

Sticky Faith Turns 30: A Longitudinal Study of Faith Development

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Abstract: One aspect of the *Sticky Faith* research involved in-depth interviews with 15 students during their college years. I continued to follow these young adults until they reached the age of 30 in 2018. This presentation will describe some of the themes identified as they struggled with their personal and faith commitments. In particular, I will rely on case study methodology to describe two very different, engaging young adults' faith journeys, from adolescence to age 30.

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Introduction (Cheryl)

What follows is the introduction to the book we are writing. Today's presentation will focus on two case studies, which will represent two chapters in the upcoming book.

For years I have argued that we cannot measure spiritual growth or development. Having read so much research on spiritual growth, and adolescent development, I am simply unable to provide a formula that guarantees an adolescent will grow in their walk with Jesus. Yet at the same time I think we can identify some factors that impact one's growth while still honoring both adolescent individuality and God's sovereignty.

This is not a book of "how-tos," but rather a book that invites readers into the spiritual journeys of a group of youth group kids as they journey from adolescence through emerging adulthood and into young adulthood. Each adolescent's journey is unique, yet there are some common threads. After interviewing them for the past twelve years, I feel I have the privilege of understanding a little more about how they have grown, how they have made decisions, and how their families impact their faith commitments.**

This group of fifteen students began as a sub-category from the College Transition Project, which became recognized through the results published in the *Sticky Faith* literature. The objective of my portion of the study was to dig deeply into the lives of these students as they made their way through their respective colleges. I visited each student on their particular college or university campus over their four years of undergraduate work.

But it didn't end there. I decided to ask if I could interview their parents in an attempt to gain their perspective on what impacted their child's spiritual growth. And, I

decided to follow this group well beyond their college years – up until their 30th birthdays. None of these results have been published previously as I wanted to accumulate more longitudinal data.

So here we are – 2018 – and this group turns thirty this year. They live all over the United States - some married, some single, some with children. After their final interviews this year, I would say they have all arrived – they have achieved identity, as described by Erik Erikson. They know who they are, who they want to be with (for the most part), what they believe, and what they want to do vocationally. And, they have individuated from their parents.

Not surprisingly, it takes longer these days to accomplish the identity task. Whether it's because of the lengthening of the adolescent stage of development, or the complexity of options available, or simply being overwhelmed in college with day-to-day life management, it seems common that most are not “identity achieved” until sometime in the mid-twenties.¹ Does that mean they will not continue to change or grow in their faith commitments? Absolutely not.

During 2017-2018 I partnered with my Research Assistant, Daniel Gillooley, to complete final interviews with this group of thirty year olds. Daniel just completed his MDiv at Azusa Pacific Seminary, and is in his mid-twenties. I asked him to join this project because of his younger perspective, incisive thought processes, and his thoroughness. Daniel's insights and collaboration became critical to our finishing this longitudinal project.

Our objective in writing this book is to share all we have learned about spiritual and identity development from these fifteen generous people as they have journeyed

from late adolescence to young adulthood. We hold their stories loosely....knowing there is still room for growth and change. We are so grateful for their willingness to share their thoughts, dreams, and lives with us over the years. So many words were spoken with tears; so many regrets, so many second thoughts. We feel privileged to be able to share their stories.

In order to maintain confidentiality, we have changed their names and identifying details such as hometowns, universities/colleges attended, parental information, and current geographic location.

The structure of this book prioritizes the individual stories. We have accumulated pages upon pages of transcribed interviews, combing through them multiple times in an attempt to tease out significant variables which might help us better understand factors impacting spiritual growth. We conclude each chapter with current research which supplements what we discovered through the individual stories.

I would like to thank Lisa Howard for the paper she presented at last year's AYME conference, titled, "Parental Involvement Factors Promoting Adolescent Faith Formation." Ms. Howard provided a detailed analysis and synopsis of current research regarding parental impact, for which we are extremely grateful. Her thorough description provided a more global view with regards to parental impact, whereas our project led us to zoom into individual stories. Both are needed to help us understand faith formation, and to provide guidance for parents as they raise children.

In the course of our research we infrequently encountered stories of parents simply dropping their kids at church, assuming it was the children's and youth pastor's job to "handle" the spiritual development of their children. The vast majority of our

participants' parents were more deeply invested in all aspects of their children's growth, including spirituality. The individual stories elucidate parents' conscious and subconscious words and actions that impacted their children's faith development. It is these individual, idiosyncratic aspects we hoped to identify through our longitudinal study.

Finally, we found personalities and family systems to deeply impact those we studied. Because of these individual stories, we are hesitant to suggest any formula or list of to-dos to encourage faith development. We are hopeful that our readers will come to their own conclusions about how best to encourage faith in the individual adolescents one pastors or parents.

Nate's Story

Is it true?

How do you evaluate the truth of something? Some might recall an anecdotal experience that indisputably convinced them of a proposition. Others might quote mathematical evidence or probability. Another might use their hand, touch the arm of the chair they sit in, and say, "this is." Still others feel as if they are unable to answer this question in a way that satisfies all variables.

What happens when your own "religious arguments" cannot stand up beyond a shadow of a doubt?

"I had been having doubts about the truthfulness – the ability to prove – what was happening in the Bible." He felt it happening for years and it was uncomfortable. He had been trying hard to compel his perception of "a normal faith" into existence, but he perceived it was devastatingly incompatible with his questions. He acknowledged he

always had doubts, was always holding something back – but he had also thrown himself into Christian community.

Nate couldn't help but think about his faith philosophically and rationally. He wanted to understand how it worked and he desperately wanted to help people. But he felt he asked too many questions. He wondered if he thought too critically – but how could he do any different? Thinking critically was who he was.

Like a caged tiger he followed commands and jumped through hoops. He allowed the ringmaster to harmlessly open his gaping jaws and resigned himself to be placated for fear of being discovered for the doubt-filled person he really was. Something had to give.

The clearest message I focused on as a Christian was that I was not good enough. Every human, the best and the worst, falls short of God's standards. I believed that I deserved hell if not for Jesus' sacrifice. Rather than interpreting that as a message of hope, I used it to fuel a feeling of self-hatred.

As a Christian, Nate began to perceive himself as becoming increasingly more inauthentic and unsure of himself. "I knew what I wanted, but I had no idea what God wanted for me. I wasn't great at turning Bible verses into meaningful insight on my life. Prayer didn't help. Any time I thought I had an answer, I had the sinking feeling that I was deceiving myself. Was it my own thought or God's will? This helped me cultivate a distrust in my own judgment."

Today, Nate is a software developer that values efficiency and continuous improvement. He tries to live his life in the best way as he can. His understanding of "best" is directly tied to helping other people live as good of lives as possible. Nate

understands that he does not live in a vacuum: his life is interdependent on the lives of those around him.

But he admits that right now has been reserved for a time of personal growth. A time of recovery, if you will. Nate describes deciding to leave his faith as a “gut-wrenching decision” because it “turned [his] world upside down for a bit.” He did reassure us that he is content with the decision of leaving his faith. His past interviews shed light on the significant emotional turmoil he went through and a current interview reveals this decade old decision still has influence.

Nate hopes to resume his service to others in the near future, as this was a very significant part of his life in college and after college as he became a young professional. But, for now, he is “focused on personal improvement and nailing down routines that make [him] better.”

What is Nate’s story?

Parents:

Growing up from childhood to high school, Nate recalls that his mom had the most influence on who he was. In 2007, he has a hard time determining exactly what it was about his mother that influenced him so much. In his 2017 interview, though, Nate retrospectively recalls that his mother “was better at the life coaching like breaking down a social problem into chunks so that [he] could understand it.” But she has a hard time understanding Nate’s interests: particularly physics and math.

While Nate really liked his mom and connected with her better than with his dad, it is important to note that he does not describe his mom as smart. While he admires

how much his mom values the Christian faith – going as far as saying “she is good” – It appears that the faith is not associated with intelligence in Nate’s mind.

Nate describes his dad as the worker of the family because his software job takes care of most of the money. Nate also emphasizes on a number of occasions how smart his dad is – which is a direct contrast to how Nate does not communicate the same perception of his mother. Furthermore, dad appreciates Nate’s interests: physics, football, etc. His dad is also able to tutor him through the hard sections of Nate’s math and science classes.

Interestingly, though, in spite of the similarities between Nate and his dad, Nate does not talk about having much intimacy with his father, especially in the way he describes it with his mother. Growing up, Nate associates relational connection, faith, and “being a little bit crazy” with his mother. On the other hand, Nate associates intelligence and rational thinking with his father.

Even in 2007 it is apparent that the contrast between these associations for mother and father will likely play a role in the inner conflict Nate will face over the next decade as he enters his 30s.

Church Experience:

During his early years, Nate recalls attending a church approximately once a month with his sister and mother. Dad wouldn’t go – he liked to watch Formula 1. He recalls they eventually decided to stop going because “[they] didn’t really like the church anymore.” This is when the once a month church visits began to become a “once in a while” thing.

By 10th grade, however, his family had switched to another church that he recalled they “liked” a little more. Nate describes it as being a more modern evangelical church with contemporary music. His dad appreciated it quite a lot, given his interest in music. Thus, the family increased their attendance to usually once a week, but Nate was really only involved in youth group.

In 2007, when Nate was asked about his involvement in youth group, he could really only talk about his mom’s involvement in the youth group. One of his primary examples of her involvement, that he was assuming was his, was her cooking meals to serve the group. There were a few side references to a couple other adults that Nate mentioned when he spoke of youth group, but he did not express or describe any deep connection with them.

Even at this stage, it is apparent that Nate’s church experience is inextricably tied to his mother. She appears to be the primary influence in church selection and attendance for their family from Nate’s perspective.

Transition to College:

As is the case with many adolescents, Nate described his transition into college as “not fun.” When recalling the first month of school in his 2007 interview, he called it “absolutely terrible.”

This appears to be in part due to his interpretation of what growing up might have meant: he mentioned that, in order to “try and make it [on his own]” he cut off all communication with home for a while. This is especially interesting considering his closeness with his sister and mother. His shyness did not help his ability to make new

friends, either. Furthermore, he didn't get along with his first roommate. For the first few months, Nate was completely alone.

When he was asked about advice he would give to upcoming college students in 2007, his own experience seemed to be projected into his advice. Among his advice were statements about the difficulty of meeting people, clarifications that college isn't always fun, but also encouragements to stick with it and try to make friends.

The only time Nate mentioned his faith without prompting in 2007 is when he talked about how easy it was to drink on campus. Before coming to school, Nate had decided not to drink on campus because the Bible warns against drunkenness and he did not want to portray Christians as hypocrites. He was going to wait until he reached age 21, then possibly drink responsibly.

Theory, Belief, Practice & Reason:

In 2007, Nate finds it hard to see the change in himself when he looks back, even though he is certain that he has changed. He does recall his pastor "telling students arguments" to believe, but as much as Nate enjoyed these, he mentioned that he was not convinced. It was just another propositional argument that failed to increase faith. As he remained in the faith community, his understanding of the "theory" of Christianity would increase, but he did not necessarily believe it.

In 2007, he understands "practicing his faith" in a way that many his age would: going to church, spending time with Christian friends, being part of a university fellowship, and attending a weekly Bible study. Like many, he tried to read through the whole Bible; but he admittedly made it partway through Genesis and had given up by week two. He does exhibit a discipline for his faith (evidenced by his community

activities, however limited), but this discipline seems to mirror the kind of role his mother played as he grew up where the goal to be at the local church.

Concluding his freshman year of college in 2007, Nate does describe Jesus as his savior – but in the “Sunday School answer” sort of way. As he dives more into his understanding of and belief in Jesus, he says “I need him a lot” followed shortly after by, “I don’t follow the rules.” As he dives deeper, he says, “If I tried harder I wouldn’t be sinning nearly as much.” Then he confesses, “I let my failures get in the way of our relationship.” He goes on to continue to express guilt, pick himself apart, and express how hard it is to pray when he has done something wrong.

This guilt he feels is a big deal.

“I always have questions,” Nate stated during an interview during his sophomore year of college in 2008. When he expanded on this statement, he processed it within the context of his leadership experience as a counselor for 15-16 year olds. He said, “You can’t have all of those serious doubts and think about them because you have to lead your kids and there’s limited room for change.” Clearly Nate, at this point in his life, had accepted these doubts and questions as part of his life – but why would he think he needed to shield his students from them? In what ways did he perceive these students he led needing to change? Did Nate see his life as an example of one to avoid?

Nate’s self sufficiency is a key trait. Rather than going to a tutor or teacher when he struggles in physics, he decides that he should “try and read the book. Just put in a lot of time and see if anything comes [of it].” But even though Nate is focused on self-sufficiency, he really likes being able to help people and does so through tutoring. He describes “feeling useful” when he is able to help individuals understand math and

physics. In math and physics there are less grey areas than there are in faith. He doesn't have to worry about his doubts when studying these fields. Nonetheless, it's interesting that Nate is not willing to find a tutor for himself but finds purpose in being able to tutor others. Finally, however, he seeks out his father as his tutor. Perhaps a turning point in not only his identity and faith journey.

Much of Nate's dialogue, particularly in 2008 and beyond, focuses on "understanding problems." A frustration he experiences with his students that he tutors is when they solve a math or physics problem, but move on even when they do not understand it. It is this lack of understanding that frustrates Nate the most. He appears to regularly ruminate on what goes on in the world, how much he can be sure of, the sheer diversity of opinions and experiences in the world, and what his beliefs are based in.

Part of what is so frustrating to Nate during his sophomore year in college is that he is unable to be sure of what he believes because of his uncertainty as to why he believes it. He can't "figure it out." While he still goes to his university fellowship on campus and still calls himself a Christian, he admits that he is uncertain about what is right. He is going through a whole series of questioning his beliefs. While many would be completely miserable during this phase, Nate mentions that he is glad he is struggling through this phase because he is sure he will come out the other side and be sure of the answers he is looking for.

Related to figuring out his beliefs, it is valuable to observe an aside statement that Nate made during his 2008 sophomore year interview about trying to gather as much information while he is young and can still make decisions. For an ultimate reason

unknown, Nate is convinced that now is the time to figure this out – not later. Will he rush to a decision?

Another observation to make about this 2008 sophomore year struggle: Nate is alone. Sure, he is playing ultimate frisbee and connecting with his team. He is tutoring students in physics and math. He has a roommate. He still attends the university fellowship from time to time. But he does not mention that he has anyone to process this spiritual struggle and intense session of questioning with – at least no one in the faith that he apparently still ascribes to.

Nate has intentionally distanced himself from prayer because he believes it is contradictory to the process of logically thinking through questions that he is going through. “If I’m going through all these questions, then why do I still have to be attached and pray to God?” He believes it is most logical to figure this out on his own. Even though he does reflect on this reasoning and question his conclusion, he remains quite convinced.

A third valuable observation about Nate: he is very self aware and reflective. He admits that the secular culture of his college has likely had an effect on his development. He is able to acknowledge that he is jealous of people who can have religious and philosophical certainty because he wants it so badly, but he has the discernment to know that he is not there. Furthermore, he consistently counters his own arguments throughout the interviews, trying to bring in as many perspectives as possible to any statement. This is a very healthy trait, but it also seems to be part of what is driving the process of “figuring out his beliefs.”

Good Intentions and Great Expectations:

It appears that the one thing Nate won't question is whether or not he does need to "figure out his beliefs." Or, what is possible to figure out and what is most certainly not possible to figure out.

Nevertheless, he is learning to ask better questions than he ever has before. And this is a good thing. He begins wondering about "how much other stuff [he] just accepted and didn't really think about." But in spite of learning to ask better questions and doing his utmost to bring in as many perspectives as possible, it appears that he believes that the Christian faith is merely one perspective.

A statement claiming that a person can't support gay rights or marriage to any real extent and also be a Christian highlights this. What is significant about this statement is not the particular view he purports, but rather the totality through which he believes he is able to represent the diversity of being a Christian. While there are plenty of Christians who would sooner die than support gay rights or marriage, there are likely just as many Christians who would die for the sake of persons who profess a gay identity gaining rights. There are also a vast range of opinions that Christians hold between these two polarities.

The point of this, therefore, is that the Christian identity and faith is significantly more diverse than Nate believes in relation to this topic. In what other areas has he drastically simplified the Christian faith? In this particular context, Nate welcomes the perspective of his bisexual friend and uses this anecdotal experience to determine that the world is not supposed to work in a hateful or restrictive way towards persons who

embrace non-binary sexuality. But he is not able to acknowledge that the Christian faith is also non-binary.

Is the Christian faith really in or out, right or wrong, the pastor's (usually mistaken for God's) way or the highway? Or is it is complex, diverse, messy, and beautiful?

While Nate can't quite see the diversity of opinion in the Christian faith surrounding this issue, he is able to acknowledge that he isn't quite in the real world yet. His world is filled with 18-23 year olds. Furthermore, the adults in his life, like his campus minister, are more concerned with fixing his doubts than listening to his questions. Nate describes this experience as the minister trying to provide the "quick and easy answer" when Nate wanted to say, "Here is what I'm thinking about and that's it, like I want to think about it more... If you're not sure, you're not sure. Period. That's it."ⁱ Nate isn't looking for any kind of shortcut.

The Beginning – or the End?

It's 2010: the end of Nate's senior year of college. He is finishing his physics degree with a philosophy minor and is hopeful about doing a "Teach for America" program upon graduation. He really wants to help the people around him in whatever way he can.

But what's changed?

It's been almost two years and he admits he is still trying to come to terms with not believing anymore. Nate says that he stopped identifying as a Christian at the end of his sophomore year – likely a matter of weeks after the interview with him in 2008. In his opinion, the worst part of his religious experience was the struggle: being unsure and having to ask the questions to figure it out.

He is uncertain whether he should identify as an agnostic or as an atheist – but he is willing to state that he believes God probably does not exist. Honesty and rationality run deep in Nate, he is perfectly willing to admit that he is certain about almost nothing. He acknowledges that he “values logic and reason but it doesn’t always lead [him] to a good place.”

At this stage, Nate does not refer to Christianity as a faith but rather as a series of “arguments.” He believes his philosophy classes helped him evaluate the strictness to which he abided to the arguments of Christianity. It appears that Christianity can only be described in terms of a logical debate, not as a tradition or a community.

He recalls three primary reasons why he made the shift away from the Christian faith: (1) his own “religious arguments” could not stand up beyond a shadow of a doubt, (2) his intellectual ability increased, and (3) he lived with non-Christians who were “alright.”

Nate mentions some of the fallout of this decision. The hardest part for him was not letting go of the Christian intellectual arguments, but rather learning “[to see] the world in a different light.” He contends that most Christians are not Christians because of intellectual arguments, but because of their lifestyle and the way they view the world.

He also claims that drinking in college during junior and senior year was a direct result of deciding not to be religious. He went from easing into drinking to drinking very heavily primarily because this is what his friends did – and he didn’t have to worry about hypocritically representing the Christian faith. This is a very intentional decision and highlights the precision through which Nate makes decisions. Drugs are not part of his sans-faith life, but he remarks that they aren’t “a closed door.”

What are Nate's sans-faith values? They appear to be essentially the same as when he professed to be a Christian: caring, responsibility, dependability, seriousness balanced with humor, and cultivating an open mind – only sans Jesus. His guilt still seems to have stuck with him, though.

He claims he is reasonably happy with who he is, but his self reflectiveness gets the best of him and he quickly says that if he were to change anything it would be his character. He also acknowledges that he would have done much crazier things by this point in his life if he had known he would have left the faith. But, in typical Nate fashion, he immediately ponders that it probably would not have been a good thing to do those ambiguous crazy things.

Who is Nate in 2010 sans-faith? “I definitely believed something very strongly, and not believe something totally different equally strongly.” He believes he can relate to others better because his mind is more open to other people.

Quick Conclusions

“Solving problems is kind of my natural state. Using analytical abilities is – it's where I find the most joy, I guess.” Nate does recall that his youth pastor and camp counselors did raise questions about faith and pose difficult issues, but they came to conclusions entirely too quickly. Nate really valued actually thinking about these things. It takes time and struggle to process through these aspects of faith. But it appears he wasn't encouraged or allowed to dwell in the uncertainty. Uncertainty seems to have been presented to him as a wading pool used to dip feet in for a matter of seconds. Nate, on the other hand, saw uncertainty as a way to challenge himself by diving deep, holding his breath, and coming up with a “reasonable answer.”

And he believes he has. Or is he still having a tough time even convincing himself? “When you take something that’s the foundation of who you are and say, ‘no, no longer,’ it’s kinda – it’s pretty jarring. So, I don’t know. Any time you shake a foundational belief it’s just difficult. And I don’t wish for anybody to do it.”

There is audible struggle in Nate’s voice as he says this. Visual turmoil on his face as he recalls the trauma of the decision he made in 2008. He still sees himself as a work in progress and is glad for the opportunity to become a better person. Even though he can now make the positive claim “I believe there is not a God,” he still acknowledges it as a “best guess.”

When asked, “what do you feel most certain about?” He responds, “I’m certain that I don’t know the answer to that question. The right thing – I’m certain that there are things that I can do in my life that will make other people’s lives better and I’m certain that that’s what I want to do. And I’m certain that I want to do more. I guess that’s where I am.” Is it possible that Nate’s conclusion to say “no, no longer” to the Christian faith was too quick? Time will tell.

When all is said and done, the lasting impression from the interviews that Nate gives is this: “thanks for having this conversation because it’s gonna spur me to be a little bit better soon.” That is not just a single quote from 2017 – he made this type of statement multiple times in all the interviews. Nate is a grateful man that really seeks to do his best in all areas. His deep care for those around him is immediately captivating to the point where I, as the interviewer, can’t help but wonder whether or not Nate is done with God yet.

But maybe a better question is this: is God done with Nate yet?

Esther's Story

Faith Anchored through Challenge

Esther. From the moment I met her as a middle-schooler I knew this girl was going to rock the world. She was loud, opinionated, loved Jesus, and was oblivious to other's reactions to her overpowering personality. She described herself as "strong-willed and prideful." She was bold...always speaking her mind without hesitation. So when it came to putting together a small group for an 8 week leadership development adventure, choosing Esther meant changing the group dynamics. But she was so sincere, so in love with Jesus, so committed to pursuing the truth – just not always with love. We dove in and took a chance on Esther, deciding that her love for Jesus would always win, regardless of the anticipated confrontations, difficult conversations, and awkward moments.

It was during this extended time together that I learned more about Esther and the depth of her faith. Since the day she was born she grew up into faith in the Lutheran tradition. She loved her church, the theology, and the liturgy. She thrived in a formal worship setting. But as a high school student, she decided to attend two churches – one Lutheran, with her family, and the other, a non-denominational evangelical church. She described her experience with the Lutheran church as wonderful, but added, "they simply don't know how to minister to kids." Everything was very adult-oriented, so she found camaraderie in a huge youth group at the local evangelical church. She invested heavily in the large group, and regularly participated in a small group. This small group grew to become her best friends in high school and college.

When Esther arrived at college she was prepared for spiritual challenges. She already had a regular Bible and devotional reading pattern established, and added a Christian book club to her weekly regimen. Together, this group read several of C.S. Lewis's books throughout her college career. Esther's pursuit of Christian fellowship on her southern private university campus helped her continue to strengthen her active faith. She frequently quoted the Bible as she talked. Because of her long-term commitment to Bible reading and her pursuit of fellowship in the form of others similarly committed, Esther thrived during her college years. Perhaps the biggest shift in her, however, was movement from a Bible-knowing, hardcore evangelist to someone who became equally concerned about social justice issues. This growth seemed to flow naturally as she strove to integrate what she was learning in her social work classes with what she learned from her Bible reading. She developed not only an understanding of those whose life circumstances differed from hers, but she grew in compassion and conviction.

Perhaps of interest is one of Esther's friends from the 8 week leadership development program also chose to attend the same university. Their experiences were as different as night and day. Although Janet's family regularly attended church, Janet describes them as "pretty disengaged spiritually." They never talked directly about their faith or how it impacted their daily lives. The youth group was very small, and Janet does not even recall whether the youth pastor was male or female.

When Janet arrived at college, she shot into the party scene. Not atypical for most college freshmen. The drinking begins on Thursdays in the south (Wednesdays in the north), and pretty much ended Sunday night. She continued to be good friends with

Esther throughout college, but they never shared the same social group. During her first interview, spring freshman year, she indicated she was going to try out some of the Christian groups when she returned in fall. She never did. She partied throughout college, finding a group of friends her shared her interests and values. As a social work major, she chose a project which involved looking at the emotional manipulation of worship music in Christian fellowship groups. By the end of her college career, she noted she was interested in Christian spirituality but approached it from a Buddhist perspective. Today Janet lives in a large northeastern metropolitan city, working in development at an Ivy league college. Although she would identify herself as spiritual, she does not consider religion or faith key to her daily decisions.

Two very different life and faith trajectories that converged as these young women journeyed together from 16-22. What factors contributed to their unique journeys and commitments?

Esther believes that her family experiences during her high school years dramatically influenced the depth of her faith. When the family moved from Illinois to Maryland during her mid-teens, her two older brothers were sent to elite boarding schools. Esther was home alone with her two parents throughout her high school career. Sadly, her mother's struggles with depression (later diagnosed as bipolar) deepened, while at the same time her father's drinking increased – dramatically. He became an alcoholic. Both parents attended church regularly with Esther, with no one in the congregation clued into their struggles. It reached a point where they began conversations with Esther about separating. According to Esther, she sat them down individually and told them point blank, "You need to pray about it. Like you need to pray

about it and you need to talk to each other about what God wants you to do or else this is not going to work out.” She continued, telling me, “I remember just laying in my room, just praying for hours about it and the way things were with both their issues. I don’t know how they ever overcame it, but I know all of a sudden like things were working out. God did it.” Esther’s parents became deeply involved in the church, as their faith in God grew stronger and stronger.

Esther repeated this story to me in 2018. Same facts, same emotion. Her interpretation of the impact of this event on her life is that by virtue of her parents involving her in their struggles, she was not only able to encourage them in faith, but reaped the benefits of the miracle she saw unfold before her very eyes. Although Esther’s faith was remarkably deeply anchored for a 13 year old, the relational healing and growth she witnessed in her parents during this heart-wrenching period fueled her digging in deeper. Her faith became rock-solid at a very early date. Likewise, her identity was fully enmeshed with her faith commitment to Jesus.

Esther is an incredibly unique young woman. At 30, she is a strong advocate for social justice. She recently began a master’s degree in public policy so she can advocate for those less fortunate than herself. When she met the love of her life at a summer camp, they became engaged and were married during their college years. One of their early conversations confirmed their like-minded priority to adopt rather than birth their first child. According to Esther, she knew she would adopt children from the time she was in middle school. They recently adopted a baby girl, whose birth mother knew her coming baby needed a more stable and nurturing home than she could provide.

Although Esther and her husband were told it would take years for them to adopt, they were chosen by this selfless mom-to-be in a matter of months.

Conversing with Esther at 30 is different than when she was 15 or 18. Although she continues to win the prize for word count from all our interviews over the past 12 years, she is much more eloquent in her choice of words. She is incredibly descriptive and articulate – almost as if she paints a picture as she speaks. She continues to project the same energy, passion, and excitement, but seems a bit moderated, perhaps by maturity.

Esther is not without struggles. Although her faith and identity are firmly established, she is still conflicted about how to engage her mother. When living in close proximity, she found it difficult to maintain healthy boundaries, as her mother's mental health has deteriorated. In an attempt to raise her newborn daughter in a healthy environment, Esther and her husband moved away. They are still in regular communication with Esther's parents, but felt they needed space in order to raise their child without the constant emotional ups and downs of a neighboring parent.

Perhaps the key to understanding Esther is she knows herself. With some interviewees we had to ask multiple follow-up questions in order to prod their reflection. Esther's responses flowed like an open spigot. She not only knows what she thinks and believes, but wanted to help us gain a thorough understanding. As a result, her interviews were among the most helpful.

After my first interview with Esther during spring of her freshman year of college, I realized she was much further along in her identity process than most of her peers. In addition, her faith commitment seemed more anchored in reality. She is intentional in

working out how her faith impacts her life as well as others. Her pursuit of a Master's degree in public policy is an attempt on her part to change systemic marginalization of the poor and disenfranchised.

Esther's story is still unfolding. Although she has already impacted the lives of those in her friend and family sphere, her influence will grow, as she continues to extend that sphere. She truly lives as a light in our world.

Matthew 5:14-16 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Conclusion

These two faith journeys are dramatically different. One seems well anchored in their faith commitments, while the other continues to search for answers. We watched one describe their developing faith with great boldness, while the other's body language (downcast eyes, sudden fidgeting) indicated he was still very much unresolved. How do we explain these different pathways?

Without oversimplifying by outlining a to-do list to encourage faith in emerging adults, I think we can humbly offer some observations.

1. Parental influence is of the utmost importance. Not only what they say, or if they attend church regularly, but how their faith is integrated into their daily lives. In addition, their willingness and ability to talk through issues in their lives, seems critical in faith development for their kids.

2. Extraverts might have the edge on establishing multiple circles of friends that encourage their faith through adverse contexts. Esther was able to not only engage multiple friend groups to support her faith, but also easily talked about her faith like she talked about everything else. Nate, on the other hand, was almost disabled by his shyness. He found it very difficult to make friends in college. Even once he had made friends, he was still unwilling to share his doubts and struggles with those who would have been able to help him process. Building important, supportive relationships in college to encourage faith seems important.

3. Related to the last point, Esther married during college – a man whose faith commitments are very similar to her own. Although they have had struggles, she has chosen a partner with whom to share her faith journey, encouraging her along the way. In addition, they have sought out faith communities –both large and small – everywhere they have lived. It is a priority for them. Nate has found a woman whom he loves and with whom he now lives. Although they are on the same page in terms of serving their community by building a community garden and engaging with those who are less fortunate financially, we don't know anything about her faith. We assume she will have great impact as Nate continues to grapple with his faith commitments. Stay tuned.....

4. When presenting some of the *Sticky Faith* research during and right after the group's college years, I always referred to the challenge of my (Cheryl) pastoral reflex. When Nate talked about his internal, undisclosed struggles with faith, I wanted to jump in and be that safe person. As a researcher, I could not. I wish his high school youth pastor or camp counselor continued to follow and converse with him about his faith struggle. I wish they continued to build on the relationship they established as adult-adolescent, transitioning to adult-adult. The implication for all of us is to maintain relationships with students as they graduate high school and matriculate college.

5. Brad Griffin and Jim Candy wrote *Can I Ask That?* when we (FYI) realized that although students had doubts, they rarely voiced them. Those I interviewed told me they didn't "feel" doubt while in youth group, and never thought to raise the questions once they left. How can we raise and respond to doubts, in such a way as to encourage students to share more?

As we unpack more of the interviews from the past twelve years, we hope to discover what impacted the unique faith journeys of these fifteen young adults. There are so many nuances to each story, but our goal is to continue to search for common threads that will help all of us – youth pastors and parents – encourage deepening faith commitments as adolescents grow into adulthood.

** All quotes captured in this paper were taken directly from either transcribed audio interview tapes, or written responses from interviewees.