

I'm not sure if you think this or not, but just in case you do, let's set something straight: no one just wakes up one day and says, "Oh, by the way, I'm an atheist from now on." That never happens. Never.

Now, it's true that some people are born that way because their family or their culture rears them in that mindset, but I'm referring to the person who spent years and years and years as a believer in God. This person doesn't just change his mind one day. It's a long, grueling process that starts from within rather than from without. What I mean by that is this: while there are vocal atheists speaking out about their conclusions, there really isn't any sort of atheist evangelism going on, by which I mean you're not normally accosted on street corners and in parking lots by atheists armed with pamphlets and preachy pushing. While it's true that atheists usually unite with other atheists once they've become one, their journey toward atheism is almost always a solitary one, a private unraveling on the inside---and it usually takes place over a period of years. And most of the time, no one in their life knows what's going on until the atheist comes forward and admits (usually with apprehension and fear of the fallout) that he or she is an atheist.

Atheism is usually born out of a sequence of events, a domino effect of one step leading to another: 1) questioning one's faith; 2) disliking the answers; 3) seeking better answers; 4) adopting reason as the best methodology to seek those answers; 5) using that methodology to follow the evidence (or lack thereof), and 6) arriving at an atheist conclusion.

Now, not everyone who does this ends up becoming an atheist; I'm only saying that this is usually how those who do become atheists arrive there. Also of note is this: when the seeking pilgrim begins moving through that aforementioned sequence of events, he most likely did not start out thinking or even expecting that atheism was going to be the final destination. He likely had honest questions, sincere misgivings about how A, B, or C just didn't line up with what he was taught to be true. It's usually because he believes so fervently in his religious creeds and doctrines that these various discrepancies bother him. Why do they bother him? Because he knows in his heart and in his mind that 2 plus 2 never equals 5, and all the faith in the world will never make this so (he can train himself to believe it on a certain level, because faith can be quite persuasive, but a part of him will always know that 2 plus 2 equals 4). And so, because there is a chasm between what he knows must be true and what he's taught is true, he cannot reconcile these in his heart and mind---and until he can, one way or another, he cannot go on doing what he's been doing because to do so would be insincere and the height of hypocrisy.

So what is he to do? Well, he has a few choices. 1) he can pretend there is no problem (but as we've already observed, insincerity is anathema to him); 2) he can admit there is a problem but then shrug his shoulders and say, "God knows more than I do; therefore even God can make 2 plus 2 equal 5, because he's God, even the impossible is possible to him," and then get on with his faith, or 3) he can square with the problem and address it accordingly. Now, am I saying that anyone who addresses the problems and questions they have with their faith will end up becoming an atheist? No. I'm only saying that for those believers who did become atheists, this is how it starts.

Question: do you think that those atheists who were once fervent believers had an easy time with the transition? Do you think it was a simple flick of a wand that turned them overnight into the exact opposite of what they were the day before? To think this is to grossly underestimate the power of faith. Faith is an extremely potent psychological element. Furthermore, faith itself comes with its own built-in protection clause: since the gods, or "God," in this case, value only your faith (what you do, good or bad, doesn't matter; it's what you believe that counts), the believer therefore, whatever else he might do, cannot relinquish his faith. Why not? Think about it: if you can only please God by possessing faith, then possessing faith becomes the only factor that matters. Thus, that which is contrary to reason, however

strong and convincing it might be, must bow down to your faith, otherwise you displease God. It's an ongoing loop: Faith pleases God; I therefore must keep my faith, because faith pleases God, I want to please God, I must therefore keep..." In other words, to believe in God is to want to please him, and you please him by believing in him. Thus, faith has its own self-protection. You can only lose your faith by letting go of it, but you cannot let go of it, otherwise you're in the hot seat.

The atheist punched his way out of this loop. But that doesn't mean it was easy. The beauty of the Faith-by-Fear system is that you constantly gain proponents but end up losing very few. Psychological fear is quite powerful, after all. But those few (didn't Jesus once say something about a narrow road?) saw that it was the system itself that was the problem. It was the loop itself that created the discord that caused them to question everything in the first place. To punch through that system and break free, therefore, requires a tremendous amount of mental fortitude, a fierce desire for truth, a violent lust for life, and sheer guts.

Having said all of this, let me say a few words to my Christian friends out there who may be reading this. Consider this: you may not respect the atheist for being what he is and for concluding what he concluded, but I hope you can at least respect that the road he had to walk to become what he is now was a long, arduous, painful, and lonely road. There are very few atheists out there that didn't become atheist without having to fight unspeakable mental and emotional battles. Disrespect their lack of belief all you want, but for the love of the God you say you believe in, respect their journey. The odds are it was born out of a severe, sincere, obsessive need to know the truth.

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