

# Light in Dark Places

CALEB MORIN



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: In The Book of Joy, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama teach that joy and compassion stem from adversity. Experiences that challenge our faith in ourselves and humanity can strength it. When my UWP instructor Dr. Miller prompted us to write on someone embodying principles from the text, I looked to my father and his departure from the Mormon Church. This event, and his positive attitude toward life, informed my own outlook and early life, but I only connected the two as I started preparing for the assignment. When I interviewed him in the research phase of my writing, it dawned on me he'd always framed his experience in terms of joy, that he'd learned firsthand what the Archbishop and Dalai Lama taught. Thus, writing this piece became an exercise not in fitting his words into a prompt, but in telling his story as best as I could.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Caleb's reflection on his father's crisis of faith in the context of family is one of the most impressive student essays I have encountered. What strikes me above all about Caleb's essay is its overall cadence. Quiet, unhurried, and unusually thoughtful, Caleb's voice—delivered in sentences whose detours and varied clauses marvelously reinforce his subject's careful deliberation—achieves a stylistic clarity as affecting as it is unusual. Note, for example, how the syntax of the essay's last sentence manages such an emotional landing on two simple words ("for me") that bring together the essay's themes of inheritance, transience, acceptance, gratitude, and love.*

*What a pleasure it is for teacher to read the work of a student*

*who finds a way of transcending an assignment in order to make it his own.*

—Gregory Miller, *University Writing Program*

When my grandmother started her family, she wrote a song with this refrain:

*Families are forever, the prophet told us so.  
We belong, we belong, we belong to a family eternal.*

Rene was her name; Arthur was her husband. They both believed, as all Mormons do, that heaven lets us see our loved ones again. This extends down the generations, which means we meet our children, and their children, and their children's children . . . A lot of names to learn past the pearly gates.

My grandmother wanted to make this easier.

Besides the refrain, it becomes more of a list than a song. My father was their second child; his name—Brad—was the fourth to appear, followed by nine younger siblings. When I was born, my name was appended, one of scores increasing to hundreds. Each addition dragged out the tune, lending the lyrics a singsong rhythm. But each name reinforced the underlying message: Death won't keep us apart.

In 2014, a year after my grandmother passed, the Morin family held a reunion, at a large, quiet house in Idaho. We gathered around a grand piano, almost a hundred strong, and sang the first ten lines. Tears were shed, noses blown between stanzas; now, more than ever, the family wanted to believe that we'd meet her again in heaven, that our family couldn't be separated.

Nine of the eleven "original" Morins—my uncles and aunts—were there. My father and his brother Chris were not. Everyone knew why. No one said anything.

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My dad has had gray hair for as long as I remember. He shaved shortly after he married, to avoid burning my mom's face. And whenever he smiles, his eyes twinkle—a physical trait one could see even before his cataract surgery. Some things don't change.

And some things do. For most of his life, my father was a Mormon,

too. He believed that God created the cosmos for us; that a single path leads to righteousness; and that we alone choose to take that path. Hymns and sermons raised him on faith, family, and hard work; Bibles and books taught him how to pray, how to live, how to treat his fellow man. Religion offered answers to the profound questions we as human beings ask as readily as breathing. And for forty-eight years, he accepted no other answers.

His religious upbringing colored his outlook of the world black and white—there was good, and there was evil, and people decided what they embraced. Atheists, practitioners of other faiths, and LGBTQ people were all sinners; but more importantly, they had actively chosen to sin, with their divine gift of free will. The world at large chose not to hear the voice of God in their lives, so in my father's eyes, the world was shrouded in darkness. Happiness hinged on how well he himself adhered to the tenets of his faith; sins and other signs of the influence of this outside evil struck a superstitious fear in him. On his mission to New Zealand, he met a woman plagued by sleep paralysis characterized by demonic hallucinations, indicative of an actual encounter with Satan. Some time after he and his fellow elder tried to heal her through conversion, my dad had his own episode of sleep paralysis. He believed this uncontrollable, physiological phenomenon reflected upon his piety, disturbing him for weeks after the event.

Over time, however, he became more troubled not by his own perceived failings in faith, but by whispers he heard of a less noble history of the Latter-Day Saints than what he had been taught, and instances where divine inspiration failed to show his family and other members of his religious community the right path. Forced polygamy, blood atonement: these were old practices and beliefs he found upon digging into the discourses of early Mormon leaders like Brigham Young, concepts that shook his faith in the church. Nixon, the Vietnam War, black priesthood, the beating of Rodney King: these were events and policies where his thinking strayed from that of his congregation, where his skepticism, compassion, and aversion to violence stood in stark contrast to the sociopolitical stance of the establishment. He thought these people heard the voice of God. Now he wondered if He even spoke to them. Doubts about membership became doubts about leadership; doubts about leadership became doubts about God Himself. My father could no longer, in good faith, call himself a Mormon.

In 1998, he left the church.

The backlash tested him. Siblings and friends called him, begging him to come back. One brother sent him an email, telling him he never wanted to see him again. My dad decided not to attend the family reunion that year, a choice he would also make in later years, even after much reconciliation. He became the black sheep of the Morins—when his brother Chris also left the church, and a nephew came out of the closet, he kept his head low and his mouth shut, knowing his family saw him as the source of this corruption. The circle which encompassed the family he had come from stopped short of the family he had started. His name, and my name, and the names of all our descendants no longer belonged, belonged, belonged to the family eternal.

The experience changed his outlook, but the trial did not break his spirit. It went so far as to strengthen it. The darkness he felt enshrouded the world lifted, for he began to see the light in others. Choice could not always overcome circumstance, so he more readily empathized with those he once called sinners. Wonder and goodwill replaced the false optimism afforded by His will. The chaos of the universe and the improbability of existence enriched his appreciation of scientific discovery and beauty—the rainbow was not placed in the sky by decree, but resulted from light traveling aimlessly through an atmosphere. We wrest knowledge from the cosmos, not from capricious gods; we look at accidents, not creations; we exist by sheer coincidence, not by design. And for that, he appreciates life more fully.

Death will come eventually, and he will not get to see everyone the song promised he would. God no longer guarantees the better future my dad strives for. But now the choice is his, to do what he can to make the world a better place—if not for all those named in the song, then, at the very least, for me.