

Howard

“My face had become my enemy.”

*Taken from Jonathan Carswell's book [‘Uncovered: True Stories of Changed Lives’](#)
available from [10ofthose.com](#)*

“Christians are insecure, naïve and they belong in a ‘mad’ house.” Or so I thought. In the days approaching my arrival at Nottingham University I believed that I had the whole Christianity – religion thing figured out. “It’s a man-made self-help tool, born out of a time of crisis and suffering, when there was a need for hope,” I used to tell myself. “It’s just intellectual suicide.” Little did I know that in barely twenty months time, a handful of Christians at Nottingham University would squash an arrogant law students’ stereotypical thinking for good.

I grew up in a happy and loving family who were comfortably above the poverty line. I got on well with my sister, Hannah, too, even though there are a couple of years between us. It all seemed so perfect; however, inside I was desperately unhappy. My face had become my enemy.

What I saw in the mirror, I hated. My nose and my ears – I hated them. Catching a glimpse of myself in a mirror or in the reflection of a CD filled my mind with such disappointment at how I looked. I wanted so much to change my face. There were times when I couldn’t bear to look into the mirror and others when once I looked I couldn’t draw myself away, as I played with my face and imagined what it would like if my nose were smaller, straighter and my ears more symmetrical. It was an obsession. I wanted my physical appearance to bring me happiness and I was prepared to do anything to make that happen.

My mind had toyed with the idea of plastic surgery for some time. When I weighed up the cost and the pain of having it done compared to my looks, there was only going to be one outcome. I just wanted to be happy. ‘Plastic surgery is the answer’, I thought. ‘If I just have a small change here and there I’ll be happy.’ I believed that the route to true happiness was to look good.

Naturally, my parents were worried about me. I had, towards the end of my GCSEs, become quite reclusive. I stayed in my room a lot of the time and wasn't keen to go out with my mates. It was as if I'd put my life on hold until I was satisfied with my appearance. My school work wasn't suffering as staying in gave me time to work, but my friends had become somewhat distant.

My parents were aware that I was toying with the idea of plastic surgery and suggested I see a doctor or somebody professionally qualified in these matters before rushing into anything. I happily obliged. If anyone could help me, I was willing to listen to their advice. My Mum arranged for me to see my GP and a couple of days later we went to speak to him together about my suggestion of having plastic surgery. I was referred to a NHS doctor at first and then to a private plastic surgeon, Dr Gault.

Dr Gault was caring and sympathetic to my situation. He could see how insecure I had become as I struggled to make eye contact with him. He was mildly confident, however, that he could improve my appearance and a provisional date was set for the operation.

Mum and Dad were not supportive of the idea of me having surgery at first, but under the pressure of my own loneliness and despair and no doubt their love for me and confidence in Dr Gault, they agreed to the surgery. So, in the summer holidays between first and second years of 'A' Levels, I had a 'nose and ear job'.

The prospect of being "fixed" was electrifying. I thought this was the beginning of a brand new me. The wheeling into theatre was both an exhilarating and scary experience. I was taken over with the thought that in just a matter of hours I would be leaving slightly sore, but looking pretty good and crucially, feeling happy.

As I lay in the hospital ward post surgery, my face was numb and heavy. They said it would be but this was unreal. I was still wearing a tight mask they had fixed over my nose and I felt like there was a ten tonne weight pressing on my face. "It will all be worth it though," I told myself, "If it makes me look good. A couple of days of pain are worth persevering with if it brings years of happiness and contentment."

Eating was difficult but laughing was near impossible. Jokes were not allowed, the pain of smiling was too much! It was exciting though, how would I look when the mask came off and the swelling and bruising had died down?

It was a strange experience looking into the mirror for the first time. I think part of me wondered if I would recognise my own face. It's difficult to explain my reaction when I first gazed at my new reflection. It wasn't wow! Yes, the improvement was obvious, I was looking better, albeit bruised...but it was still my face.

Nearly two months had passed since the operation and I was back at college. None of my friends were aware that I had had any surgery. Whether or not they noticed, I have no idea.

I'm not sure when my initial satisfaction turned to disappointment. It was a gradual plummet. Nevertheless, two months or so later I was staring into the broken mirror again, looking discontently at myself. I was unhappy again. I wanted more plastic surgery. The gloomy storm clouds had returned to hand over my life once more. My heart was heavy with the emptiness that my life had thrust upon me.

I was depressed. However, I was not beyond help and was willing to try and work things out if I possibly could. My parents, who have always been very good to me, were doing all they could to help. They suggested that I should perhaps go talk with a counsellor, if I thought it would help. I willingly agreed and an appointment was booked. To be honest, it didn't help very much. I needed more than someone to listen to me – I already had this in my Mum and Dad. So, we went back to my GP who prescribed me Prozac, an antidepressant, and referred me to a psychiatrist at the famous London clinic, the Priory.

Driving to the Priory I was nervous and unsure what I would be met with or be required to do or say. The large Gothic manor house appeared from around the corner and as we drove up the long, smartly kept drive the frown on my forehead dropped a little. I arrived at the front desk and gave my name to the tidily dressed, middle-aged receptionist. She asked me to take a seat in the reception area.

The doctor came into the reception area about ten minutes later and walked us down the corridor and into his office. It was more like a large sitting room than an office. The walls were covered in books, some of which looked like they had never been touched and were there more for decoration than anything else! On his desk sat a rather impressive model of a brain.

The doctor's respect for me and my emotions was encouraging. We talked for nearly an hour and I remember his saying, "Look at me – I'm not much to look at am I? And yet I am one of the most respected and sort after doctors in my field. I am not perfect and yet I am extremely successful." Begrudgingly, I knew there was some truth to what he was saying. Without being rude, he was not blessed with good looks and yet here he was earning loads of money, happy with his life and respected by people all over the world. If I was right and only 'beautiful' people could be successful, how could he be a successful psychiatrist, treating the likes of Kate Moss? He referred me to a specialist in body image problems, Dr Stoll, on the famous medical street in London, Harley Street.

My visits to Dr Stoll in Harley Street were the catalyst in my process of recovery from the depression that had swallowed my life. He helped me to help myself. I recall him saying at an early session, "If you think you have to be perfect before you can be successful in life then you have got things quite wrong. You're missing out on life if you're putting life on hold till you think you're perfect."

Deep down I knew he was right. It was about this time as well that I had a follow up appointment with Dr Gault who honestly explained that any follow-up operations could cause more harm than good, expressed his reluctance about performing any further operations and echoed Dr Stoll's advice.

It was a bitter pill to swallow at first but I knew they were right. I began to realise how foolish I was being missing out on so much whilst putting my life on hold.

I attended just over half a dozen appointments with Dr Stoll, sharing how I felt about myself and my life for sixty minutes or so every fortnight. I was slowly beginning to make a recovery and to embrace life again.

Despite my depression and frequent doctor's appointments I did quite well in my 'A' levels and got into my first choice university, Nottingham, to study law. I deferred my entry to Nottingham for a year to give myself some time to earn some money and experience new things. I was keen to explore the spiritual as well as the physical and so took up the Eastern martial art of Tai Chi Chuan. It was mysterious and stimulating, something that appealed to me greatly. My parents were excited that I was getting out more and getting involved in 'normal' life again. Dad came along to the Tai Chi class sometimes and we had great fun together.

As part of my Tai Chi training the opportunity arose for me to travel to Malaysia for a month to train. I jumped at the chance to train with the Masters in Malaysia!

The trip was a great experience but if I was subconsciously on a search for truth and meaning in life I didn't really find any answers in Malaysia. I enjoyed training and continued to practice in the fields at Nottingham University.

University proved to be a good experience for me. Not only was I able to have a fresh start, but it was while at Uni' that I became friends with a couple of people – Christians – on my 'corridor' who seem to have something I lacked.

Just as I had been deceived by the stereotype that only beautiful people can be happy and successful, I was deceived by the stereotype that Christians are 'namby-pamby' people who are out of touch with reality. Jude (a 2nd year) and Kate (a fresher) were not how I imaged Christians to be. They were really friendly and interested in others, something that most people I knew were only like during Freshers' week!

While at times they appeared vulnerable I was impressed that they both seemed to have a deep strength, something I had never had. 'What should I make of people like this?' I thought, unsure of the answer. It appeared a little strange to me that the two of them seemed so content with God, somebody they have never seen. My mind was closed and unresponsive to their beliefs because for me their beliefs seemed illogical, something for them but not for me.

A couple of months into Uni' life, persuaded by Kate and Jude, most of our corridor trooped over together to another hall of residence to attend a Christian Union meeting. Kate and some other Christians were going to explain how and why they became Christians. I think we claimed we were going as moral support but truth be told I was a little curious about the whole 'Christian Union - CU' thing.

Kate was a bubbly character whom it was easy to like. I respected her because it was obvious that she genuinely believed in God.

I sat at the back, with my friends, and listened intently to what she and about two other people said. The simplicity of what they said surprised me. Although each person had different starting points, some of which were very moving, they all came to the same conclusion: they had done wrong against the God who made them and loved them. As a result of their wrong, or sin as they called it, they had been cut off from having a personal relationship with God.

It is probably fair to say that this was when I really started to consider Christianity as one of my options in tentatively seeking to fill that uncertain void I felt. It was a decision that made the palms of my hands a little clammy with nervousness. In my opinion Christians were 'wackos' and now I was wondering whether there was something more to them and their beliefs. I asked myself many times: why on Earth am I letting myself consider this? It was because they seemed so 'normal' though, that I could not dismiss their beliefs totally. After all, my misunderstanding through stereotyping had caused me big problems in the past; I didn't want it to happen again.

Towards the end of the first year I was sort of 'press-ganged' mainly by Kate and her Christian friends to attend a group that they called 'Just Looking', which was designed for those who had questions and were looking into the claims of Jesus. I was very reluctant to go. I was a little embarrassed about attending and really wanted to play football with my mates on the night the course was being held. In order not to look rude, however, and out of sympathy because I thought very few people would attend, I nodded and agreed to go to the first meeting.

I went along as promised and was pleased to see a handful of others present. Eventually, however football won the day and I dropped out.

The summer holidays or rather a summer job as a removal man came and went and I returned to Nottingham for my second year.

At the start of term I was living with three guys and a girl in a small terraced house in 'studentsville'. My housemates were a good bunch and fun to be around. The lads in particular were larger than life characters who were always up for some partying, and being lads, always keen with the ladies. I went out into town with them sometimes and we had a laugh together, although their idea of fun didn't quite seem to match up with mine anymore.

As for most students, time at Uni' flies-by and before I knew it I was getting invited to Christmas parties again. I had always loved Christmas because my family made it such a fun time. Time away to relax and recoup your energy levels can never be a bad thing!

Kate and a number of other Christians from my hall of residence were involved in organising the Christian Union carol service and were keen for me to go. It turned out to be a partial 'house' outing.

We arrived quite early and were sat about ten or twelve rows from the front. The hall soon became quite full and by the time we had sung the first carol, people were beginning to stand at the back. The candles flickered as 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' rang around the hall. Then a guy was quizzed about why and how he became a Christian. It was a bit like the stories we had heard a few months before at the Christian Union. Another carol was sung and the story of Jesus' birth was read from the Bible. Then a little to our surprise, a guy stood up and gave a 'preachy' talk. My mates weren't too happy about this – this wasn't what they had come for. I wasn't too bothered though. In fact, the guy who spoke was pretty interesting, not to mention entertaining. His name was Paul and he spoke very honestly about what faith in Jesus really means and why we need Him so much. He explained how God had created the world perfectly, just as He wanted it; and that the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, disobeyed what God had told them so they were cut off

from knowing Him. “For the same reason,” he said, “we are cut off from God today – because we continually disobey Him and do as we want, with no regard for Him. However, because God is a God of love, He came from Heaven to Earth, in the form of His son Jesus, to die on a cross – taking the punishment of our wrong-doing on Himself, so that we can escape His judgement and be saved. But Jesus didn’t stay dead. He came back to life three days later – just as He said He would, appearing to over 500 people. Before returning back to heaven he made a promise that He would come back, just as He left.”

I began to fidget. Not through boredom, but because I had so many questions in my head again, that I was finding it hard to concentrate on what Paul was saying. Just before he finished his talk though, he said something that surprised me very much.

“I am so glad you are here tonight and have heard about the good news of Jesus. I am going to be stood at the back in a minute and on your way out, if you want to talk to me then I would be delighted to spend some time chatting. However, if you need to rush off then my address is on the back of the little booklet about Christmas that was on your chair when you came in and you can get in touch with me that way.”

It was a brave statement – students can be strange people you know! And yet Paul was willing to take that risk – that impressed me.

My friends were ready to leave as soon as it was over. They were bitter that some guy they had never heard of “preached at them” for thirty minutes.

It took me until the end of the holidays to pluck up the courage to write to him. As I sat down at my laptop and started a letter to Paul I smiled to myself as I realised what I was doing. I was writing to a man I had heard speak once and hadn’t even met, and now here I was writing to him, pouring out the questions of life that consumed my troubled mind...

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Dear Paul,

I hope you don't mind me writing to you. I am a student at Nottingham and heard you speak at their Christian Union carol service. I was impressed and would like to ask for your guidance.

My goal in life is to find the truth, or at least strive to find the truth. I struggle to accept Christianity, despite talking with Christians and reading books; I can't divorce myself from the opinion I regrettably feel myself forming, that Christianity is merely a 'self-help' tool.

As I make my journey in life I have found many truths through my experiences and in this sense I am slowly building myself a 'centre' which has no limits, no boundaries, in essence no terminal creed. At least this is the view I would like to adopt. Unfortunately, at times my faith in this belief system is significantly undermined – I have nothing greater than myself from which to draw strength - yet this implicitly seems right.

Essentially, I would like to examine the evidence and claims which are the foundation of the belief in Christianity. Ideally I would like to be able to feel the truth, to know the truth. I have tried praying and have been to the Christian Union meetings. Unfortunately, having experienced various belief systems, I demand more than a supportive role in which my anxieties and problems can be displaced.

I have further reservations which would certainly be overridden if I could adopt Christianity as the truth. Why is Christianity divided and uncertain? Why does it set absolute boundaries, preventing the human from growing? Why does it condemn practicing homosexuals to hell? Why does it take a blanket approach to no sex before marriage, without leaving it to the judgement of the individuals involved? Why does it dismiss all other religions as wrong, without considering the

possibility that the truth may have been expressed and interpreted differently around the world? Was Christianity created in a time of crisis, suffering and depressions, when there was a need for salvation and hope? Is it therefore created by man and impacted on by man's environment? Why does the Bible stem from one main source, St Paul?

Yours sincerely and gratefully,

Howard

I licked the stamp and made the short walk to the post box. As I walked home I wondered to myself if I would every get a reply? I hoped I would but doubted that I would ever hear from Paul again. Deciding not to tell anyone about the letter, I put the fact that I had written it to the back of my mind and tried to forget about it.

Three days later my inbox read 'You've got mail'. To my surprise, I had one from Paul. He was brief but friendly...

< Howard,

Thanks for your letter and all your questions. I'm sorry it has taken me a couple of days to reply, but I have been away from my desk.

I am due to be back with the Christian Union at Nottingham at the end of February – I suggest that we meet up for a coffee and chat things through then. Does that sound ok?

Best wishes,

Paul >>

In the weeks that followed, preoccupied with exams and coursework, I completely forgot about Paul's reply.

It wasn't until mid-February that I had a strange message from Paul re-laid to me by a Christian friend of Kate's, that he's coming to Nottingham University in a week to speak at a series of evening and lunchtime talks and would I be able to meet up with him after one of the evening talks. I was surprised to say the least.

Somewhat anxiously I attended the second to last evening talk. I was there with Kate and Andy, one of Kate and Jude's friends who gave his testimony at the CU meeting last year. Andy was really friendly and willing to help explain his faith to me, and as a theology student, I thought he was suitably qualified for the task. We spoke for a long time that evening before and after Paul's talk. Andy was very persuasive, he said that on the available evidence, the Bible and notable historians, it is more unrealistic to say that the Resurrection of Jesus was a hoax or a lie than to accept that it really happened.

After this talk with Andy, people began to leave the meeting and I was introduced to Paul. He remembered me instantly from my letter and we made our way back to Andy's house, for coffee. Despite having a bad cold and the late hour, Paul was keen to chat.

As Paul answered many of my questions, it appeared that the Bible could answer all of them, however difficult I thought they were.

"Howard, the best thing for you to do now is read the Bible for yourself. As you're a law student, you might enjoy reading the book of Romans..."

We went our separate ways and I was left with much to ponder. My head felt a little less consumed with questions since I was having them slowly answered one by one. It had been a long but beneficial evening, although I was ready to fall asleep as soon as I got home. My housemates were watching a video when I got in so after a quick 'Hello!' I headed up to my room, falling asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

The following two or three weeks were both exciting and challenging. I took out an armful of books from the library that looked at the arguments for and against Christianity. I also committed myself to do as Paul said and try to read the Bible for myself. I was a little hesitant at first, as I had never really read the Bible by myself before. In the end I decided to start with the book of Mark, which is an eye-witness account of Jesus' life on Earth. It was something I had never understood before. As I began to read and dipped into other books of the Bible I found myself being more and more compelled to believe. It was fair to say that my interest had been aroused, I was now seriously weighing up the ramifications this would have on my life.

I had, following the suggestion of Kate, started to attend her "happy-clappy" church. It seemed a bit barmy at first, singing, shouting, clapping and hands raised in the air, but I could sense an order and sincerity in the worship and preaching. In the days before what would have been about my third visit to church, I felt that deep down things were still not right. I was doing the right thing I guess, by reading the Bible and going to church, but I still knew that as yet I had not truly stepped out in faith in Jesus and his act of forgiveness on the Cross. I felt I needed to acknowledge him and was hoping that this week at church, like the other weeks, there would be an opportunity for me to respond to Jesus.

Sunday morning arrived and I was once again deeply challenged by what I heard. There was nothing new or different to what the minister of the church was saying, however this time I knew I couldn't put off the wrong I had done before God, and my need to ask Him to forgive me and change me so that I might live for Him rather than myself.

Towards the end of the service the minister explained that he was going invite anyone who had not given their life to Christ to stand up in the service, whilst everyone else had their eyes closed and he would pray a short prayer. I knew I wanted to stand but I was so nervous I had to battle to get to my feet. I managed to stand up, body trembling with nerves and began to repeat the minister's prayer...

"God - I admit that I have done wrong against you and I want to say sorry. Please forgive me. I want to trust in Jesus who has taken the punishment for my sin. Please will you live within me and

change me so that I may become more like you. Thank you for loving me and for hearing this prayer.”

As I sat in my chair next to Kate, nothing mysterious or radical happened, however I did feel a great sense of peace and happiness that I had never experienced in my life before. It was something I now know only comes through having the confidence to say that Jesus has forgiven every wrong thing I have ever done, and that now with His help I can live for Him every day and one day go to heaven to be with Him forever.

Howard openly admits that the Christian life has not been plain sailing since becoming a Christian and often has to remind himself that the way he looks and feels has no relation to the peace and happiness that comes through the forgiveness of sins, through Jesus. His identity is no longer through his looks, but in the relationship he has with Jesus.

***"Don't judge by his appearance or height...the LORD doesn't make decisions the way you do!
People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at a person's thoughts and
intentions."
1 Samuel 16v7***