

May God's Love Be With You
By
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I teach Humanities at the University of Texas at San Antonio. This is a loaded statement - as humanities covers spectrums from art, history, sociology, anthropology, politics, literature, drama, diplomacy, sexuality, and even the late night TV shows. My reading list includes "Fast Food Nation", "Freakonomics", "A Brief History of Time", and other writings by Stephen King, Gloria Steinem, Fredrick Douglas, E.B. White, and former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum's remarks on homosexuality being in the same league as pedophilia. In the class we look at the scope of government, public education, examine the rights of Americans, and question "why are we here"? The goal of the class is to question. Technically, I can include almost anything I wish in my classes. Including a section on religion in America.

No one comes to UTSA for long. Most students use the school for a year, then transfer to a more dominate school in the state. Since being at UTSA, each of my classes has been composed of students from central casting. But, that's not quiet true. Each of my classes has *appeared* to be composed of students from central casting. I've has the EMO kids, wearing all black and constantly commenting on how stupid "everything" is. These are the students that hold mock gay weddings in the food court at lunchtime, screen Japanese cartoons in the library basement, and offer to swap bibles for pornography-at the doors of the campus chapel. There's the sorority girl, consumed with how much money they can make with charity car washes. I've had the jocks, the nerds, the geeks, freaks, bad boys, and, sadly, the alcoholics. My first semester at UTSA, I took one of my students to a twelve step.

My students are like my children (probably because I sold my kids to Vietnamese pirates, at least that's what I like to tell people) and I love letters from them regarding all the great and ponderous adventures they have, from traveling the world, to having families, to getting older and wiser. I don't want my students to be like me or think like me (who would) but I do want them to graduate from college and think for themselves. Which is why recently, one student crushed me.

I'm an atheist, and I have no clue as to why anyone would believe a higher power. It simply makes no sense to me. The thought process in which someone is watching over us is grand in the comfort department, but the idea of a talking snake, a dude surviving a whale attack, and a cat loading a bunch of animals onto a boat is very impressive when you are eight years old. Because its' childish. This is not to mention the thousands of other religions: Buddhism, Islam, The Hindus, and so on. The stories of Vishnu are fun, but an ass kicker with multiple arms and skin the color of "sky" are the things of comic books and Hollywood blockbusters.

Most of my students have been able to handle the idea that I don't see eye-to-eye with them on the theories of divinity. Before the Texan Hill Country, I lived in the Big Apple for a decade where godlessness is a sport, and when I handle religion in my class I like to

have students sit on the floor and in a circle so they can see one another at the same level. No one is better. No one is worse. We are all stupid. This is why I was shocked when my student Neil barked that homosexuality is wrong and “all fags will burn in hell” because this is what the bible “says.”

“Man “shall not rest with man”, Neil said. I was curious if god had written the word “fag” or was this Neil’s interpretation of God’s vocabulary. His response was “God says, “man shall not rest with man” like a programmed robot boy. Neil’s response was cold and blunt as if it was drilled into him.

I said his phrase over and over again. “God says, “Man shall not rest with man.” Many of the students simply let Neil’s statement slide and went about their business. We quickly moved onto the next students’ idea about religion, but I was rocked for days. I had heard about people like Neil, but I thought they weren’t real, like fairies or talking snakes.

Neil was a relatively good student; as good as any student can be at the age of 18. He would come to class on time, turn his papers in on due dates, and enjoy a good politically incorrect joke. He loves extreme sports like snowboarding and rollerblading, is a fan of horror movies, and loves women. In fact, Neil had the habit of announcing his womanizing ways at the beginning of class, telling his friends of the great conquests he had over the weekends. I remember him telling tales of a red head, an Asian chick, a blond bombshell, and a girl he could only describe as having jet-black hair. When asking Neil what this last girl’s name was, he blushed and informed me “I don’t know.” I remember thinking “How very Christian of you” but didn’t say it.

The most piercing experiences I had with Neil involved his older sister. Neil introduced her to me in the hallway one day. She wore a necklace with a picture of an infant glued to tarnished silver. This was Neil’s nephew. “I love him”, he told me. The two come from a broken home. His sister is not married, nor has she ever been, and Neil described the father that left as an “asshole.” Neil has a passion for zombie movies. I suggested he see “Grindhouse.” He loved it. Neil told me it was the coolest flick he’d ever seen, but he wanted the blonde girl and the Rose McGowan to make out. I almost called him on his hypocrisy, but that would’ve shaken Neil’s confidence and that is not good teaching.

When reading “A Brief History of Time”, I asked “Why are we here?” Neil responded with “It’s God’s will” and commented on how brainless the conversation was. And with that, I’d had it with Neil. When I loose my temper, I can kill any man’s argument. I got calm, stood in front of the class, and planned to set Neil up, then put him in his place. I asked him how much of the bible he believed. “Every word” he said.

“The talking snake” I asked?

“Every word.”

“The boat with all the animals?”

“Every word.”

“The dude inside the whale?”

“Every. Word.”

I wanted him to explain how kings in Europe chopped his holy book, edited it, and even changed passages of the bible. I wanted to tell him that the bible is literature and nothing but stories, like a zombie flick. But I looked into Neil's eyes and I saw a dead kid trying to hold on. He comes from a shattered home life, he has a fatherless nephew, and maybe he sleeps with so many women because he can't find the strength to be honest to just one. Does Neil believe everything the bible has to offer? “Every. Word.” Cold. Unflinching. I asked Neil if he read the Stephen Hawkins essay. He said “No.” It bored him. I could have crushed him. I should have given him an “F” for the day. But, if I had cut him down, that would be no better than what he said about “fags.” And I let that be that.

Now, one of my sorority girls has transferred to Texas A&M. She's studying Southern Literature. One of my EMO kids has moved on to a small private school to study theatre. The student I took to the “twelve step” has been clean for two years and transferred to Texas Tech. I get letters from them all. This summer, I got an email from Neil, although that is not his real name. Now that he is no longer my student, I allow him to call me “T-Bone.” He needed a letter of recommendation for business school from a professor at UTSA. I told him I'd do it, but I am leaving UTSA. I'm now an English professor at a school called St. Edward's. Ironic, for an atheist. I told Neil his letter would focus on his strengths and convictions, and his love of zombies. And I ended the message with “May Gods Love Be With You.”