

OPINIONS

# Struggling to find my truth in religion

The fire hisses, warms the air, devours the twigs in the steel bowl in front of me. I face the flame, sitting on a stool three inches above the ground.

We're close around the fire – Mom and Dad to my left. Seven priests complete the circle.

One of the priests in a frayed, orange shawl rapidly chants in Sanskrit, saying words I don't understand.

"...Swaha" . . . our cue to place the offerings into the homam.

Nervously, I drop the grains into the fire, trying not to burn my hand, trying to drop them at the exact same time as all the priests do.

I rest my hand on my knee, knowing I'll have to continue the ritual for another hour until the priests finish taking turns chanting.

*Ugh. Why can't this be over?*

But right away, I answer my own question.

*Because my parents believe this is the truth, and it's so hard to let them down. That's why.*

...

*A few weeks earlier:*

*It only works if you believe, Dad says. He always says that.*

What if I can't believe? Can't have the same faith? Can't trust the rules and dogma other people — the priests — have created to govern my life?

I bite my lip, hold back, afraid I'll spill to Mom and Dad what I'm really thinking.



Sai Thirunagari  
Focus Magazine editor

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Say I can't bring myself to commit to their version of the religion that's been a part of me since I was born.

I'm too afraid to abandon the traditions, rituals, superstitions, beliefs Mom and Dad and their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents trusted their whole lives.

I love so much of my faith, but I can't get over the rules that seem to hurt more than help me, seem to adulterate the beautiful purity of Hinduism.

So I say, "Ok... I'll do it." Mom breathes a soft sigh, smiles. She's happy, satisfied, relieved.

*Thank you. We'll buy the plane tickets. She gives me a kiss. You know it's only for your own good.*

I look away because I know if I look them in the eye, I'll say something I shouldn't.

Say I don't want to go on this 10-day pilgrimage to

*Because the priest said so, Mom says.*

I oblige. Suppress my doubts, my disbelief, my disagreement. Pretend to believe what they say.

I can't just blindly accept the little things that don't make sense to me. I've tried, but I can't keep feeling like I'm deceiving myself.

So Mom and Dad, please don't be upset. I'm sorry. I can't wear the lie anymore. Can't let the superstitions — the man-made rules — govern my beliefs anymore. Can't let someone come between the gods and me.

Please don't think teenage cynicism is making me challenge my beliefs just to be a rebel. It's not. I simply can't bear the weight — the pressure — to conform to every single tradition.

I'm still a devout Hindu. I think I'll always be — it's such a fundamental part of who I am — but in a more spiritual sense. I'm letting go of the Hinduism where I follow customs only because I'm afraid of what'll happen if I don't.

I'll still pray every day. Still believe in the lessons I've learned. Still try to be a good person — a good man. Still trust in the gods.

I will still continue to genuinely search for the truth of God.

But no more superstitions. No more compromises. No more traditions I don't believe in.

Only the truth.

**I'm still a devout Hindu. I think I'll always be.**

Sai Thirunagari

## Sally's pigtails: understanding selflessness at summer camp

I'm surrounded — *surrounded* — by about eight campers.

*Eight campers.*

*Eight girl campers.*

Eight *eight-to-ten-year-old* girl campers — at their cabin's lunch table, too.

And my first-year-counselor self has no idea what's going on.

They're screeching, question after question, demand after demand . . .

*"Hold your head still! It's hard to put this rubberband in when you're moving so much!"*

*"Why are you such a meanie in our bedtime stories?!"*

*"Sally! Are you really from Texas?!"*

...

The lunchtime conversation is all over the place. From the correct way to eat a taco to whether a spoon or a knife is a more useful utensil, these girls can't seem to keep their minds on the same topic for more than 15 seconds.

There's a very real difference in energy between the quiet, Rubix-cube-playing eight-to-15-year-old guys in my cabin — whom I normally eat with — and these eight-to-10-year-old Energizer bunnies disguised as humans.

Boom! New topic. Now it's the "girl name" I should receive as part of my initiation into the younger girls' cabin.

I squint out of the corner of my eye. At least four girls putting hairbands in my hair, trying to convert some of my hair into something resembling pigtails.

I look in front of me. Four more girls interrogating

me. Talking over each other. I'm not really able to make out a complete question, but I think they're asking why Sid the Kid keeps stealing things from the good guys.

I give them my what-are-you-talking-about face. I haven't stolen anything from camp. I guess I'm supposed to know all the answers, but I have no clue where this came from.

*"What do you mean?" I fire back defensively. "I'm not a thief."*

*"Well, you see," says one of the girls, trying to thoughtfully put into words why her whole cabin seems to hate me. "In our bedtime story, there's a character named Sid The Kid. He sounds a lot like you, and he steals everything precious from everyone good."*

Fantastic. These campers think I'm a thief. Just what I need.

The girls yanking my hair manage to put every strand of my bangs in one of three different black, blue, red hairbands . . . and a *bright* red scrunchie.

*"Should we call her Sydney?!"* someone screams.

Right. Back to my girl name. I'm a *her* now, after all.

*"No, it's too close to a guy's name,"* one of the bedtime story investigators says. *"We need something girlier."*

For a moment, silence. Pure, golden silence. The Energizer bunnies hush for a moment, thinking of girl names for me. Names that start with the letter S.

I take a deep breath, trying to wrap my mind around what's happened in the last few minutes.

And halfway through my deep breath that's supposed to calm me down, one of the girls still tugging



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at my hair shouts, "What about Sally?"

And with one suggestion, the girls' silent-and-thinking switches are flipped.

The roller coaster starts again.

*"Yeah! Sally! That's a great name,"* the story investigator yells in agreement.

*Hi Sally! Welcome to the cabin! Do you like your name? Your hair looks great! Can you braid my hair? Can I braid your hair?*

I'm asking myself some questions too.

*Who the hell thought of this? Why? Just why?*

Then I remember the answers.

Remember a couple of hours ago when I asked staff, "Wouldn't it be a fun idea to swap counselors for lunch?"

Now, pigtailed, ears ringing, *Sally* is thinking, *great idea, genius.*

Then I get to the *why* — because it was fun when I was a camper.

And then the bigger truth hits me. The whole reason I loved camp for the six years I was a camper. The truth staff spent all of counselor training week drilling into our heads. The reason I don't have anything to complain about right now.

*Camp is for the campers.*

So I'll laugh when they tug on my hair, even though it hurts.

I'll spin stories about how Sid the Kid is really a good guy trying to help people who need it.

And I'll let them clumsily spill metallic pink nail polish all over my hands. Let them giggle as they call me Sally. Let them laugh their hearts out at the four pigtails sticking out of my head.

Because camp is for the campers.



Cartoon James Shiao

### Around the Quad

Students and faculty answer our questions

Have you done anything differently for the environment after the Amazon fires and increased ocean awareness?



**I've almost completely stopped using single-use plastics for water consumption.**

Stephen Arbogast, Chaplain



**I've begun composting all of my food and paper waste in my backyard.**

Nick Kowalske, senior



**I've started using a reusable water bottle instead of plastic water bottles.**

Wyatt Awtrey, senior



**I've been trying to use less paper due to the deforestation that is happening there.**

Rahul Banerjee, junior