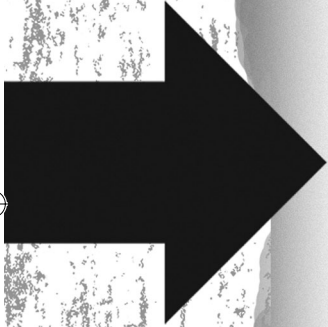




3

FROM AMEN TO UH-OH



Mark Twain once said, “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”

Running into those things that “just ain’t so” is something I have come to call an “uh-oh” moment. It’s that time when reality opens up in front of you and you can either step into it or run away from it. That night at the Passion Play, I hit the first of my many spiritual uh-ohs, and I jumped into it with everything I had.

We all have our uh-oh moments: you find a lump that wasn’t there before, and life changes in an instant; someone says “I love you” or “I don’t love you,” and the future takes on a different trajectory. When the uh-oh is fun and friendly—oh, you didn’t know your aunt left you her entire fortune?—we embrace it. But those uh-oh moments that threaten our well-balanced life—oh, you didn’t know your dad was once a jailed criminal?—well, those are the ones we’d rather avoid.

We might try all kinds of tricks to send them away: isolation, attack, marginalization, denial. But these work about as well as a teacher putting a talkative kid in the corner of the room in the hope the other kids will ignore her. She will not be quiet, and the other kids find her so intriguing, they head over to her and start up a conversation. Before long, this thing we hope to ignore not only keeps piping up but drags all our other supposedly solid beliefs down with it. These uh-oh moments can be dangerous things.

I have had uh-ohs in every aspect of my life—in job situations, in family dynamics, in friendships, in my understanding of who I am. But the ones that have really taken me aback are those that mess with my understanding of God and the

Christian faith. They are the ones that rip into all my other carefully tended assumptions. They are the ones that leave me reeling for years at a time.

It's ironic that faith and the uh-oh are so often turned into enemies. The disciples, who had witnessed Jesus performing miracles, didn't believe in the resurrection because it just couldn't be so. Galileo was forced to recant his belief that the earth was not the center of the universe because it ran against the church's official version of the "truth." The kid in Sunday school asks the wrong kind of question and is scolded for her doubts. The woman feels she can't tell her Bible study group about the benefits of her yoga class for fear of being labeled "new age."

The irony is that we religious people give tremendous importance to the uh-ohs that lead to initial conversions. We find these unsettling realizations so astonishing that we create testimonies relating the uh-oh moments in which we realized we needed faith. These conversions are celebrated and shared and held up as great moments in the Christian story. But once that initial shift has been made, our religious system holds little room for further uh-ohs, those that might challenge rules of the faith, even if they might move us toward a richer, more sustainable understanding of God. And that's unfortunate. Being once-and-for-all conversionists squelches the dynamics that created faith in the first place.



In some ways mine is the classic story of a dramatic, once-and-for-all conversion. Told in the right way, my conversion is a perfect example of "Amazing Grace": I was lost but now I'm found, I was blind but now I see. I was a captain of the high school basketball team, a recreational (and just a bit more) alcohol and

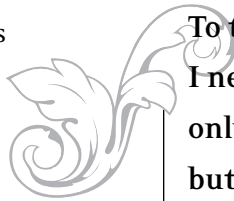


drug user, a totally nonchurched, angst-ridden teenager—and now I’m the model of a fired-up, can’t-wait-to-tell-my-friends Christian.

My faith uh-oh was so profound that I didn’t just change; I changed with a capital C. During the first year and a half of my Christian faith, I helped start after-school groups for students interested in Christianity. I led Bible studies. I evangelized at my school and was suspended for distributing a religious newspaper. I was the lead litigant in a federal lawsuit against the school district for the violation of my constitutional right to freedom of speech and freedom of religion. As a result, I became a presenter at youth groups, churches, fundraising events, and conferences. I went to a Christian college, graduated from seminary, and became a youth pastor at a well-known megachurch where I helped reach other struggling kids. It was the kind of turnaround conversion youth group legends are made of.

While this is my “official” conversion story, one I have told many times, it is not

the entire story. As in all stories, the details matter. To tell my story honestly, I need to include not only the conformity but also the wondering, searching, and reconstructing—the uh-ohs that were there from the start of my Christian life.



To tell my story honestly, I need to include not only the conformity but also the wondering, searching, and reconstructing—the uh-ohs that were there from the start of my Christian life.

Watching the Passion Play and discovering the story I wanted to live in was my first spiritual uh-oh. And it was a



beauty. As I walked backstage, I felt like I knew what I was stepping into. I knew that God had a story, and I knew that God had a place in it for me. Yet within moments, my confident, hopeful faith was met with a second uh-oh, the kind that's not so pleasant.

I didn't mean to start my Christian life disagreeing with the powers that be. Really, I didn't. But in my heart I knew that what happened next simply didn't jibe with what I'd experienced mere moments before.

Steve and I sat in a circle with a dozen or so other people. There was a man there who told us he wanted to explain a few more things about the play we'd watched. He pulled out a bunch of little booklets, handed one to each of us, and started reading out loud as we followed along. From the first page I knew something wasn't right. I found it hard to accept that the wondrous story of God, the one I had just seen and been changed by, could be boiled down to bullet points and placed in a booklet. I wondered what happened to the version I'd just witnessed.

He finished the booklet and led us through a prayer meant to turn us into Christians. Even though I prayed the words, that prayer didn't mean nearly as much to me as the one I had improvised in the theater. I know this tract was meant to help new converts get the gist of the story of Jesus, but the booklet version made the story seem far more complicated than the joyous telling that had led me backstage. In fact, it made it seem like a different story altogether, one with steps and stages rather than people and passions.



My struggle with this version of Christianity increased ten days later when Steve and I met with two youth workers who



graciously offered to “disciple” me—a term that sounded as odd to me the first time I heard it as it does today. Steve and I joined Bill and Kevin in a booth at the Burger King near my high school. As we dipped our fries in our chocolate shakes, I waited for Bill and Kevin to tell me that the play was everything I’d thought it was and that the life of God that had been growing in me over the last week and a half was a great start. But that wasn’t how the conversation went. Instead, Bill turned over his placemat and wrote out what he called the “most important things” about Christianity.

This proved to be an even more disconcerting version of Christianity than the one I’d heard backstage at the Passion Play. In fact, the content of this conversation has caused me trouble to this day. (Even though I struggled with the explanation Bill and Kevin gave me from the moment they started writing it down, these two good men came to play a crucial role in the development of my faith by the way they loved, protected, and modeled faith for me. I’m certain I would not have stayed in the faith without their care.) You can see what Bill wrote on the placemat—That’s it, right there on the next page, a copy of the actual placemat. Take a look at the top. There it is in gray and white: “Truth = absolute.” Bill then jotted down two phrases that have haunted me for decades: “3 essentials to salvation” and “3 assurances of salvation.”

Think about those words: *absolute*, *essential*, *assurance*. These are the perfect words for once-and-for-all conversions, but they don’t do much for the continual growth of an uh-oh faith. I had jumped into Christianity without any sense of the absolutes, without knowing the essentials, without a shred of assurance. I was taking a chance that this was the right story, and I trusted that it was. But could I prove it? Did

I get it? Was I certain? No, no, and no. And yet my faith felt as alive then as it ever has. I was in the thick of something true, something meaningful. Even though I only had ten days of Christianity under my belt, those words crashed into my faith experience with a fury.

Next came the train cars. Bill explained that the front car was the engine and the middle car was the coal car. The last car was the caboose. (This explanation was actually helpful since it was 1983 and I had never ridden in a train.) He then labeled the cars: the engine was “Facts,” the coal car was “Faith,” and the caboose was “Feelings.” And here’s the kicker: Bill explained, “The train needs only the first two cars—Facts and Faith—and can run just fine without Feelings.” He drew a hard line between the Faith car and the Feelings car (you can see it right there), telling me, “Feelings and circumstances will change. You don’t need them, and you can’t trust them.”

Now think about that. What is the point of a Christianity that doesn’t involve our circumstances? The Bible is full of stories that are about faith lived out in particular circumstances. I got into Christianity because I *wanted* it to interfere with my circumstances. They have *everything* to do with faith.

I looked at the picture and realized that my train was running in reverse. I had experienced something real at the Passion Play and in the intervening ten days. I was in the midst of catching up on the facts and faith. If it was true, as the placemat said, that my faith had to start with my knowledge and the trust I had in that knowledge, then I had no faith at all because I barely knew a thing.

In spite of being unsettled by this explanation, I realized that Bill and Kevin were sincere in their effort to help me understand Christianity, so once Bill finished talking, I folded

up the placemat and put it in my wallet. It stayed there for fifteen years. Not long ago I scanned it into my computer and laminated the original. I have often wondered why I kept it. I think it might have something to do with wanting to trace my Christian roots to someone or something. After all, next to the tract at the Passion Play, this was the first sermon, Sunday school lesson, or Christian teaching I ever heard. It has served as a reminder of the version of faith I was taught, the version I was welcomed into, struggled with for a long time, and gradually had to leave behind in search of something more hopeful.

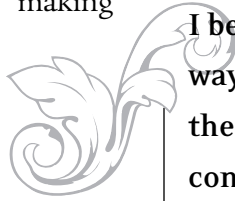
I have been a pastor for a long time, and I understand the kinds of concerns that lead to the train explanation of faith. Some high school kid watches a play and thinks he's heard from God. It's not the most trustworthy scenario. Bill and Kevin wanted to be sure I didn't become discouraged when my life didn't change dramatically. They didn't want me to give up on my new, fragile faith. But the presentation provided a solution for a problem that wasn't there. My life had changed more than I thought it could, and I was anything but frustrated. I was more hope-filled than I had ever been in my life. I needed facts and faith to go *with* my feelings, not to replace or supersede them. Rather than starting with my lived experience and suggesting that there were other components I ought to consider adding—which I was desperately hungry for, by the way—the explanation for what had happened to me was a generic equation created years before.

I'm sure this version of the faith made sense to the people who first designed it back in the 1950s. They may well have had righteous reasons for choosing the "most important things" that applied to all people. But it did nothing to build my faith—quite the opposite: it sent me into a crisis. It's ironic

that this attempt to keep me from feeling discouraged with my faith did exactly that—made me struggle. It's like getting sick from a vaccine. But what was I, a sixteen-year-old kid, suppose to do when long-term, faithful Christians were telling me the official story of the faith, even if it didn't match my experience? Question my experience, that's what. As often happens when hit by an uh-oh, I had two choices: either give in or give it all up right from the start, and I wasn't about to do that.

I have struggled with this version of Christianity from the beginning, but I have never wanted to give up my faith. I have always believed there could be a way forward that followed the story I was invited into, a story of hopefulness, of God's continuing presence in all our circumstances, a story with a call to live in the rhythm of God.

The issue here is not just the content of the placemat but the approach of making general requirements for all people. I believe that there is a way of living and telling the Christian story that connects with the life and experience of the person living it. And I believe the only way to find that version of the story is to peel away the centuries-old veneer that covers Christianity, recognize the faith found there, and move forward with it embedded in our lives.



I believe that there is a way of living and telling the Christian story that connects with the life and experience of the person living it.