

Doing My Best

by Lisa Pedersen

In 1976, I was four years old, sitting in a Catholic church in Hamilton, New Jersey. The rituals, incense, and candles left me in awe as the prayers and singing swept me off my feet. At that time in my life, I thought I wanted to give my life to helping others and to do so I wanted to be a nun.

I already knew what poverty was and saw things a child should not have witnessed. At the age of six, I went to a different church with my next-door neighbors. When I got home after the service that evening, I was upset because I had learned that my mom and I were going to hell — according to this particular church. That day I heard for the first time exactly what hell was and that my mom and I were going there because I was conceived and born out of wedlock. I relayed to my mom, who was a single parent, what the preacher had said. My mom was angered by what she heard. It would be four years until I would ever step into another church. My belief in a god was stagnant but I did not challenge the concept.

By the time I was 13, I was going to a Presbyterian church in Vineland, New Jersey with my mom and other family members. This family activity was mainly due to my mom's ex-husband being an on-again-off-again alcoholic. He began going to church and the family wanted to support him in hopes that he would stop drinking once and for all. In turn, I had to go to church too.

I did not care for the sermons, the people, and anything else for that matter which dealt with god. I did not fit in with the rest of the parish, probably because I was a teenager. Although my mom's ex-husband turned back to drinking, which he eventually died from in 1991, my mom ended up becoming a reborn Christian and was immersed in the church.

As I was entering tenth grade, I switched from public school to an all-girls private Catholic school called Our Lady of Mercy Academy in Newfield, New Jersey. It was not until my junior year of high school in religion class where I heard the phrase said (but only once), "God is not only masculine but he has feminine characteristics as well." These words sparked my personal journey to search for a higher power and removed any further contemplation of me being a nun upon graduation.

I furthered my studies in Christianity by reading the Bible, which I found to be offensive at times and contradictory. What I found to be most disturbing was that I was to "fear God" because he could do "horrible things" to me at any time, such as he had done to Job — yet "he loved me unconditionally." This was taught in Catholic school and in the various churches I attended: Catholic, Presbyterian, Protestant, Baptist and Methodist. I think of that entire scenario as being in a dysfunctional relationship and one that I did not accept.

Next, I studied Wicca for several years. There were too many deities and too many unexplained things, no evidence or proof. Because of that, I was not able to justify being a Wiccan and I moved on.

Then there was Hinduism. It was interesting, but I found it to be just not for me. In my early 30s I eventually discovered the philosophy of Buddhism and even now apply Buddha's idea of searching for truth as one of my goals in life. I do not hold any belief in reincarnation, however.

From the time I was in my early 20s, up until 2007 or 2008, I did not like Christianity, nor did I care very much for those who believed in the religion. I thought some of them were hypocrites. They would portray themselves as abiding by God's word yet they did not practice what they preached. Simply put, I found some members in the various churches I had attended throughout my life to be fake and this did not sit well with me. I believe we are alive for a limited time and should work together to make things better than we were when we started.

My negative perception of Christianity began to fade and finally diminish in the next chapter of my life. I was on a personal journey to love more while furthering my compassion for various walks of life. I felt that if I were to ever find my peace it would be through observation and understanding. I wanted to know others from Christianity.

Between 2007-2008, I began going to a Christian church a few times a month. I did this for about 18 months. I was surrounded by people who were welcoming, but most importantly, they were sincere. What I witnessed were everyday people who were on their own personal journey. As I discovered my heart and mind opening to this group, I one day simply stopped going. The reason was that I accomplished what I had set out to do, which was to understand a certain religious group better.

Fast forward to October 2011. I was on my first date with **Michael Steven Martin** (pictured below with me).

As we were on our way to see a play, he asked me what my religious preference was. What transpired at that moment would forever change my personal outlook. I told him that I was following and learning more about the Buddhist philosophy, to which he said, "You do know that you are actually an "atheist, right?"

I just sat there for a few moments processing that word "atheist" and what it meant. I realized that he was indeed correct. Up to that time, I had an idea of what an atheist was. I had a few friends who were atheists but I did not take the time to fully embrace the concept, mainly because of the negative connotation that went along with being an atheist.

Today I find that many people do not fully understand what an atheist is, much like me before that first date with Michael. Religion has put local communities and entire countries behind socially and educationally. I know one



thing for sure: As the nontheist movement continues to grow and as we reach out to others from various religious backgrounds, it is important not to humiliate or shame religious believers.

Men, women, and children are bearing the scars of religious ignorance and are evidence of the type of harm being done. Further intolerance to one person is injury to all. If we continue to sit back in silence or make fun of believers, we are as guilty as those who gain prominence

and power by the dissemination of false ideas and by appealing to the deepest fears and hates within the believer's mind. It is important to educate others on what an atheist is, what we believe, and why we think the way we do. Also, we should all strive to present a good example of what an atheist is, because people are perceptive and do judge. Anything less than doing our best and being kind will only slow the nontheist communities momentum of gaining understanding and respect. ◆

2016 Freethought Hero Awarded to Lisa Pedersen, for Doing Her Best

by Jan Meshon

I recently had the distinct honor of presenting Lisa Pedersen with a FreeThoughtAction Hero Award — in part for her efforts in the freethought movement, but mainly because of the extraordinary efforts she makes to improve the lives of those in need. Everyday Lisa shows the world that the good people do springs from their humanity, not from divinity.

The award was presented to Lisa at the May 2016 Freethought Alliance conference held in Fullerton, California. **Margaret Downey** (President of the Freethought Society) recommended Lisa for the award and also arranged for its surprise presentation at the conference.

Lisa is an ambassador, educator, advocate, and a humanist. She is a co-founder and former board member with the secular nonprofit organization Friends of Freethought. She also founded the Women's Secular Group of Southern California, which hosts an Adopt-A-Family outreach within secular communities.

She raises awareness and educates the public on matters such as morality, the history of freethinkers, and activism. She does this in person and online, helping people access reference materials. She attends outreaches to educate the public as an example of what an atheist and humanist is.

Lisa has been involved with the Compton Initiative Project (CIP) for 10 years. CIP brings people together from different backgrounds and helps them make a difference while painting schools, cleaning parks, or maintaining homes.

Lisa raises money for a dozen orphanages in Tijuana, Mexico so they can purchase necessities like food, clean water, clothes, school materials, and medical care. She personally contributes money, diapers and cleaning supplies in addition to fundraising. Working with a national dental distributor, she provides toothbrushes and toothpaste for many within the orphanages. She works toward her goal of providing free dental care for these children.

She has created a bridge between her career in the dental industry and her local Orange County, California community where she has collaborated with Project Hope Alliance and National Children's Oral Health Foundation to help provide free dental care to over 400 homeless children in 90 schools. She hosts collection drives at work to gather dental hygiene products, and in two years raised over \$25,000 for Project Hope.

Her concern for the welfare of the homeless inspires her to host events for the secular community with the Orange County Food Bank. She and her volunteers work with over 100 people from various organizations on an assembly line to package nonperishable food. These 1,200-1,800 boxes are delivered to low-income individuals or families. In the winter she partners with the Mercy House in providing up to 400 sleeping spaces a night at the Armory, which acts as the local emergency shelter.

Lisa's passion for the environment compelled her to become a leader, fundraiser, and organizer with the OC Hiking Club. She has hosted events to maintain and clean local trails. She helps new hikers acclimate and propels them to an advanced level. She's also an advocate for a children's hiking program called Kids In Need.

Lisa's tireless efforts on behalf of those in need help break down negative stereotypes and gain acceptance for all freethinkers as those she comes in contact with see her dogged optimism and heartfelt empathy. Lisa is a true Freethought Hero! ◆

