



## From the Mag: Raw Christianity

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Anne Lamott is a writer who energizes some, and infuriates others. Her detractors ask, "How can she be a Christian and say the things she says?" Her fans ask, "Why aren't there more Christian writers who say the things she says?" Her books and her public appearances are known for their raw, take-no-prisoners honesty, as well as for their artistry and humor. She has written 11 books, fiction and nonfiction. Both *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* and *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* made the New York Times best seller list. Her book *Operating Instructions*, which describes her fears and joys of trying to raise a child as a single mother, was named by the Modern Library Association as one of the most important nonfiction books of the last century. Her newest book, *Grace, Eventually*, came out in early 2007. She sat down with RELEVANT recently to discuss her often-unconventional faith.

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**I've heard it said, "Anne Lamott is the only Christian writer who tells the truth." What do you think that means?**

It means there's a lot of pressure within Christian churches to talk about stuff that fits within certain factions that people are part of. According to those factions, it's important for lecturers and writers to sound sure of what they're saying, so that they sound like they are living the Christian life, and it's going so much better than anyone could have hoped, where they don't hate anyone, and they forgive easily, and they don't have awful moods, and they don't care what their stomach looks like.

**They're perpetuating a myth about the Christian life?**

It just doesn't help me if people are focused on sounding really good like they've got their Christian act together, because what they have is an act. What helps me is to come across something that I can read and say, "Oh, exactly. Me too." It seems that this is what Jesus did. He would listen and nod and say, "I get it. This is really odd for a lot of us." A lot of our lives feel like mistakes were made because it doesn't feel very hospitable to be a human on earth—whether it's 2,000 years ago or in 2007. So I write books where people in them say, "I hate everyone, and I'm not a good forgiver, and I'm in an awful mood, and I'm just going to watch TV, and I don't feel like being friendly to you, and I'm sorry you're having a bad day, but go call someone else." That doesn't come across as perfect Christian values, but I can't get bogged down by what it sounds like to

other people. I need to tell the truth as it's come through me. It has helped me grow and get less crazy and less self-centered, which is the source of so much of my unhappiness. I write books that I would love to come upon, so that what I am longing for would exist.

**That means telling secrets, which we all seem well trained to hide.**

One of my deepest beliefs is that every single thing that happens to you is yours. You get to own it, and you don't have to keep others' awful secrets for them anymore. You don't have to be such a good son or such a good daughter that you can redeem their lives. You can dance til the cows come home, but it won't redeem their lives for them. If people don't want you to write about them, then they should behave a lot better. It's amazing when someone tells the truth.

**Your books are full of people who are imperfect, flawed, unforgiving, conflicted.**

Annoying.

**Self-loathing people.**

My parents talked about nothing else. I grew up around a lot of drinking and hating a lot of people. My parents were ferociously political, and I was told a lot of things about people, so on any given day when I'm not there briefly, it's a triumph. Most of the people I write about are variations of me or the people I love most who are exquisite and fearfully human.

**Weren't you raised to believe that Christians were idiots?**

I was raised to believe that Christians were desperate and that religion was preposterous. It was an opiate. My father's parents were Christian missionaries in Japan, and he hated the Church. We listened to Alan Watts on the radio, acknowledged the Buddhist tradition in the Bay Area. It was OK to read Thomas Merton or Augustine, though. But if I had become a Christian and talked about Jesus Christ while my father was still alive, it would have been creepy for him. My mother went to an Episcopal church on Easter, having been raised Anglican in England. She was not a believer.

**In *Traveling Mercies* you talk about your stunning conversion experience, where you heard the choir at St. Andrew's Church while you were in a cocaine haze. But your relationship with God didn't start there.**

I prayed as a child. I always believed there was someone listening. I prayed in times of greatest need and self-loathing. I tried to find other children who went to church or synagogue. As I got older, everything I studied in science supported the belief that there was a divine intellectual energy of love that was the stuff of creation and my own funny little human life, and that I could turn to that source when I was unwell, sad, lost or when tragedy struck.

**You even sensed this during your alcohol and drug use?**

I was living this herky-jerky life, drinking a lot and feeling very called to God, and yet feeling very uncomfortable with the Christian tradition because of my father's hatred of the Church. I went through this lurch and flail through different wisdom traditions, hoping I wouldn't have to become a Christian when I grew up.

**And then you read Kierkegaard.**

When I was 19 and I experienced Kierkegaard, I said to myself, “I’m in. I’m officially a seeker whose life is going to be about learning about God and trying to find God in my own life.” There weren’t a lot of specific milestones in my spiritual walk before that conversion experience I wrote about—there was everything but, in that hippie, West Coast, Bay Area way of being spiritual. Not much of a pre-round before I got the knockout punch.

**But looking back now, you can connect the dots?**

It’s more like a quilt. I had pieces of information, experiences—some drug-related, some not—where I was able to step outside of myself and sense that there was something greater. There were pieces of truth that would lead me to someone I should read, and the threads would bring these pieces of the quilt together.

**After your conversion it seems that your interest in social justice issues became more passionate. Is that true?**

I was raised to do social justice work in the world. I was part of the civil rights movement, peace marches, prisoners’ rights. I participated in vigils outside San Quentin to protest executions. Sobriety heightened my social justice consciousness more than my conversion. After I got sober, I wasn’t sick a lot of the time. I had more energy, and my mind was a lot clearer. Now it is hard for me to separate my faith from my social justice involvement. I was influenced more by Martin Luther King Jr. than by any theologian. King’s Christianity was about putting your money where your mouth is, putting your life on the line. You don’t deepen your relationship with Christ with books; you do it by showing up with other people who are taking care of the poorest, hungriest and most marginalized. If you want to find where Jesus is, you’ll find Him close to the poorest of the poor, the suffering, the terrorized people.

**Does it seem odd that you worship the same God as people you criticize the most severely, namely people like George W. Bush?**

I try not to follow people who follow Jesus. We’re all screwed up in ways that are more similar than not. Almost all of my problems are problems of perception, where I am seeing something so wrong, through my very human, anxious, greedy eyes. Our common ground is this disease of a conviction that we are right. It’s like the Bob Dylan song “With God on Our Side.” I don’t want to try to convince people to come to Jesus. I just try to tell my truth and share my story and the stories of daily salvation. But the social positions of the early church are not those of George Bush or his father.

**What does it mean to be a believer?**

I have a very pathetic and innocent relationship with Jesus. [The things] I’m sure about are the things the kids in church sing: that I’m loved and never alone. I am a complicated and worried person. To know that I can just say “hi” and “I am so lost,” and He says, “Hi, hon. No, you’re not. Let’s breathe. Get a glass of water. Do you want to call a friend?” Simple works for me. I love to read profound, theological, brilliant, stunning stuff that throws the lights on for me, and then I write about it so I can disseminate it. But I don’t have brilliant, theological thoughts. The difference my church makes is that I still get lost, but I find my way back sooner.

**Your new book is called *Grace, Eventually*. What is grace?**

It’s miraculous, unmerited love and fresh air and the comfort of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In the book I write about going skiing and having a terrible experience where I ended up stunned and freezing in a shack where

the ski patrol brought me to warm up. The kerosene heater in the shack was filling the air with a foul odor, but the cracks in the shack allowed more oxygen in. The smell of the trees through those very small spaces connected me to a bigger space. That's grace.

