

Literacy Narrative

by Alexandria González

Stepping through the doors of my parish was one of my favorite parts of going to church every week as a young child. I not only went for my own enjoyment (as well as to get away from three other siblings, always vying for the attention of our mother) but because I had a very important job. My abuela took me every Saturday, the routine making me feel like the most special, the singular favorite of her dozens of grandchildren, for I alone not only wanted to go with her but always was the only child to receive the invitation.

Shtup-shtupping along the red brick sidewalk and dragging my feet as I always did, my grandmother and I would walk in through the heavy wooden doors hand-in-hand and become immediately inundated by the unique and unmistakable aroma of our church. The smell of burning incense could be smelled from the foyer even with no altar boys or their thuribles in sight. On weekdays years later when we would go to religious education or Confirmation classes, the school would still smell of that myrrh and frankincense long after masses had ended for the week.

Holding my abuela's hand, we'd step into the sanctuary. Unlike the single front door, the doors to the sanctuary were many, made almost entirely of glass, and created next to no sound when pushed open. And yet my abuela always opened them so slowly, almost reverently, as if to make the silent action more silent still. Perhaps there was an apology to it. *Here we are, G-d, I'm so sorry it has been a full week, mea culpa*, perhaps she was thinking. Entering reverently, the hushed babbling of the large baptismal font, the gem of our church in my eyes, was the next thing you'd smell. Holy Water, clean and endlessly bubbling through an unseen filter in the top of the structure, splashing down into the massive basin like a Vatican City waterfall. A wet smell, like being outside near a lake, fresher and more natural than a pool.

Sitting in the unforgiving pews with my abuela, I always immediately got down to my most important business; finding all of the page numbers for my illiterate abuela in our hymnals, and singing out loud for her as she blindly followed along.

My abuela's illiteracy was well-known amongst the family. The importance of a good, well taken advantage of free education was one of the cornerstones of her nine children's upbringings. The seven who survived childhood passed the importance down along to the dozens of children they had. Tearfully, she loved to guilt us with the reminder that she not only had no mother growing up, but that she never got to learn to read past a 3rd grade level, and what little she did was only in Spanish. Did we want to end up like her? Look at her life! If you don't "Get you education, you gunna end up like me!" I idolized my grandmother, though; I felt that I was an extension of her. To put it simply, if she couldn't read, I would read for the both of us.

And so, I did.

I began reading at the age of 3. I sat upstairs in my abuela's house, all of my chores done, flipping through books. A picture book with the lyrics to Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer is the first book I remember reading. Months and months of singing the song over and over, connecting the alphabet patterns gleaned from *Sesame Street* with the blocks of symbols on the Little Golden Book's pages until finally, the bridges were created in my mind and I understood the words "dasher" and "prancer" and "and".

I in turn became insatiably hungry for more books, more stories, more bunches of symbols. My astute abuela noticed and would sit me at the kitchen table and slip prayer cards and religious pamphlets in front of me. She never had to ask a single thing. The second the literature was in front of me, I read it for her. An impulse, an involuntary response.

I learned how to venerate my saints this way, and how to pray the rosary. That most sacred and beloved ritual of my abuela, who prayed it in the chapel of her bedroom every day.

And so began my ongoing, never-ending odyssey of literacy. How deeply intrinsic was my literacy to my religion, such that I knew all the prayers of the rosary before I even sat down in the parish school for Religious Ed-

ucation classes. I knew all the most popular songs performed during Ordinary Time, and most of the songs sung only during specific holidays. After my baptism, finally able to step into and be lustrated in those immaculate, flowing waters of the baptismal font, I frequently caught myself humming the “Litany of the Saints”.

By the time I reached 10, I was so enamored by Catholicism and reading both, that they became inseparable in my mind. During Lent my fifth-grade year, I fasted and prayed the rosary in the school’s office during lunch. The perplexed secretary pretended she wasn’t sneaking confounded glances at me. This was the ultimate peak of my religiosity, enamored with, indoctrinated, and comforted by the rituals and incantations and sacraments.

This was to be the peak, with no plateau, because only a steep decline would follow this year.

Having taken it upon myself to begin reading the Bible in its entirety rather than small sections for candy prizes at Vacation Bible School, and having already chosen the saint I would be confirmed under during Confirmation in a few years’ time, I paged through the fables of the Pentateuch looking for the answer to a question that had always worried me: Do animals go to heaven when they die?

I couldn’t imagine my future patron saint, St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals, would dedicate his life to a G-d that didn’t allow animals into heaven. And also, what kind of deity wouldn’t allow my beloved and long-gone pets, Fito and Bruno and Chato, into heaven to greet me after a lifetime of waiting to be reunited with them? Sometimes I imagined Jesus himself sitting on a throne of gold and ivory with my pets sleeping at his feet, halos floating above those precious little ears, bounding over to me and so happy that I finally made it.

That’s a Mexican child’s morbid imagination for you.

When the Reverend Father, Fr. Mike, came to visit in our classroom one Monday I was so excited to ask my question. After weeks of reading with no answers, I had begun to just assume for myself that I had the right conclusion. But here was the expert, and so I took my question to the professional.

“No.” he declared, quite bluntly. “They don’t have souls.”

The silence that followed could’ve been contrived of my own horrified shock, but I swore even a feather could’ve dropped onto the floor and we all would’ve heard it land. Our teacher’s head snapped back to look at me, obviously sensing this response as a massive blunder. Not willing to contradict the Fr., she only nervously and mirthlessly laughed. Then, satisfied, with a curt head nod Fr. Mike was off to destroy the dreams of the other children in the building.

While I was weeping later, my mother tried to assure me that Fr. Mike didn’t know what he was talking about, of course G-d let Fito into heaven! He was such a good cat, he is waiting for you, sweetheart! But the damage was done. So wounded was my faith in G-d, and mortally so. I sobbed, the years of my love for G-d hemorrhaging from my spirit over the next week until, at the next Religious Education class, I was the bled-out shell of a child. I couldn’t, nor would I, love a deity who believed animals had no souls.

I still attended church with my family, with my abuela, and I still read her the saint cards. I still even participated in the church band, the Christmas pageant, did cheerleading for the church team. This was, after all, the only religion I knew. This was my sanctuary of marble and frankincense, of iridescent sunbeams through stained glass, of prostration before the golden tabernacle and 30’ hanging crucifix. I had no other way to live, to meditate, to cope or console myself. And so I went through the motions, lifelessly and forlorn until in recalcitrant adolescence, I finally decided to give up the holy ghost.

For years when asked, I still answered that I was a Catholic, but it felt something like being a stateless person in the country you were born in. That was until the birth of my first daughter. As doctors pulled her forth from my lacerated, torn, bleeding body I felt that there, in her first cry, G-d rushed again into my soul. In that operating room, I remembered my ability to read dogma. I remembered how to gather symbolism and interpret these folktales, to research where they came from, how they have persisted, and even where they came from before the concept of Judeo-Christianity.

As a young adult and mother, I came back to the Bible. I re-read the Pentateuch and, in my hunger, turned to the ancient rabbinical discussions regarding it: the Gemara, the Mishnah. I gained interest in the holidays that Jesus may have celebrated, the holidays which came from the Torah and persevered through generations despite pogroms and eviction decrees and the Shoah. I became insatiable for religious literary knowledge once again.

Shabbat rituals and singing prayers and learning how to read in a completely new alphabet, I felt just like my beloved abuela. Illiterate in Hebrew, I sat in the semi-circle around the bimah, watching my child read from right to left, learning a new set of letters from *Shalom Sesame*. Together, we'd both figure out how to make sense of these blocks of symbols. I became empowered to believe again. I gained the courage to have faith again, and to put the emphasis of life on the impact I make on Earth through *mitzvot* and *tikkun olam*. I even shared certain aspects of this new religious way of life with my abuela and the rest of my family.

Alas, years after my conversion, having been lustrated once more in mikveh waters, my abuela passed away. Walking into the funeral held in our old parish, I was overwhelmed by the never forgotten scent of frankincense and holy water. My eldest, who my abuela had begun taking to church with her, dipped her fingers into the font and pressed the water to her forehead, which she learned from her beloved *Nini Nana*.

Ambling up to the podium I bowed as if it were the bimah and read from the Tanakh in her Catholic funeral mass. My hair covered by a mantilla that doubled as a tichel, because I was married now. Brimming with tears my eyes couldn't make out the distinct pattern and symbols on the pages in front of me, and so I raised my eyes to try clearing them from my burning lids. As I looked out into the sanctuary, I could imagine my abuela, the woman who encouraged my literacy and my love of G-d, sitting on the right-hand side of the church as she did every Saturday with me in tow. With trembling breath, I read one last time for my abuela.