

Student Publications

9-1-2018

Spiritual Training

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Recommended Citation

Willis, Johnna, "Spiritual Training" (2018). *Student Publications*. 131.
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Johnna Willis

Spiritual Training

Dozens have told me their story. I've heard of some coming to know Christ at age five and others not meeting him until they were gray. My story follows more closely to the former yet applies to my life every day while studying for my degree. From the time I was born until now in college, experiences and people have trained me to be the person and teacher God calls me to be.

I spent my time growing up singing off-key, giggling frequently, playing in the dirt, jumping off swings, and hearing scripture from my family. My dad was the youth pastor at a nearby Baptist church in Southern West Virginia where he lived the gospel inside and out of the youth rooms. From the time I could speak I could repeat bible verses and answer foundational questions such as "What is sin?" like a robot. My parents would ask me questions and I would generate the best answer a child could give.

This routine and heartless knowledge continued as such until I attended one of my church's outreaches directed by my dad. The children's program consisted of people of all ages shouting and cheering for their own designated team. There, I could be the crazy, energetic kid I was at home. At the end of the night, everything calmed down. My dad told the hundred or more students the story from John 3 of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night. In verse 3 of the passage, Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to go to heaven he must be "born again." When he finished speaking there was an invitation to accept Christ. I didn't understand what being "born again" meant for me, so I went to the back to speak with a leader about it and ended up receiving Christ.

Although it was a memorable and celebrated night, little changed after I became a Christian. My family always attended church, prayed, and encouraged personal devotions and Christ-like influences. However, the older I got, the more in-depth my devotions became and the more questions I asked others and myself.

One day that stands out in my Christian life is September 14th, 2012. That day I checked a Christian radio station's website and on the sidebar they advertised for King & Country's newly released music video for their song, "The Proof of Your Love." The cover art intrigued me with black and white, strange "uniforms" on adults and children, and dark, eerie eyes. I had heard the song once or twice beforehand, but after only watching the video once it ended up on repeat for the next few days. The newly-featured band told the story of a child who was beaten for speaking up in a prison about the love of Christ. The men who heard him speak carefully spread the news throughout the prison. The zombie-like people within the walls came alive as the good news spread, but the men sharing the news were thrown into cells and hurt for not following routine.

This jarred some questions concerning my faith. I didn't know if I had the trust in God to spread His love when times were hard. I didn't think I could withstand persecution if it ever came. I couldn't see myself being the person to risk it all to tell others the good news like the men did in the music video. I watched the video over and over until I came to tears before God and told him I wanted him to rule over everything. My comfort wasn't mine, my friendships weren't mine, and my schoolwork wasn't mine.

High school tested my priorities. I had made decisions to trust God through it all but I wasn't succeeding in keeping up with them. Thankfully, God placed two wonderful young ladies in my path, Liza and Kristen. Liza worked at my Summer camp and Kristen became like my big sister within our church. As I struggled in high school, they struggled in college, but I saw they handled greater loads of stress more gracefully than I did because they relied on God over themselves. They taught me about serving God in everything and using my talents to bring him glory. Kristen told me, "Learning and studying is an act of worship because it's something that the Lord intended for us. It, by definition, is good when the purpose of it is to bring God glory or enable us to serve Him better."

I spoke to Liza about how she stayed motivated through difficult classes. She replied with, "I was convinced... to take my studies more seriously for the sake of the Gospel. So, really, I guess my intention became to rely on Jesus to be my motivation and encourager throughout school." She also reminded me of Colossians 3:17 which says, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Words like Liza's from multiple other strong influences helped me through high school and into college. Some high school classes seemed useless in many ways, but college classes often related to my major. I chose the major that Kristen and my mother both pursued: Early Childhood Education. One reason I chose to become a teacher was to be a missionary to my own classroom, but first, I had to become a Christ-like example in my own studies.

My connection with God first occurred when I was the age of my future students, therefore I know personally they can be impacted. My decision to dedicate everything to Christ will apply to my future career in the public school system. These two experiences in my past continue to impact my studying to be an educator. However, I know before I can become a Christ-like teacher I must keep my studies Christ-like.

I know my purpose at school is to learn to be an outstanding teacher from my professors and courses. Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." My training began at a young age, and thanks to experiences and mentors I had growing up, I felt spiritually strengthened for challenges to come.

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