

HOLY RUNAWAYS

REDISCOVERING FAITH AFTER BEING BURNED BY RELIGION

BY MATTHIAS ROBERTS

DISCUSSION GUIDE

OPENING

1. In the foreword, Jen says, "I am here as a character witness. You have chosen the best guide." Do you think Matthias was a good guide throughout the book?
2. In the foreword, the author says, "Pain is often part of the process of healing, but there's a difference between the kind of pain that comes when our bodies are healing and the kind of pain that causes more damage." Do you agree? Is it sometimes hard to know the difference?
3. The author mentions growing up on *The Boxcar Children*, *Annie*, and *A Little Princess*. Why do you think these types of stories captivate us at such a young age? Did survival stories appeal to you when you were younger?
4. Where do you think the line is between running away and leaving somewhere toxic?

PART 1

MUSTARD SEEDS

1. The author started to question his faith when the university seemed not to have his best interests at heart. Do you feel like your identity is protected by your faith? Do you feel welcome?
2. Have you ever felt like the amount of faith you had just wasn't enough? What do you think of the parable of the mustard seed?
3. Do you agree that the church is dying? Do you think "repackaging faith" is the answer?
4. Have you ever felt like you needed to deconstruct your faith? What was that like?

5. What do you think the difference is between exploring your faith inside versus outside of a church?
6. What do you think of the advice “You just need more faith” or “Don’t give up on God”?
7. Do you agree that what holds us back from experiencing love, belonging, and faith to move mountains is our lack of belief in our own worthiness?
8. Do you agree that it’s easier to see another person’s worthiness than to believe in our own? Why do you think it’s so difficult to see our own positive qualities?
9. The author talks about the word “perverse,” translating it to “to turn away.” How do you think other mistranslations and interpretations of the Bible have affected Christianity over the years?

PART 2

CONCRETE BOXES

1. How can the faithful hear Jesus’s words about caring for other people and not act on them?
2. The author talks about building your faith on a solid foundation. What do you think that really means? Is it more than simply rock or sand?
3. What was your reaction to the school’s rejection of the author’s senior-year speech, saying, “The president doesn’t think our campus is ready for someone to come out yet, so for your protection, we’ve decided to not feature you as a Gathering speaker this year. Thanks for applying”? How long would you have given the college leadership “the benefit of the doubt”?
4. The author says you cannot fix the symptoms unless you fix the cause. How do you think this relates to spirituality?
5. Have you ever felt pressure to be a martyr for your faith? Why do you think there is so much demand for faith to be like concrete?
6. Why do you think civilizations have been building with concrete for so long?
7. The author references Joe Rigney’s position that compassion and empathy are good only up to a point. Do you agree? Do you think there is such a thing as “too much empathy”?
8. The author states that empathy is engrained in our brains and bodies. How do you think empathy came to be such an important part of our evolutionary biology? How does it benefit us to care about others?
9. The author states: “The walls of our concrete boxes are sturdy, made of heteronormativity, white supremacy, gender hierarchy, ableism. . . . And each of us has helped reinforce those walls in order to survive.” Why do you think empathetic, well-meaning people help reinforce these beliefs, even when they don’t feel like it’s the right thing to do?

PART 3

DIRT

1. How do you feel about the author's mother's gardening analogy, "And then we have to weed, getting rid of any competing beliefs, anything that might prevent the gospel from continuing to flourish"? As a child, were you told to deal with conflicting beliefs and sin in a similar way?
2. The author sees the quote "If you don't like the direction you're going, change it." Why do you think it is so hard for us to change our path, even when we know we are heading in the wrong direction?
3. What do you think his professor means by "Your theology is only as good as your psychology"?
4. Have you found that you have rooted yourself in a theology of shame? How can we work to find more nutrients and improve the quality of our own soil?
5. Why do you think shame is such a captivating motivator?
6. What do you think of the advice sometimes given of "Just go to a different church" or "Don't give up on God just because some of his people hurt you"? Has finding a new, less toxic community helped you reconnect with God?
7. Have you ever felt like your "window of tolerance" was shrinking or expanding? What type of situations made it easier to deal with negative stimuli?
8. Do you resonate with Dr. McBride's definition of spiritual trauma as "someone handing you an inner critic and telling you it's the voice of God"? How do you feel about your own inner critic?
9. Have you ever gone through something similar to the author's "new mattress" analogy? How long does it take to adjust to a new product before you realize how important the change was?

PART 4

MIRRORS

1. The author mentions not wanting to go back to church but needing the comfort it once provided. Why do you think having a sense of belonging and community is so important, to the point that we will stay in places that make us feel unsafe in order to have it?
2. Do you agree with Dr. Coakley that desire is nothing less than God-given, and that all desire points back to God in some way or another?
3. Nadia Bolz-Weber states, "People don't leave the church or Christianity because they stopped believing in the gospel. People leave the church because they believe in the gospel so much, they can't stomach being part of an institution or a community that says it's about it and so clearly isn't. That's different." Do you agree? Do you think there is still hope for a better Christianity?

4. The author says that “runaways often go from holding in contempt people who believe that humanity is fundamentally good to holding in contempt people who believe that humanity is fundamentally evil.” Do you feel that you may have simply ended up on the other side of the seesaw instead of trying to solve the real problem?
5. Do you agree that desire is environmentally and communally determined? How has your desire for different items and experiences changed over time?
6. Why do you think advertisers are so good at tapping into our reflective desires?
7. How has communication with others helped you develop a sense of self? Growing up, did you have a caregiver who helped you recognize and process your emotions?
8. Do you agree that individualism is a myth? How has your environment shaped you as an individual?
9. We are dependent on the people around us. Does this make you uncomfortable?
10. How do you think scarcity has affected your desires? Do you ever feel like Rebecca in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*?
11. How does scapegoating build a false sense of community? Who is benefiting from this system?
12. How have you seen the reinforcement of the goodness of the “in” group and the badness of the “out” group play out in your community? Does it seem to follow the template of myth, unity, taboo?

PART 5

SLIPPERY SLOPES

1. What do you think is meant by the quote “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out God hates all the same people you do”? Do you think we create some version of God within ourselves?
2. Do you think a new God can be different from a past version of God that made you feel less-than?
3. What impact do you think the use of language has had on your understanding of God? Do you agree that the use of certain words is just “semantics”?
4. The author states that he wants more than acknowledgment; he wants their blessing for the different path he is taking. What do you think the difference is between acknowledgment and blessing? What does that look like?
5. Do you think it’s possible to separate God from the oppressive system we were all a part of?

6. Did you participate in the journaling activity (In one column, write all the things you wish you believed about God and your own faith. In the other column, write all the things you truly believe in at this moment)? What did you notice about your responses? Is there a disconnect between what you believe about God and what you wish you believed about God?
7. Do you agree that “knowing” gives us a sense of safety? Can we gain the same sense of safety from “not knowing” something?
8. What do you think of Fr. James Alison’s position that atheism offers a more adequate picture of God than theism?
9. Why do you think modern religions developed such a monotheistic culture?
10. Alison explains that any time we create meaning through an over-and-against mechanism, we reveal how similar, rather than different, the things we are comparing are. The author draws a comparison between himself and his father, maintaining he does not want to be like him. Is there someone in your life whom you would never want to be like? Can you think of this relationship differently?
11. Do you agree that it’s the same system, whether we pray to the most conservative evangelical God or the most progressive? What harm is there in projecting our own values onto what God might be like?
12. Do you believe that Jesus will come for all the assholes, and at what point does this belief become toxic?

PART 6

PAIN

1. What do you think is meant by “You can’t go with others any further than you’ve gone yourself”?
2. Why do you think the author’s breakup uncovered so much more than a simple heartbreak? What is it about the grieving process that makes us grieve the wrong things?
3. To deal with trauma, we create stories as an attempt to understand what happened, but the trauma doesn’t get resolved; it gets lodged within us. Why do you think our bodies react to trauma in this way?
4. Why do you think trauma often leads to shame?
5. Now knowing more about the process of fragmentation, isolation, and dissociation, how can you use this information to be a better ally for those going through trauma?
6. How can someone who has experienced trauma work to trust someone who is trying to care for them?
7. The author says that understanding our trauma does not mean we have healed from our trauma. Do you agree? What role do you think knowledge has in understanding yourself? What more is needed to move forward to heal?

8. Have you thought about the “why” behind your runaway journey? What has that path looked like for you?
9. Do you agree that as a society, we are getting better at listening to victims?
10. What can we do as an advocate to remove power from the system for a more inclusive world?
11. The author quotes Nadia Bolz-Weber as saying, “Our drug of choice right now is knowing who we’re better than”? Why do you think our society is so obsessed with hierarchy over inclusivity?
12. How can you do better to “love thy neighbor” as you would love yourself?
13. The book refers to loving relationships as involving attunement, containment, and repair. Have you applied these steps in your own relationships? How can we use this template in our own lives to begin the healing process?
14. How do you feel when someone else shares their pain with you? Why do you think we become annoyed or angry when we see someone “complaining” on social media?

PART 7

FAITH

1. Alice, the therapist, responds to the author’s grief by saying, “You are alone.” Why do you think she says this?
2. Do you agree with the author that those who believe they are worthy have been shown they are worthy? How have people in your life shown you that you are worthy?
3. How have you physically experienced worthiness? How can you work to redefine worthiness for yourself?
4. The author says he imagines friends who watch trashy TV one night and the next night stay up late over a glass of wine sharing their souls; friends who reflect and affirm each other’s worthiness and belonging, no matter what. Do you have friends like this? What did it take to build that kind of solid relationship?
5. Do you think there is a certain level of “religion” in simply finding good friends?
6. Did you feel that your church community had boundaries on its love? Do you agree that “if your family and community put limits and boundaries on their love, it’s not love”?
7. How do you think we can let go of the need to be “good” and of voices that tell us we’re “bad”?
8. What is your definition of “home”?