

Fireside Essay 2016 How is your religious education influencing your life?

There I sat with eyes closed tight, for what seemed like an eternity, seemingly all alone. I stayed motionless and discovered that my palms were sweating and my heart was racing. I felt like I was frozen, not by fear but by something even greater. I felt frozen by the sense that I was home. There I sat miles from my house, miles from my school, and miles from where I was born, and yet I felt like this was where I belonged all long. Then I slowly opened my eyes just enough to see the Eucharist. Then suddenly I slammed my eyes shut, it was as if my life just flashed before my eyes and I remembered everything, even the times I desperately wanted to forget.

I remembered that throughout my life I have had moments of doubt, disbelief, and denial and a lot of that involved God. There were low points in my life where I turned away from the faith because I was angry with God, but I constantly found myself turning back to Him. Times when all I wanted to know was that God had a plan for me and that he was there for me and all I would hear was nothing. The moments when I hated him and thought that it would be easier to accept my sufferings if there wasn't someone looking out for me. Yet I still found myself stuck in a place where I would try to run from God before slowly turning back to him. It made no sense to me that I would turn back to God time and time again and even less sense to me that I would be accepted back by Him time and time again. Then I realized something in that moment, I realized that the reason I turned back to God time after time was because I am rooted in the faith, from a seed planted a long time ago. That seed was planted throughout my time at Holy Family elementary school and the same seed sprung roots and leaves during my time at Christian Brother's academy. That seed of faith was watered through conversations with my pastor and boring confirmation classes. Still I know that many times I have resented these roots but I know that without that seed being planted and then rooted, that I wouldn't be where I was, I wouldn't know the people that I now know, and I wouldn't be the man that God wants me to be.

Then, I snapped back to reality and sat motionless with my eyes fixed on Jesus, for once in my life I knew why I was here. It was because of where I had been. I was reminded of all the paths I had ever chose in that moment, and for once those winding paths, through forests, and valleys, and over mountains, became a straight and clear path all-leading me to this point. I remembered my fifth and sixth grade religion teacher at Holy Family elementary school and how she gave each and every student a bible verse in our sixth grade year. She said that the verse she gave to each of us was based on who she saw that we were, not on the outside but on the inside. The verse she gave me was Psalm 119:105, and it's still the only bible verse that I have committed to memory. The verse reads, "A lamp to my feet is your word, a light to my path." In that moment I realized that I was always meant to know God's plan for me and that I was never meant to leave the church or God, I was just too naïve and proud to see it. In that moment I swallowed my pride and just sat there with my eyes fixed on Jesus and the only thing I could force my mouth to utter was a feeble, "I'm sorry." I was sorry for everything that I had done to ignore God over the last few years and I was sorry that I almost wasted those roots of faith that had been seeded many years ago.

Minutes flew by as I slowly became aware of my surroundings. I could now see everything that I was missing. I was at a Steubenville conference simply sitting right in front of Jesus. I was home for the first time in a long time.