

Good morning!

Before I introduce myself I need to say that I have put a lot of thought and prayer into this talk. It originally started off much differently, but as I've worked and reworked it it's turned into something much more powerful than it was. This is, essentially, my testimony of the Atonement.

I pray that each of you will be touched, in one way or another. And I want you all to know that you can talk to me about anything I say today - I'm in the ward facebook group and I'm in LDS tools. I don't know nearly enough of you. :)

Hello, my name is Hanna Thayer. I'm newly 24. I'm an artist, a very amateur chef, a mediocre pianist, and a voracious reader. I'm afraid of spiders and zombies, and I don't like watermelon. I suffer from anxiety and depression, and I am a recovering addict. I tell you this because one of the experiences I am going to share today deals with addiction – and the only healing I have found has been through the Atonement. But we'll get there.

I am going to start with the story of Christ blessing the children in the Americas. You can find the story in 3 Nephi 17:21-24, which reads: “...and He took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them....and He spake unto the multitude, and said unto them, Behold your little ones. And as they looked to behold they cast their eyes towards heaven, and they saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven as it were in the midst of fire, and they came down and encircled those little ones about,...and the angels did minister unto them.”

I never thought about this story much until one of my BYU institute teachers presented a different view of it. He explained that these little children had just gone through an immensely traumatic experience – what they probably thought was the end of the world: earthquakes, buildings falling down, and then total darkness, for days, probably separated from their parents and families. Think about yourself as a child and then try to place yourself in this situation; I would have been terrified.

But then Christ comes, bringing light, and blesses each of these little children, probably with forgetfulness, and with strength and courage and comfort. He blesses them all, and then angels minister to them. I believe this was one of the first great ministrations of the Atonement. Think of it - He'd taken upon Himself the terror, the pain, the suffering of these little children, *individually*, only a few days before. He knew *exactly* what blessings they each needed, and He *personally* delivered those blessings.

Stephen Mitchell said, “What we are tempted to call a disaster is sometimes the first, painful stage of a blessing,” and in my own life, I have seen this clearly. Many terrible things have led me to the wonderful place I'm at now – and that last statement only makes sense if I also state that my testimony of the Atonement is one of healing. Christ has said that He will heal “any who are afflicted in any way,” and through the Atonement, this is made infinitely possible.

I don't know how many of you follow Humans of New York, but you all should. A few months ago, one of the posts on facebook caught my eye, and I want to share a piece of it with you: “Going through life without God is like being an astronaut tumbling out of control in outer

space....you've got to stay close. You can't cut your umbilical cord.” I just love that. And, at least for me, life without God really is like that, directionless and terrifying.

Now I have three personal experiences to share with you, and I pray, as before, that I can bring the Spirit and touch something in each of you. As a short background, I grew up in the church, but became less active in 2012, was totally inactive in 2013, and returned in 2014, but I've only been truly active since about June.

In 2012, I was plunged into a deep depression. All I clearly recall from that year is lying in bed in the middle of the day watching *Friends*. I felt like I had nothing to live for – my family was far away, my best and only friend in Salt Lake had just gotten engaged, I'd just moved and didn't know my roommates, and no one at work or school seemed to notice I was there. I had no one.

Needless to say, it was a very dark time in my life. During a conversation with my mother around this time she promised that if I would just pray to feel Heavenly Father's love for me, I would be able to, and I would feel peace.

I prayed that night for close to three hours, and I felt nothing. I felt *nothing*. It was the single worst night of my life. However, even though I was so numb, even though I could only feel vague, all-encompassing pain, Heavenly Father got me through that year. I didn't have the will to keep on living, but somehow I stayed alive.

Over the past couple years I've thought a lot about that moment, and it's only recently that I've been able to understand that I was in such a deep dark state of mental and emotional anguish I was completely unable to feel His love. I physically could not feel the Spirit.

This has become more apparent to me as I've come back to church and been able to feel the Spirit again. Yes, the pains and aches of depression are still there, but they're not as strong, not as demanding as they were; and I've also gained an unshakable testimony of Heavenly Father's love for me. I had a recent experience that solidified this beyond all doubt.

This last November, after going to the Salt Lake temple for the first time at least three years, I walked over to the North Visitor's Center, the one with the statue of Christ, and sat down smack in the middle of the back row of couches. For a few moments, the space was empty, clear of all tourists, families, and missionaries. In those few moments, I could feel so many spirits around me – my children, my grandparents, my sister – and so many others I didn't know. But I could feel their love for me, and I could feel the love of my Heavenly Father and my Savior, Jesus Christ. I can testify that when President George Q. Cannon said that “[there] is not one of us that [Heavenly Father] has not given His angels charge concerning,” he was speaking the truth.

The second experience I'd like to share is the story of my first Addiction Recovery meeting. The first Sunday I came to this ward was June 8, 2014. I'd been struggling with my addiction for about a year and a half and I kept saying to myself, *it's just a bad habit, I can stop anytime, in fact I'm stopping right now!* I'd said those words to myself that morning, actually. And then the third hour meeting was about the church's addiction recovery program. I knew as soon as the speaker began that I needed to go to an ARP meeting. So I looked up the LDS Addiction

Recovery website – I think I actually looked it up on my phone during the meeting - and found a meeting on Tuesday, June 10, that was relatively close to my house.

That Tuesday I drove to the church building and let me tell you, I've *literally* never had to make so many detours. There was a police barricade I had to go around, and construction on at least three streets, making them impassible. Someone clearly did not want me to get to that meeting. But I persevered. As I walked toward the door, I was so nervous. I was afraid I was going to be the only girl there. I was convinced everyone would judge me for what my addiction was, and that this was a bad idea, and that I had no idea what I was doing and that I should just go home.

But I have never felt more love in my entire life. As I sat there and listened to the stories of the fifteen or so people around me, I teared up. I couldn't help it – I was feeling the Spirit for the first time in over two years. I'd never seen more amazing examples of strength in the face of utter despair and hopelessness than I did that night.

I was one of the last to speak. When I admitted, for the first time, that I was an addict, I started crying so hard I could barely talk. I'd never felt such an incredible sense of divine love directed specifically at me before. It was overwhelming.

The third and last experience I'd like to share is from 2013, the worst year of my life. I don't say that lightly, either – I mean it. I was in a manipulative and emotionally abusive relationship for most of that year, and it's not something I like to dwell on. It caused me to walk away from the church – I turned my back on all of it.

I grew up in the church, as I said, but it was much too easy for me to turn away. What Matt McBeth said several months ago in his talk has stayed with me ever since, because it describes me exactly – even though I was going to church and doing all the right things, I was not applying the principles and doctrines I was learning to my life. *I was just there.*

One of the biggest influences on my returning to church was a book I read in 2013, called *Dakota: A Spiritual Biography*, by Kathleen Norris. It was her definition of sin that caught my eye: sin is “any impulse that leads us away from paying full attention to who [we are] and what we're doing; any thought or act that interferes with our ability to love God and neighbor.” I remember reading that and thinking, wow, that's a much better definition of sin than “doing wrong things” or “breaking rules.” It was this definition that got under my skin and eventually helped me come back to the gospel.

Coming back, after spending so long away, has been an exercise in pain. The amount of crap that I needed to put behind me felt like a mountain range, but I've been able to do it. And I cannot stress this enough – *I could not – **could not** - have done it without the Atonement.*

I know the despair of wanting to die. I know the complete devastation that follows suicide. I know brutal, overwhelming, absolute loneliness. I know the minute-by-minute struggle of addiction. I know the bitter physical pain of serious sin. I know worthlessness and self-hate. I know the shame of being bullied, of being verbally abused, of being grossly manipulated. I know the weight of suffocating depression. I know the anguish of not belonging.

The thing is, Christ knows it too. He knows all of it. He was there, right next to me, as I watched *Friends* and cried because being alone hurt so badly. He knows how long it's taken for me to forgive myself for choices that I've made. He's listened to the thirteen-year-old girl in the back of my head whisper *worthless, stupid, ugly*. He knows all of this, and yet He still loves me so incredibly much, more than I can even imagine.

And that, to me, is the Atonement – being able to come out of the darkest shadow imaginable and into the brilliant sunlight, to go from feeling nothing but pain to feeling oceans of peace, galaxies of peace.

The Savior – *my* Savior – *your* Savior – died so that we can live the most beautiful lives possible. He is the best friend any of us will ever have, and He is always, always there, even when we feel utterly alone.

I *know* this church is true. I *know* the Book of Mormon is the word of God, that Joseph Smith was a prophet, that the church was restored through the power of the priesthood. I *know* that the Plan of Salvation is perfect, and that Heavenly Father is lovingly and carefully guiding our lives. I *know* the power that living the gospel brings into my life, and I *promise* – ***I promise*** - that as you use the Atonement in every aspect of your life, you will feel peace, and you will feel our Father's love for you.

I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, our Redeemer, our Comforter, amen.