

First They Belong, Then They Believe

Robert and Denese are newer followers of Jesus. They found their way into relationship with him by first connecting with some of his followers in Los Angeles. OTM believes that Christians never get enough of these kinds of stories. We learn best through stories because they move us. They're like mental movies. You'll also find several OTM Coaching Tips along the way that help explain the significance of their story.

Robert and I always believed that there was a higher power. Earth, and all that was in it, is too vast and intricate to simply be a result of "Primordial Soup." Besides, we knew enough to know that there were too many unexplainable things happening in the world for there not to be a superior being that was responsible. What we had a problem with were the people who were involved in the various religious groups. Our answer was to develop our own "religion," believing that if we lived our lives as good people, we were on the right road. While some of the following descriptions might make several groups unhappy because these things are not what they really believe, this is only meant to be a description of how we morphed several religions into our own belief system

This is how our "religion" broke down. Robert was always very psychic. He read tarot cards and had a crystal ball that had been handed down through his family for three generations. He was not able to read it, but believed in its power. We used the tarot cards as a guide, believing that being prepared for possible futures would help us avoid the pitfalls. Every New Years day we would read the cards to help map out our goals for the following year. We were very aware that there was a dark side and had to be careful of who "came through." On this point, although we believed in channelers like Seth, we never actually took part in a session where a channeler would let a spirit from the other side speak through them. We believed in guides from the other side, like a father or sister that had passed on and would come to help you through life. I've actually seen the presence of several spirits, which with what I know now would scare me to death, if not for the love and power of Jesus to protect me. We believed in reincarnation. You had to try your hardest to get life right this time around, or you would only have to come back and live it all again! For example, those who were harsh to the poor would find themselves poor in the next life. We believed in the power of crystals to heal, calm or energize; besides they were pretty!

OTM Coaching Tip: *Too often we strain at a religious gnat while we swallow a spiritual camel. We hear a missing person say "tarot card" and we gloss over and plan our bible counterattack. Robert and Denese were not highly committed Tarotists they were just using it as a way to have some fun and try to make sense out of a life they found overwhelming. They actually viewed channelers as having more credibility than Christians. Before dismissing them as demonized we might first ask ourselves in what ways the church earned this reputation in their eyes.*

We read every book that we felt held a portion of truth from Lobsang Rampa, to Conversations with God that actually had little to do with God. All of this left us with the belief that we were in control and could make of life what we wanted. We were an expression of God and had the power inside us (the subconscious mind) to change ourselves and the world around us. The only problem with this is that none of it worked! We were self-centered, self-serving and self-righteous!

Although we had trouble with all religions (even the Buddhists in Venice Beach made fun of me for believing the writings of Lobsong Rampa when I tried to talk to them about it) Christianity was the religion we were exposed to most and had the biggest problem with.

OTM Coaching Tip: *Whether we like it or not or whether or not it seems "fair" to us, the default religion on the mission field most of us find ourselves working on is "Western Style Christianity". While it has certainly proven to be helpful to many of us it also has made our work of finding missing people and helping them connect with Jesus quite challenging at times. In marketing lingo, we often experience "Brand Blur" - In other words when we say "Christian" the customer often pictures something quite different from*

what we are trying to say. But since "perception is reality"(at least in the mind of the customer) there is no use trying to educate them out of their illusion. We have to create experiences that will move them from one state of mind into another. Stories create an emotional experience that catch people off guard and enable them to identify with the person who is either telling the story or who is the subject of the story. It is also why normal people aren't moved by statistics. So read more of the story.

We had gone to churches in our search for truth, and felt that they taught hatred. At the time we smoked and as smokers we were very sensitive to preachers that would stand up and talk against the evil of cigarettes. Cigarettes were the LEAST of our evils. This was not a place that would accept us. Have you ever tried to find an ashtray at a church? At one church we went to, the minister was on a roll talking about the Mormons, Catholics and others and how they had warped the message of God and would burn in hell for doing it. I had gone to great pains to try and raise my children without prejudice. How in the world can we learn to love each other if we keep teaching prejudice? This church was basically teaching hatred in my mind, and was no place to take these precious children who would describe someone to me by the color of clothing, not the color of their skin.

So given all of this, how is it that I sit here today, writing all this as a follower of Jesus? Simply put; I couldn't change me. I lived in fear, anger and hatred.

The Lightning Bolt

My brother and I had grown up very close, but drugs had gotten hold of him at a young age and he was a very DANGEROUS person. He would threaten to kill us and had actually pulled a gun on my mother's boyfriend at the time. The family knew something had to be done and decided to call the police and have him arrested. While he was away, we moved my mother and hid her away, so that he could not hurt her. He ended up doing 4 years in prison, for what I'm still not sure, and during that time he found the Lord Jesus. When I saw him again after 6 years, he was a different person. He was no longer angry, he took responsibility for himself and his actions, and he forgave me for driving by him when he was homeless. He had a peace, and a look on his face that I could not understand. He told me that Jesus had come into his life and changed his heart. **WHAT DOES THAT MEAN!**

Although I didn't understand at all what he was talking about and (I) felt that a lot of weak minded (here's the self-righteous part) and chemically dependent people found the strength to get off of drugs through the hype of Jesus. Basically what was happening, in my mind anyway, is that when people were prayed for it released them from feeling that something couldn't be done and allowed their subconscious mind, or the god within them, to heal or free them the whatever "monkey" was on their back. Whatever was happening, I was pleased to see my brother was on the right road to joining society as a productive individual.

***OTM Coaching Tip:** Getting "saved" still happens. Some people still have dramatic encounters with Jesus that immediately impact some important areas of their life. We would be wise to remain open to this invasion of immanence and not dismiss or diminish the reality of these types of conversion stories while we are trying to make a place for process and mystery. It is incumbent upon us that we hold these things in tension and allow the possibility of God breaking in on people as he pleases. It happened to me.*

I told him I would go to church with him to show my support of his efforts to change his life. At first, we sat way in the back! As I would listen to worship and what the pastor had to say, the Holy Spirit started to talk to my heart. It all started with a teardrop. One tear fell, probably the 3rd or 4th time I went. Then the flood came. For the life of me, I could not figure out why I was crying, and I mean streams of tears pouring down my face. My brother told me that it was OK. Every tear that hit my chest was healing my heart a little bit. All of a sudden I began to realize that it was all true! There was ONE TRUE GOD, and he would come and truly change my heart! It was happening, I could feel it. And it scared the hell out of me. I began to run from the Holy Spirit. **I mean run fast!**

Life Begins

My brother told me to talk to and stay close to one particular pastor, that she was trustworthy. She would not make fun of my questions or treat me like a leper. It was Marti Clark. I met her one Sunday and we talked a short while. I returned the next Sunday full of fear and searching for Marti. A kind gentleman said

he didn't know where she was, but he would be more than happy to talk to me. I said "I can't talk to YOU!" He smiled and I left. Two days later I quietly accepted the Lord into my heart sitting in the car with my brother. The fear, anger, and hatred I had felt all of my life came off like a coat. The problem now was what do I do next. I had no idea where to start.

OTM Coaching Tip: *Even after people "find Jesus" they still have many issues to deal with. For Denese, having to connect with followers of Jesus a.k.a. Christians was a completely separate issue from connecting with Jesus. Our (Christians) naiveté on this issue disables many of us from being able to successfully help missing people navigate their transition into the church. We incorrectly assume that something "magical" happens once a person "accepts Jesus". We think they will now want to be part of the church. When in fact for many people all they are saying when they raise their hand is "tell me more".*

I called a friend who is Christian and asked, "How can I hang out with all those hypocrites"? He told me "Keep your eyes on the face of Jesus. People will let you down. They're only human, but Jesus is God. He was, is and shall be the same loving person you found in the car. Keep looking to him". Later this same friend let me in on the truth that I too, would let someone down, because I am only human. Marti invited me to join a group meeting that she was part of that explored Christianity called Alpha. She told me that no one would make fun of me or judge me. Being judged was one of my biggest fears. My first question was "Who wrote the Bible, anyway"? By this time I was a mess. My whole design your own religion was falling apart and I began to realize that the Christians that I had always made fun of were right. This wonderful group of women invited me to join their Bible study. No one ever invited me to join anything if they didn't need money! They sat each week and listened. They loved me anyway. This was true affection: pure Christ's love. These people didn't care how much money we had, how well read, or how ignorant of the Bible I was or what I had done in the past. They saw that the Lord was at work and they loved me through the messy part. Marti was teaching in Genesis, her favorite book in the Bible and it opened up a whole New World. She would tell me things like "I don't really know. Some things only God knows". WHAT WAS THAT! This spoke more to me than anything. I loved that she let God be the only REAL authority on God. When she was asked if the Pope was really the antichrist, she told me that we were not qualified to judge, but she was sure there would be Catholics in heaven! WOW, this meant I didn't need to hate people because they worshiped the same God differently than I did. She taught me, through example, how Jesus can help you through a tough place and help you find the strength to forgive those that have hurt you. Now I'm sure that there are some that would want to argue and pick apart these statements on an intellectual and theological level. All that I am saying is that I would NOT be a Christian if she had not made it possible for me to love all people and include all people. She also told me NOT to get rid of all my non-Christian friends. She said that I might be the only view of Jesus that they ever got. As frightening as this sounded, it was also a relief. I liked these guys!

The Kingdom Life Begins

Two years later, both Rob and I are Christians, as well as our two children, and my mother. What a great God we have! We have found a whole group of people. These rare and wonderful individuals are trying to follow Jesus example of how to live life with love and compassion for others. Time is spent in the Word of God, in the Love of Jesus, and the Presence of the Holy Spirit. We finally found a place we belong and love to be. Now it is time for us to give other people a place to belong and to be loved, like those first wonderful individuals loved us, the unlovable. They have taught us to reach out to others in love, not in judgment. Right now, there are two ways that we are trying to reach out to our (missing) non-church friends.

- 1) We have a Sunday dinner where we invite about 10 - 20 people. Usually God sends us the guest he wants us to have. We don't talk about Jesus unless they bring up the subject. We have found that they usually do. What is most important is to just have a good time, good conversation and live as a Christian. We have 1 drink, we don't fall into gossip, we have our children there, and we try to make it light and fun.
- 2) I put together a phone list of all my friends and call 2 or 3 of them a week for no apparent reason. When the time comes to place the call, I make sure that I have plenty of time to talk. Some conversations run long, (1 ½ hours) some very short, but everyone seems to benefit, including me.

Rob and I don't really know what we're doing or how things are going to look tomorrow. What we do know is that the Love of Jesus is real. There is forgiveness for EVERYONE, no matter what. We know that we live in a Kingdom, separate from this world, but in it. We know we have a lot to learn.

OTM Coaching Tip: *At Off The Map we call what Robert and Denese are doing "Ordinary Attempts" or OA's. Simply by being themselves they have found doable and effective ways to make connections with their missing friends. Send this story to your church friends and ask them if they would try one of Denise's ideas for a month or what new ideas were triggered in their minds when they read these OA's. We've discovered that these kinds of ideas are like a virus that spreads among a group of people who are wanting to connect with their missing friends in non-programmatic, self organized ways.*

http://off-the-map.org/idealab/03-01/Issue16_Jan_03.html#ma