

Why Hate?

I'm wrong. I usually am.

I'm not saying that to sound self-deprecating, or to appear whimsical and charming in order to endear myself to you (though if it happens, I'm fine with that). I'm saying that because it's true. I know hate is wrong. I just don't know any other way to describe what I feel. It's to-the-point, direct, and yes, maybe even a little reckless and rude. But it's what I mean.

When I was growing up, my father — who's more civilized than I am — would strongly admonish me for using *hate* to describe my feelings about something or someone. He wanted me to understand how potent this word is. He was uncomfortable with its implied violence. He wanted me to use it cautiously.

I understand. But there are realities I must face.

Like Coca-Cola. I've loved Coke since I was a child. I would do fine never letting another beverage touch my lips for the rest of my life, not even water. I love the taste of the ice-cold liquid as it passes through my lips and cascades down my throat. I often say I'm a Coke addict as a joke, since it has such power over me. But the reality is that Coke isn't good for me in such large doses, and it causes me to gain weight. So I *hate* the fact that I *love* Coke. It's a tension I have to learn to manage.

Unfortunately, this wrestling exists abundantly in the deeper, more important issues of my life as well.

My life is filled with personal conflict. This conflict has the power to crush my hopes and blur my dreams until they're merely memories of childhood fantasies, never again to be imagined, for fear of bringing even more tension, more confusion, more hate. Especially when the conflict is coupled with failure.

I used to dream of being a musician. When I was twelve, I worked through spring break and used my earnings to buy a cheap amp and guitar. I spent years teaching myself how to play. I would listen to tapes of my favorite bands, trying to copy the music and sing along. Eventually I began writing my own songs and even went on to be in a few bands.

After investing time and money and delaying college, in my early twenties I finally realized I wasn't very good, and I quit. It was a heartbreaking reality to face. The experience still follows me. It's as if I'll never let myself pursue any type of dream again. Dreams aren't worth the

disappointment and heartache when they don't come true, and it's almost certain they won't. Is failure the end? Or is failure one of many steps to succeeding? The risk doesn't seem worth it. But unlived dreams can also cast an unbearable shadow of "what if." There's no way to avoid this conflict in my life.

When we're alone and being honest, most of us would probably admit there's a deep personal war going on inside us. The smaller battles in this war break out in strange ways. They might drive us to eat a little too much dessert, spend a little too much on yet another pair of shoes, or have another drink. When left unchecked, conflict leads to confusion, regret, and guilt. And it grows. It may cause us to do things like insist on the last word in an argument and cause damage to a relationship we care about.

The truth remains: Life is a constant battle. If we're to experience any peace, joy, or love as we learn to do life and relationships more productively and successfully, our only option is to learn to fight our own inner demons. Because if we give up, we'll turn into a mess (or more of a mess, in my case).

I hate all this tension, and I hate having to face it. It's a dilemma wrapped in a crisis stuck between a rock and a hard place.

But I've learned that bigger conflict, the deep inner conflict, can be a positive force. It can bring us past the endless cycle of reaction and regret, and lead to a breakthrough and the opportunity for much-needed personal growth and renewal. We can train our minds to use our hate, and when we begin to sense it, we can create forward momentum: We sense the tension, wrestle the issue, win the battle, learn a lesson, grow as an individual, and move ahead. This can bring a new day with a new perspective and new opportunities.

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There's nothing like watching the strength of the human spirit reaching forward in times of turmoil. This is why I put pen to paper. I'm just trying to chart a course through the murky waters of frustration and hate. I think I'm discovering a path through this fog, and I want to share it with you.

In this process, my faith has been key — which may surprise you, given this book's title. I am in fact a Christian, though I hesitate using the term because of the baggage that comes with it. Maybe it's better to say I'm trying to follow Jesus as closely as I can, like one of his twelve disciples. It's not easy. This may be why I like the disciples Thomas and Peter the most. Like them, I have a lot of doubts and open my big mouth way too much.

This book is basically a log of my journey with faith, sometimes faltering, sometimes firm. It's a record of release and renewal, as I try to work toward contentment and wholeness.

So I'm inviting you to hate with me — not the unguarded, irresponsible, and negative emotion my father often warned me about, but the inner sense of overwhelming dissatisfaction that can launch a progression toward personal growth. Identifying my feeling of hate has given me an awareness to move forward. It has ignited a drive toward newness, unseen potential, and the fulfillment that lies ahead. It has also caused me to seek resolutions to bigger questions in my life: *Why are we all here? What's it all about? Is there more to it than this?*

It's these bigger questions that led me to a faith in Jesus. It was different from what I expected, which I'll get into. But it was what I was looking for through my wrestling. I've found it to be the only way to achieve sanity in my own existence.

Unfortunately, believing in him didn't fix everything. While I deeply admire, respect, and love Jesus, my faith in him has actually added to my inner struggles. And this is a real dilemma.

Faith can be a challenge, and extremely inconvenient at times. Over and over I've had to face certain aspects of my faith that don't seem to line up. I've been quite confused by what it means to seek God's purpose for my life and to follow the teachings of Jesus. And while working through these questions, I came to a helpful life-lesson that has become self-evident: *Wrong expectations lead to absolute frustration*. When we don't have all the facts, we usually end up disillusioned and angry. Like when a couple thinks that having kids will make their relationship better. Then comes the rude awakening: More people equals more problems.

I'm constantly bumping up against this principle about wrong expectations because it pretty much applies everywhere. It has been especially true when it comes to my faith. If you remember only one thing from this book, make it that. It will help you in every arena of life — career, relationships, marriage, sex, having kids, faith, etc. I wish someone had told me about it a long time ago, so I'm telling you now.

Everyone has a story. This is mine — what I've actually hated about my faith at times, and how I'm working through it all. Maybe it can help you work out some of the issues in your own story.

1

Faith

Like many kids in America, I grew up playing baseball. At age seven, I skipped T-ball and went right to Pony League. It was extremely intimidating at first. This was real baseball, complete with the threat of being decapitated by a stray pitch. Kids were reckless. Everyone was trying to throw the ball as fast as possible, because speed equaled great pitching. Control was secondary.

After Pony League came Little League. Now pitching was something to really be afraid of. Kids were bigger, so speed increased dramatically. Unfortunately, the accuracy still wasn't there. Plus, the formula was still the same: Speed equaled great pitching.

But for a nine-year-old, the real challenge in moving up to Little League was striving to hit a homer, as every young boy wants to do.

The homerun. It's what dreams are made of. When boys are staring into the clouds outside their classrooms, they're probably thinking about hitting a homerun. When a mom has to scream for her son's attention, more than likely he's daydreaming about knocking one over the fence. When young kids have sleepovers and stay up way past bedtime, they're probably predicting how many long balls they'll hit next season.

I had homerun dreams. I obsessed over them. And I was thrilled when I met our new neighbor, Bill. He was an old-timer and told me about the glory of his Little League years. You know, "back in the day." I hung on his every word, because he said he could hit homeruns at will. He even claimed to have hit homeruns in *every* game. I fantasized about being him and living those moments. It seemed so unfair that he was so good.

But that was all about to change.

One day Bill told me his secret. I never felt so lucky in all my life, because his method wasn't magical at all. The next time I stepped up to the plate, I knew things would be different. This kid was going to give Hank Aaron a run for his money. As Bill explained it, all I had to do was *keep my eye on the ball*. Simply watch it leave the pitcher's hand all the way until it hit the bat, and

BAM! A homerun. “Don’t try to kill it,” he added. “Just make contact.” After that, I never took another swing without my eyes locked on the ball. But I never hit a home run. *Never*.

I began to resent my neighbor. His advice didn’t yield a mantle full of homerun balls, the admiration of teammates, fear from opponents, or attention from girls. All I wanted was to feel the thrill of hearing the crack of the bat as the ball sailed away from me, and the victory lap around the diamond, and the applause of the crowd, and the home-movie immortalizing the moment. I wanted what so many other kids seemed to get. But it just never happened for me. I couldn’t accept that I wasn’t good enough or that I was doing something wrong. It was *his* fault. I felt as if Bill lied, and all his stories were probably lies too.

As my temper took hold, I did what we kids did to other neighbors we didn’t like. I lit a flaming bag of dog poop on his welcome mat and rang the doorbell so he would be forced to answer the door and stamp it out. Hot dog poo everywhere! Not really. He was too close to home. But it was hard to resist the urge to take vengeance on him. I wanted a guarantee. I wanted to know how to control the outcome, but I couldn’t. I’d been given a false sense of hope, and the results, or lack thereof, crushed me. After that season, I never played baseball again.

Not much has changed since Little League. I’m pretty good at most things I put my mind to, but not really amazing at anything. I’m also not very lucky. I’ve never been in the right place at the right time. I can’t help you get a crazy deal on a set of tires, and I’ve never won an all-expenses-paid cruise to Cozumel. I find myself just having to work hard at every little thing in life.

And a familiar feeling much like my failed homerun dreams eventually brought my faith in Jesus to a breaking point. I was reaching for purpose and meaning, but I found new questions and new problems. I started feeling as if I wasn’t good enough for this “team,” or maybe I was doing something wrong, and I wanted to quit. I often wondered if there was a way to find an angel with a sense of humor so he could help me place a flaming bag of poop in front of heaven’s pearly gates for St. Peter to answer and stamp out. I suppose I have passive aggressive tendencies in my spirituality too.

Something wasn’t quite right with my faith; it wasn’t working out that great for me. I started to wonder: What’s the point to having faith if it isn’t even helping or working?

The Small Print

There’s always fine print, isn’t there? A friend offering a free lunch comes with a catch like, “By the way, do you mind feeding my pet iguana his live bugs this weekend while I’m away? And while you’re there feeding Leonard, could you pick up my mail too?” Don’t you hate that?

I thought faith would dispel all the unknown variables and problems in my life. It seemed reasonable to think that if I took Jesus seriously, God would answer all my questions and take away all my problems. I thought it was a good deal. But it seemed to take a wrong turn, because he didn't come through. Didn't he understand I didn't want to live with so much confusion anymore? It made me so mad at him, and I wanted to take back the commitment I made. To be fair, I don't think it's totally his fault, but I still get mad over it.

One thing I hate about my faith is the fantasy element. There's Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, God and Jesus. We teach kids they're *all* real, but they're not *all* real. Eventually our kids will be okay with Santa, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy being cute little white lies, while accepting Jesus and God as completely legit — right? Now I know the intentions are good and fun, but I wonder if it's unfair. Could this also set us up for almost certain disillusionment as we all inevitably question the existence of God and consequently the meaning of our own existence? I've had many a conversation with people trying to figure out how to work through this, and it's not easy. Many times they hit a wall, and I totally understand.

In any other context, believing this "lie" would be clinical. For instance, imagine you and I run into each other somewhere and I ask if you would like to meet my friend Jane. You respond, "Sure!" With hand extended, you reach around me to find no one. But I insist. I'm adamant about her being right here with us. I even tell you how much Jane loves you and wants to help you in your life. Undoubtedly you would give me a casual smile as you contemplated making a secret phone call. The whole episode could end with me being escorted off the scene in a white jacket with lots of extra straps and shiny belt buckles, and remarking how much better this thing would look in black leather. You would call me crazy, and you would be right.

Do I expect people to think it's any less delusional because my friend's name is Jesus? I admit it. The whole *having a relationship with someone who isn't physically there, and talking to him on a regular basis (praying)* is weird, to say the least, and eccentric at best. If only God and Jesus would appear every so often around town to buy sneakers at the mall to prove to everyone they're real, it would make all this a little easier. But they don't, and it makes me mad. *I'll be expecting my jacket anytime now.*

Once I can get past the fantasy element, I have to deal with feeling stupid. I hate feeling stupid. Who doesn't? It seems like I always have to face the fact that having faith isn't really an intellectual exercise. There really are no facts and figures to prove (or disprove) the existence of God or what I believe, and that makes me feel dumb.

If I were talking to someone who considered himself somewhat intellectual and fairly intelligent and rational (as most people do), and he was explaining to me how he came to a

certain large-scale life-altering decision, I wouldn't be surprised to hear him say it involved reading some academic research, pondering certain intellectual principles, and weighing lots of empirical evidence. Maybe he would even pull out some graphs and pie-charts. And his decision would make total sense to me. But when I describe my own life-altering decision, it's a little different.

I always end up in pretty much the same place. "Yes, I believe in Jesus. I can't really explain it. It's basically a decision I made based on a feeling. And I trust in the sincerity of that feeling." Unavoidably, there's a sense of embarrassment. And I *hate* that. It makes me feel so stupid. It's not that I'm ashamed of what I believe or who I believe in. I know it to be true. It's just an awkward situation by default. Not to mention the many people who already think having faith is simply superstitious, primitive, and irrational.

I know I would sound more introspective, informed, and perceptive by pointing out flaws or being more skeptical and *not* believing. But I can't, because I *do* believe. There are, in fact, volumes of reference-type materials that try to deal with faith in the academic arena and do a fine job of intellectualizing a faith decision. In the end, however, all these scholars and philosophers arrive at much the same place as me: Faith is essentially a decision based on a feeling. There's just no way around it. But I hate having to push through that every single time I talk about what I believe.

Another thing I especially hate is the seemingly broken promise. As I've indicated, I like guarantees and predictability. I want to be able to forecast and control the outcomes in my life. Faith was supposed to bring clarity in my confusion, answering all my questions and helping me make total sense of life. This would give me the ability and confidence to make the best decisions in all situations, thereby ensuring that only good and beneficial things happen in my life — total peace all the time. Sometimes it gave me peace, but mostly it didn't, and I felt like God was letting me down.

My confusion multiplied with the number of forks in the road. Should I buy a car or lease it? What should I major in? When should I get married? When should we have kids? Can I even afford a kid? Is this the right house to buy? We all have our own lists of unpredictable situations, and mine gets longer the older I get, as life grows more complicated. I find living with so many unknowns to be quite unsettling.

The fact is, I knew absolutely nothing about faith. In an effort to fire me up in my commitment and keep me devoted to Jesus, some Christians early on seemed to inadvertently "sell me" on this cure-all idea of faith, like some kind of acne medicine that could clear everything up and help me get a really hot girlfriend. Christian television and radio reinforced it,

telling me things like “name it and claim it!” With enough faith, I’d be able to create and control the outcomes in my life and get whatever I wanted. Like Luke Skywalker using “the force,” I could move objects around in my life and make people do what I want with my Jedi mind-tricks. And if my faith wasn’t doing those things for me, I just didn’t have enough of it.

I liked the idea, but it didn’t work. This obviously meant something wasn’t right, and I felt like it was me. I was doing something wrong; I wasn’t good enough.

Where were the guarantees? Where was the security? The good deal turned raw, and I wanted my money back.

All these issues brought a dose of reality I wasn’t prepared for. I mean, who wants to trust his whole life to someone nobody can see? Who wants to tell others about this very nebulous personal decision? And who wants to keep up the commitment when things don’t exactly work out like we think they should, making it all look pointless?

That’s the fine print no one ever told me about. It’s been twenty years, and sometimes I still feel like I’m about to come apart. These things still go with the territory.

Sometimes I still get mad. But as I made myself push through these issues and work them out, I began to discover the true value of my faith. I would have robbed myself had I shut down over these issues and let my hate and frustration defeat my faith and newfound purpose.

I have to be upfront. I owe a lot of this to an old friend of mine who caused me to think through this stuff. It’s an old conversation, but it formed the very basis of why I still have an enduring faith today. This is why I have to share the highlights of that conversation. It illustrates the process of my faith.

The Other Jason

It’s always strange when you meet someone with the same name as you. It’s even weirder when you’re alike. I met Jason in my high school years, and he became a good friend. He didn’t go to my school, but one of his best friends was in most of my classes, so we hung out periodically in mutual social settings. Eventually I caught up with Jason at community college, and that’s when we started becoming better friends.

We had a similar schedule on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We would hang out in the cafeteria between classes, usually grabbing breakfast or lunch if it looked edible enough. He always wanted to play chess, but I despised the game. It took too much thought. I’m more of a checkers kind of guy. I was at community college, after all. So we talked instead. We were young guys, so

we talked movies, music, and girls. Eventually we started talking about spiritual stuff because we were both curious.

I wasn't as smart as him, but I communicated the best I could. I started telling him things I'd been wondering about and how I'd come to believe in the life and teachings of Jesus. This subject became our ongoing dialogue, as he challenged premise after premise that I presented. Inside, I hated his apprehensions, but I began to appreciate them as he stated his questions with respect. He seemed to be tracking with me and gauging his spiritual search along the way. Our dialogue went on for nearly a year.

He first challenged me to explain why I would believe in someone or something I couldn't see. I acknowledged it was a strange practice. I thought it through a little more, and the next time I saw him, I told him I just couldn't ignore something going on within me (and it had nothing to do with the cafeteria food). I started to sense a void deep inside. In no particular order, I was overwhelmed by the randomness and despair in life, I was struggling with a sense of purpose for my future, and I was more and more convinced there was a spiritual element to our existence. That was the framework for my void.

Just acknowledging these realities brought an initial sense of relief, though it soon yielded a greater sense of responsibility.

I told Jason I was noticing and thinking about things I never had before, and I couldn't stop. Clearly there was more to us than flesh, blood, and bones. I mentioned how some of our classes might actually be backing this up. In Chemistry, my professor tried to rationalize the mystery of why an atom remains intact and the universe doesn't fly apart. She taught us about "cosmic glue," "dark matter," and "X." To me, this fit what I was discovering spiritually. But to explain the unknown, there had to be more than overly generous, sweeping, generic catch-all descriptions. I told Jason I thought there was a spiritual element to life that these deficient descriptions were touching on. Specifically, hidden deep down inside him, somewhere between his heart, soul, and mind, I was convinced there was a spiritual being, something all the science in the world could never explain. It's in all of us, it explains who we really are, and it has little to do with blood or guts or cosmic glue.

Besides, there's so much about our existence that can't be explained or classified. So believing in something I couldn't see wasn't a big issue to me, since we all do it to some degree. It was more a matter of what to do with that knowledge. Would I ignore it? Or try to make sense of it? Was there a reason for, and behind, all this mystery?

Jason could see how I got to that point. It made some sense to him, as he was having similar thoughts. But he still wasn't sure if he was willing to have faith in something he couldn't see or prove.

I said I understood. I also reinforced the idea that we all believe in someone or something. Every individual relies on a set of beliefs or core values, not necessarily religious in nature, that may guide them at unsure times. Perhaps people seek the advice of good friends, or ask their parents or grandparents, or take a class, or read a book. The resulting beliefs and values they develop aren't visible, but people trust in them. So, I argued, everyone looks at the situation they're facing, considers what they believe, and then leaps. This functions much like faith. For the most part, we're all trusting in things we can't see — a type of faith, to some degree. I was simply bringing it to the next level and choosing to be influenced and mentored by Jesus.

He saw my point. We finished our waffles and went off to our classes.

The next time I saw Jason, he asked why I would trust in God even when things aren't exactly going great. He'd often observed bad things happening to people of faith, and it made him wonder: What's the point? There had to be some immediate benefit to faith, if it's worth anything at all. Or maybe God wasn't as involved in our lives as people like to think: Either he didn't care all that much, or wasn't really that powerful.

“Fair question,” I admitted. Here was his own version of the “broken promise” and “guarantee” thing that had angered me.

I came back the next time, ordered my pizza and tater-tots, filled my cup with Coke, and told him my additional thoughts on the subject. I had to believe that regardless of how things were going, there still had to be a rhyme or reason greater than myself.

Part of this was just out of necessity. I talked about my growing sense of needing certain absolutes with regard to truth. There was a part of me that didn't want to be the sole authority in my life anymore, the sole decider of what was right and wrong. With just me, I could remodel my right and wrong at any time simply to make them more convenient, and that was too chaotic and dangerous. It made everything too relative and fluid. It meant that ultimately I couldn't find the meaning in life I desperately wanted out of all these spiritual musings.

I told Jason I was convinced there had to be a measure that was true, regardless of outcomes. Bad stuff happening or things not working out right did not mean there's no God. That stuff was another issue altogether (which I'd have to deal with later).

Jason remarked that perhaps my relationship to God was based less on what I was getting out of the situation, and more on *who* was going with me through life as I experienced it.

“Exactly!” I answered.

He said he’d never thought of it like that before — like a relationship. He compared it to hopefully being married and having kids in the future. His wife wouldn’t fix all his problems and make life perfect, but sharing his life with someone he loved deeply, and who loved him, would definitely make life better.

There was more I needed to say. I admitted I still sensed frustration, since I wanted life to be a lot easier and safer and without so many variables, so much unpredictability. But I had to be fair to God. Faith had, in fact, brought me more clarity and confidence — just not to the level I wanted or expected. Yet without a doubt, I was better off now than when I functioned without faith.

I ended with this: *My faith actually gives me the ability to navigate life in the midst of the unknown.*

He said that was kind of similar to what he was saying, and I agreed. The bottom line was, things may not be perfect or perfectly easy, but my life was better with faith.

We cleaned our trays and went on with our days.

Jason later admitted he often viewed faith as a crutch. I’d heard this many times and found it insulting, but I didn’t know how to respond. Was there no way faith could find a home in the heart of the truly strong-minded, independent, freethinking person?

I came back the next Thursday and confessed I agreed with Jason. I even took it one step further. For me, faith was more like a wheelchair or one of those motorized things old people drive around in the grocery store. I was beginning to gain a little life-experience, and to realize that when I’m down-and-out, beaten up emotionally, or at my wits’ end, faith is the only reason I can press on.

I also submitted the idea that those who live by their sincere faith are in fact quite strong and resolute, maybe even the strongest of individuals. Faith can propel a person forward against all odds and carry them through the storm of failure and discouragement. They may act against practical thinking and pragmatic theories, but they don’t care. They have a drive in them that’s absolutely amazing, like Rocky Balboa in the boxing ring. And no matter what they’re facing, they see each situation as an opportunity.

I said I that in the hearts of the willing, faith can lead to achievements of mythic proportions. Because of my own faith, I knew I was learning to pick myself up, dust myself off, and keep going in tough times. “Yes,” I told him, “I lean on my faith, because I’m weaker on my own.”

The next time I saw Jason, he asked me something I didn't want to answer, and it was pretty big. This was really the last major theme we discussed. (Everything afterward was mostly a rehash of ideas we'd already covered.) Jason asked why I found the Christian faith and philosophy more interesting than any other. Why did I think it was true?

That was a hard one. Not that I didn't know, but I knew my answer would be kind of polarizing.

Next time, I told him I wasn't interested in religion, specifically. What was compelling to me was the spirituality Jesus spoke of, and the context for it he created. What Jesus said was relational, making it different from the systems our World Religions class revealed, which were legalistic (working our way into heaven) or fatalistic (you're doomed no matter what you do in life). I understood that Jesus wanted to spend eternity with me, and even go with me through this life, just because he loves me. There's nothing I have to do to earn his love, and I can do nothing to drive it away. All I had to do was sincerely believe.

This gave me a sense of value. My parents had separated when I was young, and growing up I never felt particularly valuable or valued; I pretty much felt like an inconvenience, like something disposable. That always loomed over me. But what Jesus said finally washed all that away. He gave me a blank page, a new beginning, a reason to set some goals and even dream a little, because my life mattered. My future did too.

It also challenged me about growing, being continually willing to stretch myself. I already didn't like some things I was turning into. I was developing some addictive habits, had a tendency to get angry, and was typically negative and pessimistic. Reading the words of Jesus, I decided he wanted me to never be too impressed with myself. He challenged me somehow to question the status quo, reach beyond my limitations, and test my potential.

Just think, I told Jason, about those first twelve followers of Jesus. They were a rag-tag team of misfits. Many were rough and working class. Some were even hated for their professions. They were just average people, not particularly gifted or successful. No fame, power, position, or influence to speak of.

At first, this discouraged Jason's view of the Christian faith, as if those men weren't qualified to represent God. He even wondered why Jesus would pick them.

But look at the flip side, I told him. God didn't want perfect people, just *willing* people. And when Jesus said, "Follow me," they did. And because of those devoted misfits, we're still talking about Jesus two thousand years later. He continues to be the most influential person in history because of that handful of failures and undesirables who found value and purpose and were

willing to challenge the possibilities, even the threat of death, in those early days of the Christian faith. And that's what Jesus wanted me to do — to keep going, to keep growing, to keep reaching forward.

I also mentioned how Jesus inspired me. Sometimes life just plain sucks; we can't control it, and there's no way to change our surroundings. The only thing that helps is a little comfort as we wade through all the garbage. Jesus gave me that comfort in the form of hope. He said his spirit would be inside my heart during those times to comfort me. There was something to look forward to, the promise of a better day. This helped me endure whatever situation I might be facing. To me, that's really what hope is.

I'd become convinced that a life without hope is no life at all. Life had proven to be filled with so many personal failures and overall difficulties. Life was hard way more than it was easy. And when people lose hope (which is easy to do) — nothing to live for or look forward to — it seems like something dies inside.

I ended by saying I think we all want something more in our lives than to just exist. My faith gave me this — a sense of value, a reason to dream, a reason to grow and become a better person, and hope to inspire me.

The Deciding Factor

It was amazing. The next time I saw Jason, he said something I never expected. After our months and months of talking, he said he was totally convinced that what I'd discovered was true. I couldn't believe it! But he also said he wasn't ready to make the change and decide just yet. He had to think it through a little more to be fully convinced. I didn't really understand that, but I gave him some space.

That's where we pretty much left things. From then on, I decided to let him initiate any spiritual-type conversations.

It became awkward when I saw him. It was as if he was avoiding talking to me on a deeper level. We mainly talked about what was going on with him, and it wasn't pretty. To get through it, I thought he needed faith more than anything. I wanted him to experience some of the peace, contentment, purpose, and clarity I'd begun to have. But I didn't press it. I wanted to, but he was becoming distant, so I wanted to give him some room. I knew he had to make the connection himself. We'd spent a year building our friendship, and I didn't want to ruin it by being overly enthusiastic and appear like I had some agenda (though in a way I did, but for a good reason).

Jason always had a hard time at home. His dad was never around. As a result, his mom looked to him for everything. She turned her relationship with him into some warped kind of

husband-friend-son combination. He had to do everything around the house, help with the bills, and listen to all her woes and somehow fix them. It had been like this for a long time, and it got to be too much. He had to get out.

That's about the time our conversations became shallow. He moved in with a friend who had an apartment with his girlfriend. Jason slept on their couch, but I think it was an improvement.

Things were better for a while, but then got worse. Jason's mom wouldn't leave him alone. She called him and showed up at his job. She told him how much he let her down and what a jerk and failure he was, and how worthless he was to leave her just like his dad did.

Jason finally decided to make another change.

I hadn't seen him at school for a couple weeks. This wasn't completely unusual, since we both had jobs, papers, and projects to balance. Plus, since Jason wasn't living at home, it was hard to phone him. (Not everyone had cell phones back then; they were the size of a brick and really expensive.) Finally I asked another friend if he'd seen him. He hadn't, but he knew where he was. He told me the story someone else told him.

One day Jason quit his job, withdrew from school, closed his bank account, and left a note to explain everything for his roommates and the rest of us. When the roommates came back late that night, they found the note on the coffee table. It was right in front of Jason's couch, where his dead body was lying. He'd purchased a gun with his last dollars and killed himself.

I was devastated.

Then, there we were again, like back in high school, in a mutual social function. Except that this one was a funeral. Jason's mom even read his suicide letter aloud. She was emotional and weeping and seemed strangely ambivalent to the parts in it related to her. It was uncomfortable, and I just wanted to leave. It was one of the saddest moments I've ever been part of. It was so empty and hopeless, and I felt partly responsible in some way. If only Jason and I could have had one more talk.

I know it's a heavy story. Jason had a big affect on me, and his story is part of my story. He challenged what I believed and caused me to really examine it. And he also helped me learn one last lesson in his final act: Everyone has made a decision about God. Even the atheist or agnostic decides something. Even no decision is a decision.

I just wish my friend had made the decision I wanted him to make.

When Jason and I had talked, I never wanted to be overly enthusiastic and press too hard and turn him off. I always wondered, how far is too far? When do conversations on faith become pushy and self-defeating rather than healthy and productive discourse on important spiritual

issues with eternal consequences? It's a balance I still struggle with today when talking to friends, family, or people I meet or work with. Most of the time I choose to opt out of those conversations so I can seem more normal. That bothers me, because no one's guaranteed another day. You never know about tomorrow.

As I've come to understand my faith's value, it has become clear that faith is the reason good times are better, while it makes hard times livable. I think that's essentially the promise God *does* make to humanity as we have faith in him — that he's still with us regardless of how we feel. It's a compelling promise, and I still trust in it.

Don't get me wrong, I still doubt from time to time. But I think it's normal to doubt. In fact, I don't even view it as the opposite of faith. Some think it is, but that's unfair. In the same way that caution isn't always the opposite of risk, or fear isn't the opposite of courage, doubt is not the opposite of faith. They can both be present at the same time. There's always a measure of caution balancing a risky decision. There's also a sense of fear to sober us as we advance in a courageous endeavor. And there's always a sense of doubt that tests and purifies my faith as I step forward with it. I just believe what Jesus said is true.

To me, faith is the unknown revealed and explained. Having faith may seem irrational to you — and I assure you, it is. With faith it's strangely possible to acknowledge the unexplained, face it, embrace it, and move forward. It's not mindless devotion to antiquated ideas or benevolent ideals, but a calculated conclusion in the light of present reality: There's more unknown than known. It's a coming to terms with the mystery of life. It's the strength to keep a conviction when surrounded by questions. It's discovering twenty variables and one truth, then holding to that truth regardless of the present ambiguities. It can go against better judgment and modern thought, while being the wiser approach.

My faith is still a mystery in many ways, which drives me insanely crazy, but I also know it's the one thing that's true.

Maybe that's my homerun.