

## I'm an Atheist Parent Trying to Raise a 'Moral' Child

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1000 Words

I live in Springfield, Missouri, also known as the buckle of the Bible Belt. It's obvious everywhere I go: the pamphlet about damnation in a public bathroom, the evangelist who drops what my aunt dubbed a "God Grenade" on strangers in public. We have as many churches per capita as Vegas has casinos (and many are just as flashy, too), but unlike most of my friends and family, I'm an atheist.

I had my first child last winter, in November of 2011. Before she was born, my husband and I knew we wanted to raise her without religion. I believe that it would be an insult to her intelligence to tell her what to believe. I was raised by college-educated Christian parents who not only attended church but did their best to live morally. However, I'm embarrassed to admit my faith gave me a sense of superiority as a child. I remember being 14 and trying to convert my friends, thinking they must've had weird families because of their lack of church attendance. I don't want my girl to grow up with that exclusive sort of mentality.

I also don't want a belief system to come between me and my daughter. When I "came out" as an atheist to my family, I feel like I severed a tie that I'd never be able to repair. And although I know they still love me, I can't help feeling I've disappointed them—something I never want my daughter to feel.

Fortunately, my daughter is growing up in a more diverse era. But even as the country seems to grow more secular, the 2012 US Census shows that the majority (76 percent) of Americans still identify as Christian, with a mere 15 percent saying they are not religious at all. This means that my daughter is bound to be confronted by a believer at some point, and I'm bound to have a few fingers wagged at me for not raising her as a Christian. After all, it's a common argument that religion keeps children out of trouble and helps them know right from wrong.

My close friend, an agnostic, is living proof that this simply isn't true. **Madalyn Faucett** was born and raised here in Springfield by an atheist father and Wiccan mother. Her moral guidance, she says, came mostly from her dad's side of the family, who taught her to treat others the way you want to be treated. Principles that are, she believes, simply common sense.

Madalyn recognizes that spiritual growth has to come from inside oneself. "I think a person's moral compass doesn't stem from parents teachings alone," she says. "I gathered info from my surroundings and formulated an opinion based on those. In fact, my opinions are still changing." It's exactly this sort of mentality that I want to expose my daughter to: the fact that it's okay to change your mind as you mature, and thinking about what you believe is just as important as feeling it.

I will admit I have wondered whether raising my daughter without god will produce a hedonistic brat. What if the absence of eternal consequences will lead her to believe it's fine to, say, rob a bank? (Or steal a friend's toy, which, in fact, she did recently—took a pacifier right out of the girl's little mouth). If we all meet the same end, she may wonder, what does it matter whether she cures cancer or makes millions off developing the next weapon of mass destruction?

Madalyn says that, as a child, she never needed hell to keep her behavior in check. Instead, "The prospect of disappointing my parents or hurting someone's feelings was enough of a deterrent for me." It's true: unless one is born a true psychopath, it's simply more pleasant socially to behave well toward others. We like to be loved and admired. This won't exactly happen if we run around killing each other. Plus, for those of us that believe there's no afterlife, why would we screw up our one chance to live by spending its entirety in prison?

But even those who aren't particularly religious sometimes argue the Bible is a good foundation developing morals. Indeed, the New Testament is full of inspiring anecdotes. Jesus was a true humanitarian—he helped the lepers, the castoffs, the whores. But he was also brutally murdered, which is hard to explain to a child without invoking nightmares. Why not fill my daughter's library with secular, age-appropriate books that teach about charity, empathy and humility? Even better, why not demonstrate these behaviors in real life so she can see how rewarding it is to be open and kind? I learned far more about kindness from the time I saw my dad buy a cup of coffee for a haggard backpacker than I learned by reading the Bible. And I learned far more about hope and strength by watching my mother persist in relearning how to speak after a nearly fatal brain aneurysm.

My daughter is just nine months old. She just barely mastered crawling and still drools like a mastiff. She won't be curious about the meaning of life for at least another couple of years. But when she's older and inevitably asks, mom, what do we believe? I'll say simply that each individual can believe whatever she wants. But it is important to treat all living things with respect and love. And if she asks me why I don't believe in god, I'll tell her I don't need to. When I'm sad or scared, I have my friends and family to confide in. And the world isn't any less beautiful and wondrous without some deity having made it—in fact, the world may be even more beautiful simply as it is.