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Jacina's Worldview 2.0: Revisiting, Refinding, and Refining Faith in the University Years

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J. N. Andrews Honors Program
Andrews University

HONS 497
Honors Thesis

Jacina's Worldview 2.0:
Revisiting, Refinding, and Refining Faith in the University Years

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31 March 2014

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Abstract

In this non-fiction, 46-page, creative extended essay, I revisit my worldview essay from HONS105-106 Western Heritage, specifically focusing on my belief in a loving God. I trace my path to this belief, beginning with my freshmen year of college when I first started to question its legitimacy. Though teetering on the edge of agnosticism, I eventually learned how a belief in a loving God need not be a blind one. I came to understand what it means to have a relationship with God. This project reconstructs the reasoning that verified to me that a faith in God does not have to be ignorant and recounts some of the experiences that led me to have faith in a loving God. What follows is the story of my journey thus far to finding God's love.

Preface

Freshmen year, Fall of 2010, I was enrolled in the year-long class Western Heritage, HONS105-106, as partial fulfillment for the honors program at Andrews University. Professors Jeronic and Markovic informed us on the first day of class what our final essay for the class would be: our worldview essay. We were to take all we had read in the class and amalgamate it with our own experiences to answer to the eight questions that James W. Sire states make up a worldview in the fifth edition of *The Universe Next Door*:

1. What is prime reality—the really real?
2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to a person at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of human history?
8. What personal, life-orienting core commitments are consistent with this worldview?

These questions were designed to help us understand the assumptions and beliefs we hold that make up and direct our daily lives.

A worldview, in summary, according to Sire is

a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true, or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or unconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality and that provides the foundation of which we live and move and have our being. (20)

In this first essay, I was required to explain my beliefs in God. What I didn't expect, however, was that the assignment would open the Pandora's Box of my beliefs, bringing forth a multitude of doubts and questions about God. But, like in the myth, at the bottom of my box was hope: the hope that I might be able to answer these questions. I tried to answer them in my first worldview essay, but my answers failed to bring me back to a relationship with God. I spent the next two years or so suppressing these doubts that remained, but they began to surface again around the end of my junior year and beginning of my senior year. As I thought about what to choose for an honors thesis project, I kept coming back to this essay, which is still one of the most meaningful essays I have written while at Andrews. I was tired of running from my questions, and I thought, "What better way to make sure I know my beliefs now than to be under a time pressure to explain them?" Thus, the idea for Jacina's Worldview 2.0 was born.

I have often thought Sire's definition limiting, but when I met with Professor Markovic a couple of weeks ago, he helped me better understand how these worldview questions can be all encompassing if you break up each of the eight questions into more questions. For instance, the question of "Why is it possible to know anything at all?" can be broken down into more questions including, but not limited to: What is conscience? Where does conscience come from? Where does intelligence come from? Where is the repository of truth? Where is the repository of spiritual authority? and Is science the only source of knowledge? The more questions a person asks under each of these headings, the more it becomes apparent that everyone has a worldview unique to them. While each of us have a worldview that may be similar to another's, I think it would be impossible to find two people who would answer every question and sub-question regarding their individual worldviews in the same way.

That being said, the essay that lies ahead does not seek to explain every aspect of my

worldview, which I think would actually be impossible if every question was to be considered. Rather, it aims to show how my classes and experiences while at Andrews have formed key components, or specific ideologies, of my worldview. This thesis takes readers on a journey from my freshmen year where I first came to doubt my life-long belief in the existence of a loving God until now where I can honestly and happily say for the first time in my life that I believe in a loving God. This story maps not only the experiences that affected my beliefs but also lays out some of the logic that has helped me answer some of my questions. There is also some inclusion of how this belief affects my daily life and has changed me personally.

While my main purpose for writing Jacina's Worldview 2.0 was for solely personal gain in that I wished to definitively know what I believed, I see now the potential value in others hearing it, as well. I expect that few will ever read this. My thesis advisor will, of course, as well as my family, perhaps my best friend, a few of the people who have asked me to send it, and possibly future English honors students when they have to read or scan through past honors theses for HONS398. But, even for the few who do read this, I offer it for a variety of purposes, not knowing which, if any, will apply.

I first offer this to readers like me who have previously or are currently struggling with God to remind them they are not alone in their struggles. I have discovered over the past few months the joy and solace that can be found in conversing with others about struggles with religious beliefs. More often than not, I have seen these struggles silenced rather than talked about. From my experience and the experiences of those I have talked to over the past year, this silencing has the tendency to make those struggling feel alone in their questioning and as if they have to either confront their doubts by themselves, while hiding them from others, or ignoring the nagging questions altogether. When I began this project, I had this mindset that I was alone.

But as I delved further into my project, it became more a part of my life, and became a more common topic in my conversations. And something surprising to me happened. Instead of people telling me my questioning was futile or shying away from the conversation, most welcomed the conversation with open arms and ears, seeming as excited as I was to find someone else who struggled—we were not alone, and that made the struggles all that much more bearable.

I second offer this to readers who have never struggled with God. Because so many of us have, I think it is important to on some level be able to empathize with us who have, so that those struggling can hear a better response than, “You just have to believe,” or “There’s no point in questioning God. He’s beyond our understanding.” Because, while in the end, a belief in God is a belief and none of us will ever be able to fully understand God, there is more to believing in God than just belief and we can always learn more about God even if we will never succeed in it fully. Furthermore, I would argue it’s impossible to love someone you do not know, and impossible to know someone that you do not understand to at least some capacity. And, if God wants us to love Him, then surely He desires us to always understand Him. And for many of us, there is no understanding without struggling. I would have benefitted if those who had not understood this from personal experience were more like my mom, who knew about it enough to realize she could help me through these struggles instead of seeking to shut them down.

Third, I offer my Worldview 2.0 essay as a record of my thinking as I forced myself to face the difficult questions that in all honesty I tried to have the strength to avoid. For in hearing my present ideas for how I have answered these questions, perhaps others can formulate their own answers and overcome some of their doubts.

Finally, I offer this essay to the honors faculty as a record of how one honors student journeyed through faith during her time at Andrews University. It was in the first assignment that

I began doubting God and in this second assignment that I found my way to believing in a loving God, and I can't help but wonder if future honors students might also benefit from this end-game analysis as they graduate. Furthermore, an understanding of the process of students' way to or from faith could help faculty, both honors and others, see where they might best help students in their spiritual journeys. And having bookend personal worldview essays from students could aid in providing that information.

Worldviews are always changing. This is a record of how mine changed in the past four years and where it is at the present moment. My worldview will continue to grow and change after writing this, so do not take this as a final result, for I do not; rather, it should be seen as one stage of what will be a life-long expedition, though not necessarily in written form, that I am now quite joyfully undertaking.

Jacina's Worldview 2.0: Revisiting, Re-finding, and Refining Faith in the University Years

"The credibility of faith is in its freedom to let itself be judged and to grow."

Rowan Williams

Growing up as a Seventh-day Adventist has its advantages and its disadvantages. The obvious advantage is that I have learned about God from the day I was born. The disadvantage is that this truth, because I have always known it, became commonplace and thus expected. Giants? Normal. Donkeys that talk? Is that supposed to be surprising? Someone who died on a cross and was resurrected three days later, dying for our sins so that we may live? Well, obviously. But these things aren't normal. By forgetting the otherliness of these things, I grew up labeling God as ordinary. It's easy to believe in ordinary. There wasn't any need to question Him or figure out how I knew He was there, because I grew up in an environment where believing in God was the norm. Even during my early years attending a non-denominational private elementary school, I only remember meeting people who believed in God. It is simple to believe when no one questions you further than asking, "What do you believe?" So, it was easy for me to say I believed in God for the first eighteen years of my life.

Then came the day during my freshmen year of college when I was assigned the first worldview essay, which asked me not "What do you believe?" as I had been used to hearing, but rather, "Why do you believe what you believe?" I initially thought the question would be simple to answer. But, almost immediately, I was stumped. I couldn't explain God. As I began to think more about the assignment, writing many failed drafts, I shortly found myself obliged to inwardly accept that the stories I had grown up hearing about God weren't ordinary and weren't explainable by any means that I knew. If somebody who didn't believe in God came up to me and asked why I believed in God, at that time I would have had to say, "I just do." That was a problem for me.

The world had taught me to reject that which is both unexplainable and improvable. But my life had taught me there was unquestionably a God. In the end, though, I whole-heartedly agreed with 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you” (NKJV). Drawing even more strength and encouragement from Saint Augustine’s battle with God as depicted in *The Confessions*, Aquinas’ reasoning of God’s existence as laid out in “Summa Theologica: Third Article,” and the fact that the assignment implied a need to question our beliefs, to the best of my ability I let go of all my fundamental beliefs about how the universe and all that is in it came into existence. I tried to follow Descartes’ footsteps of starting at the beginning to see where reason would lead me. I set out to logically prove or disprove God’s existence in my first worldview essay. Though as I read it back now, I see that I said in that first essay that reason was not enough to create a belief in God, at the time I was thinking that if I could logically determine the existence of God, my faith and relationship with God would go right back to where it was. I thought I could skip over what I would later learn to call the Kierkegaardian leap.

A friend read the essay the summer after I had finished it. He said to me, “You sound so certain of your beliefs.” I immediately found myself contradicting him and said, “I’m not sure at all.” He replied, “Well, you sound pretty sure.” But I knew I wasn’t. This outward acknowledgement also marked the first time I inwardly acknowledged that I wasn’t sure of God’s existence. I began to feel my faith slipping through my fingertips.

Writing that essay seemed to have done nothing to strengthen my faith. Instead, it made me ask questions that I hadn’t thought of before, and, by extension, caused many doubts. I decided to reread my essay, as an attempt to revive that assurance, hoping that the surety of my words would reawaken a certainty in me. So, when I returned home, I sat down, wrapped myself

in a blanket, coffee by my side, essay in my lap, ready to believe again. However, my coffee soon grew cold as I pulled my blanket over me, trying to escape from the world and its uncertainties. Instead of becoming assured, I had begun to notice some holes in logic and crucial areas that weren't well explained, such as how suffering and an all-powerful, loving God could coexist. My doubts were coming on full-force, and I didn't want to face them. I knew I couldn't have a relationship with someone that I was unable to understand or see or prove.

I have heard and read from many people that there is no room for reason and faith together. Kierkegaard is one such person who seems to strongly believe this. In one statement, he says, "If someone wants to have faith and reason too, well, let the comedy begin" (72). But, while Kierkegaard has a lot of meaningful insights about how to follow God and what a relationship with Him would look like, this is one area of his beliefs where I think he goes a bit awry.

I have seen the damage done both to religion and to others' opinions of those who believe in God when people believe in God without any reasons. This often manifests itself as people answering the question, "Why do you believe?" with an "I just do," as would have been my answer freshmen year, or "Because I have felt him." But to anyone who hasn't felt God, or who likes logic a little more than believing in something "just because," these answers are not only unsatisfying, but frustrating and off-putting. They were to me. I knew there had to be a more logical answer. If God created all that exists, and the ability to reason exists, then surely God and reason shouldn't conflict.

I have always desired answers and to understand the world, which is one of the reasons I love math and have pursued it as a minor. I am assigned problems that I am guaranteed I can find the answers to—normally. My mom loves to repeat a story from when I was in first grade. Six-

years-old, white blond hair, my feet were dangling off the front seat of our red Ford van. My thoughts were racing a thousand words a minute, as always, drowning out the country music that was surely playing from our car speakers. I turned to my seven-year-old sister sitting behind me in an identical white blouse and green plaid jumper, but she was staring out the window, backpack at her feet, clearly not interested in conversation. I returned to staring out the front window. I watched the sun rising that November morning as we headed toward school. I thought about the lessons we were learning in the astronomy portion of our class, specifically that the earth is always spinning. I had spent much of the previous day standing, looking at the ground, trying to see it moving, half the time convincing myself that I could. Finally, I asked my mom, “If the earth is spinning so fast, why don’t we fall off?” She explained to me there is a force called gravity that holds us against the earth and directed any further questions I had to my dad. She says I appeared satisfied.

But desiring answers is only half of my journey to discovering God. I never would have made it far if I didn’t know how to question. I give one of my cousins much of the credit for teaching me how to question. I have to interject here for a moment and say that my parents, especially my dad, who have always questioned information presented to them, political debates and issues going on, and so forth, and had their own logical reasons for believing what they do, were significant in teaching me how to ratiocinate throughout my entire life and still today. What my cousin did for me, however, that they couldn’t was he gave me significant practice at reasoning with someone who disagreed with me. I could develop my reasoning abilities only so far from people who believed the same things as me, or rather I believed the same things as them. I needed someone who disagreed with me. Because ultimately in life it is talking to those

who either disagree with me or have thought of things that I haven't that will most easily see and point out the holes in my logic. One of my cousins became this person for me.

He kept me from having a closed mind to politics, religion, and basically all of the subjects that people try to avoid when they are with people who disagree with them. He disagreed with me on all of them. When I first began these conversations with him, I approached these disagreements with the goal of bringing him to my side. However, I quickly found myself getting frustrated because he would prove something that I had said to be wrong. And, when approaching from the standpoint of trying to win, it was difficult to admit I was wrong, and even more difficult to allow myself to change one of my beliefs or understandings.

I could have stopped having these conversations all together, but I have always, at least as far as my memory goes back, thrived off debate and carried a certain amount of self-esteem from being knowledgeable. So, instead I slowly learned to approach these disagreements in a different way. Rather than looking to win my argument, I went into these conversations with the goal of finding out the truth, even if that meant I had to drop my own beliefs. The conversations became much more enjoyable and significantly more valuable. Krista Tippett, while speaking at Saint Mary's College Christian Culture Lecture in 2013, dealt with this same issue of how to approach disagreements and debates. She referred back to Francis Kissling and said, "You have to get to the point where you are vulnerable." You have to ask yourself where you are wrong and where they are right. My cousin taught me how to be vulnerable, and as a result he fine-tuned my ability to reason. He showed me that saying "I just believe" is a cop-out. Though I still tense up every time I know I'm about to be critiqued, he helped me welcome critiques more than fear them. He taught me the power in being able to keep an open mind enough to change my beliefs. He taught me how to question. He helped to prepare me for my three-year battle with God.

Asking questions and finding answers had become an integral part of who I was by my freshmen year at Andrews. I had managed to hide my beliefs in God behind a veil of normality, so that I didn't see any need to question it; but once that veil was removed, I had to face those questions. If I couldn't explain to someone what I believed or claimed to know, then I wouldn't let myself believe it. I wanted the world and how I saw and responded to it to make sense. I felt the need to be able to show others that I didn't believe in fairytales. So, when I reached the point the summer after my freshmen year when I knew that despite all the reasoning I had attempted I was still unable to explain my belief in God, on some level I knew that I also couldn't believe in him. But, I had eighteen years of a belief in God fighting against me letting go of this belief.

I have spent much of these years battling with myself over whether to believe in God or not. For periods of time, I managed to ignore my doubts. Other times, my doubts sent me over the edge, spiraling toward panic attacks. I felt uncomfortable asking these doubt-filled questions, because I was afraid I would be told the answers didn't exist, but I listened intently to see if others might answer them without me asking. However, no one around me talked about these questions deeply enough. Some would just begin to skim the surface and then move on. Others steered clear of them completely. It seemed like my peers who surrounded me didn't even ask them, though, looking back, it's possible that they were keeping their questions silenced as I was. But, if that was the case, I didn't know. I felt alone.

I kept trying to revive this relationship with God, but I couldn't find a way to do it when these doubts were simmering just below the surface. I spent time in prayer, with the Bible, going to church, doing devotionals. I repeatedly asked, no, I begged God to let me feel His presence or to give me a sign He was there or to give me anything that would help me be certain of His existence. All I wanted was a sign like what He gave to Gideon. When a pastor spoke about

feeling God's presence, I would intently listen to how he managed it and try to imitate it. If I could feel God's loving embrace just once, I knew I could believe. But I received nothing. I became stuck in a place for about two and half years where I strived to believe while seemingly being incapable of it.

The first six months, I ignored these doubts pretty smoothly, but then they became increasingly harder to suppress. I became unwilling to listen to God until he showed himself to me. Yes, I see the contradiction in that statement now. I can see now that I sensed God directing me in certain ways, but because I didn't know it was Him and He wouldn't prove to me that it was Him directing, I refused to listen. Fighting against God while battling to know Him created a reality filled with never-ending anxiety. I was holding on to something as much as I could, while repeatedly trying to push it away. I have found this degree of anxiety difficult to explain to those who haven't experienced it. The most important thing to understand about this anxiety, though, is that I blamed God, if He existed, for it. One of the psychologists whom I saw during my struggles suggested that God uses anxiety to help people. I realize now she was trying to say maybe God was trying to tell me something and I just wasn't listening, but at the time it felt different. This suggestion marked the moment a new idea entered my mind: maybe God did exist, but maybe He was cruel.

After about six months of living with every minute feeling like a year, seeing a psychologist and then a psychiatrist, I finally found some peace. We had labeled the cause of my anxiety as something different than it was, which is not surprising since I left out all information about God when talking to them. But, I had convinced myself they were right. Then, a year later, the doubts began to come back. This is now toward the end of my junior year. They returned slowly at first. Then, at the beginning of my senior year, they all bombarded me. There was no

escaping them this time. I didn't even try. I was ready to know definitively what I believed. I was done suppressing.

I grabbed the bull by its horns, so to speak. In order to make sure I didn't have the excuse of not having the time, I put myself in a situation where I had no choice but to figure it out. I chose to pursue a second worldview paper for my honors thesis—this essay. Just as the first worldview paper showed me that I was unable to explain my beliefs in God at that time, preparing for this worldview essay did exactly what I wanted it to: it forced me to begin actively searching for the answers to my doubts. Wittgenstein believes that ““proofs of God's existence' are generally provided by people who already believe in God for other reasons,” but that is not my story (McGrath, 7). It was only by first reasoning that I even allowed myself the chance to believe in God. If I couldn't find those answers, I would have left all belief in God behind.

I researched my questions, explored various answers, was candid with myself about questions I still had, and was willing to hold beliefs that went against what others I knew held. At first I was terrified. I didn't even want to start. Every time I sat down to look for another answer, I began to feel anxious. If I couldn't find these answers, I knew that I would soon be calling myself an atheist or agnostic.

Around this time, I ran into an old friend who confided in me that her brother was now an atheist. I asked, “Why?” And she said, “He needs proof. He's read the Bible cover to cover, searched for answers profusely, and he couldn't find them.” That's when it hit me. Trying to prove God's existence was futile; if that were possible, someone would have done so a long time ago. I also came to the realization that proof of His existence wasn't what I needed. All I needed was to understand the possibility of His existence. From there, I could give Him a chance and see where following Him led me. I began to see the power in proving the possibility of God.

As I went back to the drawing board, rereading, revising, and deleting much of my first worldview paper, I approached it with the goal of affirming the possibility that a loving God existed rather than trying to prove that He did exist. Countless times I found myself becoming frustrated, and felt my faith slipping through my fingertips yet again. Then, I would realize my mindset had changed back to trying to prove God exists. I would return to proving the possibility of God, and the logic worked. What follows is the core of the reasoning that was left of my first essay after I hashed through it. It is the logic I used, and still use, at the most basic level to explain the possibility of an intelligent designer. Without it, I'm not sure I would have continued my search for God.

A little over two years later, I still agreed with my initial approach of starting at the beginning. When trying to uncover if there is a God or other Supreme Being the only place to logically start is at the origin of everything. After all, if God does exist as our creator that is one place he should be found.

I remember learning in my cosmos class that the earliest science proclaims to take us to is to about 10^{-43} seconds after the big bang exploded. I have found no reason to question the big bang theory. The science and various experiments behind the theory all seem to support it. But, what science doesn't know is what started the big bang and what existed before it, and that is where I will begin.

While there was a group of people who agreed with Parmenides around 500 B.C. that everything that exists today has always existed, no one that I have found subscribes to this belief anymore (Gaarder 35). In other words, there is no standing theory that everything we see today has always been here. Which means, the way I see it, since the possibility everything has always been here has been ruled out, there are only two ways in which everything could have come into

existence: 1. It all came from nothing *or* 2. Something has always existed, and this something either directly or indirectly created what we see today.

Can I believe that something came from nothing? This would mean that at one point in time there was no earth, no galaxies, no universe, and no air—it was a vacuum. Yet, from this nothing, something was created. I cannot imagine defending this belief. It is an idea that is both mindboggling and inconceivable to me. As Aquinas argues, it is an unwinnable argument, an inconceivable notion, and an impossibility. As I searched to see if anyone believed this, I discovered no one. In fact, people on both sides were offended that outside interpretations of their beliefs concluded they believed this. Dr. Gary Burdick, a professor of physics at Andrews University and one of my Cosmos professors, explained to me at the honors poster session that there is speculation that before the big bang there was an equal amount of positive energy and negative energy that cancelled each other out so one could say there was nothing. From my point of view, energy, though the sum total might cancel out, is still something. So the fact remains that no matter where peoples' beliefs go from here, we all seem to agree with this first belief that nothing can come from nothing. This means we all inevitably believe that something has always existed, even if it's positive and negative energies cancelling out, and this something in one way or another is the cause of everything else.

So, is it more likely that this cause is intelligent or unintelligent? People say the existence of God is too drastic to believe in or assume. But to really know which is more likely, the best way is to compare the probabilities of these two events: that the first something is intelligent and that the first something is unintelligent. The way to find out the probability of something is to take the number of possible ways a specific event can occur and divide it by the number of ways any of the events can occur. For example, imagine you are trying to find the probability of two

dice coming up with the same number when you roll them [i.e. (1,1), (2,2), (3,3), (4,4), (5,5), or (6,6)]. The probability would be the number of ways you can roll the dice with the same number (i.e. 6) divided by the total number of possible outcomes when rolling two dice (i.e. 36). The probability would be $6/36$ or $1/6$. When I compared the probability formula for the first cause being something unintelligent and the probability formula that the first cause is something intelligent, I found that it is more probable that something intelligent created everything (See Appendix). Richard Dawkins suggests that a complex God would be statistically improbable (Frankenberry, 276), but mere logic shows an intelligent designer with the capacity to create is more probable than the existence of a simple, unintelligent something with the capacity to cause the existence of everything else. With the information we know now, it's possible to imagine many different types of all-powerful, intelligent beings with the capacity to create this world. On the other hand, no one has come up with a thorough explanation of how even one unintelligent thing could have sparked the big bang. I find it far more probable, and thus far more believable, that an intelligent being could have created everything than that something unintelligent did.

At this point, it could make sense to discuss evolution. And, in several of my drafts I did, but I have to admit I am uncomfortable doing so to any significant extent because of my lack of expertise in biology, geology, paleontology, and so forth. I have done reading on many sides of the creation vs. evolution vs. God creating through evolution debate, but the one thing that became most apparent to me through this research was that to tackle this question would be heading into something that I am only beginning to understand and would be best left to the experts. That being said, I am still always seeking to understand this debate better. I continue to do research and take in what I learn, so one day I can hold an explainable opinion on this matter.

I will say that currently, some of my doubts about evolution are about the seeming impossibility of amino acids first being created, then organizing themselves into more complicated life forms; the fact that macroevolution is still unobserved; and the fact that because of the nature of transitional species, where everything is transitional, and because of the nature of fossils, it's impossible to ever determine a direct line of transitions. This means, if I understand it correctly, it would be impossible to prove evolution just as it would be impossible to prove creation through intelligent design and evolution guided by an intelligent being. None of these beliefs are provable. But, at the same time, one day any one of them might be disproved. And, I also have questions for those on the biblical-literalists' standpoint including the timeline of fossils that are found and dated, why some species aren't found in the Triassic, and how the ark could have held enough animals to produce what is in existence today.

All of that being said, for me, it is okay that I can't answer these questions yet. My belief in God is not based on the creation account in Genesis. I am a firm believer that God speaks to us where we are. In other words, as John Calvin says, "God accommodates himself to our ability" (McGrath, 25). As a little kid, I still remember being told negative numbers do not exist. For the purpose of that assignment, my teacher was telling the truth, they don't exist. However, as I learned more, I one day reached a point where for the purposes of my assignments and my grown knowledge they did exist. Then, in junior high algebra I was taught that I cannot take the square roots of negative numbers, again for the purpose of teaching me the basics, only to learn once I had mastered the basics that those numbers, called imaginary numbers, are essential in much of engineering and physics. And, one of the most mind-boggling realizations came in geometry my sophomore year in high school when I found out that there was another type of geometry where triangles can have angles that add up to more than 180 degrees. If the knowledge gap between

adults and kids is so great that adults have to only give so much information at a time, in order to prevent giving students more than they could handle too soon, how much more would that be the case between an all-knowing intelligent creator and us? And, just as teachers giving only the basics, leaving out more complicated and seemingly contradictory facts isn't a sign of the teacher's intelligence, or morality, but of the teacher's care, this could be similar to God. It wouldn't be a sign of His lack of knowledge, or His goodness, which is good if we are to stand by the belief He is all-knowing and loving, but rather it is a sign of His caring for us. I believe God would give us the information we needed to know for the purpose of understanding who He is. In order to keep from driving us away, He meets us where we are.

When it comes to science and God, it would be impossible from the point of my worldview for them to conflict. God created everything, which means He created science, so they should not conflict. If they do, then either science made a mistake or an interpretation of God is incorrect. I believe as Galileo did "that known scientific truths should help *guide* biblical exegesis" (Frankenberry, 5). The Bible does not set out to explain science. The Bible exists to explain who God is.

After concluding the likelihood of things being created by an intelligent being, I had then reached the point where I had to acknowledge that there are so many reasons an intelligent creator would create us. We could be some galactic experiment, a means of entertainment like *The Truman Show* on the galactic level, part of a contest for who can create the best world, perhaps a sadistic creator designed us to watch us suffer, or maybe a loving God created us so he could form a relationship with us. These are some among many possibilities of why we might have been created by intelligent design. Here's the catch: not one of them can be proven to be right or wrong, except perhaps the only one that would have any impact on my daily life: a

loving God. This is the one people try to prove wrong, but it's also the only one I was interested in understanding how it could possibly be true. Any other answer would have resulted in me letting go of all attempts to worship or have a relationship with this creator.

Having realized that a belief in intelligent design was far from ignorant and that it seemed more plausible that this was the means by which we were created left me feeling more comfortable with the idea that an intelligent being created this world. But the question of what kind of being this was left me at times thinking there might as well not be a creator at all; if the creator was anything but loving, I would have no interest in worshipping him at all. Because I could not understand how this world could have a loving creator, I have often felt similar sentiments to those expressed by Richard Dawkins:

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. ...In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom...nothing but pitiless indifference. ("Richard Dawkins on the Nature of Darwinian Life")

I eliminated one part I did not agree with: "no design, no purpose, no evil, no good," and another part that was irrelevant to the discussion at hand. But the rest I felt. How could a loving

God exist in a world where everything seemed arbitrary and hopeless? I was now faced with figuring out if that was the type of designer who existed or if there was any way a loving God created this world. I approached this inquiry in two ways: I tried to understand reasonably how a loving God could be possible, and I tried to give God, if He were loving, the chance to show me it was true.

I expected certain things from a loving God if He existed. For instance, a happier life than I would have without Him. But around the time I started attempting to listen to God, my life turned into a living hell. I reached a low psychologically. I lost all plans, hopes, dreams, and even ideas for the future. It felt as if no matter how hard I tried to figure something out, there was nothing out there for me, and I kept going back to square one. Then, in the midst of this hopelessness, crisis struck. My dad, who had been guidance, support, and a source of unconditional love my entire life, became critically ill and none of us closest to him (my mom, sister, and I) were near at that time. We came close to losing him. When we didn't, I wanted to thank God, but I found that I couldn't. I couldn't find God. If I ever found myself having to concur with someone about what a blessing or miracle it was that he was still alive, I had to force out those words. I didn't believe them. My foundation was crumbling. My hope was dwindling, and I began to hold on to even the smallest things that brought any amount of happiness, even as small as someone saying hi to me when they walked by, but then those small things began disappearing too. And my patience for giving God a chance was rapidly running out.

Things were at an all time low, and I woke up one morning miserable. As I was praying and reading the Bible, unsure if there was even a point to it, I realized all the things I was asking God for could be summarized in one general prayer. There was only one thing I needed that day. I prayed, "God, help me to feel better when I go to bed tonight than I did when I went to bed last

night.” It was the simplest prayer to grant. Things couldn’t have gotten much worse than the previous night. I thought, if there is a loving God, He would be able to grant this request, and I couldn’t see any reason for Him not to. I began my day with a small amount of hope. But things soon turned from bad to worse to the point where I felt like I was living in a never-ending nightmare. It looked like I was headed for the worst night I had had in years. By 2 p.m. I was done. I was convinced of this absolute indifferent or possibly even cruel creator. If God couldn’t answer such a simple prayer, if He couldn’t help me feel even a little better, He either didn’t exist or was a cruel creator who had no love for me.

I found myself sprinting to my car to drive, the one thing that always made me feel better. I slammed my car into reverse, backed out, and then shifted to drive, squealing off. My hands were shaking. All I wanted to do was run my car into something. I immediately knew that driving wasn’t going to make me feel better, and that driving in the state I was in was reckless and would only end in disaster. Every tree, every building screamed at me to hit it. I slammed to a stop at the stop sign, prepared to turn left out of the school, convincing myself that the drive would make me feel better and there wouldn’t be that moment I decided to give into my shaking hands. But before I could turn left, every fiber of my being started screaming at me to turn around. There was something I was missing. Something I hadn’t thought of. Tears started flowing down my face. “Dammit!” I screamed, pounding the steering wheel. I saw my family in my mind and forced my hands to turn my wheel clockwise, turning back into the school, knowing my life mattered to at least a few people, even if not myself, and to keep driving in my state was to risk throwing it away.

I soon pulled into the parking place that I had reversed out of only a few minutes earlier. I broke down. Chest heaving, tears coming, I punched my wheel again, furious at what the world

had become. Nothing. Nothing but hurt, pain, and agony, and for no purpose. I was sick of it. Why was I even bothering to try? And then I realized what I had missed. The answer crept into my head: it's only two in the afternoon. My fountain of tears slowed to a stop. My breathing slowly came back to normal. I hadn't given this possible god a chance to answer my prayer yet. I still had probably ten hours before I went to bed. I thought, it's impossible for things to get better by tonight; there's no way. But, enough of me was saying, just give it a shot, and if they don't, then you'll know and you can finally stop trying to believe.

I did everything I could think of to make my day better, so that at the end of it, when I was still living in this nightmare, I could know either God didn't exist or didn't care and settle the matter once and for all. This, I told myself, was God's one last shot.

Through a number of unexpected conversations, a surprisingly meaningful vespers that I had only gone to in order to give God every chance possible, encounters that revealed miscommunications and brought friends back to me who I thought were out of my life for good, and newly revealed possibilities of the future, I went to bed that night feeling better than I had in months. I was not only happier, but also more at peace, with a deep sense that things were right in the world. I felt like I never thought I would feel again. I was on a high, laughing with my suitemates and actually dancing to music in my room. Then, I thought of how close I had been to not experiencing it. And in that instant, I made a promise that marked the first moment of my relationship with God. In the instant I chose to trust Him, I took my leap. As I look back on this time, I realize that was what the leap looked like: trust. It was the first time I trusted that God was someone who loved me. It also was the moment that marked the first time since my questions about God first began that I felt at complete peace.

I immediately recognized that I didn't expect answers to every prayer I asked as I had received to this one. After all, I certainly hadn't received them before. Rather, having things get so much worse before they got better in the short time span of a day was a sign to me that the same could happen in a longer period of time. I promised God that no matter how hard things became, I would trust that one day they would be better, and I would push through, looking for solutions, not escapes, waiting patiently for His plan and not let my belief in Him be threatened if He doesn't follow my plan. I promised that I would always have faith that He hasn't left me and will always bring me through if I let Him. And, in the same prayer, I asked God if for some reason I ever forgot this promise to remind me of it. I wrote this prayer and experience down in a journal so I can always refer back to it, at least as long as I don't lose the journal. This promise to not consider escaping from my problems was one that I had been unwilling to make before. It is a promise I have abided by without hesitation since.

I understand this experience probably sounds trivial and meaningless to those who read it. But, to me, it was exactly what I needed. It spoke to me in a way it couldn't have to everyone, or possibly anyone, else. I believe God knows what each of us needs to believe in Him, if we are first willing to open ourselves up to this belief, and that we all need something different. I believe we all experience God differently. C.S. Lewis says, "If all experienced God in the same way and returned Him an identical worship, the song of the Church triumphant would have no symphony, it would be like an orchestra in which all the instruments played the same note" (*Problem of Pain*, 155). So, while you may wonder at the seeming insignificance of the events that led me to trusting that God loved me, I hope you can believe me when I say they were significant in every way I needed them to be. Other times when something happened just the way

it needed to, I blew it off. I didn't accept mere coincidences as proof of God. This time, while I am having a difficult time explaining it, was different.

After this day, I began to approach church, prayers, and my devotionals with God differently. Rather than reading for proof, I read to learn about this God who I now believed loved me, who I had finally let show Himself to me. I now desired to know God, rather than feeling obligated to try to know Him. I read to develop a friendship, rather than out of a feeling of necessity or desperation. For the first time, I looked forward to my morning devotions with God. Getting up was no longer a daily battle. As I spent more time with God, talking to Him and learning about Him, I soon began to love Him and my desire for Him grew.

I learned that a relationship with God wasn't a process anymore than any of my friendships are. But, in the back of my mind, I still knew that while I could explain the potential for an intelligent creator, I couldn't explain to others or even myself how it was possible this loving creator existed. Now, Wittgenstein's statement about finding proofs after already believing for other reasons rang true. I knew God was with me, because for the first time, while my future had never felt more unknown, I felt emotionally and spiritually whole. I had been continually discontent, unable to change that seemingly permanent state of being, until I made the leap to God. Discovering God brought contentedness into my life. But, at the same time, I still needed more than that. I wanted to be able to explain my relationship with God better. So, I let myself be open to doubting again as I returned to this question of how God could be loving. I knew if I didn't answer it then, I would only face this question later.

This world consists of good and bad things arbitrarily happening to both good and bad people. Sometimes it seems those who are closest to God suffer the most while those who don't

even believe in God suffer the least. Horrible illnesses and natural disasters wipe out scores of humans indiscriminately. Why would this be the case if there were a loving God?

I'm going to approach these questions partially using the Bible's description of a loving God, not as a way to prove its story legitimate (that will come later in this essay) but as a way to see if there is at least one possible way a loving God could exist.

So, back to the question at hand: Why would a loving God create a world with suffering? According to the Bible, God didn't. He created a perfect world with no suffering, no pain, no disease, no natural disasters, and so forth. Yet, what he also did was create a world where humans had the freedom of choice between the world they knew with Him and a world that contained knowledge of good and evil. I have often found it tempting to look at the situation in the Garden of Eden as one where God said you have to obey me or you'll enter a world of suffering. That paints the picture of a cruel, selfish dictator, not a loving God. But, as I reread Genesis, I discovered that is entirely different from what occurred. If the situation were just about disobedience, then an arbitrary tree would have been picked, perhaps in the seventh column 57 rows in; a tree that was like all the other. Instead, it was the tree in the middle of the garden; it was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When Eve ate from that tree she wasn't choosing to do so as a way to disobey God; she did so out of a desire for a world where she could know good and evil. Genesis 3:5 says, "God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." She, and then Adam, chose to know evil. Even if they didn't understand what evil was when they were choosing it, by choosing it they were saying they weren't content with the world God had created for them and wanted a different world. As Anne Lamott says, "We're not punished for the sin but by the sin"

(200). It wasn't that they didn't choose God that brought suffering; it was the fact that they decided they wanted a different world than the one they were given.

But why would God give this choice to begin with? I'm sure many of us would initially say we wish God had created a world where only happiness were possible with no possibility for us to choose a different world. But the question we first have to ask is what would that world look like?

There's a scene in *Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle that describes a world where everyone had no choice but to be "good" and the result was a group of robot-like humans. There was no happiness, no love, no choice. As the main character describes it, "This is Evil" (157). But is that what a world would look like if there were no choice but to be good?

While I think we would be supremely more subject to living as this world dictated, I'm not sure I would ever argue that we would be robots. There are many ways to live both good and bad lives, so removing the choice between good and bad perhaps doesn't dictate to us just one life. But what if that wasn't what the created choice was about?

Christians believe God created a choice because He wanted to love what He created and have His creation love Him. Can you love when there is no choice? According to 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." I think it is possible for a person to be designed to do all of these things, where he or she has no choice but to. But, imagine the difference between someone who has to do these things and someone who chooses to do these things. Think of the relationship between Jesus and His disciples. After Jesus' death, His disciples were loyal to and defended

Jesus until they were killed for it. Now, imagine if we discovered His disciples had no choice but to follow Him. If they had no choice but to die for Him, that would not be seen as love. From this perspective, they would have been seen as robots. It is not the actions themselves that determine if a person is loving. It is the act of choosing those actions that is defined as loving. No one who is looking for a relationship filled with love would be content with someone who had no choice in the matter, because that wouldn't be love. While I can see an argument for people having the capability of being good with no choice, I see no way for people to love if they don't have a choice. If God wanted to create creatures that could be loving, He would have necessarily had to create creatures with free will.

However, this is where I hit another roadblock. How does this choice between either loving God or not loving Him translate to the choice of a world with God or a world with sin? Why couldn't they coincide? Or why couldn't there be a third option? The answer, according to the Bible: God is love. The opposite of love is hate, which requires what we call sin, or evil. It was a choice between a world with only love and a world with hate. By rejecting the rules of God's world, they were saying they didn't love His world, and chose what was perhaps the only other world possible: a world where knowledge of good and evil was present. They chose to understand what the world with hate is. Perhaps it was the only other option available for those who wanted something other than God's world.

So hate and despair and suffering entered the world when humans chose to know what it is. How, however, does that explain why animals now suffer and natural disasters take place? I find two answers to those questions. The first involves another question: could imperfect people live in a perfect place? I think what is happening in today's world illustrates this is impossible. We are making our imperfect world even more imperfect with the destruction of the ozone layer,

pollution, massive amounts of garbage being buried into the earth, and so forth. If we can't even keep an imperfect world in the best imperfection possible, I think it's reasonable to assume we couldn't keep a perfect world perfect. The second answer lies in the choice Adam and Eve made. And this also answers the question of illnesses, which Steven Weinberg summarizes well: "How does free will account for cancer?" (Frankenberry, 330). The answer, in the end, is frustratingly simple: they chose to know all evil, not just the evil that they could cause. This means all suffering that is possible we as humans learn, including that caused by natural disasters, diseases, the imperfections of genes, and an unfair and arbitrary world.

But then, even given all of this, wouldn't a loving God intervene? According to the Bible's description of a loving God, He would and He did. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16 NKJV). He took it upon himself to suffer the inevitable result of our choice: death. By Him dying once, even though resurrected, He gave us the same opportunity, to die once with a chance of living again. But why doesn't He intervene more on a daily basis? Why doesn't He stop natural disasters? Protect those who have chosen to love him from pain? Give good things to those who show love? And let bad things happen to those who don't? Why wouldn't He intervene on a daily basis? Why wouldn't He intervene as He is described doing in the Old Testament?

I think there are several possible answers. First, maybe it's because He can't do as much as we'd like to wish He could. I don't mean to suggest that God isn't all-powerful. I mean this as perhaps it defies what is possible. No one, no matter how powerful, can change a square into a triangle. An all-powerful being could make us switch what we call them: we could call a triangle a square and vice versa. Or perhaps he could take us to a three, four, or five dimensional plane

where seeing them in all dimensions would show them to be equal. But in a two-dimensional space, He wouldn't be able to make something with four corners equal to something with three. It's outside the realm of possibility. As C.S. Lewis says, "If it is self-contradictory it is absolutely impossible" (*Problem of Pain*, 18). Perhaps the possibility to take away the natural consequences of our choice only existed up to a certain point as with the triangle. God could take away the permanence of our choice, but not the temporary, initial consequences of it. To take away those consequences would be the same as taking away the choice, rendering it as if the choice never existed in the first place.

Parents can never take away the consequence of their children's choices, but they will sometimes love them enough to help them make the best choices possible from there on out in order to make the consequences less painful and provide them their best paths forward. For instance, if I had continued to drive recklessly that one day last semester and been hurt because of it, my parents could not have reversed the damage done to me or the car. But, they could have helped me heal as much as was in their power to do so, as well as figure out how best to proceed without a car. I think that is how God's love works for us. He can't take away the natural consequences of our choice, evil and thus suffering, but He can show us the best path to take now within this world of suffering. That is certainly not a promise for fairness, comfort, or only good things. That is a promise that He will be with us and show us our best path within that suffering that we have already chosen.

A second reason could be because of God's omniscience. Our knowledge is far below that of omniscience and we have to admit that in a grand plan of trying to show God to as many people as possible and to enact a plan that could reverse the permanence of our choice, we would have a difficult time seeing exactly what that would look like. We often confuse the words

kindness and love. A kind God would not necessarily be a loving God. “Kindness cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escape suffering,” C.S. Lewis says (*Problem of Pain*, 32). But God’s ultimate goal is for as many of us as possible to be reunited with Him in a good world. The only one who knows what is necessary for this to occur for the highest number of people is God. As C.S. Lewis explains, sometimes there is more good than we realize or initially acknowledge that comes from pain, such as pity and love (105-6). Everything we do or don’t do, every pain we do or don’t suffer, affects the world in ways we cannot understand. Ultimately, not only are we unaware of where the line is that determines whether God is removing suffering or free will, we also cannot possibly understand the ripple effect of every occurrence to be able to judge whether God is just or not in removing some pains but not others.

In the film *300: Rise of an Empire*, which I don’t recommend watching and is a perfect example of how there is a lesson to be found in everything, Themistocles at one point is accused of starting a war that is causing so much suffering. He responds, “Do you think I enjoy this? Witnessing my friend’s final breath? Every widow that is made by my decision, every child that will grow without a father, they are my choices. This is the burden of my command.” The clear implication is that if there were any other way, he would take it, but this was the only way to save their home. It hit me as I was listening to this reply, often times we have to suffer in order for God’s plan, which, since He is all-knowing, all-powerful, and loving, would be the best plan. But, God takes no joy in it. In fact, He suffers with us. I cannot imagine God’s agony as He watched Jesus die on the cross, wanting to be able to take away all of that pain, but knowing it was the only way for any part of humanity to be saved. If even Jesus had to suffer so excruciatingly, how can I expect to be exempt? The only way to show others the love of God is

to step onto the battlefield. I have to go to those on the enemy's side if I truly am seeking to proclaim the good news. How can I expect there to be no pain?

There is a God who loves us and not only has to watch us suffer because of our initial choice that we made to know evil, but also has to ask some of us at times to suffer even more so that He can save more people. Jesus did not come to Earth with the goal of making a peaceful world as many had hoped, nor did He come to give His followers comfortable lives. Instead He came to show us who God is as well as how to tell others the promise of a good world afterwards if we choose it. He came to show us how to walk through suffering rather than avoid it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains, "Jesus says that every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God. Each must endure his allotted share of suffering and rejection" (89). God's best path for each of us is not one that will necessarily lead to the least suffering. It is the one that will help us to best show others Jesus, and sometimes that means more pain. Bonhoeffer says, "To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more the road which is too hard for us" (88). For me to say I believe in a loving God, and that I accept Him as my Savior, I am simultaneously saying, "I will walk the path God has for me."

This is where I ended up hitting my next wall: if God has a path that He wants me to follow, then there must be a way for Him to communicate with me and show me this path. I had long questioned how this communication could happen, but no one had given me a satisfactory answer to it. So, at the time I began researching for this paper, I began to search on my own. I began by praying, though I spent much of it wondering if I was only talking to air. I spent other parts of the time trying to understand how I might be able to hear God's voice while knowing I'm not schizophrenic. I also began reading the Bible, trying to better understand the God it

describes. Through this process, I have found three ways God communicates with me, though only two are reliably consistent.

I have heard others describe God's voice as something that sounded like the person next to you speaking. Or I've read in the Bible about God communicating through dreams and such, but I have never heard a speaker mention that communicating with God was akin to communicating with a smarter self. And that is what I have experienced. I have spent several years now blowing off this voice, of sorts, because I couldn't explain it. But a few months ago when I started listening to it and saw its beneficial guidance, I switched to trying to understand how this could even be possible. I finally found a name and explanation for this voice on March 6, 2014, about three months after I first began actively searching.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis describes in the opening chapter the "ought to" voice. We all have this innate sense of things we should and shouldn't do. Lewis gives the example of when people are arguing they often say things like: "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?"—"That's my seat, I was there first"—"Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm"—... "Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine"—"Come on, you promised." He points out that these people are not merely saying they don't like what the other person is doing, they are "appealing to some kind of standard of behavior which [they] expect the other man to know about." And, based on the fact that people rarely say, "To hell with your standard," but rather make up excuses for why the standard doesn't apply in that particular situation, this standard appears to be understood by all (3-4).

The most common argument against a universal standard of morality is that morality is determined by culture. However, I would suggest that the same standards simply manifest in different ways, depending on the culture. For instance, every culture seems to admire courage

and bravery, and frowns on cowardliness. But what one culture might deem courageous another might call stupid. The sense that we shouldn't be cowards, though, remains constant. This could also why many instructions in the Bible are not followed specifically anymore: people recognize that the principles behind those instructions require different actions in today's world. That all being said, I do not think that means that how a culture determines a principle to be followed is necessarily good, proper, correct, or desirable. I simply meant to illustrate how the principles themselves are universal. I believe that the more time we spend with God, the closer we come to understanding the right way to live these principles. Spending time with God helps develop this moral sense and following this moral sense helps a person grow closer to God.

We all start at a certain base level of living these moral principles. In this way our paths are determined. This leads me to believe that it is not reaching a certain point of truth that determines if we are saved, but rather it may be more about always searching for truth. If anyone is genuinely searching for truth, they should in the end be led to the one Truth of Jesus. As Kierkegaard says, "Everyone who in truth wills one thing will eventually be led to will the Good" (Provocations, 35). However, he goes on to say, this means even willing the good for the sake of a reward or for fear of punishment is willing two things, and would not lead to the Good, or God. There must be a desire for good for good itself. And, I believe if a person is doing that, they will eventually be led to God, in one way or another. If a person wills to know God, they will begin a path of learning the right ways to live these moral principles, and vice versa.

A universal morality is the only cause of morality that would explain how the world looks and behaves. It was by discovering the name for the voice that I finally understood the first way God could talk to me: through a voice that told me what I should and shouldn't do. The more time I then spend with God, the more developed this voice seems to become. Sometimes it

is instructions such as don't sign up for that mission trip over break. God saying don't sign up for a mission trip? I was doubtful too. But I felt this instruction strongly enough that I listened.

Thank goodness I did. Even if the trip hadn't required extra classes, being gone for the week of spring break would have made my life chaos by taking away time I absolutely needed to finish up school projects as well as experiences and conversations I needed to have to determine the next steps for my future. Other times it's things such as "you should or shouldn't go to this event," and by listening either I or someone else because of me experiences or hears something that we needed to; or "you should text this person," only to discover they really needed to talk to someone; or "you should not text that person," only to find out that because of what was going on on the other side of things, I would have been hurting myself if I had, or "you should read some of this book today," which was the suggestion I followed when I picked up *Mere Christianity*, despite the fact that I was in the middle of four other books already and I hadn't read it in years, and discovered the name of this voice a day before I needed to be able to explain it (the poster session); or "don't worry about your pile of work right now, I'll help you with it later; right now, you need to spend the hour or two and talk to this person," which generally always leads to meaningful conversations that positively affect my life and, to the best of my abilities to discern, theirs, and then I end up finishing my homework in record time and understanding it better than expected. It's like my focus during that time magnifies.

Furthermore, since the moment I began listening to this voice after I chose to trust God loved me, I have been a happier, more contented person. I used to be someone who would lose her cool at the smallest of things, but I can think of only once when I have done so since I let God into my life. I used to be someone who would hold onto grudges, but now I typically move on and don't even think about them unless there is something I still need to fix. I was a person

who would constantly worry and plan for everything possible. Now, I simply trust, on most days, that everything will work out. And, it has. But this trust and these behaviors come from more than a guiding voice. I will be the first to admit, as I noted earlier, that this form of guidance is not consistently there. Sometimes I don't hear or feel nudges toward any one direction or have a feeling that I need to wait for an answer, so I either assume that particular decision doesn't matter or that I already have the knowledge to make the right choice. It is not a way of communication or a foundation on which I can firmly rest my beliefs or plans. This led me to my second and most concrete way of understanding God and His plans for me: the Bible.

People tend to doubt those things outside our five senses, and sometimes even those within them, but what they don't realize is how much we rely on things outside of these senses. A visiting lecturer on campus helped me understand this. Stephen Harnish brings up this question of where does faith fit into a reality with five senses? And then he points out the phenomenon of math. Mathematics lies entirely outside our senses, yet we rely on it, whether we realize it or not, for just about everything we do or use throughout the day. We trust in math not because we can sense it, but because it works. Following the Bible, listening to the principles it teaches, has led me to be a better person. Just as following the "ought-to" voice has worked, following the Bible's principles has worked. Perhaps this is why obedience is often said to precede faith. It is only by obeying God's commandments that I was able to see the benefits of doing so. As Kathleen Norris says, God has "given us commandments to find our way home" (87).

I trust the Bible for one basic reason: I believe Jesus is the Son of God and humanity's Savior, which I believe because I believe the gospels to be truthful accounts. This is for many reasons. In fact, there are so many reasons and arguments one can give about the historical

accuracies of the Bible, there are many books written about it. Needless to say, that is not what I aim to do here. I'll name only a few in this essay in order to give a general idea of reasons I believe in the historical accuracy of the gospels. First, as Tim Keller points out, each of the gospels was written in a short enough time span after Jesus' death that if they were inaccurate, "there were still many bystanders, officials, and opponents [alive] who had actually heard him teach, seen his actions, and watched him die" and who would have vehemently protested and the books would never have made it far (Keller, 105). As Keller further says, "For a highly altered, fictionalized account of an event to take hold in the public imagination it is necessary that the eyewitnesses (and their children and grandchildren) all be long dead" (105). Richard Bauckham even shows how "the gospel writers named their eyewitness sources within the text to assure readers of their accounts' authenticity" (Keller, 104-5). And, Luke states in his opening that what he is writing is a carefully investigated account based on witnesses. If this were not true, people would have very soon seen his account as worthless. Furthermore, the gospels include information that anyone in power at that time would not have wanted included. They also include statements that would have been avoided if the writers were looking to tell their story in the most believable way: such as having women be the first to tell of Jesus' return and announcing that the Sadducees distrusted Jesus' resurrection.

Another interesting note I've learned is that the genre of realistic fiction has only developed within the last 300 years. At the time these accounts were written, fiction was still told in ways where few details were included and the focus was on character development and plot (Keller 110). This is not how the gospels are written. Unless they were the first realistic fiction and no one caught onto this method for another 1500 years, they cannot be fictional. Furthermore, any fabrication would immediately have been caught by those who were alive,

which would have destroyed the credibility of such an already hard-to-believe story (Imagine how much it would take to convince you of Jesus' resurrection and miracles if He lived today; if you heard people saying it wasn't true, you would move on. Certainly, the same can be said of these people). I believe in the legitimacy of the gospels, and based on all the gospels say, I believe Jesus is the Son of God.

Since I believe in Jesus' divinity, I necessarily have to believe in the Bible as the Word of God. Jesus not only referenced the Old Testament when asked questions about morality and so forth, but He also specifically refers to it as the Word of God in Mark 7:13. That being said, I do not understand the entire Bible. I can't answer every question about seeming contradictions, or if a particular passage is meant literally or metaphorically. I cannot explain it all. But I do believe it's explainable. So, as I read the Bible as part of my morning devotions, I read it not only with the mindset of learning more about God, but also with the goal of trying to understand potentially difficult-to-accept passages. I trust there is an answer, so I enjoy trying to find it. And, as I read the Bible, I learn more about God, how I view God is challenged and altered, and as a result I grow closer to Him and better understand how I should live.

This leads me to the third way I have come to know God's voice: by learning how to love. Anne Lamott explains, "God does not talk loudly, in audible or profoundly mysterious ways, but...through the love of our friends" (200). Since God is love, it only makes sense that learning how to love would directly correlate to learning about God. If I learn about one, then I learn about the other. Seeing love in others reveals God to me, learning how to love others in return furthers my understanding of who God is, and by showing love to others, I can help illustrate the character of God to them. I didn't understand any of this until I began to make a conscious effort to love others more.

At the end of high school, beginning of college, I was not what I would call a loving person. Despite having parents and a sister who were constantly showing me how to love if I had just paid attention, I was judgmental of those who messed up in ways that I didn't, and had no problem displaying that judgment to them. I couldn't even figure out how to love my own family. My four years at Andrews has, thankfully, changed that.

What first began to genuinely change my thinking and help me accurately see myself and others was my boyfriend of almost two years. I learned from him how to not judge someone who makes mistakes and screws up in ways that I wouldn't. He helped me learn that loving someone isn't about ignoring their faults, but rather it's about seeing that they're faults are not who they are. People are not the mistakes they have made. They are the amalgamation of the countless stories that have created them, which in the end typically render their mistakes as minimal.

Throughout some of the time I was learning these lessons from him, I simultaneously was writing stories for a campus magazine called *Envision*. I was assigned to write about people who had powerful stories with heartache beyond what I can imagine. In order to tell these stories in approximately 1500 words, I had to choose which part of them to tell, because I couldn't tell it all and I didn't even know it all. I felt enormous pressure and anxiety knowing that what I wrote would be the only part of them that would be known to most of the school. I held their stories in my hand, and I treated them as carefully as I would treat a newborn baby. Through this experience, I learned how to focus on the key points of a person. The points that matter in the end. The things that demonstrate to me who a person is, not merely the facts of what they have or haven't done. I learned to dig deeper than the surface level information. I learned that the facts I'm normally presented with about a person on a daily basis are not those that make up the key parts of who a person is. There is so much more to people than that.

I then learned from my leadership classes how to discover more about people's paths. My Coaching class taught me how to ask relevant and meaningful questions and to actively listen. My Creative Problem Solving class has taught me the limitation of my own instinctual perspective. And as I have opened myself up to knowing people, my life has changed. My way of approaching life and viewing life has changed. My ability to love has grown.

Every English and honors class I have taken that has assigned me readings where I delve into another's story, fictional or not, has opened my mind up to understanding those stories which I had previously been unable to relate to on almost any level. These stories began to increase my awareness that I didn't understand those around me as much as I had previously thought. I believe that having some semblance of understanding others helps me love them more, and the first step for that is seeing who they are from their worldview, not only my own.

English classes I have taken such as Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Literary Criticism & Theory have shown me the vast variety of ways to communicate, interpret, and understand our world, God, and others. There is always more than meets the eye, and there are always multiple perspectives of the same story. It is impossible to ever have a complete picture of who someone is, because we cannot see them as an omniscient outsider would be able to.

As I have begun to learn what it means to love others, I have begun to learn what it means to be humble and honest. And the more I love others, the easier it becomes to love. I have learned the amazingness of the love God has for us. And because He loves each of us that means there must be something about each of us that is worth loving. No one is a compilation of his or her faults. To know a person is to know who they are beyond the ways they mess up. Mistakes are surface level. By learning to look past them, I have begun to learn how to love. By learning how to love, I have learned more about not only how Jesus loves me, but also in the

miraculousness that He does. Knowing that I am to love others and how to actually do so is the third way that helps guide my way through much of life.

The last point of consideration for this worldview essay is where this leaves me with religion. I cannot say I have reached the point where I can be certain of one religion or another, but I have chosen to stay in the church I have grown up with, Seventh-day Adventism. I have some problems with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but I acknowledge that just as individuals are more than their mistakes, churches are more than theirs. Instead of turning my back on it for a few things I may not agree with, it would be more valuable for me to instead look to helping it grow and improve where I can.

Reasoning and logic took me to the point where I was willing to believe there could be a God. An instance that spoke perfectly to me pushed me to make the jump to trusting that God loves me. But, it was actually following God (reading His word, trying to follow his footsteps when learning how to love, and listening to his guidance when it comes) that has shown me His existence. I can show people the reasoning and logic that made me open to believing in God. I can have debates about the things that keep people from giving Him a chance. But, ultimately, people have to decide for themselves whether to take a chance on the unseen and no one can force a belief or faith on another.

When I read *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe in high school, I despised it. I didn't understand why we would be assigned to read a book filled with so much violence and cruelty and where the main character killed himself in the end. It took me until sometime during my first year in college to understand the power of the story. The story reveals the danger of treating others as if they are exactly where you want them to be on their path to God. To assume someone is ready to have a different religion shoved down their throat than the one they have grown up

with is damaging and will only result in driving people away from a loving God. It reveals the danger in treating others' worldviews as less important and less valuable than your own, especially in this age of postmodernism and its rejection of claims of absolute truth.

I believe, as many people have believed, that everyone has some aspect of truth in their beliefs already. Truths are of the nature that they have to be experienced before they can be known. This gives at least two implications for the present matter. First, trying to push a truth, even the truth of God, onto someone else is never going to work. When I look at how Jesus taught, I see that He spoke in parables or gave examples of truths people already took to be true, in order to help them understand bigger truths. For instance, when addressing the question of whether it is lawful or not to heal on the Sabbath, He asks the Pharisees and the experts on law present, "Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 14:5). He tries to show them the greater truth of what the Sabbath is for by appealing to a smaller truth that they already recognized.

Paul also approached people where they were. Rather than telling the philosophers of Athens that they were worshipping idols, he found a place where God could enter into their worldview: through their Unknown God. Humans are slow learners, and we're even slower when it comes to adapting our beliefs. It would seem that teaching someone about Jesus based on a truth that person already knows is a good path to take. There is no love in hurrying others to change their mindset. The second implication of the experiential nature of truth is that since I do believe in God, how I live on a daily basis can affect others' views of God. This is another important reason that I learn what it means to love as God loves us. His love may be an infinity I'll never reach, but it's one I can always strive to get closer to.

My faith in a loving God and my relationship with Him do not deny logic and reason. My reasons for having faith in God follow logical evidences of this world. I will never shut my ears to questions and doubts that other people have. As Polkinghorne states, “Faith is not a question of shutting one’s eyes, gritting one’s teeth, and believing the impossible. It involves a leap, but a leap into the light rather than the dark” (McGrath, 9). I believe there are answers to all of the questions and doubts out there, even if I do not know them off the top of my head. I would never be content with having a blind or deaf faith. So, I won’t ever have one. Carl Sagan beautifully says, “We make the world significant by the courage of our questions and by the depth of our answers” (Frankenberry, 225). There is no knowledge of anything, God especially, if questions are not asked and answers not found. It is impossible for me to know someone without ever asking questions. I will never be able to fully know God, but it will be by having the courage to ask questions that challenge what I believe and that will inevitably push me to change things I believe that I will come to the most meaningful answers available to me. It is only by questioning, even though I was terrified of the answers I would find, that I have come to have a relationship with God at all. Now, when I am presented with questions I don’t know the answer to, I smile. I am thrilled for the challenge of the search and the knowledge I will gain by seeking. A belief in God can certainly be a leap into the light.

Today, if I were asked how I can believe in a loving God, as I was asked three years ago by my Western Heritage professors, I have an answer. I gave myself the space and time to ask the questions I needed to. And once I felt I had enough extrinsic evidence for the possibility of a loving God’s existence, and I had an experience that led me to trust this possible God, I leapt into what would be His arms if they existed, and I was caught. Over the last few months, I have come to understand that knowing God personally is possible and yet is as difficult to explain and prove

to someone who has not experienced it as it is to explain and prove the color red to someone who has never seen color. I have learned through my time at Andrews University that my journey to God will be on going; my worldview will always be shifting and growing. But, there is beauty and knowledge to be found in each snapshot of a worldview, and enjoyment to be found in the journeying forward.

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Postface

I have dealt very little with my personal relationship and growth with God since I have found these discoveries, but unlike the time span in which I wrote my first worldview essay, I have grown significantly closer to God. In fact, much of my growth and understanding has come from the very act of writing this essay and all of the many sections that didn't make it into this final version. But even more growth, both personal and spiritual, has been coming from my significantly increased desire to know God more. Almost every day, if not everyday, I am learning something new that changes how I view God and changes who I am and how I approach life.

I have been working my way through not only the Bible, which is a read-in-one-year edition that I am approximately a third of the way through, but also through other religious works such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship*, Søren Kierkegaard's *Provocations*, and a rereading of C.S. Lewis' *Surprised by Joy*. After I finish one book, I pick up another book that has either been recommended to me or deals with a topic I am curious about. There are also the numerous readings for and discussions in Thinking Theologically taught by Professor Jeronic that help me reach one or several epiphanies every class period. A few of them have made their way into this essay, but many of them have not because they deal with context outside the scope of this particular writing piece. I have also been finding numerous articles, videos, and other forms of explanations or debates online about various controversial passages in the Bible, humanitarian issues, and questions that concern God's existence, such as the question of creation, which I mentioned before, and how God can be merciful and just simultaneously. A severely condensed answer I have found to the latter question is simply that mercy is in fact

necessary for justice to exist; just as punishment is sometimes the just response, sometimes mercy is the just response.

Besides reading, I have been talking to others about their experiences with God and their relationships with Him or their reasons for not believing in Him. One such conversation led me to the question of justice and mercy as mentioned above. Another one led me to begin questioning the value or relevance of fasting. This person I was talking to pointed out that in the Bible, Jesus never says fasting is necessary or unnecessary; instead, when He addresses it, He talks about fasting as if it is a given that people will do so. Having never fasted before, I began to do research to try to understand its place in my life. I finally felt God telling me to try it. Sometimes the best way to understand the purpose of something is through experience. So from one Friday evening until the next Sunday morning, approximately 34 hours, I ate nothing and had only water. There were several things I came to realize during this experience. First, I understood why fasting should be accompanied with much prayer. It seems to be that if it's not, it's simply a matter of exercising self-control and the spiritual benefits are limited. A second thing I realized occurred when I went to bed Saturday night and noted that I was beyond excited for when I would wake up the next morning and be able to eat. At that point, I had an epiphany. I wanted to reach a point with God where I went to bed as excited to be spiritually fed the next morning as I was that night for the physical food I would have when I woke up.

Interestingly enough, to me at least, my conception of beauty has drastically changed. I now look around at others and see beauty everywhere. I have become less concerned with makeup, dressing to the T, whether my hair can be long and voluptuous, and essentially looking like our culture's definition of ideal beauty. As a result, I have a higher self-esteem and a more genuine awareness and greater appreciation of the beauty that surrounds me.

At every other point in my life, I have found the most joy in reading novels of some nature that provided an escape from this world into another one. For the first time in my life, the only novel I'm in the middle of I haven't actually read in a couple months, because these books and resources dealing with God and other facets of reality have been much more fulfilling and interesting. The contentment and happiness that I have found these last several months has been unmatched by any period of my life before. Things that used to set me off, now often don't even make me flinch. Those people I used to be bothered by, I now see through a perspective of love and understanding.

Becoming closer to God has made me more acutely aware of my own faults, and by extension I realized that much of my judgments of others had come about by me comparing my strengths to their weaknesses. Being aware of my own weaknesses, I now see that often those who I had judged have strengths in those areas where I am weak. This has not only helped me love others more, but has also helped me understand better how we all have a place in this world and in the church where we can help most. There is no reason to try to fulfill a role that I am not strong in and no shame to step up in a situation where I know that my strengths lie. The point is in realizing that we all have different strengths that are of equal value and are put to their best use when they are accurately acknowledged.

One of my biggest weaknesses which I have a feeling I am always going to be working on is talking to people I do not know. When a pastor announces in church to turn to the people around you and say, "Hi," or give them a Sabbath hug, it takes all my strength not to all of a sudden disappear with the sudden "need" to make a phone call or go to the bathroom. When we are told to pray with someone by us, and I am on the end of my group with someone alone next to me, more often than not I have chosen to pray with my group over asking the person who is

sitting alone to join us. This is perhaps one of my biggest faults and one that I think is going to take time, prayer, stepping out of my comfort zone, and the development of a new perspective to significantly improve on. I think the first step might be in figuring out exactly why I am hesitant to talk to them, or perhaps I should simply go straight into pushing past these comfort zones to reach out more socially in these areas since I already know I should.

I do not know where I am heading when I graduate in five weeks. God keeps telling me to wait. He seems to be telling me the answer will come but for some reason or another I am not ready or the time is not right for me to know it. The last four years this uncertainty of the future has plagued me. Now, except for a few rare days here and there, I am taking it all in stride, trusting that God has a plan for me. I make sure to keep pursuing different paths so that doors do not close on me, if they're not supposed to, but I will wait for God's guidance before I fully step through one of them.

As I head into the future, I am excited for all that I will learn about God and the growth of our relationship and my personal being that lies ahead. Even in the times when bad things have happened this semester, for instance when my computer decided to crash and not work for several weeks in the midst of this project, I was able to take it all in stride and not let it faze me. I have strength and happiness, and freedom from the things of this world that I didn't have before. Opening myself up to this relationship with a loving God has been the best thing I have ever done.

Appendix

Proof: Greater Probability of an Intelligent Creator than of an Unintelligent First Cause

We will use the Probability Formula, where the

$$\text{Probability of an Event} = \frac{\text{Number of Favorable Outcomes}}{\text{Total Number of Possible Outcomes}}$$

Then, when trying to determine the probability of an intelligent creator, the number of favorable outcomes = Number of Possible *Intelligent Beings* with the Capacity to Create/Cause Everything. And, when determining the probability of an unintelligent cause the number of favorable outcomes = Number of Possible *Unintelligent Somethings* with the Capacity to Create/Cause Everything. For both formulas, the Total Number of Possible Outcomes = Number of All Possible Things (intelligent or unintelligent) with the Capacity to Create/Cause Everything. So, the formulas would be set up like the following:

$$\text{Probability of an Intelligent Creator} = \frac{\text{Number of Possible } \mathbf{Intelligent\ Beings} \text{ with the Capacity to Create/Cause Everything}}{\text{Number of All Possible Things (intelligent or unintelligent) with the Capacity to Create/Cause Everything}}$$

$$\text{Probability of Unintelligent Cause} = \frac{\text{Number of Possible } \mathbf{Unintelligent\ Somethings} \text{ with the Capacity to Create/Cause Everything}}{\text{Number of All Possible Things (intelligent or unintelligent) with the Capacity to Create/Cause Everything.}}$$

Though we cannot count the number of possible things that have the capacity to create or cause everything else to come into existence, whether intelligent or unintelligent. Based on the information available at the present time that there are many ways to imagine

possible intelligent beings that could create, and so far no sufficient way to describe how even one unintelligent something could have caused everything from before the big bang until now, there are currently more countable ways possible intelligent beings could exist with the capacity to create/cause everything else than there are possible unintelligent somethings with the capacity to create/cause everything else to exist. Therefore, the probability of an intelligent creator is greater than the probability of an unintelligent first cause. □