

From Fearful Times to Thoughtful Rhymes

by Buck Bowen

My passion for poetry, creating music, and pursuing truth before comfort has compelled me to write many free-thinking songs, but I wasn't always so skeptical.

At age 22 I still slept with the lights on. The dreadful terror of coming home at night was always justified by the ominous *Amityville*-style flashing lights in my room's window. I couldn't count the number of times I found a dead body hanging in the closet, or how often I'd awaken at night to see Jesus standing at the foot of my bed. The fear never failed.

Of course I didn't actually see any of these things. They were just vivid thoughts constantly playing out in my head — the product of ignorance, a hyperactive imagination, Hollywood, and a mild Catholic upbringing. Although the visions were false, they felt real.

I was raised loosely Catholic, which provided fertile soil for irrational thinking, but I was plagued more by superstition than religion. The degree to which fear and superstition governed my life was unimaginable, and at times quite ridiculous. For example, as a skateboarder I was constantly prone to injury, so before doing a trick I'd knock on wood (conveniently my skateboard). It wasn't long before my incessant knocking became painful, so I decided that simply tapping my thumb and pointer finger together three times would suffice. A half-hour passed before the absurdity of my actions became clear and I quit.

Although I fell prey to silly superstitions, I credit family and the film industry for the bulk of my sleepless nights. My Catholic aunts would tell childhood ghost stories and anecdotes of evil demons. They weren't funny, they were frightening, and only served to perpetuate my fearful thinking. Movies like *Poltergeist* and *The Exorcist* seem laughable now, but back then they produced a fear that had me sweating mercilessly under the covers, gripping my blanket like a shield. Thinking back, how could a one-eighth inch thick piece of cotton stop something intent on hurting me?

Terrified and confined to a four by seven-foot padded cell that I affectionately called "my bed," every floor creak was some imagined evil getting one step closer. The anticipation sent beads of sweat leaping off my cheeks like sailors jumping ship. Then, right before it consumed me, my eyes would open and it was morning. And so went the next decade plus.

As a child and teen this behavior was debilitating, but as a young adult male it was also shameful. When I'd leave the house at night I'd wait until the last second to turn off the lights, dashing for the front door before "something" got me. I must have looked like a dog running from the shadow of its tail.

*We jump up in fright
when things go bump
in the night.*

*We evolved this propensity
to help us survive...*

A few verses from "Ghost Blunders,"
a song by Buck Bowen

While everyone else grew out of childhood fears, I just grew tired of them. Nearly two decades passed before the fatigue did me in. I became so exhausted by fear that I didn't have the strength to react anymore. That was the moment everything changed.

My liberation started with a single question: what exactly IS this thing I'm afraid of? From there I began to investigate, which opened up a wonderful world of discovery!

I examined the historical basis for popular superstitions and definitions for things like God, ghosts, demons,

and spirits. The deeper I dug, the more questions I uncovered. "A ghost is the spirit of a dead person." OK, but what's a spirit? "A spirit is the soul of a human." And what's that exactly? The questions kept emerging.

As my research continued I noticed inconsistencies and contradictions. For example: a ghost can walk through walls but then pick up a plate? A soul can see without eyes? God created everything but needs no creator? The unconvincing answers may have satisfied the biased skeptic, but I wanted to know what IS — not what felt right or sounded good.

That's not to say I was completely devoid of silly thoughts. Bad habits do die hard. I recall thinking things like, "How can God not exist? Look how many movies and books have been made about him. All of these people can't be wrong!" Of course they can. But at that time I was unaware of the *ad populum* fallacy, that no amount of popularity proves something true.

My superstitious thinking was very resistant. What really helped me break through was the support and camaraderie of secular/atheist groups. I could safely and openly express myself around like-minded individuals. I was always learning new information and ways of thinking from others more experienced and intelligent than me. I also discovered many great books, such as *The Demon-Haunted World* by **Carl Sagan**.

Sagan's book had a profound affect on me. I learned two incredibly powerful facts. First, a rational fear of the dark is advantageous. It keeps me from wandering out at night just like it kept our ancestors from leaving the village and becoming dinner. Second, the wild and often sinister images I saw in walls, reflections, and shadows at night weren't actually real, but just my brain trying to make sense of otherwise meaningless information.

During most of my journey to freethought I was on a musical hiatus. In late 2012 I got the itch again, realizing with much alacrity that I could use music to liberate others from the same shackles of fearful thinking that I had worn. My first skeptically-based song, *God Is Wh?t*, was based on a debate between **Sam Harris** and **William Lane Craig**.

While fear subsided — inspiration ignited! I created songs that drew upon my favorite authors, pulling from the influential works of Sagan (*The Dragon In My Garage* featured at: <https://youtu.be/cYDxYwHGK9I>), Sean Carroll (*The Afterlife Party* featured at <https://youtu.be/w0D0iZ7fG7A>), and Thomas Paine (*Omni-Absurd* featured at <https://youtu.be/-xCzvhXZVGk>).

There are numerous ways in which I can help people through music. With vibrant storytelling and a splash of dry wit, I can inspire hope, encourage critical thinking, and motivate others to form their own opinions based on reason and skeptical inquiry.

In retrospect, I faced many of my fears simply by defining them. Every day I see the rewards of going outside of my comfort zone. It didn't happen overnight and it wasn't easy.

It was an arduous process of asking questions, investigating answers, and forming conclusions based on rational thinking. This process is ongoing by the way.

While it takes little effort to plant the seed of fear and even less work to watch it grow (i.e., overtake your garden), the seed of freethought is two-fold: you must diligently nurture it daily while constantly plucking the weeds of fear that attack it. You truly reap what you sow.

I no longer sleep with the lights on. In fact, when I occasionally feel afraid I'll usually remove my blanket and outstretch my foot as if to symbolically say, "Go ahead, take it."

I've learned many lessons on my amazing and educational journey. The most important for me has been that the shadow of fear fades once you shine the light of reason on it. □



Pictured above is **Buck Bowen**. The photo was taken during the recording of his *Openly Secular* video which can be seen in its entirety at:

<http://openlysecular.org/video/buck-bowen-openly-secular/>

Below are his original lyrics to the song:

 Hello and what's up?
I'm Openly Secular but you can call me Buck
I'm here for you whenever you need me
As a source of inspiration to speak freely
But it's not always easy, so calculate the risk
And if now isn't the right time then wait a little bit
Prepare yourself well before you do it
You can check Openly Secular dot org for a toolkit
It'll help you see the benefits
Of living openly with your loved ones and many friends
And yes the truth can be hard
But never apologize for who you are!
'Cause we don't need a supreme being
to be mean or normal
Educate the people who think your position is immoral
And have no fear if you've lost your faith
Come join the secular community
cause here you've got a place
Where you can be at ease
Feel liberated and have greater access
to support communities
And if you want to get involved and be an activist

Then let me wrap with this
You should read, study, get an education
Become a brick of knowledge in the wall of separation
Between church and state like Jefferson
Because a secular government offers the best protection
for everyone

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Bowen is pictured below during the filming of *If I Were Jesus Part II* music video. See the full video at:

<https://youtu.be/mc0t4tKHSvc>

