

Knowledge is Power

Kimberly Perez, T'19

In order to explain in which ways my core beliefs have been tested and transformed during my time in college, I must spend considerable time explaining where they came from. So, let me begin by introducing myself. My name is Kimberly Perez. I was born on August 26th of 1997, but I would say that I *truly* began living on August 24th of 2015, the day I unlocked the potential of my mind and free-will and finally began thinking for myself—otherwise known as my very first day of classes at Duke University.

As an immigrant and a first-generation college student, attaining higher education was an uphill battle from the start. I'm glad that Duke recognizes the feats of students like me. Upon arriving to Duke, I was met with 1G, a pre-orientation program designed to facilitate the navigation of an elite school for first-generation college students. While having my struggles recognized and validated was an incredible feeling, there remained one obstacle that I kept to myself, one I omitted from my application. Today, less than two months away from my graduation, I realize that my religious beliefs were the barrier that proved to be more defining of my Duke experience than any of those I've already mentioned.

My parents have been Jehovah's Witnesses for as long as I can remember. Subsequently, I was raised in the faith. By way of background, Jehovah's Witnesses is a Christian denomination with beliefs distinct from mainstream Christianity. The fundamental difference between the life of an ordinary person and that of a Witness is that Witness lives are effectively micromanaged by a religious hierarchy based in New York, a board of eight men known as the Governing Body. Growing up, my faith certainly served as a protection from many of the ugly things this world has to offer. It taught me many, if not all, of the core beliefs—some of them good—with which I entered college. However, my faith also restricted me from things most would consider inoffensive and/or joyous (e.g. celebrating birthdays or voting in any sort of election). Although I was never thrilled about certain limitations that my faith imposed on my lifestyle, I complied. Why wouldn't I when I was so certain this was God's will?

There was one ideal of the organization, however, that even my parents couldn't support. The organization vehemently discourages any and all Witnesses from pursuing higher education. As one member of the Governing Body put it, "The better the university, the greater the danger. The most intelligent and eloquent professors will be trying to reshape the thinking of your child, and their influence can be tremendous."

My parents just didn't have it in them to deny me the opportunity of higher education, an opportunity that they themselves couldn't have and one that they worked so hard to give me. Once I was officially enrolled at Duke, my father was stripped of his "privileges." He was no longer seen as a Christian man suitable for considerable responsibility in the congregation due to his parenting choices. The truth that I discovered is that the organization is afraid of young people learning to evaluate their beliefs objectively through organic interaction with others in an environment where free thought is encouraged.

I say that my life because in 2015 because Duke gradually gave me the tools necessary to effectively analyze my faith with a critical eye. It started with being around so many people who were different from me. It was followed by Bio 202, the evolutionary biology class required for the premed track. Then, as an international comparative studies major, I learned a lot about the power structures in place in the world, human rights theory, ethical inquiry, and the long-lasting effects of colonialism. As the gears in my autonomous mind were finally turning, tragically, I was sexually assaulted in my junior year. Only survivors can tell you what trauma like this can do to your faith in God and what is supposed to be good. It was time to really see if I truly believed in what I said I did. I tried tirelessly—bible study after bible study—to acquire the strength from my religious beliefs that I needed during that difficult time in my life. But after everything I had learned in 2.5 years at Duke, my faith simply didn't hold up against my new perspectives.

At this point, I had to do what I was once sure would have caused me to be struck by lightning on the spot: turn to "apostate literature." To Witnesses, apostate literature is any information that may contradict the teachings of the organization. Duke gave me the courage to trust my own intuition and formulate my own arguments. Finally, I found information that backed the uneasiness I was feeling about my faith, information that helped me get through the aftermath of my assault. Today, as I write this essay, I continue to explore ideas on the purpose of life and what it means to me. During this last semester of my college experience, I chose to enroll in a course titled Christian Ethics and Modern Society. Thus far, I've learned and considered more than I could have ever anticipated. So here I am, continuing to question and continuing to believe in my own opinions. Knowledge is power, and Duke has empowered me for the rest of my life.