

“Dave Schmelzer is not the religious type, but his spirituality rings with the kind of authenticity many of us are seeking. Not only that, but he’s a delightful writer, evoking the work of Anne Lamott (without the cussing) and Donald Miller.”

BRIAN D. McLAREN

Author and activist

“With prose as warm and conversational as an old friend just trying to share some good news, former atheist David Schmelzer does an admirable job here of encouraging us to look at the possibility of a life rooted in the mystical, a life where a faith in Jesus is not restrictive but freeing. As someone who could well be called an unbeliever, I find this book to shine with the kind of non-judgment that might, just might, get me to consider much of what David Schmelzer gracefully argues here.”

ANDRE DUBUS III

Author of *House of Sand and Fog*

“I was one of those who didn’t see myself as the religious type, who sought the Truth, who wanted life to matter, but who stayed as far away as possible from prepackaged Christianity. . . . Dave encourages us that as long as we’re moving toward God, in the best and worst of times, when we don’t have all the answers, we will have access to an infinity of good things.”

SUE BROWN, PH.D.

Resident dean of freshmen, Harvard College

“Dave Schmelzer provides a new voice that can speak about Jesus to the most hard-boiled secular and academic audiences in the United States. In the combined clarity and sophistication of his message he has become very much an American C. S. Lewis. It is hard to overstate the potential of his work, for in creating a new

audience for Christ in the Boston area, he contributes to a process that could transform the intellectual landscape of the United States and beyond.”

GREGORY CRANE

Professor of classics, Tufts University

“Wow. As fun, smart, and refreshing as he is in person. Dave Schmelzer delights us while igniting passion to experience God—here and now.”

KELLY MONROE KULLBERG

Author of *Finding God beyond Harvard*

“Disarming and provocative . . . a wonderfully unique perspective on faith, filled with hope, possibility, and encouragement.”

TRISH RYAN

Author of *He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not*

Not the

RELIGIOUS

Type

Confessions of a Turncoat Atheist

DAVE SCHMELZER



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For Grace

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Welcome to Final Participation

I got a call a few years back from PBS. They'd heard that I lead a church full of Harvard and MIT and Boston University and Tufts deans and faculty and postdocs (and construction workers and stay-at-home moms and social workers and cooks) who claimed to experience all sorts of miracles and who leaped and rolled around when they got together. This, said PBS, sounded like a story.

I said that everything they had heard was true except for the leaping and rolling around part.

Really? they asked. No leaping and rolling around? But that was the juicy part!

And thus ended our conversation.

I think they missed an opportunity, because the other aspects of the story have some punch on their own. For the last four hundred years, there have been two camps of people in the Western world. First, we have the hardheaded academic types, products of the Enlightenment who scoff at claims of the supernatural. (By and large, these would now include not only those who run our universities but also those who run our newspapers and quite a few who create our entertainment.) And then we have pretty much everyone else, who—at least in theory—is open to the thought that there's more to the world than meets the eye.

My story—as well as many of my friends’ stories—bridges these two worlds. I grew up secular and became an outspoken debater with religious people. And then I stumbled upon what seemed suspiciously like a supernatural, active God. But I didn’t leave my culture behind, which made me something of an oddity to friends in both camps. A secular supernaturalist? What on earth?

Some years ago I read a long, dense essay that gave some words to what I had gone through.¹ Written by lawyer and philosopher (and friend of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien) Owen Barfield, the essay proposed a progression for all of human history. Humans began with what he called “original participation.” In this first phase, we saw the entire world as being connected to us, with gods in the sky and in the bushes. This is the enchanted world that Shakespeare commented upon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

In the second phase, we pulled ourselves outside of the rest of the world and became dispassionate observers of it. You might call this “non-participation.” The planets weren’t gods; they were rocks orbiting the sun! Plants weren’t green because of their own whim—we wouldn’t wake up and find that they’d decided on blue. This was the post-Enlightenment world that Barfield lived in, and that those of us in the West lived in until only a few decades ago.

But, Barfield said, human history is heading for a third and ultimate phase, which he called “final participation.” Here the two worlds come together and hardheaded

rationalists will reconnect with a universe that's alive and personal.

It seems to me that's what I'm seeing in Boston. And that this not-quite-articulated hope of final participation is calling to people all around the Western world who thought they were alone—misfits among their skeptical friends and misfits in their churches.

You may have noticed that we're experiencing a renaissance of outspoken, public atheists who forcefully claim that they're the hope of the world and that, if they're ignored, the East and the West will destroy each other. I swim in the sea of these folks—periodically speaking to groups of them—and I think that to a great extent they're right about what they bring to the table.

But not infrequently these critics sound a few troubling notes in print. They often come across—forgive me for being so blunt—as humorless, joyless, and judgmental. They don't seem as if they would be ideal dinner guests, although I'm told that several of them are quite gracious if you get them alone and steer them away from this subject. So how can these writers be right in believing that their unique insight is so crucial and yet come across as so adrift in the bigger picture? These important people will waft in and out of our story to follow.

And let's face it, you may find it to be a strange story, filled with experiences and theories and guileless spiritual tips and the occasional cheerful polemic. But perhaps it makes sense if we see it as belonging to the forgotten

genre of confession. You'll recall some famous examples by Augustine and Teresa of Avila and Patrick, who wrote to the authorities of their day to justify their quirks. Their confessions included elements of memoir and spiritual instruction and their spin on history and what they believed were new ways of looking at both the observable world and the hidden world.

Are my friends and I right about all of this? That's a tough one. Yes we are, in the sense that the stories that follow are, best as I can tell, 100 percent true. But more and more, it seems to me that *right* isn't the word we're looking for in talking about such things, that—as we'll talk about—there's actually no possibility of being “right” on these terms.

This idea galls folks on both sides of this conversation. Religious people and skeptics do, after all, agree on one thing: They're very invested in being right. I think my friends would sooner punt to being “on to something” and find that satisfying—maybe even shockingly satisfying—on its own terms.

But this can be an acquired taste. So perhaps you'll need to decide if being on to something is enough for you at this stage of your life. Or perhaps you'll find it to be exactly what you need.

PART I

THE UNIVERSE

If I'd Known This Was Possible, I'd Have Signed Up a Long Time Ago

I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NOVEL *How to Be Good*, by Nick Hornby, and I can't say I'm enjoying it as much as I'd hoped to. It's about a demoralized London doctor and her angry husband, who undergoes a strange conversion and becomes utterly good—selfless, concerned about the wider world, sacrificial. But rather than being comic, as Hornby customarily—and brilliantly—is, he strikes me here as grim. The world he paints offers two choices for our lives: guilt-ridden, culturally savvy liberalism or humorless, scarcity-obsessed goodness. It's as if we can (a) write for the *New Yorker* or (b) lead the Bolshevik Revolution.

Not that this has an entirely unfamiliar feel to me. In my teen atheist years, my mom tried to convince me to go to church because it could offer me “a good thought for the week.” She's a great lady, but this didn't do it for me. Like

all people, I was already sold on my goodness, if not my happiness. (Al Capone infamously saw himself as a selfless champion of the little people.)

Of the hundreds of people I've seen encounter God over the last few years, one thing nearly all of them have in common is that they never—*never*—saw themselves as the religious type. I live in the shadow of Harvard, where almost no one sees himself or herself as the religious type. (A 1995 survey—hard to pin down but widely quoted—found that only 2 percent of folks living in my city went to church on a given week, compared to 35 to 40 percent nationwide.) But my friends would, almost to a one, tell you that what's happened to them has had very little to do with making them better people, as happy as that thought might be.

For instance, I asked some of them to take a minute and write down what has happened to them on a napkin-sized piece of paper. I got responses like this:

Me before: No friends, into pornography, broken marriage, horribly burdened at work, couldn't sleep at night, detached from my own emotions, complete lack of hope for the future, favorite saying (no joke): "Every day is worse than the one before."

Me after: Great friends, incredible hope, sexually pure, conversations with my Creator, sleeping eight hours a night, improved relationship with my ex-wife, have seen my family find God, seeking God's will in my life and knowing he will fulfill it.

Or:

I prayed that I would be healed from anorexia and am now at a healthy weight and have rejoined the track and cross-country teams at my college.

Or:

I found out that my aunt and uncle's marriage was unraveling due to an affair. I fasted and prayed for them. After thirty-eight days, I was contacted by my uncle. He was about to sign a lease on an apartment to move in with his lover. Before he could sign, he felt an almost audible voice in his head say, "stop." He went back to my aunt and started to see how their marriage could be saved. She found a way to forgive him. He was calling me to find out whether this voice was Jesus. It's been about three years and my aunt and uncle are happily together (and my eleven-year-old cousin is doing great). They are both following God now and have since then encouraged me in faith.

When people find out where I live and the types of people I spend my days talking to, they assume that I have a lot of heady conversations about truth and proofs and theorems. But I really don't have heady conversations very often (though I am trying to learn a little more about physics so I can nod at the right place in conversations).

What I *do* talk about again and again is one particularly depressing day I had as an atheist when I spun around

to see if there was anything else out there—and seemed to slam straight into a God bent on giving me all sorts of incredible and unexpected things.

I recently was reminded about a Hebrew word—*hesed*—that, when applied to God, gets translated as “mercy” or “kindness” and tells us two things: (1) God will keep his end of the deal, and (2) God will blow us away with shocking acts of kindness, love, and power when we least expect them. My friends and I tell stories along these lines quite a bit.

I’ve got a lot of problems, trivial and otherwise, as I’ll talk about soon enough. So on the mundane side, I used to be thinner than I am now, which feels discouraging. And then there was the day when my baby daughter went from being this vibrant little girl to being—as I was told by the cardiologist who checked her in—maybe the sickest child in a hospital where people bring the sickest kids from all over the world.

And you’ve probably noticed that the world has a lot of problems. I’ve spent time in Lebanon, and I have a few friends there. As I write this, Lebanon is being bombed into rubble, and I’m getting e-mails each day about my friends’ harrowing attempts to get out of the country alive. You’ve noticed similarly wrenching items in your morning paper. In the face of problems like this, perhaps the only appropriate response would be a permanently furrowed brow, as if God himself must live a righteously grim life.

And yet there are very few times when, as I'm lying down for the night, I don't think about what's happened to me and shake my head in wonder. How I got to this point has felt like one strange journey.

Notes

- ¹ Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, 2nd ed. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).
- ² Tania Ralli, "A Church Takes Root in Unlikely Lefty Soil," *Boston Globe*, December 4, 2005.
- ³ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image, 2001), 158–59.
- ⁴ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).
- ⁵ If you want to find out more of their story, check out www.irismin.org.
- ⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 62–63.
- ⁷ James F. Kraus, "The Midlife Happiness Crisis," *Boston Globe*, March 26, 2007, http://www.boston.com/business/globe/articles/2007/03/26/the_midlife_happiness_crisis/; or find the original study at <http://www.slate.com/id/2161925/>.
- ⁸ "Memoir of Jonathan Edwards," from *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, volume 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), xxi, emphasis added.
- ⁹ "Filmmaker Claims to Find Jesus' 'Lost Tomb,'" *Boston Globe*, February 27, 2007, D11.
- ¹⁰ <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2006/11/0081282>.
- ¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 64–66.

Acknowledgments

A Catholic teacher I like starts each of his teachings with a prayer that his own prejudices won't get in the way. I'm reminded of his prayer as I finish up this book, because so much of the revision process has entailed having prejudice after prejudice pointed out. After my emphatic plea against judgment, was I perhaps judging someone in this or that spot of the manuscript? And indeed. So I was.

All to say, thanks to God for folks willing to take a look at this along the way and help me get out of my own way, insofar as I've been able to. One especially helpful reader was Nancy Hess, who was given the manuscript by one of Tyndale's editors, Jan Long Harris (herself a major shaper of the book along the way). Nancy kindly gave her unvarnished perspective and highlighted more of these dicey areas than I had yet seen.

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suggested there might be a book in the things I'd said. You can be the judge of whether she was on to something.

Just about anything of interest here was first thought of and written about by someone else. I've cited lots of those folks in the book itself, but I've missed some key people like Daniel P. Fuller and Greg Read, who shepherded me into key elements here, and Dutch Sheets and Randy Clark and Brother Lawrence, whose insights show up here.

And most of this book has been shaped by my quirky journey of faith itself, which has taught its own lessons. Some key shapers of that journey—along with Grace—have been Charles Park and Rich and Lisa Lamb, who came up with the idea of this church I'm a part of, which has so transformed my life. Countless people within that community have influenced me and whatever's written here.

About the Author

DAVE SCHMELZER is a playwright and novelist who also pastors the multisite Vineyard Christian Fellowship, Greater Boston. He lives outside of Boston, Massachusetts, with his wife, Grace, and their children.



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