

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the College Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
by Jocelyn Rodriguez

Dedication

I dedicate this journey to my mother whos faith has no limit especially when it comes to her children. To my grandfather, soap and water washes everything away.

To my husband your love keeps me going baby.

And my siblings Goofy Goobers for life

Acknowledgment

To my family, without you I wouldn't be who I am today your support,
unconditional love has being something I will cherish forever. To my husband, you are my
everything.
thank you

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Artist Statement

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word memoir is defined as a note, a memorandum, a record, a brief testimonial, or a warrant record. Records of events or history written from the personal knowledge or experience of the writer or based on particular sources of information. (OED). I plan to write a memoir based on my early interactions with faith and how it has shaped the foundation of my growth. A piece of myself on paper that only I can explain is a piece of literature that holds more truth than when they say it is based on a true story. When I began to write my memoir, I faced many difficulties. I wanted to be honest but not overly share my life, yet genuinely sharing a piece of myself meant I would have to be vulnerable and share all the parts I wouldn't usually share.

During this paper, I will give examples of my work to give a more detailed explanation of how I plan to write my work and the things I need to work on.

My journey with faith began at a young age, similar to many. Praying before dinner, attending Sunday school, and participating in my communion contributed to my first encounters with faith and what it meant to believe in a higher power. My young mind couldn't comprehend that a being with a kind of power to heal the sick, cure the blind, and even help the poor was there just because he wanted to be. It wasn't for personal gain or to demand something in return but out of love for his children—a passion that is unconditional and, for some reason, that just wouldn't register in my brain. I prayed

before dinner because my mother said, “ We need to thank God for blessing us with this food.” So I did what any child would do: unthinkingly listen to my mother. Over time, I experienced faith in many forms and learned much about God and myself. I am still experiencing it, but looking at where it came from is always lovely.

My first paragraph briefly described the main idea of my faith and how it began. Like many stories, the concept came from actual truth, so I started my memoir simply but with enough insight for my readers that this is what the next few pages will be about. According to Lythcott-Haims, Memorists take on the risks associated with telling truths in public and thus are the bug lighters of the literary world. It is writing such truths that others believe it to be out of confidence that our lives are worth telling or that we have a message to share through the work of our lives. My faith journey might guide a person to discover a part of themselves they never realized was there or give them an understanding that someone out there is just like them.

When writing anything, it's essential to begin at the beginning. We could argue that not all stories start at the beginning but at the end or even in the middle. Whether it begins in the middle or back, capturing the reader's attention first is essential. It can be by asking a thought-provoking question, an event the reader cannot believe, or an event that leaves the reader asking questions hungry to find the answers. My first paragraph doesn't necessarily raise questions but curiosity. Curious about how I interpreted the word of the Lord and how he has changed my life. People are many things, selfish and stubborn, but above all else, they are nosey. We enjoy knowing about other people's lives, especially when they've experienced hardships. Why do you think we

enjoy watching murder mysteries? We love watching how people acted, fought, and even died protecting.

The first time I questioned my faith seemed like the typical moment of life when death comes around the first time, and you don't know why. By the time I was six, my grandfather had taken a turn for the worse. Every time I visited with my grandmother, she would take me to the hospital. We would help him shave, and he would share his newspaper with us. I often asked God why he had to do this when he passed. I wondered if he knew how much I loved him and how much he meant to me for him just to be gone. My grandmother said, "God called back his warrior and needed our grandpa to help him. With so many people in the world, God needs help sometimes." At six years old, I probably thought of many things before just nodding my head and going to watch Sponge Bob. Now, at 26, with my grandparents gone, I understand what she meant. We are all God's servants. We live to serve him and must answer the call when he needs us. Sometimes, it is painful when the person he calls is someone you admire and love, but it must be done.

I faced my first hurdle as I continued to drive into different life scenarios. Which one is appropriate, and which seemed to be just fillers for the gaps? I wanted scenarios that made sense for the topic and flowed together into the next one—beginning at a young age and continuing to grow, just like my story. Vanderslice states that it is true that writers are people who need to make sense of the world through words and who would do this whether or not these words were published. But let's be honest, at a certain point, most of us also want to connect with readers.

This is precisely what I would like to do to communicate through my scenarios, and to do so, and I would have to choose the right ones. Above is an example of a scenario selected from which I felt held more than a connection. The death of a family member we have dearly happens every day, and it, depending on who you ask, is one of the worst feelings in the world. She was my everything, and to have it taken away so quickly was hard to understand, which can be said for many people. We can take emotions too far and develop negative emotions towards ourselves and God. But I could see the positive no matter how angry I became.

My experience with my writing classes has been enjoyable because I witnessed how different writing formats are completed. For example, screenwriting plays and poetry must have been the most difficult because they have such complex formats and lines that I needed help understanding them. But I learned that each has a way of communicating, which is the primary goal. Poetry speaks in riddles as things aren't what they seem, and a flower can be described in four stanzas instead of just saying the flower is pretty. A screenplay is all about details, and that encouraged me to write with more explanations than just words. It describes the surrounding area, tone, actions, and clothing to give the reader a complete picture to put on the big screen.

My favorite class would've been Creative Fiction, as I was able to create different stories. I was free to be as creative as my mind would let me. My stories were of love, danger, and adventures between two lies. I created this world full of wonder and curiosity. It was perfect as I struggled with my details and had trouble making a singular path for my characters. But I learned so much about myself and my writing as a beginner. I was afraid of letting myself fall into my

work, but I would endlessly stay up late to write my three-page assignments a week and look forward to my classmates' feedback. Some enjoyed it, while others thought it was less worthy for the class, but those comments didn't destroy my confidence but uplifted it to become a better writer. My work has developed over time and has become a weekly therapy. I sit on my sofa while my husband plays video games, and I write. I find writing in a room full of people makes me concentrate more versus being in the room all alone.

My thesis is a memoir of my faith journey. I wrote it for a previous class, and the work has stuck in my head for a long time. It was fun to write but also interesting what my mind remembered after all these years. My faith has changed my life for the better, and I have these feelings that I want to share with my classmates. Everyone wrote their journeys with belief, and it was amazing to see how everyone witnessed God in many different ways. Writing a memoir for my thesis is a more comfortable format. It is a personal format of my thoughts with the sources necessary to back up my stories from friends and family members.

The book that inspired me to write a memoir would have to be *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert because she was so honest about her experiences with depression and being divorced. It was inspiring to read how she overcame these obstacles and became who she is today. I wanted to be able to write something honest about my own experiences and how they shaped me into the woman I am. For example, in my work, this event is a part of my process.

The changes we experience, first love, and new friendships form as our life is about to begin. Initially, I wanted to be a veterinarian because of my love of animals. But eventually,

I was turned away from the idea and decided to become a teacher. I read this prayer at night when I felt lost about what I wanted to be when I grew up. It helped me feel the Lord even when my unsure nature shook my ship.

God would guide me and be there to assist me. Every Sunday, we would go to church. My stepfather would ask, “ So Josie, what did you learn?” I would try to summarize what the priest preached that day each time. Once, a priest spoke of relationships and how a partnership is essential. Because without it, the relationship will fall apart, just like your relationship with God. We must maintain a partnership. At this point in my life, my act of faith was praying before I went to sleep and only speaking to God when I was bothered with something, such as when the boy I liked thought I was ugly.

I was in the process of changing my body, mind, and how I viewed myself. The road was tough, but I could eventually see the signs God was trying to tell me. A defining moment shifted life's waves and created a new outcome.

My target audience for my work is the young adult to an adult demographic between 16-25 years of age because that is the time frame I experienced the most change in my life. During that time, life was like a series of never-ending potholes on the road, and what I needed the most was someone to tell me I wasn't alone. So much is happening during those years to us girls with bodies, opposite sex, awkward stages of relationships, new romances, and everything in between. My work could have the necessary words to help them overcome those hard times. I wish I had during those moments. I want to give them a voice and words of encouragement.

My work will be organized by the time frame in that I can write during specific points in my life from the age of eight to my current age of twenty-seven. It's a series of events between that time where I experienced God in many different ways, and each way, I processed them into discoveries about myself and God. For example, I begin with the first incident with Faith.

My beginning with God began slowly and in small increments. I would say grace with my family at the dinner table, and as we bowed our heads and held hands, my thoughts would be on the delicious food or when I could let go of my brother's wet hand. I never focused on the words my parents stated. One day, I was asked to say grace during a Thanksgiving dinner. I was so nervous because I had never done it before. What was I supposed to say? Eventually, I just ended up crying and unable to speak, so my mother ended up telling me prayers for me. I felt intimidated by the words of God, and I imagined what it would be like to face him directly. My strength has never been with speeches; they make my heart beat faster, and I have to use the bathroom. It was a feeling I never wanted to experience again, so I always opted out of saying any kind of prayer for any occasion out of fear. Fear can hold us back from being our best selves because we let it consume our thoughts.

Fear and doubts are every day for a girl so young as my confidence isn't where it is today. Those notions display the time frame and how my young mind was similar to the girls around the same age. My memoir is something I continue to work on as I grow, and my encounter with faith grows with each passing event or interaction with people and God. My words are honest and filled with emotions that fit the current situation, so my readers will understand how I felt during

those times. It is not about the journey but the steps I took to reach my goal. I wanted my work to feel as accurate as possible as a storyteller.

A person who enjoys retelling events that happen to other people and hearing stories from others. When two people experience the same event, they usually remember it differently. Many of my memories come from the vault of my mind, but I reached out and requested a refresher. It was interesting to see how someone might have viewed that day, but at the same time, it helped put the timeline together and made it more complete.

My work is a work in progress as I am still learning as a person and writer. I might not become a best-selling author, but one day, I can teach our future children of tomorrow. My memoir is my pride and joy because I never gave up on myself when I began to write it. My *Journey with Faith* might be similar to others, but it is still the work I wrote for others to enjoy. I am excited to see how my work progresses and adapt just as I will. A memoir such as mine has endless possibilities to become original and completely mine. An article from the San Francisco Writing Center spoke about memoirs in a manner that created the spark to make me want to write my own. In the article, Brook Warner states, “ Today’s memories hold nothing back, and the impact for readers is shared intimacy. Memorists, to the reader, are the friends who share everything, making our stresses and challenges seem somehow less daunting” (Warner). I wanted to write something that holds that kind of intimacy because you never know if you need that friend. My goal is for my memoir to be that conversation a friend needs to realize they are not alone.

Work Cited

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Critical Paper

What does it take to write a memoir? This question circles my head constantly because it is a type of reading only a few people choose. It's a personal format that requires the writer to share the most essential parts of themselves. When we look at the word Memoir and its meaning according to the Oxford English Dictionary, it states records of events or history written from the personal knowledge or experience of the writer or based on unique sources of information. (OED). A record of events because each memoir takes place during an event, whether personal or a part of history. Everyone's idea of a memoir is interpreted differently. Some will approach the topic as a chance to express themselves about a childhood dilemma or allow the readers to experience history differently. Writing a memoir can be daunting but worth it when it touches the desired audience.

An autobiographical memoir is the retelling of one's life from the beginning to the present times. For example, our former first lady, Michelle Obama, wrote a biographical novel about her life. It was an exciting read, but not just because she is the First Lady. The book gave us a different view of a woman who was viewed as one of the most sophisticated, well-dressed, and inspiring females of all time. Her novel *Becoming* was, and she quotes, "ordinariness of an extraordinary story." She didn't want her novel to be viewed differently because of her previous status; she wanted something from Michelle, the person. A memoir can be considered in many different ways simply because the person writing it creates this idea of a higher standard.

Someone like Michelle Obama could have that outcome; she didn't want that kind of attention. She wanted to be viewed as the person, not for who her husband was.

Michelle said, “ The process of writing this book has been so personally meaningful and illuminating for me. As I prepare to share *Becoming* this fall, I hope you'll also think about your story and trust that it will help you become whoever you aspire to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.” The way she expressed herself inspired me to write my story because she made the process seem easy, comfortable, and sincere. Her story was honest, so she shared parts of her story I didn't expect to read about. For example, how serious she truly is and how she had to learn to become more carefree with herself and her studies. Michelle is conscientious at plotting her path and staying focused on her goals.

However, when she crosses paths with certain people, her view of thinking changes; she is compelled to redefine what is essential and what success looks like—this moment created this image of Michelle as someone like you and me. Her path was filled with losses and hardships, but she was able to use those moments to become a strong, intelligent, and independent woman who continues to inspire us with her wisdom and fashion. The focus of this novel was to encourage people to own their stories. Whether good or bad, it's our story; we must take ownership of them because they are ours. Michelle states, “ Writing *Becoming* has been a deeply personal experience. It has allowed me, for the first time, the space to reflect on the unexpected trajectory of my life honestly. In this book, I talk about my roots and how a little girl from the South side of Chicago found her voice and developed the strength to use it to empower others. I

hope my journey inspires readers to find the courage to become whoever they aspire to be.” Her memoir was personal and expressed that even someone viewed as perfect is less than ideal. She struggled, doubted herself, and feared her future, yet she could overcome those struggles and empower others to do the same.

Over time, we’ve read many memoirs, not realizing it is one because it was written differently. For example, Anna Frank's diaries of her time in hiding were a memoir of her family's struggles, the fear of being found with endless thoughts of hope, but also the unknown of what could happen if they are found. Her diary is of real-life experiences during a part of history we can read or watch documentaries about in this day and age. Her entries were historical and personal. Anne expressed her emotions during her years of hiding but also described how people were treated during those times. The novel has more power within its pages, coming from a thirteen-year-old girl experiencing the results of Hitler and the Nazi Party's treatment of Jews in Europe during the second world war.

Her story inspired people to realize not everything is as it seems and that people, no matter where they come from, have the right to live in freedom. Anne began her entries just as any young girl would. She spoke of boys she liked, her friends, and girl experiences. The diary held the sense of conversation with the reader as if she was just telling us how life was going. The connection was made once we realized how we found a piece of ourselves with Anne during that age. But it also held its elements of realistic nature as we read Anne went to a completely different school in Amsterdam based on her nationality, called Jewish Lyecum. Her family

continued to experience hardship, moving across the Netherlands to escape persecution in Germany. Anne wrote of her experiences as just another adventure. They found sanctuary in Otto Frank's office, where they had supplies. Her entries told him that even in this hardship, Anne still held her positive outlook and creative nature and loved creating stories and writing entries in her diary. We received what you would expect from a thirteen-year-old girl in these entries. For example, she states, "I don't fit in with them, and I've felt that clearly in the last few weeks. They're so sentimental together, but I'd rather be sentimental on my own." The separation she felt was expected as she was still young and discovering her identity. Throughout her diary, she continues to express the differences between herself and Anne's family. Being so close is causing their personality to clash.

She openly and honestly expresses her loneliness during her time in the secret annex. Going from being a social butterfly to hiding every day took its toll which created that personal bond and let the reader truly feel the emotions. An autobiographical memoir is a retelling of one's life from the beginning to the present times. At a glance, we might think it is a straightforward task retelling the stories of your past. But don't let that simple nature fool you it takes strength in the story structures and strength of the author's voice. Both authors come from different paths and different points in history. But both had a voice strong enough to retell their stories on a personal level to connect to their readers.

They both displayed something fundamental. They each knew how to tell a story. If you're wondering, I can tell a story. Does that mean I can write my memoir? The answer I am still

trying to figure it out. But what I have learned from these two authors is that we need to write as if we are confiding in a family member or a good friend. And it all begins with being open to the possibility of failure and understanding the necessary elements of a good memoir. Michelle Obama told her story without fear of being judged because she knew the story was hers and hers alone to tell. She was honest and personal regarding the steps she took to write her work. Anne Frank was a young girl who loved to write and created an imaginary friend named Kitty to write about her fears, dreams, and personal thoughts just as a young girl would a friend. They both shared the elements of personal storytelling as if they were speaking to someone they knew. These elements are what made their work so good because we became friends.

Another Memoir that touched base more emotionally was *Eat, Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert. It recounts her journey of self-discovery, overcoming depression and confusion. She experienced something many women, unfortunately, go through a divorce. A hardship many are embarrassed even to admit that it happens. It's considered a failure as a woman that their marriage fell apart. The memoir has many deep elements because it is a memoir on rebuilding one's life after going through something that could make anyone break down. But Gilbert wrote her memoir in a format that gave it a different view. The format is the pattern of 108 beads in the Japa malas used by Hindus and Buddhists during meditation. One bead for each repetition of a mantra. She chooses the format to show balance and her efforts to find balance again.

The format was engaging because it was like we were on a journey to find our balance. She was honest about her struggles and shared personal information that many wouldn't even consider worth sharing with the world. But her honesty made the memoir create its level. Not everyone is willing to share their most intimate parts especially when it's parts filled with love affairs and nasty divorces. Gilbert's thoughts on writing are fascinating as she describes how to write and even publish your writing. She states, "I believe that if you are serious about a life of writing, or indeed about my creative form of expression, you should take on this work like a holy calling. I became a writer the way other people become monks or nuns. I made a vow to write when I was very young. I built my entire life around writing." (Gilbert) Her devotion to her work is inspiring as her love for writing became her whole world, creating that space to write freely.

She enjoys what she does and that is an essential element. We must enjoy what we do or lose focus and drop our projects before they are finished. Writing, especially a memoir is a personal emotional experience as we must rethink ourselves. The actions we took during a specific time. Gilbert's words regarding writing and how we should consider all possibilities. She states, "Here's another thing to consider. If you always wanted to write, and now you are a certain age and never got around to it, and you think it's too late, please think again:" It's never too early or too late to begin writing your memoir. It is a process that is easily chosen but not so quickly executed. Our doubts stop us from reaching our goals, but if we can overcome those obstacles, the writing world is our ocean.

A memoir has been written in many different formats, but each comes together to deliver a message, whether personal or a fact needing to be known. Michelle Obama wrote a personal piece as a figure many looked up to. She is viewed as one of the most influential people of her time. Her story made people know that although she is our First Lady, Michelle grew up with struggles and doubts but overcame those things to become the person she is today. Anne Frank, a young writer, began her story to help fill the gap of loneliness she felt hiding in the attic. Her letters are all different lengths, and each grows and develops a picture of history—a history we cannot experience today. But we felt her fears and her hope for a better tomorrow. She wrote for herself rather than for others, and it shows. Anne's memoir is a piece of history untouched by man and is still read in classrooms worldwide. Elizabeth Gilbert wrote a heartfelt memoir filled with pain and recovery. It was honest about a topic many women and men deal with daily. A topic many people couldn't even begin to discuss due to its nature. But she was open and let her readers know she experienced this pain and was not alone.

All have the same elements combined to create a memoir worth sharing with the world. They are personal conversations with their readers. This action causes many things to happen to the reader and the writer. The best memoirs take readers on an emotional journey of discovery, redemption, and more. A memory of an event can give insight into the actions others display and how to handle similar situations. Everyone is different and handles certain situations differently. It can be a refreshing moment to know someone out there knows how it feels to be sad and

depressed because these kinds of emotions can feel lonely. *Eat, Pray, Love* was such an emotional rollercoaster as we experienced her trying to restart her life. It is not easy to share, but the novel sheds light on a topic that isn't a part of everyday conversation. Gilbert states, "It's important, but sort of over-rated. The more important virtue for a writer, I believe, is self-forgiveness. Because your writing will always disappoint, your laziness will always disappoint you." (Gilbert). We forgive ourselves for our actions and things preventing us from completing our work, but we also forgive ourselves because we need it to continue to write our stories.

We have a chance to tell our stories. It is an opportunity personality, but it is also an opportunity to tell that story in a way nobody else can. That is where your writing comes into play because it is something nobody else can write but you. Someone once said our writing is our signature. It is unique to us because we write it, explain it, and even experiencing it. Personal writing specific events is different for everyone. For example, Anne Frank wrote about loneliness, but her Father might have written about being happy when his family is together. Elizabeth wrote about regrowth and depression, but her ex-husband might have written of his urge for change and falling in love again. There is a difference in how people view the same event, and it's interesting to see how it is interpreted.

Writing about real life comes with doubts, so having sources to back up your claims is another element when writing a memoir. Having supporting stories helps with critical events to

become more honest and transparent. If the memoir is about coming of age, it's essential to have friends and family members' statements to support it. We cannot deny that facts from history backed up Anne Frank's memoir. Facts about Nazis, the camps, and Hitler's reign that we found our time and added to our history books. A natural source that is undeniable because most people will deny the facts that are right in front of them

According to Colin Dunbar, who wrote an article on how to write a Memoir, he states learning how to write a memoir can be a complex, daunting exercise, depending on the subject or topic of your book. Writing your memoir is different from journaling moments or events in your life. If you want your memoir to be successful, you will also need storytelling skills. A memoir is a piece of a whole pie. Think of it as a slice of that pie. A memoir usually covers a particular period or a specific event in your life. Some memoirs are similar to autobiographical novels because the piece contains different aspects of your life to the present time. Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone tells the story differently. When we begin to think about writing our stories, we have to start thinking about how we want to tell our stories and who we want to reach by telling our stories.

The importance of storytelling can create a connection with your reader. The first step in doing so is by engaging the reader with the first word. That is a difficult task because how do you know which word to start with? And what might be entertaining to us might be less engaging to others. For example, Elizabeth Gilbert wrote *Eat, Pray, Love*, a memoir about her

life after a heartbreaking and horrible divorce. She began this novel writing about an Italian man wishing he would kiss her. The type of book left readers wondering who that man was and why she wanted a stranger to kiss her. A hook that makes you question the actions of others usually creates the curiosity to read more. People whether they want to accept it or not enjoy the drama and gossip of people they don't know. We want to know the who, what, where, when, and why.

The opening must be robust and accurate, as most people respond to the brutal truth rather than something made up. The hook doesn't have to be in the beginning. You can also find it towards the end of the first chapter, kind of like the reason for everything you just read. The shock can cause the reader to wonder and continue to read. Writing a memoir is a personal piece of literature shared with strangers, so an element that can also contribute to your writing is to do so as if you share a secret. It is a secret that not everyone has the privilege of hearing. The details of these actions create a different kind of storytelling most people have difficulty putting down. It depends on how far we are willing to share our secrets and how much information. Too much can cause the reader to lose interest, while too little can cause the reader to feel like something is missing.

A balance must be found to have the kind of memoir many will continue to take for years to come. For example, Anne disclosed many things about her family but also about the Nazis and how they treated her people. That kind of information might have created a negative review as it gave the novel a somber emotion. But it also made the novel genuine and honest. She wasn't

afraid to express her fears, and doubts of what could happen. That is how she captured her audience, that raw emotion that can make readers feel as if they were in that little room with her.

Another element is emotion. It is one of the most important elements when writing a memoir because it builds that connection. When we read a book that made us cry, laugh, smile, or even mad we tend to remember it more than a book that didn't make us feel. A memoir should approach its readers with a human element in mind and evoke emotions. For example, Michelle expressed how her Aunt Robbie a piano teacher and her maternal great-aunt, was hard on Michelle as her piano student but was one of her biggest supporters. That information made me feel happy and made me think of my own family, as they can sometimes be hard on me, but I believe Michelle knew it, too, that it was all out of love. The emotions I felt were simple, but they also connected me to Michelle. A simple emotional connection can come a long way in any novel, and it isn't easily achieved. People might want to have sympathy instead of an actual connection. Petty and understanding are entirely different, yet people tend to fuse them as the same thing. Having someone's petty doesn't warrant them to be understanding; instead they hold a soft spot for them. But when something is understood, a bond is formed, which helps the reader understand the message within the writing.

This brings us to our next step the message. We might not realize it, but we all have a message to convey to others. That could be a spiritual message or even something simple about life. We are surprised by how much we share similar situations across oceans and how much we can relate. Eat, pray, and love gave the message of finding oneself again after life knocks you on

your feet. And forgiveness isn't for others but for ourselves. We can learn so much by experiencing other people. A memoir is a series of events experienced or one huge event expanded to give the little details nobody knows about. A conversation told to a close friend as we unload our thoughts, memories, and emotions. A message of understanding that I've been there and maybe how I handled it could help you understand and react.

The San Francisco Writers Conference posted an article on the eleven crucial elements of writing a memoir. These facts are what define a memoir and being able to prevent it from making mistakes and ensure your writing is suitable for future publishing.:

The idea: Will it excite editors because it's new or a fresh take on an old idea?

The first page: Do the first sentence, paragraph, and page compel readers to keep going? (For more about this, please see my earlier post on The S Theory.)

The story: Do your conflicts, story twists, and subplots make readers want to know what comes next?

The people: Will your readers connect with your characters and care what happens to them?

Page-turnability: Does the pace vary, and does the tension or suspense keep your readers turning the pages?

The dialogue: Is it varied and distinctive enough to portray the characters through tone, emotion, and the way they speak?

The writing: Is it good enough for the kind of book you're writing?

The setting/s: Does it reflect, enhance, or drive your story?

The structure: Is how you constructed your story the most effective way to build tension until the climax?

The ending: Is it the perfect dessert at the end of a great meal?

Your future books: Do you have a synopsis or proposal for a follow-up book?

Each question develops an answer that builds towards the desired memoir to publish and to feel comfortable with our writing. The idea is the foundation of your work. It helps to know what kind of writing you want it to be and how you want to execute the process. The story is important because we have so many stories to tell. But choosing the main one we want to share with the world helps define our plans as we begin to write another stone towards the foundation.

Memoirs are a personal touch towards a society where people have experienced life and wish to share those experiences. Just like any story, it has to have a beginning, middle, and end. Even when the story is our structure, it is vital because it helps keep the flow of things. We want that climax to hit the reader the way we intend it, which causes the best effect. Anne Frank built up our hope that she would survive and stay hidden from the Nazis down below. The Climax of her capture was emotional, upsetting, and even surprising as we read with her the hopes of a better life. But that didn't end up happening, and we were devastated. A memoir is just like any other school we've read the only difference is that it's based on fact instead of fiction.

Writing is a profession only a few choose because of the thought of sitting for long periods, staring at a computer, and even the idea of strangers reading your work and the possibility of them not liking it. Writing effectively is difficult work as it is one of the most salient skills in the professional life of individuals. Professor Larry McEnerney held a lecture about the craft of writing effectively. In his lecture, he touched on different aspects between the reader and the writer, making connections and honest truths. He mentions that we should not think of rules when writing but rather think about the reader. There are two kinds of processes of writing Horizontal and Vertical.

In most cases, writers use Horizontal to help themselves think and make sense of the world. Vertical is the process of reading in which the reader uses the text to change the way they think about the world. Writers of memoirs lean towards the horizontal side of the process as we try to make sense of what to put into the text. We process things entirely differently from someone else, so we must write as if we are explaining it for the first time.

A memoir can be a piece filled with information historically and mentally. The process of writing can be tedious as we try to pick and choose the stories we want to share, the format, and even the setting of the work. But the most important thing to remember is to be ourselves, be honest, and enjoy the experience of reliving life all over again. A memoir is a piece of history whether it regards our own or a part of someone else. It's the only format considered an original piece because nobody can write our story excerpts.

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My Journey with Faith

By Jocelyn Rodriguez

Chapter one: Beginnings and changes

AGE: 6

Like many people, my journey with faith began at a young age. I prayed before dinner, attended Sunday school, and had my communion. All those moments in my life were the start of my faith journey. It's strange to think, one moment, that we aren't thinking much about God but what kind of snacks we get to eat or when we can play with our friends. I didn't know anything about God unless someone said, "God bless you," when someone sneezed. It was life-altering to realize there is more to life than just us, and everyone believes in something, even if that means they don't believe in anything. Religion was constantly introduced but never forced upon me.

My grandmother would bring us all together before vacation and pray or when she felt the need to pray for us. I never paid any mind to it as I was use to her always asking God to bless us and protect us. Her faith was something I wish I took the time to experience more of because I believe it made her who she was. My grandmother was a sweet, caring woman who feed everyone on the block when she cooked. She use to sell frozen treats for a dollar that hundreds came around to buy. Her spirit was so bright and I wish I got to ask her how her faith continued to stay strong as time and life showed its ugly face.

Pentecostal Church

My grandma attended a Pentecostal church and would travel late at night to participate in extended services in Spanish. Her faith was like anything I've ever had the privilege of witnessing. She walked countless miles and traveled on buses in the middle of the night to worship God. The Church was small with brown pews. The lights weren't very bright and it seemed like the most unlikely place a church would gather. I remember accompanying her and sitting, trying to sing the songs and read her Bible. Unfortunately, my Spanish wasn't fluent at seven, and I have not heard these songs. My mother attended Catholic Church every Sunday for about two hours. I knew more of those songs, not simply because they were in English, but because I participated in them more than in my grandmother's church. It demonstrated how strong our faith can be and what lengths we can achieve. Could my faith be that intense one day? I was unsure.

She showed great faith walking in the dead of night, singing church songs with me all the way home. I never knew what she was saying, but her smile and squeezing my hand showed me how happy she was for the company. It's those moments I remember the most after her passing almost five years ago. She had the kind of faith others took years to achieve with her unwavering positive energy and prayers before big trips in her living room. But above all else, it was her love. She loved me with all her heart and prayed for me to be a good person, a good man to marry, and good health. Her church was strong as she attended each service. But her faith in God to protect, watch over, and guide us was much more potent. I miss her every day.

First Confession

My first confession. I ran across the street late because Sunday school required us to attend confession monthly. I remember not knowing what to say and if the person listening would just listen and not go and tell my mom. I remember rushing through and saying anything that came to mind, "I stole money from my grandma's purse, just a dollar because I wanted some candy. I never brush my teeth when my mom tells me to. Sometimes, my dad drinks too much and falls, and my grandma gets mad and puts him to sleep. I don't like it." The priest blessed me and told me to say two Hail Marys before bed. I don't think I did it, but the thought crossed my mind.

You would think when speaking to a man of god I would be more respectful. For example, being on time and speaking of a more deeper conversation. But if I am honest I found it weird to be speaking to a random stranger about our inner thoughts. This man is a man who pledged his life to do Gods work. What if I wanted to confess to God himself? What difference would it make? And yet I continued to confess to a stranger every other weekend as part of the communion process. Confessing our sins to a holy man so our hearts are light and for a young girl I never truly knew how to appreciate it. I confessed and continued to live as what I got to experience was nothing special. It was more special that I realized.

Passing of relative

The first time I questioned my faith seemed like the typical moment of life when death comes around the first time, and you don't know why. By the time I was six or seven, my grandfather had taken a turn for the worse. His name was Eddie and he wasn't my biological grandfather but he was there when I was born and he had a connection with all of us. He was a tall, skinny man with a love for cars, knickknacks and creating music. He played the harmonica and always tried to teach us how to play with him. My grandmother adored him and he adored her. So when he got sick it was hard. Every time I visited with my grandfather, it became apparent that things were going well. We would help him shave, and he would share his newspaper with us. I can't recall what he had, but I do remember him wearing a head brace from the top of his head to his chest. I feared that he was always in pain because it looked painful, but whenever I asked, he would say, "No baby, This is what helps keep the pain away." So I would help him do things around it. If I touched him on the metal headpiece, I figured the pain would come back, so I never felt him unless my grandmother told me to.

I often asked God why he had to do this when he passed. He took away a person I held very close to me and was suddenly gone. I wondered if he knew how much I loved him and how much he meant to me for him just to be gone. My grandmother said, "God called back his warrior and needed our grandpa to help him. With so many people in the world, God needs help sometimes." It's strange; I don't remember crying or even being sad. I knew he was gone, and I had to keep going. My grandmother would play his records in the house, and his voice would fill the room as if he were there singing to us. In those moments, I found comfort that he was okay. Now, at 27, with both my grandparents gone, I understand what she meant. We are all God's servants.

We live to serve him and must answer the call when he needs us. Sometimes, it is painful when the person he calls is someone you admire and love, but it must be done. Our memoirs hold more power than we realize, connecting us to the past and those long gone. I remember the smell of metal, the ends of boxes of tapes, tools, and equipment. And whenever my grandmother would miss him, she would put on one of his tapes of him singing as she cleaned or cooked. In those moments, he continued to live through us, and I believe God does this on purpose so that we never forget what we witnessed and survived. We are stronger than we realize, but sometimes we need those reminders of how much.

Friends and Family

Family is everything; they can be our harshest critics and our biggest supporters. Being of a fully Hispanic family, we have more critics than supporters. They point fingers instead of realizing the actual reason for these actions. My mother is a strong woman who taught me things about being a mother, especially if I ever had to do it alone. For a time, it was just her and my two other siblings. Being the youngest, I was never aware of the struggles around me. My mother was very good at making them seem okay even if the world was falling apart around us. She is a dark skin woman, and I came out looking like my father, white with light-colored hair.

Growing up, I struggled with those differences; my mother, sister, and brother are beautiful chocolate. But I stood out like a sore thumb. I couldn't help but think, "What happened to me?" why was I distant to be different when all I wanted was to be just like my mother? My lovely siblings, being who they are, would tease me and say that I was adopted. Cruel, I know, but what siblings aren't, and I felt that maybe their words had some truth in them. Every night, I prayed to wake up darker, and I was filled with disappointment each morning. My aunt Yvette said I would ask her why I wasn't brown like my mother. Her soft hands would hold me as she said, "God made you this way; Mama, it's okay to be white just like your dad, and you're not adopted." She and my mother got a kick out of this conversation, and they laugh today whenever this story is told.

But I couldn't help but think why God would do such a thing. Everyone here is the same color, so why wasn't I treated equally? I suppose it is because someone had to come out on my father's side of the family. My father is a white Hispanic with black hair, is 6 feet tall, has a silly sense of humor, and a kind heart. Yet his first two children came out similar to their mother's complexion. I figured I was an answered prayer from my father as he said, "I wanted at least one baby with

my beautiful skin tone and outcome me. God has a sense of humor, I believe, as we all come from the same background but are born in different shapes, colors, and sizes. I was born with my father's skin color, but I look just like my mother. The Lord knows what he is doing as he continues to show us that family is family no matter what we look like.

Fathers and Daughter

When I was young, my mother and biological father split up. I was too young to understand the meaning of it all, but I knew that my father wouldn't come home anymore, and I'd get to see him when I visited my grandmother's house. Strange how a simple change in the basic routine can affect someone's life. My siblings took things differently than I did because I was younger and didn't know what was happening. As time passed, they met other people. While my mother remarried, my father bounced to different women, finding pieces of my mother in each one but never truly like the real thing.

God does things for a reason we never truly understand until we are old enough to understand them. Being a four-year-old child, my mind wasn't on why but more so that my father wasn't at home anymore. The questions arose just as I began to ask the right questions to the people involved. My mother's account of the situation was simple: he wasn't responsible enough to handle three kids. While my father felt he wasn't given a proper chance to redeem himself. God creates these challenges so we can realize just how much we are truly capable of. The possibilities are endless, as we can overcome many things. My mother was strong enough to know she wanted more, not just for herself but for her children as well. But curiosity is an emotion created to build up our strengths and bring to life truths so ugly we have no choice but to face them.

The man that came into my mother life was the father I never knew I needed. He took on a role that wasn't his own but continued to do everything for me. He showed up when it mattered the most, listened, advocated for us and did everything a father should for his kids. In my mind I couldn't believe this random person would do this but he did and for that I am forever grateful. If I am being honest I prayed for it for someone to stand next to my mother so she wasn't alone and

for us to be a family. God knows exactly what we need before we realize we need it ourselves. He is my father who blessed us with another sibling so instead of three of us we became four. He taught me what it means to hustle, to be unapologetically myself and music so much music. I maintain the relationship with my biological father because at the end of the day he is my dad but so is Pablo Rivera and I will continued to be grateful that I was blessed with two dads.

I was able to question my father as I felt the need to know why he couldn't be the father I knew he could be if he tried harder. It was an ugly but simple truth that all I could do was accept the circumstances for what they were. His answer was simple: he wasn't ready for three children's responsibilities. He wanted to party and hang out, which caused the ripple effect of losing his family. It was an answer I had to think God for because even though it was something I didn't want to hear. I was grateful for my father's honesty and thanked God for the opportunity to ask him that kind of question. God created a moment, and I took it.

Each moment can be taken as a new opportunity to grow and to learn not just about ourselves and what we are capable of but also what our faith can do for us. Faith is a force unlike anything we've ever seen. It is something that can't be seen but felt within our bones that someone or something is guiding us to make different choices. I knew from an early age that the events happening in my life were events beyond my control. But I felt their effects as if I was meant to learn from them and grow.

Chapter Two: Moves and Unexpected Turns

AGE 10

As I grew, my walk with faith continued. In small moments of my life, my parents would have us read a prayer every day before school. My sibling and I would take turns reading it. The blessing was a book called *New Devotional Spiritist, Collection of Selected Prayers*. The prayer was called *Prayer of the Shipwrecked*.

“Turn your eyes, oh! God of mine,
To this unhappy creature
Do not give me grave
Among the waves of the sea.
Give me strength and valor
To be saved from the abyss
Give me grace and peace
Because your bondage is so great
If I were such a fragile ship
By my soberb I have just failed
The humane sea I crossed
For only pleasure also perish.
Oh! Let me, Lord to, come back
To seek to set foot in the continent
I make a promise, and it will be fervent
To be a faithful Christian.”

This prayer was read every day before school. In the beginning, I didn't understand what it meant. But reading it every day finally started to make sense. The ship is me; if I ever become fragile in my faith because of my own devices, the lord will help me stay afloat. It's asking God to forgive me in my moment of weakness. I promise to be a more faithful Christian if God lends me a hand. The prayer combines many things: forgiveness, weakness, and reflection. My family made a massive change at age ten as we moved from New York to Miami, Florida. I left my friends and family behind for a better chance at life. My mother would always say how she dreams of all of us having our room and having a dog. So that dream came true.

New York to Florida

The change was interesting. Miami school systems versus New York are two different things. Children are just as ruthless as can be at this age because middle school is a whole world of changes, physically and emotionally. Church was almost every Sunday, and we got closer to my grandfather Tony from my mom's side. He brought to light a religion that has been around me since I was born, but I just never paid attention. It goes by many names and is described as a practice of saints formed from the time of slavery. It wasn't something I noticed as my parents aren't religious, and they've never forced anything onto me or my siblings, but we knew that we had someone to thank for our family being healthy and together. My mother had a tureen in the living room, white with yellow flowers and a gold beaded necklace wrapped around it. I knew to be careful not to knock it over and never touch it. That was the extent of my knowledge.

According to my mother, she has had her for many years, since she was three years old. Ocuñ is a lady of charity in the catholic religion, representing the Virgin Mary. When I interviewed my mother regarding this saint, she states

Question: What does she mean to you?"

Answer: she is a friend, a mother, and a sister because she filled spots in her life growing up.

Question: If you've had a long time with Ocuñ, what would your advice be if someone would receive this saint?

Answer: Always talk to her, be honest, and know that you have someone loyal in your corner.

Watching my mother speak to this saint showed me what it means to have faith. She talked to Ocun every night about her worries, doubts, and dreams. She believed her voice was heard and continued to have this blind faith that Ocun would have her back. My mother taught me that I am listened to when I pray and speak to God or a saint. Having that kind of faith is not easy, as people tend to be more of a physical answer instead of a silent answer.

My days continue to be filled with new understandings of what it means to have faith. Faith and religion are two separate things. Religion is an organization made up of millions of people around the world. Judaism, Catholicism, Christianity, and even Santeria are just names for a group of people worshipping Saints. But faith is a rollercoaster filled with twists and turns as it grows with us. It is a blind action because we believe in something we cannot see. Yet we feel deep within us that a higher power is watching over us, guiding us. Growing up and witnessing my mother speak to this tureen as if she was talking to her friend was inspiring because she believes that this being is listening and even providing comfort in her time of need.

My faith led me to believe that Miami would be an adventure. But also it would be difficult. I would have to make new friends, learn a new school system, and experience another side of the family I wasn't familiar with. It was an adventure as I learned more about myself coming to Miami than ever. I realized that I could adapt to my surroundings, make friends with many people, and even experience what it is like to wake up every day with a new kind of faith.

Sundays

On Sundays, when we did attend church, My stepfather would ask, “ So Josie, what did you learn?” I would try to summarize what the priest preached that day each time. Once, a priest spoke of relationships and how a partnership is essential. Because without it, the relationship will fall apart, just like your relationship with God. We must maintain an alliance. At this point in my life, my act of faith was praying before I went to bed, asking for another good day at school, and for my family to be happy and healthy. Was this enough to say that my partnership with God and my faith was solid? Probably the bare minimum, as I saw no point in being constant. Boys were on my mind just like any young teenage girl, but it wasn't something I found to be necessary.

Sundays were always the same church in the morning or afternoon, depending on when everyone woke up. In church, we sit in the middle of the section and sometimes listen, if I am honest. The priest would sound like the teacher from charlie brown, and on other days, his voice would reach my ears as if he were talking to me. It was strange, but I suppose in those moments, God had a message for me that day, so I better listen closely so that I could catch it. I can recall one Sunday, the priest was a different man. I could only understand he was a Haitian man with a thick accent. Amen, and let us pray. I felt my faith that day was to be in God's presence instead of the message he wanted to share.

Sometimes, we just need to sit in his house and feel the spirit cleanse us for the coming new week. We laughed when we got into the car; my father asked what we had learned today because we didn't know what the priest was talking about. But I remember telling my father, “ I learned that I love being with my family,” which was the correct answer.

Middle school Rules

Middle school was if I could choose a word for it, crazy, unfair, and even a little weird. Middle school is the most awkward phase of anyone's life. Body parts were growing different sizes, and hair and hormones were raging without knowing why. I was always scared and confused about being in a new school. Florida school systems divide their days between odd and even days or A and B days. We would have a set of classes one day and another set another. I was shocked, as in New York school systems, you have all your classes each day for one period or two. My middle school was small and easy to navigate with my street smarts. But my faith also guided me through my most challenging moments.

During those short years, I didn't have many friends, and for some reason, many people didn't like me. I wasn't mean and kept my friend group small, but every other day, my ears would be filled with people who wanted to fight me or simply didn't like me. The funny part was that 99.9% of the time, I never knew who these people were. Like many young girls during that time, I just wanted to be liked and have many friends. But that wasn't the case, and my first fight was in the hallway coming out of the gym. A girl pulled my hair, walking past me, so I responded. It wasn't my best action, but I felt it was the best outcome. My faith was tested during those days when I was suspended as my family forced me to reflect on my actions.

We were taught always to defend ourselves, especially if someone touched us. But the question arises if I could've handled the situation differently. I could've used my words instead of acting on my passion. I could've asked for guidance from God to seek an answer on how to react. Church that Sunday was filled with questions about whether my actions were fair or unfair. My mother was the one chosen to spread the word of my questions. She reminded me that it is okay to defend ourselves and that sometimes, we must try to talk things out before using force. I

understood that to take care of ourselves, we must protect ourselves. When we face those moments when evil energy tries to bring us down, we must learn how to fight for our body and spirit. It is the same thing when the threat is physical.

Teenage drama queen

AGE: 14

As a teenager, I felt I wasn't attractive. I would ask God to define beauty because I had no clue what beauty meant, so maybe God would provide me with answers. And he did overtime with people close to me as well as the opposite sex. He did this with hints of encouragement. As I grew, I realized beauty was in the eye of the beholder. Everyone viewed beauty differently, but the most essential thing was that God thinks I am beautiful and I should be, too. Why do I need the validation of the outside world when I already have what I am looking for? Plus, at the time, I was young. Similar to most young teenagers, it was a time of self-awareness and evolving into a woman. Boys, body parts growing, things getting hair in the strangest places. It was an emotional rollercoaster. So, finding God during those moments changed my life completely. I had to feel these emotions and go through them all by myself. But that's not true. God is always with us, guiding us.

Best friends

A young girl in high school probably needs to understand that even in our time of change, God is there for us. The changes we experience, first love, and new friendships form as our life is about to begin. In the beginning, I wanted to be a veterinarian because of my love of animals. Eventually, I was turned away from the idea and decided to become a teacher. I read this prayer at night when I felt lost about what I wanted to be when I grew up. It helped me feel the Lord even when my unsure nature shook my ship.

Even though some of us might not believe that there is a higher power, those people still have someone guiding and protecting them. I met my first non-believer in high school. She was a close friend who always spoke her mind. One day, a friend asked us to join her youth group at her church. They met every Saturday. Kiana is such a high-spirited person; she spoke of her church with such happiness and wanted to share that happiness with the rest of us. I agreed because, well, why not? It wouldn't do me any harm to experience another form of worship. Kiana spoke of being present and in the moment as if it was the easiest thing to do. Her positive energy is what brought me to her. We met as any two girls would in English class sophomore year over being from New York. She has shown me what it is to have faith in God when we need him the most and how singing his word is another way of praise.

A friend was very against us going. I remember her being upset and saying, "She's forcing her religion on us." I disagreed because it was just an invitation, not an act of Congress, and we had the right to say no. The conversation was weird. I never had someone be so upset by a simple invitation. This friend refused to attend and even went as far as to distance herself from us. I found her actions strange but not surprising as we always fear the things we don't understand.

Sing a Song

The following weekend, I went to the youth group with my friend, who is now my best friend and had a wonderful time. The songs and messages were so uplifting. Each message spoke to me deeply. It was the first time I felt close to God. The music that touched me is called End of Days by Hillsong Y&F. It goes like this.

“You came to earth that you created
You walked beneath the stars you named
You came from heaven holding freedom
Jesus Christ, the Lord our God
I’m going to sing until my voice won’t let me
As thunders roar, I’ll shout your praise.”

This song was everything to me. Or it could be the way the band sang the song. It gave me goosebumps. When it says, “I’m going to sing until my voice won’t let me,” it means that I’m going to keep speaking until my voice is gone completely. Spread God's word, love, and joy until I can no longer say. When I hear this song today, it still gives me all the same emotions as when I first heard it, and I feel uplifted and refreshed for a moment.

My high school days were filled with weekends at my best friend's church. As I grew closer to the teenagers attending, the blinders I had on suddenly came off. While the messages were helpful, many weren't even following the Word. They were still having sex, drinking, and messing around. It seemed like a hangout spot instead of a place of worship. I understood everyone has a different way of showing their faith, but this didn't seem right. So, after high school, I just stopped attending.

My best friend went once in a while, but she eventually stopped. Over time, churches change, and the spiritual and emotional connection loses its luster. It was a letdown. I enjoyed my time and learned so much about myself spiritually. I am a sensitive soul. My emotions are high, especially if someone is having an emotional moment. Even if the moment has nothing to do with me, I feel it. I will start to cry just because the other person is crying. It happens all the time. God gave me this gift so that I could connect with others on a deeper level. Ever since then, I have continued to learn and adapt my gift to work in my favor. At the same time, it is a beautiful gift. I needed to be able to control it so I am not crying with strangers.

Chapter 3: Adulthood

New Beginnings

AGE 17

Time passed, and I got accepted into a community college. My times with faith were spaced out. I prayed to God for patience as I started teaching preschool students. Teaching is a rewarding career, but it isn't in some other way. I genuinely believe God specially made teachers to teach the younger generation. I met many kids during my time at a private school.—kids who needed to have a special connection with someone other than their absent parents. A child is so innocent. They are not corrupted by their parent's influence or society's influence. All they think about is candy, cartoons, and more candy. So sometimes, we are the first line of defense. We teach children how to act in society, learn new things, and make friends. I distinctly remember one child who would cry every time he came into the classroom.

At first, I tried to give him a moment to relax and calm himself. But he wouldn't stop. This would go on for weeks. The director would ask us what we were doing to help him. I explained how our day worked and what I had done to help him. That conversation did nothing to help me. She made me feel inadequate as a teacher because, in her words, “I wasn't doing enough.” That night, I came home crying to my boyfriend about my day and how lost I felt. He grabbed my hands and said, “You are a wonderful teacher. Take a deep breath, relax, and I am sure the idea will come to me on how to help him will come to you.” So, I asked God for guidance. I asked Him to send me a sign showing me how to connect with this poor child crying out for help.

The next couple of weeks were rough. I tried talking with him and his parents to determine if he had similar outbursts at home. One day, I grabbed him in my arms and hugged him. I held him for five minutes straight. He kept me tight like he would fall apart if I let him go. He stopped

crying after that. Every day I would continue to do the same thing every morning. When I spoke to the parents about his changed behavior and our little routine in the morning, we would hug and talk about Mickey Mouse and Jack Skeleton. His mother stated, “We try not to hug them so much, so they have more independence and learn to self-soothe.” Right at that moment, I knew this was God answering my prayer. The child only wanted to be held for a moment, and I was able to give him that. I cried when I got home because I knew that I made that boy's day.

Halloween fair

I have never been one to force religion on someone because everyone views the world differently. It should be an unspoken rule that religion should not be moved, and anyone can join. Maybe it is already, but I have encountered a few people who need to see it that way. God is the ultimate power, but some believe he is the only one. I remember we were going to a town fair for Halloween. Halloween is known for its celebration of dark creatures of the night. Some people all over the world celebrate it, while others don't. A group of friends and I were walking into the fair, excited about the food, rides, and haunted house we would experience at the night's end. But a couple of people out front asking people not to enter, shouting, "This is the devil at work!" People were walking past them fast while others talked to them about religion. We didn't pay them any attention, but as we approached the entrance, two stopped to ask if we had heard from God today. We replied with a shrug and continued to walk into the park.

They followed us continuously, telling us that God didn't want us to go inside and that the young were impressionable. A guy friend stopped and turned to say, "Look, we understand what you're saying, but you cannot just force your words on us, thinking we are going to listen." We stared at the people waiting for a response. The young woman looked upset and said, "We are just trying to help you! God is speaking to us, warning us that this place worships the devil's work, and you wanna go inside!" We looked at each other, uncomfortable with the situation because it seemed weird. While God may speak to us in various forms, this didn't feel like a spiritual moment but more like harassment. It made me uncomfortable, and my friend seemed upset as she shouted, "And that's fine! Thank you, but we can make our own decision, and if it's the wrong one, we can personally take it up with God!"

After that, he kindly pushed us to keep walking into the park. They didn't follow us, and we had a good time. We laughed and walked through the haunted house. Around midnight, as we were leaving, those people were still praying over people coming out. We minded our business as they rushed towards us as we got in the car. They asked if we could pray together and repent of our sins. We respectfully declined, but they insisted that it would be essential for us to get a good night's sleep. But we continued to get in the car and leave.

That was the first time I ever felt uncomfortable in a spiritual way. I am sure those people meant well and only wanted to help everyone feel closer to God. But I don't think that's the way to do it. Even though they have the freedom to practice their religion, it shouldn't be forced upon random people. That seems to be a common practice regarding who and how we worship. It is a continuous fight against who has the better religion, and I think it's just wrong to push others into a faith they might not even understand.

Honestly, I never understood why reading The Bible was such an essential aspect of a person's life. They say reading The Bible gives us insight into what God had to experience for us to be free. I've read bits and pieces of it for school and out of curiosity. The many different stories in The Bible gave me another lesson to learn. My favorite story would have to be Judges 4:1- 24. This story is about Deborah, who was known to be a wife, judge, and prophetess and, most importantly, had similar characteristics to Mary, Elizabeth, Naomi, and many others. She was a mighty woman of faith. She would hear from God and carry out his instruction. The story states, "The Lord, God of Israel, commands you: 'Go, take ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin's army, with his chariots and troops to the Kishon River and give him to your hands.'" This story interested me from the beginning because Deborah randomly came in and received a message to

guide the Israelites and change the war. It interested me because she received a message to help people she had never met. This was what I realized to be blind faith.

Feel the faith within

Blind faith seems to be what I have. I have blind faith in a higher power that will guide me in the right direction; if I stray from the path, it will help me get back on track. I had many questions while reading this story, for example. Why was Deborah chosen to do these tasks? Once the task is completed, what happens? Was the outcome of doing this task so Jael could die at Heber's wife's hand? This confused me. Why would God request the men if, in the end, someone was going to be murdered in cold blood? I understand every action causes a reaction. So, I suppose this story was meant to share that even in difficult times, such as leading a man to death, we must continue to have faith even if the outcome isn't what we thought it would be.

In my life, I have had many different interactions with God and my faith. But I realized as I got older there was another religion around my family that I didn't know. My family believes in God; we go to church, pray, and practice Santeria. In some people, it causes fear because they think it is some kind of witchcraft. But it is far from it; it is an Afro-Caribbean religion with traditions and beliefs that include some Roman Catholic elements. For example, we have our masses, which can be held at any home. We sit together and pray for protection, guidance, and clarity. As we do so, we receive messages from spiritual entities.

It can be very enlightening but also scary how spot-on they can be about someone they've never met. But they can tell you what you've been thinking about, who has entered or exited your life. Or how the course in which you travel can be the wrong one. I don't know how long it's been in my family, but it probably goes back generations. When I first learned about this religion as I grew older, my Mother had a beautiful vase in the living room. We never touched it, but we always knew it was there. My mother would tell me she was there to protect us. I never really thought much of it until I moved closer to my grandfather.

I interviewed many people about their experiences with this religion and realized everyone has a different view. My grandfather would say they are the ones who look after us and guide us as a parent would to their child. My mother has experienced this religion all her life as her father, and those before have practiced for longer than I've existed on this earth. Being with her meant those who stood by her side would understand what resided in her home. My biological father understood but never went beyond simple understanding. My stepfather went beyond the formal understanding and learned to respect, accept, and even help guide others into their path. He has taught me what it means to grow in our faith instead of letting it dwell in its humble beginnings.

When I asked him how he felt at the beginning of his journey, he stated, “ **It was very enlightening and seemed natural. Something I had a feeling for that I didn't realize was there.**” So I asked if you could experience that again, would you? ‘ he states, “ **I wouldn't change anything. It all came naturally to me this feeling, and when I saw something, I would question it instead of shy away.**” So I asked if someone was coming into this faith, what would your advice be. “ **be patient this isn't a sprint but a marathon. You will see and hear things that will make you yearn for more. But be patient and listen to that little voice who is there to help you.**”

How he embraced this religion as if he were receiving a hug from a friend was inspiring. He knew nothing of what he was getting himself into but trusted in his faith to stir him in the right direction. Today, I see him assist others on their path with the guidance he received and continues to receive. He taught me what it means to accept change and that our fears of what could be are created by our doubts. I have enjoyed watching him grow as a person spiritually and mentally. He continues learning, which tells me I will never stop learning. I will never stop

growing. And one day, I will use that knowledge to help others learn about their capacity for faith.

Through it all, I realized many things about myself and the meaning of faith. Faith means doing what you are capable of, even if that means doing the bare minimum. Faith means growth within ourselves to be the best person we can be, and if we ever feel as though it is not enough, remember these words. Life is a set of trials and errors, and whatever path we decide to take, know that God and those who are long gone look out for you. They surround us. All we have to do is open ourselves to their love and protection. I have experienced life as many have, through pain, hardships, laughter, and passion. My faith continues to grow and develop into something I can carry to my children and their children when I am long gone.

The end of a new beginning

I learned how to cleanse my spiritual body and my home and space. I realized I would always have someone to protect and guide me until my last breath. I have always believed in God, and I think there is an extension to his work. The central belief of Santeria is that every individual has a destiny from God, a destiny fulfilled with the aid and energy of the orishas. An orisha is a spiritual entity usually referred to as deities. We guide people and inspire them to listen to God's voice talking to us with a message. History has altered the description of this religion because of its traditions. Similar to every religion, some people use it for harmful activities. Therefore, people continued to view it that way. And to me, that's unfair; just because they don't understand what it means doesn't mean it has to be negative. People fear the things they can't understand, so instead of trying to understand what it means, they would rather be scared and spread hatred.

My journey with faith has had its ups and downs. I've never been overly religious, and neither has my family. We believe in God and say our prayers at night before bed. I have attended churches and youth groups, and I can say that my faith remained intact. I've always believed in God, what he could do for me, and what he has done for me. I am blessed to have such a powerful spiritual force behind me, guiding me and protecting me.

I've had many people come into my life and question how this religion worked, and I would try to give them a basic understanding. But most of the time, I would tell them to speak to my parents if they had questions. Sometimes, they did; other times, they did not. I couldn't blame them, but I would somehow end up helping them with advice or a friendship. The best advice I ever gave someone was to a friend who wasn't on the right track. She seemed lost, unsure of herself all the time. We talked about what we wanted in life and the person we wanted to be when we grew up. I remember saying, "I don't think that's for me. A life doing that. Maybe I am

not meant for love.” I didn’t understand what she meant by that. In my mind, I thought everyone was meant for love because it comes in all kinds of shapes and forms.

At that moment, I felt a voice come out to me. I remember crying and telling her, “ That is not true, and it is sad that you think of yourself way. You are an important person with a destiny.—a destiny God is preparing you for. Of course, we don’t know what that is, but you are worth love just like everyone else”. I remember crying with her, and at that moment, I knew my voice and energy helped people feel better. Sometimes, I carry their burdens with me because my thoughts will stay with that person until I know they have overcome their hurdle.

God has given us a gift, whether to speak to people, become friends, or give a warm embrace so they know what it feels like. We can do so many things in the name of the Lord. We just have to get in touch with our spiritual nature before we can be the person God intended us to be. My journey with faith is far from over. I still have so much to learn about myself and whether my gift will grow or if it will maintain this level of connection. Not too long ago, my grandmother passed, and it was the most challenging moment of my life. My chest was tight, and tears just wouldn’t stop falling. I remember one thing the pastor said during her wake: “She has arrived at the place she spoke of often, where God reigns. She was reunited with her true love, and she is happy”. Those words gave me peace and a knowing that she would be okay. In the end, we would all be okay. My journey has had its ups and downs. But in the end, I found myself and what I can achieve as long as I have the Lord, the deities that continue to protect and guide me. I will continue to grow and shine above the rest.