I have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—or rather something like it. I don’t mean to be melodramatic—I only mean that PTSD is the closest idea I can relate to. But it isn’t backfiring engines or exploding fireworks that transport me to another place, trapping me inside myself with an unforgiving imagination—it’s the unspoken sacraments of so many conservative evangelicals: proper feeling, proper language, proper behavior, proper politics (proper, of course, shifting definition within each generation), unwavering certainty—the marks on the measuring tape of faith that give me an urge to pull the fire alarm.

My most recent encounter came when I played keyboard at a special event put on by an edgy, rogue, Spirit-filled Discipleship Training Service program from Detroit. As we were eating pizza beforehand, I chatted with one of the interns. He asked a few questions and talked about how he ended up in the burnt-out suburbs of Motortown, U.S.A. He asked if I was looking forward to the service. “To be honest, I’m trying to follow Jesus, but I’m not all that comfortable in religious settings,” I said. I wasn’t being religious-pretentious—“oh, those whitewashed Pharisees”—I just genuinely get in knots when people I vaguely know start measuring up my faith—even when I only feel like they are.

“Oh, me too, man, me too,” says the guy going through a DTS program that is putting on a special church service. After pizza we practiced the songs. I hastily jotted down little phrases, verses, and even a little doodle of a tree—a stabilizing metaphor for my paranoid faith—that I could meditate on if things got hairy.

Sure enough, in the middle of the third song, the leader of the group grabbed the mic and wondered at how we could appear so stiff when God’s presence was so obviously here? My already uncomfortably straight legs moved closer together and my shoulders hunched over the keys until I resembled Quasimodo or, more appropriately, the Phantom of the opera, for the rest of the evening, awkwardly hammering out chords. During the sermon I made a break for the bathroom, at which point the intern interrupted his apparent ecstasy to follow me and ask me what I thought of it all. I rambled on about nonsense excuses until I could finish my business.

I’ve been through more of these scenarios than I’d like to admit (though only a few involve being cornered in the bathroom). In high school, it was Brad Pitt the youth pastor trying to get an arena full of kids to break up with their girlfriend if they really loved Jesus. In my early twenties, it was the fellow who called to tell me that being in a rock band is satanic. Also, there is pretty much any sermon that references "comfort zone," the moral decline of America (have you even read a history book?), or any sort of "man sermon" in which the health of the church depends on a Teddy Roosevelt-like theology of purging weakness in the wilderness, or at least in the gym and the marriage bed.

Each situation I encounter is a new addition to an often self-contradictory list of oversimplified items I am supposed to conjure passion for, which in the moment I typically do not (and as the record shows, rarely did). Every time I step into a new church setting I shift in my seat because this list is very long, and when folded tight enough to place in my back pocket, it’s bulky and causes lower back pain.

I used to think that perhaps this was all God’s doing (and sometimes I still do). Was he the greasy landlord pounding on the door because the rent was late again? How many months was I behind? And this was supposed to be good news? It was as if I were living in a shabby apartment with carpet from the 70s that everyone seemed to think was a mansion.

Not that faith was a nightmare. When I was alone with God, there was wonder, as if I knew of a single room in the same building with a view of the ocean, and giant windows, and a hot tub on the deck. But when I heard footsteps in the
hall I didn't know if I'd get in trouble, so I'd scurry back to the doldrums of what I didn't realize at the time were the confines of my Christian subculture. What I didn't realize was that this subculture was an expression of following Jesus, but certainly not the only way to do so.

Back to today, it all feels strange to write about—as if I am reclining on a chaise lounge convincing myself that the dysfunctional mother of my faith is the reason I feel uncomfortable asking my boss for a raise. It feels conjured and distant until something explodes, and I am suddenly closed in on again.

This can be triggered by religious events that could very well be completely legitimate and worthwhile. But if I don’t attend, I can feel like a shoddy Christian, turning off the TV and closing the blinds lest the greasy landlord has proof of what we both know—that I'm at home and hiding. It has nothing to do with the validity of the event; it’s more a matter of my paranoia. Does my lack of interest mean that I don't love Jesus enough?

Never mind that my faith is more vibrant—and I’d argue more mature—than it has ever been: I see God interjecting Himself in clearer ways, even though I stopped trying to strain to make Him show up; I feel increasingly free from sin, fear, self-loathing and cynicism, even though I more clearly see the ways I regularly and significantly do damage to myself and the world around me with my lust and selfishness and consumption; and let's not leave out that I now know how to feel things like joy, sadness, anger, and compassion, or that I understand on a whole new level the importance of faith in the context of a community. It all feels healthier and more joyful, like I've been living most of the past six years in that room with the ocean view and a hot tub—but as I was told so often as a child about the good news, it comes at a cost.

There are places in our lives that were once so familiar and comforting, but now fit like a jacket on which the sleeves are a little too short and the shoulders get tight when you try to drive your car. And that is what the subcultures of Christian faith feel like to me—the music, the books, the sermons, the jokes, the language—familiar enough and full of great memories but also uncomfortable to wear. This is not because of what the subculture is, but because of what I think it expects me to be and what it wants me to feel about it.

And here is the reality: for a regular doubter, a recovering cynic, an endless questioner, a line pusher, and an often apathetic, sometimes obsessive, explorer of possibilities who loves digging up actual history and doesn't realize that he often tramples on tradition to do so, the church is more of a minefield than a playground. And often it feels safer—or just easier—for everyone involved if I just stay away.

To Have and To Be Safe Places

At this point you might wonder if I even attend a church anymore—I do. We are a congregation of 30 or so. It's no frills. In fact, for a couple of months we didn't have flushing toilets. When they started working again, some in the church worried that we might be getting a little too seeker friendly. Not to oversell it, because we can be awkward and often dysfunctional—you know, like family. But in a group that crosses significant theological, political and economic lines, we all feel free to be ourselves and to speak and to be in love with God and at times — sometimes a lot of the time—to not be in love with God. It's remarkable really. I'm bragging here I know, but I've never been a part of anything like it. If it is only a season of what church is like, it will be difficult to top.

And it is precisely what I needed. In only a couple months the sun had warmed me enough that I felt like taking off the ill-fitting coat, setting it aside. I became so comfortable that when I finally encountered some of the old way again, it hurt worse because I didn't have my guard up. Feeling called out and cornered at the awkward church service sent me
reeling for a couple of weeks; dodging invitations to other services had me spinning for a couple of months.

But pain teaches us. And what I learned whenever I found myself in those claustrophobic places was that I longed for my little church—I missed feeling known, loved, and challenged for who I was. Going back each Sunday was like jumping in a river on a hot day. The unspoken sacraments there are honesty and vulnerability, not demanded but invited in due time—like a tree that bears its fruit in season. There is no rush for a decision, no gimmick demanded but invited in due time—like a tree that bears its fruit in season. There is no rush for a decision, no gimmick

to convince me of a new technique—just people showing up and saying, “This is who we are. God, where are you?”

A Safe Prophet

Several months after the awkward service, I had another run-in with the charismatic, this time during an artist’s conference. I am a part of a collective of believers who are interested in asking a lot of good questions and creating excellent things. But they aren’t all that concerned with toeing lines, which often makes them feel on the fringes. A lot of these artists have been through tough experiences; part of the vision of the group is to find healthy ways to connect back with faith communities while maintaining artistic integrity.

A Safe Prophet

This group is a safe place for me. A bunch of curious misfits. If you were at one of these conferences, to your left would be a heavily tattooed fellow with amazing guitar skills who has played with some recognizable names and who has also battled meth addiction most of his life. And to your right, a small-town Minnesota Lutheran pastor’s wife who looks like she stepped out of Prairie Home Companion, and who writes science fiction novels and loves reading scientific research papers and studying quantum physics.

This year’s conference was on the arts and the prophetic—though we might define prophetic a tad differently than that DTS group from Detroit. My friend Jonathan, who is a talented songwriter, invited his friend Glen, who describes himself as a prophetic practitioner, to contribute to the weekend by praying for anyone who would like it. Three things to note: I was in a room full of people who loathe putting expectations on other people’s faith; Glen the prophet was soft-spoken, nearly shy even, not the get-in-your-face sort I had typically run into; and my friend Jonathan had known Glen for years and trusted him. And because I have a deep trust in Jonathan and his awareness of the ways this group had been hurt by their own subcultures, I was able to lean on his trust of Glen.

What also helped was that immediately after Jonathan introduced Glen, we broke out into smaller groups to do a staple exercise of this group called “What’s on your mind?” The idea is that we all bring distracting thoughts to the table. Sharing for 2-3 minutes about whatever holds your attention helps us all get on the same page and sometimes even discover something new. “What’s on my mind?” I said. “Well, Glen. I’m terrified of you. But I think God knew I needed you here—so I’m glad.”

Immediately, any remaining feelings of anxiety turned to excitement. This was a safe place; I felt known. And though by proxy, there was trust. The next day my wife stopped in at the conference and we sat down to pray with Glen and Karen, a woman who has the same gifting.

I need to say here that my interaction with the charismatic branch of Jesus followers has been the most difficult. There are wounds from close family, and I have seen and read accounts of people getting messed up in big ways by dozens of separate charismatic entities. Here in Elkhart County, a solid 25% of my friends grew up in a conservative Pentecostal group affectionately called The Glory Barn, in which rules were strict, services were hyped, and more than one person died because of refusing medical treatment in the name of faith. Many people who grew up in The Glory Barn are still trying to grapple with the fallout twenty years later. Of all my “triggers,” charismatics especially send me under a table.

The prayer was simple. Glen and Karen asked a few questions, listened for a bit, then offered some encouragements and what I took as God speaking some things that I really needed to hear—things that bring focus to the next several years, possibly the decade. There was no ecstasy, no speaking in tongues, just deep peace and wonder, as if they just held up an ace of spades and said, “Is this the card you picked?” The space around us felt wide open, or if you have agoraphobia, it felt heavy and safe on your chest, like those X-ray vests at the dentist that put me to sleep every time. It was so natural a process that it was only afterward that I realized that the typical tension was gone.

Later that day, someone speaking about the prophetic remarked, “If you don’t listen, God will eventually send your enemy to speak to you on His behalf.” Of course he also might turn that enemy into a friend.
The Why

I’ve found that writing pieces like this have regularly been a turn of the page for me. When I was asked to write about it several months ago, it seemed like a series of caverns that needed to be mapped out. So I have my selfish reasons. But also I have over the years greatly benefitted from others who have publicly exorcised their demons. "Me too" is a powerful agent for change.

We also find ourselves in a bit of a shakeup in our corner of the church. People are getting mad and leaving or getting mad and staying, all for reasons, of course, and sometimes good ones. But there aren't many conversations that sound like this: "I'm hurt, but I am staying and healing," or "I'm shifting cultures but WE are still the church and the door is still open." I don't think all, or even many of those discussions belong in print, although some of them do. Most of them should be face to face, so whether you like what I've said or not, perhaps it can be a conversation starter and maybe even bring some healing.

Because that is what I want—healing. And I think telling some of these tough stories is the way to it. So here's one more story. A year ago I was the only person left in a cafeteria with a Dunkard Brethren fellow. All things above considered, you can guess what my gut was doing. So I decided to experiment with the situation and said, "I am afraid of you and what you think of me." We spent the next half hour sharing the joy of both knowing Jesus, even if we might not fit well in each other's Sunday morning service.

I saw him again a few weeks ago, and what had been a twist in the gut before was now laughter and a hello.

Jason Ropp is a musician, writer, and guitar teacher in Goshen, Indiana, where he lives with his wife Courtney. He writes monthly at jasonropp.com. His current musical projects include The White Oaks (thewhiteoaksmusic.com), who just released their first 4-song album. Jason’s first solo album Knowing can be found on any digital store and includes the song "Ode to a Ragamuffin," which will be featured on an upcoming movie about Brennan Manning, directed by the fellow who directed the most recent Rich Mullins biopic.