

Nothing: Something to Believe In

A Talk with Nica Lalli

Writer Nica Lalli is an art educator working with the Metropolitan Museum of Art who also writes a weekly column in the Brooklyn Paper. She recently talked with D.J. Grothe, Associate Editor of *FREE INQUIRY*, about her acclaimed memoir of growing up nonreligious, *Nothing: Something to Believe In*.

FREE INQUIRY: Are you surprised that your book is getting such great reviews?

NICA LALLI: I'm not, because I think there are a lot of people out there who lack belief in God like I do. I am not a chest-beating, angry atheist. I don't have an ax to grind. I just want people to respect me. The positive reviews of the book show me that there is at least some respect for nonbelief out there.

FI: You're not a theologian, scientist, or philosopher. Yet, in your book, you address the biggest questions of all, such as "Does God exist?" and "What is the meaning of life?" What are your qualifications to treat such big topics?

LALLI: My only qualification is that I am a human. I spend a lot of time wondering about why things are the way they are and why people believe what they believe. I don't want anyone to pick up this book and think that they're going to get a scientific argument against belief in God. I merely wanted to put my story out there as a person who has lived a pretty normal life. There are many things I believe in and that I hold dear, but I just don't believe in God. I wrote the book as an answer to those people who tend to demonize those of us who don't believe and feel that we need to be saved, that we have a void that needs to be filled. This book speaks to that and says, "No, I don't have a void."

FI: So you didn't just write the book to tell these beautiful and funny stories about your childhood when you discovered you were "nothing." You also want to tell people that it is alright to not

believe in God. Do you think its time for others to "come out" as nonbelievers?

LALLI: I read Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and also Sam Harris's books. They were the first books that I read where I said "Wow, there are a lot of people out there who are like me." In the beginning of the Dawkins book, he calls on nonbelievers to come out. I am not

“... we have to stop being ashamed of ourselves and that we need to start having confidence in our nonbelief.”

sure we need to become a marching army of nonbelievers, but I do agree that we have to stop being ashamed of ourselves and that we need to start having confidence in our nonbelief. This was something very difficult for me early on as a woman without God in her life.

When others start talking about what church they go to or what religion they are, saying "I'm nothing, I don't have a religion, I don't believe in God" is no longer a scary thing for me.

FI: When did you first discover you were "nothing"?


LALLI: When I was a child and my

friend Michelle was having her First Communion, I wanted to get a dress like she got. So I asked my parents, "What are we? What do we believe in? I mean, are we Catholic? Look, all my friends are something. Stephanie is a Unitarian, Susie is a Jew, Michelle is Catholic, and Lucy is Presbyterian. So I just want to know. What am I?" My parents told me that we were nothing.

FI: So, as a child, you reasoned that,

“Life is so full and meaningful that you don't need to believe in something like the supernatural or the afterlife.”

if everyone has a religion, that if everyone is something, you should be something, too. But now you say that being nothing isn't actually being nothing, it is being something. What?

LALLI: I spent a lot of my childhood worrying about being nothing—that there might be a part of my life that needed to be filled. But I actually ended up embracing being nothing, and doing that made being nothing become everything. Life is so full and meaningful that you don't need to believe in something like the supernatural or the afterlife. People add to our lives and make them rich. So I do have a lot of beliefs—based on humanity. The word *nothing* lets me feel comfortable within all of that, without having to sign on to an "ism." I don't really have a manifesto. I just have a life that I live and that I try to enjoy and share. 

To hear more of D.J. Grothe's talk with Lalli, go to www.pointofinquiry.org. —Eds.