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Death and Life by a Thousand Cuts: Lessons Learned from the Deconstructive/Reconstructive Journey

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Questioning one's faith and beliefs about God, church, and their religion can be an excruciating experience. Since we all have an innate need to belong, feel safe, and be loved, we can be reticent to question and doubt our faith due to fear of rejection and isolation from two major figures: God and the church. For many people, it is not easy to separate the two. For some, the fear of losing God's love, even momentarily, is terrifying. For others, the thought of leaving their beliefs behind may also feel like they have to leave their religious tribe behind, which can be just as anxiety-provoking. Yet, there comes a point where a person must simply choose to live life authentically. Feeling the lure of God to move in a certain theological direction may at times take precedence over the risk of suffering the social consequences of exclusion. Following the leading of God's voice may also take precedence over pretending and living a lie according to other people's religious projections of how one should live and what one should believe. This article explores the journey of a therapist and ordained pastor who chose to leave the comfort of his religious beliefs and faith community and shares vital lessons learned throughout the process.

KEYWORDS deconstruction, doubt, faith, reconstruction, spirituality

For inquisitive, status-quo offending folks like me, being in the church has been like staying in a long-term abusive relationship. The problem is I love the girl so much. At least, I think it's love. Maybe it's infatuation. I'm not sure. Anyway, I stay because I have this stubborn hope she changes. I dream of being the valiant hero who comes along, sweeps her off her feet, and dramatically transforms her into the stunning princess she is meant to be. Unfortunately, time after time, she abuses me. She verbally assaults me. She tries to control me. She manipulates me. She stabs me in the heart with a rusty and serrated knife. But like a lovesick idiot, I keep coming back. I think, "Maybe tomorrow it will be different. Maybe, tomorrow she'll love me for who I am, in all my theological quirkiness." But she doesn't. Not too long ago, after some reflection, I finally made the tough decision: I decided we needed a break.

After many years of incessant doubts, deep reflections, and inner angst, I finally had enough gusto to take a break from my passionate lover. The decision to take a break was made in an instant, but the deconstructive process had been going on for a while before that. For a long time, I have felt like I have been trudging through a murky pond with alien-looking fish taking nips at my legs while stepping around jagged, rusty nails at the bottom. It is never easy to leave behind what you consider to be a part of your identity. It certainly wasn't for me.

To be honest, I am still in the process of deconstruction. I think everyone is, whether we realize it or not. Death and deconstruction are the water we all swim in. We suffer the cuts of a thousand deconstructive deaths in a lifetime. And through those cuts, reconstruction, transformation, and new life can emerge. Some of us can deny death's deconstructive sting by engaging our superb defense mechanisms. But, whether we like it or not, nothing is static.

Nothing remains the same. All of life is fluid. We are on the roller coaster of life and death, moving swiftly on tracks that are laid out ahead of us only a few feet at a time.

Like many other God-lovers who are outside-the-box thinkers, I have been told I am going to spend eternity in hell. People have shouted at me, calling me a heretic and a false teacher and telling me I have no right to teach others about the Bible. Some have told me I am deceived and probably have demons in me that need to be cast out. Others have scolded me and confidently declared God was angry at me. Recently, I wrote a book called *Divine Echoes* (Karris, 2018) that sought to investigate, deconstruct, and reconstruct petitionary prayer. I gave it to the pastors at the new church I was attending. I was hoping it would invite dialogue, but instead I got passive-aggressively kicked out of the church. That was the final, frayed, and delicately-laced straw that helped me make my decision to take a long-overdue break from religious life as I knew it.

The rest of this article will explore lessons I have learned at this stage of my deconstructive journey. I have written them for two reasons: First, so I can wrestle with and reflect on my journey and integrate what I have learned so far; and second, because I hope that it can benefit you, the reader, in some way. Keep in mind that what I write are my lessons. They are my truths. In the end, I hope you come up with your own truths. Take in the good, spit out the bad. There are enough replicas and automatons in the world. Ultimately, my desire is for you to be true to who you are and where Love is leading you.

Lesson #1: Disorientation and Pain Suck!

When Montu opened in 1996 at Busch Gardens in Florida, it was the tallest and fastest roller coaster in the world. There are moments on that ride during which you are completely inverted. You will experience 3.8 times the force of gravity (Sehlinger & Testa, 2015). At the time of Montu's unveiling, there was also a Nile crocodile exhibit below part of the track, making the ride both visually stunning and terrifying as you plummeted toward the crocodile pit. It was truly a sight to behold and a treacherously amazing experience. Oh, and did I mention that Montu was the name of an ancient Egyptian god who was known as *the god of war*?

The experience of those who are struggling in their faith and who feel like they are at war with God (and his representatives) is often like being on an unpredictable, out-of-control, zigzagging roller coaster. At some points along the way, people can feel a profound heaviness, as though pinned down by a high g-force. They can feel overwhelming dread as they look down at the hungry crocodiles wanting to eat away at a hopeful and stable future. At other points, they can feel steady, secure, and optimistic about the spiritual journey ahead, as though rolling down a straight, smooth path.

I remember when I left, or rather ran, from a Christian cult I was in over a decade ago. I embarked on a fearful zigzag to an unexplored destination. I followed a friend of mine who went to a liberal Christian college ("liberal" at least compared to the denomination I was in). That feat was monumental. You see, I had really wanted to be the first person on both sides of my family to go to college. I had a dream that I would learn, grow, and avoid the ignorance, death, and dysfunction that infested my family. But my authoritarian pastor had told me, in an emphatic manner, that I shouldn't go to school. He told me he needed me for ministry and was concerned I would be brainwashed. So I obliged. Who was I to go against the man whom I naively perceived at the time to be *the Lord's anointed*? Therefore, going to college was my first act of rebellion. While it felt scary at the time, it also felt really, really good.

Leaving the familiar would wind up being the best decision I ever made. But it also left me disorientated. One brisk night during the first week of school, I was on the unusually cold

and hard floor of my dorm room in the fetal position. I felt like I was going out of my mind. I was sobbing uncontrollably. I was distraught and scared. I was frantically questioning everything. I didn't know what was real. I didn't know whom to trust. I didn't know what truth meant. God? Who the hell was that? I thought to myself, *Am I going insane? Will I be locked up in a mental institution like my brother?* That was my first of many panic attacks.

Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, writes about disorientation: "It constitutes a dismantling of the old, known world and a relinquishment of safe, reliable confidence in God's good creation. The movement of dismantling includes a rush of negativities, including rage, resentment, guilt, shame, isolation, despair, hatred, and hostility" (1984, p. 51). Basically, I entered into the wilderness where the wolves of deconstruction were nipping at my heels. I was entering into the chasm of the unknown. I was entering into the woes of grief and the kaleidoscope of overwhelming feelings I could neither name nor tame. The state of disorientation, which is a sign that change came barging through my life's door, would visit me often, especially in the early stages of questioning my reality, faith, identity, and anything else that wasn't bolted to the ground.

Starting down the deconstructive road was also painful. According to the latest neuroscience, we all have an innate need to belong, feel safe, and be loved. Our nervous system encodes loneliness, isolation, and rejection as primal threats (Cozolino, 2006). Loneliness and isolation can send anxiety and stress hormones rippling through our brains and bodies with devastating consequences to our immune systems and overall well-being. Social rejection registers in the same part of the brain as physical pain. When we start questioning God and foundational doctrine, we usually fear rejection and isolation from two major figures: God and the church. For many people, it's not easy to separate the two. I know it wasn't for me.

One of the reasons why leaving faith, and more specifically the community of faith, is so painful is because we have evolved to have tribally wired brains. Back in the day, we belonged to groups and tribes. We sang the songs, followed the rules, maintained our roles, and respected and obeyed our leaders. No one dared to deviate from group norms because that could leave the tribe vulnerable to attacks. Also, to think or act differently could get you kicked out of the tribe. Being expelled from the group was basically a death sentence. You couldn't survive alone. Therefore, we kept the status quo. That tricky tribal-brain never went away.

Our tribal-brains are one of the reasons why it's so hard to stop singing the songs, start breaking the rules, change our roles as docile sheep, and disobey the religious leaders in our lives. To stray from the group brings enormous anxiety. It certainly did for me. Then, throw the tribal God into the mix (usually a punishing, angry, and dissonantly loving deity) and now you have double the anxiety. But as disorienting and painful as it can be, we know we must follow our hearts believing it is in God's loving hands. That's what I did. The pain of remaining with my group seemed to outweigh the pain of breaking free to explore the unknown. Step-by-step and inch-by-inch, I made my way into the wilderness. But I realized fairly quickly I couldn't do it alone.

Lesson #2: The Blessing of an Unholy Huddle

In sports, players regularly form a tight circle to encourage one another and strategize about how to advance against the opponents and win the game. In your unholy huddle, a team of like-minded people can listen to your story and encourage you through the struggles that lie ahead (Karris, 2017). They are not the uptight, holy rollers, with seething judgment waiting to spew out of their mouth for any perceived unchristian infraction. They are fellow journeyers who travel with you to the unholy abyss and embrace the so-called *unclean* aspects of who you

are. They will help you grieve losses, maintain your balance, and move forward to cross the goal line of healing and integration. With empathy and compassion, your teammates will help you strategize for success; extinguish harsh judgment, shaming, and criticism; and celebrate the victories along the way.

During my deconstruction process, I realized I was bleeding out and needed other people to come alongside me. The utter aloneness was excruciating. The occasional bouts of heaviness felt unbearable. The suffocating fear of the unknown was brutal. It was crucial for me to be around people experienced in the areas of faith, deconstruction, reconstruction, loss, and life. I realized I could not deconstruct alone and became desperate to find community.

I quieted the fear of letting others in and shared my struggle with as many people as I could. I sought the wisdom and the listening ears of friends, professors, and even a couple of people I barely knew. Not everyone had good advice or even the capacity to listen without making the conversation about him or herself, but the experience did help me learn to distinguish safe and comforting people from oblivious and cold ones. I started building a network of supportive friends, which was beneficial not only for my season of disequilibrium but for the rest of my life.

Rogers (1994) was right when he said, “Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone” (p. 114). Years after I first heard them, his words continue to ring true for me.

The mind’s need to tell the story after a distressing event is like the body’s need to spike a fever after an infection. Just as our bodies seek to heal and restore themselves, so do our minds. Telling my story to others helped me integrate my thoughts and emotions. Because I had so many thoughts—some of which were contradictory—and mixed emotions during my deconstructive process, my mind undertook a mission to manage my mayhem and make sense of it all. Telling my story to others helped accomplish that mission. Sharing my story also helped me recalibrate my spirituality with who I felt God was calling me to be in the world.

The qualities of a caring friend that Nouwen (2004) identifies also describe the characteristics of what I call the unholy huddle. An unholy huddle is a group of people who, “instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand . . . [who] can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion . . . [who] can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement . . . [who] can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness” (p. 38). Now that is the type of people that I needed. Thankfully, I found a few of those. Their witness—their *witness*—changed my life for the better, and it continues to do so.

For some people, the idea of being vulnerable in an unholy huddle conjures up thoughts of biting into a lime. They learned a long time ago that people are sour and hurtful, not sweet and safe, and it is better to comfort themselves than risk rejection from others. If the thought of reaching out to other people causes you to cringe, I completely understand. Nevertheless, you and I are biologically wired for intimacy—we’re not meant to live life alone. Just like Frodo needed Samwise and Gandalf, Batman needed Superman (even though he tried to kill him), and the apostle Paul needed Barnabas and Mark, we are also going to need journeying partners as we proceed through some of the painful and disorienting experiences that are inevitable in the deconstructive and reconstructive life.

Lesson #3: Mindful of Displacement

The food our mother prepared came out of the oven—and was thrown violently down on the kitchen floor by my father. Our mother, furious with rage, found a large knife in the kitchen drawer. They began yelling and cursing at each other. The venom of their callous words poisoned their already-bruised hearts. They saw each other as enemies. Little did they know that their perpetual wars would leave lifelong wounds on innocent bystanders.

Our mom told my two brothers and I to go outside. We ran out the front door. It wasn't the time to question. It was time to simply obey. As the sound of two angry monsters engaging in an epic battle reached us, we looked at each other, silent with shock and disbelief. We were scared. We didn't know what was going to happen. Then our mother, fierce and wielding that knife, chased our father out of the house. I was six when that happened. That is one of the only memories I have of my mother and father being together—if you can even call that “being together.” Unfortunately, the death of my family as I knew it was not the only death I would experience.

As you can guess, my parents divorced after the incident with the knife. The odds were stacked against them, anyway. They had twins when they were eighteen (I am one of them). A year later, they had my younger brother. That makes three kids at nineteen. They lasted six years together, which was remarkable considering the circumstances. But they divorced. And it certainly was not a friendly one. Their deep love for one another quickly turned into a tenacious hatred. Unfortunately, the greatest casualties of warring parents are usually the children.

While my brothers have had their own perceptions and reactions to our past (one of which has schizophrenia and a life-imprisonment for murder), I can only share my own. I am not sure what I thought when I was six. I didn't have an adult brain, so my thoughts were certainly not integrated. I do remember fear being my predominant emotion. I remember being divided. Whose side was I supposed to be on? Who was I supposed to love more? What did I do with my dad picking us up on the weekend and calling my mother every name in the book? What did I do with my mom periodically keeping us from our dad just to spite him? I was afraid. I was confused. I felt divided. I had to shut down and hide my emotions. I had to placate whichever parent I was with. The potential loss of love was too great to risk being honest.

Not only was I divided within myself, but there was an even greater barrier between my parents and me. Their hate for one another blinded them, keeping them from seeing me as an innocent child who was in need. I was desperate for affection and for them to compassionately listen to my hurting heart. But instead of seeing me as a person, they saw me as a canvas at which to throw their verbal vomit. The focus of each on hurting the other diminished the already small presence they were able to offer to me and my brothers.

But their conflict was hardly the worst thing about my childhood. I had a mother who did the best she could, but she was addicted to drugs as far back as I could remember. She would eventually die from a drug overdose. I had a father who was mentally, emotionally, and physically abusive. He never told me he loved me. He never told me he was proud of me. He never showed me affection. I can't tell you how many times I was told, “You're a f***ing loser just like your mother,” “You're a lazy piece of sh*t,” “You're weak,” and, “You're clueless,” besides other wonderful life-affirming phrases (note the sarcasm). I had a step-father who was a violent biker, who would eventually go to prison for decades. (Hmm. I wonder where my shame infestation and my suicidal tendencies came from?)

Okay. Okay. This is not a Lifetime movie. So why am I sharing this? I think family and faith are inextricably wound together. As I look back, I can see that while I was angry that the church profoundly hurt me and let me down, I was hurt and wounded way before that. The church was just a place where I displaced all of my enormous pain and anger because of the existential realities of my life. That is not to say the church, or more specifically people in the church, didn't threaten me, reject me, let me down, or seek to control me. But the pain and lostness I felt in the deep recesses of my heart pre-existed them.

Besides whining at the church and harshly judging Christians for being jerks (which I did a lot of), I found myself reflecting on my early childhood deprivation. Unconsciously, I realized I wanted the church to become the parents I never had. I unfairly projected my need for the love, acceptance, attunement, encouragement, and nurturing I never received from my parents onto a bunch of imperfect, wounded people.

Not only did I realize I was displacing my unresolved, negative emotions onto the church because of my parents, but there were other existential realities causing me pain. I was hurt about life not being fair. I was hurt about my brother rotting in a prison. I was hurt about the crappy decisions I made, which caused me and others heartache. I was hurt about how hard I had to work just to inch my way through life. I was hurt about people in power marginalizing and oppressing others. I was hurt about my heart getting broken in failed romantic relationships. I was hurt that nothing lasts—that everything is fluid and changes repeatedly over time. I was just hurt, and someone had to pay. Someone had to be the scapegoat.

I slowly realized I was dumping my hurt on the church. I unconsciously expected the church could fix me—or provide me with the idealized family I never had. The problem was I set the standards way too high. The payment for my hurt was more than the church could afford. No one could fill the void that was left in the wake of neglectful and abusive parents and an unfair, ever-changing, and sometimes harsh existence—not even the church. Once I started realizing this truth, my heart shifted toward the church and the people in it.

Lesson #4: Empathy for Monsters and Forgiveness for Myself

A long time ago, I was at a United Pentecostal Church (UPC) conference. The UPC was the denomination I was connected to for a while. They were strict, no-nonsense, Holy-Ghost-stammering Christian folk who took faith and the Bible extremely seriously. Women couldn't cut their hair because it was a sin. I couldn't have facial hair or long hair because supposedly it said not to in the Bible. Only those who spoke in tongues were saved. According to them, Trinitarians were going to hell. At this conference, I had a conversation with a well-known preacher. I thought I was in the presence of royalty. I was so nervous I could barely speak.

After some small talk, I briefly mentioned that I drank wine at a wedding. Being a fairly new Christian, I didn't think much of it. Then his eyes began to widen with a fierce sternness. His cheeks began to flush. He looked at me with his piercing eyes and firmly told me I was in danger of hellfire. I was shocked. My heart began to race wildly. I immediately began to fear for my life. It was as if God himself spoke to me. The thought of going to hell terrified me. I knew at that moment I would never drink wine again. His words affected me for a very long time. Even after eventually leaving that cult, it took me years before I was comfortable drinking wine without thinking God was going to violently punish me.

As I began my journey of deconstruction, I realized that pastors, teachers, and other Christians are like emperors with no clothes. They are just like me—imperfect, wounded, searching, pretending, longing, and anxious, with a dose of relational ineptness. After pondering their fragile finitude, I started experiencing empathy for them. I began to look at that well-

known preacher with new eyes. Sure, years after the incident I was still angry at him. He used his power to instill fear in my heart. He made a loving God into a monster and pit that God against me. But what was his backstory? Why did he speak to me that way? Did someone speak to him that way when he was growing up in the faith?

Please hear me: I am not condoning or excusing what he did. I am not saying it was okay. I am merely trying to withhold harsh judgment and empathize with him. Empathy requires withholding judgment and seeks to enter into the world of the other. That is what I tried to do. I also recognized my own inner Pharisee and lust for power. I reflected on my dysfunctional background and how that negatively (and positively) shaped me into the person I was. I then imagined what he may have gone through to become the person he became.

I wondered what nature/nurture factors contributed to his being an uptight, judgmental, Pharisee-type Christian. While I can only speculate, perhaps he was never shown grace and tenderness by his parents. Perhaps when he was learning to be a disciple, he was not shown love and compassion by other Christians. Perhaps he felt deep shame and had tons of insecurities that led him to pursue a prestigious position traveling the world as a preacher. Perhaps exerting power over others made him feel special. Who knows. But the more I reflected on how he was shaped to portray God like a vindictive monster, the more empathy I felt. I also wondered how terrifying it is for him to feel like he can go to hell for not being perfect. I thought about how tragic it is that he cannot feel loved and accepted by a compassionate, forgiving, and merciful God.

Forgiveness became a sacred, life-giving discipline for me that came naturally after I began exercising my empathy muscles. There came a point when I didn't want to have a boulder on my shoulder and be bogged down with a negative and judgmental attitude toward the church. I didn't want to have unfinished business, hate, and unforgiveness festering in my heart. I was tired of my attitude—always deconstructing something and never offering something positive and empowering in its place. I decided to research forgiveness and practice it—not for the people who hurt me, but for myself. As some wise person once said, “Not forgiving someone is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

Forgiveness. What is it? Forgiveness is not forgetting, not pretending, and not a fancy word for psychological suppression. Forgiveness is a prayerful process of surrendering to God's will and making a choice to release the debt we feel the injurer owes us because of how deeply he or she hurt us. True forgiveness does not deny but accepts the full impact of the injuring partner's choices and decides to let go and let God perform His transformational work in our lives. Forgiveness is also a powerful gift from God that releases us from the poison and bitterness of unforgiveness. Forgiveness is a gift unto ourselves.

Although it has taken years, I have finally forgiven my parents, my step-father, religious fundamentalists, God, life, myself, and anyone else who has ever hurt me. I realized that if God has forgiven all my sins (prior to the cross, by the way) and continues to do so, then how can I withhold forgiveness from anyone else? Even after all my wanderings and the continual shutting of my ears to God's loving voice, God always gives me another chance. Moment to moment, God offers me Her forgiveness and healing graces. While I have not reconciled and become close companions with all those who have caused me pain, I have made a choice to forgive them and set myself free. And that is the point. It is not about those who have hurt me; it is about loving myself enough to let go of some of the pain and hurt that keeps me from being my true self.

Jesus did not command us to forgive to make life hard but rather to emancipate us from a hard life. Forgiveness propels us toward a future where we easily express and feel love. The author of Hebrews lovingly encourages us to “make every effort to live in peace with everyone” and cautions us “that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many” (Heb. 12:14–15, NIV). If we choose to harbor the bitter root and negative energy of unforgiveness, then we waste additional energy to keep those destructive elements at bay so they don’t harm us and other people. What if you forgave? What if you released yourself from the negativity and instead used the freed-up emotional energy in positive ways? You could use that energy to love yourself, God, and others with much greater capacity. There is no greater joy than to love and to be loved freely!

Lesson #5: Love is the Greatest

In Matthew 22:36, an inquisitive expert in religious law asked Jesus, “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” In other words, for those of us who profess to believe and trust in Almighty God, what is our priority in this life?

Jesus answered boldly and without hesitation, “Love doctrines and debating, judging, and condemning others with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.”

Oops, I’m sorry! I was quoting from the Legalistic Religious Bible. Forgive me; that is not the version I wanted to quote from. Jesus really said, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:37–39, NIV).

The greatest of all the commandments (and there are a lot of them) is an invitation to love with all your being. Throughout history, particularly through the mystics, God has shouted through a megaphone that life is all about vibrant and intimate relationships that last into eternity.

After many years of embracing the never-ending deconstructive/reconstructive process, I have come to realize that, even with my unholy huddle beside me, I have to find my own way and my own truth. I have to leave the place of comfort and the ease of conformity to come to my own conclusions. I have to continually punch fear in the face and trust that God is in me, all around me, and guiding me toward ever-increasing wholeness and truth—and, more importantly, into ever-increasing love. Amid the myriad doctrines, theologies, plans of salvation, promised paths of perpetual peace, and the over 31,000 verses in the Bible, I have chosen to focus on love—God-love, others-love, and self-love.

Unlike the typical crosses we see in churches in the West, the historic Lorraine Cross has two horizontal crossbeams and one long vertical beam. Although there are several interpretations of the design that point to the work of Christ on the cross, for me the design also symbolizes the threefold relational pathway essential to a life worth living:

1. The vertical pathway symbolizes the relationship we need with God.
2. The first horizontal pathway symbolizes the relationship we need with others and creation.
3. The second horizontal pathway symbolizes the relationship we need with ourselves.

I believe the degree to which I am lovingly connected on the vertical and horizontal pathways is the degree to which I will experience emotional and spiritual health and vitality. One without the others results in a lopsided journey, and I will lose out on valuable relational resources for growth, healing, and transformation.

Love, as I see it, is not merely humanistic. True love encompasses the biblical qualities in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7. The fruit of that love is not some foolish portrayal defined by “liberals” (whatever that term means); it is the fruit described in Galatians 5:22–23. That love will also be a perfect kind of love. What does that perfect love look like? It is the kind of love that prays for and is kind to the ungrateful, the wicked, and those we consider our (and God’s) enemies (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:35).

It is the kind of love portrayed in one of the only parabolic pictures of the Father told by Jesus: the story of the Prodigal Father (Luke 15:11–32). The motherly father in the prodigal story is a dad who obsesses over his son and is constantly longing and looking for him. He is a dad who hugs and kisses his child. Instead of giving his son a history lesson on what he has done wrong or scolding him in public, which would invariably have pushed the son further down into a pit of shame and despair, the father reminds him of his true identity. The father gives him royal garb and proudly calls him “this *son* of mine” (v. 24, emphasis mine). And the father knows intuitively that his son needs a coat, slippers, and a ring to give him an extra reminder of who he really is. God is like this father. And that blows my freakin’ mind and explodes my heart wide open.

Love, as I envision it, is considered weakness by those who are violence-prone and value propositions over people. Nevertheless, that love is fierce. It is strong. It is powerful. It pierces and transforms every part of who I am—if I let it. It feels like a hot cauldron of liquid judgment pouring down one’s mouth, burning the esophagus and singeing the heart—especially to those hell-bent on oppressing and marginalizing others. It is the strongest force on this planet. After religion is no more and all the hay and stubble of humanity’s religious creations is burned up, all that will remain is love.

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