

Jon Reed

The American Enlightenment

Times are turbulent they seem. There is hostility in the air. With the fear of terrorism, with the fear of other beliefs, and not the fear that the unknown. Growing up I grew up in a Baptist Church going family and was taught to see the world in a particular light. Growing up I've heard of Buddha and didn't think anything of it. I heard of how he became enlighten and how it lead to others trying to follow in his footsteps. Growing up in my family, I was always told that if your not a baptist you're a sinner. If you are a Jew you are a traitor. If you are a Muslim you are a terrorist. If you are a Satanist you are the scum of the earth. If you are blah, you are blah. Basically, if you ain't-a baptist you were going to hell. Thankfully I am no longer align with the church, and I am not that close with my family, for I know that they will not accept that I am no longer a Christian.

This past semester, I've read the story Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse in my international literature class. In the story a brief summary, Siddhartha was born as a Brahmin, a son of a religious teacher, and was the next high priest of the community. He was unsatisfied with his place, he felt that there is nothing left for him to learn. He left the Brahmin to become a Sharmana, a minimalistic group of people that eat and drink the bare minimum, that seeks to rid themselves' of all their earthly desires. Here Siddhartha and his friend got to the point that they were skin and bones, eating as little as possible and forgetting all the earthly desires that they had except one thing, they wanted to learn more, the only thing that they can't lose. They soon hear of how Buddha has found enlightenment and went to learn from the enlightened one. There they learn from Buddha, and then Siddhartha asks what more he has to do, Buddha tells him that he has to figure that out for himself. He leaves his friend behind and headed to go and find out for himself. He meets a prostitute and asks her to teach him how to love a woman, she does. One day

years later he leaves her, and returns to the river where he works as a fairy man, he sees his son he never has seen and tries to teach him stuff, but he runs away and he becomes enlightened when he looks in the river and hears it, realizing that everything is connecting. Resulting in him reaching enlightenment.

As I stated earlier, I was raised in a Baptist church going, family. My grandfather read the bible every night, he could quote the bible, he would have us pray before eating anything. It got annoying being told to pray every single time, especially after I decided that I was no longer gonna be a Christian. You see, growing up in a small community, where everybody is taught the same things growing up, you don't see the flaws in the belief until you are out of that environment. An actual quote from my pastor, that he gave to the church right before I was gonna come here to Marshall for a summer was, "Anyone that worship Buddha, that worships false idols, that worship false ideals of God, (such as Jews, Muslim, and other Christian Denomination) are all apart of Satan's coven, and will do everything in their power, to corrupt any of you." Stupidly, I was naive enough to believe this bull-larky at the time. But my journey to become enlighten was just 40 miles away at Marshall University.

I feel that it is necessary to say that in terms of my hometown I was the black sheep. Out of the entire church, actually the entire community of baptist I was the less religious, the least in the eyes of the church, I was the most likely to leave the church.

The summer of 2013 I came to Marshall University for the first time. I was in the Upward Bound program, which basically meant, I had higher education summer school. This is where I meant some nice people and one of my closest friends, Jacob, when I met him I didn't know what his religion was, just that me and him connected. One day I and he was sitting in Harless Dining Hall, and for some reason, we were talking about religions, and he let it slip that he was a

Satanist. Surprisingly to him, and to myself, I didn't really care about that. When became friends, and he taught me about his religion, and I found that it was not about sacrificing animals and that it was not evil in the slightest. In fact, Jacob save my life on two different occasions since I've met him.

So when I return from Marshall that summer, I kept hearing the same old things from the pastors and all the other baptist in the community. So like Siddhartha, I decided that it was time that I left where I was comfortable to find the complete opposite. So I became an Atheist, because I thought that I don't know what's right or wrong, in the religious sense. Of course at the time, I had no clue about Siddhartha journey, but in hindsight I can see the similarity in what I did and Siddhartha did. I basically choose to lose everything that I ever had. I went from being religious to not knowing where I would go, but I wanted to do it by myself, with no help from my parents, and especially no help from the church. I guess what I was looking for was purpose in life.

School started back up and since I was still under the age of 18 I was still forced to go to church with my family. Where they would always make snide remarks about other religions, other views on life, and makes the world seem so evil, that if you leave the town you wouldn't come back the same. In a way I guess they all were right. I left a christian, and return an atheist. I was the black sheep on the verge of becoming excommunicated, and returned hiding the fact that they were right. Luckily, on returning to school, I shifted away from believing in god to not, all because I wanted to start a new, and make the choice for myself if Christian's God is the true way or if it is another belief. I really just wanted to find out how was the best way to live life to its fullest and treat others like actual human being no matter there ideals.

So in this point of the novel, Siddhartha is living among the Sharmanas, living on the bare minimum. I was going through the high school not looking to fit in, because fitting in meant that I had to care about things I didn't. And I found close friends within those who weren't Christians, I found friends in Atheist, Muslim, Agnostics, and Universalist. They are all close friends of mine, and have been close friends of mine since high school. And they were the ones to accept me for me, not because I was the same faith as them, but because we had common interest and because I wasn't a horrible human being.

I spent a year and a half as an Atheist, before I decided that there had to be something out there, but I didn't know what. In terms of religion, I was an Agnostic. In this point of the novel, this would be where Siddhartha found Buddha, (the enlighten one) and was tried to become enlighten through him. I started to follow the lifestyle of my friend Jacob, because he always seemed happy, and accepting of everyone. I spent a good 2 years as an agnostic, around this time, I just came to Marshall University as a Student, and meet my current group of friends that had accepted me before they knew where my belief laid. They thought I was a Satanist after a while due to my fascination with death, and the rules/lifestyle of Satanist.

While I was attending Marshall, I was starting to look into the christianity again as a possible route to go, and not be a baptist, but then I met the Hate Preacher. Who just happen to remind me of all the things that I left behind in my hometown. So I kept away from Christianity and continue to try and find my place in this world, and find a belief that I could fall in line with. I started to research different religion, and started to understand religion more. I started to connect with people from different religion. I gained friends that were Jewish, Wiccan, Rastafarianism, Nordic Pagan, Egyptian Pagan, Mormon. In terms of the novel, I would say that

this is where Siddhartha leaves the Buddha, because I felt that I was going away from the way that Jacob's lifestyle, and started try and find my own way of life.

In the end of Siddhartha, he finds enlightenment at the river when he sees that everything is connected. In my life, I found a religion that I personally thought was the best way for me to live my life. Omnism, the belief or respect of all religions. I started to live my life as an Omnist, and I started to see the connection between these religions. I saw that the difference between Christianity denomination - Baptist - Catholic - Protestant - etc. I can see that if we drop the charade that we are all different, we are all human beings, we are all connected. I mean look at Marshall for example, we are full of different belief, Wiccans, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Satanists, Atheists, Agnostics, and Omnist, but whenever there is a game on that football field being played, or when there is a hate preacher yelling at a fellow student, we all unite, we all come together. Because... We are Marshall!