

# My Husband Is Deconstructing His Faith. How Do I Journey with Him?

Some of us are called to love unbelieving wives and husbands.

**KIMBERLY PENROD PELLETIER**

**FEBRUARY 14, 2020**

In the fall of 2017, not long after we'd celebrated our 10th wedding anniversary, my husband and I sat down for an evening chat after getting the kids to bed. The particulars of the conversation are hazy now, but this was clear: After 30 years of being a Christian and spending almost half of that in ministry, my husband was leaving the faith. The faith that formed our marriage vows; the faith our children were baptized in; the faith we held when we buried a stillborn son; the faith our community was built around; the faith that my vocation is centered around as a spiritual director, writer, and speaker—he was leaving *that* faith.

I wanted initially to respect this news as his journey (even though it was mine, too), so I didn't tell anyone. I also tried to keep the experience safe in my head so that I could think my way to answers in the newfound madness. My body, however, told a less cerebral story. I was driving home after a long day of errands when the full impact hit me: My eyes blurred with tears, and short breathes rolled through my chest. Two weeks had passed since my husband had dropped the “I don't really believe there's a God anymore” bomb. It took that long before I could even begin to feel the disorienting weight of his words and the betrayal, loss, and grief that came with them. This was clearly more than I could handle alone.

As I shared the news with some close friends and pastors, I felt plagued with questions: How do I tell the kids? What does this mean for their spiritual formation? How do we connect? How do I like him again? How did he get here? Why didn't he tell me earlier? Will we still go to church together? Will we ever feel normal again?

In *Letters to a Young Poet*, the 19th century German poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes, “Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” As the spouse of someone who has lost faith in God, I am living the questions right now in hopes of finding future answers. But not everything is a mystery. Day by day, I'm learning how to love my husband in the midst of change. Over the last two years, I've learned these 10 lessons in particular:

## **1. Trust the work of the Holy Spirit.**

Early on in the process, my husband came to me and told me he wanted to share his “anti-testimony.” Though I didn't tell him, I felt appalled and disgusted. I brought those feelings to my much wiser spiritual director. She said to me, “It is only the Spirit's work that opens up our heart to want to be known by others. His desire to be known is a gift.” Her words have remained with me and born fruit continually over these years.

As Adam Neder [writes](#), “Our confidence that God will reveal himself ... is grounded not in our own competence, character, or powers of persuasion, but in God's desire to be known and in the eloquent presence of the risen Christ, who makes himself known in the power of the Spirit.”

Although Neder is writing about the dynamic between a teacher and a student, his wisdom applies just as well to a spousal relationship. The work of the Holy Spirit is ever-present in my husband's life, and I can trust that reality.

## **2. Get clear on what keeps you spiritually growing and then do it.**

When my husband parted ways with Christianity, I began to feel spiritual loneliness in the space of my very own home. In that context, I've had to consider what keeps me spiritually alive. For example, my connection with my spiritual director has become increasingly essential to me. I also continue to cultivate practices that form me spiritually, like spending time in silence, engaging Scripture, praying, being in nature, reading spiritual formation books, and staying connected with my Christian faith community.

As you ponder your own faith story, think about what fills you up and keeps you open to the Holy Spirit. Stay in community with others who can support your journey and your spouse's. And cultivate the relationships and practices that leave your heart open to God.

## **3. Slow down your life.**

Two months after my husband declared his departure from faith, I found a new job as a chaplain, something I had always wanted to do. It was a great job and a good fit, but I quit after three months. It became clear to me that I was trying to escape my pain. Leaving that job was a repentance of sorts, not because a woman shouldn't work or leave her child with a sitter (which I had to do) but rather because I was running from myself, from my husband, and from God. I had to stop the frenzy. I had to reckon with my body and my emotions, and I needed therapy to support the process.

Since then, we've moved to a smaller home and slowed our pace of life considerably. Making room for his process and my own has cost both of us, but it has also borne significant fruit. We have more time to talk, ponder, and attend to our inner lives. I have more time to pray.

## **4. Practice hospitality.**

Christ's command to "love your neighbor" never hits home closer than when that person is the one you share a bed with. In split-worldview marriages, we need hospitality for ourselves and also for the deconstructing neighbor right next to us. When we allow ourselves to come as we are, that deep, honest well within brings forth genuine prayers and a closer connection with God. It also enables us to follow Jesus when he says, "Love your neighbor *as yourself*" (Mark 12:31, emphasis mine).

Although your spouse may be uninterested in Jesus in the formal sense, they're unlikely to refuse genuine hospitality that comes in the spirit of Christ. In my own marriage, I practice this more than I perfect it, but nonetheless it's worth every honest, humbling moment with my husband.

## **5. Stay out of resistance mode.**

When someone leaves the faith, it's easy to get into the habit of making apologetic arguments ad nauseum. Our mistaken belief that faith is primarily cerebral can lead us to center the

conversation around theology, ontology, and philosophy in hopes of “winning them back.” These conversations are often (but not always) conversations of debate and resistance. Some of them are necessary, yes, but when they become the primary tool in our belt, we suffocate the wooing power of the Holy Spirit.

As we stay out of resistance mode, we can remain curious about their experiences and grounded when our differences feel insurmountable.

## **6. Remember their truest identity (and yours).**

Genesis 1:27 says that “God created mankind in his own image.” The person you married is made in that image, irrespective of whether they embrace it. That means their truest identity is located not in their new worldview—whether atheist, agnostic, or other—but in the hand of Providence. The Apostle John develops this likeness by reminding us that “God is love” (1 John 4:7) and Paul notes that “all things have been created by him and for him” (Col. 1:16). Your spouse was made by Love and for Love, and there’s nothing you or they can do to change that truth.

When fear threatens to overtake me, I consistently rest my mind in this reality of God’s affection. My husband is loved far more than I can comprehend.

## **7. Create space for them (and you) to process.**

Over the last few years, there have been weeks when my husband and I talked almost daily about faith followed by months when we let it rest between us. At one point, I had to place a conversational moratorium on philosophical and theological debate. I simply couldn’t carry the discussion while holding in my own heartache.

During those times, I’ve told him that I need a break from intense conversation but will gladly offer personal stories of my own faith journey if he asked. I’ve also learned to listen without judgment when he wants to share his own experiences. This practice of “creating space” has protected us individually and also relationally.

## **8. Develop a deeper friendship.**

In any marriage, it’s helpful to cultivate shared interest. But these bonds are increasingly important when two married people have diverging worldviews. Whether riding bikes, enjoying nature or listening to live music together, my husband and I now take more time than we did before to develop our friendship. Enjoying the pleasure of his company is a fulfilling way to live into the glory and beauty of God, and it also eases the sting of knowing that we no longer share faith between us.

## **9. Keep praying for and discipling your kids.**

Discipling kids is no small task with two spiritually aligned parents, and it’s even more difficult with two misaligned ones. One of my deepest desires is that my children will experience the love of Christ in their lives. Raising them with someone who is not even sure that is a “thing” creates a very unique challenge. Though my elementary-age children are not yet developmentally ready

for heavy philosophical debates, they're old enough to ask questions about theology and human origins. For the time being, I'm able to give space to their questions and discuss what Scripture offers.

When I read Scripture to my kids over breakfast almost every morning, my husband isn't hostile, thankfully. He honors the fact that we agreed early on to raise our kids in the faith. At the moment, he's chosen not to share his journey with them, so when they question him about church or his unwillingness to receive communion, for example, he simply answers, "I am working things out with God right now." But we both know there will come a time when he'll have to share his story. Until then, I am praying for and preparing their young, malleable hearts.

### **10. Lean into the body of Christ.**

As I lean into my believing friendships and learn from my spiritual director and others, I gain the courage and wisdom that I need to cultivate a more loving family rather than a divided one. I've made a concerted effort to have my kids around other believers of all ages through family, friends, and church connections. The body of Christ has also given me a steady diet of sermons, rich readings, and communion experiences that keep me fed on multiple levels.

Through this journey, God has called me to practice the hardest part of Christian discipleship: letting go of the life I dreamed of and instead allowing the resurrection power of Jesus to rebuild new life in me time and time again. For me, this could never be done outside of the Body of Christ.

For those of us married to a spouse who is deconstructing the faith, their experience can feel like a problem to fix more than an invitation to heed. But more often than not, these problems can't be solved, they can only be held. As we hold them in open hands, we in turn hold on to God and trust that he is holding on to us. He is the same God who is and always has been able to be and do "more than you could ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20).

The process will be hard, there's no way around that. But it can also be deeply good.

*Kimberly Penrod Pelletier is a spiritual director, writer, speaker, and co-host of the Ask A Spiritual Director podcast. Connect with her at [kimberlypenrodpelletier.com](http://kimberlypenrodpelletier.com).*