

Amber Boardman

Author's Note: My goals are to earn a transfer degree from Mt. Hood, and go on to Portland State where I want to have a double major in Literature and History with a minor in French. I then want to go on to earn my master's degree in Education. This essay is a simple personal narrative essay. I chose this topic because it affected me so deeply that I started to question who I was. I remember the details vividly, which helped me to write with more specificity.

You . . . You . . . HEATHEN!

In the fall of 2001, I decided to enter the crazy world of Ozark Christian College. As a "loner," somewhat quiet and reserved, I should have known that my views on music, life, and society in general would be under a certain scrutiny at a Midwestern Bible college. I didn't think that far ahead. My best friend Ashlee happened to attend there, and I had actually visited her a few times. Living in a dorm seemed like a fun adventure and I needed to pick a college, so off I went. There I was, pierced, with bright blue hair and loud music, in a land that thrived on and literally preached conformity. What the hell was I thinking?

My first "strike" was the fact that I didn't arrive until 9 p.m. on the day before classes began. I was on my way back from a "last hoorah" trip to Chicago with my friend, and we hit some traffic. I didn't have my dorm assignment yet, so I went to the dorm I had signed up for and bravely knocked on the door of the "dorm parents." Mom Reid took one look at me, from my hair to my earrings to my eyebrow ring to my ripped jeans and back again, and then asked if I was sure I was supposed to be there. When I answered, "Yes, I am supposed to be here," she saw "it": that horrible, terrible part of my identity that would cause me almost more problems than it was worth. My tongue ring. She promptly grabbed me by the arm and pulled me quite harshly to the side and said, "You are not allowed to have any part of your body pierced other than your ears, and since I see that you have at least ten in each ear, I must also tell you that you are not allowed to have more than two in each. So let me ask you again....are you really sure that you are supposed to be here?" She said this with more venom spewing from her mouth than I assumed any "Christian" woman would have in her entire body. I ripped my arm from her grasp, looked her square in the eye, and said, "Yes, I am supposed to be here. Now will you please help me find my room, or do I need to find someone more helpful?" This was probably not the best retort. By the time I found my room and settled in for the night, it was already 10:30. Classes began at 7 a.m., and I fell asleep thinking that I still had a lot to learn about this culture. I also, not for the last time, promised myself that I would not become one of those judgmental people, those sheep leading themselves through this life of same-mindedness.

The next week, things began to settle down. I was going to class as planned (of course, respectfully not wearing all of my piercings). Nothing out of the ordinary happened until around two weeks into the semester. I was eating lunch down at "the caf" with all of my new friends. A group of around eight of us were talking and eating around two banquet-style tables. Then a Resident's Assistant (R.A.) from a different floor in my dorm came up to me and asked me if I was wearing my tongue ring. I looked at her and said, "Excuse me?" She then said, "Stand up. I asked you if you were wearing your tongue ring." I answered, "No, I take it out before I leave my room." She replied with the ridiculous, "Stick out your tongue." I could do nothing but gawk at her. She then repeated herself loud enough for the entire table to hear. "STICK OUT YOUR TONGUE!" Everyone stopped mid-bite, almost like a cartoon, and looked directly at us. Reacting more to her volume than to the command, I proceeded to open my mouth. When she was satisfied, she looked at me and said, "If we ever catch you with it in we will confiscate it." I stared at her with a look that said, "I'll do it one of these days, and I DARE you to try it." I sat back down with as much dignity as I could muster, and resumed eating my lunch. Everyone was a little quieter after this exchange. When I asked my R.A. about this, she told me about an apparent meeting, in which ALL of the lead sheep, I mean, dorm parents and R.A.'s, met to talk about me and my so-called "problem with authority." My R.A., Erika, had stood up for me because she had taken the time to get to know me, the "me" behind the piercings, music, and hair.

I have a habit of listening to music too loud. I always have. Thank goodness my roommate was in the same habit. One day, my door was open and I was listening to some "shock rock" ... loudly. There was a girl from my dorm who lived down the hall named Becky. She was part of a "ring by spring, or your money back" family. These families actually send their daughters to Ozark to find an equally virginal pastor to marry. It's almost like breeding horses, and Becky was destined to be a thoroughbred. She grew up in a house in which listening to anything other than gospel music was a sin, and receiving anything less than perfect on her report card was a sin. You know the type. Well, she came into my room and started talking to me and after a few minutes I noticed that she was listening to the music. She finally asked me who the artist was, and I asked if she liked it. She said, "Yeah, I really do! Who is it? Is this what they call 'Christian Rock'?" It was all I could do not to fall out of my chair laughing. I said,

“Not exactly. It’s Marilyn Manson.” I was listening to a song called “Posthuman” from his album Mechanical Animals. The lyrics?

She’s got eyes like Zapruder, and a mouth like heroin. She wants me to be perfect like Kennedy. This isn’t god, this isn’t god. God is just a statistic, God is just a statistic. Say “show me the dead stars all of them sing.” This is a riot, religious and clean. God is a number you cannot count to. You are posthuman and hardwired. She’s pilgrim and pagan. Softworn and social, in all of her dreams. She’s a saint like Jackie O. This isn’t god, this isn’t god. God is just a statistic. All that glitters is cold, all that glitters is cold.

Then she started paying attention to the lyrics and she turned white as a ghost, got up, and walked quickly out of the room, I’m sure to run and repent. I just kept laughing. She honestly thought that it was a sin to like any music that wasn’t Christian. I was not making fun of her; I was honestly shocked.

I don’t think it was two days later when I was called into the Dean of Women’s office. I had not quit smoking before I left for school, and when I got there, I really tried to quit. It was too hard. I would shake, and get so irritable that I would almost rip anyone’s head off who tried to speak to me. When they found out that I was still smoking, they moved my roommate out of my room. This was in order to “help me.” More like keep my little bad habit a secret. Little did they know that my roommate was a smoker, too. I would have told them this, but why make her life miserable? They informed me that they were “making an exception for me,” since I had quit doing drugs before I came. The drug problem. Ah, yes. Everyone also seemed concerned with my drug history. I told them when I got there that I had been sober for over a year, not that this school experience was making that any easier. Well, as long as I went off campus and didn’t tell anyone else, they allowed me to smoke. I actually met my husband on that campus, and our best friend Jeff. We all smoked, and that’s why we started to hang out together. We found each other that semester. We were all seen as “weird,” outsiders, and generally no one talked to the three of us. We all knew we were great people, and that was what mattered.

I left Ozark after that semester, mainly because my then-boyfriend, now husband, Chris, was not planning to come back, and I wanted to move to Portland to be near him. The only other reason was I could not take the criticism any longer. I believe in God, and I was learning a lot in my classes about the Bible. I am just part of a different belief system, one where people are seen as equal no matter what their background. I learned a lot about myself that semester. I have always known that I am intelligent and talented, but these people absolutely refused to see that. They only wanted to make sure I was following their rules. Anything seen as going against their “code” was to be a dirty little secret. I am not that way. I had to go into myself to find what really mattered to me. I had to remember that I could do one of two things with their opinions of me. I could allow them to change me, and my view of myself, or I could go with the brain God gave me. God made us all different for a reason: He has an imagination. He is creative. He likes us colorful. So I say that as long as you are comfortable with yourself and you are not hurting anyone, what is the big deal?

Instructor’s Note: Amber’s essay was in response to a narrative essay assignment in which I asked students to write about a time when they were perceived differently from how they perceived themselves and what they had learned about themselves, others, and/or the world from this experience. Amber’s essay is a detailed snapshot of two-way culture shock. It’s both highly descriptive and reflective. Amber goes just to the edge of self-righteous indignation about those who seem to her self-righteous, but then she pulls back and shows us the very acceptance she hopes to promote.

--Chad Bartlett