

In this interview, I talked with E. about growing up in a conservative Christian home, how God's love for her helped her to develop more positive coping mechanisms and also about her advice on how to talk with Christian youth who are currently self-injuring.

Amy: How would you describe your religious/spiritual upbringing (including the beliefs and practices of your family)?

E: Conservative evangelical. When I was small, my family was at church twice on Sundays and again midweek for kids programming and adult prayer meeting. It was pretty insulated - I didn't have many friends who were outside my church bubble. At home, grace before meals and bedtime prayers always happened. Most nights after dinner, my dad would read a passage of the bible or a brief devotional and we would all pray. We took turns praying for family, friends, and missionaries we supported. The home and the church had clear gender distinctions. I experienced it as a very loving community. There was definitely an emphasis on good/moral behaviour and believing the right things.

A: Thank you. In what ways have various people shaped your religious/spiritual identity whether positively or negatively?

E: With my childhood, I can see now some things that were not helpful in shaping my spiritual perspective but at the time I didn't see it that way. My earliest memory of a challenge to my spirituality/worldview was in grade 6 when I started experiencing bullying. I went to a private Christian school and couldn't wrap my head around the disconnect between what we (I assumed we were all on the same page) believed and how some of my classmates acted towards me and others. That really shook me.

When I was in high school, my church had a major conflict that turned ugly, and I was really shaken to see people who had taught me Sunday School and been examples of "faith" to me getting into yelling matches and accosting people on the 'other side' in the grocery store. That really unsettled me. Within my family, I was definitely influenced in a positive way by my grandparents. One of my grandparents prayed for each person in our family every morning. Another was highly involved in their denominational region. Both my parents read their Bibles every day, and I followed suit not because I -needed- to but I genuinely wanted to.

The other thing that really shaped my spiritual identity was going from a private Christian school to public high school. I had never been in such a "secular" environment before and felt very nervous about being a good witness and not losing my faith.

A: You shared about your spiritual upbringing. How would you describe your personal religion/spirituality currently?

E: Hm. I'm a Christian, and my faith is still a central part of my life. Many of the values I was taught as a child are still there, but what they look like has changed drastically, and I no longer prioritize sin-avoidance and overt evangelism as the most important identifiers of a Christian.

Some days my faith feels very fragile. I've experienced & seen too much suffering to be untroubled by questions that have no easy answers. And I have come to realize that the church isn't always a hub of safe, vulnerable relationships.

I'm really thankful for the chance I've had as an adult to learn church history, which might sound weird! But it's helped me realize how big christianity is, and to find spaces and practices that support my spiritual needs.

A: How would you have described God when you were an adolescent? How would you describe God now?

E: As a teenager I was very aware of God as father. Loving but stern. Cheering me on but easily disappointed in me. Difficult to know. Vital to respect.

Now - I see God as a co-collaborator. One who has my best interests at heart, but always allows me to make my own choices. Empathetic and freedom-giving. Exploring life together as it unfolds, rather than having a singular path I need to find.

A: How do you personally experience God? How do you experience God on a day to day basis?

E: Most often in the world around me - playing with my dogs, my partner's snuggles, laughing with a child, watching a sunset. The delight of these things reminds me that every good and perfect gift comes from God, who loves to give us good things. And in moments of vulnerability and sorrow too. Honest conversations. Tears that are shared. For me there is a sacred gift here - the ability to be present to one another is part of where God's Spirit dwells.

In terms of spiritual practices, I pray and meditate. I'm in search of a church community, and as I visit local options, I've realized I crave communion/eucharist every week. It has become something essential to me, a way I receive God's love as an act of faith, a gift I sometimes don't actually want. I also read a lot of poetry. I experience God often through the arts. The capacity to create beauty astounds me.

A: Thank you for sharing. Now that we have talked about your spirituality we are going to talk about self-injury and its impact on your life when you were young. Please describe the patterns of self-injury that you have seen in your life. When did it begin and what method(s) did you use?

E: I think I was in grade 10, and I used semi-sharp objects to create surface scratches.

A: What do you think was your primary purpose for using self-injurious behaviours?

E: I had incredibly high standards for myself and was really angry with myself for not living up to them. Self-injury helped me release that anger and sadness.

A: How do you think that your religion/spirituality affected your self-injurious behaviours and vice-versa?

E: I think it was a contributing factor because it set me up with an unrealistic idea of how to be a teenager while also being a Christian - I thought I needed to be morally perfect, friendly but unhurt by those who were unfriendly to me, always ready to tell people about Jesus, etc. And I didn't have anyone close to me who understood and was empathetic to the struggles of crushes, body image, bullying - the real difficulties of navigating adolescence.

On the other hand, I stopped self-harming (for the most part) because of my faith. I remember lying in bed one night after harming myself and feeling so sad & guilty. I prayed and asked God

why I couldn't be better- I was full of self-loathing. And Psalm 139 came to my mind. I remember thinking that God says I'm wonderfully made, and God loves me. But I don't love myself... I went back and forth on this and eventually decided that if God truly loved me, it was wrong to actively harm myself - and that even if I didn't love myself that much, I wanted to believe someone did, and that I was deserving of love.

A: Were you able to talk to anyone within your faith community about your self-injury?

E: No.

A: If a Christian young person were to come to you and tell you they were self-injuring right now, what would you say to them? Are there any scriptures or images that you could share?

E: I'm not sure exactly what I would say but I would want to communicate non-judgment. That I imagine things feel very heavy and dark for them, and that it can be a scary place to be in. I think specific scriptures would depend on their story and what is going on in their lives, but I would definitely focus on the fact that God loves them as they are, where they are. That there is no shame or condemnation from God. Just love and a desire for deep healing - which doesn't just mean an end to injurious behaviour, but healing to the pains underneath the skin.

If I were talking to a Christian who is self-harming, I would 100% support and encourage them to start a therapeutic relationship that will help them as well. I stopped self-harming on my own, but I didn't start unpacking the underlying problems until I was in therapy as an adult. And those wounds came out in my life in other ways that were destructive. So, it's so important not to merely focus on the injurious behaviour, or to think that prayer and Scripture is all we need to get "better".

A: Thank you. Is there anything else that you would like to share regarding any of the areas we have discussed (e.g. self-injury or religion/spirituality?)

E: I think that's it...

A: Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me. I really appreciate it!

E: You're very welcome. 😊

S. was very kind to talk with me about her self-injurious behaviours. She began cutting herself when she was around 15 years old, and stopped when she was about 17 or 18. Below, we talk about images of God, the concept of sin, and the compassionate presence of the Transcendent.

Amy: How would you describe your religious/spiritual upbringing (including the beliefs and practices of your family)?

S: Christian. Presbyterian denomination upbringing rooted in Korean culture. I was part of the Pentecostal Church during my teenage years.

A: Thank you for sharing. In what ways have various people shaped your religious/spiritual identity whether positively or negatively throughout your life?

S: *Negative:* Church context Brought to the forefront the issue of belonging. Some confusion around why we do the things the way we do things in church. Culture, custom, tradition, etc.

Positive: Sense of purpose, theology of suffering that facilitated meaning, hope in darkness that promotes resilience, ironically, the gift of community, communion with triune God, doctrine and theology. My father was one of the positive influence and has had much impact on my spiritual formation. His positive view on having only two daughters and never referring to us as the lesser sex. Empowered my sister and I which created a positive image of God as the father. My Christian friends during my stormy teenage years that reminded me of God's love.

A: How would you describe your religion/spirituality currently?

S: Christian. Follower of Jesus. Trying to live out my faith and embodying the love of God. Allowing that to manifest in the very fabric of my life. Seeing the sacredness in ALL of life in others, in creation, in relationship and even in me.

A: Thank you. Would you mind telling me a little about your self-injury as a young person? When did it begin? What self-injurious behaviours did you use? (Like cutting or burning yourself?). Please only share what you are comfortable sharing with me.

S: Ok. It began in my mid-teens 15 or so. I was a very angry teenager and I think that had to do with a lot of vented up anger rooted in much pain from my childhood. Form I used my often was broken glass. I'd release my anger my smashing it and then take a price to cut myself mostly on my wrist area where the folds were so that it could easy be hidden. I liked the way it felt and seeing the blood always seemed to calm me down. Helped me separate from the overwhelming emotions that threatens to consume me.

Often I was so angry and overwhelmed, I felt like I was being choked. Self-injury was a way for me to escape that. I wasn't what you'd call a regular cutter but I often resorted to it when it got really bad. I was also afraid that I would need to do this all the time and I didn't like something having that much control over me so I didn't use it until my emotions got really out of control. This continued for about 2-3 years. And then it came to a halt when I went through sexual trauma. I went into survival mode cutting off all emotions. Not the healthiest way to stop cutting but that's what happened for me

A: Thank you very much for sharing. How do you think that religion/spirituality affected your self-injurious behaviours?

S: Guilt. I felt bad. Like I was sinning. That's why I hid it. And then often wouldn't go to church. Felt like everyone had this honkydory life. And here I was a crazy deviant messed up kid. Drive me further away. Didn't feel like there was room to be authentic or embraced.

A: How would you have described God then? Can you tell me some adjectives?

S: Absent. Apathetic. Angry/judging.

A: And how would you describe God now?

S: Emmanuel - God with us. Present. Compassion. God who steps into our darkness willingly. God of grace. God who weeps at our pain.

A: Is there anything else you would like to share regarding any of the areas we have discussed (like religion/spirituality or self-injury)?

S: Not at the moment but I'll let you know if anything else comes up.

A: Thank you very much for sharing your story with me.

In this interview with L. we talk about her experiences growing up in her tight-knit Christian faith community, issues relating to growing up as a LGBTQ+ youth, and talk about why she thinks young people are self-injuring now more than ever before.

Amy: How would you describe your religious/spiritual upbringing (including the beliefs and practices of your family)?

L: Growing up my family was really involved in church. The friends we had from there were our best friends and really our entire lives were lived out within this community. My parents were very influential in the formation of my faith and also in the faith of my siblings.

A: Thank you. In what ways have various people shaped your religious/spiritual identity whether positively or negatively?

L: My mother has been the most influential person in my life faith-wise. She was always there for me when I was bullied through adolescence and into high school. She taught me how to go to God with my pain and she was always there to talk to me when things were really hard.

The kind of church that I grew up in was very close-minded and looking back, harmful towards my faith development. I felt very torn about who I was inside as a person who was trying to understand her bisexuality and the complexities that are associated with who is ok and not ok to love according to the people in positions of religious power in my life. I also struggled with issues related to gender expression as I liked to wear what was typically defined as more masculine clothing. I really wanted to be in a position of leadership within the faith community, but sadly they didn't see women as capable of being leaders at all (and they still don't). I felt that I had to hide who I truly was in order to not be "found out" by the very conservative male pastors and other members of the faith community.

A: I'm sorry to hear that. What would have happened if you were found out?

L: I would not have been welcome anymore, pretty much blacklisted by that community.

A: You shared about your spiritual upbringing. How would you describe your personal religion/spirituality currently?

L: Due to having done a lot of work in therapy regarding self-acceptance, forgiveness, and exploring who God is to me now and what kind of relationship is possible with God, I am at a much better place spiritually than I was even a few years ago. My partner has also been very helpful in coming alongside me and showing me love and wrapping their arms around me when I need a hug. Sometimes this is how I experience God the most: in the arms of my loving partner.

A: How would you have described God when you were an adolescent? How would you describe God now?

L: When I was younger I felt that God was always present with me and helped me when times were really tough. God was my advocate and friend. I didn't understand though why God didn't intervene and help me many times when I was going through traumatic experiences such as being physically bullied by many kids at my school.

Now, I see God as loving, kind, patient, and also kind of mysterious. Growing up there was such a focus on having all of the right answers about God and seeing God as all powerful. Now I am more comfortable saying I don't know or understand a lot of things and that's ok. Now that I am a little older, I feel that God isn't some judging old white guy waiting to smite me when I break the rules. Instead, God is mysterious, compassionate and present with us in both the light and the darkness.

A: Thank you for sharing. Now that we have talked about your spirituality we are going to talk about self-injury and its impact on your life when you were young. Please describe the patterns of self-injury that you have seen in your life. When did it begin and what method(s) did you use?

L: I was about 12 or 13 when I started. I would run my knuckles and the backs of my arms along the bricks of the fireplace in my house until they bled. I would also pick at my scabs to interfere with healing.

A: What do you think was your primary purpose for using self-injurious behaviours?

L: I was really messed up inside from being bullied. I felt really ashamed and like I wanted to hide from everyone. Hurting myself helped me when those emotions would come up, and it calmed me down and made the emotions stop making me go crazy.

A: How do you think that your religion/spirituality affected your self-injurious behaviours and vice-versa?

L: It's complicated. I knew that God could help me, but I didn't know how to get that to happen. When I was at church I felt I had to wear a mask that everything was fine all the time and to be strong and always happy because that's what good Christians did. When I met a friend who also self-injured when I was about 16 or 17, I finally had someone to talk to who understood what I was going through. That friend was very helpful in being there for me and listening to my pain. We kind of both supported each other and over time stopped self-injuring.

A: Do you have any thoughts on why more kids are self-injuring now than ever before?

L: I think it's because we as a society don't know how to talk to each other anymore. We have so much technology to connect us but not as much genuine community. I recently watched the movie *Eighth Grade* which is all about this really lonely young girl who is trying so hard to be friends with people but the kind of world we have created for kids puts up so many barriers to genuine connection. Anyway, it's a good movie to watch to think about how we are all living right now.

A: Is there anything else you want to share about your spirituality or about self-injury?

L: I think that's all...

A: Thank you so much for talking with me.

L: You are very welcome!

Some suggestions for questions to generate conversation and reflection following the reading of one or more of the interviews are:

- What form of self-injury did the interviewee use?
- What reasons did they give for self-injuring?
- What did they say about God in the interview, or about their faith?
- What did they say about their circle of care? (i.e.: friends, family, their faith community?)
- What did you learn about self-injury from reading this interview that you didn't know before?
- What images, scriptures or texts from your faith tradition might you share with a young person who self-injures?