

Learning to Live with the Questions

I thought I had my faith all figured out — until leaving my Christian comfort zone left me feeling vulnerable. Over drinks in a Vancouver pub with my older sister, I realized faith comes with uncertainty.

Danielle Salchert

Spring brought a buzz of excitement to the streets of Vancouver. As the sky dimmed, I let my older sister Nicole lead me down streets filled with fluorescent lights. We turned the corner and settled into bar stools at Dublin Calling, a lively Irish pub.

I felt relieved to be part of my sister's weekend plans again after she moved from Winnipeg to Vancouver seven months before, back in 2022.

Nicole slid her beer across the table. "You probably won't like it, but want to try this?"

One sip indicated she was right — I preferred my sweet Long Island iced tea.

We enjoyed the familiar laughter between us, but I found it challenging to find a way to casually bring the topic of Christianity into the conversation. Talking about my doubts aloud meant I could no longer deny them.

Nicole took a sip of her beer, when I squeezed in the question, “What were your thoughts on going to a Christian school?”

Even as adults, our bond was the most important to me, so I intended to protect it. Though faith was supposed to be my own, I wondered if God existed, and I needed someone like my sister to hear the concerns I usually guarded. Nicole was 24, and as she was growing and gaining independence, I felt like I was falling behind and losing my Christian beliefs that once seemed strong.

While we both grew up in the same house, I wondered how different levels of involvement in church or varying faith experiences shaped our perspectives. I always admired Nicole’s laid-back approach to faith, but for me, becoming open-minded was difficult. I learned faith should be bold and concrete. If I kept sitting on the fence, shifting between Christian and secular thinking, I’d end up belonging nowhere. I needed to know if Nicole thought it could be possible for me to declare that I still had my faith even though my values were shifting.

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As I sipped my drink, I remembered other situations when Nicole took time to help me out. When they split us into separate groups for summer field trips, I complained to my mom how I wanted to be in Nicole’s group. Whenever I feared bugs on walks to the park or was overwhelmed by kids who terrorized our daycare, she helped calm me down. She was always my friend — and a third parent when needed. It felt cruel to be stuck on the preschool side, knowing other kids got to play with my sister on the school-age side.

Our three-year age gap often felt bigger because of Nicole’s maturity. Part of my little sister contract involved occasionally pushing my sister’s limits, but for the most part I looked up to her.

Nicole’s consistent help is why I trust her today. I appreciate when my parents offer good advice, but I lean on my sister because she knows me best. She humours me and humbles me.

Her advice on fashion, cooking, and being kind had rubbed off on me and I became another version of her, except maybe she was the cooler sister.



The cool kids: me and Nicole getting along

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When I started at the same private Christian school as Nicole, I was thrilled. Instead of searching for a guy named Waldo in a red and white striped shirt, I hoped I'd stumble across my sister when I walked down the hallways.

I struck it lucky when my Grade 1 class got to play in the big field where Nicole hung out. My eyes scanned the field and landed on Nicole with a girl I hadn't talked to before.

I ran up to them with urgency. I was a fangirl, and the two of them celebrities.

I pointed at the other girl, saying "Your name is Beth and I know you from the yearbook!"

I thought knowing the kids who shared the classroom with Nicole was important — they were cool by association. Beth leaned away from me against the wire fence. Nicole politely told me to stop scaring her friends.

Nicole rarely lost patience when I'd burst into her conversations. I swarmed around her like *Looney Tunes'* Tasmanian Devil, yet she didn't shoot down my enthusiasm. Eventually, I chilled out a bit, but over the nine years we shared a school, I never stopped looking for her.

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I was Nicole's slightly over-the-top younger sister, but that wasn't the only thing to brag about. My joyful heart had Jesus, and I wanted that to be known.

Over the course of the summer, when we would play walkie talkie tag and go on road trips to the United States, our parents still tried to regularly take us to church.

Our church wanted to keep us kids equipped with scripture, so they encouraged us to learn the Ten Commandments. Dressed in our Sunday bests, we recited a new Commandment each week.

My mom stood by my side, as I carefully recalled nine Commandments and pleasingly remembered the tenth: "You shall not be jealous over what you do not have."

"Great job!" a kind volunteer said as I proudly accepted the sticker she gave me.

When we missed church, I would insistently say, "We should have our own service in the living room!" My family watched me put on solo puppet skits that covered biblical lessons.

At school, Bible classes and weekly worship services helped grow my wholesome faith. At the time, believing in God was as simple as singing and tapping my foot along to worship songs and using fun actions to reinforce messages of Christ's love and of Heaven. Fear seemed irrelevant because God controlled all outcomes.

Memorizing scripture and getting to learn in classrooms where most kids shared my beliefs allowed me to sit comfortably in my Christian "bubble," shielded from perspectives different from my own.



My childhood faith: handwritten notes to Jesus, my family at church, Bible verses and drawings.

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Before Grade 3, my friend invited me to join her for a week at Bible camp. My sister got a break from me, as I let two teenage counsellors sub in for Nicole and be my helpers for the week. I listened to them share their testimonies and lead me and my cabin through morning and nighttime devotions.

I left camp with a nice tan and a new fear of leeches sucking on the blood of innocent swimmers, but otherwise I knew I could face any challenge Grade 3 planned to roll my way because I had God with me. My friend and I made summer camp a tradition, and each year we invited more of our friends to join.

At 14, I headed into Teen Week at camp with two friends, but by the last night I knew the lives of six other girls in my cabin. My camp counsellor told us she had the gift of prophecy — the ability to receive messages from God. All of us were tucked close together in a circle between our bunk beds, waiting to hear what God would tell each of us. We were tired from a long week full of outdoor activities, but these personalized messages would be the perfect send-off before we'd leave camp the next morning. The plan was to quietly talk amongst ourselves as our counsellor listened to God on each of our behalf. My turn was next. I thought about what God would possibly say to me. I lived like a good Christian so I wondered what great plans would be reserved for me. Or maybe I'd be given an obstacle because God knew I could handle it.

“Alright Danielle,” my counsellor said. She was ready to give me life changing words. Me and the other girls went quiet. It didn’t matter that the opened windows let in a cool draft; my hands were sweating.

“God says you have established a firm foundation for your faith. To keep growing, He challenges you to go outside of your comfort zone. I’m also getting a picture of a butterfly, which means you’re going to go through a transition.”

My camp counsellor warned us to take the words she heard with a grain of salt, but we were teenage girls hungry to hear God, so of course that wasn’t really possible. As I navigated myself through Grade 9, I always referred back to my camp counsellor’s words.

I used to wonder whether the changes I went through like moving to a new neighbourhood or being without my sister for the first time at school was the transition I had been warned about. My counsellor’s vague words stuck with me like glue, and I was unsure of how long I should let her words stick for. Throughout high school, I received a lot of advice from different people about what I should and should not believe. It frustrated me when some messages contradicted each other, and since I looked up to each person, I panicked whenever I felt like I had to pick and choose between the conflicting messages.

Now I understand people’s experiences with faith are personal, and even well-intentioned guidance might not resonate with everyone. I’m learning to not always accept everything I hear as absolute truth, but to make room for complex thinking.

When I relied too heavily on other people to define who God was for me, faith became ambiguous. How could I not believe people whose faith looked so authentic? Sometimes emotions dictated how faithful I felt. My emotions could fluctuate at any time, and I longed for my beliefs to be steady. I was starting to learn that faith can’t always be packaged into neat and tidy boxes; instead, faith shifts and evolves.



The summer my faith started to get complicated.

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Even in my confusion, I tried to remind myself of the genuine moments where I encountered God. In Grade 7, my indoor soccer team desperately needed a goalie. My coach asked us all to each decide by next practice if we would be comfortable giving the position a shot. In the summer I practiced playing goalie for fun, and Nicole would jokingly say to me: "See the ball. Hear the ball. Feel the ball. Be the ball." Her words of wisdom helped me save most of the shots she kicked toward the goal posts. Maybe I could be decent in an actual game. So next practice I said to my coach, "I can try to play net."

The week leading up to my first game, I searched the Bible for a verse to calm my nerves. I discovered **Jeremiah 32:27**, a verse that I repeated constantly. As my dad drove me to my first game of the season, I couldn't deny the nerves fluttering around me.

When I stood between the posts, I repeated my new favourite verse that reminded me I could trust God to help me overcome scary situations. I started to focus rather than fear. As the first girl wound up for a shot, my arms were there to save it. Throughout the game I felt a remarkable confidence that did not come from me. I was convinced it was more than just adrenaline. When the ref blew the last whistle, we had won the game in a shutout. A team scored against me for the first time a few games later, yet I kept my cool. As I moved onto high school, I equated simple moments of experiencing God's presence with the strength of my faith.

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In high school, I became more focused on how people perceived me. Pride snuck into my prayers; I used fancy words to try to impress God and my peers at Bible study. I held high expectations for myself because I wanted to be like the “perfect” people I looked up to.

I wanted words to come as easily to me as they did for speakers at camp. I wanted to be unbothered by the daily concerns of winning soccer games and solving math equations, only focusing on heavenly outcomes. I wished a radiant smile would be the evidence of my outstanding faith.

Teachers asked us to reflect on Bible verses, so I wrote a full page of notes as if to prove I was a thoughtful Christian. When Nicole was in high school, she drew cartoons of Jesus and his disciples. She let her faith be more fun, while sometimes my approach to believing became too serious and exhausting.



Our different approach to Bible reflections: A cartoon of Jesus and God drawn by Nicole and a snippet of my handwritten thoughts

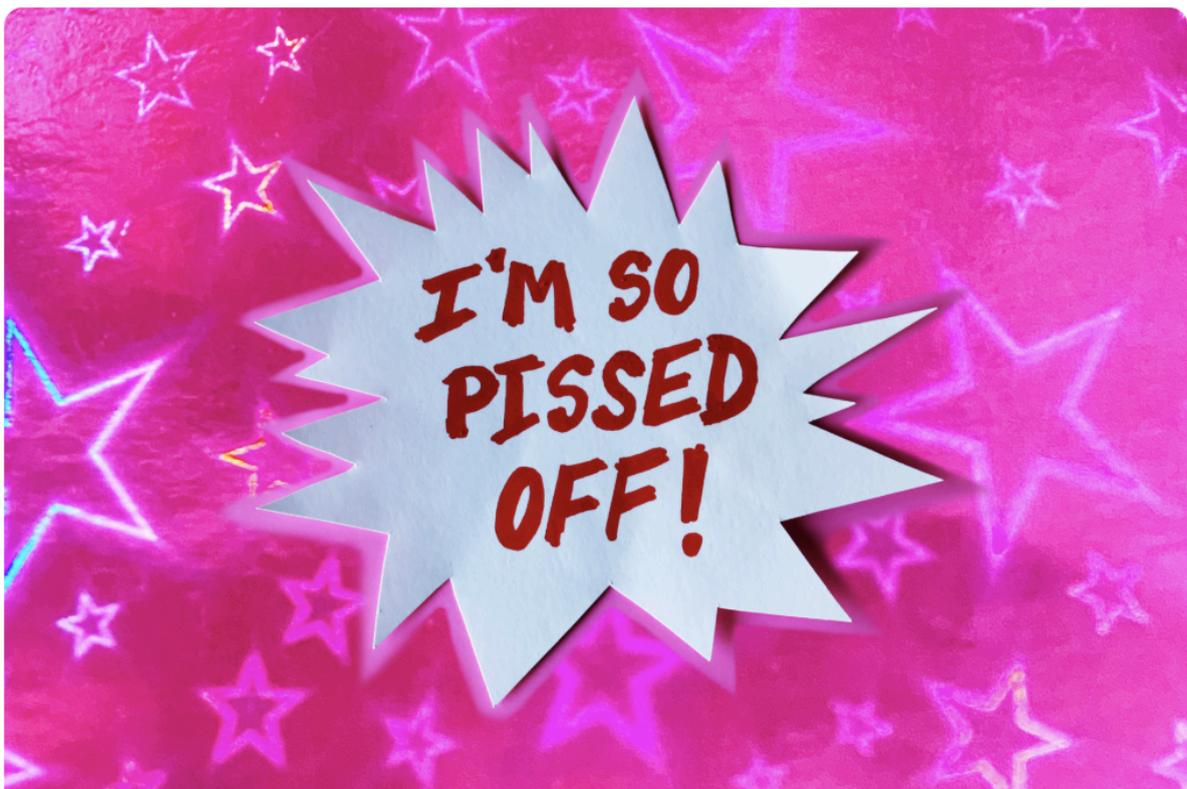
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I think I was allergic to conflict, so I found it much easier to resort to humour in uncomfortable moments. When I'd see people act or speak in ways that didn't align with Christian teachings, it

upset me — I mourned how innocence didn't last forever. People's Christian ideals often broke down in the real world outside of my Christian bubble.

When Nicole strayed away from my usual perceptions of her, I worried excessively about the trajectory of her life. I thought one mistake could escalate quickly to another.

Swept up in her teenage angst, Nicole once stomped up the stairs and said: "I'm so pissed off!" I now laugh knowing there are much worse phrases out there, although initially my eleven-year-old self couldn't believe the person I thought so highly of could ever say something so distasteful in anger. I envied how Nicole found the courage to express her true feelings, while my rigid beliefs suppressed my emotions and held me back. I would someday learn that perfectionism invites resentment to easily sneak into faith.



The words my sister yelled that made me concerned.

Nicole didn't volunteer as much as I did at church or camps, but she excelled at discerning where to draw the fine line between her morals and being genuine.

It's one thing to pray for someone who seems like they need help. It's another thing to silently decide whether they're getting farther away from God. I couldn't sustain this way of guessing what direction someone's life would go, otherwise I'd wear myself out. I didn't call other people out when they stopped living by the rulebook. I watched them try to figure out who they wanted to be, and pretended like I wouldn't benefit from doing the same thing.

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Back in the Vancouver pub, Nicole finished her sip of beer.

We then unpacked what it was like to go to a Christian school for so long. We both agreed growing up in a Christian bubble was a double-edged sword. We grew friendships and good values, but I had found when I went into new environments, it felt like I was a foot shorter than everyone else. Others had been exposed to swearing and drinking, whereas my exposure to real life seemed delayed.

I thought back to when I graduated high school in 2020. After stepping out of my Christian bubble where spiritual leaders spoon-fed me my beliefs, I had to fend for myself, which became the hardest pill to swallow.

Leaving my Christian school felt the same as when I had aged out of ordering off the kids' menu. My options were now less sweet and more expensive; seeking out God required more effort and felt controversial. My family and I hadn't attended church on a regular basis for years, and while I no longer had chapels or summer camp to keep my faith growing, I tried to clutch onto my beliefs.

Without a Christian community, I decided I could learn from what I used to do — I would recreate church activities at home. So, I listened to worship playlists, read online devotions, and wrote in my prayer journal. I settled for reaching out to God in solitude, but motivation dwindled as university got busy.

It's not like I was the only one struggling to incorporate religion into their routine. In 2019, **Statistics Canada** reported 72 per cent of Canadian women said they were religious, yet only 18 per cent participated in a religious activity at least once a week. I became aware that regular churchgoers probably prayed that guests like me would come every Sunday.

My friends invited me to church. I'd go every so often because this felt like a way to see them now that we each had our own schedules. While others grew every Sunday, I convinced myself I was falling behind. I didn't recognize worship lyrics. I was skeptical of the joys I identified in other people but could no longer see in myself. During services, I subtly checked the room for a clock. How much longer would I need to listen to leaders talk about messages that didn't always resonate with me anymore? I couldn't sit still in my seat. I now realize it's comparison that causes resentment rather than community.

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Nicole was sitting right next to me in the pub, as I told her about how this past half of a year without her in Winnipeg has been tough. The first month away from her, back in September, I had entered my third year at the University of Winnipeg with uncertainty.

Christianity started to feel like a chore not worth keeping up with. With my set-in-stone beliefs, that was bound to happen. I also knew Nicole, at 23, would move out eventually, but sometimes I wished her independence hadn't become too big for our house.

I didn't have my Christian community and my sister to reinforce my beliefs and keep me in check. University classes offered more liberal views different from what I was taught in high school, but I tried to hear the theorists out. I was a sponge, trying to soak up every bit of information — again, I didn't know what information was credible and worth holding onto.

In my psychology class a young woman said, "I'm not trying to be offensive, but I don't believe in God. I think Christianity is kind of like a cult." She said something so bold in a nonchalant way, while just a few seats away from her, I sat frazzled.

That woman didn't understand what it felt like to have prayers answered, or to feel Jesus's peace while doing intimidating things. I hadn't experienced those joyful moments in a while, so a part of me listened to her words with curiosity, letting them chip away at my faltering faith.

As the year went on, I became more lenient with my faith, which made me uncomfortable. I felt hypocritical. How could I go to church when some of my beliefs were unravelling? In Carol Tarvis and Elliot Aronson's book, ***Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)***, they explain that a person experiences cognitive dissonance when they hold two contradictory beliefs. To escape tension, they will try to justify their inconsistent attitudes. This phenomenon is why broke gamblers keep betting, why voters will continue to support a politician who breaks promises, and why I kept trying to convince myself that my faith would remain the same, even though my values of righteousness and showing grace had shifted.

I started to ask myself what distinguished Christianity from other religions. I needed Nicole to remind me challenging my previous beliefs wasn't going to make me farther away from Heaven.

Luckily, I finally did have Nicole beside me again. She said, "When I first started university, I was around different types of people than before. I fear that maybe made me closed off for a little while, but eventually the topic of faith was brought up and I told them I was a Christian. Nobody batted an eye. I realized I'm not being attacked, and I can be friends with people who have different backgrounds, as long as they're nice people."

Maybe I just hadn't been listening to the right people; I needed to be open to the voices that would help me the most.

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I found it easier to remember the negative encounters I experienced with faith, but I remembered a silver lining. To get to university, I took the bus downtown. Nicole had taught me how to use the bus a few years ago. When the cramped bus neared Portage and Graham, I got ready to exit. I liked to pull the yellow cable before anyone else, because it reminded me of how I once knew nothing about buses, but with Nicole's help and my own freedom, I had made progress.

Nicole's university survival lessons taught me that when walking alone I needed to display some confidence. On my seven-minute walk, I listened to my shuffled playlist as I passed by a whole mix of different kinds of people. In the Bible I had read about Jesus helping people who were homeless and now I ran into them every second day.

I heard about people buying gift cards for those in need, so I decided that even though I was a student, I could probably afford a couple gift cards from Tim Hortons to give out. I usually clung onto money as if it would disintegrate at any moment, and didn't remember the last time I gave my money away to someone in need.

I got off the bus one morning at my usual stop and saw a woman clutching a cup asking for money on the busy street corner. As I walked closer, I said, "I don't have money, but here is a five-dollar gift card."

The lady reached out her hand to accept the coffee or sandwich she would be able to buy. We briefly talked and rather than feeling like a hero as I walked away, I felt completely normal. But this nothingness was everything I needed. On most days, doubts outweighed my convictions, but I caught a quick understanding that if Jesus did exist, this is how Christians were supposed to act. Faith doesn't have to be complicated; it's about how we live it.

I remembered the countless times I took credit for the good things God did. When I prayed for someone, I passed on *my* own peace and wisdom rather than giving God the glory. So many people who call themselves Christians start with good intentions but lose the right motives when they treat God as a genie in a bottle. Faith got complicated when I started to place my own expectations on God and used my religion to look good. Yet, being generous and kind should be at the basis of what I do — it's what's necessary — and completing a good task is not worthy of a gold star like I once obsessed over.

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At the pub we sat beside empty glasses. Nicole and I were both ready to head back to her place. As we walked back outside, I remembered how hours ago, I stressed over sharing my doubts with Nicole, but realized it's not perfection she cares about. That night, Nicole's grace helped give me permission to start letting go of my rigid ideals. I could be unsure about things.

Nearly two years later, I'm still in the messy middle of figuring out faith. I have compassion for my younger self, and the panic she used to feel when black-and-white beliefs would start to turn grey. It was overwhelming, but those uncomfortable moments helped me grow and accept a nuanced understanding of what faith can be. Beliefs still change, but it's nice to know I am not alone in this life-long process. I have family, friends and strangers to exchange perspectives with. Right now, I'm learning to live with the questions. That's the answer I need.

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Danielle (she/her) might not be a great cook like her older sister, but at least she can laugh about it. She leaves trails of sticky notes and is always ready to go on random side quests.
