

# John Wood

*John Wood has lived all over the world, including Chicago, New York, Seattle, Sydney, Hong Kong, and Beijing, and now calls San Diego home. He spent the earliest parts of his career globe-trotting with Microsoft, helping the company to expand its global markets. He left Microsoft to found Room to Read, widely considered as one the most effective education NGOs working throughout the developing world. In early 2022, he launched his second education start-up, U-Go, which focuses on helping young women in low-income countries to “shatter one more glass ceiling” by enabling them to pursue higher education with financial support and job placements. John is the author of three books, including the best-selling Leaving Microsoft to Change the World. He was named by Goldman Sachs as one of the world’s 100 most intriguing entrepreneurs and is a Henry Crown Fellow at the Aspen Institute. John is an avid outdoorsman, having run 17 marathons and hiked some of the world’s most famous mountain ranges. He and his wife, Amy Powell, are active readers, wine drinkers, and global travelers.*

# What I Believe

As a young boy growing up in a small town in rural Pennsylvania, I was always jealous of my mother on Sunday mornings. She had the pleasure of sleeping in, while I was forced by my father to wake up from my peaceful slumber, and told to hurry up with showering, scrubbing up, and putting on my Sunday best. “Wasn’t Sunday supposed to be a day of rest?” I would wearily ask, knowing that I would not like the answer.

My mother enjoyed her lie-in for a simple reason—my father was as dedicated to attending church as she was to avoiding it. She was raised loosely Lutheran, while my father’s family was fairly strict Catholic. He’d asked that they be married in *his* church. This did not thrill her at all, but since organized religion meant more to him than to her, she let him have the win. She hated the prep sessions with the priests, finding them to be smug and sanctimonious. She wondered, “How am I supposed to have a man who has *never been married* give me all kinds of unasked-for advice? Who is he to tell me how to live my life and raise my children?”

She’s a smart cookie, so when my father reminded her that a good Catholic upbringing required a regular dose of Sunday services, her response was, “Great idea. That can be the one day of the week that you wake up the kids and get them fed and dressed.”

None of this was as rancorous as it might sound—just opportunistic on her part.

I often asked her, later in life, why she was not at least attending Lutheran services while we were at the Catholic church. She explained that there was just a lot about organized religion that she did not like. At my young age, I did not know what words like *sanctimony* and *hypocrisy* meant, so she explained them. She not only told me that many people in our small town would talk a good game in public every Sunday, and then be off cheating on their wives and deserting their children every other day of

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the week, but she also named names. I delighted in this secret intelligence.

She did not, she shared with me, need an intermediary to channel her communications with God. But apparently I *did* need that. I drew the short straw and was dragged off to St. Joseph's every Sunday morning, jealous of my mother and wondering how old I had to be before I could become a service-skipping Lutheran too.

There was certainly plenty of time to daydream; the long service bored me out of my skull. I was also really confused. What was the old white-haired man up front mumbling about while simultaneously dumping ashes on the floor? Who was St. Paul, who were the Ephesians, and why did they write so damn many letters to each other? How was it that we were eating the body of Christ (*gross!*) and drinking his blood (*ditto*)?

None of this was ever actually explained to my siblings or me. We were simply waltzed into church and told to sit down, be quiet, and not act up.

I could not wait for it to be over. I relentlessly tracked the time, via frequent and likely not-so-surreptitious glances at my trusty Timex. Every minute we had gotten through was one minute closer to the things that mattered on a Sunday, like playing kickball with my friends and watching NFL games.

The only highlight was the passing of the collection plate, but it might be more accurate to call it an ethical lowlight. My older brother Bruce taught me a neat trick. Every Sunday as we walked into the church, my father would hand us each a 50-cent piece to drop into the collection bucket that was placed on a long pole and waved in our face. Neither of us really cared about supporting the church, so Bruce instructed me to always place Dad's coin in the left pocket, while keeping a nickel of our own money in the right pocket. Guess which coin made it into the church's coffers? Suffice it to say the local candy store made more money from us than the priest did.

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Almost as if to punish us for this financial subterfuge, next came the worst part. As the service closed, we were told to locate two people close to us and to shake their hands while intoning “Peace be with you.” Never mind that we’d been totally ignoring these strangers for nearly an hour while sitting in close proximity. Now we were supposed to be bestowing them with some magical power (that came from who knows where?) to have peace in their lives, but doing this while trying at all costs to avoid eye contact.

Finally, the old guy up in the front spoke the magic words—“Mass has ended. Go in peace.” This marked the first nanosecond of my Sunday morning that I’d actually been happy. Though once we got home, it was clear my mother—still lying in bed in a bathrobe and reading a book over her second cup of coffee—was in a jollier state than I was.



Some traditions fade. I think my father knew it was not working, as our attendance at church became more and more sporadic. He seemed to lose his enthusiasm for church—perhaps because it’s not fun to force your three children to do something they clearly do not enjoy. By age 11, my Sundays were mostly spent water skiing in summer or snow skiing in winter. My mother and I would often hike with my beloved beagle Pretzel, as she told me that one can find God in Nature. No intermediary required.



With such an unpromising start to my spiritual upbringing, and with my fanatical devotion to books, science, math and logic, it might have been logical for me to follow the path to atheism. But for reasons that to this day I cannot explain, I believed in some higher power. I also wondered whether denial of God was too easy a cop-out.

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As so often in my life, I sought answers in books. As soon as I was 2,000 miles west of Pennsylvania, on the campus of the University of Colorado in sunny Boulder, my exploration began. I read Desmond Tutu, Malcolm X, and Christopher Hitchens. I even tried reading the Bible, but found it to be ponderous and quit one quarter of the way through the Old Testament. I asked my friends what they believed, and why they believed it. One of my roommates responded by gifting me a copy of Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry* with a promise that "this will expose the hypocrisy of huckster preachers." As I studied astronomy and astrophysics my freshman year, I could not determine whether the vastness and complexity of the universe proved that God was irrelevant. Or that there was simply no way he *couldn't* exist, because how else could something this amazing be random?



At a certain point in my young life, I decided that I was too impatient for decades of navel-gazing and theorizing. What was instead required—no, *demand*ed—was to search for examples of the actual implementation of religion, by real people. And then observe, connect the dots, and weigh up what the evidence told me. Pay no attention to words, but only to actions.

This might be a dog's breakfast of ecclesiastical memories, but here are some of the observations that became critical to my own personal belief system.

- ◆ Jesus is celebrated for washing the feet of beggars, but I did not observe many modern Christians taking extraordinary steps to aid the poor and the downtrodden. I tried to determine which religions were all about action, and which were just filling the air with sanctimonious words.

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- ◆ What drove Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers? How can they be so screwed over by life's vicissitudes, but not lose their faith? How can I, who had won the lottery of life, not be working as hard as they did to fight for social justice?
- ◆ I could not understand why figures like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson seemed so mad all the time. They claim to believe in a loving God and in Jesus, yet they didn't seem to emulate him.
- ◆ The Jesuits, on the other hand, impressed me. Their relief work to help migrants was laudatory, and they had established hundreds of universities where students were encouraged to ask tough questions rather than blindly accept dogma. They encouraged a wide range of reading and seemed quite tolerant of those with different beliefs.
- ◆ It made no sense to me how so many religions denigrated women in so many ways. The priesthood was closed off as an option to half of humanity. Some denied young girls the opportunity to gain an education. Their message seemed to be that women existed to be mothers and wives—i.e., relegated to roles that preserved a male hierarchy.

The more I read, the more I decided that I would not give credence to people's words and would only pay attention to their actions. If a belief system was divisive, or taught their followers to despise people with different beliefs, those were teams I would not join.



After I finished college, travel became a bit of a religion for me. Whether as a backpacker taking motorbikes and trains across Vietnam, or as a go-getting executive flying to business meetings

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in Dubai and Hong Kong, I could not get enough of the open road. And the more I traveled, the more I was able to experience belief systems in action.

I fondly recall the first time I experienced Ramadan in a Muslim country. It was a cold evening in Morocco's Atlas Mountains, and as the sun was setting, I felt a tug on my sleeve. A local man about 50 years old, bearded and bundled up against the winds that had etched deep lines in his face, motioned me toward the front door of his humble home. The setting of the sun signified the breaking of a 12-hour fast, and he was insistent I join his family in quiet celebration of the fulfillment of their religious duty.

Traveling through India, I learned to respect the quiet dignity of Sikhs, and the way religion requires them to give shelter and food to total strangers without any expectation of being repaid. Generosity was a belief system I could get behind.

During my two years as a soon-to-be-failed banker in Chicago, one of my high points was volunteering once a month to work night duty in a church that fed 40 homeless people every night, then rolled out cots and blankets so that they'd have a comfortable refuge against the winter cold. My friend Rich would sleep from 10 p.m. until 2 a.m., at which point he'd relieve me and I'd bag my four hours. During my quiet time alone, I'd ponder why some churches provided this blessing but why most did not.

An offer from Microsoft saved me from life as a banker and brought me to Seattle. Within a few months, a local shelter run by a Jesuit order recruited me to help stock the pantry before winter set in. I started a campaign amongst my coworkers, mainly of them flush with cash from the company's recent IPO, to throw down some coinage, and then spent a very happy Saturday with my friend Mary pushing a "food barge" through the local Costco.

On a business trip to New York, I was walking between meetings and made eye contact with a Pakistani taxi driver. He responded to my smile and head nod by placing his palms together

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and intoning *Tashabuk alsalama* (“Peace be with you”). That same expression that had seemed phony back in my youth now seemed genuine and alive with the spirit of brotherhood. Were these all random moments? Admittedly, yes. But what else in life do we have to go on? Isn’t our life nothing more than several million impressions jammed together? If so, then the questions one asks are “What do I make of it? How do I pattern match? And then what, ultimately, do I believe?”



And then one day it all came together. Taking a break from the long hours and demanding pace of Microsoft, I headed off to Nepal to spend 18 days hiking the famous Annapurna Circuit. It would be nearly 200 miles of trails that would take me as high as 18,000 feet on the Tibet border, and I was euphoric. Each day’s sojourn would be six to seven hours long, leaving the late afternoon and early evenings free for reading and journaling.

Though hiking alone, it turned out that I had the perfect travel companion. The Dalai Lama’s *The Art of Happiness* was one of the books I’d eagerly stuffed in my backpack, and from the opening pages I was hooked. Here was a belief system that encouraged us to try to understand people who were different from us, and to ultimately love them. That taught us that the road to happiness did not lie in material things or great wealth, but in service to our fellow human beings. And to not stop there, but also to respect and give love to our animal friends.

These teachings came at a fortuitous time. On the second day of my trek, I had met the headmaster of a rural school, who invited me to take a quick tour. Like many schools in low-income countries, it was simultaneously hopeful and sad. Hopeful because over 300 students were showing up every day, eager to learn. Sad because of the conditions—dirt floors, no desks or chairs, and a “library” that was completely devoid of children’s books. They had a few backpacker cast-offs, including thick novels by Danielle Steele



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and Umberto Eco, but nothing that would engage a young reader. I asked the headmaster how they could be missing something this basic. His answer seemed a bit like the topic sentence of poverty: “In Nepal, we are too poor to afford education. But until we have education, we shall always remain poor.”

He then spoke a sentence that would forever change my life. “Perhaps, sir, you shall some day come back with books.”



During the next 16 days of trekking, I could not stop thinking about the headmaster, his adorable students in their bright blue school uniforms, and his request. I had promised him that I would one day return with hundreds of books. Expecting enthusiastic gratitude, I was thus shocked when one of the teachers shook his head, looked at me skeptically, and said, “Many of you trekkers tell us that you will help us. But we never see any of you again.”

The gauntlet had been thrown down. And I picked it up, telling the small group of teachers, “I won’t be that guy.”

Reading the Dalai Lama each night felt like talking to an old friend who gave great advice. Helping those in need was the best way to live one’s life. When we give things away, it does not make us poorer, but richer. If our main focus is on hoarding our own resources, then too much is never enough. A compassionate heart is a happy heart.

I toasted His Holiness with my dusty bottle of Carlsberg that had been carried into these mountains on a donkey track. In my journal, I reminded myself that the cost of all my trekking gear and plane ticket would be enough to buy several hundred children’s books. And couldn’t this be turned into a win-win? Since I had already fallen in love with trekking amongst these mountains, why not have an excuse to come back to the little village of Bahundanda?



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A year later, I did. My 73-year-old father, affectionately known as Woody, had helped me with a book drive and then asked to join me for the delivery trip. As a result, our six rented donkeys were laden not with Danish beer, but with books. It would turn out to be one of the happiest days of my life. There can be no feeling quite as inspiring as watching children who have never before seen brightly colored books as they literally stage-dived onto the books while they were still being unloaded from the donkeys. Their eyes were as big as pizzas and their smiles as wide as the Zambezi.

The only person happier than the students was me. At the relatively young age of 34, I had made more money than a small-town Pennsylvania boy could ever have expected. But I had questioned its meaning. I was bored while listening to coworkers talk about real estate prices. There was no desire on my part to buy a yacht, to check out of society, or to own several homes. Yes, I had success, but did my life have significance?

That day in Bahundanda, it did.

That night, talking to my father in front of a roaring fire over plates of egg-fried rice, we talked about what could be. Given that there were over 700 million illiterate people in the world, could we replicate this little library in Bahundanda a dozen times? A hundred? A thousand? I talked about other places I had traveled, like Cambodia and Vietnam, that also had great need. I believed in the adage “To whom much is given, much is expected,” but would I dare to take on a radical implementation of it?

It turns out that I didn’t. Until I did.

Life back at Microsoft was, as always, fast-paced and demanding. And lucrative. But after Bahundanda, it seemed empty. My heart was back in the Himalayas. I thought of the headmaster who had walked six hours round-trip from his rural village, simply to hand me a letter in which he requested books for his school. How soon could I go back? Every day his students did not have a library was a day we could never get back.

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So one morning I reminded myself: “Look, dude, you’ve always said that it’s not about words, it’s about deeds.” Within an hour, I nervously knocked on the door of my boss’s office. Took a long sip of my coffee. “OK, you’re not going to like what I have to say, so I am simply going to say it. This does not work for me any more. I need to quit.”

On this day, my new life started. I was free from any obligation other than the one that mattered most—to serve those kids who had lost the lottery of life. Who, through no fault of their own, were born in the wrong place at the wrong time, and as a result might never gain an education. Changing this, and doing it as soon as possible, became my True North.

Did I leave a few million dollars on the table? Yes. Am I a happier person as a result of my decision? Most certainly. I may be financially poorer, but I am emotionally richer. My belief system drives my life, and when those two things are perfectly in sync, there’s no limit to what one can accomplish.