

STUDENT

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Argumentative and Persuasive Writing

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Learning About Love

One of the unfortunate lessons I learned from Catholic school was that you had to cry during Adoration. Well, of course, you didn't *have* to, but when half the sophomore class was falling on their friends' shoulders sobbing, the pressure to do the same was kind of overwhelming. After all, that was really Jesus in that thin wafer up there— body, blood, soul, and divinity — so I felt I owed Him some sort of intense emotional reaction. You know, just to let Him know that I appreciated His presence. When your God does something so radical and shocking as to situate Himself within a piece of bread, it seems only the right thing to feel a joy so powerful that it moves you to tears. Somehow it never occurred to me that I encountered Christ in the same way every Sunday at mass, and that nobody ever went to pieces crying then. Nor did any of the weeping girls around me ever exhibit that kind of behavior when the school gathered to celebrate mass on feast days (then, you were more likely to see them yawning or whispering, or sometimes even falling asleep). But I didn't think about that when I was on retreat, the Eucharist before me, my friends and the rest of the grade beside me, the sounds of singing and sniffing and the dim bluish light of the stage all around me. No, at that moment, all I thought about was how I— unlike the entire rest of the world, it seemed — didn't particularly feel the need to cry. In fact, I didn't particularly feel anything at all, apart from an acute sense of loneliness and inadequacy. *Why couldn't I just cry?*

I hugged my knees to my chest and brooded upon the situation, mournfully listening to everyone else's emotional outpourings and wondering why I was so heartlessly unmoved. Could it be that I just didn't really love God? I sighed into my knees, pondering the question. Did I love

God? Did I? Now that I considered it, I wasn't sure. At that point in time, my concept of love was entirely tangled up in the explosive, knee-knocking crush I had on the first chair clarinet player. An error, to be sure (the concept and the crush alike), but unfortunately one that I didn't quite perceive. However, I did perceive that thinking about Ben Wilson produced a much larger reaction in me than thinking about God did. A cold terror struck my heart. I didn't love God, did I? I couldn't— not if a scrawny bank geek made me feel something more than being in the very presence of God. I hazarded a glance up at the host where it stood displayed on the stage; it seemed so tiny, so remote, so insignificant, and yet the girl next to me was bawling her eyes out. But, nothing. I felt nothing— nothing, but tiny, remote, insignificant, and a little bit monstrous as well. Something was wrong with me. *Why? Why couldn't I cry?*

It occurred to me that this entire scenario was unfair. Unjust, even. When had I ever done anything really, truly bad? As far as I could recall, never. So it didn't seem right to me that God wouldn't give me the feelings for Him that everyone else seemed to have. I conveniently laid aside the doctrine of free will that my religion teachers had instructed me upon and focused on what they had taught me about God's omnipotence instead. He was all-powerful, wasn't He? Why, then, wouldn't He let me cry with all of the other girls in my grade? *Why? Why, God, why?* A bitter combination of resentment and sorrow wedged in my throat and burned at the edges of my eyes. Then, at last, as though by sheer force of will, my long awaited flood of tears burst forth. I let out a choking sob and buried my already sodden face in my knees. Finally. I was normal. I loved God. I did. *I did.* Joyous relief inflated my chest like a balloon, and I raised my eyes to the round wafer displayed onstage— to Jesus — my vision swimming with tears. He had granted me my wish. I could feel something now. I could finally, finally feel something. But deep down, deeper down than I was conscious of in that dazzling instance of relief and loving

belonging, I knew just how manufactured my tears were. Then, I could revel in them and the emotion that they brought and in the love that the two in tandem supposedly signified. Later, though, their falseness would haunt me. In my heart of hearts, I knew I did not really feel anything so overpowering towards my God. And for years, that knowledge formed the basis of my underlying suspicion that I did not love God— that I had never loved Him, and never would.

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In hindsight, I suppose it only made sense that I ended up a pseudo-agnostic by my senior year. Combine my perpetual anxiety about my lack of proper feelings towards God with a couple of determinedly atheistic friends, and you get something that's pretty far from your standard Christian faith. To be honest, the anxiety alone could have done it; the friends mostly just sped the process along. It was an easy step to make, from not being sure that I loved God to not being sure that I even believed in Him. If I didn't have heart palpitations or at the very least a nice solid burning sensation in my chest, then I couldn't possibly love God. And if I didn't love God, and didn't feel anything towards Him besides a mild intellectual interest, then what was there to say that I actually thought He was real? At first, this idea was shocking. Horrifying, too, considering what it implied. There was a time when I would lie awake at night, staring into the thick black darkness that shrouded my canopy and wondering what it would feel like to have that swallow my entire consciousness at the end of my days. None of my imaginings were very comforting. Still, existential agonizing doesn't take long to become exhausting. After a while of it the idea of losing all your thoughts forever doesn't seem that bad. Such was how I reconciled myself to dying in a probably-but-I'm-not-totally-sure-it-is Godless universe. And once that stumbling block was mostly rid of— mostly, because it would sometimes still come creeping back in the dead of night — I could muddle along just fine under the auspices of agnosticism.

I say muddle along, because it was a muddling, no doubt about it. Without God, I was anchorless. I drifted along listlessly, as uncertain about my daily decisions as I was about what greater power (or lack thereof) watched my unsteady progression from above. When it came time to choosing a university, I waffled and wavered and eventually settled somewhat guilty on my expensive dream school. When it came to choosing my major, I pulled one out of the hat of my esoteric reading habits and my parents' expectations. Small wonder, then, that I spent the first half of my first semester in college feeling lonely and lost and as though I had made all the wrong decisions. I remember curling up in bed, my face to the bare off-white wall, and sobbing desperately on account of uncertainty and just plain homesickness. There was no forcing these tears; they came all by themselves, and I couldn't keep them away if I tried.

In the midst of all of this mess and anguish, I realized one crucial thing that I was missing in my life. Or, more accurately, I was missing one crucial *Someone*. I needed grounding. I needed a foundation. I needed God. So I broke down one day and prayed cross-legged on the shaggy blue carpet between the beds in my dorm room. I imagined I was asking Him which church I could find Him in, since I was uncertain that the Catholic Church of my childhood was the one. Really, I was imprinting my own desires for something easy and new on Him. I ended the prayer— it was, in actuality, more of a meditation — determined to join an obscure and watered-down Christian sect. It was not a sure foundation, and I soon knew it; the Lord made sure of that. He prodded my mind and worried at my heart until I grudgingly came around to the recognition that His way wasn't easy, or watered-down, and that if it was really His truth that I wanted, I would have to choose the path that was difficult and full of the richness of Life. I stayed Catholic.

But my struggle here was an almost entirely intellectual struggle— I sensed something lacking in my life, God revealed Himself as the answer, and He appealed to my desire for rightness and truth. No dizzying emotional heights. No all-encompassing loving feelings. And certainly no crying. It was a moment of resolution that I don't ever think I quite realized the significance of until I began writing this reflection. The central problem remained.

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I think that might have been why I started reading. As a student at a Baptist school, belonging (after my reversion experience) to a vibrant Catholic community, I was surrounded by people very visibly in love with Jesus Christ. I still am. It's wonderful, even if it's a bit slow to infect me; that's what made it so intimidating. I shared their faith, but their passion? My lack thereof gnawed at me. I wondered— *did I belong?* I doubted— *am I just making all this up? Do I really believe anything if I can't feel anything?* So perhaps it was to prove to myself that I cared deeply enough about God to devote my spare time learning about Him that I took to reading. I read a lot of things, and learned a lot of things. It's a good practice, reading, especially about God. It fills up your soul and heart and mind with Truth and holy goodness. And it's a practice that I still very much keep after. But it all began with *Mere Christianity*— and it all changed with *Mere Christianity*, too. You see, it was *Mere Christianity* that taught me not to fret so much about my lacking feelings, and taught me to focus on God instead.

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The passage is a short, simple one, but it was all that I needed to hear and more. *Some writers use the word charity to describe not only Christian love between human beings, but also God's love for man and man's love for God, C.S. Lewis writes. About the second of these two, people are often worried. They are told they ought to love God. They cannot find any such*

*feelings in themselves. What are they to do?* It stopped me dead when I first read it. I remember a sudden stillness, clarity, blessed relief. *There are others like me. And—* I allowed my shocked eyes to wander a few lines down — *there is an answer.* That knowledge alone was worth more than any belated solidarity I had gained from the first couple sentences. My problem had a *solution.* And the solution was this:

*The answer is the same as before. Act as if you did. Do not sit trying to manufacture feelings. Ask yourself, 'If I were sure that I loved God, what would I do?' When you have found the answer, go and do it.*

*On the whole, God's love for us is a much safer subject to think about than our love for Him. Nobody can always have devout feelings: and even if we could, feelings are not what God principally cares about. Christian Love, either towards God or towards man, is an affair of the will.*

What a revelation. It was like being high up on a mountain, breathing thin cold air and seeing the expanse of everything spread out before me in stunning clarity. I had been going about it all wrong: so foolishly, lopsidedly wrong. I had thought that feelings mattered everything to God. And so I had wasted my time doubting and worrying and entirely manufacturing feelings (my sophomore retreat tears being only one example) when I could have been loving Him, really loving Him, through my actions. *Love is an affair of the will,* I told myself. I repeated: *Love is an affair of the will.* I had found the answer. God had given it to me.

I have never been more profoundly grateful.

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Sometimes, I still have to remind myself of Lewis's words. I have to fight against the unemotional impulse in me and the little nagging voice that whispers, *because you don't feel,*

*you don't believe*. But now his words are there for me where they weren't before, and I can repeat them to myself for strength. And more than that— I can repeat them to others who might need them, too.

I shared them once at a Bible study. At the mention of C.S. Lewis's name, I heard murmurs of approval, and saw smiles. And then I spoke the words, or some paraphrase of them: *love is an affair of the will*. More smiles, more approving murmurs. Some people even beamed. A connection had formed between us all— those words spoke to us, linked us. We each had, somehow, in some way, experienced the trembling uncertainty that came from not quite knowing what loving God really meant. But those seven small words provided a definitive answer, and all the solace that comes from one. I could see it radiated in the faces of the people around me, and I (with a glowing heart) knew: they, too, were profoundly grateful.