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1st Place
2003 Finalist Chandler Award
CONTEST:
Chandler Award for Student Writer of the Year
CONTEST CATEGORY:
Feature/Profile
HEADLINE:
One Life, Two Faiths
SUBHEAD:
Lauren Winner tells of her personal reconciliation of Judaism and Christianity
DATE:
October 25, 2002

CHARLOTTESVILLE--If she had to boil herself down to a list of adjectives, 26-year-old Lauren F. Winner would describe herself as Southern -- even though she feels at home in New York, where she went to college; Tar Heel -- although she now lives in Virginia; and Democrat -- although she admits her lefty tendencies are evolving.

She'd also call herself Jewish, despite the fact that she's a devout evangelical Christian. In Winner's eyes and heart, this is not a contradiction. It's a reconciliation.

Her new memoir, "Girl Meets God: On the Path to a Spiritual Life" (Algonquin, $23.95), chronicles her personal peacemaking between the faith that first shaped her spirituality, Orthodox Judaism, and her fulfillment through baptism and worship in the Episcopal church.

Winner's struggle is nothing new. According to the American Religious Identification Survey, published recently by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, at least one in six U.S. adults switches faiths during the course of his or her life, many during college.

For Winner, who was born in Asheville and lived there for 11 years, religion has never been a halfhearted undertaking. As a teenager, she embraced her father's faith, Judaism, first in the Reform tradition and later in its more fundamentalist, Orthodox practice.

Her parents divorced in 1986, and she moved to Charlottesville with her mother, a lapsed Southern Baptist who continued to raise her younger daughter within the Reform community.

Linda Winner never practiced Judaism, but Lauren did enough for both. As an ardent reader and student, she became convinced that at the heart of Judaism was the text -- the Torah -- and the only people who were reading the Torah correctly were Orthodox Jews.

"If the Torah was true, then we should spend all our time reading it, and all our life living by it," she wrote. "Either God revealed all this stuff to Moses on Mount Sinai or he didn't. If he did, then we're bound by it, all of it, every last word, every syllable, every letter ... Either there was no Judaism or there was Orthodox Judaism."
As a history and religion major at Columbia University, her religious pursuits became both personal and academic. She studied Talmud, a compilation of oral law and rabbinical commentaries accepted as authority by Orthodox Jews.

She ate kosher cuisine, donned ankle-length skirts and recited countless blessings over food, flowers and bodily functions. She formally converted, immersing herself in a mikvah, or ritual bath, to affirm her commitment.

But intellectually, Winner was drawn to Christianity. She wrote papers about Protestants and the Great Awakening. She wrote her senior thesis about the Mordecais, a Jewish family that arrived in Raleigh in the 1800s. After becoming Episcopalians, they helped build Christ Church but also helped establish Oakwood's Jewish cemetery.

She did not take one course in Judaism. And that, she says, was a clue.

"If it was a marriage, me to Orthodox Judaism, I failed long before I met up with Jesus," she writes.

**A new faith**

Like many biblical stories, Winner's new faith came to her in a dream. Kidnapped by a school of mermaids, she was rescued by a good-looking man, presumably Jesus, who returned her to her childhood home and remained her personal confidant.

She dwelled on the dream for a while, then renewed her focus on Orthodox Judaism. But no matter how many candles she lit or blessings she recited, Winner had encountered what she calls a "spiritual dry spell."

She heard the call of Christianity again as she read the novels of North Carolina writer Jan Karon, about an Episcopal rector in Mitford, a township resembling Blowing Rock. Karon's Christian characters had infinite and boundless faith.

"They sang hymns I didn't know and prayed from a prayer book I had never opened," she writes. "And I thought: I want what they have."

With that on her mind, she left for England and graduate school at Cambridge University, where she studied history. There she met the Rev. Dr. Jo Bailey Wells to whom she dedicates the book.

Wells recalls hours spent with Winner discussing politics, sex and God. "She didn't take half-baked answers," Wells says.

"The personal stuff was part and parcel of what was academic for her."
Before she returned to New York, Winner was baptized in the Anglican Church and began to embrace her new faith and her new intimate relationship with God.

But now she faced a new dilemma. No longer did she have to reconcile being Jewish in the South. She now had to face her Orthodox Jewish community in New York.

The answer seemed simple. She'd avoid it. She didn't call. She didn't write. She even dodged neighborhoods where she might encounter old friends.

"Everything I knew about spirituality and God comes from Judaism," she said. "What do I do with that, given that I've left it? I was face to face with a truth which I eventually concluded is a great truth. But at first it was puzzling."

She also faced skepticism from family and friends. Her older sister, Leanne Winner of Raleigh, thought it was just another phase -- that Buddhism might be next. After all, her little sister is only 26.

So Lauren wrote "Girl Meets God," hoping it would explain and reconcile her journey to people whom she baffled or possibly hurt with her decisions -- people like her father.

"It doesn't make it any easier," says Dennis Winner, a Superior Court judge in Asheville and a former state senator. "Still she's a lot smarter than I am and knows tremendous more than I do about Christianity and Judaism. She's a grown-up woman and she has to make up her own mind."

Leanne Winner said the book convinced her that Christianity was not a phase for her sister, but part of a continuum.

Linda Winner, Lauren's mother, had yet another response. "I got an unprecedented opportunity to see inside the soul and heart of my own child, which parents seldom are able to do," she says. "I felt almost like I was eavesdropping."

As it turned out, Linda Winner also experienced a spiritual awakening, eventually joining Christ Church in Charlottesville, the same church Lauren Winner attends today.

Winner returned to Charlottesville earlier this year to write her dissertation, not surprisingly, on the Anglican Church in Colonial Virginia.

Since her return, she has become fully engaged in the life of her church, serving as a lay person who recites public prayers and offers the chalice of wine to worshippers during the Eucharist.

"It gives me a total thrill to watch people of God coming forward in throngs to receive communion," she says. "It's a place where people uniquely meet God and it's such a privilege to participate in the mechanics of that. Watching people flow forward, none of
us really understands what's going on here. It's really an act of faith. ... It's an embodied act of reconciliation."

She hopes her book will be as well, and she hopes it finds an audience among Orthodox Jews.

"I have a secret inner hope that some of them will come to some understanding as to why I converted," she says. "I hope they can see that I learned important spiritual lessons from them and I'm on-goingly grateful."

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CONTEST:
Chandler Award for Student Writer of the Year
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Torn Between Cross and Crescent
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Some U.S. Muslim parents say their religion has become a sticking point in child custody cases
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An anti-Muslim backlash documented since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks last year has put American Muslims at risk of losing more than their dignity, advocates say. Some fear losing their children.

According to the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Washington-based Muslim advocacy group, more than a dozen Muslim parents nationwide have been sued since September 2001 for custody of their children by non-Muslim ex-spouses and grandparents who don't want the children reared by the Muslim parent.

That compares with two such lawsuits reported in the year leading up to the terror attacks. Most of the cases are scattered across the South and Midwest. At least five are in Texas, the most in any state.

The latest case, according to CAIR, was filed three weeks ago in Fort Worth. Bill Burton is seeking custody of his 9-year-old daughter from his former wife, Norma Saadi, five years after she married Kamel Saadi. Mrs. Saadi said her daughter has chosen to become a Christian.

According to Mrs. Saadi, Mr. Burton believes she is trying to alienate their daughter from him.

"She's lying ... if she thinks Islam is a reason for a custody case," said Constance Langston, Mr. Burton's attorney. "She has tried everything to keep a father from exercising his court-ordered visitation."

"The attitudes of some of these judges and social workers are clearly fallout from September 11," said Laurie Jaghli, a caseworker in CAIR's civil rights department. "I don't think Muslims are bringing this on themselves."

Non-custodial plaintiffs and their attorneys in the Texas cases said their lawsuits hinge less on religion and more on a history of bad decisions that they fear endanger the children's health and welfare.
But civil rights advocates said they fear that the secular motives are legal tactics to
disguise a bias against Islam. "We're a conservative Christian state," said Ann Del Llano,
an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union who is monitoring the cases. "It
represents what our state is."

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For Michelle Anderson of Round Rock, Texas, becoming a Muslim was a carefully
weighed decision. She said she admired the monotheistic faith for its strong moral values.

Her court deposition and a social work review contend that Ms. Anderson's conversion
and marriage to a Moroccan Muslim led her ex-husband, Doug Anderson of Wimberley,
Texas, to challenge custody of their 9-year-old son three days after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Mr. Anderson's attorney, Mark Cusack, says religion has nothing to do with the case. He
says that his client is disturbed by the "blind-faith marriage" because it fits a pattern of
poor decisions. But Susan Sanders, a social worker appointed to investigate both homes,
said the case does turn on religion and determined that the boy should live with his father.
"Ms. Anderson's conversion to Islam and her subsequent arranged marriage to a foreigner
are very basic issues in this case and are certainly unusual from the point of view of
prevalent American culture," Ms. Sanders wrote in a social study submitted for evidence.

Ms. Anderson's nuptials followed Muslim custom. To help find a groom, members of her
Austin mosque put her in contact with Abdellah Douli of Casablanca. Through a series of
conference calls and e-mails, she got to know him and his family. In August 2001, two
weeks after they met face to face, the couple married in Morocco.

The decision to become a Muslim alarmed Ms. Anderson's friends and family. She said
that her mother, Peggy Piper of Memphis, Tenn., disowned her. After the Sept. 11
attacks, Ms. Piper called her former son-in-law to tell him he should fight for custody of
his son.

Mr. Anderson said he wants to give his son a "normal, stable home." Ms. Anderson said
she wants to instill values that she says are preached by Islam, such as acceptance,
kindness, patience, love of God and tolerance.

The trial is scheduled to return to court on Wednesday.

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The principles of Islam appealed to Jessica Johnson-Shankle of Austin. She became a
Muslim two weeks after being introduced to the faith.

"I wanted something stable, something closer to God," she said. "It's a way of life. It
keeps you from trouble and from sin. You're at peace all the time."
Her father and stepmother, Danny and Sheena Johnson of Luling, Texas, were stunned. They worried not only for their daughter but also for their 3-year-old grandson.

Ms. Johnson left home at age 20 to make it on her own, leaving her son to live with his grandparents. When she returned a month later to get him to live with her, her father and stepmother filed for custody to keep him. A judge ruled that Ms. Johnson could visit her son every other week.

She has since married George "Abdulhakeem" Shankle, who became a Muslim 10 years earlier. They pray at an Austin mosque about three times a week, taking her son when he's with them. At night, his mother reads to him stories of the prophets.

Mrs. Johnson-Shankle has also tried to educate her parents and clarify misconceptions. Her grandmother insisted that Muslims molested boys. In hopes that such episodes will pass, Mrs. Johnson-Shankle recalled the Quranic verse: "Allah is with the patient."

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In Dallas County, grandparents are suing a former-daughter-in-law. Melada Alamleh became a Muslim in 1998 while living in Dallas and entrusted the care of her three children - ages 7, 6 and 4 at the time - to her former in-laws, Steve and Irene Orosco of Grand Prairie.

"I really liked Islam," said Mrs. Alamleh. "I started to change my ways."

But when Mrs. Alamleh began taking her children to pray at a mosque, Mrs. Orosco, a devout Jehovah's Witness, objected.

"I was embarrassed to tell her," Mrs. Alamleh said. "They always wanted me to go back to their religion."

After Sept. 11, the Oroscos called Islam a "terrorist religion" and pleaded with her not to take their grandchildren to the mosque.

Last October, Mrs. Alamleh married Emad Alamleh from Palestine. Two months later, the couple announced plans to move with the children to Houston. By that time, according to court depositions, the three children had lived at the grandparents' home for 3½ years.

When Mrs. Alamleh went to the Oroscos' home to pick up her children, a constable served her with a custody lawsuit and restraining order.

"Our position has not been anything about this lady's faith," said the Oroscos' attorney, Larry Martin. "The grandparents are doing a good job as the 'de facto' parents. We don't need to disrupt something that's working pretty well."
Mrs. Alamleh's attorney, Khalid Hamideh, said religion plays a central role in at least 95 percent of custody cases in which the parents belong to different faiths, including this one.

"None of us have our eyes closed," said Mr. Hamideh, who is Muslim and represents a number of Muslim clients. "It's the anti-Islamic, anti-Middle Eastern, anti-foreign biases amongst us in everyday life. It's nothing we can ignore, even in our custody battles."

It's too early to tell whether Sept. 11 has skewed verdicts in Muslims' custody cases, he said.

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Sami Kabbani and Teresa Lauderdale were married in an outdoor civil ceremony in 1987. A Catholic priest presided and wore a cassock emblazoned with the letter M. The priest said the symbol stood for both Mary and Muhammad and signified the union of two faiths.

Mr. Kabbani filed for divorce in April 2001. Even before the split, Ms. Lauderdale expressed fears that her husband would kidnap their children and take them to his native Syria.

Last fall, she told Mr. Kabbani that she had hidden their 4-year-old daughter's passport. He told her the document didn't matter, that he could take their daughter to Syria if he chose to. Shortly after divorce papers were filed, Ms. Lauderdale moved unexpectedly to Virginia. Mr. Kabbani insisted that she return to Texas. In the eight months that she stayed, he traveled to Virginia regularly to see his two daughters - now ages 5 and 1 - without supervision and including overnight stays in the hotel.

Ms. Lauderdale filed for an emergency hearing to stop the visitation. A Harris County judge ruled in her favor in August. Until each child turns 18, Mr. Kabbani can see them only on certain days between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. in the presence of an armed guard.

Mr. Kabbani said he will appeal the ruling next month.

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Suing for custody on religious grounds is unconstitutional on its face, said Tom Oldham, a law professor at the University of Houston. "You'd have to show either that the child is somehow being harmed or learning something that the court feels is objectively harmful."

To prove that, Ms. Lauderdale recorded her daughter saying that, according to Daddy, God would give her wings to fly if she did good deeds. An expert witness in international child kidnapping called to testify on Ms. Lauderdale's behalf said the parable represented a murder-suicide threat.
"In the Kabbani case, the ruling was not based on the evidence but was based on fear, innuendo, speculation and a prediction of the future," said Mr. Kabbani's attorney, Jolene Wilson-Glah.

Rep. Nick Lampson, D-Beaumont, chairman and founder of the Congressional Missing and Exploited Children's Caucus, said family courts are encouraged to be vigilant because countries such as Syria are not members of The Hague Convention on International Abduction.

Since January 2000, six children from three families were reported missing as a result of international abductions to Syria, said Nancy Hammer of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. At least 37 children were abducted from Texas to international destinations, she said.

Judges are urged to find a way for children to have a relationship with both parents while also protecting them, Mr. Lampson said. But Will Harrell, executive director of the ACLU's Texas chapter, said many judges are a product of an evangelical Christian movement to dominate the state's school board and family courtrooms in recent elections.

"All those people who recently compared Muhammad to terrorists are the same people who dominate the political agenda and whose policy is being reflected," Mr. Harrell said. "Their religious intolerance is being exemplified in this process. They happen to be in the position to perpetuate the bigotry."

Some legal experts say that courts are ill-equipped to adjudicate such issues. Stephen M. Crampton, chief counsel for the Christian-affiliated American Family Association's Center for Law and Policy, said both parents have equal rights to raise the child in a religious environment. "The court can't play Solomon," he said.

The only case among the four in Texas approaching peaceful resolution is the one in Austin involving Mrs. Johnson-Shankle. In August, the court required the opposing couples to attend counseling together. They did, and conversations have since moved toward a compromise.

"If we had not gone to counseling, we would have gone to court, and it would have been ugly," said Mrs. Johnson-Shankle. "Now there's hope. ... My dad has learned to respect my religion."

Mr. Kabbani said he feels unjustly convicted for a crime that he said he did not commit, and he feels punished by God for not being a devout Muslim. He said that he usually prays once a day instead of five times and that he smokes, drinks alcohol and rarely makes it through Ramadan without prematurely breaking the fast.

"It's getting to a point where I'm asking myself, 'Why is this happening to me? Is it because I'm too soft on my faith?'" he said. "I have a deep faith inside. I'm not giving anything in return. Maybe I should start. ... The strength I have inside me came from my religion."
SULPHUR SPRINGS, Texas - It has sometimes been hard to fill the pews at First Baptist Church of Sulphur Springs this summer, but not because parishioners were sleeping in on Sundays.

Anything but.

This summer, the church in Sulphur Springs - population 14,000, about 75 miles northeast of Dallas on the way to Texarkana - sent more than 350 missionaries to fields as far as northern Nicaragua and as near as a house about six blocks away over on California Street.

The church sponsored eight mission trips, making it a leader in missions among the state's 5,708 Baptist congregations.

But for a church of about 1,000 members, it seems a miracle that so many can do so much in a town of so few.

It's not a miracle, said Emily McMeans, 18, who taught vacation Bible school for Nicaraguan children this year for the first time. She calls it a matter of life and death.

"If we don't go, there are thousands of people in the mountains no one will ever see but God."

Although unusual, First Baptist's ambitious mission itinerary reflects a growing mindset among Baptists in Texas and across the nation. According to church profiles compiled by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the number of Baptist churches sponsoring missions rose more than 17 percent last year.

"That's due to the culture," said Becky Bridges, a spokeswoman for the state convention. "People want that one-on-one contact. If you poke a Baptist, what we talk about is missions."
First Baptist of Sulphur Springs has modeled that mindset for 14 years. Since 1989, the church has sent teams of young people and professionals to offer medical and dental assistance, manual labor and salvation to neighborhoods in need.

In addition to Nicaragua, mission frontiers included Lame Deer, Mont., on the site of a northern Cherokee reservation, Milwaukee, St. Joseph, Mich., Eagle Pass and across the border in Morelos, Mexico, Playa del Carmen and Cozumel.

Carrying out eight missions requires breaking some deeply entrenched mindsets. Mission trips are not vacations, as many of the teens who traveled to Morelos, Montana and Nicaragua learned.

The allure of the trips, said 20-year-old Brad Cutrell, is never the same once you've been. For the past five years, he has traveled to the most northern regions of Nicaragua, where villagers have no running water, little food and no medicine. This year's trip fell during the rainy season.

Though several medical ministries serve areas around the country's capital city of Managua, First Baptist has one of the few medical missions that assist people in the rural mountainous regions bordering Costa Rica.

"The living conditions are a shock the first year you go," Mr. Cutrell said. "The view of what the trip will be like is altered forever. How giving, how happy and how joyful they are - it transcends human explanation."

The same was true for young missionaries who traveled to Morelos to build a parsonage for a local Baptist preacher. Neighbors donated land for the pastor's home, despite their own homes' lack of indoor plumbing, air conditioners, washing machines and dishwashers, items the church youngsters often take for granted.

Bruce Welch, the church's education minister, said the Mexicans' gratitude was a powerful lesson for all the missionaries.

"They live that way every day and rejoice and count God's blessings," he said. "It helps you kind of understand that you don't need as much as you think you need. Understanding that was a great thing."

Not all the trips challenged the students to live within lesser means.

As a reward for students who faithfully attended rehearsals and concerts this past year, the church choir sailed from Galveston to Cozumel aboard a Carnival cruise ship. But even the reward was a mission, said choir director Fred Randles. Students handed out 900 Bibles and sang hymns on the ship and mainland.
Mr. Randles' wife, Jane, went to Nicaragua and Cozumel and is exploring mission opportunities in Nairobi, where Buckner Children's Orphanage in Dallas has opened a home for African children orphaned by AIDS.

She wonders whether she'll be called to Nicaragua or Nairobi next year. A ninth mission trip might stretch the church beyond its means - both personally and financially, she said.

Then again, she said, it's important to teach kids where they fit in.

"As long as they learn the whole world doesn't revolve around them," she said, "it's worth every penny spent."