

This book takes an unorthodox approach in reflecting on the Christian life. It is a memoir of sorts. Through personal narrative, the author, a pastor and bartender, challenges readers (and himself) to think more carefully about common assumptions found in modern Christianity.

Why the Church Needs More Bartenders

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Why the Church Needs More Bartenders

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ISBN 978-1-60145-812-4

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Printed in the United States of America.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2009

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seminary parties

Our on-campus fraternity house in college consisted of an entire floor of one of the school dorms. While all the other fraternities and sororities had the privacy of on-campus houses, we had a more intimate relationship with the school- especially campus police. We were on probation for my entire college career. But man, never was being on probation so much fun. And campus security was a constant source of entertainment.

One day my friend Eric found a dead groundhog on the side of the road. It was a slow Sunday afternoon and most of the guys on the floor were recovering from the night before. However, when Eric brought the groundhog back to the dorm it did not take long to figure out a good way to put it to use. We knew campus police were always eager to take a call that involved our fraternity. So we put the groundhog on its back in the middle of the hall and set an empty beer can next to it. Billy (a friend of mine) immediately called campus police to report that there was someone apparently passed out in the hallway of our dorm. Sure enough, campus police were there in an instant. We all stayed in our rooms while they investigated the scene. Billy greeted the officers asking

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them if they thought “he” was dead or just passed out. The officers said they were not amused. Billy said he was not amused either. He was concerned for his safety as it was obvious that the individual was not a Hope College student and therefore had somehow broken into the dorm. Then he suggested that campus security ought to take their jobs more seriously.

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A few years back I was interviewing for an interim position at a church outside Chicago. I was on my third interview and everything seemed to be going very well. This third and final meeting was the big one in where I met with the senior pastor and a few other big wigs in the church. As far as interviews go, I was money. It turned out that the senior pastor was a Hope College alumnus and very proud of the fact. For half the interview I did not even have to answer questions because we were too busy dropping names and trading inside jokes. That was until the associate pastor mentioned that I was the chaplain of my fraternity. He thought it was cool. However, the senior pastor asked, “What fraternity?” I was screwed.

You see, my fraternity had a certain reputation. Or, as the senior pastor put it, “The Cosmos hey? Was there anything to be a chaplain of?” Truthfully, I wanted to tell him that I would much rather be hanging out with them right now that sitting in a circle with all these church folks, but I really needed that job. I would not trade my time and friendships in the fraternity for anything. However, I tell this story because not everyone outside the fraternity views it as I do. For most Hope College church types, being a Cosmo and a Christian is simply

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an oxymoron. I am not sure what they would define being a Christian as, but being a Cosmo meant hippies, parties, booze and dead groundhogs.

That is what made my first year at seminary so interesting. After a year of driving across the country in a van and living in Australia, I made my way back to Holland, MI to Western Theological Seminary- a small, quiet, conservative school across the street from Hope. When you picture Western you must think of brick buildings and really quiet libraries. All the professors wear suits and the most popular one is famous for his bowtie. Think suburbia in the 1950's where everyone on the block is studying to be a pastor. It was certainly no place for a Cosmo... much less, three of them. That fall, Billy, Paul, and I did our back to school shopping and made our way to WTS new student orientation. To the astonishment of many, three frat guys were going to theology school. This was our "seminary experiment".

On the way over, we decided to walk across the street to visit the Dean of Hope College. Over the years we had developed a very close relationship with Dean, as we called him. Most of the relationship centered around things like destroying Hope property, parties, breaking into the cafeteria, groundhogs, and not being allowed to use tarps and Crisco as slip n' slides for the dorm hallway. Paul and Billy both served as the president of our fraternity for periods of time, so they got to know the Dean especially well. Dean liked me because I helped bail a friend out of jail, saving him the trip. Being so close, we thought he would be happy to take our first day of school picture out in front of seminary. I am sure he thought the admission office at Western must have made a mistake- three mistakes, actually.

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It was during orientation that we met Shots. Of course Shots was not his real name or the name he introduced himself as at seminary. He picked it up partly due to his last name and partly due to his college activities. Shots was from the East Coast and more than unsure if going to seminary (by himself) was the right decision. To make a long story short, he fit right in with the three of us.

It is hard to describe what those first few months of seminary were like. The four of us began our “seminary experiment” because we were all on an authentic search for God. But it was obvious that we were far from the typical Western student. We laughed more than most people liked. Don’t get me wrong, the professor with the bowtie loved us. There were just some people who did not know how to react to us. It was like we did not spend enough time in the library or something. I guess you could say that we just saw things differently than some of our classmates. For example, during one of our three hour classes, Billy put the movie “Elf” on his laptop with subtitles. I was almost bleeding from biting my lip so hard to keep from laughing. It was one of the best lectures I ever attended. And we made a few friends that day, seemingly brightening their otherwise boring day. However, one of our classmates decided to share the story with the President of the seminary. People’s reactions to us were just mixed.

And our reactions were mixed as well. In one way, the four of us all felt that God was real and wanted to do something with our lives in response to that reality. And so we tried to learn and become part of this seminary community thing. We were trying to figure out what it meant to do church- more importantly, to lead the church into what it was supposed to be. But in another

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way, we were skeptical. I could not wear a hat in Greek class, Billy got funny looks for reading Harry Potter, and all of us would not dare share with others things we were actually thinking. Quite frankly, I do not think anybody would have found a passed out groundhog all that funny.

This was our first semester of seminary. We did our best to fly under the radar. But even on our best behavior, we were still having a bit too much fun. We tried our best to fit in, but it seemed that fitting in was incompatible with having a good time. When we wanted to play Frisbee golf, everyone else had to study Greek.

As difficult as first semester was, by December we were beginning to make quite a few friends. So after being gone for a month, it seemed like the perfect time to throw a party- or so we thought. We reckoned that as Christians, we ought to value community. More than that, we wanted to have deeper community with our classmates. Hospitality was the one thing we all seemed to be pretty decent at, so that January we planned a "Back to School" get together. Underneath all the serious faces, we saw a bunch of people who were actually real cool- and could afford to have some fun outside the library walls. So, instead of homework and in-class movies, we began party planning. For the first time this year, we were in our element. Shots gladly offered to host the event, and as word began to spread, it looked like it was going to be a full house.

Paul and I got to Shots' early to help with some last minute party set up. When we got there, it became obvious that Billy and Shots went all out in their party prep. The grill was going and the refrigerator was well stocked to say the least.

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The party was a riot. We were surprised at how many people showed. Almost our entire class came along with some second and third year students. Music was playing, Shots had steaks on the grill, and the house was filled with laughter and conversation. I was on the deck with a group of classmates (I mean, friends) having a deep conversation about what it means to be the church. We were confessing our frustrations, hopes, and aspirations to each other. Oh yeah, I had a beer in my hand. It was beautiful. Everywhere I looked, people were smiling. The party was a huge success and I am pretty sure that almost everyone stayed up past their bedtimes.

The next day Paul and I went over to help Billy and Shots clean up. We spent most of the morning laughing as we shared stories about the night. Most of the stories consisted of our astonishment about who showed up, or sang along to Neil Diamond, or had a beer. In the midst of the laughter, we commented about how we got to know people so much more hanging out with them outside of seminary. It truly was a party- a celebration.

Monday at school it seemed like everyone had smiles on their faces. Conversation came easier and was more enjoyable. It seemed like everyone had a story to share or comment how they had a good time. For the first time, I think we all felt somewhat connected. I am not sure if we were all friends yet, but we were closer.

That is what made Tuesday so difficult. That morning, Shots grabbed Paul, Billy, and me with a real bummed look on his face. He said that he got a letter from the President of the Seminary requesting to meet with him. In the letter, the President said that he was concerned because he was told by an “anonymous” source that over

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the weekend there was a party with “frat-like activities”. At that moment, all laughter and joy were gone. Our new found connection with our classmates was again replaced with skepticism and mistrust. Basically, we were hurt. (And we had to admit that the Jell-O shots were a bad idea).

That spring, three of us transferred to different seminaries. Billy stuck it out, but we wonder how much of that had to do with the fact that he ended up meeting and marrying a girl from Western. We did not quit because of the party. We did not quit because of the students or the professors. For the most part, they were all good people. I reckon we left because we were still on a search for God and for faith. Truthfully, there was a lot we were still looking for. But one of them was a God who threw a heck of a party.

Jesus tells a parable about a God who one day is going to throw one heck of a banquet. And he is going to be the Lord of the party. This is how the Bible describes heaven. And heaven, after all, is a celebration. I understand that parties can all too often mean drunkenness, drugs, sexual promiscuity, and so on. There is no doubt that because of the pain in life that people party, or drink, or whatever to escape life. But Jesus tells us about a different sort of party. It is a celebration. It is a party where people come together to remember the goodness of God, not forget the pain of life. It is a party of laughter, joy, and love- of friendship with God and each other. And it is going to be one heck of a bash.

There is this twisted idea that being a Christian is about not partying. And this perception is held by both Christians and non-Christians. But nothing could be

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further from the truth. How ironic is it that the people who have the most reason to celebrate and enjoy life (the church), are the ones who are known to avoid the festivities? Why is the church not known for throwing more parties? After all, that is what heaven is.

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jumping off cliffs

Hindsight, they say, is 20/20.

When I was in Australia, the pastor we were working with took my buddy and me on a trip 18 hours up the coast. The purpose of the trip was to connect with an aboriginal village where the pastor used to teach. Besides 36 hours in 100 plus degree heat in a car without air conditioning, the trip was a riot. Well, besides that and this other thing...

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Part way through the week, the pastor (Cam), had us take the afternoon off from working at the school so we could go to a swimming hole. Dying of heat exhaustion, my buddy and I were not going to argue. Little did we know that this swimming hole was almost 2 hours away, mostly down gravel roads littered with potholes. There was a community swimming pool just down the road. The allure of this swimming hole though was being able to jump off this one cliff. When we finally got there we hiked a ways until we finally got to this little stream that tricked into a pool of water. After we jumped in to cool

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off, Cam showed us that as the stream continued there were more and more pools- each one larger and deeper. We continued hiking and swimming, having a blast, until we came to the main attraction.

Australians are crazy. Cam is a pastor- a very conservative pastor at that. But as we came to the final cliff, his face lit up with excitement. The final descending pool was a trickle of a waterfall dropping 60 feet into Python's pool. And Cam could not wait to jump. If you are not good with distances, 60 feet translates to much higher than a person should ever jump from unless committing suicide. The trickiest part of this suicide mission, however, was rock climbing down to a ledge that was safe enough to jump from. And if you did not climb down carefully, you would fall a mere 40 feet onto rocks. Oh yeah, and in order to climb to the ledge you had to go across the mini-waterfall.

Of course, there is no way I am stupid enough to risk my life to do something I do not really want to do anyway. But then Cam climbed across the waterfall, with much effort and skill, and jumped off. Then my buddy Paul did the same. And there I was, alone, scared out of my mind, staring 60 feet down at Cam and Paul who were smiling, laughing, and looking up at me. Here is the deal. When your mom asks you if all your friends jump off a cliff, would you? The answer is yes. You are going to do it- it is just that more times than not you are going to regret it.

Cam is a 6'3" crazy Australian and Paul is a 6'2" avid rock climber. I am 5' 10' on a good day and did rock climbing once in gym class. I say all this because the closest I have ever come to dying was when I was trying

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to climb down to that ledge. With much effort and skill, Cam and Paul made it down with the help of their long arms and legs. I prayed and God spared my life. Of course, I did make it down to the ledge. And when I got there, I finally realized that there was no way I was going to jump off. The crappy part of the situation was that climbing back up the cliff was impossible. I was stuck- I had to jump.

The other way to describe 60 feet is that when you jump, you get butterflies in your stomach. This is the thrill of cliff jumping. Now when you jump from 60 feet, you still get the butterflies, but eventually they go away. And after they go away, you are still falling.

When I finally hit the water, I landed funny. The speed of the fall and angle of my body made me do a reverse sit-up of sorts. It happened so fast, but it felt as if my calves touched my shoulder blades. I truly felt like I just broke my back in half. Luckily, I did not, and am not paralyzed or dead. But over five years later, I still have back pain. I tell this story, because we all have regrets. And hindsight is 20/20. Looking back, there is no way I would have jumped off that cliff- I regret it.

Most of us can relate to this story- or to its regret. There are things that we have done that we regret. And many of us still live with the pain of decisions we made long ago. Maybe this is why our moms try to teach us not to jump off cliffs if our friends do. Maybe they jumped and felt the pain. And they want to spare us that hurt.

I believe that this kind of regret is legitimate and real. And I believe that this sort of regret is what drives most of our churches, what we teach, and how we live. For

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Christians, it is more than regret though. We call a lot of this sort of thing sin. Decisions we make, that maybe we should not make, that lead to hurt and pain. And so we focus on issues of partying, or divorce, or abortion. Maybe we have jumped off cliffs of drinking, or pornography, or whatever. And when we landed it hurt. And we regretted it deeply. *So we teach those around us and after us not to do what we have done or what those around us are doing.*

But I wonder, at the end of my life, if jumping off that cliff is going to be my greatest regret.

When I was a senior in high school, I had a physics class that was very boring. A lot of time in class was spent in labs and hanging out with a few friends that had the class with me. I was a quiet kid, but pretty involved in sports. It landed me in what you might want to call the “in-crowd”. Though I did not really care about the social life of high school that much, it was nice not having to deal with the struggles of fitting in, self-esteem, and surviving high school. I was smart enough to realize that not everyone was so fortunate.

In my class were two kids- Josh and Brandon. Josh was in the “in-crowd”, but not really a friend of mine. And I did not really know Brandon at all. During our labs and time together, Brandon struggled to fit in with others in the class. Soon enough, it became apparent that Josh had no desire for Brandon to fit in with anyone. And over the course of the year, Josh began picking on Brandon. Brandon tried to defend himself, but struggled against the quick-wit of Josh and band of laughing support. Josh had plenty of friends, and in my opinion, had no

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need to pick on anyone- especially a kid who was just trying to fit in. Frankly, he really began to piss me off.

One day, Josh and Brandon got into a war of words. Again, Josh was doing his best to humiliate Brandon, and Brandon was struggling to defend himself. And then, in the middle of the one-liners, Josh stopped and said something that I will never forget. He looked Brandon dead in the eye and said,

“Brandon, shut up. Don’t you get it? Nobody likes you.”

I sat there and my heart sank for Brandon. I felt anger towards Josh. And I did absolutely nothing.

I regret jumping off that cliff. But not nearly as much as I regret not standing up for and befriending Brandon.

They say that hindsight is 20/20. There is no doubt that as I look back I am going to have regrets. But I wonder what kind of regrets are going to hurt the most. I know that I have done things and jumped off cliffs that I wish I had not. But if I am honest, it is the things that I have not done that I regret the most.

As a Christian, I believe that one day I am going to stand before God and look back at my life. And I am going to have deep regrets for the way in which I lived my life and decisions I made. I have heard many pastors preach on this- and I believe it is true. But almost always they say this so that we will **not** do certain things. But I wonder, as I stand in front of God, if it will be the things that I did that I regret the most. I don’t think so. For these things, there seems to be grace, forgiveness, and redemption.

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Maybe as Christians, we miss the point. Maybe we spend too much energy trying to focus on all the things we should not do- all the cliffs we should not jump off. But what about all the things that we are called to do? I think what I am going to regret most is not standing up for Brandon. I am going to regret not loving people that were lonely, or feeding starving people. I think when I stand before God and look back on my life, what I am going to regret the most is all the things God called me to do, and I left undone.

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