

FACEBOOK FOR DEAD PEOPLE
AND OTHER ESSAYS

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INTRODUCTION

These essays are the culmination of three years' worth of brainstorming and writing. Written over the course of the past two and a half years, these essays are the result of many re-writes, revisions, additions, and deletions. Some essays have none of the material from the first draft. These essays, each approximately twenty to forty pages in length, combine historical and scientific writing with personal narrative and essay.

The first essay, "It's Not Your Fault, Marie Antoinette," recounts my travels during my three weeks in France when I was nineteen. I stayed with family friends who were kind enough to show me the sights of Paris as well as Normandy, Brittany, and the Loire Valley. I mentally linked the historical sites with my knowledge of French history, particularly the French Revolution. I wanted to connect the present with the past to show that history is still alive and that the experience of history is unique to the individual. How we understand and see history varies on our preconceived notions, and unlike the attitude of middle- and high-school teachers, history is not a series of immutable facts. Rather, history is a series of interpretations and ideas based on previous writings and primary accounts.

Next, "Facebook for Dead People" examines identity and different ways of constructing that identity. I use my personal experiences with genealogy and my ethnic identity crisis to walk through some of the methods of creating identity: genealogy, DNA testing, heredity, and ethnicity. I look at how we understand who we are through our ancestors and our ethnic background as well as where we find a sense of belonging both in homeland and with other people.

“I’d Like to Talk to You About Jesus” looks at the other side of not belonging—when one is the “other” in his or her hometown. I tell some of my experiences growing up Unitarian Universalist in a Southern Baptist town in the middle of the Bible belt. I was often not accepted for being different, especially as many of my Protestant peers did not understand Unitarian Universalism or told me I was going to hell for not being Christian. To better understand my childhood experiences, I go through the history of evangelicalism in America, from Puritan Massachusetts to the modern-day Christian right. Throughout this essay, I discuss spirituality, religion, and faith as it pertains both to humanity and to myself.

Last but not least, “Acadian, *Cadien*, Cajun” looks at how a group, the Cajuns, have constructed a sense of identity after the Acadian exile in 1755. I discuss how Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Evangeline* has built and supplied a narrative for the Cajuns’ suffering, and the character of *Evangeline* now symbolizes the struggle of a people. I also look into the history of Louisiana and the revival of Cajun culture in the 1960s and Cajuns’ conflicts with Americans, French Creoles, and themselves.

These essays are the culmination of my historical and scientific interests as well as my life experiences. Throughout the essays, I interweave the personal with the factual and alternate between the past and present. I wrote in the style of a creative nonfiction essayist, not a scholar, so these essays are not academic writing. As such, there are no citations within the text, but all sources can be found at the end of the paper. I hope that these essays are enjoyable, informative, and engaging.

IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT, MARIE ANTOINETTE

“History is a great deal closer to poetry than is generally realised: in truth, I think, it is in essence the same.”

--A. L. Rowse

An hour southeast of Paris, there is a town that has, for the most part, remained unchanged over the past thousand years. Virtually untouched by the Revolution and two World Wars, Provins is a testament to life in medieval France. The catacombs, gothic archways, and cathedral stand preserved in time, glimpses back ten centuries ago—rough stone buildings with thatched roofs stand nestled together along uneven walkways, catacombs hidden underneath. A thousand years ago, when this area was a thriving trade center, it served as a crossroads between Italy and northern Europe. The monuments of France exist as living artifacts and remnants of a past that is still with us. One need only walk outside to encounter it.

I'm walking in the First District of Paris with my friend Maëlys, who, for lack of a better word, is my tour guide. She's fluent in American English and is the daughter of an old family friend. Although I read, write, understand, and speak (to an extent) French, she acts as an interpreter, a map-reader, cultural advisor, and most importantly, my friend while I'm here. We're headed to Île de la Cité, where the Notre Dame sits, unimaginably large with its flying buttresses and pendentives and gothic arches, looming over the Seine. It's morning, and we've woken early to get to Ste-Chapelle before the hordes of tourists arrive.

The waves of the Seine glisten in the early morning sun; the bridges arch gracefully over the water, carvings of masks protruding like garish clowns. Although

it's still early, I can feel the sun beating down on my back. The stones under my feet are uneven; my steps twist and fall, my gait awkward and ungainly. The mass of traffic rumbles over them, horns blaring and motorcycles weaving through the cars. We cross the *pont* and line up in the queue forming outside the doors. We find a spot in the shade, behind a Japanese woman wearing a visor with her two sons clad in sneakers. She holds out a plastic container of cherries to them, and they eat quietly.

We aren't the first ones there. The sign outside informs us we've arrived an hour early. Americans in t-shirts emblazoned with logos from other tourist destinations like the Grand Canyon or the Freedom Trail, tennis shoes, and baseball caps sport heavy backpacks and wear enormous cameras hanging from their necks, lens caps still fastened tight—there's nothing to record yet, no memories yet made. I hear loud American English in all directions; I cringe as I tell Maëlys in French, "Today, I am *not* an American." She smiles and nods. Maëlys has tried her best to steer me away from the Ugly American stereotype.

She has helped me pick out a purse that's in style, a faux leather brown bag that she calls my "doctor bag," because it resembles an old-fashioned medicine bag. I'm wearing a navy blue shirt that has a pattern of beige birds and stars reminiscent of the haute couture popular this season, available on sale during the one month a year French stores feature signs declaring SOLDES. She still disapproves of my shoes, but as most French stores don't carry shoes big enough for my feet (when I told her my shoe size, she laughed out loud), she lets me make do with what I have. My height, like so many of my mannerisms and features, telegraph instantly that I'm not from around here. But if Maëlys says it's so, it goes. With her long wavy dark

hair and round, pretty face, she has classic French almond-shaped brown eyes and delicate features. She's a champion shopper, and her little French legs carry her far and fast through the shops of Paris, pointing out to me what's à la mode and what is passé and *démodé*.

Eventually the line moves forward, and because Ste-Chappelle sits next to the Palais de Justice, I must go through a metal detector and have my bag searched. Without knowing why, I am nervous. I carry a copy of my passport with me, and I have practiced the line over and over again, "*Je m'appelle Rachel Spurrier, et je suis une citoyenne américaine*": "My name is Rachel Spurrier, and I am an American citizen." I have practiced reciting my birth date, my home address, my passport number, and the number of the American embassy. I repeat them to myself silently, the rhythm of knowing the lines by heart soothes me. The guard glances in my open bag and waves me on once I pass through the metal detector. I exhale, no need to explain myself.

Before Maëlys guides me into Ste-Chapelle, I take a moment to regard the Palais de Justice—literally, Palace of Justice, though better translated as Hall of Justice. The Palais sits where the palace of Saint Louis used to be, and from the 1500s to the French Revolution, the Parlement de Paris met here. The Palais, apart from housing several courts, includes the Conciergerie, where Marie Antoinette spent her last days before heading to the guillotine. The Conciergerie is forbidding—its ancient turrets rise forebodingly. I imagine the methods of torture employed inside those walls, the screams and cries of prisoners begging for death, a relief from the inhumane treatment used on fellow human beings. Marie Antoinette was spared

for the most part; the most torture she endured was being denied the luxury she was accustomed to and being put on trial, accused of sexually assaulting her son.

Marie Antoinette has gotten a bad shake in history. Many attribute the phrase "*Qu'ils mangent la brioche*"—"let them eat cake" to Marie Antoinette, but no proof exists that she ever spoke those words. Furthermore, brioche is not cake but a rich bread, so even the translation is inaccurate. Sent to France from Austria to marry the *dauphin* to cement an alliance between Austria and France, Marie Antoinette entered a foreign country at the tender age of fourteen. England and Prussia had just forged an alliance, despite their previous animosity, and this left France in a vulnerable position. France could either reach out to Austria for an alliance or be sandwiched between two enemy nations, so the two countries formed an alliance with Austria sending a princess to promote diplomatic relations. Unpopular with her subjects, she was called the "Austrian Whore" and "Madame Deficit," and because of the long-standing antagonism between France and Austria, the French people viewed her as a spy and an enemy. So, Marie Antoinette came to France, married Louis, and became the dauphine. When Louis XV died, Louis XVI ascended the throne, and Marie Antoinette became the queen of France at nineteen.

The young Marie Antoinette was grossly unprepared to be queen. She married fifteen-year-old Louis at age fourteen, though the marriage was not consummated for seven years. Some historians speculate that Louis had a congenital disease, phimosis, that prevented him from having sex with his wife, though this has never been confirmed. And to this day historians cannot be certain of why Marie Antoinette and Louis took so long to finally have sex. She quickly became lonely and

felt isolated at Versailles, which was filled with intrigue, gossip, and backstabbing among the courtiers. She had only one or two friends, so the courtiers quickly assumed that her shyness was haughtiness and pride. Dealing with immaturity and lack of affection from her husband, as well as being terribly homesick, Marie Antoinette began to gamble and spend with abandon. This behavior continued, only adding to the national deficit, which was the legacy of Louis XIV's opulence and wars and the Seven Years' War waged under Louis XV.

Ste-Chapelle is a vestige of a time before the Revolution, when the divine right of kings still went uncontested and unquestioned. Louis XIV had the chapel completed to house the religious relics of Christ's Crown of Thorns and pieces of the True Cross, purchased from the Emperor of Constantinople. My feet are already sore by the time we walk from the "Low Chapel" of Ste-Chapelle (intended for those of the lower ranks in which to worship) to the "High Chapel," where the nobility and upper clergy came to worship.

Ste-Chapelle is famous for its high stained-glass windows and massive Rose Window above the altar. Described as "ethereal and magical," Ste-Chapelle's midnight-blue ceiling is covered in small gold stars, as though the ceiling opens to the heavens (the devout used to call this place "a gateway to heaven"). The windows depict over one thousand scenes from the Bible, all the way from Genesis to the Apocalypse. Maëlys finds large plastic cards that guide us through, scene by scene, the maze of blue, red, green, and gold, tiny patches of color forming the mosaic of the Bible.

The chapel quickly fills, and a man with a large staff periodically bangs it on the ground and chants in a low voice for quiet. We sit for a minute on benches lining the walls below the windows and watch the sun filter through the colored glass; as the light hits the kaleidoscope of color, the ground becomes bathed in tinted light. My neck begins to hurt from craning upward, but I'm afraid to look away and forget the details. A riot of color in a dreary gray world—thousands and thousands of tiny pieces, painstakingly dyed and melted and arranged in metal, delicate and otherworldly.

Over five centuries later after Ste-Chappelle's completion, the royal family, still reigning absolute, enjoyed their last few years in power without knowing that time was already running out. Louis and Marie Antoinette did eventually consummate the marriage and subsequently had four children, and Louis remained devoted to his wife for the rest of his days. Unlike most monarchs, he never kept a mistress and was a family man. But fixing his marital problems did not ameliorate the dire issues in his country—famine amongst the peasants, helping the American colonists overthrow their English king, and the outrageous spending of the French court.

Louis was an indecisive ruler, a nice guy by all accounts, but wishy-washy and unsure of himself. Marie Antoinette was no stronger and no better educated on running affairs of state. Louis XV had died suddenly from smallpox, long before Louis XVI had really begun to prepare for his kingly duties. When the Revolution broke out, Louis bungled dealing with the National Assembly's demands, and

eventually the royal family was arrested. Marie spent her last days in the Conciergerie, the ancient prison, until her beheading.

Before following behind Maëlys out of the gates of the courtyard, I stop. Young and beautiful, Marie Antoinette was handed off to a foreign nation, the wrong girl at the wrong time. Her fate seems almost cruel to me—as she was a naïve and sheltered girl, it's no wonder she overspent and tried to fill her sorrow, homesickness, and loneliness with clothes and food and games. She died at the hands of the revolutionaries, and I stand here, feeling sorry for the wife of an absolute monarch who mistreated his people. But she was a victim of circumstances, and I like to think that in a way the Conciergerie stands a monument to her misfortune, how the blessing of birth can turn to a curse.

I fall in step behind Maëlys, passing the gilded gates and tri-color flag, free of the fleur de lis of the monarchy—erased during the Revolution. The blue, white, and red of the waving flag stand for *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*—the motto of the French Revolution. The bitter peasants attempted to remove all remnants of the oppressive monarchy and to replace them with symbols of freedom, equality, and brotherhood. Yet Marie Antoinette's meeting with the guillotine feels not a service to justice, simply a reminder that history can be cruel and inexorable. But over the gates I notice a gold circle winged with gold filigree—and stamped in the middle are three fleurs de lis.

My family and I like to joke that most of Europe is under renovation. When my brother was in France, the famous Hall of Mirrors in Versailles was closed to the

public due to renovations, and when I visited Ste-Chappelle, several of the windows and part of the altar were covered because of renovations. I admire Europe's determination to preserve its heritage, even when it gets in the way of my travel plans. Even so, on my way to Versailles, I pray the Hall of Mirrors is open again. Maëlys and I have just boarded a train headed southwest of Paris to Versailles, an hour's ride away. Even early in the morning, her wavy hair is tied into a fashionable chignon, sporting a white and blue striped shirt that is the mode in Paris right now. She puts her Ray Bans into her bag as the train pulls out of the station. Somehow I've managed to look presentable by French standards: unlike Americans, the French never leave the home in sweatpants and tennis shoes, even for a run to the *boulangerie* around the corner. I fall asleep minutes after the train departs, exhausted from the jet lag and the constant strain of trying to understand rapid French.

I wake with a start as the train slows into the station. I wipe the side of my mouth, grateful that I woke right before I began to drool in front of train full of people. A massive crowd disembarks the train, and we move forward, mob-like, toward the palace of Versailles. Versailles, Maëlys informs me, is the wealthiest city in all France, which I don't doubt. The city surrounding the most opulent château in France, the ultimate symbol of absolute monarchy, is bound to have some cash up its sleeves. Stone houses flank the quiet streets; expensive cars roll down the wide boulevards. Trees line the sidewalks, branches extending in graceful arches upon which birds sing, but no one pauses to notice. The flow of the crowd pushes me along. Everyone seems to be in some sort of inexplicable hurry, as if they think

anyone who gets ahead of them will steal their spot, usurp their chance to see Versailles. I'm briefly afraid of getting trampled as scalpers offer to sell ticket packages to us.

We jostle until we arrive at the gilded gates of Versailles. Adorning the rods of the gates is a rococo-style sun with the face of a handsome Greco-roman man. Louis XIV is called to this day *Le Roi Soleil*, the Sun King. Louis attempted to make himself the center of court life and of his country, and as the sun, everyone and everything would revolve, literally, around him. He is seen as the most successful monarch at cultivating absolutism; he famously said, "I am the state." His bedroom in Versailles was situated at the very center of the palace, and he meticulously controlled all aspects of court life—what you could and could not wear, appropriate etiquette, down to the personal details of life: with whom you should and should not sleep, who your friends would be, what kind of power he would grant you, what kind of wealth you would amass. He toyed with the lives of the courtiers, hoping to turn them against each other, giving them less time to plot against him.

Maëlys and I go to the long line and wait in the baking sun to get our tickets. Tall tour buses are lined up in front of the gates, the tour group members in matching shirts with passport carriers tied to their belts, nametags hung around their necks. They are standing in groups, eyes screwed up against the glaring sun as they emerge from the tinted-windowed buses.

Originally a hunting lodge, Louis XIV moved the court here and made it the *de facto* capital of France. During Louis' youth, the feudal aristocracy revolted, attempting to keep their ancient feudal privileges and assert their dominance over

the monarchy. This insurrection, the *Fronde*, left a permanent mark on Louis' attitude about the nobility. Louis actually ended up hiding in the kitchen of the palace during the *Fronde*, a frightened little boy at the mercy of an angry nobility. So, as an adult, he decided to take matters into his own hands and move the court *away* from Paris, where he alone could manipulate the aspects of daily life. He had the hunting lodge massively expanded and moved royal life southwest of Paris, where every move of every person was under the control of his bejeweled thumb. Courtiers were forced to live there year-round unless given express permission from the king so they'd have less time to scheme away from the king's careful control.

The line moves slowly, snaking around stanchions that seem to never end. Once we reach the ticket counter, Maëlys, being under twenty-five, a student, and a citizen of the European Union, gets in for free. When I walk up to the glass, she shows them my student ID and explains to them that I'm an art student (this isn't strictly true—a year ago I had started at TCU as an art history major before switching to writing). They shake their heads, and I hand over my Euros. I turn back quickly and ask, "*Un plan, s'il vous plaît?*"

"In English?"

I sigh, "Yes, please, in English." The woman behind the glass hands me a map, and Maëlys and I start the tour. We skip the château to first walk through the spectacular gardens. Louis XIV was big into taking multiple walks a day—he *did* die four days before his seventy-eighth birthday. He reigned for seventy-two years, one of the longest documented reigns in Europe, so maybe all this walking did him some

good. But during each of his walks he liked to see different flora, so he had servants go and change out the flowers in between his walks, keeping the leftovers in pots inside garden sheds.

Gravel crunches beneath our feet as we walk down the paths separated by bushes. When I turn to take a picture of the palace, I have step back several yards before I can fit the entire façade into the frame. Towering columns separate the windows, and stone statues, large enough to look imposing even from a distance, stare down at us from the roof. I try to count the number of windows but quickly give up. A balcony looks over a lower garden with maze-like paths cutting through the grass. This little scene is off to the side, separated from the main garden, and I wonder what purpose it served, who went there, if Louis used it when he wanted a walk away from the noise and calamity of his palace. We walk down the stairs to a stagnant fountain, crowned by a Hellenistic statue of a woman, filled with golden statues and open-mouthed frogs. Versailles is on elevated ground, so it's difficult to get water to flow *up* to it. When Louis was going on his walks, servants would hide behind the fountains and turn them on then off as he strolled past, so he could pretend that they flowed all the time.

We settle down on the lawn on a bare stretch next to the rectangular lake and eat sandwiches that Maëlys has packed for us with petite *madeleines* for dessert. The cloudless blue sky is reflected in the rippling water. A group of teenagers row out into the middle of the lake, laughing and threatening to tip over as they stand in the middle of the boat. Ducks swim right in front of us, and we throw out scraps of bread to them. Relishing the shade, I close my eyes and appreciate the relative quiet

here, the lack of trains and Parisian crowds. Unaccustomed to city life and more comfortable in the country, I feel relatively at peace here.

A side path leads through the forest to another clearing that comes to Marie Antoinette's "peasant village," dubbed, "*Hameau de la Reine*," meaning the queen's village, which is centered around the palace of the Petit Trianon. Facing the palace is an orange juice stand. Maëlys says she's thirsty, and I am, too. Our water bottles have long been drained. We each ask for one, and the girl behind the stand squeezes oranges and hands us each a small glass after we hand her three Euros each.

Orange juice stands aren't there simply because it's a refreshing drink on a hot day or a way to squeeze money from tourists (though they do). Louis XIV loved orange juice so much that he planted orange trees in his garden, and when they died in the winter, he bought more, potted them, and brought them inside during winter, so a courtier in the middle of December might have to skirt around all the potted orange trees in the hallways. He created the conventional glass of orange juice at breakfast, much like his daily habit of morning coffee.

Marie Antoinette's little hamlet included a farmhouse, dairy, and mill, though she did none of the chores or work required to operate these buildings. She used this little faux town to escape the harsh social life of the court, where she had to navigate social and political games too complex for her to understand. The state paid for the costs of the upkeep, another massive expense on the already staggering national debt. With her sheep and cows and chickens and peaceful, commoner pursuits, she pretended to live a life of simplicity, when in fact she merely perpetuated her profound misunderstanding of daily commoner life. She tried to

play peasant and ended up with her head chopped off in front of a crowd of real peasants.

Back at the palace, the hallways are overflowing with people crammed together. I squeeze against doorframes and peer on tiptoe to not run into anyone, and the flow of the crowd seems to move me along before I'm ready, because fighting against the tide only seems to aggravate the group. Maëlys, who studies medicine, not history or art, waits for me as patiently as she can as I try to read all the signs for every portrait, every artifact, but she moves ahead of me while giving polite interest to the portraits of former kings, queens, archbishops, and royal advisers. The walls are painted in rich colors, navy blue and scarlet and emerald green, some lined with damask, others lined with gilded rococo siding. One room opens to the next, and I strain to translate the plaques on the wall before someone pushes me aside and forces me forward.

In the larger chambers, I run into some tour groups, and I hear the guide mention that most of the furniture and decorations are not originals; the angry mob during the Revolution ransacked and pillaged the palace. They destroyed almost everything, and few authentic artifacts remain, although the current furniture pieces are accurate recreations. Though I know I'm seeing the closest thing to the originals, part of me mourns the loss of these artifacts, either burned or stolen, the loss of what we might have learned or appreciated about eighteenth-century life of the French nobility.

I walk through the Hall of Mirrors, one of the most famous attractions in Versailles. Mirrors at the time were rare and precipitously expensive; to have floor-

to-ceiling mirrors in a long corridor was unheard of and a brilliant display of wealth. Louis XIV walked into his Hall of Mirrors wearing a suit entirely encrusted with diamonds—glittering jewels reflecting from one surface to the next. The majesty still exists here, and with only a small stretch of the imagination, I can envision what the splendor of the court would have been like—sumptuous fabrics, court intrigue and gossip, jewels glittering at ladies’ necks, power plays between rivals. Some reports claim that Louis actually invented the butter knife, as he would not allow sharp knives at the dinner table: jealous men often tried to stab fellow diners.

Louis XIV’s unbridled spending left France with a severe debt, one that remained unpaid and that eventually bankrupted France, sparking the Revolution when Louis XVI called his Estates General to find some way to resolve the crushing debt. At the time, the Estates General was comprised of three Estates: the First Estate of the clergy, the Second Estate of the Nobility, and the Third Estate of everybody else (usually wealthy merchants in the bourgeoisie). Each Estate got one vote, and usually the First and Second Estates voted together, leaving the Third Estate constantly in the minority (even though its numbers made it the majority, and many of the men in the Third Estate were wealthier and more powerful than the noblemen in the Second Estate whose titles were hereditary). The Third Estate began to argue for “one man, one vote” in the proceedings, and tensions among the Estates and between Louis XVI flared.

To make a long story short, negotiations came to a halt when the Third Estate showed up to meet in their chambers on June 20, 1789, and found the doors locked. Sensing an attempt by the king to limit their influence and a possible attack from the

monarchy, they adjourned to a nearby tennis court, where 576 members made an oath to continue to meet until they had written a new constitution for France. This landmark event marked the coming together of the Third Estate to demand fairer representation.

Centuries after the Tennis Court Oath and its subsequent aftermath, some argue that the Revolution is not yet over, that France is still fighting for ideals and principles, as subsequent upheavals disturbed France during the 19th century and Marxist communism cast a Soviet shadow over France in the 20th. The Hall of Mirrors remains, a symbol of the enormous wealth of a bygone era, but perhaps not so bygone—to the French, injustice persists.

That evening when Tania arrives home from work, she asks us what we did that day. Maëlys recounts, in French, our visit to Versailles. I then leap into detail, in English, about how I loved matching up my history lessons with my experience. Tania's eyes widen a little, her eyebrows moving up to her hairline, as I can't seem to stop myself, pouring out everything about diamonds and orange juice and Marie Antoinette and coffee and court life.

She smiles and says, "Well it looks like you are teaching Maëlys about her own city!"

Maëlys nods in agreement, "I don't know half of what you are telling me about the history of my own country. I guess I wasn't paying attention in history class!"

The color rises in my cheeks and I mumble "*Merci.*"

Maëlys' parents, Tania and Jean-Marc, have offered to take me to the Loire Valley on a weekend trip. As an American deprived of "old stuff," as Maëlys likes to call it, symbols of the monarchy and ancient nobility fascinate me. America, a young country with little monarchical legacy, doesn't have many historical sites older than about three or four hundred years at most, while France is chock-full of UNESCO World Heritage sites (according to their website, the United States has twenty-one, while France has thirty-eight, and to add some perspective, the square mileage of France is similar to that of Texas). And while they are not as grand or opulent as Versailles, the châteaux of Chambord and Chenonceau are excellent examples of the fairy-tale like castles for which the Loire is famous.

Before the kings of France settled in a permanent palace, the king traveled around France to visit the various nobles and survey his kingdom, rather than the aristocracy coming to him. Subsequently, the nobility constructed fabulous palaces along the Loire River where the king would stay as he palace-hopped across the country. The king himself would build some palaces along the way. François I constructed Chambord, tearing down in 1519 the previous hunting lodge. Henry II continued the construction, and Louis XIV finally completed the 440-room palace in 1685—the largest château in the Loire Valley.

Maëlys' twelve-year-old brother Aymeri, Tania, Jean-Marc, Maëlys, and I climb out of their car at Chambord after the two-hour drive from Paris. After having woken at seven AM, even though I've finally recovered from the jet lag, I stumble on the gravel as we walk toward the château. Translucent gnats fill the air in clouds visible as the morning light filters through them. Sounds of rustling trees and

morning bird song mingle with the quiet chatter of tourists clambering from their cars. The humidity closes in on us, sticking to our skin.

Châteaux should not be confused with castles—castles were built as fortresses, meant to keep invaders out, while châteaux are regal palaces with luxury, not protection, in mind. Unlike castles, châteaux feature many windows, which would make the structure difficult to defend in case of an attack. Châteaux are pleasure quarters, intended for entertainment and enjoyment rather than battle buttresses and fortifications. Castles are far more ancient, some over a thousand years old, while the oldest châteaux are around half a millennia old.

Only by standing across from the moat can I get the entire castle in my camera frame. The moat, while pretty, is a breeding ground for mosquitoes, and construction workers often died of malaria. And although Chambord is grand, its building took almost two hundred years because it's hot in summer and cold in winter, plagued by insects and drafty halls, so no one wanted to stay long. The roof is covered by towers jutting from the terrace—domes, Notre Dame-esque structures erupting from turrets adorned with black geometric shapes.

Because it is so early, the halls are still cool, and I relish the cold stones as the temperature rises outside. The castle is constructed symmetrically, with four equal arms in the shape of a Greek cross. Although most former decorations have been removed and the walls are bare, in my mind's eye I try to imagine the silk and damask tapestries that may have hung on these walls and the lavish furniture that must have adorned the rooms, the smell of rich feasts, the elegant sounds of the lute and mandolin, laughter at the antics of the court jesters. When in a historical place, I

try to think of what must have happened in this precise spot however many hundreds of years ago, if another person was standing right in my place and what they were thinking or feeling or doing, what they saw, where they were coming from and where they were going. I like to think that by imagining that I am following their footsteps, they are living beyond grave.

I am not French—mostly descended from various Germanic tribes. By heritage, I feel no connection to these places. My ancestors did not live here; further north, they lived on English moors and by Scottish lakes. My people battled the French, war after war trying to reclaim territory that had changed hands dozens of times. If anything, I am a descendant of the enemies of France: England, France's ancient enemy from the Hundred Years' War; Germany, an adversary in the Franco-Prussian War and both world wars; and Norway, whose Vikings pillaged their way down the Irish coast and into Brittany and Normandy.

My only connection to this place is the language I chose to learn and the culture I've tried to understand. I am a lover and learner of history, art history, and the French language. I have decided to *make* a meaningful bond with these monuments. Artificially created and forcefully forged, these associations with a past that is not my own and forming a bond with a group I do not belong to is challenging. My sole tie to this place is my knowledge of European history and my ability to understand the language its past inhabitants spoke. My pilgrimage here is not one to my homeland to visit the place of my people, but instead I came here to finally see the monuments I learned about in French class and history class, to experience in person what I've only read about in books.

Chambord is famous for its double-helix staircase, allegedly designed by Leonardo da Vinci. Two people can go up the two staircases and see each other across the way but never meet. Ascending the staircase, we emerge onto the roof, where we can see the different roof terraces. Unfortunately, the stones are tufa, which is a variety of limestone not intended to withstand rain and moisture, so many of the stones are worn down and pockmarked. Their surface, now rough and uneven, glints in the sunshine. I look out over the grounds and for a minute pretend that I am watching the coming of the king's court, as he is flanked by hundreds of horses, servants, and courtiers, all carrying his wardrobe and equipment.

As symbols of a former monarchy and now merely tourist attractions, I believe that the time of the traveling kings and of the magnificence of the courts reign over these châteaux, that they are more than mere monuments to a long-dead past. By flocking to the Loire and making the pilgrimage to Chambord, François I, Henry II, and Louis XIV's reigns are continuing on, perhaps quietly and perhaps only in the minds of the visitors, but monarchical France stands as long as people are willing to remember it.

Although the Revolutionaries beheaded the king and the aristocracy fled the country, the world of the monarchy, all the way from Charlemagne to Louis XVI, can still be found—if you look for it. As long as people continue to journey to places like Chambord and are willing to learn about a former world, it continues on as a ghost, a shadow of the past. The hoofbeats of horses and the calls of hunters still echo over these grounds if you strain your ear to hear them.

After exhausting Chambord, we drive to Chenonceau. While Chambord was a man's domain, a masculine hunting lodge turned palace, Chenonceau is a delicate, feminine palace owned by a series of aristocratic women. Chenonceau is allegedly the inspiration for the now-famous Disney castle, which symbolizes modern-day pop culture's fascination with all things royal and old. Chenonceau "floats" over a river, straddling in a series of arcs over the River Cher (literally the Dear/Expensive River). We are lucky enough to rent actual iPods that go through a tour of the castle, both with audio and visual aids. As we make our way through the Grande Galerie with windows looking out on the river and through the room of Catherine de' Medici, wife of Henry II, we learn of Madame Dupin, an educated aristocrat who hosted some of the famous *salons* during the Enlightenment. She saved the château from the Revolution.

In the Grande Galerie, I trip over the black and white square tiles (made of two different materials, they have worn at different rates over the years). The open windows reveal the lush riverbanks on either side of the softly flowing water. Shouts from families in rowboats drift through the windows, and I breathe in the fresh air wafting in from the soft breeze.

The upper levels house several bedrooms, famous for their past inhabitants of queens and royal mistresses, including Catherine de' Medici, Gabrielle d'Estrées (mistress of Henri IV), Louise of Lorraine, Elisabeth of France, and Diane de Poitiers. Fragrant fresh flowers sit on polished wooden tables. Lush curtains hang from the bedposts. The large fireplaces are dark and unlit. The ceilings are all carved and painted or instead are bare to reveal the wooden beams.

The grounds include two gardens and a maze. Diane de Poitiers' and Catherine de' Medici's gardens are both in the French style, cultivated year-round. We tour the gardens, full of roses about to bloom and bright pink primrose. A circular fountain bubbles softly in the center of Catherine's garden, and flowerpots line the terraces of Diane's. This palace is said to be the epitome of elegance and refinement, a fairytale palace fit for the finest queens and princesses. I am no queen, no descendant of royal grace. My last name, Spurrier, is an English trade name meaning "maker of spurs." I come from blacksmiths, those who made armor and swords for the nobility. I come from those who served the people who inhabited these palaces. My time here among them is borrowed, a fantasy world that I can only see for a short while before I leave them behind.

I left for Paris on July 2, so I missed out on July 4 in the United States. Not a huge loss, considering I'd already experienced eighteen of them in my lifetime, and the nineteenth wasn't promising to be any more exciting than the last. But, fortunately for me, I *was* in Paris for July 14, Bastille Day, which is the French equivalent of the Fourth of July in the United States. On one of my first nights in Paris, Tania asked me to explain to Aymeri, in English, the importance of the Fourth of July in the United States. I spoke slowly, trying to use the simplest words and sentences I knew, but I eventually gave up when I saw Aymeri's blank stare.

I started with, "Okay. The Americans were mad at the king of England."

Aymeri nods meekly.

“So they wanted to write something that would tell the king they didn’t want to be a part of England anymore.” I enunciate each word meticulously, forming my lips solidly around each syllable. I choose each word carefully, doing my best to choose small words in a syntax easy to understand. “They wrote this thing that said they were done with the king, and everyone in America is happy that we did. So we celebrate the day they all signed it.”

His dark brown eyes are wide, his hands folded tightly in his lap. I’ve lost him.

When I compare the United States’ celebration of Independence Day, it pales in comparison to the French *Prise de la Bastille*. In the US, a bunch of aristocratic wealthy men got together and signed a document that was essentially a philippic of George III. A well-worded invective, it was not much more than a piece of paper with some signatures on it. Granted, the delegates *were* committing high treason and would all most likely die if the colonies lost. But the signing of a document that they did not even regard as particularly important (they passed it off to Thomas Jefferson, who was, at the time, regarded as just a kid) hardly counts as more than a symbolic gesture.

By contrast, a mob of hungry French insurgents stormed the Bastille, a medieval fortress-turned-state-prison. Although it stood as one of the greatest symbols of ancient monarchical power, Parisian citizens actually broke in to access weapons to fight the royalist troops. Military deserters and the angry mob stormed the prison. The commanders of the king’s troops did not even subdue the attack, because the commanders weren’t sure that the soldiers would follow orders to

shoot. Although the Bastille held seven prisoners (one of whom is reported to have thought he was Jesus) instead of the imagined hundreds of starving and deprived men, the mob tore down the Bastille so only the foundation remained, the symbolic tearing apart of the *Ancien Régime*.

The night of the fourteenth, my legs are about to buckle under me. I've spent the entire day walking through the Place des Vosges and the Musée de L'Orangerie—an Impressionist museum famous for its Renoirs and Monet water lilies. So, as a fan of the French Revolution, my exhaustion fails to prevent me from trying to work my way through the wall of people lined up on either side of the Seine who are there to watch the fireworks behind the Eiffel Tower. We haven't eaten dinner yet, so Tania buys the French version of hot dogs. I devour the meat, and I hand off the baguette to Maëlys. As much as I try to overcome it, I cannot in good American taste eat a hot dog inside a baguette. Although the crowd is thick, we worm our way through the layers to carve out a little spot with a view of the Eiffel Tower. Night does not fall until ten PM or later so far north in the summer, so my legs, tired from a day of power walking through Paris, quake a little as I wait.

For all my years of watching fireworks over lakes and in football stadiums, none come close to the spectacular display that lights up the Eiffel Tower. They go on for over thirty minutes, and several times I believe it's the grand finale, yet they keep going. Flashes of neon green, hot pink, pastel blue, fiery red illuminate the sky. Shapes of flowers, splashes of teardrops, crackling circles form and fade away in rapid succession. I am transfixed, and I can see that even though the Parisians are enjoying the lights and their holiday, the celebration of the *liberté, égalité*, and

fraternité are in the back of the Parisian mind. Even so, today, they are willing to protest, go on strike, demand their rights, and rail against the government. They maintain the spirit of the Revolution, and here is my proof, one explosion at a time.

By far, my favorite place in Paris is the Luxembourg Garden. Maëlys has taken me here on one of my first days in Paris, and I revel in its quiet sanctuary in the midst of Paris' overwhelming crowds and noise. When I walk through the iron gates, the sensation of panic and rush melts away. The Parisian impatience and hurry has evaporated in place of a calm fountain on whose surface ducks float serenely.

Benches provide respite beneath rustling trees in the breeze. The chaos is replaced with tranquility, and the air is inexplicably soft, a sweet sensation on my skin. For the first time since my arrival, I feel at peace. We take a walk around the gardens. The tree lined paths all lead to the carefully manicured lawn and flowers. Before I have enough time to look around, Maëlys tells me there's a lot more to see today and we don't have much time before we have to meet her parents somewhere in the First or Second District. Reluctantly, I let her lead me away.

A couple weeks later, Maëlys is planning a barbecue to host for her friends. Despite my misgivings about the French ability to barbecue—their "barbecue" is suspiciously small and from a distance appears to be made of either green plastic or rusted metal—I tell her that it's a great idea and ask if she needs my help. She says no, she just needs to go shopping and get ready. Up until this point, I haven't ventured out on my own for two reasons: one, I mistrust my abilities to navigate the metro and two, although I'm an excellent map-reader, I have no phone and if

something were to happen to me or if I got lost, I'd only have a photocopy of my passport, broken French, and the assuredness of being able to say three sentences understandably in French: *Je suis une citoyenne américaine; Je suis perdue—pourriez-vous m'aider?*; and *Où se trouve la métro?* .

But today I'm feeling brave and needing a break from the constant barrage of French; I need an hour or two to stay inside my own head to think in English. I've brought my Kindle to France, and within a week, I raced through the three books in English I'd bought to be my linguistic refuge while here. Luckily, there was an English section of the bookstore in the Galeries Lafayette, and I bought a paperback of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Lacuna*. Armed with a map, a metro ticket, and a bottle of water, I bid goodbye to Maëlys and take my first steps alone toward Paris.

My metro ride is tense. I sit with my limbs pulled close to me, and I listen for each stop. I do not break my concentration for one second; if I get off at the wrong place, I'm not sure I'll be able to find my way back. But lo and behold, I get off at the right stop and find the gates to the garden in minutes.

I pull my book from my bag read a few pages at a time, in between wandering along the gravel pathways and watching young lovers sitting close on the secluded benches with arms wrapped around one another and lips locked. My American sensibilities tell me to look away and feel embarrassed for them. I've brought my camera, and I take pictures of the statues of famous women from French history or lore—such as Genevieve, Patron Saint of Paris; Blanche of Castille, wife of Louis III; and Jean III, the mother of the first Bourbon king (the Bourbon reign continued unbroken through Louis XVI.) But my favorite is the statue off to the side in shadow,

not in the line with the rest of the statues, as though she's been pushed aside. She is Laure de Noves, and unlike the other statues, her features have eroded, but even still, I can see the sadness in her face and the sorrow in her eyes. She is looking down and to the side, away from the passers-by. She was born exactly seven hundred years ago, yet I can feel the melancholy and ache from her downturned lips and somber tilted head.

At the end of the garden stands the Luxembourg Palace, where the Directory of the Revolution (1795-1799) met during the backlash after the Reign of Terror, a period of time during which neighbor turned in neighbor for petty crimes and an estimated 40,000 people were beheaded. One can handle only so many executions, and a desire to end the violence spread among the French populace. Another constitution was written, creating the Directory consisting of five men, beneath which were two houses—the Councils of Elders and Five Hundred, who proposed and voted on legislation. Contrary to the ideals of the Revolution, membership was limited to property owners, so only one third of the adult male population could vote. Also, elections were indirect—one voted for electors who then voted for representatives, ensuring that only the wealthiest and most powerful men participated in the legislature.

In an ironic twist, the Palace stands for both power of the ruling elite under the old regime (it was originally built by Marie de Medici) and the power of the ruling elite after the Terror. Although in no way did the Revolution come full circle, the idea of universal suffrage and all men being equal had fallen to the wayside in favor of the opulence now enjoyed by the bourgeoisie, no longer second class after the

nobility. One need only regard portraits of Napoleon after his rise to power to see that the best laid plans of the revolutionaries had gone awry.

On the opposite end of the garden, I marvel at the fact that a building almost 400 years old has housed the rise and fall of the monarchy—it was even once owned by Louis XIV—and belonged the government that eventually gave way to Napoleon’s empire. Even more, I am able to physically be in its presence, and though the Bourbon monarchs and the Directory are long gone, they are not entirely extinct. This place is not a fossil of a past life; it’s a monument to the rise and fall of a royal world.

Most little towns in the Parisian countryside look like giant anthill mounds, topped with a church. The roads rise higher and higher, winding up the hill, until they meet at the entry to the little Catholic church that every French village seems to have. We drive through one of these little hamlets, narrow streets converging at dangerous angles. We park and trek up to the *Église Saint-Loup de Naud*. The front doors are crowned by a tympanum and flanked by column-like statues, remnants of Gothic architects, reminiscent of its giant cathedral cousins.

Inside, the wooden pews are worn and faded. Ribbons hang from them, and flowers litter the floor. A wedding must have just happened here, and the leftovers flutter gently in the breeze we have just let in. I walk up the aisle, kneel to the altar, cross myself, and sit down. The floor is stone, and I cannot imagine genuflecting for hours at a time on this hard, cold, rough surface while listening to endless blessings in Latin. I say a quick prayer, though I am neither Catholic nor devout. I then listen

for the whispers of the past, of all the prayers that must have been uttered here, of all the weddings and funerals and baptisms and masses that have been conducted here over the past several hundred years. Thousands of people have gone through the sacraments within these stone walls, and I can hear the echoes of the blessings and Lord's Prayers and professions of faith, ringing through the centuries.

While in Paris the Revolution raged and the dechristianization of society ran rampant, in the countryside, the Church held strong. Although church lands were seized, days of the week changed to ten-day long segments so no one knew when Sunday was, and priests lost their power, centuries of Catholic tradition held firm. The small parishes' welfare systems *were* the Church, and the Church acted as the education system of France, as public education was not available. Losing the Church came as a huge blow to both education and the poverty-stricken. Many relied on their faith to get them through the harsh conditions of peasant existence: this life may have been full of trial and tribulation, but in the next life, they would be rewarded with an eternity of paradise in return for their faith on Earth.

This counter-revolution posed one of the greatest challenges to the Revolution centered in Paris. With foreign monarchs threatening to invade, the government in Paris faced the pious in the countryside taking up arms to defend the traditional faith which had been a keystone of French culture for thirteen centuries.

When Clovis I, new king of the Franks, converted to Christianity in the late fifth century, his baptism signaled the beginning of the Frankish people being a Christian nation. This strategic move united the Frankish people, and over three hundred years later, Charlemagne was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire

on Christmas day by the Pope. As Voltaire said, the Holy Roman Empire was not Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire, but the Pope's crowning of Charlemagne cemented the Catholic church's control and influence over the Franks, an influence that continued through the Revolution and to this day.

Towards the end of my visit, Maëlys and I spend the day along the Champs-Élysées, which at one end stands the Arc de Triomphe and at the other, the Louvre. It's yet another warm day, and I can feel the sweat running down my neck as I guard the table while Maëlys gets us sandwiches. I've had to stake a claim over a table that I think a group of businessmen is about to vacate, and as soon as they stand, I swoop in for the kill. We haven't been able to afford anything at the crowded stores we've seen—Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Dior, Yves Saint-Laurent. Maëlys has shown me through a make-up store the size of a small grocery, walls lined with expensive perfume and booth after booth of expensive lipsticks, concealers, face creams, mascaras, and eye shadows. Maëlys was absolutely delighted when a store person addressed her in English after having heard Maëlys speaking with me in English—Maëlys has worked hard to improve her English.

Maëlys comes back with two baguette sandwiches and two tarts. We talk in English about the heat, her brother's obsession with the Mavericks, how her rich uncle will pay for her cousin to live in an apartment not far from here while she goes to school for makeup design. A young man approaches me and asks, "You speak English?" I give him a quizzical look, reply, "*Non, je ne comprend pas,*" and turn back

to my conversation. He walks away, disappointed, and Maëlys nods approvingly. I've learned quickly.

Only a couple afternoons before, we had walked to the Eiffel Tower. The line was so long and the heat so unforgiving that we turned in circles for a while, trying to figure out which entrance had the shortest wait. We discussed our options in English, and a North African woman came up to me and asked me if I spoke English. Surprised, I said yes. She thrust a note in my hands written in elementary English, pleading for money. Before I could think of what to say or do, Maëlys pulled me away and warned, "Never tell anyone you speak English. They'll ask you for money. Only speak French back." Shocked, I nodded, wondering if I should have been more generous.

A few minutes later, a soldier in uniform had approached Maëlys and asked in broken French if he could take a picture of us. Not fully understanding, I let Maëlys guide me over to the group of Czech soldiers waiting for their comrade. He stood in between us, putting his arms around our waists while one of the soldiers raised the camera. Just before the shutter clicked, he dropped his arm to my waist, resting just above what I deem appropriate. He thanked Maëlys and me, and when we were a safe distance away, I asked, "What was that all about?" She grinned at me and said, "Oh he just wanted a picture with two pretty Parisian girls. See, as long as you don't open your mouth, people might think you're French!"

We eat our sandwiches, and I sip from my glass of water. The 90-degree weather makes me want to down it in one gulp, but I don't know when I'll be able to buy any more, so I ration it carefully between bites. I ask Maëlys about what her

younger sister, Anysia, wants to study in college. Before entering high school, French students must choose between social studies, language/arts, and math/science. This choice will determine their high school and academic focus for the next three years before they apply to university. Anysia, like Maëlys (who is currently in medical school), has chosen to study math and science but has no idea if she wants to take on the rigor of medical school—Maëlys, intelligent and bright, has to re-take her first year of med school next year after failing to obtain a high enough score on her end of year exams, which is not uncommon.

I lick the last of my raspberry tart from my lips and walk away from the Arc de Triomphe down towards the Louvre. On our way, we stop at the Place de la Concorde—where today stands an Egyptian obelisk from the time of Ramses II, a gift from the Egyptian government. It's regal, an import of another ancient world. The traffic prevents me from making a full circle around it, but it's not my fascination of Egyptian history—it's that the guillotine of the Reign of Terror stood here. Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Maximilien Robespierre: they were all beheaded here.

The guillotine is named after one Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, who proposed this device to carry out death sentences. At the time, royalty received sword beheadings, which were cleaner, quicker, and more instantaneous, while the peasants' heads were hacked off with dull blades. With the guillotine, every guilty person would die in the same way, no matter his or her estate or rank. It was to create equality in the great equalizer: death. When Dr. Guillotin presented his new device in front of a

crowd, the spectators were thrilled but walked away a little disappointed by the lack of gore.

This is another crowded tourist spot, confused pedestrians attempting to cross the busy streets. I'm lucky—I get three weeks living with a French family, not only visiting every tourist site in the books but also experiencing the homes of Maëlys and her friends. Most other visitors, however, get identical experiences: the Louvre, the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, Les Invalides, the Musée d'Orsay, the Seine, Sainte-Chapelle, Montmartre. One tourist attraction at a time, they race through Paris, some running through the Louvre to see the *Mona Lisa* and the *Venus de Milo* before scurrying out to catch their tour bus. At the end of my day, I return not to a hotel with hostile French help but to a traditional suburban Parisian house on a quiet street, the ruins of a Roman aqueduct nearby. On the top floor, I can unfasten the little latch that opens the wooden door on the ceiling to give me a narrow view where I can just make out the Paris skyline. *This, I think, is Paris as it was meant to be.*

The attitude of the people toward the *Ancien Régime* during the Revolution could best be described as hostile, bellicose, or pugnacious. Jean-Paul Marat, martyred author of the newspaper *L'ami du Peuple*, wrote, "Man has the right to deal with their oppressors by devouring their palpitating hearts." Although no one took this literally, the violent sentiment amongst the French people quickly escalated. The progress of the Revolution was threatened by enemies both foreign and domestic. Anti-revolutionaries within French borders threatened to begin a counter-revolution, and foreign armies were preparing to invade to restore the monarchy.

To understand this time period during the darkest days of *La Terreur*, Mark Steel, author of *Vive La Revolution*, writes, “It takes some imagination to comprehend the tension within Paris in the summer of 1793. Maybe if you imagine that al Qaeda is in control of Canada and Mexico, preparing to sail for an invasion of the United States, while Montana and Arkansas are already under Islamic law, Donald Rumsfeld is murdered in his bath, which is filmed and shown on Al-Jazeera.”

Foreign monarchical governments were preparing to invade to reclaim the throne, and Charlotte Corday killed Jean-Paul Marat in his bath—he spent much of his time soaking in water because of a painful skin condition which no doubt added to his ire towards the nobility. The Terror (1793-94) resulted from fear of invading armies, famine in Paris, and civil war raging in the countryside. During the Terror, a “Revolutionary Tribunal” had the power to execute those suspected of hoarding grain or aiding foreign armies. Neighbors could accuse neighbors of treason and the sans-culottes army (“those without breeches” who prided themselves on wearing trousers rather than the aristocratic breeches) would show up at your house, cart you off, and chop off your head.

Despite the intense irrationality of the period, reason and science replaced mysticism and the divine right of kings. Months were renamed to reflect scientific seasons: *thermidor* as the month of heat, *frimaire* as the month of frost, and *brumaire* as the month of mist. Notre Dame was converted into a Temple of Reason for the Cult of the Supreme Being, a “religion” centered around the virtue of justice, republicanism, wisdom, and rational thinking. A new Lord’s Prayer read:

Our father who are in heaven, from whence you protect
in such an admirable manner the French Republic and
the Sans Culottes, your most ardent defenders.

Give us today the daily bread which we eat despite the
vain efforts of Pitt, Coburg, and all the tyrants who unite
to keep us hungry.

Forgive us the faults which we have committed in
supporting for so long the Tyrants from which we have
purged France, as we forgive the Enslaved Nations,
when they imitate us.

Do not suffer them any longer to endure the fetters
which restrain them and from which they are
strenuously seeking to free themselves.

But may they deliver themselves, as we have done, from
Nobles, Priests, and Kings. So be it.

While the sans-culottes army in Paris whole-heartedly accepted this new reason-centered rationale, those in the countryside still refused to give up Christianity, and so the civil war raged on. Afraid of this uprising, those in power in Paris redoubled their efforts to maintain control. Any suspicion of counter-Revolutionary sentiment got you a one-way ticket to the guillotine. In August 1793, a new law decreed that the defense of the Republic was now the job of every citizen. To not defend the Republic was to commit a crime. Any action could be considered a failure to defend

the Republic, even for something as small as not properly addressing your neighbor. The punishment? The guillotine.

France today is mostly secular. Although the French enjoy a multitude of religious holidays that no one actually observes, the majority of French people do not regularly attend mass; some will be baptized and receive first communion and go through confirmation, yet most marriages in France are through the state (marriage through the Church is an entirely separate process which must occur *after* the official state marriage). However, this move towards a secular society has been gradual and is not the result of the formation of the Cult. France has seven-day weeks and twelve months starting with *janvier* and ending with *décembre*. The violent upheaval against religion is now a historical fact with the violence it caused now covered by an Egyptian obelisk.

After a brief walk down the Champs-Élysées, we pass the Louvre, one of the largest palaces in the world—eclipsed in France only by Versailles. It began as a medieval fortress, and subsequent kings modified and reconstructed the castle until it became a mixture of fortress, Medieval, and Renaissance architecture. During the Revolution, revolutionaries decided to display the king's vast private art collection for public view, and the Louvre, of course, is still a museum today. Various other important historical events have occurred within its walls—Napoleon married Marie-Louise here. When Maëlys guides me out of the train station and directly into the Louvre, I think I've found paradise: more works of art than I feel I could view and appreciate in a lifetime.

A former art history major, I can remember the pages of my textbooks, captions of photos underneath listing their current location: British Museum, Egyptian National Museum, Musée d'Orsay, the Louvre. Here I know I would find the *Seated Scribe* in the vast halls of the Egyptian Antiquities wing; I would find *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugene Delacroix; here I would finally get to see the Lady of Auxerre in ancient Greek art.

With four stories and fourteen different collections from which to choose, I spin in circles before picking a wing where we'll find the Egyptian antiquities. I've been going to Egyptian art exhibits since I was a child and never thought I could get enough, but here, with room after room of artifacts, my Egyptian hunger seems to be, for now, sated. Tour groups who attempt to do "Paris in a Day" jog through the museum to catch a glimpse of the main attractions: Greek statues and Renaissance works. We're in no such rush, and we meander rather than go full speed forward.

The only picture I take in the Louvre is a view from the main hallway topped with the *Venus de Milo*. I want to capture the crowds spilling through the archway, how all the statues seem so still and unchanging and how the people are the only variables. The art here will stand seemingly forever, and we will come and go, temporary fixtures in this place. I take no photographs of artwork. Although photography is permitted in most of the museum, for some reason I think photography cheapens the artwork. I view my visit less as a tourist attraction and more paying homage to these amazing creations. I'm not here to re-record them. I'm here to *experience* them.

Maëlys, Jean-Marc, Tania, and I first see a glimpse of the Mont St-Michel from miles away. It towers over the surrounding ocean, famous for its high and low tides—in high tide, it's an island; in low tide, it's accessible by land. Tania tells Jean-Marc to stop the car to let me get out to take some pictures. Maëlys, good sport that she is, does not complain but remains in the car. I get a few snapshots of its silhouette against the clear blue sky, and I smile: it's always been a dream of mine to come here, ever since I learned of its existence in my first high school French class almost five years ago. This is something that I can now check off my list of "Things to do before I die"; this is something magical. Its tall tower has stood as a beacon for pilgrims for hundreds of years, and its massive fortifications warded off the English during the Hundred Years' War.

Once we've crossed the drawbridge and walked under the raised portcullis with its sharp spikes pointing down towards our heads, we walk up narrow, winding streets and little alleyways leading to nowhere. I take a picture next to a door whose top of the frame hits close to my shoulders. I can't seem to tilt my camera far back enough to capture the height of the tower.

The original sanctuary was built in 708, growing over the centuries to the structure that stands today. An abbey for most of its history, Mont St-Michel demands a certain level of respect, so I remain quiet as I tour the sanctuary, cloister, refectory, and chapel. If I listen hard enough, I can hear the phantom whispers of the monks' chants as they passed their lives in prayer and solitude. I take pictures of everything—the gothic arches, the rib vaults, the stained glass. I think that Americans can't fully comprehend the scale and the history of the ancient buildings

of Europe, which took centuries to create. Those workers who helped build these monuments often died before seeing them completed, and the architects, craftsmen, carpenters, and builders who designed them and laid the stones and carved the statues have remained anonymous, no record of them apart from the building remains. To have claimed credit was against Christian morals at the time, taking credit away from God. Not until the Renaissance did artists begin to sign their works or take credit.

The air is cool and damp inside. Eventually this place of worship became a prison during the Revolution. In 1789 the National Assembly seized all church land, about ten percent of France, and put it into the “service of the nation.” In 1790, the Church became a department of the state, where the government paid the clergy, who were required to pledge their loyalty to the nation. Bishops were now to be elected and all parishes redistricted to be equal in size. However, by the time the Revolution began, most monks had already abandoned Mont St-Michel, so it was closed and converted into a prison.

A veritable fortress with ramparts and buttresses, the Mont St-Michel is an imposing structure. The fortifications should make its towers look foreboding, but instead there’s nothing but delight for me as I walk among ancient stones and work my way through the same narrow streets once occupied by Benedictine monks, soldiers, and prisoners.

We spend the rest of the day exploring St-Malo, the neighboring town, but by nightfall, Tania declares we’re driving back to Mont St-Michel. Part of me wants to exclaim, “Why?” while I fantasize about pillows and the rock-hard mattress I will

return to that night. But I sit patiently in the car, and when we arrive, the entire façade is lit. It glows in the last vestiges of dusk, shreds of pale purple and orange lining the horizon. We only stay for a little while, until night has completely fallen and the tide is too high for us to go any closer.

Deeply breathing in the night air burns my nostrils from the salt, and I cannot hold my camera steady for long enough to get a clear photograph. Each one comes out blurry. Eventually I give up and try to etch it into my mind's eye and remember it with striking clarity: golden walls, blackened windows, sharp buttresses. A statue of Saint Michael tops the belfry. Lanterns hang from arches leading to darkened passages. Inhabitants close their windows and blow out candles. A couple staying in a refurbished hotel straightens their white sheets before turning in.

Though we didn't get back until after midnight, the alarm goes off at seven the next morning. I have no idea where we're going—I trust Tania to get us there. She has a French guidebook, *Guide au Routard*, which she consults as a sort of checklist/authority on all things tourist. I don't question it, so when Jean-Marc drives to Château de Combourg, I trust that it'll be worth our while. The famous French author François-René de Chateaubriand spent some of his childhood here. It's a small, fortress-like structure with three turrets and a grand stone staircase leading up to the thick, foreboding door. Several other French tourists join us, and the tour guide lets us in precisely at 9 AM. I am the only English-speaker in the group, so they hand me a small brochure with minimal amounts of badly translated English. Even though I can read all the French signs, once the guide starts talking, I have no chance of keeping up.

The halls are small, cramped, the rooms, drafty, cold. Chateaubriand was afraid of this house, of the creaks coming from the walls, of the sounds of seemingly disembodied people roaming the walls. As part of an ancient French tradition (at least from what Maëlys can explain to me in rushed whispers), whenever they built a new room, they killed a cat, mummified it, and entombed it inside the stone walls and in some cases, left live cats inside to die. As far as I can tell, it's a tradition to protect the house and keep away misfortune, but I understand why Chateaubriand would dislike sleeping in a room with dead cats decaying in the walls.

Chateaubriand was at first initially sympathetic to the Revolution, but as the violence escalated, he joined the ranks of the émigrés and left for North America in 1791. He returned in 1792 to join the royalist émigré army, but he was injured in a clash between the royalist forces and the Revolutionary Army. He was taken to Jersey in England and did not return to France until 1800 when amnesty was issued to the émigrés.

Contrary to popular belief, the Revolution did not begin as an anti-monarchy movement. Most people in the Third Estate simply wanted to reform the government and perhaps establish a constitutional monarchy. Republicanism was not common or popular—only the most leftist of radicals supported deposing the king and creating a democracy (we get the terms “left” and “right” in politics from where the representatives sat with conservatives on the right and liberals on the left). However, the king unwisely left behind a letter denouncing the work of the Revolution before attempting to flee the country—the royal family was captured at Varennes and returned to Paris (interestingly enough, a peasant recognized the

king's face from a coin). After his attempt to flee, the Assembly began to mistrust the king and hostility mounted.

Most members of the National Assembly (who had formed from the Tennis Court Oath) became horrified when some radicals moved for the king to be dethroned. Many in the Assembly wanted to write a constitution and have the king approve it so that life could return to normal. Constitutional monarchy was preferred, not a total rewriting of the entire system. Unfortunately for the king, when Prussia threatened to invade and destroy Paris if the king was harmed, the Assembly viewed this as nothing short of treason and the king's aligning with the enemy. Afterward, the Assembly voted to suspend the monarchy and to write a new republican constitution.

Although royalist sentiment still persisted outside of Paris, the main hotbed of republican extremism, thousands of aristocrats fled France. Some, like Chateaubriand, eventually returned, but others lived out their lives in exile, their titles revoked and their status destroyed. Many émigré families who returned adopted a bourgeois, middle class lifestyle. As the bourgeoisie was the main force behind the Revolution and they were the new ruling class, returned émigrés chose to fit in to this new lifestyle with women, who once helped control the court, staying in the home and focusing on family values and domesticity.

I am standing on one of the balconies of Château de Combourg. I look over the grounds of the château and try to empathize with the fear and terror the émigrés must have experienced. The legacy of the aristocracy and their way of life is here in these empty, abandoned places of former grandeur, now museums and preserved

artifacts, conserved to show a time of nobility and royal elite. Well-kept, these places still feel derelict. At night, their doors are closed tight and locked; this is no one's home, not anymore. France spends a fortune to upkeep and restore its national heritage, but places such as Château de Combourg merely feel vacant and bare, devoid of life. Oh yes, the memories remain, but the air is stale, the dust settled, the rooms cold and echoing.

Most émigrés fled, leaving almost all their possessions behind, and oftentimes, angry mobs stormed their homes, destroying everything in their path. If and when the émigrés returned, they came back to a changed world. Their hereditary titles meant little to nothing, and when Napoleon took power, he created a new order of *notables*, who received nonhereditary titles. The bourgeoisie could then quickly rise through the social ranks, and the old order became a mere memory.

Yet the past is here. Some of the artifacts remain, some of the buildings have been restored to their former grandeur. Though now a museum open to all, it is by venturing through these rooms and seeing the remnants of a life long gone that we are still connected to the past, a history of nobility and aristocracy reaching back for well over a thousand years. It's at our fingertips, if we just reach out to touch it.

After finishing the tour, we go to Honfleur, a little port city in Normandy, known for its art galleries and flowers. Unfortunately for me, I have severe apiphobia, and I chose this day to wear a floral skirt. I spend half the day on the lookout for bees and the other half following Tania on her mission to visit as many art galleries as possible before the day is done. It's a quiet town, filled with weekend tourists and boats resting quietly on the water. It's what my mother would call "chi

chi,” her catchall term for anything the upper classes would love—things under the “chi chi” list include pricy hotels like the Ritz Carlton and the Four Seasons, five-star restaurants, and box seats at the theater.

Unlike in Honfleur, other towns suffered destruction because of the uprisings in the countryside by the royalists. Although the Parisian revolutionary government was strongly republican and anti-religious, controlling the masses outside the city limits proved more difficult. Civil war broke out in Nice, Lyons, and Marseilles as the French Republican troops encountered royalists and Church sympathizers.

I stare out over the water and listen to the gulls swooping over the small pier before realizing that Tania is about twenty yards ahead of me and shows no signs of slowing down. Jogging to catch up, I fall in step next to Maëlys until we reach a church, at which Maëlys rolls her eyes and crosses her arms across her chest. Tania ignores her daughter’s dissent and marches into the church.

Once inside, I kneel, cross myself, and take a seat on the rickety wooden chairs serving as pews. Although I was not raised in a strict religion (Unitarian Universalists tend to be pretty lax in their views on just about everything), I kneel and say a short prayer. If I’m going to pray anywhere and guess that God might hear me, it will be in here, with cold stone floors and beams showing above the altar. I briefly consider using some of my Euros to buy a candle to light and leave behind me, but I’m not sure I have anything important enough to merit it. Instead, I stand, listen to the cracking sound in my knees, and stop in front of some candles. They’re blue, red, and white, and though I have no idea what they symbolize, I’m guessing it’s not for the tricolor of blue, white, and red of the Revolution. I wonder who these

candles represent, what desperate pleas are flickering and dying out in wax, whose souls are being prayed for.

I once prayed at a Shinto shrine while in Japan. I dropped some yen in a rectangular basin covered in wooden slats. I clapped so that the gods would hear me, bowed, said my prayer, bowed again and left. If the Shinto gods heard me or not matters little; the sense of wellbeing and wonder I experienced was enough. This comfort and amazement at the world around and that that is beyond me must have led the Catholics fought against the Revolution. I occasionally experience this feeling in church today, and I think this is the reason that the Church supporters took up arms to defend Catholicism—who else will we believe will listen to our prayers?

One night while in Brittany, we stop in the little port town of Cancale, famous for its oysters. Jean-Marc, walking with his head held high on a mission, walks off, leaving us behind. I ask Maëlys what on earth he's doing, and she says that he's going to ask one of the locals where we should eat. Before I can stop myself, I blurt out, "Seriously?" and she nods.

"He always does this."

"And it works?"

"Oui."

"How long will it take, do you think?"

"I have no idea."

"Soon, I hope," I say trying not to think of the fact that lunch seems a lifetime ago after the miles of trekking we've done along the Emerald Coast.

I try to hide my eternal surprise as Jean-Marc returns and leads us to a little restaurant that looks over the grey water. It's a calm evening, and the fading light wanes little by little. Jean-Marc and Tania offer me a raw oyster, and I adopt the "Sure, I'm here anyway, might as well" attitude and immediately regret it as I choke on the harsh saltwater flavor. They offer me more, and I wave my hand and say, "*Non, merci, elles sont à vous,*" No, thanks, they're for you.

In a few minutes, I discover that cooked mussels are far more to my liking, and Jean-Marc and Tania teach me the traditional way to eat mussels: use a fork for the first mussel, then use the empty shell like tongs to extract the next piece and when the first shell loses falls apart, pick another. I'm happily enjoying this lack-of-utensils approach when a street performer sits a few yards down from us. He strums an instrument I don't recognize and sings in a language I've never heard.

I look quizzically and Tania and her eyes light up as she smiles.

"He's singing in Breton, the native language here. They're all traditional songs of the Bretons."

I nod and let the music wash over me. It sounds familiar yet absolutely foreign all at once, like I song I might have heard once before but forgotten. I almost think I can make out the words before I remember that even Tania and Jean-Marc can't understand him; he's singing ancient songs of the native people. The tradition survives, even though the French Revolution attempted to homogenize the people.

At the time of the Revolution, various areas of France spoke different languages—*langue d'oc* in the south, *langue d'oïl* in the north, various Gaelic and Breton dialects in Brittany and Normandy, and various hybrids of Italian, French,

and Spanish in the south, depending on the location. While the people knew they were under French rule, this did not mean that there was one French culture and identity, far from it. Yet the Parisians were determined to create a more unified language and culture once the Revolution was in full swing. Many *langue d'oc* villages were destroyed, and the systematic imposition of the *langue d'oïl*, northern dialect, rankled many outside of Paris. Today, there are very few people who speak *langue d'oc*, and they were rarely, if ever, speak it to outsiders. Most people speak "proper" French, and the various dialects have died out.

But here is a man who is singing from the words taught to him by his parents and grandparents, going back generations. This culture and language survived the Revolution, despite violent attempts to stamp it out. Listening to him is like reaching back hundreds of years, hearing the voices of those dead and gone, kept alive in this oral history. I lean back in my chair and close my eyes, full from a pot full of mussels, humming this tune familiar yet unknown.

FACEBOOK FOR DEAD PEOPLE

“When the children are grown, [and] they know nothing of their ancestors, this would be evil. Ancestors are the roots in any house, and children are the flowers, and the two must not be cut asunder.”

--Pearl S. Buck, *Peony*

Roots are powerful. Tree roots can destroy piping, foundations, sidewalk. Colonies of aspen trees grow from a single seedling, and these roots can survive for thousands of years and support massive groups of aspens. Without strong roots, plants wither and die—they depend on roots to suck up nutrients from the soil and to absorb water in the ground. Separated from the roots, flowers wilt and die. Roots are the support system, the essential for life to flourish.

My maternal grandmother, Carol Jean, gave me the quote for the epigraph of this essay. I told her I was writing an essay about genealogy and how much she'd taught me over the years about the value of one's ancestry. The day before my mother and I left Kansas to go home to Texas, she insisted on looking through all her Pearl Buck books and googling on the Internet before she printed out a page and said, “Here you might want to use this in your paper.” I folded it, slid it in my backpack, and saved it for later.

Although my family left Wichita before I was even a year old, when my family visits Kansas with the trees and rows of crops in neat parallel lines whipping by, the hills rolling gently past, I think, *I'm home*. Depending on the season, my eyes skate over the silhouettes of barren trees against the clear blue sky or I watch the golden and scarlet leaves shivering in the wind or the sunflowers dancing under the sun. Hiking through the hills over the large outcroppings of rocks, staring over the horizon, and walking along the banks of the Verdigris River, I feel like I belong in

this place, like the leaves rustling at my feet are telling me that at last, I've found my way back.

My sense of belonging to Kansas comes from the fact that my ancestors have been in the region for the past 145 years on my father's side. My great-great-great grandfather, Calvin Streets, came to Kansas in 1868, where many of his descendants still live today. My maternal grandfather's family has been in Kansas for at least the last hundred years. Both my paternal grandmother and maternal grandfather felt a strong connection to this land on which they grew up and with which they formed an unbreakable bond felt only by those who understand the meaning of homeland.

Over the course of my life, my grandmother has tried to teach me the basics of genealogy. Sitting at her kitchen table, she would patiently teach me how to sift through giant tomes of marriage records, birth records, and death records, how to search on ancestry.com to connect with distant cousins across the world, the different types of charts tracing ancestry.

Through working with her, I learned that my Dutch ancestors on my mother's side came here in the 18th century on a ship called De Bonte Koe—"The Spotted Cow." Centuries of marrying into other cultures led to a German-Dutch hybrid far removed from Vorhees back in the Netherlands. My other ancestors immigrated in the 19th century, and years of marrying between English, German, and Scots-Irish origins have diluted my heritage down to a hodge-podge of northwestern European pasts.

Many Americans have a disconnect from their immigrant ancestors, who arrived so long ago and intermarried so much that the nationalities of their ancestors have been muddled and mixed. This separation from one's roots leads to a kind of an American identity crisis—who am I? Where do I come from? People use a variety of methods to answer these questions: DNA tests, genealogy, lineage. So few Americans are 100% anything, one full nationality. And while this mixed patchwork diversity makes America one of the more tolerant, accepting countries (to an extent), many people start to wonder who they are, where they come from, what it means to have heritage and patrimony.

I began to ask these questions of heritage when I was assigned a family tree project in sixth grade. My mother pulled out a binder of pages tucked safe into page protectors and helped me copy the names in sharpie onto a piece of poster board cut out in the shape of a tree. During presentations in class, I noticed that my project was more detailed and extensive than the other students', which made me nervous. Did I know too much? As I grew older, I looked through this binder more and more on my own. I became more and more immersed over time, and word spread about my interests. By the time I was a senior in high school, someone from the yearbook staff actually interviewed me on my interest in genealogy and took a picture for a brief insert for some feature story whose name I can't remember.

The notion of identity in the 21st century in the United States often centers on nationality, ethnicity, and race. Many of my friends in high school were white, and they struggled to orient themselves in an ethnicity or nationality. They tried to invent an identity based on "Irish Pride" or on their "Polish Pride" or whatever they

most identified with, picking and choosing what suited them best. In a pluralistic society, they strived to be something more than “white,” something more than the mutt, Heinz-57 (as my mother puts it) existence that their ancestry makes them.

Growing up in a primarily white, upper-middle-class suburban town, my classmates and I suffered from a sort of white-bread identity crisis, a lack of any cultural identity that led us to either a) grab on inappropriately to our “ethnic” friends or b) cling desperately to any notion of ethnicity that we *did* have (often a tenuous link at best—an eighth here, a sixteenth there, the occasional rare and precious quarter). “Exotic” wasn’t in our vocabulary—we were as ethnically whitewashed as you could get.

Despite the assumption among many that as generations became increasingly removed from immigrant roots, according to Marilyn Halter, author of *Shopping for Identity*, “new studies of the children, grandchildren, and the great-grandchildren...have shattered the assumption that over time and with greater structural integration, ethnicity would simply disappear.” Rather than ethnicity being something confined to a lower socioeconomic demographic, the more educated and higher socioeconomic classes have strengthened a search for ethnicity, countering the earlier idea that increased wealth and education assimilates. Nowadays, not being able to identify one’s ethnic heritage is associated with poverty. Halter sites the 1990 U.S. Census, which reported, “those of European descent who answered the question about ancestry on the census forms with ‘American’ rather than a specific ethnic heritage had higher rates of poverty and lower levels of education.” For those who do not fully subscribe to an “American”

identity, being able to cite a specific English, Irish, German, French, Italian, Polish, etc. heritage is a sign of higher education. No longer is ethnicity a sign of lower class—it is desirable, sought after. Without even knowing it, my classmates and I were tapping into this trend.

Rather than ethnicity acting as a liability, ethnicity oftentimes, but not always (think nationalist attitudes toward immigration), provides a sense of belonging separate from the masses, a way to become distinct from the assimilated society. Instead of avoiding ethnicity as a problem, Halter explains that many people find that “getting ahead financially and getting back to one’s cultural roots are perfectly compatible personal aspirations in America today.”

We live in a time of a partially integrated society, and although we still struggle with the segregation of racism and opportunity inequality, many people, particularly white Euro-Americans, feel anonymous, lost in an artificial and uncertain world where they do not stand out or have any unique characteristics. They are simply one of many, with no distinct attributes. As Halter explains, this sense of a blank and crushing world drives people to look for “authentic experiences...[the] localized traditions [to] seek out the timeless and true.” Rather than being isolated in an indistinct identity, “ethnicity offers tangible markers and potent symbols of ascribed commonality.” In a postmodern world full of unceasing change, increased personal identity is a way of dealing with a life full of ambiguity.

A myriad of ways to express identity is through pilgrimage to the homeland, cooking, festivals, and family trees. My grandmother has whole-heartedly adopted the family tree and has spent decades painstakingly uncovering the clues of the past.

She's traveled to Salt Lake City to delve into the ocean of ancestry records kept in the library and even hired a private investigator to look into the genealogical dead end of my great-great grandfather, George Humphrey Brown.

But she's also experimented with other forms of connecting with the past. One Christmas, she cooked an entirely English dinner, complete with traditional English Christmas crackers and a rum cake she attempted to light on fire. After half a bottle of rum, she gave up and served the cake in bowls to the adults. And for the past seven years, she, my mother, and I have wanted to go to Grimstad, Norway, where my great-grandmother came from. My grandmother has talked fondly of her great-grandfather bringing his shipbuilding trade once he arrived in Louisiana and listening to her grandmother read to my grandmother from her Norwegian Bible. I promised her that I'd try to learn Norwegian before we went, and I began researching the geography of the country, its cultures and customs. We never made any specific plans with dates and an itinerary, but my grandmother would become wistful whenever we mentioned the possibility. Before we could make solid plans, however, my grandfather's dementia worsened, and my grandmother could no longer leave him for long periods of time. We reluctantly abandoned the idea, and my mother and I never mention it in front of her, afraid to evoke her feelings of regret and loss.

But where does this idea that there's a difference between one cultural identity and another? After all, many white people have simply adopted the term "Euro-American" to encompass their pasts. The traditions and customs might be different

among cultures, but there seems to be something lying deeper under the surface, that there are important, inherent differences between say, a Polish person and an Irish person.

The history of believing in different white races is a long and disturbing one. Nell Irvin Painter explains in his *The History of White People* that for most of America's history, "Americans firmly believed in the existence of more than one European race." I would like to briefly mention that I by no means am a racist, nor do I believe that my ancestry makes me superior or inferior to any other person. Rather, I like to identify with my ancestors as individuals and how they lived and what they achieved, rather than believing in a fantasy of "scientific" and "biological" differences among various peoples. I find such practices abhorrent, and I am *not* a proponent of white supremacy. But perhaps some of our obsession with identity comes from the legacy of this centuries-old practice in believing in different white races, even if the more blatant forms of this idea have faded to an extent.

Some of the basis for the idea that different races of white people existed was an unsupported observation that all Celts had similar physical characteristics, or Teutonic, or Mediterranean had their own respective groups of physical traits. According to William Z. Ripley, author of *The Races of Europe*, Teutonic people had a long head, a long face, very light hair, blue eyes, tall stature, and a narrow, aquiline nose. By contrast, the Celtic people had a round head, broad face, light chestnut hair, hazel-gray eyes, a medium or stocky build, and a rather broad and heavy nose. White people could be divided into different subdivisions based purely on how they looked.

We can still see this tendency to classify based on looks today. My brother, a redhead, gets asked all the time if he is Irish and where he “got” his red hair. My mother, with bronzed skin and black hair, has been asked if she is Middle Eastern. When a French friend of mine came to visit, at dinner she went around the table and said what we all looked like. She classified my brother as Scottish, my father as Irish, my brother’s friend as English, but when she turned to me, she said, “I don’t know; you could pretty much be anything” and repeated the same to my mother. This assessment somewhat disappointed me; I wanted my appearance to make me seem *something*, anything.

Interestingly, the idea of ethnicity based on *country* rather than on ethnic group (i.e., Germanic rather than Teutonic or Irish rather than Celtic or English instead of Anglo-Saxon) is a relatively new idea. The association of ethnicity or identity with a specific country rose with the advent of the nation-state. Up until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nation-state did not exist—that is, the idea of a homogenous group dwelling within the same borders and developing an identity based on said shared ethnicity and race. The nation-state derives from nationalism, the feeling of superiority because of belonging to a particular country and social group.

Nationalism had evolved from Joan of Arc’s attempts to drive the English out of her French homeland for the sake of the “French people” (an unfamiliar thought at the time, a collective French people) to Otto Von Bismarck using *realpolitik* and the Franco-Prussian War to gather Germany’s many principalities into one large nation-state. The countries of Europe as we know them today were once a bunch of

scattered city-states, principalities, and small kingdoms with groups of ruling families, but no central idea of being Italian or Spanish or English. Territories and borders were always changing from constant warfare, and tiny kingdoms and fiefdoms dominated the European landscape as various warlords sat as kings and princes over their serfs. Within one modern-day country, one would find dozens of dialects of the same language, impeding communication. European countries as we understand them today did not exist until the 17- or 1800s, when nation-building gathered steam as France gathered her territories during the revolution and when Italy gathered as the Kingdom of Italy in the early 19th century. So our modern-day claims to be Portuguese or Italian or Greek stems from a contemporary desire to identify through nationality.

This desire has not always been necessarily healthy. Nationalism on steroids—fascism—leads to social Darwinism, racism, and genocide. A disordered, unhealthy feeling of superiority allows various groups to hate each other on the basis of language, race, and culture. This xenophobia has many examples in history: Oliver Cromwell's genocide of the Irish, Adolf Hitler's "Final Solution" for the Jews, and Saddam Hussein's treatment of the Shiite Muslims. History is littered with leaders who used their power to systematically eliminate or oppress an ethnic group: the pogroms of Russian tsars, the English ruling class's attitude toward the Quebecois during the Montreal smallpox epidemic of 1881, and the conflict between Muslim Pakistanis and Hindu Indians.

My ancestors were not immune. My great-grandfather, an Englishman from Leeds, declared every Saint Patrick's Day, "We are not Irish!" and could not

understand why my grandmother would want to wear green to school on March 17. A friend of mine from high school teased me and laughed when I told him that some of my ancestors were from Bavaria, saying that Bavarians were the hicks of Germany. I countered him, though, by citing another branch of my family tree that comes from Schleswig-Holstein, at the very northern edge of Germany, which silenced him. By his standards, these northerners were far superior to my southern Germany kin. Although these examples are far from extreme, little tinges of these prejudices exist in our conscious minds, poking and needling at our pride.

My maternal grandmother has taught me to value my ancestors. She has a slight Louisiana accent that becomes more pronounced when she's tired or speaking of her childhood. Five-foot-two and sharp, she's the kind of grandmother with whom you bake cookies, who calls you Southern endearments like "sugar" and "honey" every few sentences, who teaches you how to knit and how to cook gumbo.

She likes to work on jigsaw puzzles with me, and as she sorts out the edge pieces and organizes little piles of colors, she tells me of her life, of her grandmother reading to her from her Norwegian Bible and her English father's refusal to eat corn (English people think corn is for livestock, not people) or any Southern cuisine. Instead, he preferred traditional English dishes like meat pies and puddings. She tells me of her resentment that she grew up the daughter of a Methodist minister, constantly under the congregation's scrutiny. She tells me of the family's black maid, Dell, who taught her how to make gumbo, yet whose last name my grandmother

never learned. At the time, Dell was just the help, and although my grandmother loved her, there was a line drawn in those days that you simply did not cross.

When our eyes grow tired from matching shapes, she patiently sits with me while we work with her “Facebook for dead people,” as she explores ancestry.com, finding links with distant relatives as far away as Australia and New Zealand, showing me the years of family history she has compiled, both of her own family and her children’s and grandchildren’s. I think she sees ancestry.com as a way to connect the dead, building relationships online much like Facebook in order to make links between people who exist now only in records and memories. She explains to me the different charts that outline lineage: descendant charts with a couple at the top and all the progeny underneath; a pedigree chart to show a descendant and all the ancestors preceding him or her; a family tree to show all the complex family relationships between cousins and aunts and uncles, etc. We search for my father’s ancestors together, finding matches on ancestry.com, trying to piece together if that person is the one for whom we are looking. Oftentimes it’s a dead end or a false lead, and we go back to the search bar.

I have never asked her, but I think she views “Facebook for dead people” like our jigsaw puzzles: a bunch of disparate pieces strewn about, and it’s up to us to organize them and see how they fit together, filling in the blank spaces with what we find. Yet for her, she must find the pieces from all corners of cyberspace and paper trails. Our fill-in-the-blanks must come from searching far and wide, casting a large net into many databases and records to possibly, maybe, find a hint. And once we’ve

found the pieces, we fit them together, finding the edges that line up and pressing them together, hoping that they're a match.

My grandmother's ancestry program provides a number of different charts to track ancestry, descendants, and pedigree—a term reminiscent of dog shows and kennel clubs. I did not grow up in a family that placed a premium on good “breeding” or coming from a “nice family.” Despite the fact that apparently the Spurriers are a “prominent family” in Wichita, I never heard anything to even remotely indicate superiority. The only possible source of a superiority complex would be that I could qualify to join the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) on either side of my family. I didn't even know that being in the DAR meant something socially significant until I heard pop culture references to DAR snobbery.

I stare at a little box with a cameo silhouette of a woman. Listed underneath reads: “Rachel Kathryn Spurrier; b: 03/01/1991, Wichita, KS; m: ; d: ”areas of my life still blank, empty, waiting to be filled in. Branching back behind me are my parents: Rebekah Jean Vorhees and Gary Roger Spurrier, two lines linking them together, two lines extending from where they meet which end with my brother and me. Behind them my grandparents, my great-grandparents, on and on, stretching out into an exponential array of people distant and long-dead.

Yet these pedigree charts can be both misleading and inaccurate. For one, paternity, especially preceding the late twentieth century, is questionable at best. There's no guarantee that your great-great grandfather is biologically your great-great grandfather, barring exhuming remains and then performing DNA tests.

Maternal ancestry is more reliable, but not an exact science. There's a certain level of trust, or a willing suspension of doubt, when charting genealogy, because family scandal never seems to show up in the official record. Marriage, birth, and death records from churches in Europe tend to be fairly accurate, yet combing through ancestry archives can lead to confusing results, with multiple matches for one name and phonetic spelling changes once the family reached Ellis Island. For example, my great-grandmother's grandmother's maiden name was "Coffman," a clearly Anglicized version of the German "Kauffman."

Scientists have found ways to circumvent these record-keeping issues. Today, researchers use specific methods to track both maternal and paternal ancestry. On the maternal line, scientists study mitochondria, organelles in eukaryotic cells that act as the "power plants" of cells. Mitochondria are inherited from the mother and passed on mother to child. A father's mitochondria do not appear in his offspring. This exclusivity provides an excellent method for tracking maternal descent. For example, my Norwegian great-great grandmother had one daughter (my great-grandmother). That daughter had one daughter (my grandmother), and that daughter had two daughters (my aunt and my mother). My mother was the only daughter to have her own daughter (me), so I am the only descendant of my great-great grandmother to be able to pass on her mitochondria.

On my sixteenth birthday, my mother and grandmother gave me five gifts: my great-great-great grandmother's hair braided into a watch chain after her death, my great-great grandmother's gold locket, my great-grandmother's pendant engraved with her initials (HB), my grandmother's pearl earrings, and my mother's

ring from my father back in high school—one item from each generation, passed on to me to care for and keep. These are among my finest treasures, those things that I would grab and take with me if they were the only things I could save in a house fire. On the wall in my mother's kitchen hang three formal portraits: one of my great-great-great grandmother Greta; one of my great-great grandmother Theresa; and one of my great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and me sitting together in my grandparents' living room from many years ago. We sit arranged by age, moving clockwise: my great-grandmother, my grandmother, my mother, and me. We complete the circle with my great-grandmother's hand touching my tiny infant hand.

My mother and father joke that those photos represent six generations of bossy women. When I was younger, I would stand in the kitchen and look from face to face, trying to find similarities down the line between mother and daughter, grandmother and granddaughter. I'd study noses, eyes, chins, hair, but I never quite found one particular trait that found its way down the generations, no link apart from what we've found on the books. I still look to these women, though, to establish I sense of who I am, where I come from.

Mitochondria have more uses than tracking lineage; mitochondria have been used to trace ancestry in historically charged events. When several bodies were found in the Koptiyaki forest of Russia, some suspected that the remains were those of the long-lost Romanovs, the last imperial family of Russia. Scientists used mitochondria to link the DNA from the bones to people who shared maternal lineage with Nicholas and Alexandra, respectively. Using mitochondria to establish the

identities of the bodies fanned the flames of the Anna Anderson case, the woman who claimed to be the lost Grand Duchess Anastasia, because scientists were reluctant to confirm (despite a 97% match) one way or the other that yes, indeed, these remains were the imperial family. Mitochondria eventually worked against Anna Anderson as well—her family was traced back to the Skankowszka family in Poland yet without perfect accuracy. Controversy still exists on whether or not the case is closed.

I've meant for years to sit down with my grandmother and ask her to tell her stories; I keep telling myself that I have more time. I imagine sitting in her kitchen at her small wooden table as we might de-vein shrimp or shell green beans or remove the husks from corn, throwing the husks into a metal bowl we'll take out to the horse later. She'd tell me about growing up in Louisiana then Texas then going to boarding school in Oklahoma. She'd tell me about my great-great grandmother's trip to the United States, the great-great grandmother whose locket I often wear.

But I might be running out of time—we all become members of Facebook for dead people eventually, and one day it might be my job to keep the family records, dutifully continuing the search for distant relatives and ancient family lines. These are the things we pass on—not just our DNA, not just our souvenirs and trinkets—but our memories, our traditions, the ineffable things that move from generation to generation as effortlessly as telling a story.

While mitochondria provide a way to trace maternal ancestry, to trace paternal ancestry, scientists use the Y chromosome. The Y chromosome is exclusive to males (women with two X chromosomes and men with XY chromosomes). Scientists can then use the Y chromosome to trace male descent. This technique has been used to track migration patterns from Africa to India, from Norway to Ireland, etc. Checking the Y chromosome allows researchers to trace descent and heritage in men today. This tracing helps us find the origin of man, working our way back to the genetic Adam and Eve. The two lived thousands of years apart, but the idea persists that we all share a common male and female ancestor.

My grandmother has recently become interested in DNA testing to learn more about her ancestry. Certain companies offer DNA testing. Send in a swab of your cells and get back a detailed chart telling you where your ancestors came from—Africa, India, Asia, Europe, et cetera. Amy Harmon explains in a recent *New York Times* article that genetic tests now open a window to people's pasts: "where they came from, why they behave as they do, what disease might be coming their way."

Some desperate college applicants have resorted to this testing in the vain hope that they'll be able to prove some sort of racial diversity to put on their college and scholarship applications. Even job applicants are jumping on the bandwagon, using the test results to apply as minorities, or conversely, African-Americans are claiming European ancestry for inheritance rights; claiming Native American blood is a popular way to vie for scholarships and casino money. Another example involves a Christian using the results to prove Jewish genetic ancestry to request

Israeli citizenship. But unlike my grandmother or me, who are merely curious, these people aren't necessarily looking for a new form of identity; they're looking for money and power, resorting to a commercial market to show that ethnicity does not always match skin tone.

For them, the DNA test is incontrovertible evidence; instead of citing records or family lore, a person can wave DNA results to demonstrate their ancestry without question. The jury is still out on the accuracy of these tests, and only time will tell if the legal system will hold up commercial DNA test results as evidence. And unfortunately for power or money seekers, "many scientists criticize the ethnic ancestry tests as promising more than they can deliver." One ancestor among many may not show up in the test results, or the margin of error in the results could falsely lead someone to believe they are from Central Asia when they have no ancestry from the area.

But when the tests are accurate, they often yield surprising results. People who believed themselves to be exclusively of European descent find evidence of African ancestry or the like. Suddenly, the whole notion of "Yes, I'm American but of European descent" changes. Harmon mentions a young woman who marked her race as "Asian" on a college admissions form when her older sister's test results yielded 2% Asian ancestry. In this case, the information was to her advantage, but for some, the information may be unsettling and lead to uncomfortable questions. Who are you? You were so certain you knew, for sure, who you were and where you came from. But I might counter, "What difference does it make? The same person

still exists, and a past that remains unchanged has now been revealed. How important is it that you know for certain who ‘your people’ are?”

My grandmother has told my mother and me that when she and her husband die, my mother and I will be the executors of the family heirlooms. My grandmother complains that my aunt is too careless and will just sell them, and that my uncle’s wife wants nothing to do with them while my uncle can’t be bothered. My mother and I will become the caretakers not just of the family records but of the family treasures. I am not sure I need more than what I already have—the four mementos from my foremothers. I am not sure I can accept the responsibility of my great-great grandmother’s trunk she brought with her from Norway or one of my great-grandmother’s furniture and the other’s fine china. I’m afraid I will damage them, break them, tarnish them and therefore tarnish the memory of their previous owners.

This fear looms in the back of my mind from time to time. My great-grandmother’s 1920s vintage filigree engagement ring will be mine one day, if I want it, if I get engaged. It’s one-of-a-kind, priceless both in make and in sentimental value. Though the day is far off, I’m almost scared to wear it, because it is irreplaceable. If damaged or lost, there’s no one to find another one. These things given to us, we must treat them carefully and delicately—we’ll never come by another.

For decades, scientists assumed that DNA acted as an unchanging blueprint—the cards dealt were immovable, fixed, static. Yet this theory failed to explain why in some pairs of identical twins, who are genetically identical, only one twin would develop a disorder (e.g., bipolar disorder). If both twins were exactly the same at the genetic level, how could one develop such a disorder while the other remained unaffected? The study of epigenetics attempts to answer this question, supposing the idea that genes can be “switched” on or off depending on environmental factors.

From the Greek “Epi” which means “above” or “beyond,” epigenetics explains why environmental factors can affect genes that are passed on to the next generation. Certain genes express themselves while others remain silent, so that differing experiences can “flip” on the switch or turn it off. This switching on and off occurs naturally in human development as certain genes turn on for various developmental milestones and then turn off and remain dormant for the rest of the person’s lifetime. Some turn on and never turn off, leaving a person to deal with the potentially negative effects of that flipped-on gene.

Judith Shulevitz explains that epigenetics play a role in the “development of a person’s temperament, body shape and predisposition to disease,” and the epigenetics can be affected by “what we ingest (food, drink, air, toxins); what we experience (stress, trauma); and how long we live.” To put it another way, John Cloud summarizes that basically, how we live and what we do can affect our chances for obesity and cancer later in life and will affect any offspring you might have because the changes in epigenetics affects which traits you will pass on.

Epigenetics opens doors for scientists, who can develop ways to manipulate epigenetics as a way to treat illnesses through waking some genes and silencing others. Some of these diseases for which epigenetics could hold the key to treatment include cancer, schizophrenia, autism spectrum disorders, Alzheimer's, diabetes, etc. Instead of DNA doling out destiny, we can be the masters of our own fate.

I was drawn to epigenetics about six or seven years ago after reading an article. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age fourteen, I used to accept the diagnosis as a lifetime of battling depression and mania, managing medication, and tracking my moods. Currently, there is only treatment for bipolar disorder and no cure, but epigenetics gave me hope that maybe scientists can figure out a way to shut off those genes that led me to develop the disorder in the first place. Instead of being at best "high functioning," I could be cured.

Epigenetics holds the promise of controlling genetics, but genetic testing is sometimes more of a curse than a blessing. Genetic testing may yield worrisome results without supplying any method for remedying the genetic defect. Sometimes I'm afraid of what genetic testing might reveal about me and what diseases I'm predisposed to. Although I don't like to admit it, thinking about hereditary diseases occasionally keeps me up at night. My grandfather died of Parkinson's; the other is slowly wasting away from dementia. My grandmother suffered heart disease before she died. Both my mother and grandmother have gotten knee replacements; my knees already creak and ache. I wonder if I am looking into my own future, if these misfortunes are the windows of what comes next for me, or for my parents. I worry I will see my mother's mind slowly degenerate to the point where she cannot

remember what day, month, week, or year it is, her short-term memory resetting every five minutes. Or I'm afraid I will watch my father's hands twitch and shake as his motor function deteriorates from Parkinson's. I'm afraid one day my own brain will fail me, and those around me will have to deal with a sick old woman who can no longer care for herself.

Sometimes it's better not to know.

I am not the only family member acutely aware of hereditary diseases. There was a time when my mother blamed herself for my bipolar disorder. Her sister, father, grandmother, and great-uncle all suffer(ed) some form of mood disorder, whether it was cyclothymia, bipolar I/II, or bipolar NOS. She thought that her genes, although unexpressed in her, had left me doomed to be bipolar. And while my chances of mental health problems were high (there's a longstanding history of depression on my father's side as well), there was no guarantee I would have become bipolar. My brother is not, and my cousins show no signs of the disorder. It's a game of probabilities, one where the bets and stakes are high.

I wanted to be able to trace the origins of these problems, how we see problems in our family trees, why our doctors always ask for as complete of a family history as possible. Grandmother with high cholesterol, grandfather dead from Parkinson's, grandmother dead from heart disease, grandfather crazy from dementia, brother with osteopenia and a drug problem, mother with osteoarthritis, alcoholic uncle, alcoholic aunt, the list goes on and on. These are supposed to be clues, indicators of our risk factors. But so many variables go into epigenetics, into meiosis, into the merging of haploid into diploid cells. We can never really know.

Out in the country in Kansas, I sit on a porch swing, watching the hummingbirds flitting between the feeders. My grandmother is next to me, gently rocking on a glider. We sip sun tea sweetened with juice, listening to the buzzing of carpenter bees burrowing into the logs of the house while the wind chimes tinkling musically. I remind myself once again that I do not have forever to listen to my grandmother's stories and share her memories, so I turn to her and ask, "What is the thing you miss most about Louisiana?"

She smiles, the corners of her eyes crinkling, and she begins to speak.

I'D LIKE TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT JESUS

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you."
--Luke 6:37-38

I have a tendency to see the world in dichotomies: black and white, right and wrong, good and bad, left and right. I tend to avoid the shades of gray philosophy and fall into the trap of grouping the world into categories without allowing room for nuances. Classification is all too easy, all too simple; I lose perspective and the world ends up in little boxes, neatly compartmentalized to fit my opinions. This approach to life has its share of contradictions, for I've spent years preaching tolerance and acceptance of others, that all roads to faith and spirituality are equally viable, that we're all on the same path to the same place, but it's okay if the journey is different.

I've spent too many years simultaneously promoting the acknowledgement all faiths while touting my own secular humanism. I was unintentionally shoving my ideas down others' throats, all the while claiming that I would never force my beliefs on anyone else or maintain that my way is the right way, the only way. In my defense, if there is one, I separated the world into believers and non-believers because I became pegged as a non-believer before I had the chance to decide for myself. The Southern culture in which I grew up taught me that there were only two sides: saved and unsaved, faithful and unfaithful, and I was on the losing side of the culture war.

After my second-grade classmates informed me that I was going to hell for not believing in Jesus, I began avoiding the topic of religion altogether when people asked. I found ways to skirt the topic, either by changing it or simply lying. At school, I followed the rules, worked hard, behaved myself, never swore, and often kept to myself. When I did talk to people, I was soft-spoken and generally polite, and for some reason people simply assumed I was a Christian. The times I did forget to lie and instead accidentally revealed that I was not a Bible-beating, God-fearing little Christian girl ended with me in tears, or, as I got older, with me defiant and angry.

Without the emotional maturity to rationally discuss the relative merits of our respective viewpoints, my peers and I would end up in a stalemate, us glaring at each other in mutual dislike and frustration. In sixth grade I got into a heated argument with a classmate who was greatly insulted that I did not believe that the earth was only several thousand years old and that God created Earth in six twenty-four-hour days. I had never heard the theory of new-earth creationism, and I let slip that I did not believe that that literal interpretation was possible or plausible. As I encountered situations that put me in conflict with my friends, I began to reject religion as evil, that the institution of Christianity was damning and that my failure to believe it saved me somehow. I couldn't believe that God would allow religion to create walls between people. The uncertain belief I had in God turned sour, and my faith turned bitterly atheistic.

My brother experienced similar situations in school. In his biology class in high school, his fellow classmates responded to the evolution lecture by unzipping their backpacks with one clean movement, whipping out their Bibles, and opening

onto Genesis. My brother was afraid if he spoke too much he'd reveal he was in the minority. Though my own experience with the evolution lecture was not as nerve-racking, I always knew not to speak up when discussion ventured into controversial waters, a habit that continued well into college.

The continued rejection festered within both of us, and it grew, simmering and then boiling over, into resentment, even hatred. The judgment of my peers pushed my faithful doubt over the edge, and I became an atheist, vehemently anti-God and anti-organized religion. To me, if God had taught His followers to treat others like this, then there was no God. No true and "loving" God could lead his people to commit such cruelty, the kind of cruelty where schoolchildren damn one another. I hadn't yet learned the term "theodicy," but I could not understand how God would have let people experience pain and suffering that I'd watched my brother go through.

Beyond my brother's and my struggles with our classmates, I did not understand how a world full of pain and suffering could be ruled by a Christian God who, like a puppeteer, orchestrated all the action. I grew up in a world dominated by fear and suspicion—one of my first truly clear memories is seeing the cover of Newsweek after the Oklahoma City bombing, and my first flashbulb memory is of the morning of September 11, 2001. My country has been at war for over half my life, and because of my penchant for reading history and historical fiction, I got a clear view of how the tragedies of today are merely the most recent in a long and storied history of human depravity.

My mother, while never encouraging the avid atheism I had adopted (perhaps she did inadvertently by her snide comments and scorn), taught me on the day of the second grand damnation, ironically enough, a verse from the Bible to help me with the pain: “Don’t show your pearls before swine” from Matthew 7:6—“Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet and tear you to pieces.” I had cried without abandon after having come home from school that day, afraid and unsure as to why my classmates had become so angry and cold. To protect me from further conflict and pain, she taught me that my beliefs were like pearls and to never show them unless I knew the person was worthy. Although I became more cautious in revealing my beliefs, learning the definition of what “worthy” meant took much longer.

This attitude about pearls before swine became my *modus operandi* when it came to religion, one I carried with me for years. As I moved from middle school to high school, I met a group of friends who were either a-religious or really didn’t care about others’ belief systems. Life got simpler. By integrating into a group of creative, socially awkward students, I formed a bond based not on shared faith but on shared love of learning and fringe creativity. Although religion may have been an important part of their lives, my friends and I never broached the subject. We spent our time discussing the relative merits of Ayn Rand’s objectivism versus socialism and the historical context around famous Supreme Court cases like *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

But when the subject did come up, my attempts at explaining my beliefs petered out lamely, because giving Unitarian Universalism a succinct, clear

explanation is a challenge, even for UU ministers. Considering the fact that the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) has some basic tenets but no strict creed, rules or regulations, or indeed any set beliefs, the only things I could share were some of the more general ideas—the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, etc.

My brother and I had struggled to find a satisfactory explanation for Unitarian Universalism—how do you describe a religion where you can believe whatever you like as long as you follow a certain set of loose guidelines? How do you tell people that you're supposed to build your own beliefs and find your own truth? Who is comfortable with a subjective truth that isn't handed to you from a pulpit? My brother learned to describe it as a garden where you are the gardener: you're given a plot of earth and some water—the basic tenets and beliefs that all UUs hold. But you're also given tools and seeds to decide what you want to grow on top of this foundation, how you want to build and nurture your faith. The choice is all yours; in my case, making a decision took years of trial-and-error.

Unitarian Universalism is the result of a merger of the Unitarian Church and the Universalist Church. The Unitarians were distinct from their other Protestant brethren by their belief that the father, son, and Holy Spirit were one, a unity, rather than a trinity. Later, the American Unitarian Association emphasized rational thinking, a close relationship to God, and the humanity (rather than the sacredness)

of Jesus. Meanwhile, the Universalist Church of America operated under the belief that all people were saved and that every person had inherent worth and dignity, no matter what happened in his or her lifetime. Eventually, the two merged in 1961. Today, there are less than one million Unitarian Universalists worldwide. In the United States, about one in every thirteen hundred people is a UU and worldwide only one in every 40,000.

Unitarian Universalist congregations tend to have at most 500 members and are mostly comprised of what I lovingly refer to as “religious rejects.” These are people who have had a crisis of faith, been summarily kicked out of their home church, or multi-faith families needing a place where everyone can fit in. People who need spirituality but who can’t seem to find a church home often wander into Unitarian Universalism’s inclusively loving arms. In these churches, people choose their faith.

My parents were of the crisis of faith model. Both raised Methodist, married in the Methodist church, and their firstborn baptized in the Methodist church, my parents were for the most part well behaved members of the congregation, taking communion and being involved in the community. But at some point, and I cannot tell you when or where precisely, they stopped believing. Right after their second child was born (me), they left the church indefinitely before they could get me baptized, moved to Indiana from Wichita for my dad’s grad school, and started going to the UU church in Bloomington. They haven’t looked back since, and if they have, it’s only to disdain or scorn.

The “free and responsible search” for truth and meaning advocated by the UUA is a great weight for many people. This burden of having to find the truth can wear on the soul, for many of us desire the comfort and safety of simply *knowing* and believing what comes next, that there is a God who loves us and cares about us and *has a plan* for us. If we know that we are always cared for, always forgiven, always redeemed and that all we have to do is ask, the business of living does not seem easier but perhaps more manageable. There is no such comfort or reassurance in Unitarian Universalism, at least not if you don’t want it. Many UUs try to go out and look for meaning through various intellectual forums—books (both fiction and nonfiction), talking with people of other faiths, group discussion, various forums of literature and canons of other faiths, the list goes on. UU parents try to pass on these methods of spiritual research to their children, who attend Sunday school learning everything from humanitarian treatment of the earth to the basics of Passover to the tenets of Buddhism to how to look up Bible verses.

But we’re never guaranteed certainty; yes, we can form a worldview and a set of beliefs. Yet no eternal, ethereal objective truth is a permanent solution. A UU never stops looking, never ceases seeking, continuing on the exhausting quest for subjective truth. At a church service I attended not too long ago, the minister said something along the lines of, “If you think you’ve finally arrived at the truth, you’re probably further away than from where you started.” Every time I think I’ve found the answer, I second-guess myself. If I think I’ve arrived at the truth at long last, I’ve probably gotten further away from it.

For years, my mother kept a newspaper clipping taped on her computer monitor, even as the article yellowed and faded and curled around the edges. It was a listing of top SAT scores by faith. Unitarian Universalist students had ranked at number 1; number 2 was Judaism. My mother highlighted the “1. Unitarian Universalism” and proudly declared, “It’s because you have to look and read and find out for yourself. You’re not going to get the answers on your own.” When I took the SAT several years later, I looked up the code for “Unitarian Universalism” (sometimes I’m surprised we still get national recognition), wrote it in the appropriate slot on the form, and took a deep breath. I felt like I was representing a team, playing for the UUs, making them proud, because UUs don’t get a lot of recognition. Once, when a UU church sent in their tax exemption forms, one representative didn’t realize that Unitarian Universalism was a real religion and tried to make the church pay the taxes. Boy Scouts of America, last time I checked several years ago, does not recognize the UUA as a legitimate church and you can’t get badges related to learning about your faith in the UUA.

When I was twelve, my first boyfriend gave me a Bible for Valentine’s Day. It was a lovely Bible, actually—a burgundy faux-leather cover, golden-edged pages, a thin burgundy ribbon for a bookmark. It felt solid and sturdy in my hands. I wasn’t happy when he showed up three hours late without calling, and I had spent days working on personalizing an atlas, my gift for him, with post-it notes, because I knew he loved geography. Unwrapping that heavy package and finding a Bible inside felt like

a slap to the face, that he couldn't accept me for who I was or what I believed in, that I needed to change for him to like me or want to be with me.

Unable to see the motivation behind the gift, I felt heartbroken and rejected. What I couldn't understand still have trouble understanding is that he truly believed he was helping me by saving my soul. Because he cared about me in his own way, he was concerned about the fate of my soul. Nearly a decade would pass before I had the emotional maturity to comprehend this expression of affection, and for much of those ten years, I carried a grudge as a vestige of my immaturity and anger. The eventual eye-opener on my then-boyfriend's conversion tactics came from the book *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University* by Kevin Roose. Roose, a liberal student at Brown University, decides that if he wants to understand American evangelical culture, he must spend a semester at Liberty University, founded by Jerry Falwell. Roose's views, unlike my own when I first read it, are both critical and understanding. He approaches the topic with curiosity and tries not to pass judgment, something I had been doing inadvertently for years.

Roose describes a weekend he spent over spring break proselytizing to spring breakers at Daytona Beach. This type of evangelism is described as "cold turkey evangelism," straight-up approaching a stranger and witnessing to them. Roose, a liberal student from Brown University, spends a semester at Liberty University, founded by Jerry Falwell. Roose is trying "to understand how well-intentioned Christian kids—some of the nicest people I've met all semester—can end up on street corners in Florida, shouting hellfire and damnation to the masses," and he somewhat finds an answer. These Christians truly and wholeheartedly

believe that they are being altruistic and doing the world a service by bringing people to Christ. In their eyes, attempting to convert someone is worth the ridicule, pain, or humiliation that may come from addressing a stranger and informing him or her that unless he or she converts, they're getting a one-way ticket to hell. In trying to understand his fellow students' determination to convert at least one soul, Roose compares the situation to someone having the only cure for a terminal disease—wouldn't you do everything in your power to convince the sick person that they need the cure to survive, even if the person adamantly refused any kind of treatment?

At the time of the Valentine's Day Bible fiasco, I really and truly did not understand the concept that my boyfriend and our mutual friends were looking out for my wellbeing every time they encouraged me to accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and savior; instead, I walked away hurt and confused. But I was young and insecure and wanted to do whatever it took to make my boyfriend still like me, so I cracked open the book to Genesis and started to read. Later I realized this approach to the Bible was probably a mistake; I've been told that the best way to ease into reading the Bible is not straight through—start with the New Testament and then try and wade through the Old Testament. I got stuck in the begetting section in Chapter 5 of Genesis and decided instead to take the easy way out and read the Bible Cliffs Notes. That didn't last long either.

The problem was that I didn't believe that the fate of my immortal soul was tied to my conversion, far from it. My faith in an afterlife was tenuous at best, and even if there were some plane of existence after death, I thought everybody got to go

through the pearly gates. I couldn't invest the time slogging through the material, and I found the study portion aspect of the Bible to be both insulting and overtly cheesy and clichéd. To me, the wording was pedantic and patronizing. Reading them, I imagined an overly enthusiastic Sunday school teacher reciting these words in a singsong voice to a room full of young children.

Looking back, I can appreciate the rhetoric, but part of me still cringes a little at a notation for Genesis 3:8-9:

Adam and Eve hid from God when they heard him approaching. God wanted to be with them but because of their sin they were afraid to show themselves. Sin had broken their close relationship with God....But Jesus Christ, God's Son, opens the way for us to renew our fellowship with him. God longs to be with us. He actively offers us his unconditional love. Our natural response is fear because we feel we can't live up to his standards. But understanding that he loves us, regardless of our faults, can help remove that dread.

Or when I took a quick gander at the New Testament, I found this notation for Matthew 15:16-20:

We work hard to keep our outward appearance attractive, but what is in our hearts is even more important. The way we are deep down (where others can't see) matters much to God. What are you like inside? When people become Christians, God makes them different on the inside. He will continue the process of change inside them if they only ask. God wants us to seek healthy thoughts and motives, not just healthy food and exercise.

The entire Bible was replete with these footnotes, increasing the page count to over 2,300 pages. I couldn't imagine my friends who had achieved the goal of reading the entire Bible within a year (there *was* a 365-day reading plan at the back of mine) or who attended weekly or even bi-weekly Bible studies. My main level of

appreciation for the Bible was its influence on Western literature, but little more. My evangelical friends' enthusiasm was a mystery to me.

Although some of my good friends are evangelical, I cannot and will not even attempt to define what is in fact a multifaceted movement full of subgroups that disagree and battle with each other all the time. Modern evangelicalism is diverse, and lumping evangelicals all together with the stereotype of rabid, angry, uneducated Southern conservatives is both unfair and inaccurate. As tempting as it is for me to label them as intolerant theocrats attempting to impose their morals and values on what they believe to be a Christian nation, I can no longer subscribe to that simplistic manner of thinking. As I once heard a comedian say, "There's a certain type of ignorance in the South...let's go ahead and call it 'Southern Baptist.'" As much as I've enjoyed ranting and raving about the injustices perpetrated by conservative Christians, there's no easy way to define such a complicated movement.

On my first day in a History of Evangelicalism in America course, the professor asked the students to come up with a working definition of evangelicalism. Despite working for fifteen to twenty minutes, none of the five groups came up with a strong definition; we mostly had words and terms that we associated with the movement such as "activist," "conversion," "witnessing," "passionate," "charismatic," "informal worship," and so on. Scholars similarly have been unable to find a consensus on a definition for the term, but stereotypes abound.

Mark Sheler in his book *Believers* describes a scene in which he and his fellow staffers at the *U.S. News & World Report* discussed potential angles for the article on Jim Bakker's resignation from his Praise the Lord Ministry after having confessed to an affair with one of the church secretaries. Various other TV evangelists joined in the controversy, and the newsroom was searching for a way to cover "Pearlygate" and the "pulpit wars." Sheler's coworkers threw about phrases like "born agains," "fundamentalists," and "holy rollers." A few reporters in the room attempted to explain the movement, saying that "evangelicalism was a rather rustic brand of Christianity that appealed mainly to undereducated rural folk in the South and Midwest...[and] didn't have much traction in the more urbane and enlightened precincts of the Northeast and the West Coast." The staff began to turn on evangelicals, particularly those who watched televangelists, wondering why they're so "stupid" and "fanatical" to donate money to frauds and con men masquerading as men of God.

Although it's true that evangelicalism has a particular stronghold in the South, evangelicalism is hardly a regional phenomenon. True, according to the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, fifty percent of Evangelical churches are in the South and eighty percent of evangelicals are white, but the movement is not confined South of the Mason-Dixie. The best, broadest definition I can give for evangelicalism is fairly simple and comes from Barry Hankins's *American Evangelicals*, which borrowed the definition from David Bebbington. Hankins says the "four essentials of evangelicalism" are Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism.

I've seen these essentials in my daily life. As I mentioned above, my evangelical friends had a schedule to read the whole Bible by graduation, and they were free and open with quoting scripture. When graduating from high school, many quoted Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength," and both the valedictorian and salutatorian of my high school class cited scripture in their speeches after the group prayer (I went to a public high school). I cannot even begin to count the number of times I heard John 3:16 repeated *ad nauseum* whenever evangelicals tried to witness to me.

Indeed, on Friday nights near Sundance Square in downtown Fort Worth, a group of evangelicals stand on the street, preaching that people who are out to see a movie, go dancing, or go drinking are asking for the wrath of the Lord. One evening when I was out to see a movie with some friends, we saw the group congregated on the street corner by the AMC Theater. One of them called out to my friend if she knew her scriptures, and she replied loudly, "Yes, I do!" The man responded, "Well what is John 3:16" and without pause she replied, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." When we'd lined up to buy our tickets, leaving the evangelicals behind, I whispered under my breath, "Even *I* knew that one."

One need only turn to the 2012 election to see the activism from evangelical groups such as Focus on the Family and the Southern Baptist Convention. The news features the heated debates surrounding abortion, health care, and immigration. The social and political activism of evangelicals can be seen in Planned Parenthood Protests, rhetoric of conservative Christian organizations, and the language of the

candidates trying to garner the Christian right vote by leaning to the right on social issues. Both President Obama and Mitt Romney refer to their faith to pander to values voters. President Obama keeps reminding the electorate that he is indeed a Christian, and Mitt Romney has repeatedly emphasized his right-wing values, even if evangelicals don't believe that the Mormon faith is technically Christian.

Crucicentrism, of course, is a no brainer. Many evangelicals in the South, particularly girls and women, wear cross necklaces or rings or even a nail to symbolize Jesus' suffering on the cross. This suffering is often captured with the oft-quoted Mark 15:34 "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" or the modern-day depictions in popular culture such as in the film *The Passion of the Christ*. Crucicentrism is closely linked to conversionism in that if a person accepts that Jesus died on the cross to pay for his or her sins, then that person will be born again and saved. Once a person has professed a version of the sinner's prayer, he or she is considered saved, and oftentimes the evangelical witnessing to the new convert will tally that conversion on their "number of people I've saved" list. Below is an example of the sinner's prayer:

Lord Jesus, I know that I have sinned against you, and that my sins separate me from you. I am truly sorry, I repent of my sins. I now want to turn away from my sinful past, and turn to you for forgiveness. Please forgive me of my sins, and help me avoid sinning again. I believe that you (Jesus Christ), died on a cross for my sins, that you (Jesus) was raised from the dead by God the father on the third day, is now alive, and now hears my prayer. I believe your blood shed on the cross blots out my sins. I invite Jesus to become my Savior and the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me obey You and to convict me when I sin. I pledge to grow in grace and knowledge of you. My greatest purpose in life is to follow your example and do Your will for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Shortened, simpler versions are often used when witnessing to teenagers or children, but the evangelical rarely follows up with the converts to confirm that they are indeed keeping to their newly found Christian faith.

Biblicism, crucientism, conversionism, and activism all have roots in the history of evangelicalism in America, and in the history of Christianity in general. The history of evangelicalism in the United States has a long and storied history, and the body of literature on the subject is both vast and diverse. I suppose the best place to start is with the Puritans in Massachusetts. Puritan life was difficult—two hundred Puritans died in the first year of the colony, and the Puritans believed that their success depended on their faithfulness and the level of their devotion. The Puritan faith hinged upon the idea of covenant theology, that everyone in the community made a promise to one another and to God to uphold a Christian life.

Puritans did not emphasize an individual relationship with the Son but rather promoted the community's relationship with God the Father—as Stephen Prothero explains in *American Jesus*, “Puritans lived in a world of the first person plural.” The community followed the leadership of the educated minister and the governor. The minister, well-read in the Bible, led worship and the spiritual life of the community, and the minister gave erudite, didactic sermons. Worship was a controlled affair, full of hymns glorifying God the Father (God was decidedly male), and church service was more of an intellectual exercise than an emotional outpouring of devotion.

These sermons focused on the God the Father portion of the Holy Trinity, and that God was omniscient, omnipotent, and to be feared. Jesus, a focal point of the later Evangelical Century in the 1800s, was, as Prothero notes, “at best a marginal figure.” To the Puritans, turning away from God meant losing His favor—the consequences would be dire, especially in such a harsh, unforgiving climate as New England with its rocky soil and bitterly cold winters. Therefore, the Puritans viewed themselves as servants who must fulfill God’s will, and if they did not, they would experience His punishment. This God was masculine and vengeful, and one of the signs of His divine grace and forgiveness was the fact that some congregants, known as the elect, had been chosen before the beginning of creation to be saved, and the rest would be damned. Despite the fact that Puritans accepted not knowing the fate of their salvation, they found comfort in knowing that God controlled life, because Puritan life was full of death, disease, malnutrition, exposure to the elements, raids by Native Americans, and starvation.

I was grossly uneducated on these aspects of Puritan life. All my US history classes taught me about Plymouth Rock and the Great Awakenings as aspects of a larger narrative, central only to the history of the United States as a whole, rather than evangelicals themselves. When I entered my History of Evangelicalism in America course, I realized quickly just how little I knew about the history of evangelicals. I had not given them credit for their achievements and the complexity and depth of their stories.

The more I read and the more I gained from my classmates' comments in class discussion, the more I began to appreciate that evangelicals today are the product of centuries of growth and evolution while still retaining their roots in the Puritans and the Great Awakenings.

One can trace the partial foundations of Puritan faith back to two theologians—Martin Luther and John Calvin. Martin Luther helped define two of the major tenets of Protestantism: *sola scriptura* and *sola fides*. Martin Luther emphasized the idea of salvation by faith alone, or *sola fides*, and that the Bible gave the greatest religious authority—*sola scriptura*. For the Puritans, these two principles meant that study and interpretation of the Bible along with a holy life could be a sign of salvation. Tellingly, *sola scriptura* did not mean an individual interpreting the Bible, because Puritans still had to listen and submit to the authority of the ministers.

Anne Hutchinson, who went rogue and claimed to have communicated personally with God, went head to head with the leaders of the colony when she said she was assured of salvation. She had connected with God personally, in the first person singular, and now she knew that she was saved. Both claims—communicated with God individually and certainty in her salvation—were both blasphemous and dangerous to the survival and spiritual life of the colony. Breaking the bonds of the community and challenging the authority of the ministers was unacceptable. Subsequently, Anne Hutchinson was banished. She had failed to conform to the Puritans' methods and standards of Biblical study and a holy life.

The reason that Biblical study and good living did not necessarily translate to salvation and a healthy life can be attributed to the work of John Calvin, who developed the idea of predestination. Puritans took Calvin's work and emphasized the idea that we are born sinful and can never be sure of our salvation. Therefore, many Puritans focused on trying to please God the Father while remaining unsure of their own salvation.

In contrast to the Calvinist, dogmatic Puritans, the Protestantism of the Evangelical Century centered more on Jesus, featuring the Son of God as a personal, friendly, and loving man who was waiting to embrace His followers. Salvation, instead of being limited to a select elect, was free to anyone who accepted Jesus into his or her heart. For the Puritans, Jesus was the incarnation of God on Earth rather than the sign of God's incarnation on Earth, because, as Prothero explicates, "the Puritans...were a God-fearing rather than Jesus-loving people, obsessed not with God's mercy but with His glory." But in the Evangelical Century, Jesus moved to the center stage. Instead of a masculine God, a feminine, maternal, and nurturing Jesus became a figure with whom worshippers wanted to take an intimate walk and know personally. Rather than the Puritanical view of acting as servants of God, many evangelicals in the nineteenth century were friends of Jesus, and rather than the community forming a covenant with God, the individual fostered a relationship with Jesus.

One of the central features of evangelicalism in the nineteenth century was the conversion experience. George Whitefield, an Anglican minister and one of the main figures of the First Great Awakening, experienced a profound religious feeling

which he described as a “new birth” and no longer doubted his own salvation. He began to focus on the born-again experience, “the transformation of the soul by the Holy Spirit...an immediate connection to God and the individual human soul.” A hundred years after Anne Hutchinson proclaimed to have communicated personally with God, George Whitefield was sowing the seeds for one of the biggest features of the Evangelical Century: conversion. For the Puritans, conversion had no meaning, because God had already predetermined who would go to heaven and who would go to hell. No one could rest assured of his or her salvation, but George Whitefield spread the notion of the conversion experience and its importance in knowing one’s salvation.

Encouraging people to convert and become friends of Jesus was one of the most pronounced traits of the Evangelical Century, and one way to promote conversion was dramatic, charismatic worship services that were more informal and less academic than Puritan sermons. The revivals of the First Great Awakening, which helped shape the Evangelical Century, were “unconventional”—some were held outside; some preachers were barely educated, and women participated through public exhortation. Rather than reviewing scripture and creed as ministers did with the Puritans, preachers told stories and employed theatricality. In this century, worshippers wanted “unpretentious leaders and self-evident doctrine.”

This trend continued with the Second Great Awakening, beginning roughly around 1801 with the Cane Ridge Revival—the opening of the Evangelical Century. This Second Great Awakening continued the trend of less educated ministers, and over time ministers transformed into preachers, who were informally taught and

less focused on hierarchy. Indeed, preachers were at the whim of the congregation, for it could dismiss the preacher if its members felt dissatisfied with the preacher's performance. Instead of the preacher, the individual held the ultimate authority over his or her own salvation, and as Jesus had died for everyone's sins, anyone and everyone could be saved. The notion of sin changed as well—as God became more human and humans became less sinful, evangelicals began to view sin as a “choice,” not as “inheritance.” Puritans viewed humans as inherently sinful and depraved—the legacy of Calvinism, but evangelicals during the nineteenth century turned away from this pessimistic view of humanity and turned toward a more optimistic idea of human morality.

Having grown up in the South, I heard a lot of talk about sin and human depravity. Because sin and the devil are not central to Unitarian Universalism, I didn't understand when my classmates would suddenly become repentant and quiet because they had committed a sin. I mostly saw it as dogmatic superstition and didn't pay much attention to it until they start addressing what they saw as sin.

I suppose my morals could be seen as sinful, but my idea of living a good life is not dependent upon whether or not I will go to heaven and be rewarded in the afterlife. I want to have integrity and to help others because Unitarian Universalism teaches social justice and person responsibility. I don't constantly punish myself or carry around guilt for having had sex before marriage, occasionally cursing or taking the Lord's name in vain, disobeying my mother and father, and regularly working and not going to church on Sundays.

Although I have my doubts about humanity and reading *Fahrenheit 451*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *Brave New World*, I generally like to believe the best in people—people tell me the truth, say what they mean, and aren't plotting to undermine or hurt me. This rule applies to just about everyone, excluding politicians and celebrity gossip columnists. But many of my Christian friends disagree that you can be a good person without being Christian—not being Christian means an incapability to have morals and follow a set of proper ethics. And they also do not believe that humanity is progressing; instead we are rapidly devolving into the Second Coming.

The optimistic view of human morality has disappeared in some sections of evangelicalism. Premillennialism is still preached in many evangelical churches who are waiting for society to deteriorate until the rapture. Evangelicals cite gay marriage, abortion, and feminism among the main evidence for society's downfall and march toward the apocalypse. These problems are also occasionally mentioned by evangelical preachers when explaining the causes of natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Sandy, a forewarning of what will happen if we don't fix society and prepare for the second coming. The popular *Left Behind* series has inserted into mainstream literary culture a potential rapture scenario and what happens to those who have not accepted Jesus and are left behind.

Some critics have claimed that the *Left Behind* series employs a fear-based tactic to frighten people into conversion. The *Left Behind* contribution to the culture of fear in some branches of evangelicalism is fairly benign compared to hell houses. Hell houses are a fairly small, somewhat countercultural part of evangelicalism.

Around Halloween, evangelical churches (often mega churches with plenty of extra funds) will put on a “hell house,” a Christian version of the secular haunted house. Instead of men popping out with chainsaws and spooky lighting, hell houses guide the visitors through a series of rooms that depict different sins that lead a person to hell: drunk driving, pre-marital sex, abortion, homosexuality, etc.

Many of these scenes are quite graphic (some hell houses use raw meat as aborted fetuses, and the scenes of car crashes from drunk driving are stomach-churning with gratuitous blood and injuries), and the intended audience is mostly teens, who are the most susceptible to committing these particular sins. The second-to-last room is the “hell room,” where the visitors are forced to stand in a room often over-heated and eerily lit, scented with rotten meat or cheese, to listen to the cries and moaning of those damned to hell. The goal is to make the visitors as uncomfortable and frightened as possible before they enter the “heaven room,” which is cool, pleasant, and fragrant with soft music playing in the background. The heaven room is an altar call for those who have just witnessed what happens to sinners to repent their sins and be born again. These two scenes set up a clear dichotomy: accept Jesus, repent sins, and go to heaven, or fail to convert and end up in hell.

Hell houses have varying success, but many visitors are genuinely terrified and immediately approach the altar to repent. This approach to modifying behavior, especially teen behavior, is both effective and offensive. I suppose for some, the ends justify the means in establishing hell houses, including scenes from sensitive topics like the attacks on September 11 or the Columbine shootings. Gore and horror are

acceptable in disorienting and upsetting audiences, guiding them to conversion. Being controversial and generating bad publicity grabs attention and is better than no publicity at all, even if the practice is controversial and, according to some, in bad taste.

Evangelicals who participate in hell houses blame Christianity's waning cultural influence for all the sinful temptations available in secular pop culture, and most of these temptations are geared toward teens. Hell houses attempt to depict sin in these scenes as horrifically as possible to deter sinning that has reeled out of control. I knew that one of the functions of religion was to control behavior, but hell houses center on America's youth who are presumably the most impressionable—and susceptible—to sin and perpetuating immorality in our culture.

I have my opinions on the phenomenon of hell houses, but I can't fully condemn them. People have an option to attend and an option to interpret the hell houses for themselves. But what does bother me is the reliance on the slippery slope logical fallacy and inaccurate dramatizations that skew reality in order to elicit an emotional or visceral response. Evangelicals support fear as a means for control rather than relying on people being drawn toward God's love and forgiveness, which I find curious. I have no answer, but I'm left wondering if frightening people into believing is as effective as calling them to accept Jesus' love.

Because every individual held the key to his or her salvation, some of the demographical barriers of the Puritan age wore away during the Evangelical Century. Puritans worshipped with men on one side of the church and women on

the other, and both age and race played a role in the power and authority the individual held in church. The Evangelical Century, because of the Second Great Awakenings, broke down these barriers, and women as well as African Americans participated in witnessing and preaching, something that would have been unthinkable to the Puritans. For Puritans, sermons were for teaching, educating the worshippers, usually through analysis of scripture, but during the Evangelical Century, the ultimate goal was to encourage worshippers to convert, anyone could witness to anyone else. In this age, people were in control of their own spiritual fate—free will Arminianism was combating Calvinist predestination.

As the social barriers of the time wore down, another large feature of evangelicalism began to burgeon and grow: activism. Evangelicals were forward-thinking progressives in many respects, fighting slavery, alcoholism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. Although much of the evangelical activism today now seems conservative and, according to some, backwards, evangelical's desire to change society has old roots. Conservatives today continue traditional activism, albeit in a somewhat different form.

The Evangelical Century's society, like the Puritan society, featured an emphasis on morality, discipline, and their effects on society, but for the evangelicals of the nineteenth century, the guardians of this morality were women, not men. Women, once viewed as the daughters of Eve who caused the Edenic fall, were now examples of Christian virtue, daughters now of Mary of Nazareth—pure and pious. As a woman educated and raised children in her domestic sphere, she was responsible for the future of American Christianity—they were now “guardians

of virtue.” But, the ideas of virtue had not disappeared from the Puritan age; women as the keepers of domesticity were expected to teach children to live a moral life and encourage her husband to continue on a virtuous path.

And even though *sola scriptura* and *sola fides* began to involve *solus Jesus*, the Evangelical Century still believed in Biblicism. Although the latter three were not features of Puritanism, Biblicism remained an important aspect of Christian life in the Evangelical Century, as Martin Luther’s idea of *sola scriptura* persisted. But instead of ministers controlling interpretation, individuals took to the Bible for more personal, more informal reading and study.

As the Evangelical century continued, a major division began to form between two groups, the fundamentalists and modernists. The fundamentalist-modernist debate centered around several major issues: interpretation of the Bible, scientific and evolutionary thought, and the fate of society. Historical movements like the rise of the social sciences, Romanticism and transcendentalism, and the Industrial Revolution contributed to these tensions.

The first was interpretation of the Bible. Biblical literalism was and still is a trademark of fundamentalism. Of course, there is no single literal interpretation of the Bible. Literalism can include young-earth creationists, those who believe in miracles, etc., but also encompass the group of people who believe in the Bible’s inerrancy and that it is the literal word of God, divinely inspired. Meanwhile, modernist interpretations began to break down the Bible as a literary and historical text and analyzed it in the context of the social sciences. Also, modernists began to doubt Biblical authority, and no longer was the Bible, according to Hankins, “the

specially inspired revelation of God.” Modernists thought “the truth was within humanity and was distinct from the Bible. The Bible gained its authority only because it gave testimony to the truth within. Evangelicals could not accept such distinctions between truth and scripture.”

Interpretation of the Bible is still an important component of modern-day evangelicalism. Of course, any interpretation of the Bible is selective, for if we were to take every line of scripture literally, fathers would be selling their daughters into slavery to pay debts and we’d have some interesting ways to deal with victims of rape. For more on what it’s like to follow the Bible’s commands to the letter, check out *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* or *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband “Master”* by Rachel Held Evans.

Of course, the literal interpretation of the Bible versus metaphorical interpretation creates a clear division between young-earth creationists, intelligent design proponents, and evolutionists, but for me, I see focus on interpretation of the Bible almost every day. I never try to schedule group projects or extracurricular events on Wednesday evening because most people are off to Bible study. Once in high school, when my band director announced we needed to have emergency rehearsal that Wednesday evening, hurried whispers rippled through the crowd: “He can’t do that!” “I’m going to church anyway; they can’t make me show up.” “I can’t miss Bible study; there’s no way I’m going to miss it.” As a child, I saw it in my

friends studying for Bible verse memorization contests, the Salt and Light Bible Study club at my high school, and so on.

The Bible is still *the* most important tool in defending any Christian view on a controversial topic. Various religious activist groups frequently employ scripture as a way to prove their point. For example, proponents of health care reform cite “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” from Galatians 6:2, while opponents might cite “For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” from 2 Thessalonians 3:10. Pro-lifers often refer back to Jeremiah 1:5: “ Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.”

An entire documentary, *For the Bible Tells Me So*, examines evangelical views toward homosexuality, and both sides on the issue continually referred back to the Bible in defense of their views, selectively picking out passages to suit their needs, often ignoring literal or historical context. Any issue you turn to: Biblical egalitarianism versus complementarianism in women’s rights, immigration, human rights, environmental stewardship, domestic and foreign policy, all have scriptures both for and against the various sides of each issue.

Beyond debates around Biblical interpretation, the rise of science, particularly the theory of evolution promoted and popularized by Charles Darwin, came as a direct challenge to fundamentalism. While evangelicals viewed modern science as “an attack on Christian faith more serious than anything else in history,” modernists believed that if Christianity did not adapt to modern science, it would become the

butt of jokes and the object of mockery. Modernists wanted to reconcile faith and science, while fundamentalists were to an extent rejecting science altogether. This concern came to a level of fruition with the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, but more importantly than the conflict with biological evolution, modernists believed that Christianity, like living organisms, would evolve over time. Culture as well would evolve over time as God intervened and helped improve society. These views were simply unacceptable to fundamentalists.

Because society would continually improve, modernists countered the premillennialist belief of fundamentalists, that society was deteriorating bit by bit and would continue to do so until the Second Coming. Because fundamentalists believed the world would get worse, they focused on converting as many people as possible before the rapture. They wanted to get as many people on the lifeboat before the flood came. In contrast, modernists believed that society itself, rather than individuals, would be saved.

While the modernists held many new views on society, their views on the individual's relationship with God was perhaps the most damning apart from doubting the authority of the scriptures. Romanticism focused on the importance of feelings and faith through intuition rather than evangelical conversionism or Enlightenment deism. Experiencing God was natural in the eyes of the Romantics, and the transcendentalist belief of seeing God in everything promoted the idea of the immanent, near God. This view challenged the traditional evangelical crucicentrism that focused on Christ's dying on the cross and his subsequent

resurrection. Modernists downplayed the resurrection's importance and instead turned to Christ.

The fundamentalist-modernist debate reached the boiling point with the Scopes Monkey Trial. Although technically fundamentalists won the trial, the national coverage made fundamentalists the laughingstock of the country, and the general public began to view fundamentalists as backward, uneducated bumpkins. Subsequently, fundamentalists retreated from public and political life into their own sectarian groups and would avoid the profane, corrupt matters of politics and civic leadership. Several decades later, they would emerge again and reshape the landscape of American politics and culture.

A dose of this reshaping of American culture came to me in the summer of 2007 before morning marching band practice.

The pads of the keys make an unpleasant sticking noise as they touch the metal of my flute. The sun mercilessly shines down on the pavement even this early in the morning; I can feel my tight ponytail becoming hot and brassy. I hold my water jug up to my forehead and feel the cool drops of condensation that have gathered. My fingers press the keys as I absent-mindedly go through the circle of fifths: C, F, B-flat, E-flat, A-flat, D-flat, G-flat, B, E, A, D, G. The parking lot is dotted by groups of teenagers standing in little clusters, waiting for morning rehearsal to begin and for the final stragglers to arrive.

Another girl in my section has just run up, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet. She thrusts out her left hand, palm down, as though showing off an

engagement ring. A small ring adorns her fourth finger, and she exclaims in a pitch a little too high for me so early in the morning, “My dad just gave me this before my purity ball! Isn’t it pretty?”

All the girls in the flute section crowd around and congratulate her, chattering animatedly. They take turns grabbing her hand and inspecting the ring. I stand back, wary, like I do every week at football games when the flutes pray in a circle before our halftime performance. Normally I stand off to the side on the track around the field and gaze around absent-mindedly while the other flutes stand in a circle together, hold hands, and ask God for guidance during the show. No one remarks on my failure to participate, but I feel self-conscious anyway and rock back and forth nervously on my feet, looking for a place to belong. This morning, I pretty much repeat the same behavior.

I lean in to my friend Lauren and say quietly, “I think I know what they’re talking about, but what exactly is a purity ball?” Lauren is Catholic, and although she faithfully attends every week, her love of science and math have caused her some doubts and tempered the fervor of her faith.

She pauses a moment before replying, “It’s where fathers and their daughters go to this dance, and the daughters pledge to their dads to not have sex until they get married.”

“And they get a ring for that?”

“Apparently.”

I’m familiar with young Christians wearing rings with crosses, fish, or “True Love Waits” inscriptions until the ring is replaced by an actual wedding band, and

I've heard of the father-daughter purity pledge. But the purity ball is new to me. The flute player is still giggling and laughing, proudly showing off her proof that she'll be a virgin until the day she says, "I do."

I turn to Lauren and say, "Yeah, like *that's* really going to do anything."

The high value placed on a young woman's virginity is nothing new. Although the judgment for premarital sex has faded in many parts of the country, the South remains a stronghold of purity and chastity. Young women are expected to keep their maidenhood until their wedding night. If a woman does have sex before marriage, she is considered tainted and defiled. But there is a loophole called secondary virginity.

I first heard about secondary virginity at an abstinence-only sex ed assembly at my middle school. The speaker had just finished a wrap-up of the horrors of STDs and how the only way be sure 100% that you'll avoid pregnancy, HPV, herpes, syphilis, gonorrhea, Chlamydia, HIV/AIDS, and pubic lice is to be abstinent until marriage. Birth control methods aren't 100% effective, chided the speaker, and sex is only good unless it's with your spouse. This argument is common among abstinence proponents—it's okay to have sex, but the only way to have *good* sex is if you are married and sleeping with your husband or wife. The speaker used a metaphor of your virginity being like a gift: you only get to give it once, and you should save your most important asset for the person you'll marry.

I was doing my best not to roll my eyes or get up and walk out. For one, I could feel my pelvic bones pressing onto the cold cafeteria bench for an hour, and

two, I found this abstinence-only stuff to be both dangerous and ludicrous. Failing to educate young people about contraception and avoiding STDs through proper protection is sending them out in the world for failure.

But my mental ranting stopped when the speaker starts talking about how you can lose your virginity, but if you regret it, you can still decide not to have sex again until you're married. And even though it's not totally the same as a virgin, deciding to be abstinent again will keep you pure enough until you marry another virgin. The speaker held up a wrapped package, tore off the paper, and said, "This is what happens when you lose your virginity—you give your gift to someone else. But, you can re-wrap your gift if you decide to be abstinent until marriage." She taped paper around the box and held it up for us to see.

I heard this idea repeated several times for the next few years, both in my health class in high school and amongst some of my friends. By the time I reached college, I was largely desensitized to it. One morning I woke up and see my roommate sitting in front of her laptop. I could only see the back of her head, but from the rapid keystrokes and slight nodding of her head, I knew she was fuming. I climb out of bed and ask, "What's up?"

"This!" and she shoved her laptop so I could see the screen. "Can you believe this?"

I skimmed the contents on the screen. The background was of a sunset over a Cape Cod-like beach, rosy red and orange. The banner at the top of the website said something about virginity and purity. Alex opened a page with testimonials from women who have had sex, regretted it, and chosen to regain their secondary

virginity so they can regift their most precious part of their being. “What, you’ve never heard of this before?”

“You have?” Her indignant tone was almost a little painful to hear.

“I grew up in the Bible belt. So yeah, I’ve heard about it. I heard this so many times from the time I was like 13 in school. I’m guessing they don’t teach this out in SoCal?”

“They teach you this in school?” Her voice was becoming increasingly incredulous. “No, I never learned this. And thank God. This is absolutely ridiculous.”

“It’s not a huge deal. Everybody learns this here; I assumed it was common knowledge. I mean, the members of the group who came to do the abstinence-only presentation in my high school all just *happened* to go to the same Baptist church and insinuated that AIDS is a gay disease.”

“Can you believe they tell this to young women? Like a girl’s virginity is the only thing that matters about her.” She continued ranting and raving as we got ready to head out the door. I largely tune her out and think about what kind of cereal I’m going to get as we walk to the student union. Over the past decade, this world had become a part of my reality. It wasn’t my worldview, but I know I lived in a place where purity balls and secondary virginity were as common as prom and sweet sixteens.

The promotion of purity balls and abstinence before marriage is part of the cultural and political movement called neoevangelicalism. Today many people associate neoevangelicalism with the Christian Right and neoconservatives and with good

reason. After the Scopes Monkey Trial, fundamentalists stayed out of secular culture and by and large remained out of public affairs. Fundamentalists viewed political affairs as temporal and largely unimportant compared to the eternal and religious issues at hand in church.

In 1973, the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision provided the catalyst for the creation of the Christian Right agenda. Over time, abortion became one of three issues in the triumvirate of the Christian Right's culture war: abortion, feminism, and gay rights. The Christian Right has successfully framed the fight against these threats as pro-family values and therefore pro-America. To support any one of these movements is to be against the American family: working father, stay-at-home mother, and children.

At first, evangelical Protestants ignored the abortion issue, because Catholics had taken up the cause. Some of the knee-jerk reaction was attributable to the Protestant-Catholic rift: Protestants automatically thought that if Catholics were for it, they should be against it. Some younger women with small children joined right-to-life groups, whose membership swelled somewhat, but evangelicals did not take the helm until the mid-1970s.

When evangelical theologians such as Francis Schaeffer began to contend that secular humanists had inserted an anti-Christian system in government and society, evangelicals decided to take up in arms and fight the culture wars to save America. To win the war, Schaeffer supported joining with non-evangelicals to ensure political success. He encouraged "co-belligerence" and started the mobilization of conservative Christians in American politics. Groups that had never

before worked together or even agreed on certain faith matters were now joining together to collectively battle the encroaching threat of secular culture.

“Co-belligerence” gained a formidable proponent in Jerry Falwell. Although in the 1960s he had supported a more sectarian form of interference in politics, in the 1970s, he abandoned this philosophy and began to write about the corruption of government by sinful and wicked men and how it was time to fight “the spiritual war where Satan is active—in the political arena.” Jerry Falwell was a founder member of the Moral Majority, which sought out Catholics for cooperation. The Moral Majority, though no longer the force it once was, has helped spawn numerous other conservative groups such as the American Family Association and Focus on the Family.

Falwell also propagated the idea that scripture should apply to every act of government. He wanted to legislate morality, to make laws and remold government that would uphold the Christian values of a Christian nation. For Falwell and his supporters, the only way to save America from the damning influences of secular culture was to get involved in politics and influence the political arena.

Legislating morality was not confined to abortion. Other groups such as feminists and homosexuals also posed a threat to the American family. The Equal Rights Amendment would take away women’s place as homemakers and wives, and allowing homosexuals to teach would lead to other sinners such as robbers and murderers to be at the head of the classroom. These movements were unacceptable to fundamentalists and conservatives, because the family would collapse as a result of feminism and the government tolerating homosexuality. By using the rhetoric of

the family, the Christian Right made any opposition look anti-family and subsequently anti-America.

The Christian Right gained steam as politicians began to cater to this new, enthusiastic voting block. When Ronald Reagan said that even though the evangelicals couldn't endorse him, he would endorse evangelicals, he began a decades-long relationship between the GOP and evangelicalism. Evangelicalism moved from a fringe subculture to a legitimate movement with political sway, but Ted Kennedy warned evangelicals of the dangerous trap they might fall into, of we're-right-you're-wrong thinking. To some extent, they have. This voting block holds huge sway over elections, local, state, and federal. One need only watch the Republican primaries to see the candidates pander to the far Christian right.

The angrier part of me sees neoconservatives and neo-evangelicals as overly dogmatic and that they are attempting to establish a theocracy. My motto used to be "Get your laws off my body and your religion out of my government," but I realized not too long ago that for an evangelical, his or her faith permeates every area of life and affects every decision he or she makes. To separate any part of one's life from faith is unthinkable, so of course evangelical politicians would consider his or her faith in how they vote and campaign. I become quickly frustrated, thinking, "Didn't we settle this with JFK back in the 1960 presidential campaign when he said that religion should not dominate a politician's decisions?" But I try to remind myself that evangelicals want to live with faith every moment and fulfill their calling to Christ at every opportunity. No exceptions.

I live in Texas, so on an almost daily basis I see the effects of religious beliefs in state government, from Rick Perry passing “emergency legislation” limiting abortion access to the reducing of funding for Planned Parenthood. I see it in laws attempting to not punish bullying if it is on “religious or moral grounds.” I see it in the repealing of Equal Work, Equal Pay in Wisconsin and the Defense of Marriage Act. I go on long-winded rants about how legislating morality is infuriating, but then I remind myself that this group truly believes they are saving America, since, according to them, we are a Christian nation. I try to have empathy while my blood bubbles over every time I read about Jan Brewer.

There was a period time when I put my spiritual energies into somewhat believing in Christianity, though not exclusively. I had made a little shrine in my bedroom with a rosary, a Buddha statue, and a star of David, so I didn’t need exclusivity. But my need for a more specific faith came in my early teens. When I was fourteen, not long before I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, I overdosed and was subsequently sent for observation at an adolescent psychiatric hospital. The months leading up to this event had been trying: self-mutilation, deep depression, suicidal ideation. I had struggled for much of my life at that point battling major depression and anxiety, and I had reached a breaking point where I snapped and took a few too many pills.

After having had to look my parents in the face and admit what had happened, visited the ER, and drank liquid charcoal to coagulate the pills in my stomach, my parents drove me to Green Oaks Hospital for psychiatric care and committed me. That Easter weekend was particularly busy with not enough beds,

and after the orderlies examined me, they led me to a reclining chair and gave me a couple sheets and blankets to cover up. Feeling completely alone and abandoned, I began to panic. What if they kept me longer than a couple days? I have to go back to school; I can't miss class. What do I tell my friends? What will my parents tell everyone? What if I'm stuck here because they won't believe I'm not a danger to myself anymore?

Readjusting my scrubs and unable to sleep, I looked at the clock on the wall—twelve midnight. I tried to get comfortable on the chair, but no position really worked. I was panicking about what would happen if they held me and I missed school and what my friends were thinking and what my parents would do once I got out. Turning to look out the window onto the fluorescent-lit shrubs, I began to ask myself how I would face the aftermath of what I had done, how I had even managed to get through the past year, and a revelation came to me for how I got the strength and courage to continue, to persevere, in the face of what had happened: God.

At my Age of Reason ceremony when I was seven (the closest thing the UUA has for initiating children), my parents gave me a book called *All I See is Part of Me*, an illustrated book that gave a watered-down version of transcendentalist thought about God. Even if my times of vehement atheism, I thought that if there were a God, that God would not be the omniscient, punishing God, but a God who was omnipresent and in everything in life. And in that moment when I thought everything had fallen apart, I knew I would keep trying with the help of God.

When I got home Easter Sunday, I retrieved the Bible my ex had given me from my closet and opened to Psalms and began to read. Although certain passages

gave me pause, I found comfort and strength in them. I recorded in a composition notebook all the verses that particularly spoke to me, and every night I devoted time to read a few pages of the Gospel. These times set aside for reading, even if I was reading the Gospel more for background education than for strengthening my faith, I found tranquility and peace in devoting the time before sleep for reading.

I knew I never could fully fit in with the Christian crowd—it's hard to fake it 'til you make it in evangelical groups. As evangelicalism is to some extent a subculture, it has its own jargon, its own customs, etc. Whenever I hung out with evangelicals, I was afraid to speak for violating some norm or more no one had told me about. What if I accidentally offended somebody? If I ever tried to integrate fully into that culture, I suspect that I'd suffer some culture shock, trying to adapt to a world that is both foreign and frightening to me. Studying evangelicalism in a scholarly setting has been like an anthropology course, studying a culture I thought I knew and understood but in all honesty have missed the finer points of. Having been rejected so many times, I'm afraid that if any evangelical learns I'm not a card-carrying Christian, I'll either get a speech or simply lose that person's friendship. It's almost coming out of the closet but in a religious sense.

Unfortunately, my faith after the overdose did not go unnoticed by the rest of my family. Although I did not subscribe to the virgin birth or resurrection, and I was simply channeling my spiritual energy through Christian methods, my family remains deeply angry with organized religion, particularly Christianity. My father views Christianity as infantilizing, childlike, and immature with its father God who punishes and rewards based on behavior. My mother has little patience for what she

views the intolerance and dogma of Christianity. And my brother hates the walls it has driven between himself and many of his friends. Bringing up Christian practice in my household often leads to invectives.

One Christmas season, not longer after my parents had discovered my brother's extensive drug use, I was sitting next to the Christmas tree reading when I overheard my dad talking on the phone to one of his friends. "Well, we thought about sending Nick to NA or AA or something, but there's too much of a religious slant to it. That might work for someone like Rachel, but Nick's not caught up in all of that."

The lights on the tree became blurry, and walking tiptoe out of the room, I crept upstairs and leaned against the wall, taking deep breaths slowly and quietly. I couldn't mistake his derisive tone or the emphasis he placed on my name, like my brother was too good for that, but I was weak for having turned to faith in a moment of crisis. A belief in God, any God, meant that I was just like all those other feeble, irrational people who found faith in a time of trouble. He believes that people who find religion when going through difficult times are unable to cope with a complicated world without a simplified belief system.

I think the world is far too complex to rely on reason alone. Science and empiricism can only take you so far; trying to solve the mysteries of the universe through equations and theorems is admirable, but I am not satisfied with slapping a patina of science over the unanswerable riddles of existence. To quote Hamlet, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

One of my favorite books of all time expounds on this quote. *The Power of One* by Bryce Courtenay tells the story of Peekay who grows up in apartheid South Africa. He meets and befriends an old German doctor who teaches young Peekay about life. Doc, as he is called, gives a couple impassioned lessons, which I adopted for myself. The first is when Doc is telling Peekay that sometimes we do not need an answer for everything:

In this world are very few things made from logic alone. It is illogical for a man to be too logical. Some things we must just let stand. The mystery is more important than any possible explanation...The searcher after truth must search with humanity. Ruthless logic is the sign of a limited mind. The truth can only add to the sum of what you know, while a harmless mystery left unexplored often adds to the meaning of life.

I am satisfied not knowing the answers. The universe is far too beautiful and mysterious to boil down into the mundane through convoluted scriptural answers or calculated mathematical reasoning. I am satisfied to not know; I think in some ways, we are not meant to know.

Although I took up reading the Bible for a time and started thinking about God, I rarely ever prayed. Maybe the problem was I didn't really believe that God could hear all the prayers uttered every second all over the world; more likely I didn't because although I believed God existed, I did not think God had any control over my daily life and its events. The puppeteer God seemed implausible to me, and I liked my free will too much to surrender to God's plan. Like Doc, I didn't bother myself with worrying about being saved or not saved, if my prayers would be answered or not. I wanted to just keep going, to keep living well:

In Mexico there is a cactus that even sometimes you would think God forgets. But no, my friend, this is not so. On a full moon in the desert every one hundred years he remembers and he opens up a single flower to bloom. And if you should be there and you see this beautiful cactus blossom painted silver by the moon and laughing up at the stars, this is heaven....It is better just to get on with the business of living and minding your own business and maybe, if God likes the way you do things, he may just let you flower for a day or a night.

On the few perfect days I've had since I read *The Power of One*, I've thought to myself: maybe this is God letting me bloom for a day.

I've had an on-again-off-again relationship with Christianity—I'll go for a while being accepting and even defensive of Christianity before something sets me off and I fight against the evangelical culture around me. A few years after my dad made the comment about AA, my parents and I made a visit to the Methodist church at which my brother is the pianist (he keeps his religious views to himself while he's there). We decided to attend both morning services, and between the first and second service, all four of us decided to go to a nearby Starbucks.

Sipping my frappuccino outside, I leaned back against the chair and felt the cool spring breeze play across my face. A slight smile played around my lips until my dad began to go on about how ridiculous all those people at church were to believe that stuff; how could anyone in a modern world believe all that outdated stuff; thank goodness Americans are attending church less and less and that the "unaffiliated" category in America was beginning to be larger than the Christian category.

Before realizing what I was doing, I slammed down my drink and said, “It works for them. It may not work for you, but it *works* for them. If that’s what makes them happy and what gets them through the day, then so be it.”

My father missed my tone, and he countered, “But they’re just being sheep. They’re not thinking for themselves or questioning or anything.”

My voice began to rise while I said, “Don’t insult them! Studies have shown that people who have faith live, in general, healthier and happier lives than those without. So stop criticizing other people just because it isn’t what you think. Just because something doesn’t match what you think doesn’t mean it’s wrong.” Some choice insults were about to burst out of me, but I held my tongue before saying something I’d regret.

Still in high school and dramatic, I stormed inside and stayed there until we left for the second service. During the service, while we prayed together and said the Lord’s Prayer and sang hymns, I thought, “This may not be what I believe and this may not match my beliefs, but these people have a community. What’s so wrong with that?”

Especially during this presidential season, I still have days where I have philippics about limiting access to birth control or how religion divides rather than unites and how evangelicals are so self-righteous, but most of the time I try to be more tolerant, even compassionate, albeit with some reservations. Why? Because I can’t remain in a place of spiritual uncertainty and confusion. As Yann Martel writes in *The Life of Pi*, “To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of

transportation.” At some point we must move on past our doubt, our anger, our frustration. Whether we believe in Jesus or science or Muhammad or Yahweh or Vishnu and Krishna or nature or money, we all at some point have to take a leap of faith.

ACADIAN, CADIEN, CAJUN

Part I

The Forest Primeval

*This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest of their bosoms.
Loud from its rocky caverns, the deep-voiced neighboring ocean
Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.
--Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie, lines 1-6*

The story of Evangeline Bellefontaine and Gabriel Lajeunesse has become the symbol of the suffering of the Acadian people. The young and beautiful Evangeline is deeply in love with her betrothed, Gabriel. They live happily in the village of Grand Pré in Nova Scotia, Canada. When the English soldiers expel the Acadians from their land, Evangeline and Gabriel are separated during the chaotic deportation. Evangeline spends the rest of her life searching for her lost love. Finally, as an old woman, she finally finds Gabriel, who is dying in a poorhouse. Evangeline holds him as he takes his last breaths, and he dies in her arms.

Although Henry Wadsworth Longfellow invented the characters, the legend of Evangeline has captured the imagination of many, and the Evangeline Oak in St. Martinville, Louisiana, stands as testament to the enduring power of her story. The characters are fictitious, though Longfellow may have written unwittingly about true events; there are people who mistakenly believe that Evangeline is a take on a real story. Tourists come to visit the Longfellow-Evangeline State Historic Site in St. Martinville to see a traditional Acadian cabin. Here tourists try to understand life as

Evangeline must have experienced when her people came here after being forced out of their homeland during the *Grand Dérangement*.

The inspiration for Longfellow's epic poem begins a couple hundred years before the expulsion of the Acadians in 1755 during the Age of Exploration. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, western European powers (Portugal, Spain, England, and France) began colonizing the Americas. Though Spain and Portugal made many of the initial claims to South and Central America, France and England were not far behind in settling their own respective colonies.

France made her first claims in Canada; the first permanent settlement in Quebec was founded in 1608, and a few decades later, Robert de La Salle explored the Mississippi basin, naming it Louisiana after Louis XIV. Of course, with England busy making claims on the modern-day United States' eastern coast, the two countries carried their traditional enmity to the other side of the Atlantic. Age-old enemies, the two fought over territories in North America, and during Queen Anne's War in the early eighteenth century, the Acadian capital of Port Royal fell to the English. The Treaty of Utrecht ended the war, and France lost Acadia. The Acadians, now under the rule of the England, were asked to swear an oath of loyalty to the king. They refused, fearing that one day their oath of allegiance to the English crown would force them to fight against their homeland of France. Despite identifying France as their homeland, the Acadians had left western France decades before and now felt more Acadian than French, so they were reluctant to pledge allegiance one way or the other. When the English tried to force the Acadians to assimilate into

English culture, the Acadians responded with guerrilla tactics and raids, antagonizing the English further.

*Spreading afar and unfenced o'er the plain; and away to the northward
Blomidon rose, and the forest old, and aloft on the mountains
Sea fogs pitched their tents, and mists from the mighty Atlantic
Looked on the happy valley, but ne'er from their station descended
There, in the midst of its farms, reposed the Acadian village.
Strongly built were the houses, with frames of oak and of hemlock,
Such as the peasants of Normandy built in the reign of the Henrys.
Thatched were the roofs, with dormer windows; and gables projecting
Over the basement below protected and shaded the doorway.
There in the tranquil evenings of summer, when brightly the sunset
Lighted the village street, and gilded the vanes on the chimneys,
Matrons and maidens sat in snow-white caps and in kirtles
Scarlet and blue and green, with distaffs spinning the golden
Flax for the gossiping looms, whose noisy shuttles within doors
Mingled their sounds with the whir of the wheels and the songs of the maidens.
--Lines 28-42*

Lafayette, Louisiana, 2005. At the center of the ring of rustic cabins, the pond slumps still; insects skitter ripples across the surface. The sun shines brightly through the clouds, and the stagnant air clings to the skin. The one-story cabins are reflected in the water, the wooden posts holding up roofs extending over the uneven porches. Weathered railings stand on either side of outdoor rickety staircases leading to the porches, and spindly ladders extend into the attics that act as homes for wasps and hornets. The cypress timbers fit into carved wooden pegs, the logs patched together with mud. Period furniture stands silent in the one-room buildings, and the constant humidity has stretched and contracted the bedposts and the tables and chairs, leaving them cracked and battered. Dust has collected in the corners and on the glued-down fixtures, the life here held so still in time that it has crystallized and collected the dust of centuries.

The Acadian Village stands as a living monument to the life Acadians built once they were forced to become expatriates. My mother, grandmother, and I have taken a road trip here the summer before I begin high school. Outside Lafayette, ten acres surrounding a bayou feature eleven authentic buildings, donated by the descendants of those who once occupied them. Moved and reassembled piece by piece, the Acadian village shows a way of life transported from Acadia to the bayous of southwest Louisiana.

My spheksophobia prevents me from exploring the upper attics and eaves of the houses, so I stand by and feed ducks and geese while my mother and grandmother call out to me what they see from inside. Although the mannequins are a little too lifelike and the wasp nests in every corner force me to stay outside, I can appreciate this life created by the small communities of Acadian refugees who, stuck in a hostile land away from home, formed a safe haven in the middle of a swamp. After all they had suffered after their exile, they found a way to preserve their way of life.

The conclusion of the Seven Years' War in 1763 with the Peace of Paris further intensified the English-Acadian issue, because France ceded its Canadian claims over to the English and gave Louisiana to Spain. Small guerrilla skirmishes continued as the Acadians rebelled against their rulers who were determined to weed out the disloyal Acadians, and eventually the English colonial officers ordered that the Acadians be forcibly removed from the area. On September 5, 1755, the Acadians received a bulletin from the governor, who had ordered the deportation of

the Acadians. Only five days later, almost every Acadian boarded ships from Boston, and accounts vary on whether or not families were separated. Some scholars contend that, like in the Evangeline myth, many family members were split up, while others claim that nuclear families stayed together, even if extended families were separated. Either way, the Acadians were separated from the only place they knew as home, in some ways as tragic and traumatic as being ripped from family.

*There disorder prevailed, and the tumult and stir of embarking.
Busily plied the freighted boats; and in the confusion
Wives were torn from their husbands, and mothers, too late, saw their children
Left on the land, extending their arms, with wildest entreaties.
So unto separate ships were Basil and Gabriel carried,
While in despair on the shore Evangeline stood with her father.
Lines 568-573*

The Acadians were now homeless and had to resettle. The largest group of exiles, around one-fourth, settled in Boston, Massachusetts, where the exiles were further broken down into smaller groups, kept as prisoners under virtual house arrest. Seven hundred ended up in Connecticut; many escaped to Montreal in the province of Quebec, seeking francophone kin. Another group arrived in New York, but were later deported to the French West Indies, and many survivors of that terrible journey eventually resettled in Louisiana.

Many of the deportees after the initial exile died en route, and the condition in which the Acadians arrived was poor, starving, some diseased, some naked. Still another two groups attempted to arrive in Philadelphia or Virginia, but the governments refused to accept the refugees. Subsequently, many starved or died of smallpox waiting to disembark the crowded, unsanitary conditions of the below decks. The only place in colonial America where the Acadians received a slightly

warmer welcome was in Maryland, whose colonists were more willing to embrace fellow Catholics. Only ten percent of refugees who ended up in the Carolinas lived, and Acadians in Georgia were sold into slavery.

Part of the hostile welcome the Acadians received came from the Anglo-Americans' phobia of the French-speaking Catholics who were descendants of the French, with whom the English had just ended a brutal war. The Acadians were pushed to the fringe of society, where they suffered in poverty and marginalization, sometimes confined as prisoners of war. Some were even sent back to France or shipped to England. Back in the Old World, the Acadians were largely ignored by the colonial powers that had no time or energy to accept the colonists who were now a distinct group from the native French or English. The Acadian diasporas scattered the people across the western world, without a home and clinging to a lost identity, which bound together the remaining groups who were able to reunite.

By the Bayou Teche, a little Acadian cabin, refurnished with modern appliances and furniture, sits nestled in the marshy landscape. Though not the realistic, authentic cabins of the Acadian Village, this one has that snug and cozy feeling you might read about in a real estate ad. My mother is unpacking before settling down for the evening. Rocking chairs sway on the front porch though there is almost no wind, moving ghostlike. The air, as always, is sticky, close, sultry. Though the air is not warm in the evening, the humidity envelops you tighter and tighter the more you try to break free of it.

On the white wicker of the daybed, two white magnolia blossoms, freshly plucked, emit the sweet, soft fragrance I associate with summer in the South. The petals, so fragile and delicate, would brown with the softest brush of my fingers, so I have transported them here carefully, meticulously so that the muted yellows and creams of the soft petals stay unblemished. Arranging them under the lamplight, I take one, two, three pictures and then lean over and breathe in deeply, affixing in my memory the intoxication of the scent, the rippling sounds of the bayou, the ebbing and swelling of insects' symphony.

My grandmother tells me that when the Acadians arrived here, they thought they had reached the promised land, that this lush paradise was the Garden of Eden, but they later found out about the stinging insects; the malaria- and yellow-fever-inducing mosquitoes; the blistering summers; the mildew growing in the corners of their houses from the constant humidity, the smell of mold and rot extending into every nook and cranny; the alligators, the hidden dangers of the swamp. But for my grandmother, returning to the bayou is a gift, a break from her life on the plains of Kansas. She has come home to the Spanish moss veiling tree limbs and cypress knees peeking above the water. As I'm inside and the camera shutter clicks one two three, she is sitting just beyond the riverbank, resting against the trunk of a sturdy, ancient tree, breathing in the bayou.

*When on the falling tide the freighted vessels departed,
 Bearing a nation, with all its household goods, into exile,
 Exile without an end, and without an example in story.
 Far asunder, on separate coasts, the Acadians landed;
 Scattered where they, like flakes of snow, when the wind from the northeast
 Strikes aslant through the fogs that darken the Banks of Newfoundland.
 Friendless, homeless, hopeless, they wandered from city to city,
 From the cold lakes of the North to sultry Southern savannas,*

*From the bleak shores of the sea to the lands where the Father of Waters
Seizes the hills in his hands, and drags them down to the ocean,
Deep in their sands to bury the scattered bones of the mammoth.
Friends they sought and homes; and many, despairing, heartbroken,
Asked of the earth but a grave, and no longer a friend nor a fireside.
Written their history stands on tablets of stone in the churchyards.*
Lines 656-680

Despite the scattered resettlement, many Acadians repatriated to Louisiana to reunite with other Acadians and settle into the Francophone, previously French-controlled area. Fortunately, the Spanish wanted to grow the population in Louisiana, and nearly 5,000 Acadian exiles acquired land grants and settled along the Mississippi River and in the bayous of south-central Louisiana. The Acadians built little communities of farmers and fishermen, similar to the villages in Acadia. Because the Creoles were the haughty direct descendants of the French colonists, and the Anglo-Americans were obnoxious, greedy, and aggressive, the Acadians preferred isolation.

One of these settlements, present-day St. Martinville, became the site representing Evangeline's search for Gabriel, and a monument stands commemorating her arrival on the Bayou Teche. In the poem, when Evangeline arrives, Gabriel's father, Basil, tells her that he has left earlier that day. Throughout the rest of the story, Evangeline is always one step behind Gabriel, finally reuniting with him as he dies.

*Then there escaped from her lips a cry of such terrible anguish,
That the dying heard it, and started up from their pillows.
On the pallet before her was stretched the form an old man.
Long, and thin, and gray were the locks that shaded his temples;
But, as he lay in the morning light, his face for a moment
Seemed to assume once more the forms of its earlier manhood;*

*So are wont to be changed the faces of those who are dying....
 He heard that cry in pain, and through the hush that succeeded
 Whispered a gentle voice, in accents tender and saintlike,
 "Gabriel! O my beloved!" and died away into silence.
 Then he beheld, in a dream, once more the home of his childhood;
 Green Acadian meadows, with sylvan rivers among them,
 Village, and mountain, and woodlands; and, walking under their shadow.
 As in the days of her youth, Evangeline rose in his vision.
 Tears came into his eyes; and as slowly he lifted his eyelids,
 Vanished the vision away, but Evangeline knelt by his bedside.
 Vainly he strove to whisper her name, for the accents unuttered
 Died on his lips, and their motion revealed what his tongue would have spoken.
 Vainly he strove to rise; and Evangeline, kneeling beside him,
 Kissed his dying lips, and laid his head on her bosom.
 Sweet was the light of his eyes; but suddenly sank into darkness,
 As when a lamp is blown out by a gust of wind at a casement.
 Lines 1347-1353, 1361-1375*

My grandmother gives me a copy of *Evangeline* once we return; the pages are yellowed, and that old book scent that simultaneously warms and chills me, sends tingles down my spine. Its cover is adorned by a gold circular sticker labeled "60¢." My grandmother has passed it on to me after we visited St. Martinville, famed site of the Evangeline Oak. We stay in a small bed-and-breakfast right across the bayou from the oak, where Evangeline wept. My grandmother tells me the story of Evangeline's tragic life but says that there were real-life counterparts to Evangeline and Gabriel, but the ending was much different: Evangeline and Gabriel end up in this very area of Louisiana but never would meet. He would be on one side of the bayou, she on the other. They would pass in the street but on opposite sides of the road, always narrowly missing each other. He finally finds her while she is waiting under the oak tree, only to tell her that he has become engaged to another woman. He walks away, leaving her to sob under the oak tree, mourning all that she has lost

and never will reclaim. One account even states that she goes mad with grief and dies not long after.

Today I know that although perhaps maybe there were two lovers torn apart on the day of *Le Grand Dérangement*, Longfellow did not base his characters on real people. He toyed with the names of the characters and manipulated the story for dramatic effect, but Evangeline's search has come to symbolize the Acadians seeking a new homeland, a place to belong. Only in death are they reunited with their lost, beloved homeland.

After a night in the mildew-walled B&B, I wake in the morning with my sinuses full. To clear my breathing, I step out onto the balcony and turning my head, I have a clear view of the Evangeline Oak. I picture a young woman sitting on one of the broad, low-hanging branches of the oak tree, spotting her love and feeling jubilant, only to sink into despair when she learns he has taken another woman. When I come back inside and sigh, my grandmother recounts her two stories of Evangeline: apparently one real, one supposedly fake.

Although I do not remember this now, my grandmother reports that I basically said that Evangeline needed to get over it and get a life—just get a move on. Maybe I'd just never been in love or maybe I'd never really faced true despair at that point in my life, but today I become misty-eyed when thinking of the star-cross'd fates of Evangeline and Gabriel. I'm not sure what has changed in the past seven years, but today when I read the last stanzas of *Evangeline*, all I feel is the deep, weighing sorrow of finally finding after years of seeking only once it is too late.

*Still stands the forest primeval; but under the shade of its branches
Dwells another race, with other customs and language*

*Only along the shore of the mournful and misty Atlantic
Linger a few Acadian peasants, whose fathers from exile
Wandered back to their native land to die in its bosom.
In the fisherman's cot the wheel and the loom are still busy;
Maidens still wear their Norman caps and their kirtles of homespun,
And by the evening fire repeat Evangeline's story,
While from its rocky caverns the deep-voiced, neighboring ocean
Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.*
--Lines 1390-1399

Part II

The Metropolis of the South

The old French part of New Orleans—anciently the Spanish part—bears no resemblance to the American end of the city: the American end which lies beyond the intervening brick business-centre. The houses are massed in blocks; are austere plain and dignified; uniform of pattern, with here and there a departure from it with pleasant effect; all are plastered on the outside, and nearly all have long, iron-railed verandas running along the several stories. Their chief beauty is the deep, warm, varicolored stain with which time and the weather have enriched the plaster. It harmonizes with all the surroundings, and has as natural a look of belong there as has the flush upon sunset clouds. This charming decoration cannot be successfully imitated; neither is it to be found elsewhere in America.
--Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

The French Quarter is the cultural nerve center of New Orleans—here you will find the famed Bourbon Street (incidentally not named after the liquor but instead the French royal house of Bourbon), Café du Monde with the world's best café au lait and beignets daintily coated with powdered sugar, and shops with masks so elaborate that you only lift them gingerly for a moment before replacing them on the wall. Here you will never want for po' boys, crawfish étouffé, jambalaya, gumbo, fried shrimp. The jazz musicians play throughout the day and the sound of parties and drunkenness takes up the tune at night.

The French Quarter, heavy with the notes of street performers and smell of spices, is a Mecca of sorts for lovers of French, history, jazz, Cajun cuisine, zydeco,

Mardi Gras, and booze. It is a place so rich in culture and steeped in heritage that the confluence of influences (Spanish, French, Native American, Acadian, etc.) have created a *mélange* so unique that it cannot be replicated anywhere else in the world. It is the capital of the Acadiana region—the twenty-two southern parishes known for their French culture.

Because of this cultural mix, defining Louisiana as Cajun is overly simplified, because Louisiana's French population is not simply Cajun. The Francophone culture of Louisiana is diverse and multifaceted. Though today many associate New Orleans with Cajun culture, many separate French influences have contributed to form the cultural milieu we now think of as "Cajun." Many people are unaware that there are various French subcultures under the umbrella label of Cajun. The two main subdivisions under the culture that is known as Cajun are the Creole identity and the Acadian identity.

The word Cajun itself comes from a corruption of the French word *Acadien*. There are two possible sources of this corruption. The first is states that English-speakers had to find a new way to pronounce the French word. Because Anglophones have difficulty pronouncing certain French sounds, the name *Acadien* became pronounced as Cajun, an anglicized bastardization of the original.

The second hypothesis supposes that a Creole mother (the Creoles in general looked down on the Acadians) would scold her child for appearing like the rural Acadians, saying, "*Tu es habillé comme un Cadien; ça c'est Cadien,*" meaning "You're dressed like an Acadian; that's Acadian," so *Cadien* became a sort of derogatory slur

for Acadian. The Creoles' snobbery toward the Acadians had its source in heritage: Creoles could trace their lineage directly back to the European plantation owners and overlords of the Caribbean, while the Acadians were the descendants of peasant people from Western France.

The French Creoles came as refugees from Saint-Domingue, and in Saint-Domingue, the word "Creole" was more commonly used—the word "Creole" was not even in the vernacular when the French ruled Louisiana. "Creole" comes from the Spanish *criolla*, which the Spaniards referred to children born to Spanish parents within the colony, so the French took the term and made it their own to suit their needs. The Louisiana Creoles descended from the French and Spanish colonists before the Louisiana Purchase (1803) as well as Creoles from the West Indies. Because the Creoles saw themselves as pure European and therefore sophisticated and the descendants of wealthy colonists, they looked down on what they saw as illiterate, poor farmers in the Acadians.

After the Louisiana Purchase, Creoles wanted to redefine the term so that any Anglo-American newcomers wouldn't start calling themselves Creole. To Creoles, Americans could not be natives to the area. So to be Creole, you had to be French in ancestry and in culture, but proof of pure racial ancestry did not become a necessity until after the Civil War during Reconstruction. Because the Creoles did not insist on proving racial ancestry, many Americans assumed that the Creoles were covering up their family trees and they were "tainted" and racially impure. White Creoles, desperate to avoid the broad racist brush, tried to make a distinction between "white Creoles" and "colored Creoles," but African-Americans with French

culture never dropped the term and still considered themselves Creole, much to the “white” Creoles’ frustration.

The Acadians, by contrast, were an insular group, and as the Americans and Creoles encroached on both their land and identity, some retreated further to the bayous and prairie land. Some Acadians did stay in the more eastern reaches and adopted an ambitious, higher-class lifestyle, and they later become known as “Genteel Acadians.” “Cajun country” is the land where the non-Genteel Acadians escaped to. This area extends from the border of east Texas to just west of New Orleans and includes the Atchafalaya Basin and cities like Lafayette and Lake Charles, where my grandmother was born.

Though my grandmother is not Cajun, her aunt, a Cajun, was my grandmother’s favorite. My grandmother would always say, “Aunt Lydia...she knew how to have a good time.” My great-grandfather, an English Methodist minister, had an uptight view of the world—no drinking, no gambling, no dancing, no swearing, no non-Christian music. He came to Louisiana from Leeds because he spoke Parisian French, so the church thought he could go to the bayous and convert the Catholic Cajuns. Though the church’s plan failed, my great-grandfather married the church organist (my great-grandmother), and they spent much of the rest of their lives in Louisiana, but like many Anglo-Americans they held a grudge against the Cajuns, not just for their religion but for the language and customs.

When, in his youth, my great-uncle wanted to date a Catholic Cajun girl, my great-grandparents resonded by sending him to boarding school. My great-grandmother absolutely refused to let her children learn any Cajun French—those

people were trash. They would joke, "What do you get when you educate a Cajun? A fool."

Cajun French was and is sometimes still seen as trashy and lower class; for decades, Cajun French was not allowed to be taught in schools. My great-grandfather forbade his children to learn anything of Cajun French. My great-uncle today sometimes me what certain words mean, but because of the heavy accent, I usually have no clue. Today, Cajun French is taught in schools; my Cajun professor's great-nephew speaks Cajun French because of school. Cajun French is of course distinct from Parisian French or even Quebecois French but is no less beautiful for its twang. Some of the negative association with the language came from the amount of social competition the Acadian faced as time marched on.

After the Civil War, the newly free slaves entered the lower-class proletariat, searching for land, often in competition with the Cajuns, whose numbers had swelled to approximately 35,000. In response to the changing social order, the Cajuns continued their past pattern of retreating further into isolation and strengthening kinship ties and refusing to relinquish their traditional customs, religion, and language. But the post-Reconstruction period saw the Cajun isolation begin to disappear. Railroads attracted entrepreneurs and businessmen, and the Southern Pacific Railroad cut straight through Cajun country. Once again, Cajuns had to contend with the Americans encroaching on their cultural and literal territory. In addition, the discovery of oil attracted more opportunistic businessmen who sought

to delegitimize the Cajuns as painting them as crude, illiterate, poor, inferior, and primitive.

To make matters worse for the survival of Cajuns, they were exposed to the outside world because of new forms of communication, like radio, telephone lines, and better postal services. And as time wore on, young Cajun men fought in two World Wars, returning home as part of a more Americanized, larger culture. Postwar America had no room for the isolation of insular Cajun communities, and most Cajuns were falling victim to the siren song of Americanization. Some Cajuns even began to stop speaking French, and in some cases, parents refused to even speak French in the home for fear that the old language would harm their children's future in an Anglophone world.

These children, seeing their parents' discomfort with the old ways, began to view Cajun music, language, and culture as outmoded and embarrassing. Only rural Cajuns continued to live like their forefathers. The Cajun culture was endangered and faced possible extinction.

They bury their dead in vaults, above the ground. These vaults have a resemblance to houses—sometimes to temples; are built of marble, generally; are architecturally graceful and shapely; they face the walks and driveways of the cemetery; and when one moves through the midst of a thousand or so of them and sees their white roofs and gables stretching into the distance on every hand, the phrase "city of the dead" has all at once a meaning to him. Many of the cemeteries are beautiful, and are kept in perfect order....Fresh flowers, in vases of water, are to be seen at the portals of many of the vaults: placed there by pious hands of bereaved parents and children, husbands and wives, and renewed daily.

--Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

Thanksgiving Day in New Orleans is, unsurprisingly, thick with moisture that you can see through the sunlight. My mother is in Hawaii tending goats during a six-

month internship, and my brother is off in Arkansas with his live-in girlfriend's family. So instead of sitting at home and feeling half the family's absence, we have come to New Orleans. We are waiting for a tour guide to arrive. The cemeteries are closed today, so my father and I peer through the metal bars to the rows and rows of vaults. Because the ground is so swampy, coffins would pop up out of the earth during periods of heavy rains, so the colonists constructed aboveground vaults.

Today, flowers are in bloom, and the palm trees sway lazily at the faintest hint of a breeze. The stucco and paint on many of the tombs is peeling and chipping after decades or even centuries of sun exposure. Both fake and fresh flowers stand erect in vases, tucked into the carved tombstones—some inscriptions I can read from feet away, others have been worn down and eroded through time.

These little houses are home to families' generations of remains. The tour guide recounts the process of the burial: bodies are placed in the vaults, and the corpses are gradually cremated by quite literally baking under the hot year-round sun. When another family member dies, a worker pushes the cremains back until they fall down a chute to the bottom of the tomb, and a new family member lies right under the ceiling, waiting for slow solar cremation. The floors of these tombs are littered with rotted bones. Whole families' bones lie mixed together at the bottom of the tomb, piled one on top of the other, still slowly but surely decomposing as time wears on.

I find a striking, melancholy beauty here. Perhaps I am missing my mother and brother on this holiday, but there is something tender about the decrepitude of the weathered vaults' tender care, a paradox I'm not sure I understand. This

necropolis is both aging and renewing as the dead decompose, and descendants join their ancestors to spend eternity together under the unforgiving sun.

. As early as 1959, the United States government started exploring the possibility of allowing education in languages besides English. Because the ethnic revival in the 1960s gave a voice and recognition to minorities through the Black Power and Civil Rights Movements, other groups began to seek more agency. So, in the 1960s, a revitalization effort began in order to save the language and preserve the threatened subculture. Divisions and arguments festered despite a shared desire to save Cajun culture and language. Those Acadians who had integrated into the more “European” culture of the Creoles, now known as “Genteel Acadians” looked down on the rural folk Cajuns.

James Domegeneaux, one of the Genteel Acadians, helped gather support and aided the effort to launch a movement to garner state financial and political support to preserve French in Louisiana. Because of Domegeneaux and his supporters’ efforts, in 1968 the Louisiana state legislature formed the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). Another major proponent of the French Louisiana image was Louisiana Governor John MacKeithan, and, while Anglophone, he too saw the importance of preserving French.

Even though CODOFIL’s main goal was to preserve French, the question of *which* kind of French posed a problem: would CODOFIL back the Genteel Acadians’ French or the folk language of the Cajuns? Some Creoles resented being associated with Cajuns, while conversely, some Cajuns disliked the association with the

haughty Creoles. Domegenaux's solution was to develop support of international French language to both attract tourism and strengthen trade with the francophone world. French teachers from Belgium, France, and Quebec came to Louisiana to be brought into Acadiana to provide better French instruction in schools. Additionally, the methods of communication that had formerly posed a threat to Cajuns now began to air French programming, and signage with phrases like *Soyez Fier* (be proud), *De Votre Langue* (your language), *Parlez Français Avec Vos Enfants* (speak French with your children), and *Parlez Français dans la Maison* (speak French in the home) propagated French speech in daily life. The collective efforts of these campaigns resulted in a positive connotation attached to the ethnic revival of "Acadian Heritage," the new term for Cajun ethnicity.

Of course, the Cajuns and Genteel Acadians did not agree as to which customs should be revived—those of the rural Cajuns or those of the Genteel Acadians. Over time, the term Cajun began to become more and more inclusive of anyone descending and practicing the French culture in Louisiana, despite the displeasure of some on both sides. Today, 750,000 Americans claim direct descent from the Acadian immigrants, and the culture continues to thrive in the annual *Festivals Acadiennes* and the tourist trade in all things Cajun.

My grandmother, despite being Norwegian and English, cooks the best Southern cuisine I've ever tasted, except for maybe that I've encountered in Louisiana. She and my mother have taught me the secret recipe for gumbo; they were delighted

when they discovered I had a preternatural instinct for knowing just when the roux was ready, seconds before it might burn and become ruined.

When I think of her cooking, the taste of garlic Tobasco makes my mouth water, and I fantasize about the taste of crawfish étouffé, fried catfish, dirty rice, crab legs, beignets, café au lait. I think of her joke that a Cajun seven-course meal is boudin and a six pack. The sweetness of pecan pralines makes me pine for the caramel taste and satisfying crunch. Nowhere else in the world, from Japan to France, have I found food as filling, fattening, and flavorful as what the Cajuns cook.

The iron railings are a specialty, also. The pattern is often exceedingly light and dainty, and airy and graceful—with a large cipher or monogram in the centre, a delicate cobweb of baffling, intricate forms, wrought in steel. The ancient railings are hand-made, and are now comparatively rare and proportionately valuable.

--Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

The architecture of the French Quarter is misleading. Two fires in 1788 and 1794 destroyed the original French colonial architecture, so what we see today is the subsequent Spanish architecture transplanted from the Caribbean colonies. But no matter what its origin, the buildings of the French Quarter are intricate and delicate, fanciful and artful, colorful and mysterious. From a distance, the railings over the balconies and galleries look like fine lace, and once you get closer, you see the fine craftsmanship in forming these complex webs.

Potted plants hang from hooks over the porches, and vines seem to have invaded every brick wall, creeping and expanding, covering even the plaster walls and threatening to overtake courtyards. “Lush” is at the same time an exaggeration and an understatement. In the Garden District, the large mansions stand far apart, and although their architecture is graceful and tasteful, its elegance lacks the

character and personality from the French Quarter's centuries of culture. Stately manors pale in comparison to the French Quarter's closely packed homes, with only brick walls to divide them as a fire stop.

Though at night Bourbon's streets partying frightens me and I stay close by my father's side, sometimes feeling much younger than I am, by day the French Quarter is a different kind of vibrant—cats lounge in storefront windows; the line outside Café du Monde never shortens; the Mississippi flows on, ever strong.

You have a vivid sense as of unseen or dimly seen things—vivid, and yet fitful and darkling; you glimpse salient features, but those lose the fine shades or catch them imperfectly through the vision of the imagination: a case, as it were, of ignorant near-sighted stranger traversing the rim of wide vague horizons of Alps with an inspired and enlightened long-sighted native.

--Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

New Orleans is purportedly one of the most haunted cities in the United States and supposedly the world. But for me, the city is not haunted by specters or phantoms; no, the way it haunts is through the shadowed corners of porches, the fleur de lis on every street corner (remnants of the long-gone French monarchy), stories of loves lost and won, wars waged, a city that has risen from its own ashes too many times to count.

Whatever French it is, whether it is colonial or Acadian or Creole, *Nouvelles Orléans* enchants and entrances. It is mystifying and perplexing. Friendly, sunny sidewalks inexplicably meet shadowy, dark corners. Languages mix and melt and mold, English to Creole to Cajun French to Parisian French to tongues no longer identifiable to an outsider. The metropolis of the South, New Orleans calls to us in accents disconsolate.

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ABSTRACT

This series of four essays works with the themes of identity, history, and alterity. "It's Not Your Fault, Marie Antoinette" chronicles my adventures during my trip to France and how the sites I visited relate to my knowledge and understanding of the French Revolution. This essay deals with how one interprets history and how history is alive. "Facebook for Dead People" addresses identity, heritage, and sense of belonging. This essay discusses how people form notions of ethnicity and patrimony including DNA, genealogy, and homeland as well as detailing my own experiences with heritage and genealogy. "I'd Like to Talk to You About Jesus" recounts my experiences growing up in the South as a Unitarian Universalist. My town was primarily white and Southern Baptist, so my religion set me apart from my friends and peers, who did not always take kindly to my not being Christian. This essay grapples with feelings and notions of alterity, judgment and condemnation, acceptance and tolerance, and faith and spirituality. Lastly, "Acadian, *Cadien*, Cajun" uses two texts, *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, to discuss the Cajun identity after the Acadian exile. I intertwine this history of the Cajuns with my own experiences in Cajun Country and New Orleans, Louisiana.