

Prodigal Secondhand Faith: Why Isn't Enough

Three out of four young people leave the faith these days, according to a 2011 Barna survey. But the good news for worried parents is about half of those kids will find their way back.

The question is just how much pain and damage will they have to go through first? When it comes to Jessica Jones of Allen, Texas, it was almost a deadly amount.

When Jessica began her freshman year at Texas A&M, she abandoned the faith handed down from her father and mother and joined the drinking and hard-partying scene.

"Once she would start drinking, she would drink to the point of passing out," Jessica's father, Peron Jones, said.

Jessica's binge drinking ended with a drunken, high-speed crash into a pole near her campus in College Station, Texas.

Her blood alcohol level measured 0.3, "which is over two-and-a-half times the legal limit," Jessica said.

A Devastating Wake-Up Call

The crash left her in a coma and damaged her brain. When she woke up days later, she couldn't speak and could hardly move. It's taken her about five years of hard, painful rehabilitation to come nearly back to normal.

But rather than grow bitter, Jessica saw it as God dragging her out of a life that was killing her.

"She was right at the level of alcohol poisoning," Peron said. "So she could have killed herself just from drinking without

hitting anything.”

Jessica said of the Lord, “It took Him really knocking me down to get my attention.”

Now she talks to schools and youth groups about drunk driving, with the crash photos and her wounded body serving as a testament to its damage.

Prodigal Sons

Josh and Ryan Shook also know what it’s like to wander away from faith. In fact, most college-age kids desert God and religion.

“Seventy percent of students leave the church once they graduate or go off or move away from the home, and only 35 percent return,” Josh said. “And I think that should be a real wake-up call for the church.”

For Josh and Ryan, leaving the faith was seen as a big deal because they were the kids of high-profile church leaders, Kerry and Chris Shook, of the 17,000-member Woodlands Church outside Houston.

The boys both felt Christianity had little for them, or as Josh put it back then: “There’s not a big payoff in living the Christian life.”

“Even though we saw our parents living out their faith, we thought, ‘Why isn’t their faith working for us?’” Ryan said.

Their parents, who are authors of the best-selling books *One Month to Live* and *One Month to Love*, say they shoulder some of the blame for not being more open about their own weaknesses and struggles.

“We were just living on a surface level at our house,” their mother, pastor Chris Shook, confessed.

“If I could go back, there is something we would do

differently,” their father, Pastor Kerry Shook, said. “That is, we would try to open up a dialogue and a conversation about the crisis of belief.”

Chris agreed, “[We] didn’t open up enough about our own struggles and didn’t start early enough,” she said.

A Firsthand Faith

Eventually both sons found their way back and want to help other young people do the same. They write about not settling for a secondhand faith in the book, *Firsthand: Ditching Secondhand Religion for a Faith of Our Own*.

It started with Josh confessing to his family that he’d been so mired in sexual sin and guilt he couldn’t face God or fellow believers. Telling that truth set him free.

“I wanted him to know what spiritual maturity that was, to open up and be totally honest because he really taught us how to grow deeper with the Lord by being completely honest and open about our struggles,” Kerry said.

Josh and Ryan say young people shouldn’t be afraid of their doubts. God understands.

“God wants us to have doubts,” Ryan explains. “It’s OK to have doubts. The real issue is what do you do with those doubts when you have them. Do you bring them directly to God?”

The brothers also recommend not settling for anything less than finding a real relationship with God where you know He is alive.

“For me it took getting back to the basics,” Ryan explained. “What do you enjoy doing with Christ, with God, that really brings you joy?”

“Religion, Christianity will never fill me up,” Josh said. “But a personal relationship with Jesus Christ will.”

"A lot of us have carried around secondhand religion for a long time. And we're finally at a place in our 20s where we need to figure out what it is we really believe," Ryan said.

They say parents need to trust God is big enough to bring their kids back to Him.

Jessica's dad shares in his book *The Pole* how Jessica rediscovered God through her crash into that pole and long recovery.

"Because of what's happened to her, her faith is real," he said. "And people see the love and light of Christ in her eyes and in her face."

Jessica explained her new perspective, saying "I just see God acting in every situation."

The examples of Jessica, Josh and Ryan are all ones where their parents were frightened to see them wander away from their childhood faith.

But in each case, the process was important so that they wouldn't just have a secondhand faith, but come to know God firsthand.