Dear Alice,

I need some good advice. All my life, I've been raised as a Catholic. Both my parents are fairly religious, but I have completely lost interest in Catholicism as a religion because I feel it does nothing for me but preach and tell me how to live my life. It has now gotten to the point that I have become very interested in alternative religions, so much so that I want to change faiths. However, I'm terrified my parents will find out. What should I do?

Regardless Faithless?

Answer

Dear Regardless Faithless?,

It sounds exciting to discover new forms of spirituality that are interesting and meaningful to you. Exploring your spirituality and defining your religious beliefs can be an important part of your life. You're definitely not alone in fearing that your choice to follow a different spiritual path will upset you parents.

There are pros and cons to telling your parents about your desire to change faiths. On the pro side is honesty. Being truthful about who you are and what you believe allows people to know you more intimately. It also means you can be free?you won't have to worry about hiding your beliefs. It gives your parents a chance to accept you for who you really are, which could strengthen your relationship. On the con side, it could disrupt your relationship significantly.

How is your relationship with your parents in general? Does your family share all kinds of thoughts and feelings? Is it possible for you to hide a change of faith? It may be difficult if you live together but more feasible if you live farther away. Maybe you can keep things subtle when you're close to them and explore your own beliefs when there's more distance between you.

Some families preserve peace through disagreements by basically agreeing to disagree without any explicit acknowledgement of the conflict. They may find out about your religious beliefs, but everyone could pretend nothing has changed. It may be frustrating to have to keep quiet about things that are important to you or that you would like to share with those you love, but it might be better than arguing all the time.
Although it generally seems healthier to form relationships based on honesty and open communication, in the case of family, the strife that results may not be worth it. You could choose to pursue honesty, openness, and intimacy in other relationships and take the positive aspects of the relationship you have with your parents for what they are — without trying to push your parents to accept or embrace your beliefs.

If you do decide to share your new beliefs with your parents, here are some suggestions:

- Choose a calm time and place to have the conversation. Renouncing Catholicism at Easter dinner probably won't go over so well.
- As with any difficult or emotional conversation, it helps most people to compose their thoughts in advance. You could write some notes to yourself or a letter to your parents, and give them time to think things over before you talk.
- If religion is, or has been, central to your upbringing, your parents may feel rejected or think of themselves as failures as parents. You may want to tread carefully and acknowledge the valuable and positive beliefs they have taught you.

If you focus on what is meaningful to you about your new choice of faiths, rather than criticize their religion, you can model the respect for differing opinions that you hope to receive from them.

Good luck!

Alice!
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