

Megan Hasche

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I knew I was going to like backpacking from the moment I stepped foot on the trail. No need for a watch, a mirror, a shower... having everything I need right there on my back. When you're in the mountains, everything else seems to fall away. God's creation, so often overlooked in our everyday lives, takes center stage. For me, it's impossible not to see God in every little detail of the outdoors. From the vast and seemingly endless mountains to the smallest petal of the tiniest flower, God has created the most incredible world for us to explore. In the mountains, I am one with God.

While backpacking, you strip yourself of so many possessions, leaving at home cell phones, day planners and textbooks... Things like iPods and hair straighteners and car keys become obsolete. Kind of unsettling, right? The only things available to you are the things in your pack. But soon you realize, that's all you need. The distractions and concerns of phone chargers and deodorant simply vanish, and you are left with time to think and reflect about who you are and how you live. I think backpacking provides a striking parallel to the Colossians chapter three text. When backpacking, we take off our old selves, the selves that are held down by the world's distractions and sin. Carrying only what we truly need to survive, we put on a new self that is renewed and invigorated by profound appreciation for God's natural creation. On the trail, we are all equal—there is no smart or dumb people, no CEOs or janitors, no cool kids or dorks, just human beings. As Paul so elegantly puts it, "Here... Christ is all and is in all."

In the next verse, Paul encourages us to "clothe [ourselves] with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Easier said than done. It's easy to see and feel God in the mountains, and it's easier to be God-like without the distractions of our everyday lives. But we don't live in the mountains. So, where is God when we're up at 3 a.m. writing term papers? Where is God in our frenzied college lives? I found the first text

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for today while digging around on the Augie Web site. I'll read Dr. Haar's quote again: "The chapel is in the center of our campus, visible from every vantage point, but it doesn't overshadow anything."

I cannot think of a better way to describe my years here and how I'd like to live my life after leaving Augustana. Yes, Christ is my rock; I strive to keep Him in the center of all I do. However, this does not mean I go out screaming Christ's name, shoving the Bible down the throats of all who cross my path. St. Francis of Assisi once said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." What a beautiful way to put Christ's call to action. In clothing ourselves with these virtues, as Paul advises, we don't need words. Our Christ-like actions will speak volumes about our faith in Christ. If we don't know what words to say, we simply let our compassion, our wisdom and our kindness do the talking.

Everyday I am humbled by the amount of things I don't know. Science—biology, chemistry, the works—simply boggles my mind. Business and economics are foreign languages. At Augustana, I've found that there is so much beyond me and I'm humbled daily by things I have yet to learn. To me, it's so clear that God is behind all of this because I can't make myself believe, I can't comprehend that this complex world, these complex ideas and individuals and places just happened randomly.

If you ever want to see me fired up about something, simply say the word "travel." Just the thought of travel takes me to far off places, to friends, to the tops of mountains and depths of the ocean. I am invigorated, impassioned by the thought of seeing new worlds and cultures, of meeting new people and tasting new food. I've been incredibly blessed with several opportunities for travel in my years at Augustana. January interim freshman year I spent traveling all over China, touring with the Augustana Band. Spring break sophomore year, I hopped on a plane to Spain to visit a friend who was studying there.

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This last spring, I spent an entire semester living in France, immersing myself in the language and the culture of somewhere I had never been. In each of these abroad experiences, I have been amazed at the overwhelming feeling of welcome and acceptance. Wherever the band went in China, we were accepted at every venue with huge smiles, helping hands and ironically enough, a meal from KFC, their preferred restaurant of choice. While traveling in Spain, knowing little more Spanish than hola, si por favor, and gracias, I was welcomed wholeheartedly nonetheless into the homes of my friends' host families. Before leaving for my semester in France, I was pretty uncomfortable at the thought of living in the house of a complete stranger for five months. But from the first Bonjour when I walked in the door, I was treated like part of the family. This no-questions-asked attitude inspired me in return to accept them into my life, opening up a door for brilliant and deep conversation.

For me, the best part of traveling is meeting someone new. I've found that in discussing and comparing our differences, we discover many more similarities. The farther from home I travel, the smaller the world seems to be. Diverse as every individual is, we are all human. Similarly, we are all one in Christ. God has called each of us—scientists and artists, teachers and businessmen, French and Indian, Italian and Canadian, Christians or not—to be one with him in Christ Jesus.

Yesterday morning, I was fortunate enough to attend Brother Cyprian Consiglio's talk here in the chapel. Drawing on several widely diverse sources, his eloquent words on the universal call to contemplation and wisdom truly parallel with what I'd like to say today. Cyprian proposed the idea that at the heart of all authentic religions, there is a contemplative mystical core, a common tradition and wisdom that we all share. Now, clearly, this is not to say all religions are the same. Not at all. Each religion has a

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difference way of experiencing things. Each person has a unique version of God, as so perfectly worded in Gandhi's quote in the bulletin. Cyprian argued that if we want to better understand our Christian faith and beliefs, we must also better understand the faith and beliefs of others. We are each a part of this global humanity, we each share a common history. If we are ever to reach peace around the world, it will come only when we can accept each other for what we are—human. God in each one of us.

After attending a seminar of Dr. Haar's for my freshman religion 110 class three years ago, I was bewildered by his challenge, one he so prominently displayed on his office door. Think that you might be wrong. Think that you might be wrong? Why should I believe in anything if I am just supposed to turn around and doubt myself? This challenge really did get me thinking... So what if, as Christians, we are wrong? What if God doesn't really exist? Why put my faith and trust—my life—into the hands of a God that I'm not totally sure exists? And what of these other religions? Buddhists, Muslims, Taoists... What if they are right? What if we're all wrong?

These radical questions shook the very foundation of all that I claim to believe. As I looked for answers for these faith-shattering questions, I sank deeper into this depressing doubt. And then I realized something. I can't answer these questions. As one human being, I will never truly know what is right and what is wrong. But what I do know is that God and Christianity is the best explanation I have. I find solace in God, I find direction. In asking doubtful questions, in exploring other faiths and religions, I enforce what I believe all the more. As humans, we are limited. No one person, no one religion has all the answers. It's in our doubts, in our humbling limitations, that we are freed, we are called even, to ask questions. In asking these questions, however, we must be open to the answers, whether we like them or not. In gaining the insight and knowledge of these

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answers, we are both freed and called to share our wisdom with others. It's ignorant to think we can know everything. God gives us knowledge; he gives us what we need to survive... He gives us hearts for compassion and minds for wisdom. But it's all for naught if we don't do anything with them. The beauty of God's creation comes in the rich diversity and uniqueness of every single thing, both living and non-living. Our wisdom comes from being open enough to accept it and learn from it.

So. What do we do? No one point of view can see everything. No one person can know everything. If we knew everything, we wouldn't need God. But the fact is we do need God. When we accept our limitations and our need for God, it opens up such freedoms: We are free to explore, free to learn from our peers. I encourage every one of us to live with a child-like openness to things unknown, to fantastic ideas and radical questions, to paths we have yet to take. Clothed with kindness, humility and compassion for others, live with direction, grounded in steadfast faith in God, who is in all things.