

Hello, Dear!

I call you "dear" because you are my fellow human (and I believe you matter) and because you are dear to the person sharing this with you. They care about your relationship.

I'm Helen. I am writing to you because I work as a mental health therapist. In my work, I often see relationships impacted when a person leaves what has been a shared religion. This letter isn't therapy, but I hope you'll find helpful information in it.

Before you dive in, I want to prepare you for what to expect. In this letter, you'll find a lot of information on the experiences of people who leave a faith community. There is a lot of information and it includes exercises to try together. I recommend taking breaks after each exercise to give yourself time to process. Exercise prompts are underlined throughout the letter.

Throughout this letter I refer to the person sharing this with you as your beloved, to affirm the bond that is present in their desire to preserve the relationship.

With this new information (of their choosing to leave) you may experience grief. It is a common experience to grieve your beloved leaving the faith community that you have shared.

Common grief experiences include denial, bargaining, anger, depression. Those typically happen before acceptance. In grief's nonlinear fashion, you might feel accepting one day and angry the next. In your grief, you might take personally your beloved's decision and find yourself thinking, "I've failed in this relationship!"

If you've had such a thought, I ask you not to share it with them. I'll explain why I would ask this of you.

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*Why might you not want to share your grief-related thoughts and feelings with your beloved? Take a moment to imagine a different perspective.*

*Imagine you discovered something deeply meaningful to you. It may have been the realization that you feel most alive when you're engaged in creativity, learning, or even practicing your faith. Imagine that when you made this discovery of something that mattered deeply to you, someone close to you proclaimed, "Because you've chosen that, I have failed in our relationship!" or, "I'm so distraught that you would choose this!" or, "I'm grieving (your engaging with what matters to you). You have to be patient with me!"*

*Make a note of what that would be like for you.*

*Is there a sting of rejection? Rejection, isolation, and loss of family or community support are some of the most painful experiences people have upon leaving what was once their religion.*

*So, why would your beloved risk such difficulty & disruption?*

*continued...*



People take risks like these because of what matters deeply to them.

I don't know what that is for your person. Sometimes it's that people care about gender equality or LGBTQ+ human rights and see that those values aren't shared by their church. Sometimes it's that they simply don't believe and asserting that they do isn't consistent with how they want to embody their values of honesty and integrity.

What I am certain of is that your beloved has their reasons and that those reasons connect with what matters deeply to them - their personal values.

If you are able to be curious with them, you might ask them to share those values with you. This is not for you to try to argue or convince them. It is a vulnerable risk for your beloved to share what is precious to them with you. People do sometimes experience family rejection. Their vulnerability is a gift of showing up as themselves in your relationship. It is up to you to choose whether to receive it.

When you're up for it (whether soon or a long time from now) keep in mind that being open and curious without judgment is a relationship skill.

It's also possible that your beloved may not want to discuss this with you. Just as it's important for people to respect your boundaries, it is important to support your beloved's. If your beloved is with you as you read this, pause here and discuss what boundaries are needed for a healthy relationship. Try to both identify 3 supportive boundaries.

Remember that you're reading this letter because you matter to them. Their leaving your church is not leaving the relationship.

Some people who leave the church they have been in leave behind religion completely. Some change to another that more closely fits what matters to them.

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*It may be strange to read that your beloved leaving the church represents their values in action. You may have gotten the message somewhere that people who leave the church are lost, immoral, or that it's your responsibility to "save" them.*

*If you're willing, take a moment and write down what comes to mind about people who leave the church.*

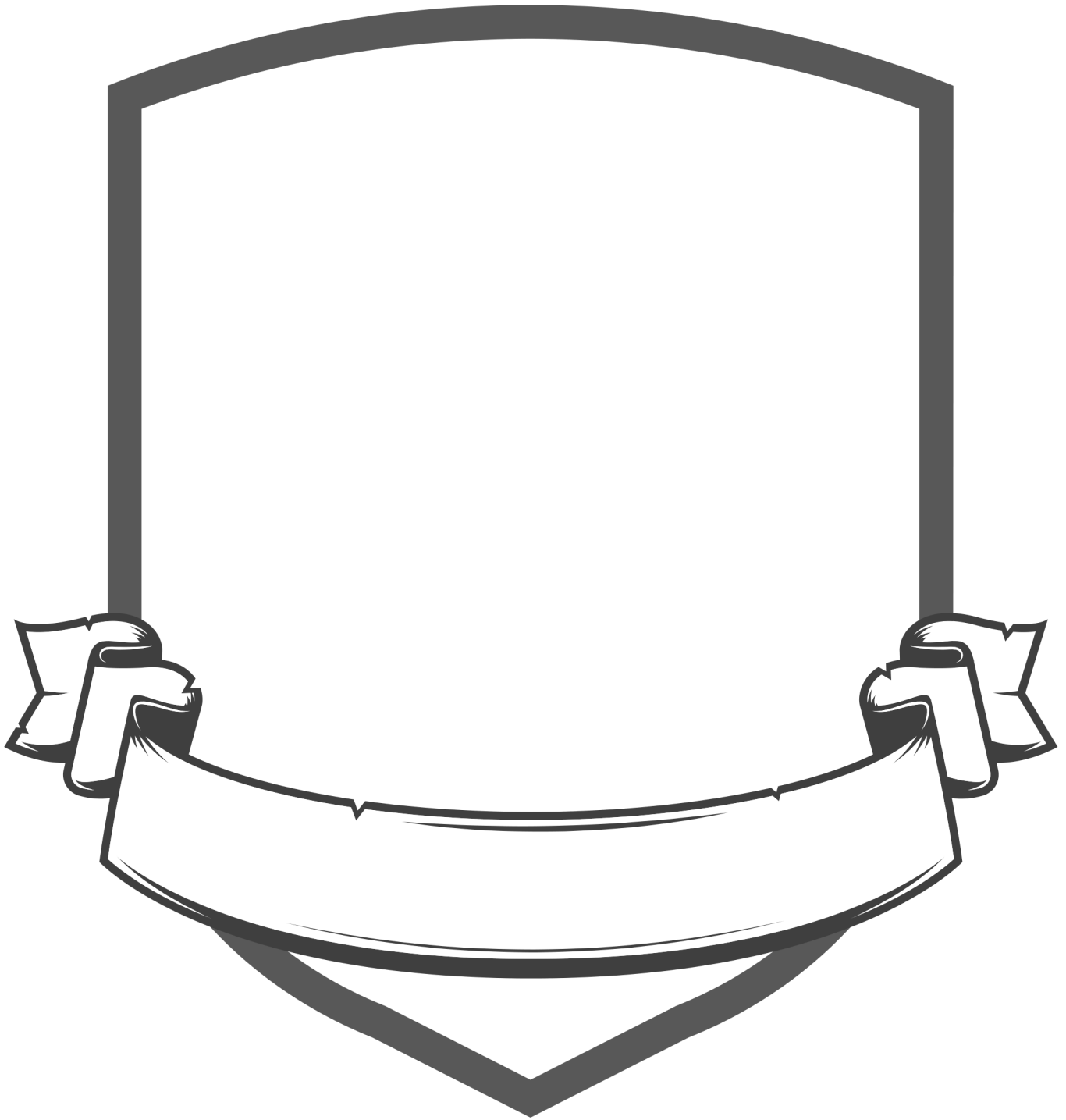
*Now, try holding the paper with those thoughts up to your face so it's all that you see. When you're holding them so close, do you lose sight of your beloved? Of the relationship?*

*Your beloved believes your faith is deeply important to you. If they have been harmed in your church community, it may make this a difficult topic for the two of you. Check in. Is this something you can talk about or an area where the relationship needs boundaries? Remember, your previously shared religion is not the only part of the relationship. Will the relationship be lost because you see things differently, or will you choose together to protect it?*

*On the next page, you can work with your beloved to create a shield or emblem that represents the most important qualities of your relationship - your shared relationship values. On the banner you can write the values themselves or a motto that represents them.*

*continued...*

# *Our Relationship Values*



Take some time to discuss what you might do together, or how you treat each other, when your actions are guided by your shared relationship values. Make a note of what you come up with.

At the beginning of this letter, I mentioned grief being a normal experience and that it may not be helpful to the relationship to share your thoughts and feelings of grief with your beloved. The reason for this suggested boundary is that giving your beloved your grief about them impacts the relationship as rejection, which (I imagine) is contrary to your relationship values.

We reviewed how your beloved's choices connect with their personal values and you were invited to write down the beliefs/messages/thoughts you have about people who leave religion. You noticed how when you focus on these messages you can lose sight of the relationship. Together you explored your relationship values and what happens when you put them into action.

Dear one, if you are struggling and need space to process your thoughts and feelings, I hope you will find it in ways that connect with your values. Many people find journaling helpful. If you need a neutral person to process with, you may benefit from working with a therapist.

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*If you found the exercises in this letter helpful, you might connect with ACT - Acceptance and Commitment Therapy - an approach to therapy that supports you in navigating painful thoughts & feelings to connect with your values.*

*I am such a therapist, supporting individuals navigating deconstruction through ACT, in Virginia. I often experience that the people I work with struggle with navigating their family relationships in this process. This letter is not a replacement for therapy. It is intended to help you start, or have a few new tools, for the conversation.*

*I believe in the importance of relationships. We need our go-to people. While it can certainly change things when someone leaves a once-shared community, it's important to remember that leaving the community isn't the same thing as choosing to leave the relationship.*

*Final thoughts: mutual kindness, respect and trust are necessary in healthy relationships. When people, included you and your beloved, find clarity in their personal values, embracing what matters to them, they often become less tolerant of what's not a good fit for them. Today, you have a relationship. I hope that continues as you both take action guided by your relationship values.*

*Thank you for being a person that your beloved chooses to share their vulnerable self with. Relationships where we can choose to show up vulnerably, are needed and precious.*

*With Care,*

*Helen Dempsey-Henofer LCSW*