

Atheism at Work

by Elizabeth Bujan (pictured below)

I will never forget my first visit to the Center for Inquiry-West, located in Hollywood, California. That is where I saw a screening of **Julia Sweeney's** monologue entitled, *Letting Go of God*. The play really resonated with me. My journey to atheism has many of the same components as Sweeney's story: I was born into a Catholic family, moved into New Age beliefs and discarded them both later in life.



I was born to a lower-middle-class family in Detroit, Michigan. My father was a painter, my mother was a homemaker. I was the second of three children.

Dad emigrated from Spain and met my mother in the 1960s. They were married when she became pregnant with my older brother. We were reared as members of the Catholic Church. Dad was from the "old country" and he firmly believed in the philosophy of "spare the rod, spoil the child." Dad owned two machetes, which he used to threaten us with often.

During grade school I was enrolled in catechism at the church, and I suffered physical and mental abuse at the hands of those in authority. My questions were met with scorn at best, and beatings at worst. My education consisted of lessons about the Ten Commandments and the concept of Hell.

I particularly remember a lesson about "coveting." I was shocked to learn that just the act of wanting something that belonged to another person was punishable with spending an eternity in Hell.

We were taught the story of Jesus and I recall being upset and in tears because I wanted to know why didn't anyone save him? Jesus was such a good guy and did all these miracles, yet he was tortured and killed. No one stood up to save Jesus. This left me with the thought that if I did good in the world like Jesus, I might end up tortured and nailed to a piece of wood!

My religious education ended abruptly when, at the age of thirteen, my mother packed us up and left while dad was at work. She made her departure because in the years after my sister was born dad began to drink heavily. Maybe he could not handle the pressure of having another child to feed, but he often came home drunk and beat us indiscriminately. Many times he would yell at my mother until she broke down and cried.

The day we left, I came home from a half-day at school and was told to take whatever I could. I was informed that we were leaving, never to return.

I didn't want to leave. We had a big house that I loved. But my mother knew that there had to be a better life for us, away from my dad. We had family in three other states: California, Indiana, and Arizona. We took a vote to decide

where we would end up, and California was the winning choice.

After we left Detroit, mom tried to find another spiritual home for us with little success. When I was sixteen, a nice family from the Jehovah's Witnesses religion came knocking on our door. This seemed as good a place as any, so we began to attend meetings at the Kingdom Hall. The family that recruited us brought me into their home for Bible study classes, which began with memorizing chapters of the Holy Bible. I found this rote exercise tedious and unnecessary.

One day I was asked if I believed that every word in the Bible was true. I could not bring myself to say "yes." My Bible studies ended after that and I was no longer welcomed back.

I then began to have disagreements with Jehovah Witness doctrines. First, this religion rejects evolution. I had become interested in science, so the nonacceptance of the theory of evolution did not sit well with me. I defiantly brought science books and read them at religious meetings.

My mother abruptly stopped taking us to those meetings and I learned later it was because she found it upsetting that they do not believe in the Trinity. That did not mesh with my mother's Catholic worldview.

To their credit, they are kind and generous people. When our apartment was broken into they helped us. They took my mother to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get a new ID and other needed documents.

After high school I explored other spiritual paths, including Paganism and New Age beliefs. I gave Tarot card readings to friends and studied every manner of New-Age nonsense — from Astrology to Paganism. I spent many years trying to change my circumstances through the casting of spells.

In 2005 I was hired as an administrative assistant at an engineering company. The operations manager held a Bible study in the office, so I decided to explore Christianity again. I read **Rick Warren's** *Purpose Driven Life* and attended Bible study meetings. The meetings were enjoyable at first, but when the subjects turned from being kind to your neighbor to political, I stopped attending. The thing that irked me the most was the anti-lesbian, gay, bi and transgender (LGBT) talk. I was also appalled by all the anti-abortion rhetoric. The boss compared abortion to illegal immigration; when we see it often it becomes the norm. I was deeply troubled that he was bashing women and immigrants with the same statement.

In 2007, I decided to finally go to college and get my degree. It was then that I began to study philosophy and critical thinking. By 2008 a ballot initiative in California caught my attention. It was Proposition 8. This proposition would change the state constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman only. Gay rights is an issue that is very personal for me. Nothing brings my blood to boil faster than bigotry toward LGBT people. This issue brought me into political activism. Soon I was involved with protesting efforts, holding picket signs, and speaking publicly against Proposition 8.

On October 31, 2007 I was standing on a street corner in La Habra, California when I ran into my old friend Shaun.

I had not seen Shaun in eight years. He attended junior high and high school with my younger sister, and we became friends.

Shaun is the reason I am so fired up about gay rights; he suffered a lot of abuse at the hands of homophobic students in high school. When we reconnected, Shaun introduced me to the “God is Imaginary” website, and he led me to learn more about atheists on YouTube.

This was when my worldview began to drastically change. When **Rene Descartes** wrote his *Discourse on the Method*, he started by doubting everything, to see the world through a new perspective and reject any preconceived ideas. I did the same thing; I went through everything I believed and rejected all my previously held beliefs one by one. While Descartes ended up at a position of theism, I rejected all supernatural and nonscientific ideas.

This felt liberating, but also like I lost something. The best way I can describe how I felt at that time is this: imagine driving down a highway. You can see ahead for miles. Then, all of a sudden you hit a patch of fog. You can’t see more than a few feet in front of you. That is where I was; I held onto this notion that I could somehow predict or alter future events either through divination or New-Age spirituality, now I was faced with the reality that I can’t really know what is going to happen in the future.

It was then that I began searching the Internet for other like-minded people. I had signed up for MeetUp.com in 2007, so I searched for atheist groups there. The first group I found was not a good fit, but then I found the Backyard Skeptics and I’ve been part of that community since 2010. The people I met there have become a second family. Being able to speak to like-minded people and learn more about skepticism has helped me to grow as a freethinker.

In July of 2013 I was laid off from the company that held those Bible meetings. A month later, while searching for another job, I interviewed with a health insurance broker. He had only three employees. I was replacing his receptionist who was leaving to move to nonprofit work. During the interview, the first two questions he asked were, “what church do you go to?” and “are you married?” This was the first of many red flags, but I bluffed my way through the interview, because I was desperate to find another job.

Next the broker explained, “This is a Christian office, and we begin every morning in prayer.” He also said, “You don’t have to pray with us. It’s optional.”

After the first interview he invited me back for a second interview, after which he offered me a job.

I was hesitant to work with someone so religious, so I turned down his offer. He was relentless, however, demanding to know why I did not want the job. I told him it was because he did not offer any health benefits. He offered to help me pay for coverage and begged me to come and work for him. I relented and took the job, starting work on August 12, 2013.

Working for this man was unpleasant, to say the least. The religious talk at the office was unrelenting; every email and phone call ended with the words “have a blessed day.” It was nauseating. He also had mood swings; he was either extremely cheerful or angry. I often sat in my car and cried

before coming to the office, I despised the job so much. I stuck with it only because I needed to work.

On Thursday, September 19, 2013, I was busy at work when the small office staff gathered for prayer. When I did not immediately stand the boss asked, “Aren’t you going to join us for prayer?”

I simply replied, “That’s okay.”

He did not say anything to me for the rest of the day. On the following Monday morning I arrived to find the boss and a few salesman in his office. The door closed and they appeared to be conducting an interview. I knew right away that he was interviewing a replacement for me. I, in fact, could hear him asking all the same questions that he had asked me during my interview.

Four days later, my employer called me into his office and said, “We are going in a different direction.” He then fired me.

When I asked why, he repeated the “going in a different direction” excuse and said that was all his CPA told him to say. That was my first clue that he knew his reason for firing me was illegal discrimination, he was trying not to incriminate himself.

The next day I had to return to pick up some items I had forgotten in the desk, and the girl who previously held that position had returned to train my replacement. It was obvious that he fired me because I did not want to pray with him. Up until that day I would not participate in the prayer, he had no complaints about my job performance, there was no other reason to let me go.

This incident did two things: first it made me more determined to work for atheist acceptance outside of the work environment. I also decided not to ever discuss atheism at work.

An atheist activist I admire once said that we should be out and proud, but the office is not an appropriate place to discuss religion. I regret staying in such a bad work situation for so long. It would have been better to reject a questionable job offer, even in a tough economic climate.

One of the most important things to remember in hostile work situations is that a journal must be kept. Documentation of dates, times, names, and what was said can be used as evidence that work discrimination has taken place. I also suggest recording conversations if that method of documentation is legal in your state.

Work discrimination narratives can be filed through the Anti-Discrimination Support Network — a database founded by **Margaret Downey** through the Freethought Society, now administrated by the Secular Coalition for America. A more formal complaint can be filed through the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission.

In July of 2014, I volunteered at The Amaz!ng Meeting in Las Vegas. This was a turning point for me; it was an awe-inspiring experience seeing so many like-minded people in one place. I am truly proud to be part of this growing movement. Though I am still afraid of losing my job, I want to do all that I can to achieve acceptance for nonbelievers everywhere. Since then I have become more involved in atheist activism, volunteering at conferences and helping to conduct public outreach for atheism. □