

Opening My Eyes

“Hello. Have you been saved?” Those were the first words she said to me.

The short woman, dressed in several layers of clothing, too warm for May in Fairview, had approached me as I was filling up my car with gas. I wondered if she was homeless, or looking for a handout. I’d seen her standing by the wall near the door, carrying a backpack and looking like she’d just stepped off a bus. But she hadn’t, and I revised my impression of her; she was probably just looking for directions.

“Have you been saved?”

A few years earlier, I would have dismissed her with a curt *“Sorry, not interested”* and turned away. I’d done that before. I wouldn’t have been interested in talking to anyone about God.

I’d been an atheist for most of my life. My first year in university was probably responsible for that. You might think that an atheist is someone who believes in nothing. But that’s not true. I didn’t believe in the existence of God, but I *did* have very elaborate and well-thought-out beliefs, most of which were very scientific, ones which discussions with like-minded friends on the floor of my college residence had carefully fine-tuned.

Mostly I believed that a rational approach to life ruled out the existence of a God, simply because that was faith-based, rather than evidence-based. I had many opportunities to talk about this with others, and I really felt strongly about it.

It started in my first year of college. A religious group who called themselves 'Navigators', would occasionally send young men out in teams of two to visit all the college residences and try to win students over to God. They were always neatly dressed and clean-shaven, with really short hair. At that time, in the early seventies, this made them really stand out.

Our residence was four floors, with about fifty rooms on each floor, all male. (The women were in a different building next door). Access to the floors was, at that time, completely open; anyone could walk in off the street. So, when these religious gentlemen wanted to talk to us, all they had to do was climb the stairs.

Everyone in the building was friendly with each other, and most of us kept our room doors open. As a result, when Navigators showed up, the word quickly spread, and doors to rooms started slamming shut all throughout the building. Most students wanted nothing to do with religion.

But a few of us didn't mind talking to them. We saw it as an opportunity to practice our arguments against religion, to hone our debating skills, and to make every effort,

politely but firmly, to try to convince the young men that they were wrong and we were right.

We saw it as fun. The Navigators saw us as a challenge. They came back often. Hours of debate and back-and-forth well-reasoned arguments resolved nothing, of course, either way. No-one was convinced to look for God, and the Navigators' beliefs remained unshaken.

Over the years as a teacher, I would debate the existence of God occasionally with others. But never in the classroom. Having become a teacher, I knew it was wrong to present my beliefs ... about anything, not just religion, in the classroom. That had been drummed into us in Teachers' College; as a teacher who my students looked to as an authority, anything I told them, whether it was how I intended to vote, what I thought about political leaders, or what I believed about God, would carry more weight, and it was unethical to do this.

After being married for a few years, and learning that Jane had become a Christian, I stopped talking about my beliefs altogether. I knew that she wanted to raise both our girls as Christians, and in fact we did. I was OK with that because I had seen how Christianity had been a positive influence in our school through our students. I wanted that positive experience for my daughters. But I also wanted nothing to do with it personally.

You can imagine how amazed I am now, looking back at the way I was, about how I ever came to the decision that

God is real and that I wanted Him in my life. This was contrary to everything I had believed. Even after I'd made the decision, and was talking about what I believed with the person whose example had made me want to find God, I was still troubled by whether I would be accepted if I started attending the Baptist church. She assured me I would be.

The one and only important fact is that I have accepted Jesus as my Saviour, and that He loves me. In fact, I've never had any qualms at all about what to believe as a Baptist. It's centred on the Word of God, and that's all I need to know. I was baptized within a year.

Being a Christian is a wonderful attribute to bring to the occupation of teaching. A teacher can't actively teach Christianity (outside a Comparative Religions class) in a secular school. But one can certainly talk about it if asked, and far more importantly, model his or her values for the kids. I tried very hard to do that.

"Have you been saved?" the woman asked me. I didn't turn away, as I once would have.

Instead, I told her that, yes, I was a Christian, and had accepted Jesus as my Saviour. We talked for about fifteen minutes. She told me how she had been directed by God to leave her home in Vancouver and travel to the Peace River area of Alberta, to talk to people about Christianity. She had hitchhiked all the way.

She was pleasant, well-spoken and quite intelligent. My first impressions of her had been totally wrong. I reminded myself how wrong it is to judge someone by their appearance or manner, a definite failing of mine.

I told her about being a teacher, and how letting God direct my life was making me a much better one. She was very supportive.

I gave her directions to the highway, and we parted after wishing each other well. And then I realized something.

I needed to thank God for his plan to convince me that I needed Him in my life. I needed to thank Him for providing someone to inspire me to seek Him out. Because if I hadn't done that, my life would have continued to be the way it had been, and I would have missed so many opportunities to glorify Him in my life, and meet people like this wonderful woman, people who were doing His work.