



INVISIBLE WALLS

Implicit Bias and The Soul



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Invisible Walls: Implicit Bias and The Soul

A personal reflection, by Megan Wilson

Security is a basic human instinct. Creating “security” dominates our thinking and decision making. Physical security is a fundamental aspect of our species, however equally as important to what makes us human is *spiritual* security. We create emotional barriers, consciously or subconsciously, that play a role in our spirituality. Sometimes the unintentional mechanisms or beliefs we develop and implicitly follow can do the most harm to our spiritual health. Especially if they are ingrained in us from birth.

How can we know if what we believe is harmful or “blocking” us spiritually if it is followed without question? How do we even *know* we are supposed to question what we believe? I would like to share a conversational essay in which I discuss my own past implicit biases and the catalyst which initiated my journey to open-minded thought.

Implicit biases do not always denote negativity, however more often than naught, they can be the building blocks to an invisible wall protecting one’s reasoning and decision making. Ironically, instead of protecting, this wall can inhibit the soul of an individual from achieving true security or inner peace. That was my experience and I wish to humbly share it with you here.

One: Raise Up a Child

I grew up in Paradise! Yeah, I know but literally I spent my childhood and tween years in Paradise, California which recently made national headlines when devastating forest fires ravaged it, and other communities, in November of 2018. Twenty-one years ago my family moved from Paradise to Greeneville, TN. When I lived in Paradise it was small, quiet, and cozy. My younger sister and I were home-schooled by my mother and our family was active in a church community of Seventh-day Adventists (SDA).¹ Paradise, for being such a small town, had a large SDA presence. The hospital in Paradise, Feather River Hospital, is an SDA hospital and my father worked there as its chief financial officer. My father was raised in the SDA church and the youth are typically “encouraged” to attend private Seventh-day Adventist schools and universities – then by proxy attain a career in education, theology, or the medical field. Other career fields are allowed of course, but the three mentioned are the most common. Paradise had a Seventh-day Adventist academy, but my mother preferred to home-school (she had an education degree and wanted to stay at home with her children). My mother was also raised in an SDA home and had a similar upbringing. My parents met at an SDA college. Being a Seventh-day Adventist was not merely a denominational distinction. It was an all-encompassing

¹ Seventh-day Adventists accept the Bible as the only source of their beliefs. They consider their movement to be the result of the Protestant conviction *Sola Scriptura*—the Bible as the only standard of faith and practice for Christians.

“Currently, Adventists hold 28 fundamental beliefs that can be organized into six categories—the doctrines of God, man, salvation, the church, the Christian life and last day events. In each teaching, God is the architect, who in wisdom, grace and infinite love, is restoring a relationship with humanity that will last for eternity.”

Source: <https://www.adventist.org/en/beliefs/>

lifestyle; how I dressed, how I ate, weekend activities, music, television – everything had to reflect my religion. I use religion here, as I do not feel that *faith* is appropriate. That came later.

What happens when you don't believe? To my knowledge there is not an "official" act of excommunication performed or assumed when someone leaves the SDA church (I also searched through the official SDA webpage, footnote one). I argue that being raised in such an all-encompassing community creates on its own the automatic "excommunication" of members who dissent. I know from personal experience that it is not an emotionless endeavor. I think that many folks who grow up in such a lifestyle actually find it easier to stay and practice hypocrisy than to ostracize themselves from their "community" – as the religion itself becomes your community more than your neighborhood or town. I am not trying to attack the SDA religion, I believe that any spiritual institution could have this same affect; a feeling of excommunication, on a person who has known "nothing else" in their life. For me, as I grew older and my thinking evolved there were actions and beliefs in the SDA doctrine that I had to question. Also, I always *felt* that there was God, but I did not feel *connected* to God through my religion.

Two: Teenagers, Synonymous with Rebellion.

I always assumed that I was an open-minded person. I was not a racist. I "knew" right from wrong. I had compassion for others. I didn't *feel* like I judged people. What else was there? To be open-minded.

The examples I'm using here are simple. Because when looking back, that is exactly how my world view was. Simple. I felt so certain that I "knew" so much truth. Why? I hadn't experienced anything other than what had carefully been curated for me by my parents, and they had not

experienced much of life outside the insular religious community of their parents. As I continue, I want to make clear that my experience does not represent the Seventh-day Adventist Church nor its members as a whole. The religion is key to *my* life experience and I am offering a skeletal outline of one family's belief centric lineage and how that affected this writer.

How *did* the beliefs of my "fathers" affect me? Many ways, I am sure, as is the same with most small humans influenced by the care, or lack thereof, of the big humans in charge of them. However, what had the biggest effect on me was how implicitly we were to "believe" the doctrine of our parents without questioning it. I was unaware that I could question it (until teenage "rebellion" kicked in). Unaware, as in I didn't even know that I should question it. I was closed-minded. This is something that I was oblivious too, and in fact, as I stated earlier, I truly believed that I *was* open minded. Now I know that that was not the case, not at any fault of my own or my parents. I believe it was a side effect of a well-intentioned religious upbringing. Biblical texts call for followers of Christ to be "set apart" and preach against sins and in favor of righteous actions. Any situation's cause and effect is because of sin or lack thereof. Basic and common principles among religions but add to them the fanaticism that can accompany a religion that claims to have the "truth" and be set apart from all other religions ... This type of reasoning accompanied by the discouragement of doubting (or questioning) "the truth" is what created a rift between my logical thought processing and heart-soul intuition. As a teen I did question. I did doubt. Not out of anger or rebellion against a strict moral lifestyle. I questioned when I saw injustices in the name of religion or hypocrisy through the disconnect of what I was taught verses what I witnessed in the actions of family members, church members, and spiritual leaders. What was the *point* of living "set apart" when it didn't make our ability to act and live like Christ any easier than other denominations?

In my teens I was active in my church's youth group. Once I had planned a mini "mission" trip to a homeless shelter in Asheville, NC. It was a Saturday², we cooked, served food, cleaned up the kitchen. They needed help unloading a van of donated items. Great! We'd be happy to help. I felt that this was a successful trip. Later, I was approached by the youth pastor who informed me that we couldn't go on another trip on a Saturday. Parents had complained that their children were *working* on Sabbath. The kicker: it wasn't the cooking, the food service, or the dish washing that triggered this response. It was unloading the van that was an inappropriate Sabbath activity. The absurdity of this regulation, of children who were doing what Jesus would have done, sent me over the edge. I was done. This was not the first legalistic hypocrisy in the name of religion's piety that I had witnessed, but I was now at an age where I could gradually slip out of the church and my parents had little control over my decision.

Three: Life After Religion

The issues that arose from a sheltered upbringing coupled with my inability to maintain a spiritual practice could fill a proper novel. I will skip the next ten to twelve years of my life, use your imagination -you will probably still fall short. I had no clue how to connect with God even though I *knew* in my heart that there was God. I had guilt, fear, and shame chasing me like debt collectors. I was so brainwashed by the strict religious *doctrine* of my childhood that I had a mental barrier blocking any other way of "knowing" God. I didn't agree with or *feel* God in my religion, but because of that religion I couldn't bring myself to "go against" some of its teachings to reach God in other ways.

I have an open soul. An inquisitive nature. A soft spot for the suffering. Empathy. And a *little* defiance. If I could see through the legalism of my upbringing, and be so fed up and smothered by it

² Seventh-day Adventists observe the Sabbath the same as the Jewish faith. Friday sundown until Saturday sundown is marked by an abstinence of work and "secular" activities.

that I rebelled against it, how could I be closed-minded? Because my character traits couldn't be managed or nurtured into a place of contentment while my mind was still programmed by such a narrow operating system. I needed an upgrade but I kept clicking on the "Schedule Later" button. Insanity is defined by doing the same thing and expecting different results. That is how I lived my life. People, places, and things would change, but my thought process did not.

By the age of twenty-seven I had a partial college degree, two children, and a massive drinking problem. I found myself in rehab under quiet, passive duress. The program was Twelve Step based. I was also educated about "walls" and how walls were not a healthy way of establishing boundaries. I completed the treatment, still obstinate and closed minded, but *slightly* more aware. I felt better physically, but mentally I was still clinging on to my "walls" – the difference was now I was slightly more aware of them. I didn't remain sober for more than a month or two; directly after treatment or in subsequent years. Never the less, I had been armed with *knowledge* that "ruined" the rest of my drinking career.

Four: Peace Be the Journey

I joined an anonymous fellowship when I hit bottom. Which wasn't losing custody of my children, wasn't the inability to hold down a job, wasn't being homeless – it was the night my *soul* said, "Enough! I'm leaving this skin bag, and there's no coming back; to the dark abyss of nothing I will go, rather than stay in this misery!" (a story, for another time). That night I genuinely asked my Creator for help and offered my complete obedience, "Whatever You Want Me To DO!" I did not define this Creator, I did not give It a face, or prescribe a set of rules I would follow. I chose to call it God, and that was the night that my mind became open and began to unite with my soul for the first time.

My religious upbringing did not make me an alcoholic - I don't have the space to list all of my character defects. I spent many years in self-righteous judgment. Full of hypocritical anger at those

who did not reflect the scripted images of my childish mentality – myself actively living in chaos. I was comforted by indignation towards the religion which *caused* me so much pain. Bitterness tainted every aspect of my life. The walls I had built to protect myself were cinder blocks, with jagged edges and poison laced spikes– and I was completely un-aware of them.

I have recovered today. I am finishing that college degree; my children are back and I added two. I am employed, with a home and a Partner in life. I would not wish an alcoholic life on anyone, but I am grateful that it is my life. I am free today because I surrendered my old ways of thinking; but I could only do this after experiencing true spiritual suffering. A grave desperation of the soul. Others have different paths to that place, and perhaps lower thresholds for suffering. I do not know if everyone has to have a violent emotional experience to truly awakened. There are many factors that shape our beliefs and thought processes. For me to break down the walls of ego and disbelief that there could be anything “wrong” with me, I had to have that hellish experience. Today I truly walk the walk of love and compassion because I have been there. I never, in my wildest dreams, could have predicted that I, a straight white girl from middle class America, protestant, college educated, with non-divorced parents, would become “an alcoholic”. It wasn’t even possible. I was insulated, protected, uplifted, privileged (notice how “open minded I was?)...

To sum it up, the biases that we carry, that remain unseen, unknown to us, create not only a disconnect within our lives in the community and outward, but within ourselves. To be raw and open and real may not be possible without a dramatic catalyst that is unique to the individual. That is not to say that everything we learn in childhood is wrong or will lead us to a place of narrow sighted thoughts; I still hold many of the truths of my childhood in my heart and have incorporated them into my personal spirituality. Rather, that if beliefs, religious or *otherwise*, are held implicitly, as to never be questioned or challenged, and believed because they are part of our inner walls and protection mechanisms – possibly the only way we can change is by a life altering occurrence. If that is the case,

then those who have come before and broken down their barriers to attain freedom must be there when others arrive to the place of willingness. When we can see beyond ourselves and into the vast beyond of the spirit – then we can be free.