

The wall my daughter can't get past

I've stopped trying to climb over it or knock it down. Now I just sit there.

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [August 1, 2018](#) issue



When my daughter was a preteen, she would often use the metaphor of a wall to describe her life: “There’s a wall in front of me, Mommy. A thick, dark wall that keeps me trapped. It never goes away.”

Heartbroken, I would take up her metaphor and try to rework it: “Can we shatter the wall with dynamite? No? OK, can we climb over it? I’ll help you look for footholds! It’s too high? Well, what if we don’t face the wall anymore? What if we just turn around and walk away?”

Each time I engaged in this wordplay, she would look at me with a shattering combination of weariness, contempt, and pity: “You know I can’t, Mommy. It’s too hard.”

My daughter is 19 now, and the wall looks different but remains. It has many names, many impenetrable layers. I used to obsess over them, believing that the right combination of labels would lead to healing. *Sensory integration disorder. Oppositional defiance. High-functioning Asperger's. Clinical depression. Generalized anxiety. Social anxiety. Obsessive compulsive disorder. Body dysmorphia. Anorexia. Self-harm. Suicidal ideation.*

I have lived in fix-it mode for many years. My husband and I have read the books, researched the medications, and visited the doctors. We've held our daughter tight when her lonely days at school wear her out. We've coaxed protein smoothies down her throat when she refuses to eat. We've bandaged her arms when she's cut them to manage her distress. We've watched helplessly as OCD rituals swallow whole months of her life. We've practically lived in waiting rooms.

My fix-it mode has spiritual corollaries, too. I pray for God to help my daughter. I look for church environments and events where she'll feel loved and safe. I scour the Bible, hoping to find a verse, prayer, or story that might inspire her to keep fighting. I tell her again and again that God cherishes her.

I do these things on my good days. On my not-so-good days, I refuse to beg for healing one more time. I wonder if the whole religion is a sham. I resent that the Gospel stories so often end in miracle or abundance. What about the times when the sick stayed sick, the hungry stayed hungry, or the dead stayed dead? When Jesus tried and tried and finally had to admit defeat? I have watched my daughter battle things I can't see. Numbers, patterns, noises; the whole world revved up, too saturated to tolerate. A nightmare, a spooky funhouse world, a circus gone awry with a clown who never takes off his distorted makeup. I have cried out for a savior who is equal to this reality, because no smaller god will suffice.

On my worst days—or on my daughter's—I have thrown the words of scripture right back in God's face. The peace that passes understanding? Abundant life? An easy yoke and a light burden? "Daughter, your faith has made you well—go in peace"? Are you kidding me?

I've inherited a Christian vocabulary that is rich and beautiful—but also impoverished when it comes to deep psychological anguish. The words I've been taught to trust are almost exclusively redemptive: God is light, peace, joy, victory. The stories I've inherited have happy endings: the deliverance plot, the healing plot,

the uplift plot, the resurrection plot. The main actor in these stories (God) is said to play fair, never giving anyone more than they can handle.

My daughter's struggles have forced me to strip away the false magic and mythology connected to my faith. Can I tolerate a God who might not alleviate my child's suffering in this lifetime? Can I put away forever the cruel belief that God "gives" us suffering in order to build our character? My daughter's limitations block her from accessing the affective benefits of religion: a sense of belonging, inner peace, the joys of worship, deliverance from existential despair. Is Christianity even worth it for someone like her? If we set aside the emotional and social perks of trusting in Jesus, is there anything left worth salvaging?

My daughter doesn't currently attend church or call herself a Christian. She respects my spiritual journey and occasionally asks me about it, but she doesn't believe that it has anything meaningful to offer her. I understand. I wish it were otherwise with all my heart, but I understand. She prayed for many years. She attended Sunday school and memorized Bible verses and sang the same songs I sing. She hoped and hoped. No one can say she didn't try.

These days, I don't try to blow up my daughter's wall or persuade her to climb over it or leave it behind. She's technically an adult now, and my role in her life is shifting. So now I simply sit next to the wall. I face it and endure it. I live each day in its shadow, hoping my daughter will decide to keep living, too, even in that chilly darkness—and hoping that my presence at the wall shows her something of God's steady presence in its shadow, too.

When I scour the Bible now, I skip over the miracle stories. I read instead about the wilderness, and I imagine how slowly time moves in that parched, barren land. I read about Jesus at Gethsemane, deserted and afraid. I read about manna—mysterious sustenance for one day at a time. And I read about the lost lamb the shepherd follows into the treacherous night, the little one who can't help but wander. The exhausted, endangered one who needs so badly to come home but just can't find her way.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "My daughter's wall."