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# Inventing a Testimony (Chapter 18 of Jesus Girls: True Tales of Growing Up Female and Evangelical)

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## Inventing a **Testimony**

*by Melanie Springer Mock*

Several months into my first year of college, I realized there was an optional worship service for students every Sunday evening and that anyone who wanted to be considered a Christian by her peers had better show up. For weeks, I had been blissfully deluded, spending my Sunday evenings running through the hills around town, then hanging out in the dorm lobby—a lobby which was, I'll admit, eerily empty, as if the rapture had come and carried away everyone except me. Students bursting through the lobby doors on those nights always provided certain relief: I had not missed the second coming after all.

Monday morning after Monday morning, my friends asked why I hadn't attended "Celebration," the student-contrived moniker given to these services. Their queries always seemed a bit weighted, as if my absence really *meant* something, either about me or about Celebration itself. Yet, oblivious to the gravity with which friends interrogated me about my weekend activities, I innocently persisted in my Sunday night rituals throughout the fall. Only when a friend suggested quite strongly that I accompany her to Celebration did its import become clear. Some were concerned my soul was in jeopardy, and only a weekly pilgrimage to the school's cafeteria—and to a night of singing praise hymns and giving testimonies—could save me. So, although I really wanted to be outside in the fall's waning warmth, I joined my friends.



That initial Celebration was my first real foray into evangelicalism, although I was eighteen and had been a Christian virtually my entire life. Baptized at fourteen, my official entry into the kingdom, I had attended church with hyper-regularity throughout my youth; as the daughter of a Mennonite pastor, my life was rooted in the church. Sunday and Wednesday nights were consumed by church activities, and although I could always anticipate a rousing game of parking-lot Ghost in the Grave Yard before and after services, I grew tired of being the first kid to arrive at church events and the last one to leave. Sometimes my siblings and I were the only kids there. We were always at church, and church was always at home: Dad brought stories about parishioners to the kitchen table. We knew whose marriage was breaking up, who had moaned to my dad about hymn selection, and who was unhappy when a woman stepped into the pulpit. Indeed, the church was my life, even when we were not at church.

Yet despite my immersion in a Christian culture, I knew very little about evangelical Christians. I had heard rumors about frenzied worship services and about tongue-speaking parishioners who danced in church aisles. Those services seemed so far removed from my own church that I could hardly believe such Christians existed. After all, our church unfailingly followed a prescribed pattern—not so scripted as the Catholics, certainly, but scripted nonetheless. We knew what to expect in each Sunday's service, down to the familiar brightly colored bulletins. The only variation, in worship leaders, was really no variation at all. If Don led worship, we would sing familiar songs to a autoharp; if Steve led, we would stumble through hymns no one knew; if Lois, half the congregation would sing tight-lipped, as they believed women were not supposed to lead worship. Because Mennonites were so predictable—nothing seemed different, even when we attended other Mennonite congregations—evangelicals appeared wild by comparison, even unreal, an image manufactured by made-for-television movies, akin to the crazy religious zealots who bit heads off snakes and stole money from poor widows.

That I chose to attend an evangelical Christian school, George Fox College, concerned my parents a little; they were hoping I would attend the safe familiarity of a Mennonite institution, where I would

receive no more indoctrination than my upbringing had already given me. Ostensibly a Quaker institution, less than 15 percent of George Fox College's student population were Quaker. Most students, including a good number of the Quakers, were evangelicals. Had the students been Quakers alone, the shared historic peace church status of Quakers and Mennonites might have seemed familiar and comfortable to me. But these were Evangelical Friends, more inclined to praise choruses and emotive sermons about personal walks with Jesus. Still, I didn't realize how different I was from the majority of the student body until my friend dragged me to Celebration. Up until that point, I had been going to chapel services several times a week, a college requirement. But these chapels were mostly staid affairs, where students sang half-heartedly, then studied while some speaker droned on about sanctification, justification, fornication—all new words I did not understand.

At Celebration, the worship took on a more fevered pitch than at chapel. Students swayed to the beat of a drum set, piano and bass guitar, raised their hands, and moved from chorus to chorus without a break; as one song ended, the band changed key and off they were again. Everyone apparently knew the words to each song by heart, but I dumbly sat by, unfamiliar with even the simplest refrains. Soon, the student chaplain implored worshippers to kneel and bow down to "truly praise the Lord," and most did, singing robustly as they planted their faces in the cafeteria carpet, home of smashed french fries and pot roast drippings.

After what seemed to me an interminable hour of singing, the second phase of Celebration began. At this point, students were invited to share their testimonies, their stories of an amazing grace that could uplift even the greatest of sinners. One student, an unlikely sophomore who always seemed a little dazed, perhaps stoned, began. His truly was a tale of woe: born into a broken home, his parents aimlessly adrift in despair, he spent his high school years drinking and partying and snorting coke. A serendipitous encounter with a youth pastor had saved him, however, and here he was, at college, looking forward to a life of ministry.

Another student stood to testify. Her story was a modification of the first; the same song, but in a different key. Her parents loved her,



really they did, but they were swept up in their own upper-middle-class longing for acquisition and neighborhood popularity. She had gone to church regularly, was in fact president of her youth group, but drank heavily to medicate her middle-class malaise; she lost her virginity in a beer-soaked affair before coming clean with her parents. One twelve-step program and a Christian counselor later, she was here, at college, anticipating a future doing the Lord's work.

And so it went. Student after student arose to spin astounding stories of sin and decrepitude. The narratives turned on the axis of God's mercy, a mercy manifest through the kind ministrations of youth pastors, teachers, church leaders, and friends. Even the sincerest believers in my midst—those who led singing and Bible study and who always smiled broadly because of the Lord's good works—were branded by the stain of iniquity, by a boozy night on the town and salacious feels in their parents' Buick. Or so they suggested in their testimonies, often told with tear-stained faces but the same broad smiles.

I had never heard anything like this, not ever in my years of Mennonite church camp and Vacation Bible School and youth fellowship. For some reason, giving testimony had never been part of my Mennonite religious instruction, perhaps because testifying and altar calls were never emphasized among reserved twentieth-century Mennonites. At church camp, we never had tearful campfire "Kum Ba Yah" moments, no confessions, no altar calls, as seems the trend at evangelical camps; instead, we sang around a fire, then gathered for popcorn and homemade donuts in the mess hall. And at my home church, Sunday school classes were less about the emotional recollection of sins than about instilling Mennonite values of pacifism, simplicity, and humility. The Mennonite distinctive of humility surely compelled us *not* to testify: in doing so, we would be promoting our stories and ourselves over the good of the community.

Perhaps, too, my well-meaning elders who taught Sunday school and led youth groups assumed the lives of Mennonite youth followed a certain trajectory: born into the church, we would be baptized in the church, married in the church, and eulogized in the church. Straying into temptation—especially the most heinous kind, like drinking and dancing—was never much of an option. Given the intended path our

lives were to take, the narratives we might tell would be hopelessly dull. Humble, but dull: "I was born to Mennonites, I went to church, I died." Of course, few of my Mennonite friends actually followed the patterned life intended for them; instead, they succumbed in their twenties to the haze of drugs and the burdens of unmarried pregnancies. If they had found God again, their testimonies would fit well among the evangelical brethren who testified in my college cafeteria.

The testimonies of these evangelicals filled me with guilt and fear: guilt, because my life had been so serene by comparison, and fear, because my life had been so serene by comparison. After all, I was certain I would have to impart my narrative to the masses, too, and I had no lurid sins to which I could confess, only run-of-the-mill transgressions like envy and sloth. I could little imagine that my audience wanted to hear I had lusted after someone's hundred-dollar shoes or that I watched five hours of television each day. Somehow, being saved from the clutches of these sins paled in comparison to being rescued from the depths of promiscuity or chemical dependency. Given the nature of their testimonies, those depths were plumbed by everyone else at Celebration—and, for all I knew, everyone else at the school.

I was of two minds that night when I returned to my dorm after Celebration. First, I could forget that Celebration ever existed, fall back on my own Sunday rituals, and escape the threat of giving my testimony. In doing so, I would also prove to friends that I didn't care about my "Christian walk," as they liked to say. Second, I could become a Celebration regular, wait my turn to testify, appear the fool with my paltry sins, proving to friends that I had no deep faith, untried by sin as I had been. Evasion or acceptance: I believed myself a loser whatever path I took.

I chose evasion, which worked for a good long while, no matter how askance my friends looked at me or how often I imagined they prayed for my soul. Evasion worked, I should say, until the coach of my track team suggested it would be nice (read: obligatory) to share our testimonies with teammates during our daily devotional time. The trap had been sprung, and I was stuck. I had to choose between giving testimony and giving up my beloved position on the track team as captain, and so losing the respect of a man whose attention



I craved, my coach. I made my choice. I would have to testify, the consequences be damned.

Already an astute student of literature, though: I knew my testimony, my narrative, had to contain a certain level of excitement to captivate my audience. After hearing my peers' testimonies at Celebration, I also knew exactly what constituted excitement: sin, and plenty of it, the tawdriest kind. I contemplated the construction of my narrative, its dramatic progression, the persona of its protagonist, its denouement. And I made a decision. If I couldn't conform the conventions of the testimony to fit the relative blandness of my life, I needed to make my life fit the conventions of testimony.

Thus, when my turn finally came to testify, I made sure my life, and my transgressions, took on the darkest hue imaginable. The sips of beer my grandfather gave me in his garage were really a sign of my weakness for alcohol. The one time I went cruising against my parents' will signaled my utter and long-seated disregard for their authority. The puff of a cigar, shared as a celebration with friends, began my spiral into the seedy world of drugs. On and on I went, fabricating a tale of teenage rebellion based on half-truths and exaggerations. At the end of my story appeared the obligatory saint—in this case a high school running coach—who turned the tide of sin and led me to the promised land; this was a nice touch to my story, I knew my audience, composed of runners, would especially appreciate this type of savior. And my audience, I could tell, was rapt.

Of course, in my testimony I did not mention that I had immediately told my parents about the one drag on the cigar, nor that during my sole cruising adventure, I wore a seatbelt, got nauseous from gas fumes, and made my friend—driving her mom's Plymouth station wagon—take me home early. Nor did I discuss what I deep-down believed were the graver sins of my youth: the envy that rotted my soul and turned me against friends and family; the gossip that forked my tongue; the complete disregard I showed for peers who were uglier or poorer or stupider than I was. Nor did I reveal that my saint was an agnostic who did little more than express faith, not in God, but in my ability to be a good student and a good person, giving me confidence I never had and making me more a believer in myself than in God. Admitting these things, I knew, would weaken

my testimony, would put limits on God's ability to heal the darkest of sinners. After all, it was easy to see how God could transform the envious; but to make a drunk sober—now sister, that took some powerful miracle working.

I had embellished most of the details about my life in testifying about God's role in that life; in essence, I had lied about my relationship to God, about its nuances and about the wonder of its eighteen-year evolution. Nonetheless, when I finished my testimony and fielded questions from my audience that day, I felt relief. More than relief, actually: I sensed that giving my testimony freed me from the burden of difference, of being unlike my evangelical peers in so many ways. I had at last been welcomed into their club, a fellow sojourner who had also felt the lick of flames before finding everlasting life. My testimony had allowed me to throw off the shackles of my staid Mennonite past, of the Sunday upon Sunday of church school and youth activities and potlucks that had made the story of my life, and of my faith, boring and predictable. Instead, I could become as the protagonist in my narrative: the wild child, high on beer and nicotine, cruising through town searching for fun, in need of Christ and remarkably transformed by the Messiah she had found. After my testimony, my female teammates hugged me tightly, grateful I had safely made a path through transgression to Jesus. A few male teammates—not prone to emotional display—clapped me on the back, thanked me for my story. My coach's side-hug, given as we walked outside for practice, signified that I had done well, in my testimony and in the life my testimony represented. I began that day's run feeling light, unburdened—a feeling that carried me through my workout and into my evening studies.

After that day, giving my testimony became easier. The worshipers at Celebration soon heard my story, as did members of my Bible study. While I never ornamented my narrative more than I already had, I never bothered to tell the real story, either; I had found a narrative that worked and felt no need to make major revisions one way or the other. That was my story, and I was sticking to it. On occasion, I was able to manufacture tears as I wove my tale, the clearest possible mark of my contrition—though manufacture may be too strong a word, for these tears were real, as was my contrition. Perhaps



viscerally I knew I was a sinner hoping for God's mercy, even if my gravest sins were not the ones I detailed in my testimony.

In the years following my college graduation, as I found my way in the "secular" world and eased back into a fellowship among Mennonites, my testimony became rusty with disuse. No one called upon me to testify, nor did I feel a similar pressure to sacrifice my life's narrative for the scrutiny of others.

And now, more than a decade has passed since I last testified in any formal sense, though surely I've shared with friends the narrative of my past and of my faith's development. Without augmentation, this story no doubt lacks the verve of my earlier testimony. Sips of beer in my grandpa's garage were just that—sips of beer, given to me by a seventy-year-old man whose attention I savored. The cigar I smoked? If I mention this bit of my story at all, I admit that the cigar was a crazy stunt, that I felt sick after one puff, that my parents laughed when I confessed my transgression. With closer friends especially, I'm likely to divulge the more significant sins of my youth: the contemptuous relationship I had with siblings, fueled by my envy for my brother's scholastic success and for the easy way my sister drew friends—especially boys—around her; the snobbery with which I treated a family in our church whose kids, part of my youth group, were poor and ugly and out of sync with popular culture; the sullen demeanor I showed my family for years, so much did I resent being with them and away from friends. These, ultimately, are the iniquities that have stained me, continue to stain me, and from which I need to be saved.

Still, even talking with friends, I feel a tug toward the other testimony, the one that captivated my college peers, the one that privileges weaknesses of the flesh over those of the spirit. In some ways, I am much like a war veteran who only served stateside and never proved his mettle in battle but hides this from his home community. I worry that I have not yet proved my mettle as a Christian, so unremarkable are the sins that have whittled away my armor and have forced my trench salvation. The temptation to fictionalize my narrative would be especially strong were I called to testify in front of the evangelical students who now populate my classrooms. After all,

I know what my audience wants and what my audience expects from a testimony, and I fear that my real narrative might disappoint.

I cannot fault them their expectations, though; few want to hear a prosaic tale that lacks the essential ingredients of madness, mayhem, and then mercy. Perhaps that's the problem with testimonies: most people are compelled by compelling narrative. We don't want to read a book without conflict, a story without a turning point and a resolution. I also imagine Christians are drawn to stories that reveal a remarkable God who enacts miracles, not some wimpy God who gives people boring lives, lives unchallenged by the trials that will compel them to seek contrition, to seek God. Still, somehow, we need to privilege an alternative story as well: a narrative founded not on climax, conflict, and change, but on God's enduring mercy and love. For I believe God's powerful forgiveness extends not only to the gravest of sinners, but also to those of us who live, day by day, felled by routine transgression. Such mercy as this, extended to all, truly deserves its own kind of Celebration.