

## This I Believe

Like many Americans, I grew up believing in a Christian God. I was taught, in ways subtle and more direct, that God controls everything great and small in our lives. This was a God, further, who doled out rewards and punishments based on our adherence to a strict Christian doctrine. Thus, unhappiness will befall those who sin, and joy for those who are obedient and pious. Every measure of this economy of happiness and misery are controlled by an all-powerful God who can change the direction of the wind, or a life. This God could also sense our deepest desires, especially the sinful ones.

I had to reject this God when in my adolescence I began feeling things that put me at odds with the strict moral code I thought God enforced. I felt myself drawn to other boys my age, rather than girls. I was gay. The power of these new sexual desires felt beyond my control, and more powerful even than my desire to be God's favorite child. I knew God would stop loving me, and punish me, so I rejected him. I pushed God out of my life, declared myself an atheist, and came out of the closet. I became an intellectual, and I scoffed at those who believed, viewing them as weak. Still, it wasn't that I didn't want God in my life. Secretly, I did. But I feared God, so I fled from him.

For most of my young adulthood I publicly rejected God, but secretly believed he was after me. I hid from God's punishment, but this wouldn't last for long. God found me on September 27, 2005 when, at the age of 32, I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of colon cancer. God had finally caught up with me. And my punishment was especially cruel: I would have to endure a painful death at a young age. God's thorough power and cruelty were confirmed for me. God was going to steal my own life from me – my career, my family, my friends, and the love I had not yet found.

But something else happened, too. I began re-examining my beliefs about God, especially my belief in his omnipotence. I began to examine where this notion of an all-powerful God had come from, and how it had wormed its way so deeply into my psyche. I came to the conclusion that this belief had robbed me of a spiritual life. I learned that the piousness of those who follow an all-powerful, punishing God is not spirituality; it is their desire for certainty and easy judgments in the face of an unjust and random universe.

I still do not know if I believe in God. I do not know if there is a singular creator of everything who watches us from above, with either benevolence or cruelty. But this I do believe – if there is, indeed, a God, this God does not have power over our lives, but is in fact as powerless in the face of the forces of our universe as we are. I can no longer bear to believe in an all-powerful God who controls everything, and who is cruel and punishing. The God I want to believe in is someone who feels just as sad, frustrated, and helpless about my cancer as I am. This God cannot help my chemotherapy work better. This God cannot save my life no matter how fervently I beg for it. This God cannot reach into my body and stop the rapid multiplication of errant cells. This God does not share the pious judgment against homosexuals or others whose lives do not conform to a strict, Christian moral code. This God cannot intervene in the world of Man. To some

this must seem a horrible, fatalistic, hopeless belief. But for me it is comforting. For although God cannot help me, he does not seek to harm me either. He neither rewards, nor hurts. He simply watches from a compassionate distance as we try our best to survive the terror of random events, and the more malicious terror of man-made injustices.