

2022

Losing God

Jordan Pugh

West Virginia University, jp0083@mix.wvu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/calliope>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pugh, Jordan (2022) "Losing God," *Calliope*: Vol. 34, Article 38.

Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/calliope/vol34/iss1/38>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Research Repository @ WVU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Calliope by an authorized editor of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact beau.smith@mail.wvu.edu.

Losing God

Jordan Pugh

I am not a religious person; I am agnostic—antagonistic, as my mom would say. I studied the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible in their entirety, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and even took a world religion course my junior year of college. Christianity formed from Judaism. Early Christians appropriated a Jewish tradition, then preached antisemitism. What was all that bullshit about thou shall not judge? The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, and the New Testament was originally written in Greek, and they have since been translated into over 600 languages. So, who is to say that the translations are accurate? Did you know that there are two versions of the Creation Story? In the first version of the story, which I prefer, God creates animals first, then he creates Adam and Eve at the same time (Genesis 1). In the second and more pedagogical version of the story, Adam is made from the dust of the earth when God breathes life into him. Then, Eve is created out of one of Adam's ribs to provide him with company and help (Genesis 2). I bet you were taught Genesis 2 in Sunday School. I'm certainly no Holy Bible thumper.

I possess profound respect and admiration for polytheistic religions and Judaism, but goddamn it, I just cannot respect Christianity. If there is a higher being responsible for human creation, I believe there is no definitive way of knowing, and it is beyond the human consciousness. I like to think that there is more out there in the universe, though. The universe is finite. I'd be foolish to think I'm the center of all life. I do not suppose energy can disappear, only be transformed. I do not know if that energy is restored to the earth, transferred to another metaphysical plane, or reborn in a new life form. Call me a pagan.

I grew up immersed in the Church of God: the New Testament version of Pentecostalism. Basically, New Testament Pentecostals can cut their hair and wear pants; traditional Pentecostalism forbids these practices. I attended Children's Church, Sunday Service, and Bible School until I was 13 years old. My Mamaw Bonnie, a silver-haired Super Christian, had a rule: If you stayed at her house on Saturday night, you go to church Sunday morning . . . it was a trick. I used to beg to go to Mawmaw Bonnie's house. She was a great cook and had an inground pool, making her house the neighborhood hangout spot. Eventually, I just stopped staying there on Saturday nights. We grew apart a little over the years due to our conflicting beliefs. She'd ask if I wanted to go to church, I'd say no, and she'd get upset all over again. She stopped asking once I

got my second tattoo and a nose piercing. I was saved and baptized in the name of Jesus Christ when I was 12 years old. Ask my family or their church. They will tell you that now I am blackened with sin.

But I like black.

I used to embody the values of a “true Christian.” What makes a person a true Christian? Praying before dinner, praying before bed, praying in times of distress, praying in times of delight—oh, and lots of singing! As a child, I recall my family’s church singing mostly traditional hymns. The church choir made up of maybe ten members of the congregation performed songs from a red hymnal book. Only two could actually sing: Pastor Hubbard, a bellowing bass, and a petite woman named Terry, a seraphic soprano.

My father died of terminal cancer when I was 16 years old. Multiple Myeloma—an ugly name for an ugly malignant disease. His name was Donald. His friends called him Don, and his brothers called him Duck, after Donald Duck. Dad was not a religious man until year five of his six-year illness. I think he knew he was going to die soon, and existential dread kicked in. So, he turned to Christianity for solace. I can only recall Dad attending one church service. It was Veteran’s Day, and I read a narrative account of his experience as a Marine in the Vietnam War. The multiple Bibles gifted to him likely contributed to him undertaking Christianity at the ripe, almost rotten, age of 68.

He really pushed the clock on that one. It was bright in the house. It was midafternoon in summer. Dad refused to put curtains up; he liked watching animals graze from his living room, looked through his binoculars at the hummingbirds, deer, and squirrels. One of Dad’s windows faced a field. My dad wasn’t ever a big man, a man of stature. In his prime, he stood a proud five foot nine. Cancer visibly shrunk him. His Marine Corps tattoos had faded with the yellowing of his skin from countless chemo treatments. Dad had a badass tattoo of the Marine Corps mascot, Chesty the bulldog on his right bicep. His left bicep was tattooed with the Semper Fi symbol. He had a feeding tube placed in his stomach and a neck brace supporting the dead weight of his cancer-ridden spine. He was a withered five feet seven in the end.

I was 15 years old. Dad had six months left to live. We were home, just the two of us. The dining room walls were three different colors: one was canary yellow, one was harvest orange, and one was an untouched chalk white turned off white over the 25 years of dust accumulation. Dad had a pain-med-inspired paint party a few years back while my mom was

making a grocery run, and we hadn't gotten around to repainting. He was sitting at the dining room table, likely trying to sneak a sweet treat, knowing he could not swallow or even taste flavor due to the chemo. Still, elbows propped on the table, he sternly called me over: "Hey Jordi!" I came swiftly down the narrow hallway plastered with collages of family photos, thinking I was in trouble for getting a B on a Progress Report, or for cutting the grass too short, or bickering with my mom. Instead, he pleaded, "Why is this happening to me?" He asked me this question with sincere hope, knowing I was religious. I gulped back a sob. "God does not give us more than we can handle, so he must think you're strong enough to beat this." My reply was nothing more than a toxically positive cliché that the people at church used to justify everything from a parking ticket to the rapture. What I *wish* I had said is, "Dad, you are the strongest person I know. I do not know why this is happening to you, but I love you, and I will be here until the end." I shuffled away from him, tears running over my cheeks; I couldn't let him see. I lost God then—gone, to never again be seen.

The day my dad died was not the worst day of my life. The worst was four days before death day. It was mid-January. Winter Storm Jonas dumped three and a half feet of snow the night before—school was canceled. It was just my mom and me at home. It had been years since the smell of my dad's coffee brewing and the sound of CNN served as my alarm. The house was stale and silent. Until my mom got the call. A nurse said she didn't think my dad was going to make it through the night; we needed to get there quick if we wanted to say goodbye. We cuddled our cold corpses into the car. The front-wheel drive snailing its way along the seven-mile stretch of icy backroad that stood between us and the two-lane. The snow was so white—pure—angelic. We were four miles out when a patch of black ice slid the weight of the vehicle and our heavy hearts right into an embankment. Mom was pinned against a wall of snow, her door crushed on impact, car tilting at a 45-degree angle. I was soberly calm, painfully numb. I assured Mom that it was going to be okay. I would walk to the nearest neighbor for help.

I footslogged my way up the icy road, canopied by pines drooping with snow in my black Ugg boots. The snow went up to my knees, but I could see the tips of my boots peeking through the snow with each step up. I knocked on the door of the first house I came to. I knew this white-bearded man. He was the mailman and the grandfather of one of my classmates: no answer. So, I trudged another 500 yards through the sea of snow to the mailman's ex-wife's house: again, no answer. By this point, I concluded that if God was up there, he was a sadistic

bastard belly laughing at my misery from above. The next house sat a distant quarter mile back from the road, but what was my alternative? My mom was still waiting for me in the car, panicked. Thankfully, the heat still worked, so I knew she wasn't cold. I tried to focus on the contrast of the black of my boots against the snow to keep from thinking that I could not feel the tips of my fingers, toes, or nose. I shivered my way up to the side door and knocked, expecting this to be the punchline of some sick cosmic joke. To my surprise, a woman in her mid-sixties answered the door. She greeted me with suspicion. I was sopping wet, and sleet and snow had frozen my hair in place. She never invited me inside or offered me a blanket. She did call a neighbor who had a truck to take my mom and me the four miles back to our house to retrieve my dad's truck. It was a nice truck: a brand-new, marble white GMC Denali. Dad had a thing for trucks. We didn't take Dad's truck to start with because my mom hated driving it. She is a nervous driver and had a hard time seeing over the hood. We also weren't thinking clearly, disregarding the road conditions. We made our way back out the unplowed backroad, this time in Dad's truck. Mom was pressed up against the steering wheel, sitting on a pillow to aid her vision. As we passed the scene of our crash, "Remember When" by Alan Jackson started playing over the radio in what was typically a dead spot—my parent's wedding song. The sweet guitar picking, soft violin, and Alan's baritone voice bellowed the story of lasting love while Mom and I stared at each other in disbelief. We said nothing. I recalled Valentine's Day when I was in elementary school when my sister helped me cook dinner for my parents, and we watched them slow dance to "Remember When" in the living room of our home. The walls were all still white then.

Mile five was where the cell service came back. My mom got another call, this time from my sister. My dad had coded, but they revived him, despite his DNR. I am 20 now, and I still do not know exactly what it meant that my parent's wedding song came on while my dad was in cardiac arrest. I think it was a sign—not a sign from God, but maybe a comforting message from my dad.

I spent the next four days slumped in a hospital chair, waiting for the cancerous carcass I once knew as "Dad" to die. My sister and niece slept on a sleeping pad on the bathroom floor, and my mom occupied the spare hospital bed, but she didn't sleep. He died around three a.m. on night four as my mom laid with him and played Alan Jackson's "I Want to Stroll Across Heaven with You." He took his last breath as Alan hit the last chorus, and my mom stole one more kiss. I

was asleep in the horribly uncomfortable plastic hospital chair I'd imprinted on. My mom shook me awake gently with her hand on my shoulder and said, "He's gone." My heart shattered. The monitors were incessantly beeping, and I saw the flat red line on the screen. The nurses came in and turned off the death alarm, then asked me if I wanted to say goodbye. I stared at the hollow corpse in the bed and shook my head no. I felt his soul depart. I knew that there was no one to say goodbye to anymore. I had to leave the room.

I waited outside for my family while they gathered their things. We all rode back to my sister's together in Dad's truck. We were staying at her house for the night and driving the rest of the way back home tomorrow. It was a quiet car ride. No one said much of anything, and we kept the radio off. I made a list in my head of all the milestones Dad would miss: getting my license, high school graduation, college graduation, walking me down the aisle, and meeting my future children. The world felt dark.

* * *

The pastor at my mom's church, Pastor Hubbard, is an eccentric man. He wears a button-up with a bolo tie, black jeans with a wallet chain, and cowboy boots. He towers over six feet, and his voice fills the room. Pastor Hubbard dedicated an entire sermon soon after my dad died to the "biblical" teaching that if a widow can control her sexual urges, she should not remarry—a second husband is not a *real* husband. Whatever the hell that means. My mom has not remarried or even dated in the five and a half years since Dad died. Women are not permitted to be the head preacher in my family's church. Yet, Pastor Hubbard's wife plays a very, shall I say . . . performative role. The first time I heard Donna speak in tongues, I thought she was having a stroke. She flailed her arms about uncontrollably, was jumping up and down and repeating the same gibberish phrase over and over. The service ceased to a halt until she regained a sense of normality. There were occasions when she had to excuse herself from the service. You could hear her gibbering all the way down the aisle. Sneaky, sinful Donna must not have thought I did my Bible Study. 1 Corinthians 14 specifically states that the gift of tongues requires an interpreter, and if an interpreter is not present, the gifted one should sit down and shut up. There was no interpreter in their congregation, and there is no service for traveling tongues interpreters. One evening following a Wednesday service, I asked Pastor Hubbard how people lived for hundreds to a thousand years in the Bible but can barely make it to 100 now. He reasoned that the earth was not as capable of sustaining life following the Great Flood. I refuted that the earth

thrives after healing from a natural disaster like a flood or fire. I cannot recall exactly how Pastor Hubbard responded, but I remember walking away disappointed and dissatisfied.

My early faith was a combination of familial pressures, wishful thinking, and naivety. Now, my prayers go out to the earth. The forest is my sanctuary, and nature is my church. Ancient guardian pines, sycamores, and red oaks make up my congregation. Frogs, crickets, and birds form a melodic choir, trilling hymns performed in my honor. I am baptized by the rain, not by the bath filled with warm city water pumped in by the indoor plumbing system. When I got baptized in the church, I felt wet. Last Sunday, I got caught in a rainstorm in the West Virginia Botanical Gardens with my best friends, and I felt joyous, sanctified, cleansed. I worship what I see.