

Connie's Open Letter About "Deconstruction"

Dear Friend,

Great news! I have finally released my new deck of Question Mapping cards: "Remapping My Beliefs – Deconstructing and Reimagining My Faith Journey." This card deck asks open-ended questions about people's faith journey and is a resource that can help them sort out and process a very important and sometimes very difficult season in their lives.

As this deck releases, I want you to hear my heart about this hard topic of "deconstruction" (I'll give a little more definition to this word later on), and why I've created this card deck. I don't expect you to agree with me about everything, but I'd love for you to be curious about it. As a graduate of a conservative Bible college with a master's degree from a conservative seminary, and with almost 19 years in private practice as a psychotherapist, I've been personally and professionally processing these issues for the last 20 years or more.

EVERY DAY in my office, I sit with people who are agonizing over their faith.

They often tell me things they have admitted to no one else because they are scared. The foundation of their whole world is crumbling. They are profoundly struggling to make sense of

God,
their spiritual existence,
the Bible,
and their church experience.

In my office, in my home, online, and in coffee shops all over, I have sat with hundreds (who represent millions) of people who are feeling tormented by their doubts, their questions, their anger, their guilt, and their confusion. There are so many reasons why they are questioning. Their stories are so varied and so poignant:

- Sometimes they have a horrible, sinking feeling that the paradigms that they had adopted don't make sense anymore.
- Sometimes they feel an agonizing spiritual emptiness when exposed to church services, sermons, or religious ideas that are supposed to nourish, and they know they desperately need something more or different.
- Sometimes they have been the recipient of cliched, "biblical" responses to their intense suffering.
- Sometimes they feel painful dissonance and confusion when seeing the church strategically unite with the worldly powers that it previously preached against.

I listen carefully to these people because I comprehend the profound truth of their experience. In varying ways and to varying degrees, it has been my story as well.

So, what can "deconstruction" look like? I put deconstruction in quotes because of the broad, loose way the word is now being used – for better and for worse. This letter is attempting to describe and define how I am using the word.

A deconstructed faith can look vastly different, depending on the story of the individual deconstructing. There is no one "normal" process or outcome of deconstruction. Deconstruction (as I am defining it) is any shifting the direction or orientation of your faith, spirituality, or theology, or leaving your previous faith altogether. Faith deconstruction is when you begin to intentionally dismantle your previous faith assumptions and beliefs. These changes can be minor and subtle or a dramatic 180 shift.

- Some people who are deconstructing retain a faith that can look similar to the one they deconstructed – for example, they now believe that women can be leaders in the church.
- Some end up re-imagining a faith that is still under the same umbrella but expresses itself very differently – for example, they may still identify as Christian, but attend a more progressive church.
- Some retain a deep Christian faith, but don't attend a traditional church.
- Some people shift in their faith and swing much further away from their original faith than others are comfortable with.
- Some people leave the faith.
- Some people switch to another faith.

These are all possible outcomes of genuine deconstruction.

Often, these wider swings away from their previous expression of faith are a desperate, life-saving measure to get distance from the severe trauma that has been caused by the religious system they were previously immersed in.

Are these atheists and agnostics “throwing the baby out with the bath water”? Possibly. Does a combat veteran’s brain sometimes need to limit their exposure to cars backfiring even if the backfire isn’t gunfire? Probably. But many of those leaving have been severely wounded by “bullets” in the church. So, these dear souls start to deconstruct...

By distancing themselves from God, the Bible, the church, or the people who attend those churches.

By limiting their exposure to the church’s power and control maneuvers that have severely damaged them.

By walking away from toxic guilt, shame, fear, and confusion in their religious institution.

By trying to save what is left of their life, their souls, and their sanity, after Ultimate Power (“what God says”) has been leveraged against them and almost destroyed them.

So many dear believers have felt threatened by the idea of deconstruction. Deconstruction has been called “trendy.” “It’s only giving people permission to sin.” “It’s a conspiracy of the left,” or any number of other caricatured labels that permit us to form an emotional reaction, put people in boxes, and feel more comfortable with such an uncomfortable movement.

How can we have an honest and possibly uncomfortable discussion about this topic?

How can we open our hearts to the experience and stories of millions of people who have walked away from what their previous faith looked like?

- What if we were to engage people who are deconstructing with dignity, genuine curiosity and understanding instead of possible judgment and dismissal?
- What if people leaving the traditional church is not a catastrophe, but a Divine opportunity?
- What if people who are deconstructing are in reality deconstructing a tainted and poisoned “gospel”?
- What if their exit could be a purifying invitation for the church to ask forgiveness for the many (mostly unacknowledged) wrongs that it has committed?
- And what if God is so big, so creative and so redemptive that there is a beautiful plan for those deconstructing, a plan that is outside of our limited scope of experience or theology?

Here is why I do not feel threatened by deconstruction:

First, this label may be new, but the process is as old as Christianity itself.

Where would we be if Martin Luther had never questioned or challenged the religious powers or “deconstructed”?

Where would we be if hundreds of other reformers, mystics and Jesus followers through the millennia hadn’t questioned the existing church structure of their era?

Second, is that faith – if it is indeed an alive, growing and powerful force – must change, and this change can take on a wide range of expressions.

If we are “trees planted by rivers of water,” we must change. We are not acorns anymore. We are not saplings anymore.

If we are growing in our knowledge of the Divine, we name fewer things “unclean.”

If we are changing old wineskins for new ones, this implies that the consistency and quality of our faith is changing.

If we are growing in our awareness of God, self, and others, our view of God changes – we “put away childish things” and childish ideas of God.

If we are growing in our ability to tolerate uncertainty, we admit more and more freely that we “see through a glass darkly.”

If, “the same yesterday, today, and forever” is True, then I hope and pray that our experience of God is not. I want my finite constructs around the Sacred to be consistently challenged (deconstructed), deepened, and broadened.

Faith – if it is real and transformative – can be messy.

Many of us raised in the church were bottle-fed a love of certainty. The more theologically precise, the more spiritual the person was assumed to be. The more convinced and dogmatic the speaker, the more we were willing to believe. We memorized doctrinal points and subpoints (that no one dared question) and were then rewarded with being able to “give an answer.”

So... are certainty, theological precision, dogmatism, and memorizing doctrinal points and subpoints... wrong? Maybe, maybe not. But my point is this (and I think you would agree with me): These can often become empty substitutes for a genuine, growing, transforming, evolving faith. I hope we are ALL deconstructing.

I hope we are ALL...

Questioning,

Reevaluating,

Asking hard questions about our brand of theology,

Letting go of old paradigms that don't fit anymore,

Walking away from templates that have done us harm,

And (like Jesus) standing up against “right” doctrine leveraged with a power that injures and scars.

Why would we not?

May we all continue to “deconstruct”: to question: to stay curious: to stay compassionate: to re-imagine a growing, dynamic spiritual life that continues to transform us.

With love and hope for growing awareness,

Connie A Baker MA LPC