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Losing What I’ve Found

I checked the gas gauge again. It was on “E.” Sweat rolled down the small of my back as I leaned forward, my knuckles white from my two-handed death grip on the steering wheel. I looked both ways frantically. Nothing looked familiar. I turned left and floored the accelerator. Trees loomed menacingly on both sides of me, giving way to only more and more trees. I felt like I wasn’t moving; stuck in a perpetual tunnel of dark branches. I had to get back into town. I had to be somewhere; people were expecting me. Wrong turn, again. My face burned red with frustration and anxiety. I had been given directions, but I knew I was completely lost.

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Evangelists fascinate me. I admire their conviction. For as long as I can remember, my dad commandeers the couch each Sunday to troll the morning political talk shows. During the commercial breaks, he flips to the mega-church sermons delivered by animated, grandiose ministers. The phone number to donate money scrolls across the bottom of the screen which inevitably launches my dad into a tirade about the hypocritical position of Christianity and how religion is at the root of every major war across every era of history. My dad was raised Catholic, but has since renounced his Catholic upbringing, preferring to seek spiritual solace in the woods. I listen to my dad, intermittently acknowledging his points, but I am weirdly transfixed by these people. The minister commands the crowd with an eerie sense of bravado and overconfidence. When the minister’s voice drops to barely a whisper, I watch the crowd move to the edge of their seats, lean in to hear every word. Then, a sweeping proclamation! His voice booms, the microphone carries out this life (soul) saving message to every corner of the rich, ornately decorated walls of the church. Hands from the congregation reach up towards the ceiling (heavens) as if pulled by some invisible master puppeteer. They are as transfixed as I, but it is for different reasons the minister holds our attention. They believe him; I don’t. How could they believe in something they cannot see? I study him like an animal caged at the zoo.

I tried believing in the Christian God. Some of my earliest memories are at church. In fact, my first completed piece of writing was about going to Sunday school in second grade. All of the kids were released from the boring adult sermon early to skip out to a room behind the sanctuary to watch Veggie Tale renditions of all the classic Bible stories, make Jesus-related art projects, and go to Fellowship for cookies. I enjoyed it. I perfected the social niceties of church; my particular favorite being the beginning of the sermon when the pastor told everyone in the congregation to stand up and shake the person’s hand on either side of you. Everyone was nice; the older grandma and grandpa types always complimented me on how beautiful my curly hair was. My own grandparents had died before I was able to store any significant memories of them and I appreciated my stand-in church ones. In fact, one of them volunteered to “adopt” me in first grade when we were supposed to bring our grandparents to school for the day and my own were too sick to leave the house. Still, even at a young age, I felt weird admitting I went to church, praying, and proclaiming my faith. If I thought being Christian only meant being nice and doing nice things for other people, I probably would have gone on pretending. I just could not shake a nagging feeling I was soon going to be found out because I had not yet had my moment where I “found” God. Each week, I heard people talk about their experiences with this particular phenomenon and how there was this metaphysical shift in their consciousness. I so very badly wanted to find God and join the ranks of the people who had. At any rate, when I was in about third grade, my pastor got caught embezzling money from the church and my youth pastor turned out to be a sex offender. I never went back.

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College is an interesting space in life. It’s basically a four year free pass for people, like me, in their twenties to explore different interests, make mistakes, and “find” themselves. I was excited to enter academia in Ann Arbor, MI where the lines, hair, and credentials were longer. I decided to pursue the hard sciences (a different kind of religion) and it came to be how I defined myself as a person. I studied chemistry, biology, physics, and kinesiology. I loved it, especially kinesiology: the study of human movement. It was a hard science I could *see*. There was a direct application and its importance was undeniable; its facts, unshakable.

On the first day of my exercise physiology lab, my instructor asked the class what we wanted to do after graduation. The class was all juniors and seniors, so it wasn’t unreasonable of her to assume we would have some direction. The guy in front of me was a senior and replied that he wanted to be an orthopaedic surgeon. The guy behind me was the former student government representative for the School of Kinesiology and he announced that he was pre-med and had just been accepted into one of his top-choice medical schools (pre-med kids always announce their career choice). The girl to my right was also pre-med, but wanted to be a physician assistant and she currently worked at the hospital. She proceeded to talk about the 5K her student organization was sponsoring to raise money for a camp over the summer for kids with parents who have cancer. And so it went around the whole room until I was the only one left and I was overcome by a feeling of complete and utter inadequacy. I felt like I was eight years old and being asked “What do you want to do when you grow up?” by an adult who just nods politely, getting high off of your unbridled optimism, innocence and naiveté, all the while beaming at you a thousand gut-wrenching truths that you probably won’t be an astronaut or a movie star or a doctor. But you don’t know yet because you’re still talking about your dreams.

“I’m not sure.” I muttered sheepishly, my cheeks growing hot.

“Not even an idea?” my instructor prodded. Of course, I had an idea. I was thinking about clinical exercise physiology; I just wasn’t sure I could see myself there. I knew kinesiology, but I couldn’t muster up the gumption to say what I wanted to be. I did not want to place my faith in a future version of myself that may not even come to be. Saying it out loud was not going to make it a reality. Science makes it a hell of a lot harder to believe in anything, esoteric or otherwise.

It started out small in a particular 8 AM human motor control lecture with my professor telling the class that no two people see the exact same color. I could believe that. I was firmly convinced I looked awful in red and therefore I refused to buy that color; my roommate was firmly convinced I already owned a bunch of red shirts (they are orange, for the record, or maybe burnt sienna…). The next slide in the lecture showed the visual pathway. Light enters the eye through the cornea and gets focused on the foveal part of the retina to travel back to the optic nerve, crossing over at the optic chiasm to become optic tracts that directly communicate to specific topographically organized nuclei that break down every facet of the image to finally reconstruct the image to project out along the dorsal and ventral streams to brain lobes that tell us “what” and “where” information about the image.

Did you know there are neurons that only respond to straight line edges of objects? Or neurons that fire exclusively for facial recognition? You can actually lesion a specific area in your brain and your son or daughter’s face will mean no more to you than the chair you are sitting on. Then, the larger-than-life fact: we don’t see the world in real time. How can we with the layers and layers of visual processing that occur in our brains every second? Everything I see has already happened because my entire world, everything I know and value and ascribe meaning to, is deconstructed by my brain and those little, tiny neurons that tell me what color something is, how it’s oriented in space, if it’s accelerating angularly or linearly, if the texture is rough or smooth, if I’m looking at a face or a flower. Everything I know relies on my neural interpretation and reconstruction of the world. What if I’m seeing the world wrong? Do my neurons know I’m thinking about them---that I’m on to what they do? There’s a pathway for everything in your brain and all of it is so fragile, so constructed. Really, we are all just a stroke or a lesion away from seeing music or tasting colors. When you can’t trust your own eyes, it is hard to find things.

But maybe that’s the point. Think about everything we miss out on when we are already searching for something, focused on finding one thing. I admit I used to think people were asinine for believing in things you can not see, like God or Allah or forgiveness or love. But really, that is on about as much faith as we can believe we are seeing the world as it is. We search and search and we are always lost and stumbling around trying to find God or ourselves or our keys or the right road. I don’t think there is anything to be found. I think it is about losing yourself in the ambiguity and freedom that comes with being lost. Research shows that people spend up to a year of their lives looking for lost things. I think some of us may spend our whole lives looking for a lot more than lost things.

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It was summer in Ann Arbor and I was out running during a break I had between classes. Earlier in the week, I had found a new route that headed north. The day before, I had tried out a trail that ran along the river. There were not many people, except for the really elite runners, and the scenery was breathtaking. I knew the two trails connected somehow, but I wasn’t sure where. I ran along the river, listening to music, perfectly content to think about nothing. When I reached the end of the trail, I realized quickly the trails did not connect in nearly the way I had mapped out it my mind. I ran out to the sidewalk along the main road. I had been running for a solid hour and the creeping realization that I was totally lost slowly spread over me. I did not have my cell phone and every intersection I came to brought more unfamiliar road names. My legs burned, each muscle contraction in my quadriceps threatening to be my last one. I couldn’t stop running, though. It was a gorgeous day, it was only one class, and I knew the trails connected somewhere, so I did the only thing I could do: I kept running and I kept searching.