parry with the 2 children who were killed in Thailand

To summarise, that backpacking trip was like one of those science experiments where the sugar, like copper sulphate, gradually crystallised on the end of a string and was able to be pulled out of the hot cup of tea and visualised. Once I started to see myself, and live and think authentically, I had no problem being redissolved in life. Not everyone needs to do such a trip to discover who they really are and what they really believe, but I did.

Why am I still a Christian?

Let me jump to the issue of why I am still a Christian. I know that people sometimes get surprised at that fact – they know that I work at the coalface of science, as the leader of a medical research team undertaking highly sophisticated genomic and other biological research, and also at the coal face of innocent human suffering, as a doctor who regularly has to break the bad news to patients that they will die of cancer, who walks the journey to death with them and who has worked many times as a volunteer doctor in natural disaster zones, where hundreds of thousands of people have died. Given that science and suffering are the commonest challenges to Christianity, they want answers.



Working at the 'coalface' of advanced science and also of terrible human suffering

When asked why I'm still a Christian, I say 'because I am a BIT MAD'

BIT stands for '*because it's true*'. Actually, it's impossible to prove that Christianity is true, just as it is impossible to prove that is not true. For me, it is a reasonable and convincing explanation for things like:

- there is something rather than nothing
- the 'fine tuning' of the universe which is a compelling argument that existence was originally set up by a creator in order to have humans in it
- the nature of Jesus (his compassion, his love for his enemies, his honouring of women, his comfortableness spending time with prostitutes and lepers who were avoided by everybody else in that culture and his life full of truth and grace, two of the most powerful words I can imagine
- Jesus' resurrection
- My deep experience of God in my life, including a deep sense of His love that makes me weep when I sing about it
- The need for absolute morals in a world of relativity and uncertainty.

I think atheism is also a reasonable viewpoint. I don't deny that. But on balance, I choose Christianity.

MAD stands for 'making a difference'. I have spent a lot of time thinking about how my life would've gone if I hadn't been a Christian. There is no control for that experiment so one has to think about life circumstances decisions, opportunities and how things might have gone otherwise. I'm certain that I am a better father and husband because I'm a Christian. There are some practical reasons for that – it is much more likely that one hears about issues like fathering and marriage/relationships in a church environment than not. But in addition there's a driving force that pushes me towards these things. It's not just the inspiring model of Jesus, living in truth and grace and compassion, nor is it instructions from the Bible, for example that genuine love is 'patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude'. No, there is an inner force in me that overcomes my driven selfishness and causes me to stop and feel and respond in compassion to others. I find that impacts on how I relate to friends. I am much more likely now to be interested in their lives, how they are going and to care for them on their journey of life than what I would otherwise have been – I'm sure of that. The same thing applies to strangers.

It has also affected my work, and I do get a sense that I am marching to a different drum. Just to be clear, I'm not saying that Christianity makes someone better than everybody else. It just makes a person better than they would otherwise have been. It's done that for me.

Just to finish, I attend two churches, Providence church in Subiaco and St Matthews Anglican church in Shenton Park. I described above an assertive, nose to nose form of evangelism. I don't do that now. I

don't bible bash anyone. If I am asked a question, which I am fairly often, I respond, but rarely initiate such conversations. I tend to ask others what they think. I am always learning and I think I still have a genuine open mind. My wife and I regularly spend time with friends drinking wine and eating, and her father once asked us (an ex-missionary and Baptist preacher) whether we took the opportunity to 'evangelise' these friends. We looked surprised but said no, we just enjoy them as friends. It took him a while to realise that that's how we live our lives.

My view now is that people look to see what lives people lead to determine whether it could be true and convincing. Evangelistic words would never be sufficiently strong to overcome any life example of hypocrisy. Such behaviour is just not sufficiently attractive to allow anyone to listen. I believe in the principle of informed consent. This is what happens in the hospital – we don't do operations on anyone without informed consent. They require a basic level of information, given by someone they trust, and then they are free to choose. That is what I think about religion. The information they get is the example that you provide, then any answers you might give when asked about it.

I know that people imagine Christians proselytise everywhere, or more particularly that they always have an ulterior proselytising motive when they are friendly, or appear to show compassion. One of the examples I can give where this is just not the case occurred when I went to Aceh on the first of five trips there after the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami. Quite by apparent accident, after I volunteered I was placed with a large Indonesian team working at the coalface of the disaster. Interestingly, they turned out to be a Christian team, working in a fundamentalistic Muslim province that had Sharia law. The leader told me that they were totally forbidden to say anything about Jesus, or even to sing at night in the houses. He said we just care for them in compassion, loving them. Perhaps they will see the love of Jesus in us, perhaps not. No proselytising, just compassion. This is important for anyone to know when it comes to my secular activities – there is no hidden agenda.



Compassion without proselytising

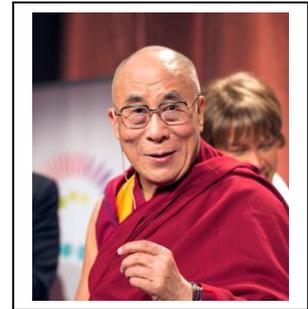
Sometimes I am asked about how we engage with our children with regard to faith. Indeed a number of atheist commentators state that if Christians teach their children about Christianity, it is child abuse. Our approach is, as you would expect from what I have already said, one of informed consent. Fundamentally

though we believe in *the theory of the moths and cockroaches*. You cannot make your children into Christians, to see light and latch onto it, you can simply make them into moths who are attracted to the light, or cockroaches to our repelled by it. And you can only do that by the way you live your life. If Christianity makes a big difference to the way you function in marriage, in your compassion to society, in your integrity and generosity and your capacity to live in grace, there's a chance that your children might say 'I want that'. Especially if you have others besides parents role-modelling this, if you don't retreat into a religious cloister of church-only friends and, vitally important, that you don't live in a fearful way, imaging that Christianity is a house of cards that can be knocked over by every puff of argumentation from atheists – it cannot, and we have always encouraged our kids to read and listen to Dawkins, Hitchens and other of the new atheists. Of course we taught our children about Christianity, that is the nature of informed consent. And we listened to their opinions without automatically telling them were wrong. At no stage we did we brainwash them and at every stage we made it clear that their decision was their own.

Our children have been encouraged to make their own minds up about faith.

Let me give one example to illustrate this. I used to walk with my children every day to the local school, talking to them along the way. It began as a chore that I thought I should do, and turned out to be one of the richest things that I've done in my life. On one of those occasions I was walking with my oldest

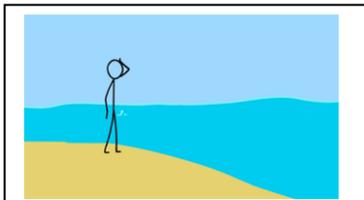
son when he was about 12 years of age. He told me that he was going with his class to hear the Dalai Lama that day and asked me ‘Dad, is he on our side?’ I told him that I really liked the Dalai Lama and that he should expect enjoy listening to him. Then he said again, ‘But dad, is he on our side?’ I asked him who was going to be getting on that bus to to hear him, me or him. He said me dad. So I told him that he needed to get on that bus and go listen with an open mind and make up his own mind about the Dalai llama and what he had to say. I explained to him that although his mum and dad are Christians that belief is not inherited. You have to think about things and make your own mind up. The main thing is to do it *with integrity*, neither following your parents just because you love them nor reacting to them because they annoy you and you want to become a more individualistic person. Just search and think openly and honestly about what might be true. And I made it very clear to him that no matter what he chose, we would still love him exactly the same, whether he followed our religion or not. Our love for him was unconditional and that included beliefs.



I have found that my Christian faith has cause me to zig when I might have zagged, and in particular it has caused me to recalibrate how I measure success in my life. As a young doctor I imagined being hospital physician, a good teacher and someone who had a good private practice, sending his kids to good schools and watching them play football on the weekends. But my Christian faith has caused me to determine success in life by *whether or not I’ve made a difference* with whatever gifts and opportunities I’ve been given. Again, other people make such decisions without being Christians – it’s just that it was Christianity that was my key to that decision. Most things you see on this website a reflection of that recalibration of the notion of success in my life.

I’m getting old now, but I am still capable of enormous personal growth. That has surprised me quite a bit. I’ve had for personal growth spurts in life, and my fourth spurt has occurred over the past few years. A combination of things which have included my wife having treatment for breast cancer, some health challenges I had, some toxic workplace issues that pounded me emotionally over a long time and a few other things cause me to stop, think and get some counselling. Some of that journey is described in my book on suffering (Understanding, Surviving and Growing from Suffering). I love that about the journey of faith – it’s not a freeway but a meandering route through many hills and valleys.

Faith can swim where reason can only wade



At the edge of reason and evidence I had to decide to take the leap of faith into scary deep water, or not.

I see faith the same way that Thomas Watson, 400 years ago, saw it when he said that ‘*where reason can only wade, faith can swim*’. I see a lot of people wading around in knee or waist deep water, always wanting to stand on the safe sand of perceived evidence and rationality, rejecting the notion of faith. It is safer. But to walk to the edge of the deep water and take a plunge into the unknown, when one can’t stand on the sand, this is the leap faith. Whether you drown or not, whether you enjoy the swimming and the experiences associated is the result of the leap of faith. That is



I took that leap, twice, and would take it again.

Christianity. I did return to that sand once and waded around on it for a few years, but returned to the edge to dive more confidently into that deep water. I can put my hand on my heart and say with complete honesty, I am glad I made that decision at the age of 19 to overcome my fear and again in my late 20’s to do so again, and take that plunge to become a Christian. I’m a better man for it,

who leads a better life, feels a deep joy in life and a deep sense of God's love and hopefully who helps a few people along the way.