

# My Odd Journey of Becoming a Jewish Christian

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Me.

Jewish. I was, am and will always be.

Today, I know the Bible – both halves. I used to...well, that is, I was raised to think only one half of it should be bothered with – no matter what the other, smaller half contained. I didn't know what was in it, but knew enough not to care.

The contents of those pages were obviously misplaced over the centuries (right next to our holy scriptures) by non-Jewish publishers, and bound into one so-called book: The Bible. What was up with that?

I knew that such followers who read and carried around this kind of bible were not to be listened to. Apparently, they believed made up stories about a pushy, renegade Jew who crossed too many lines and got what he deserved: crucifixion. By his martyrdom he somehow achieved the title: Savior. Those "saved" types, muddled, mis-matched and re-fashioned our religion doing an entire makeover of what they called the "Old Testament." If you catch the drift, "old" implies or requires the need for some kind of replacement, like a "new" Testament! Somehow this all made perfect sense to Christians, while they affronted Jewish heritage, traditions and a boat load of sagely, rabbinical teaching.

Not only were they content with this – they wanted us to join their side! How out of touch can you be?

Looking back, as a child, Judaism's key elements for me were: Moses, Torah scrolls, holiday food, sipping wine, marzipan, Bar Mitzvahs, Chanukah, Passover, matzoh, long synagogue services, yarmulkes, learning Hebrew and hearing Yiddish, jokes and storytelling, gold-foil wrapped chocolate coins, and feelings of patriotism for a faraway country called Israel. Oh, aside from those memories – a big one – do not become a Christian? Plus, we Jews killed Jesus Christ! Personally, I didn't – I wasn't born yet. *But, that fact didn't matter to some.*

We were "we" and Christians were "them." Simple.

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When I was a young teenager in Los Angeles, I enjoyed a little known rock music radio station. On Sunday nights they aired a local call in show which spotlighted supernatural phenomena. In time, I understood our world held too many mysteries to exist without a supernatural element.

My parents didn't agree with such a point. My father was a steak-and-potatoes kind of guy. My mother took no interest in this possibility either. So, for once I felt that I had *one up* on them. For all their years they hadn't settled on the very real possibility that spirits, aliens, ghosts, angels or whatever, also occupied the same world, too.

We would all prefer such an unseen presence to make themselves known in the plain light of day. That way, everybody would know the truth, and the competitive global guessing game end.

I wasn't sure what to believe, the radio program covered a lot of ground as the months and then years went by. One guest's story conflicted with another's. A finely woven net of supernatural beings, occurrences and events through history to the present, just couldn't be produced. Some guests presented their own finely woven nets and the following week another contented soul exhibited and taught a conflicting configuration.

This was a growing up time for me and a solo journey too. I shared my nighttime education with friends. I found people chose what currently fancied them: the face on Mars, UFOs, reincarnation, ancient treasures waiting for their unearthing or simply some kind of a cult, religion or conspiracies and cover-ups. Truth took on a variety of legends, teachers and books.

At 18, I knew something was out there – I wanted to pursue it or “it” conveniently bump into me.

At 20, I meditated, chanted Om, read widely, pursued hippiedom, and didn't want to end up a victim of the oppressive, old-fashioned, un-hip establishment. Life stood before me, and I peeled back a thin layer hoping to see, feel or experience the unknown. Though that sounds idealistic, progressive or envious, I wasn't ready for actual, normal life. Creating good relationships, exhibiting common sense, growing into manhood, ability to work hard, love and bond, and be emotionally secure – these I envied in others but found myself constantly lacking. I worried, feared, felt alone, and failed at achieving the coolness I so desired. I had off-kilter feelings but didn't recognize these as self-centered weakness or the continuing lack of worthwhile days. More could be had – this I knew.

I wanted to be wanted and valued more than anything else.

I wanted to get to a better place, yet at any “better” place I only found the same me. Parts of Mark couldn’t be found; whether buried, lost, dead or wounded and had healed improperly.

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I spent the summer of 1976 at my uncle and aunt’s home in Corvallis, Oregon. I gardened, did chores, worked a few hours at a natural foods bakery, and hung-out with new friends from Mississippi and England.

I had the opportunity to work at the first ever Oregon Country Fair near Elmira, a small town outside of Eugene. I needed to work only a few hours a day for a Corvallis whole foods café. For this I’d get in for free, and camp on site over the weekend.

I and my two Mississippi friends hitchhiked the hour distance. Our first driver lit up a plump cigarette of weed and passed it around.

On impulse a few days before, using a hunting knife I sliced off my pony tail by grasping it under my chin. That was an interesting hairdo. And for the Fair, I brushed black ink in the shape of a trident on a blank white T-shirt and wore it as my own identifying creation.

Once at the Fair, I tried Sufi dancing, which is spiritual worship in dance – unless you’re stoned – then it’s just a fun communal way to get exercise. While there, I even experienced the fabled “free love.”

The rural premises had no law enforcement personnel, so narcotics, nudity and a variety of good vibes prevailed.

After hours late one night, all workers at the gathering were treated to live acoustic music on stage. During the performance, a tiki torch fell, erupting into flames. Panic started to ripple among us. While a couple of guys frantically worked to put out the growing fire someone else kept a cool head, went to the edge of the stage and started to chant “Om.” This effort spread and soon the tightly packed, cross-legged crowd returned to pleasant unity.

One day, I bumped into a not-so-old high school friend. When I hugged Sandy I found her to be very pregnant. Her boyfriend, and later husband, lived a few miles from Elmira and invited me to visit them.

Days later, I hitched from Corvallis to the little town of Elmira. Off a country road I found their single-wide mobile home. I stayed with them for a couple days.

At dinner, my friend Sandy prayed some kind of prayer of thanksgiving in Jesus’ name. This was odd; I didn’t know that she followed any religion.

I grew up in a Jewish home and attended synagogue. At the age of 14, I remember my father and I watching a highly respected nightly news program, the Huntley-Brinkley Report. One of the newsmen told a story with a certain, surprising note. Apparently, Jesus Christ was considered a historical figure and not the lead fairy tale character from Christianland. I never knew that the crucified, long-haired, bearded guy really lived!

While visiting my friends I noticed a paperback book called, Good News for Modern Man. This turned out to be a New Testament book of some sort. In my 20 years I never held or worse, flipped through one of these. In this casual, slow-paced setting I went outside, sat down and opened it. The titles, chapters and names meant little to me and I didn't intend on reading much. After a fast flip I noticed the Gospel of Mark – *my name!* That made my choice easy. I read all 16 short chapters.

When I finished, 3 things changed. One, for the first time I understood that Christians held Jesus Christ to be our Jewish Messiah. Two, Christians believed confusing and embarrassing things. Three, I decided to memorize the so-called Lord's Prayer. I thought the little generic prayer would fit in fine with my daily meditation and Eastern mysticism time.

I never discussed Christianity with my high school friend and she never brought it up.

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Towards the end of summer I traveled with a close friend named Danny. I waited for him to meet me in Corvallis. We hitchhiked, wanting to explore the northwest. In a few days we ended up two hours east of Portland along the broad, slow moving Columbia River (which separates Washington and Oregon).

On the Oregon side we made camp on a narrow strip of land just off shore. The little island used to function as part of a lock system for ships; hence the town's name Cascade Locks. A narrow foot bridge provided a way for walking to the block long island, where dirt paths, patches of grass and trees awaited.

We arrived in the evening and chose not to set up our tents forgetting how rainy that part of the country can be. When early morning came, so did the rain. Danny relocated under the protection of a tree. I decided to pack up and visit the facilities in a nearby park, where I showered.

Before I walked off, Danny agreed to meet at the café in town. Cascade Locks stretched a mere two blocks long. At each end, a café marked the city limits. We would meet at the eastern one. There we'd eat, wait out the rain, or try for an easy ride farther along the Columbia River Gorge. Almost three weeks passed until I saw Danny – *back home in Los Angeles!* But that's another story.

Stepping over what happened the next several days, I will bring you along with me – traveling alone, and arriving at the Eugene train station. I already stopped in Corvallis to pick up the rest of my belongings, intent on returning to Los Angeles. One item of special note was a large 12 pound book on the modern art sculptor Henry Moore. (Remember, I'm an artist.) I stole this book from a neighbor of my relatives...but that too, is another story!

I wore a full backpack weighing 65 pounds. Also, I carried a heavy, medium-sized cardboard box. At 20 years of age I was in excellent shape – but I expected to be let off at the train station and get on a train – not end up walking seven miles towards the airport!

Only one train headed south each day, and it was full. As I headed for the airport, I occasionally tried to thumb a ride, but with little luck. I walked across Eugene not knowing the airport was outside of town. Finally, a young guy pulled over and took me there. While driving he asked me a strange question which no one had ever asked me, “Do you pray?”

“Well.” (As a matter of fact.) “I do.” As of one week ago! To whom, I didn't know, but, I figured the cosmos regularly sorted out such things. I noticed a small leather cross dangling on his rear view mirror. It swayed while we made conversation.

My ride said he would come in to see if I could get a flight out. No flights. He asked if I had a place to stay. No. But I'd take the train out the next day at 6pm. He knew where I could stay until then, and I could walk to the station from there too. KEY SENTENCE: “There might be people at this place whom you might call Jesus freaks.” I didn't mind dodging a few fanatics.

We drove into a residential neighborhood arriving at a large three story house, like a frat house. On the front porch, two plywood signs, maybe 1x8' each, were suspended for all to see. The one on the left read “Liberation House” and the one on the right “Jesus Is Lord.” My driver introduced me to someone and after that I never saw him again.

I was welcome to sleep on the floor in my sleeping bag, and I could enjoy a communal free dinner. I only noticed young people in the house, late teens or twenty-something...and there were a lot of them. As the waning hours of that day left, I found out one very important fact about the Liberation House: EVERYONE THERE WAS A JESUS FREAK!

Contrary to everyone's inquiry, I did NOT 'Know the Lord.' Apparently, the inhabitants all knew the same 'Lord.' This meant 25 or so people-in-the-know. By an odd coincidence, two other guys around my age had come from out of state to visit a friend of theirs who was-in-the-know. But they had not been in-the-know that he'd become a Jesus freak. The three of us formed a nervous, tight group wondering how to survive our plight.

I soon found out the main floor was for meals, mingling and meetings. The second and third floors were private; one for males, the other for females.

Their greeting to strangers went right to the point, "Do you know the Lord?" or the variant, "Do you know Jesus?" My simple honest answer of "No." set off their consistent need to explain why "No." wasn't the right answer.

Their procedure to address my problem included the prerequisite of a brief life story, some form of personal need, feeling lost or experiencing a tragedy. This always ended with a currently invisible, former human being (Jesus) making it all better. Their determination? No matter where I was in my life, I amounted to a perfect candidate. For what? Salvation.

Apparently, everyone needed it and these kind people knew how to make it happen! *I declined.* Then I declined again. And after several more attempts, I consistently passed up this "free gift."

This house contained all sorts of Jesus paraphernalia like little pocket-sized comic books. Each one told a story which ended up with Jesus Christ as the key, the answer, the Savior. The entire house was saturated with high-strung Christianity; foreign and of no interest to me. Also, the inhabitants spoke with a vocabulary of indigenous religious meanings which alienated me further.

One perky young woman told me that at 7pm there would be a Bible study. I determined to be gone before 7pm and busy myself anywhere else but at the Liberation House. For the past five years I smoked marijuana and did a variety of drugs. I had one joint with me I walked out the front door to enjoy a high.

I wandered around the neighborhood and found a safe place to get stoned. Unfortunately, I didn't bring warmer shirt and grew chilly. I regretted my need to return earlier than planned.

When I walked up the porch steps I was in for a surprise. The entire main floor looked full of people and many sat on the floor. I watched a man read out loud, ask questions and give his opinion on whatever was printed in his book or how people responded.

Since the crowd filled the room right to the open front door I stood in the doorway feeling more cold than warm. After some time I wiggled my way in and headed for the kitchen to get alone. When the Bible study ended, once again my new face made me a target. Eventually the leader came to interview me. As he ran down his scripture verse list to maneuver me to join up, I did my best to answer him. This got messy because I only had a mish-mosh of beliefs. I didn't know much about anything. My being Jewish activated in him a certain line of reasoning which I couldn't follow. Whatever they believed wasn't for me. This salesman knew his trade well, but I was neither shopping at this store nor buying.

The following day found me listening to, "Brother, I've been where you are and I know where it leads!" I wanted to plug my ears. The bombardment of pitching Jesus Christ as "Lord

and Savior” plus the “Son of God” continued. How God could have a son without first having a wife seemed like a real plot hole.

A guy gave me a little booklet and asked to give my word to him that I’d read it. I looked at the title, *The Four Spiritual Laws*. I took it and left the stifling premises.

I went to a café and I looked at his booklet. One diagram showed a simple chair. The word ME sat surrounded by a collage of life’s common characteristics such as: marriage, sex, death, worry, goals, future, money, God, etc. On the facing page was the same chair, but the configuration was different. On the seat sat the word JESUS. Around the chair was everything else. It hit me; those people have Jesus on the throne of their lives. That’s why they don’t talk about anything else!

I returned to the Liberation House, said as little as possible to the fellow about his all important booklet.

I noticed the house used a small room for a library – all religious books. I went in to browse and something odd happened. A guy came in and sheepishly informed me, “If you ask Jesus into your heart just a little, he will fill it up.” After this, he turned and walked out. I was shocked. No life story, no theological explanations, no pressure. This perplexed me.

I wasn’t sure what he meant, but I figured I had a little room in my heart for this required Son of God, Jesus. After all, whatever he was, he couldn’t be like these followers of his! From what I’d heard from the houseful of evangelists, I needed to recite some religious lingo recipe called the Sinner’s Prayer. Its emphasis implied you’d been out, and this tidy little prayer got you in. But, the problem compounded. In order to let this ethereal Jesus into my heart – a “little bit,” the prayer required me to throw my life in too. This shook me up. How annoying!

Why did I go ahead, saying it quietly all alone? It might’ve been the not-going-to-Hell part! Earlier in the day I talked to a cook at the café where I read the *Four Spiritual Laws*. I mentioned to this congenial stranger my unexpected intersection on the spiritual road through life. He said he was a Christian and encouraged me. Odd though, this whole foods eatery had a photo of some Asian guru guy as a showpiece. Flowers surrounded the special person’s picture frame.

But I know this. When I prayed I was very scared. I choked on the words. Most of all, I didn’t want any of “them” to know! So, I scrunched down – no, I didn’t kneel – I just tried to hide myself. I knew if “they” found out, I’d be hoisted onto stout shoulders, carried outside, where everyone in the house would join in a spontaneous, loud parade of celebration around the block. I imagined I would not be the first.

I thing I knew: No matter what happened after this prayer, I didn’t want to be like them – a Jesus freak!

No one knew. No one there ever knew.

One thing bothered me though. The little 'God loves YOU' booklet said that if you prayed the prayer, you had to tell someone, or in effect, it wouldn't work. So, fear set in. I hoped this Jesus didn't keep such accurate books.

I'm still not clear why I said that "include ME!" prayer. Afterwards, I didn't feel an inclusion into God's audience or instantly loved by Him. No excitement, no new identity, no lifting of a 20 year old weighty burden of sin, not even gratefulness of Christ's unasked for willing sacrifice on a cross in my behalf.

I got on the train and went home.

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I lived with my parents, drove one of their cars, and worked part time. With summer over, I attended art school again. I didn't know what to do with my religious "decision." I sure wanted to keep that episode of dipping into Christianity from my parent's knowledge.

As the weeks progressed nothing happened - until I did something I was not supposed to do. I picked up a hitchhiker.

Hitchhiking in the metropolis of L.A. was a gamble both ways. Hitching in the rural areas of the Northwest was safe. In L.A. giving a stranger a lift might be the last thing you ever did. Since I drove their car, and they knew I was sympathetic, their policy didn't allow me not to pick up any strangers.

One day, when driving alone, I saw a young man with his thumb out. He looked like a harmless hippie. I pulled over and let him in. When he sat down, his first words caught my attention. "It's not like walking across Eugene!" Yes, Eugene, Oregon.

I replied, "I walked across Eugene a few weeks ago."

He wore a cross around his neck. Soon, he used some of the vocabulary as those Jesus freaks in Eugene. He said something about 'Jesus providing a ride.' My eyes rolled and I thought, *not another one of them - and now in my car!* But as we did talk about Eugene, I found that he not only knew of the Liberation House but he knew everyone in it!

Now here's my problem. Los Angeles has millions of people and not many hitchhikers. I never picked up a stranger in L.A. before. The odds of getting this guy who had "walked across Eugene" and then knew all of those Christians...well, it just didn't seem like a coincidence. He asked if I was a Christian. I gave him an ambivalent answer. Today, his last words still sound fresh, "Believe the Bible, it's the word of God! Get yourself a Bible if you don't have one."

I fumbled out a, "I do, ahh...ahh...I will!"

I didn't know what was going on, but if God existed, I assumed he was after me.

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Have I based 36 years of being a disciple of the Jewish Messiah on a single, perhaps, merely coincidental meeting? No, its been many things. Does a coincidental meeting of several smoggy miles validate one or both ancient religions? Of course not. Does other more striking phenomena steer the average person into a totally different change of life? Yes.

I don't regret my conversion from hippiedom to a religious lifestyle. I made a serious and unexpected decision which still causes my lifestyle to evolve.

If you're wondering: *I've never been labeled a Jesus freak.*