

## ESSAY

## Intellectual Dynamite: How Sociology Saved My Faith from Fundamentalism

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First semester, second year at Bible college, I registered for “Introduction to Sociology” because I needed a social science course for my Biblical studies major, and because it fit my schedule. I didn’t have a hot clue what sociology was. All I knew was that the prof was a bit of a jock, and that his exams could be really, really tough.

By the end of the semester, that intro sociology course had so thoroughly devastated my thinking that I thought I might be losing my mind, really and truly: genuine loony-bin material. I have since had my mind changed countless times by gradual, systematic dismantling and rebuilding of ideas, but intro sociology was like randomly placed sticks of intellectual dynamite with assorted fuse lengths, blowing up all over the place, one after another after another. Everything I thought I understood about myself, the world, work, politics, culture, community, family, faith, love, and God, was turned to rubble. That social science credit I picked because it fit my schedule felt like a catastrophe.

At Christmas, I drove to my parents’ home in southern Alberta, Canada, to spend the winter break with my family, and I spent most of those two weeks quietly brooding. I didn’t know how to talk to my parents because I couldn’t summarize a semester’s worth of basic sociological concepts, never mind try to explain why I felt so ruined by it all. I couldn’t relate to my old friends who seemed to be slightly older versions of their high-school selves, plugging away at university, studying engineering or pharmacy or education or law, already reminiscing about the good old days when we were in high school together. I had *zero* interest in sentimental ruminating; I was already far enough into dismantling and analyzing the world of my younger self that I didn’t even know who I was anymore. I felt like I was losing my grip on reality. Words felt pliable and malleable, *especially* religious words. I didn’t feel like I fit in my home church, didn’t know how to read the Bible anymore. I couldn’t really pray without

tripping over my words and second-guessing every desperate, longing plea before I could even properly articulate it. I wasn't sure if I truly could still, in good faith, call myself a Christian.

But when Christmas break was over and I went back for the winter term, I dropped out of my biblical studies major, transferred to a social science degree track, and signed up for as many sociology classes as I could.

Because sociology wasn't just intellectual demolition; it was also intellectual cocaine. (For the record, I have never tried *cocaine* cocaine.) I loved it. I couldn't get enough of it. It lit up my imagination like wildfire. Sociology introduced me to brand new concepts, each of which turned into countless questions, which led to further questions, on and on, and eventually I felt like the questions I was learning how to ask were way, way out in front of me, blazing a trail for my life that I didn't know how *not* to take. It signaled the emergence of a vocation, a lifelong pursuit of interesting questions. I had signed up for intro soc on a lark, but that class lined up just so with the cognitive developmental stage of the late-adolescent male brain. I'd left home when I was seventeen, and I was discovering my capacity for intellectual curiosity, but I was also discovering that serious study could be fundamentally life altering. I was starting to grow up. I was primed to learn. And there was my professor, standing at the front of the classroom, ready to teach.

What made sociology so jarring was just how intellectually compelling it was, and also how fundamentally incompatible with everything I thought I knew and understood. It provided rational, scientific explanations for experiences and phenomena I had always trusted were the work of God. I was raised into a rational, modernist understanding of the world, paired with, and ultimately subject to, an unquestioning, pietist expression of Christianity. That rigid, airtight system of belief was sensible and orderly. It told me what I needed to know about the origins of the universe, and about the good and evil in my heart, and it filled all the spaces in between the stars and me. I had a pretty clear sense of what it meant to be a Christian long before I had any clear sense of being male. I assumed that the religious narrative I understood was self-evident, and that anyone with an open heart would discover the same God that I believed in. Politics, history, biology, education, music, current events, sin, heaven, God, the devil: everything had its place within my religious rubric. I coasted along with that childlike faith in God and his activity and agency in the world until I stumbled into sociology, which offered explanations for spiritual experiences, religious belief, and communal faith practices, all of which seemed to function independently from the actual existence of God. I had leaned on faith to explain everything; sociology made faith optional.

I have long forgotten nearly every key sociological concept from my degree. But that simple intro soc course set me on a path of lifelong curiosity and questions. I remember my

professor warning us that sociology could make the world around us seem artificial, that once we started thinking seriously about the social construction of culture and social institutions like family, church, politics, and education, everywhere we looked, the world starts to look contrived. If all I could see was artificial surfaces, what if there was nothing beneath the surface of anything? And if all the religious meaning I had grown up with was, in fact, as arbitrary and artificial as all the other sources of meaning, how could I ever truly commit to anything at all? The entire structure of my childhood belief dissolved into rolling waves of questions. Had God ever once *actually* spoken to my heart, or were my so-called spiritual experiences nothing but the product of a rigid, carefully delineated religious worldview? Was the church an authentic movement in the footsteps of Jesus, or was the entire two-thousand-year enterprise a socially constructed movement, an elaborate homage to just another wise, charismatic, historical figure? What if religious language was simply metaphorical rather than inherently meaningful, loaded with made-up significance through elevated metaphysical vocabulary? If belief in God was optional rather than self-evident, how could I simply *choose* to believe? Questions asked cannot be unasked, and now that doubt had seriously scuffed the shiny surface of my belief, could I ever truly believe again?

Yet even as my childlike faith was disintegrating, I became hungrier than ever for ideas. And rather than leaving faith, I searched deeper into Christian thought and discovered sincere, faithful Christian writers who had given their very best thinking to precisely the kinds of questions that so enlivened me even as they dismantled my belief. I had animated, energetic conversations with my classmates, a handful of whom became beloved, life-long friends. And I had the faithful Christian example of my professor who cared for our hearts and our minds and our lives. He prayed with humility and sincerity at the beginning of each class, and countless times over I thought: if he can do it, maybe I can too. He told us to be humble with our learning, that the ignorant can be duped, but the educated will be seduced. He taught us that learning is not morally neutral, and that in no way does learning automatically make you a better person.

He wanted us to understand that even the most rigorous education is not a substitute for humble faith, and that it's possible to read, learn, and think yourself into a deep, dark, miserable hole. (I would go on to do precisely that many times over.) Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living, but the more I learned, the more I came to see that the overly examined life is not *lived*. Careful, analytical thought is a powerful tool, but if you don't get off your intellectual ass and figure out how to make a decent sandwich, you might one day wake up to realize that even though you're the most intelligent, educated, articulate, sophisticated, brilliant one in the office, you're a selfish asshole, no one can stand being around you, and your life is a catastrophe. I'm not disparaging sociology as a discipline, or higher education as a whole. I'm as hungry as ever to learn. My intellectual curiosity is too promiscuous for me to have ever seriously considered a PhD, but I read a lot. Most mornings I

get up at 5:00am to read and write for a couple hours before I head out to make a living, and most weeks I spend about 15 hours listening to podcasts on politics, history, philosophy, theology, and the arts. I finished grad school 15 years ago, but I've never quit being a student. The intellect is a powerful tool and a true gift. But it is a merciless master. Unbalanced by other real, humanizing forces, like wonder, kindness, generosity, beauty, and, more than anything else, love – given and received – too much thinking can make life hell.

Here's another thing my professor said to me, when I was back at the college for an event after I'd graduated but was still obviously mostly lost: there's a difference between thinking deeply and brooding. I don't know if he knew he was pronouncing a diagnosis of my condition, but I knew it. Because I'm inclined to be inside my head a lot, I have been blessed with an active, meaningful presence in what the philosopher/motorcycle mechanic Matthew Crawford calls "the world beyond my head." I work part-time as a handyman, so I'm always dealing with a world that demands my attention and respect but doesn't give a damn about what I think. Setting tile, or fixing bathroom plumbing doesn't depend on my having read Ian McGilchrist, Ta Nehasi Coates, or Slavo Zizek. Parenthood, too, is a relentless blessing, a demanding school of non-self-centered attention. I'm astonished by the presence of my children, who are mostly a lot of work, and sometimes very difficult burdens, but now and then one of them will say or do something striking and beautiful, and I'll realize I don't understand anything about anything at all. I like very much to *think* about things, but being a parent requires a lot of straightforward decision-making: choose this, or choose that, and most of the time you have about two seconds to decide. My kids need me to *live* and not just think. There's nothing more boring to a kid than what a grown-up *thinks*. My kids want to throw a football or play games or read together, or they need help with math, or they need a hug, and maybe for me to shut up enough to let them talk and then cry. Only very, very rarely do they want to hear what I think.

These days I am fortunate to be part of a church and a tradition that are way, way smarter than I am, so I have to think hard to keep up, rather than dumb down to fit in. People there can speak learnedly *in church* about political theory, poetry, history, theology, literature, and music. And that's not because they go all soft and squishy on Christian doctrine either, the "I'm-okay-you're-okay" therapeutic version of church. They regularly use very unpopular words like "sin," insisting that we humans are actually wretched. Every year on Ash Wednesday we gather and profess that "There is no health in us" and get an ashy cross marked on our foreheads, and they tell us, "remember, son of Adam, remember, daughter of Eve, that from dust thou hast come, and to dust thou shalt return." And they preach unapologetically about *the* resurrection, not as metaphor or an ideal or a mythical concept but as a real, utterly mysterious, unbelievable but still true flesh-and-blood event. My church is not at all concerned about trends in worship, and they have never made much of an effort to be relevant. Other

than the electric lights and microphones, our Sunday worship hasn't really changed much in the last 400 years. We profess genuine belief in the God of the Bible and trust that if he is anything like what he says he is, even our deepest, most troubling questions will not be a threat to him. And so not only do they accept me and my doubt-filled critical ways; they expect it. My church pays me to read, write, pastor, preach, and organize poetry readings, book launches, film screenings, lectures, concerts, and performances.

I sometimes envy my professional friends who studied medicine or education, or who practiced a trade like electrical or finish carpentry. I used to joke that my years in arts education made me well-schooled but basically unemployable. I'm definitely not a sociologist, because I haven't pursued sociology systematically. I haven't pursued anything systematically, except maybe my wife. But I wouldn't trade my arts education for something "more practical," not in a million years. I have become a much more careful thinker for my mostly impractical education. Sociology hurled me into a complicated sense of the world, and I've been actively, deliberately seeking complexity ever since. I love the story of Jacob from the book of Genesis; Jacob who wrestled through the night with an angel, and even when he got his hip dislocated, he fought till he pinned his heavenly opponent and said, "Give me a blessing." That's what real learning is like. Real learning will raise life-altering questions; it should be transformative, and that is always difficult and painful. Raise the questions and you are going to have to wrestle a long time. And if you do it right, you're going to get hurt. Like Jacob, we might never walk the same again; Rowan Williams calls it "the wound of knowledge." But if you hold on, dig deep, and refuse to settle for cheap, easy answers, you will find your blessing.

That intro sociology course with Dr. Dennis Hiebert was genuinely life-changing, like the trail in Robert Frost's "two roads diverged in a yellow wood" poem we've all heard a hundred times. The path I took has been very difficult, and incredibly rich.

It did not lead to a career. But I wouldn't trade it for anything.

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