

COLLEGE TRANSITION INITIATIVE

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AFFIRMING DOUBT: HELPING STUDENTS ASK AND ANSWER TOUGH QUESTIONS

By Derek Melleby

Introduction

My wife and I led a team of college students to Thailand in June 2005. We were there to help with the rebuilding efforts after the Tsunami ripped through Southeast Asia in 2004. I had never seen devastation like this before. Our guide took us first to the place where they brought the dead bodies. A memorial signifying all of the countries that had lost people was stretched across one of the outer walls. While the team gazed at the memorial and took pictures, two new bodies were delivered by pick-up truck. Immediately, the tone and posture of the team changed, and the trip took on even deeper meaning. We were surrounded by death and destruction and our “mission” was to bring hope and light into a very dark place. This wasn’t going to be easy.

Not only did we see villages destroyed and families in pain, but we also encountered another issue that we weren’t ready for: rampant prostitution. We visited a beach resort community deemed “the pedophile capital of the world.” Men were paying thousands of dollars to have sex with children, right in our midst. I was personally solicited a number of times by men and women looking to make money. We learned of an orphanage director who was offered \$50,000 or more for children age 10 or younger.

How could a place so beautiful on the outside, be so ugly on the “inside?” If God is good, why was there so much pain in the world, especially among innocent children? Where was God the day the Tsunami hit the coastline, and the countless other days that sexual “tsunamis” devastate lives of young girls?



I have learned to view doubting and even questioning God as a good and crucial aspect of discipleship. Doubt is not the antithesis to faith, but rather, having doubts and asking tough questions about God is vital to Christian maturation.

As you can imagine, for the first few days in Thailand, having confidence, faith and trust in the God of the Bible was difficult. Sure, we had all asked the philosophical, abstract question: “How can God be *good* with all of the pain and suffering in the world?” We even had arrived at some satisfying answers. But our questions were asked in Bible studies in suburban Pennsylvania, not in tragedy stricken Southeast Asia, and not surrounded by this kind of intense pain and suffering. Put simply: we began to have our doubts about the God we worshipped. We voiced these doubts in our conversations, prayers and journals.

Since the leader of the team (me!) had similar feelings, space was created for students to express their thoughts and concerns. An amazing thing happened: working among the people, being honest about our doubts and experiencing everyday grace, we slowly and more convincingly clung to the promises of Scripture and the hope of the living God. God was indeed *good* and we were given eyes to see the fingerprints of God’s goodness even after the devastating wave of destruction. We saw it in the eyes of a grandmother who had lost her grandchildren, but faithfully attended worship each Sunday. We heard it in countless stories of families being reunited and strengthened and we watched them cling to the relationships that mattered most.

We were all changed by the experience, to be sure, but there was one change I wasn’t expecting: I learned to view doubting and even questioning God as a good and crucial aspect of discipleship. Doubt is not the antithesis to faith, but rather, having doubts and asking tough questions about God is vital to Christian maturation.

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– Alister McGrath

Student Gripes

Each year, I have the privilege of walking with students as they grow in faith. The college years are a time of settling in on central convictions that will give shape to students’ lives for the rest of their lives. It is during this time that students take ownership of what they believe and ask the big questions about life, the universe and everything in the context of a competitive learning community. For the first time, Christian students are forced to wrestle with tough questions and take stands for Truth. Many students cave under the pressure. Every year, I hear the following from Christian students:



Learning and growing only comes through asking good questions and searching for answers. Be open and honest about your own doubts and questions.

"In youth group, I wasn't supposed to ask questions, but to have faith." I have heard countless stories of students who complain that every time they tried to ask difficult questions they were either ridiculed by their peers or reprimanded by their parents and youth pastor. They were told that their doubting and questioning was getting in the way of true faith and that God wants them to believe "blindly." They were to take "leaps of faith" to prove their loyalty to Jesus. Not every student comes to college having had this experience, of course, but there are plenty who do.

"No one ever told me there were so many intellectual challenges to the Christian faith." How can a good God allow suffering? How do we know that what the Bible says is true? Isn't it arrogant to think that Jesus is the only way to God? All of the intellectual challenges to the Christian faith that students face in college are not new, but most students hear them for the first time in college, away from home, amidst academic and peer pressure. What's more, most students have not had

the opportunity to articulate their faith in their own words. The "new" challenges to the faith combined with the sometimes inadequate preparation by parents and youth workers is often too much to bear.

"If I have doubts, I must not have faith, so I can do whatever I want." This is when it can get a bit scary. The Christian faith provides a moral code for students. When faith begins to break down, and students slowly take steps away from it, they no longer have a moral code to guide their actions. The current college experience provides students the freedom to pretty much do whatever they want. It includes a cultural landscape where almost anything is permissible and accessible. Immorality can sometimes be the norm. The excuse of questioning faith is often used to justify immoral activity. This is possible, again, because many students have been taught that having doubts and questions goes against faith. The reasoning goes like this: "I have doubts and questions about God, I must not be a Christian, why shouldn't I get drunk and be sexually promiscuous?"

The Needed Response

This is often a very difficult and painful experience for the students, as well as for those charged with helping them through it. On the one hand, doubting and questioning can be fruitful, leading to deeper growth. On the other hand, doubting and questioning can be confusing and frustrating, and many students walk away from the faith. How can we help students during this time? Is there anything that parents and youth workers can do while their children and students wrestle with why they believe what they believe? Here are a few suggestions:

First, model a life of life-long learning.

Being a disciple of Jesus means that we are forever students. Learning and growing only comes through asking good questions and searching for answers. Be open and honest about your own doubts and questions. When did God seem far from you? When was God close? What big questions did you ask when you were a young adult, trying to figure out life on your own? Explore parts of the Bible (and there are many!) where Godly people cry out to God and doubt God's existence. Have students read the Psalms, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Job and the Prophets through this "lens" and notice how doubting and questioning is affirmed by Scripture. It is okay to take your doubts and questions directly to the throne room of God. God will hear you. God wants us to tell him what is on our hearts. And, ironically, the process itself often begins to provide us with answers (just ask Job!).

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Second, create a safe place for students to ask questions and articulate their faith in their own words.

I fear that this is not happening enough. While doing research for his seminal book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, a book that explores what teens actually believe about God, sociologist Christian Smith made an interesting observation. In an interview

for *Books & Culture*, Smith said that one of the biggest surprises of his research came from listening to the way in which students responded to his questions. Smith would ask students what they believed God was like, and hundreds of students, many from evangelical youth groups, would respond quickly: "No one ever asked me that before." The multitude of students responding in this way shocked Smith. Does anyone care what students actually believe?

We can get caught up in simply spoon feeding students truth so much that we

forget to take time to see if any of it has been chewed and digested. Maybe we are apprehensive to hear and learn that students are not believing what we think they should be (that was the primary point of Smith's book). Students need space to be heard and to begin to put their faith into their own words. What students articulate may not be as audible as we would like. It may sound a lot like "baby talk" at first. It is crucial, however, that teenagers have a place to do this while they are surrounded by people who love them, especially before they head off to college.

Third, be patient with students who are wrestling with faith, affirm them in the struggle, but get them to see what good and honest doubting looks like. There is a difference. Doubting and questioning is not an excuse for immoral behavior. As students realize that doubting and questioning is actually part of discipleship, they should be slower to throw it all away. Hopefully, “finding themselves” may not and should not include choices that have destructive consequences. Let students know that some of the best times of growth in life come out of wrestling with God. But, there are unhealthy ways to respond to this wrestling match. Explain to students that they do not want to leave college with deep scars.

Doubt should be expected this side of the new Heavens and new Earth and we have a responsibility to be open and honest with students. In his book *Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Faith*, Oxford University

professor Alister McGrath suggests: “Doubt is probably a permanent feature of the Christian life. It’s like some kind of spiritual growing pain. Sometimes it recedes into the background; at other times it comes to the forefront, making its presence felt with a vengeance.” The college years are a time when doubt often comes to the forefront, with a vengeance. Helping students to understand that it is a permanent feature of the Christian life is crucial. It’s not easy to walk with students through intense moments of doubting and questioning, but it is rewarding. Most students simply need to be heard, affirmed and cared for. When you approach students with this posture they often, slowly, begin to find satisfying answers and make the Christian faith their own.



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