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Hi God: An autoethnography of loneliness in graduate school

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2020

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HI GOD: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF LONELINESS
IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

An Abstract of a Thesis Project
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Grace Elisabeth Mertz
University of Northern Iowa
May 2020

This Script by: Grace Elisabeth Mertz

Entitled: Hi God

Performed in the University of Northern Iowa's Interpreters Theatre on the 7th, 8th, and 9th of November, 2019

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Date

Dr. Danielle Dick McGeough, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date

On behalf of Dr. Karen Mitchell, Thesis Committee Member

Date

Dr. Harry (Tom) Thomas Hall, Thesis Committee Member

Date

Dr. Jennifer Waldron, Dean, Graduate College

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DEDICATION

God, I have been frustrated with You, confused by You, and deeply in search of You throughout my graduate career, but I dedicate this show to You with faith that You will use it in my life and the lives of those who see it. Thank You for listening.

My wonderful family: thank you for believing I could do this. Your support, excitement, and love have carried me through performances and papers alike.

Liv: thank you for taking so many calls at all hours of the day and night. I love and appreciate you deeply, and I hope my writing has encouraged you in some way. You are and always will be my best friend.

Gunnar: thank you for supporting my studies at a school 300 miles away from yours. I look forward to ending our time of distance.

Debra: my profound gratitude for your constant encouragement and humor. I cherish your friendship and can only hope to give back the joy you have shared with me.

This thesis is also dedicated to graduate students everywhere. The hallways of academia are often lonely, but you are never alone. Here's to a joyful and fulfilling time of community in graduate school.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to Impostor Syndrome. You lose this round.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

I may have started college too early.

My fifteen-year-old homeschooled mind could not have predicted the identity shift that higher education would demand of me. I did not expect academia to be filled with people who shared my background and beliefs, but I was, in many ways, unprepared for the way my Christianity would be challenged in the classroom and in my professors' offices. After seven years of education within the structures of academia, I certainly have not lost my faith, but the way I think about, talk about, and practice it has tangibly changed. The questions I ask of God and the letters I write to Him now are vastly different from the ones my fifteen-year-old soul mustered.

Thus, "Hi God."

"Hi God" is a performative examination of the ways in which education changes and challenges faith and identity. Through metaphor, comedy, and brutal honesty, Grace—a Christian graduate student—questions how she should practice her religious identity within the world of higher education. Grace begins by writing a series of letters to God before writing to professors, other students, and the faceless entity of "academia." Throughout the show, these letters highlight the ways in which identity, education, and impostor syndrome are intertwined in the environment of graduate school. Finally, the performer invites audiences to reflect on their own complicated relationships with knowledge, faith, and identity by writing their own letters.

That's the short version—although, when dealing with feelings and experiences like this, everything is the short version.

I wrote “Hi God” as a response to the assumptions, both spoken and unspoken, that my professors, my fellow students, and myself have embodied in the classroom—assumptions that I have itched to address since I first encountered them as a high school student. I also wrote the script as a way to process my own frustrations, faults, and failures as a Christian and a scholar. Performance has a unique capacity to unite individuals through self-reflection, an experience I have craved since entering graduate school, and it also offers the much-needed opportunity to enact public confession and humility.

I intended “Hi God” to convey several distinct messages to different groups of audience members, including professors, students, and community members. The script calls professors to think before speaking on topics of faith and identity, both in and out of the classroom, and to examine implicit assumptions and biases in the academic system. The show invites other graduate students—and undergraduate students as well—to believe that they are not alone, and that they can belong and find acceptance within the system of higher education. Finally, the script speaks to community members (those not directly tied to the university education system) on the topic of belonging, providing the hope that impostor syndrome, though universal and far-reaching, is remediable.

To convey these intertwined messages, I chose to write an autoethnographic performance script. This method, full of flexibility and potential, meshes social advocacy and personal storytelling (Spry). I understand autoethnography as a creative way of

making an argument, an emotionally powerful way to offer proof of my claims by narrating my experiences and those of others. Rather than asserting my claims about the higher education system in strictly academic language, I prefer to embody these ideas in a piece “that unfolds softly, one that circles around, slides between, swallows whole” the insecurities, the joys, the failures, and the triumphs of my graduate school experience (Pelias xi).

Method

Making autoethnographic performance is always a complex journey of dreaming, writing, reading, editing, (laughing), rewriting, rehearsing, blocking, cutting, (crying), polishing, and sharing. No matter what I’m writing about, the autoethnographic process never fails to enrich my understanding of my experiences and, above all, my relationships with God and with other people.

I have not counted the letters I have written to God during graduate school. They did not all make it into the final draft of “Hi God,” mostly because their contents were either very personal or redundant. Audience members can only hear a performer cry or wax poetic so much, after all. The letters I included served primarily as concrete stories of my experience or as grounding moments throughout the show, while the letters I left out tended to be more wandering or accusatory in nature than I wanted to share.

The process of writing, compiling, and editing the letters into a script took about one year, although the majority of the effort was concentrated within the seven months leading up to the live performances. I worked through approximately seven drafts of this script: changing the structure, cutting irrelevant sections, writing new pieces as they

occurred in real life, and polishing final phrases. The ending of the show did not emerge until a few months before the live performances.

Throughout the process of drafting, I struggled to define a coherent theme. My letters to God covered a range of experiences and emotions, and it was difficult to identify common threads in my ramblings. Eventually, I found that I needed to combine two themes to form the final script: impostor syndrome in graduate students and the challenge of practicing faith within academic settings. This is the crux of autoethnography, after all—to reflect a broad range of stories and perspectives through one individual narrative. In this case, I used my personal perspective as a Christian in the academic system to narrate the universal experience of impostor syndrome.

Rehearsals of “Hi God” took place over the five or six weeks preceding the live performances. My rehearsal process always influences my script edits, and this show was no exception. Throughout the weeks of rehearsals, as I blocked the show and solidified my prop and set choices, I continued to revise the script. My two stage managers and two unofficial assistant directors were crucial to this process, as they brainstormed creative blocking and set decisions, devised lighting designs, and provided feedback on each iteration of the show.

Setting up the Interpreters Theatre for “Hi God” was an instructive process. After we had blocked the show and spiked the set, my assistant directors encouraged me to compress the performance space for a more intimate performance experience. This change allowed us to set up a letter-writing station in one corner of the theatre, which included a table and materials to hang letters in public view. I would never have imagined

this setup myself, and at first I resisted the change, since it deviated from my normal minimalistic staging style. However, I chose to trust the more experienced performers, and I enjoyed the final result immensely. This transformation of the space pushed me to perform at new heights of energy and depths of emotion, and it granted my audience the opportunity to interact with the performance in hands-on ways (e.g., touching props).

The process of performing “Hi God” truly pushed my performative boundaries in terms of length, creativity, energy, and preparation. I had never created a forty-minute performance piece before, and, while I did not always enjoy the editing process, I felt a substantial amount of growth in my writing and editing capabilities by the time I was satisfied with a final draft. It was a gift to work with stage managers and other performers as well; I tend to fall into a minimalistic rut in terms of blocking and set use, and the benefit of fresh eyes lent incredible creativity to my final performances. Performing a forty-minute show also taxed my stamina and commitment to preparation; a five-to-six-week rehearsal process is longer than my usual preparation time, and a forty-minute show is much longer than my past performances. Throughout these months of rewriting and rehearsal, I learned to practice daily and weekly commitment to my craft, and I continued to gain new knowledge about myself, my performative process, and the topics of my own writing.

The skills I will take into my future performances include lighting design, set design, blocking, audio use, editing, and more. I now feel more confident to create future shows of this length and to experiment with new techniques in writing and performing.

Additionally, “Hi God” confirmed my performative foundation and encouraged me to continue building on what I know as a writer and performer.

Making autoethnographic performance is hard work, but my experience of crafting “Hi God” only confirmed what I already knew: I love creating this kind of art, and I plan to do much more of it in the future.

Post-Performance Analysis

One of my favorite parts of sharing performance with others is the time after a live show. Whether it’s the moment immediately after the final line, the ensuing hour of discussion, or the days and weeks following the last show, post-performance time is a striking space of conversation, energy, and renewal. I deeply enjoy the time to reflect on the content and form of a performance by hearing others’ responses to the performance in question.

I created “Hi God” with the intention of generating discussion around the topics of faith, impostor syndrome, and the intersection of religious practice and academics, and I was not disappointed by the many responses from my audience! In light of the three bold messages identified above, my audience’s response to the show was incredibly generous. Professors, community members, and students (both undergraduate and graduate) all reached out after the live performance to share their thoughts, experiences, disagreements, and stories in several different ways.

The primary way that I invited my audience to respond to the show was through a letter-writing station in the theatre, as described above. A note in the show program encouraged audience members to write letters to each other, their professors, God, the

performer, or anyone else related to the stories in the show. I hung several of my own letters as examples, templates, or invitations, and I hoped people would hang some of their letters alongside mine once they finished writing them.

I was amazed by the number of letters that my audience shared over the course of the performance weekend. People of all backgrounds and demographics stayed after each performance to write letters about their experiences in academia, their faith journeys, their questions about God and religion, and their hopes for the future. The depth and honesty of these letters touched me deeply, and I felt privileged to share these moments of intimacy with my audience members, many of whom were strangers to me.

Woven from the words of Christians and non-Christians alike, the letters form a complex tapestry of thoughts and ideas about faith, love, hope, frustration, and joy.

“Hi God, I don’t typically write letters to you, or at least not much lately.”

“Dear Someone, I’ve had a complex relationship with religion.”

“Hi God, I’ve been thinking about impostor syndrome...”

“I want to hear from you. For the last 5 or so years I’ve felt like you haven’t been there. I’ve questioned if you’re even real.”

“I fear I’m not being good enough or people are judging me for it, or even that I’m not being open enough about being a Christian.”

“I’m lost and I need your help to find my way.”

“...please free me from impostor syndrome so I can live and love like You, without fear.”

“It has been a rough couple of months but I’m working through it and everything seems to be getting better.”

“Thanks is always a good place to start, so thank you.”

“...here’s to whoever’s listening...”

“You’re a good Father.”

“What an unbelievably odd, beautiful, crazy, confusing, scary, joyful, interesting, sad, hopeful experience this has been so far.”

“A thousand thanks, God.”

“Hope to hear from you soon.”

Reading these letters moved me deeply and confirmed to me that my experience of unbelonging and loneliness was not unique. The letters offered me a chance to extend my focus outward and, in reading and reflecting on others’ stories, to think about them instead of myself. At the end of the day, I intended my performance process to elicit stories from my audience and to place the focus on a communal narrative instead of my personal experience.

In addition to writing these letters and more, many audience members stayed after each show to talk to me and to each other—even on the night that a fire alarm went off and we were forced outside into the Iowa cold! The hard work of rehearsal and performance was rewarded by deep and fulfilling conversations, some of which even continued after the performance weekend. I met personally with several different faculty representatives, community members, and students in the days following the

performances, and these meetings offered both insight into others' experiences of impostor syndrome and fuel for further reflection and editing on my part.

Hi God was a spiritually and academically transformative experience for me, as I hoped it would be. This transformation occurred through the interrelated processes of writing and sharing. First, it was a relief to write down my story, to put words to my emotions and struggles, to make a space to reflect on my experiences and start to hand them over to God. It was important to acknowledge that, largely through the highs and lows of my academic career, I have grown to understand God as big enough to handle all the questions I have about faith, about joy, and about Him. It was also important for me to express to others the process of encountering and asking these questions, of opening my eyes to other worldviews and learning how and when to speak about my own beliefs in a classroom, office, or common space. It was a relief to request, in return, a parallel kind of open-mindedness from my fellow students and academics but to simply accept the reality that my work matters to God, regardless of others' response. This was a critical step in the journey of my relationship with God and enabled me to move forward in my spiritual and academic life. Second, the opportunity to explore the narratives of graduate school with faculty and other students—and to advocate for change so that other graduate students could experience a healthier culture—brought fresh energy and hope to my work in graduate school. Although the changes my peers and I have experienced in the realm of graduate program culture have been small so far, we hope that our department will continue to reevaluate its policies, and we look forward to articulating our stories for the benefit of others and for academia as a whole.

Hi God is not over, as I have the opportunity to perform the show several more times at different venues. However, I am moving toward a level of closure on my graduate school experience. So, maybe all that's left is to write a few more letters.

Conclusion

To my fellow students: we've all been in this together. And whether graduate school has been challenging, energizing, lonely, awakening, or just hard, it's introduced us to each other. That's a gift I won't forget. I hope this show reminds you that you're not alone. There will always be a piece of your identity that feels ragged or awkward in the environment of academia (or any environment), and you need to make peace with that fact. It will not be a simple process, but it can be done. I stand as a testament to that truth.

To Whom It May Concern: I'm glad we could talk. I wasn't sure what to expect. None of us were, really. Thank you for listening, for allowing my questions. This wasn't comfortable for anyone, least of all me, but I hope it was useful. I hope you can gradually stop telling the stories of unbelonging, difficulty, and failure that have infested the halls of universities we all love. I hope something changes, that we can make this place home for students and teachers and thinkers and dreamers.

Hi God, "thank you" grows trite at this point. I've worn out words of gratitude, words of reflection, words in general, and I am tired. Instead of words, then, I hope to offer acts of gratitude, acts of reflection, acts of service. Finish the work, and I'll follow in your footsteps.

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APPENDIX A

HI GOD

Cast:

Grace Mertz: Herself

Props:

Blanket

Bubbles

Cape

Captain America shirt

Cardboard box

False mustache

Letters and envelopes

Loose papers

Mug

Notebooks

Pens and pencils

Ramen noodles (two packages)

Socks (one pair)

Ukulele

Set:

Couch

Small table

Whiteboard (with markers)

Scene Description:

Couch is set DSR, with small table next to left side. Whiteboard is set USL. Props are spread across stage floor.

Letter-writing station is set up in one corner of the theatre. This includes a table with pens, paper, and clothespins. Additionally, one wall is equipped for hanging letters with twine and clothespins.

(Spotlight comes up on couch. Performer sits on couch with notebook and pen.)

Hi God,

I really need to talk to someone, but there's no one here to talk to. So, I'm just going to write you a letter, okay? I need to know that somebody's hearing this.

I almost quit today. I almost climbed in my car and drove home. I don't think anybody would miss me, you know?

(Full stage lights come up on cluttered stage. Performer stands up and begins to move around stage.)

Hi God,

Do you know why all this stuff is here? Some days I feel like I just walked onto a movie set and the director said, "Let's empty out the prop closet and give Grace whatever was in the back!" A fake mustache? A ukulele? Well, we must be doing *The Three Amigos* today.

I have questions.

(Performer pauses.)

Like, why is all this stuff here, and who am I supposed to be with it? I feel like I've been a lot of things already in my life, as have you all, and I want to know which version of me will make me belong somewhere.

Let me explain. I'm a graduate student, and graduate school has not been at all what I expected. Mostly, I think I expected to find a place where I belonged, because I adore learning. I envisioned my introduction to graduate school going like this:

(Performer skips around the stage, throwing papers in the air.)

Guys! We're going to read good books and have deep conversations and be smart together! We're going to discuss our differences and live in community anyway! We are going to be energized and inspired and WOW, I am excited!

(Performer pauses, then moves back toward couch.)

Yo God,

Do you remember how my first semester of grad school ended?

I was so tired that I just drove straight home, and I was sick all the way through Iowa and Minnesota. Imagine, if you will, a 22-year-old grad student, freshly done with an exhausting semester, with burgeoning food poisoning from a gas station breakfast sandwich, driving alone for five hours from Cedar Falls, Iowa to Saint Cloud, Minnesota. I pulled over more times than I can remember, upchucking at every rest stop and gas station I could find.

(Performer falls behind couch, then gradually reappears.)

There was vomit everywhere. It was on my hands, it was on my favorite blanket, it was on my car floor, it was on the seat, and yes, it was even on the outside of my car. The poor guy in the car next to me was looking over, morbidly fascinated by this unfolding drama.

That sums up my experience of graduate school pretty well, I think: a stream of confusing and very overwhelming moments where I was disgusted with myself, confused by my surroundings, and unsure as to why I started this trip in the first place.

(Performer settles down on couch.)

I'm worried grad school was a mistake.

You know the feeling you get when you're not sure you actually belong somewhere, when you question if you've just fooled everybody into thinking you're smart enough or good enough or talented enough to be there? You know that constant, nagging fear that people are going to find out your scheme and throw you out? It's called Impostor Syndrome.

(Voiceover fades up behind performer's voice.)

Impostor Syndrome sounds like your eleven-year-old cousin who's just figuring out how scary the world is, or your teacher telling you that you really need to step up your game to keep up with everyone else, or the other students who whisper about you in the hallways. Basically, it's that little voice in your head that rides along and questions everything you do, no matter how many times you try to say it's all okay.

(Performer cowers behind whiteboard as voiceover rises.)

Voiceover:

Welcome to grad school!

Do you feel dumb yet?

A's are good, B's are bad, and C's mean you should drop out.

You're a failure.

How the heck did you get here?

(Voiceover stops.)

(Performer sits down on couch, gradually rotating to be upside down.)

Hi God,

It's me again. Remember me?

I'm Grace, that shy homeschooler whose parents prayed for her to start talking. I'm sure they regretted that eventually, especially given the fact that I'm majoring in communication studies and sometimes will not stop talking.

I'm Grace, and I write fanfiction on the weekends instead of reading extra academic articles. I've written a whole trilogy of Star Wars stories featuring the crazy antics of Hok Enhu and Retz Markil.

I'm Grace, and I love words. When I was little, my dad asked me what the word "self-seeking" meant, and with absolute confidence, I told him that it was a snail with a sore throat.

I'm Grace, and I fell down the stairs the other day. The girl at the bottom of the stairs got this priceless look on her face, like she felt so bad but also wanted to laugh, so I told her to laugh anyway.

I'm Grace, and I'm a Christian. I don't always know what that means for other people, but for me, it centers on a relationship with you. It means I get to know you and be more like you and, yes, it means I try to talk to you about everything. It means you turn my world upside down sometimes.

I'm Grace, and now I'm a grad student.

(Performer slides onto floor.)

And those other parts of me are not meshing very well with my grad student self. Do I have to pick one thing to be? Either a grad student or a Christian? A student or a writer? A serious academic or the class clown? I know no one ever said that—well, a couple people did—and it's hard to explain, exactly...

(Performer stands up.)

I mean, I'm no dumb sock. By now, I've figured out that the central part of this is my faith. I know it's hard to imagine, in the conservative heart of the Midwest, that a Christian would have trouble fitting in.

I see it in the examples that professors use: "some people are logical, and some people are backward."

I hear it in the way we're encouraged to talk about our upbringing in the classroom: "oh, yeah, I grew up under a rock in this tiny church, but once I got to college, I was too smart for that."

I feel it in the jokes that fly between other students: "oh my gosh, you can't challenge the stupid little Christians' opinions!"

People like me do not belong here.

(Performer begins to write on whiteboard.)

Dear Academia—no.

Uh, Dear Department of Communication Studies...hm.

To Whom It May Concern:

Why did you let me in if you didn't want me here?

I was honest in my application. I said I wanted to research faith.

But if that's not a thing we do here, I get it.

I'm not lodging a complaint, either. I just want you to know what happened.

He (a professor) was trying to explain what kind of people shouldn't be in academia.

(Performer embodies professor.)

“Religious people aren’t really a good fit for higher education. Case in point, a significant percentage of them believe that the earth was created by a higher power or deity.

Obviously, this does not demonstrate the kind of intelligence needed to teach or learn at a high academic level.”

(Performer stops embodying professor.)

“Okay, do you want the door left open or closed when I leave?”

I thought everyone was welcome to come to a university as long as they wanted to learn.

(Performer continues to write on whiteboard.)

Are you familiar with argument structure? Premise plus premise equals conclusion. You make a couple of logically connected statements that lead up to a big payoff.

My professor’s first premise: creationists are stupid. Too stupid to be teaching other people. Second premise, which I quickly explained to him: I believe that the universe was actively created instead of passively evolving, so I am a creationist.

(Performer writes “conclusion” on the board and waits for responses.)

(Voiceover enters again, and performer moves to couch with hands over ears.)

Voiceover:

You are dumb.

You’re so stupid!

Do you even know what logic is?

(Voiceover stops.)

(Performer uncovers ears.)

Hi God,

There's no one here to talk to. I don't feel smart enough to try.

(Performer pauses, as if hearing a question from audience.)

Why didn't I go to seminary? That would've been a good idea. I wouldn't have to straddle this gaping divide between knowledge and faith, academia and my relationship with God, looking inquisitive enough for some people and trusting enough for others. It makes me tired, this act of living in two worlds: as if religion and academics are strictly separated. For me, they're not. And for me, seminary did look like the uniting of both worlds, a place where I wouldn't feel like an impostor anymore, where I could ask questions about faith.

How do we think critically about faith?

Jesus was a radical activist. Does that mean we should be, too?

How can I introduce people to God through academic work?

I'm really having trouble believing God is good.

(Performer embodies pastor.)

Grace, we appreciate your questions, but we don't ask those, okay? We shouldn't have to.

(Performer stops embodying pastor.)

(Voiceover begins again, and performer hides behind whiteboard.)

Voiceover:

"Do you know what God doesn't want? People who go to grad school and come back different."

"You know what God doesn't want? People who ask too many questions."

“You know what God doesn’t want? You.”

(Voiceover stops.)

(Performer comes out from behind whiteboard.)

To My Fellow Graduate Students:

In my travels, I have learned that there is one tried-and-true way to defeat Imposter Syndrome: con artistry.

(Performer applies fake mustache.)

The original con men—or confidence men—surfaced in the nineteenth century, when society was rapidly becoming more urban. As people came into contact with more strangers than they had ever met before, they had to figure out who to trust and who belonged in their circles.

Enter the con artist.

(Performer adopts French accent.)

If you’re feeling insecure about who you are, if you’re trying to fit in somewhere, just pretend you’re someone you’re not.

I’ve been told I’m not smart enough to be here. But through the power of mustached deception, I will make them think I belong.

That means that I sit through the conversations and discussions that reek of academic self-importance and try to smile and frown at the right times. By now, I am a master at figuring out what facial expression to throw up there, even when I’m completely confused.

If the professor is talking about Karl Marx, I nod sagely until she says the word “capitalism,” and then scoff loudly.

When the guy at the desk next to mine starts soliloquizing about postmodernism, I do NOT admit that I’m not totally sure what postmodernism is about. If I do that, they will eat me and my fake mustache alive.

That’s the secret to successful con artistry: whenever someone starts talking about something you don’t know anything about, pretend you knew about it first.

So, make sure you know how to talk about different salad dressings, even if you hate salad with a fiery passion. Make sure you understand the latest memes so you can laugh at the right moment, make sure you practice how to greet your students so you seem older than 22, make sure you never cry in a meeting with a professor.

Eventually, you have to turn the con on yourself, though. You have to make yourself believe that you belong. Every time Impostor Syndrome whispers in your ear, you say something back.

(Performer pauses, as if hearing Impostor Syndrome speaking.)

“I am a successful graduate student. I am a successful graduate student. I am so totally successful. I wrote a paper today. I wrote a page today. Okay, I wrote a paragraph, but it was super well-researched. Plus, I got groceries and practiced my Australian accent in the car, and don’t get me started on that amazing conversation we all had in the office about the place of milk in modern society. Take that, Impostor Syndrome, I am totally succeeding at this grad school thing.”

(Performer pauses, as if hearing Impostor Syndrome speaking.)

“No, I made it out of my apartment today. I call that an unmitigated success.”

(Performer pauses, as if hearing Impostor Syndrome speaking.)

“You know what, you don’t get to judge my wardrobe choices. If wearing a Captain America shirt makes me feel strong enough to defeat you, then I’m wearing it. I am awesome.”

(Performer pauses, as if hearing Impostor Syndrome speaking.)

“You know what, you’re right. I am a failure. Does that mean I can just stay home and be lonely today?”

(Performer drops French accent.)

(Performer sits on couch.)

Because that’s what this is really about, isn’t it? Grad school is lonely. Constantly questioning if you’re good enough makes you lonely. Feeling different makes you lonely. I’ve talked to enough of you to know.

(Performer points out imaginary people in audience.)

You feel way behind on your thesis, like maybe you should just give up and go home because you’re not cut out for this academic stuff.

You are the only woman in your cohort. It gets weird.

You are older than everyone else in your program.

You’re younger.

You came all the way across the country and realized you don’t look like anybody here.

You are a little like me, and the fact that you have faith makes you hesitant to speak up in class.

You have so many questions that nobody else seems to be asking.

You really want to go home.

You're thinking that this is not what you signed up for.

It doesn't really matter what it is that makes you different: it just makes you feel lonely.

And you didn't prepare to be lonely in this place.

(Performer moves back to whiteboard.)

To Whom It May Concern:

There is something wrong with an education system that prides itself on weeding out the weak.

Wasn't that the point of our professor's story?

(Performer embodies professor.)

"During my master's program, I almost walked in front of a bus."

(Performer stops embodying professor.)

This was my cohort's first graduate seminar ever. We're excited, we're happy, we're ready to get going on this thing, and—

(Performer embodies professor.)

"Hopefully none of you get to that point."

(Performer stops embodying professor.)

Five of our first-year master's students left the program during our first semester together. Five of them. Don't worry, this isn't a complaint. I'm not stupid enough to imagine that correlation is causation. They didn't leave because he warned them that they might get discouraged. They left because they got discouraged.

They left because they realized that they were supposed to leave. They were expected to leave, to make room for the people who “truly” belong here.

That’s what all the articles and, frankly, most of the professors seem to be saying. You should be willing to go through hell to get your Master’s degree or your doctorate, and if you can’t suck it up and handle the struggle, then leave.

(Performer embodies professor.)

“Oh, what’s that? You said you’re *tired*? Suck it up, buttercup. Everyone else is tired, and everyone else feels lonely, too, but they’re not moping around. You are absolutely pathetic. You need to go home. And close the door on your way out.”

(Performer stops embodying professor.)

(Voiceover begins again, and performer moves behind whiteboard.)

Voiceover:

Welcome to grad school!

Do you feel dumb yet?

A’s are good, B’s are bad, and C’s mean you should drop out.

You’re a failure.

How the heck did you get here?

(Voiceover stops.)

(Performer comes out from behind whiteboard and sits down on stage floor.)

Instead, I went to Hy-Vee.

Grocery shopping can fix a multitude of evils. As I strolled the aisles (where there's always a helpful smile), I thought about my expectations of grad school and my experience of grad school and the wide ways in which those two paths had diverged. I had an epiphany in the pasta aisle, where I realized that one thing in life never really changes: the price of ramen noodles. You can always count on ramen noodles to meet your expectations.

So I'm in front of the ramen noodles, gradually falling into laughter so pure and sincere that joyful tears are a chuckle away, and a lady pushes her cart past. She looks mildly concerned, but it's obvious that I'm having a moment with the ramen, so she doesn't say anything. I mean, what do you do when you see someone possibly having a breakdown in public?

(Performer sits in front of couch.)

Hi God,

Are you tired of seeing this yet?

Are you tired of watching me fail and give up?

If I were you, I would be tired of seeing Grace try, and I would send her back to where she came from and get someone more capable of doing what you want. That's what academia would do. That's what grad school would do.

Hey, God, I thought I was done proving myself by now. Done thinking that I'm just taking up space reserved for someone else.

I didn't come here to fail, but I'm failing in every way I know how. Relationships, writing, teaching, faith, even eating and sleeping. I was not prepared to fail so hard.

When do I get to say that I've tried long enough and this isn't working for me?

God, I know that you brought me here, and I think this is something you want for me, but God...your daughter is tired.

And that's how I found myself stuck in my apartment for a weekend. And not stuck because I was snowed in: stuck because I couldn't make myself go anywhere. I was so discouraged and so depressed with my failures and the thought that I would never be good enough anyway that it was a monumental effort to go to Starbuck's and grade three of my students' speeches.

One of the first things I learned in graduate school was that an A is good, a B is bad, and a C means you should leave. So for our entire first semester, my cohort freaked out about our grades.

To Whom It May Concern:

Why did you bother sending us acceptance letters, if you're so eager to make us leave?

(Performer stands up.)

This is not a complaint. This is an accusation.

You said, and I quote from your letter of acceptance in February of 2018, that you were "looking forward to working with me." You said you were happy I was coming and that you'd help me in any way you could. Guess what? I don't believe a word of it anymore. Not a word.

I've tried to be calm and rational up to this point, but forget it. Let me tell you about all the nights I came home from seminar and cried my eyes out, because the professor made

everything I did seem pointless. Or the growing number of times I've fantasized about leaving without saying a word to anyone, because no one here would miss me.

I have tried to keep a level head, but I'm done. You've made me and my friends feel like dirt. Bottom of the barrel, worthless, hiding in a stairwell before class dirt.

I can't really blame the people who've said these things, and done these things, and passed on these pains. I blame the culture that told them the stories they're telling us.

(Performer gradually sits down on stage floor.)

Who decided grad school had to be this hard? Who decided it had to hurt? Who decided that depression and anxiety are the norm for higher education?

And who gave you the right to demand I give up the most important relationship in my life just for you?

That's what it is. When you say that "religious people" don't belong here, you're not asking us to leave a book full of ideas at the door. You're telling me that in order to succeed here, I need to give up a relationship with Someone. It's petty and ridiculous, because you're not even offering one in return, and it's stupid that I keep falling for it.

I went to counseling for you.

I took medication for you.

I studied all night and wrote things I hate for you.

And I am never going to be good enough for you, am I?

(Performer silently moves around stage, gathering items and putting them in a box.)

To Whom It May Concern:

You have hurt us. Figure out what to do about it.

(Performer hands box to audience member.)

(Performer walks away from audience.)

Hi God,

I am mad at you, too.

Is it too much to ask to fit somewhere?

You're the thing that seems to make me not fit.

It hurts to think some part of me is made wrong and won't ever be made right enough for the people around me, to think that unless I get rid of that piece that doesn't belong, I'll never be able to do the things I want to.

Sometimes it's tempting. You know that, don't you? It's tempting to think if I give up this whole relationship with you, this whole Christian thing, I could fit.

(Performer addresses audience.)

Hi God,

I'm sorry.

I needed someone to hear that, but there's nobody else here. I don't think they understand the choice they're asking me to make with every joke, every comment in class, every statement that implies faith is the opposite of logic and I couldn't possibly have thought through what I believe.

I've thought through it, God, and I know I've fallen short.

If I'm a Christian, and I'm trying to be like the God I know, then my life should be the embodiment of love. Love is patient, and kind, and humble. And it's not boastful, it's not rude, it's not self-centered, and I hate looking back and seeing how much I've failed, God. I'm not patient, and I'm not kind, and I take offense so easily.

I've messed this up so bad that I'm not even sure where to start.

This is really hard, and I am tired.

Is this worth it, God?

(Performer continues to gather items from stage floor.)

Obviously, I'm still here. There have been wonderful moments, like Wednesday night theory class potlucks, purple cohort T-shirts, and long conversations in the office. We've shared memes, cornbread crumbs, and Tuesday soup runs to Kwik Star.

The good parts are worth it, but the loneliness eats them all up: the nights I spend alone in my apartment, the afternoons I pretend to study at coffee shops and bookstores and anywhere except my bedroom, the mornings I try to plan lessons for my students when I'm not sure they learn anything from me at all.

I don't think the loneliness is worth it. It's not worth being away from my family and everyone else I know, showing up to another class, telling off Impostor Syndrome for one more day.

But I'm still here, God. So what do I do? What kind of person am I supposed to be?

(Performer begins to sing.)

God, the places I've been

*Have taken my strength
I'm not sure what you've meant
Can't you see how far I'm bent
I want to be grace
Just like you
Bold, kind, strong,
Joyful, too
With grace as my name
I'm ashamed to fall so short
But I'll trust there's enough grace
To make me Grace
There's enough grace
To make me Grace
(Performer stops singing.)*

I don't want to spend the rest of my life facing down Impostor Syndrome and thinking that I don't belong in my church or my school or anywhere I want to be. Impostor Syndrome will follow me around as long as I let it.

It will follow all of us around and shape the culture of academia as long as we let it have power.

How do we do this? How do we become the people we want to be, how do we stay in our own skin, in a system that doesn't seem to want us?

(Performer finishes cleaning stage.)

To My Fellow Students:

It would be easier if you didn't make snide comments about Christians every chance you get. I know we have flaws, and I'll admit mine, but it wears me out to hear "poor little Christians" and "silly Christians" and "backward Christians" in the hallway and the office.

Plus, you gotta have some new ones by now. It's just unoriginal.

Tell me how I can help you belong. I can't take away the Impostor Syndrome, but I can be here with you. I can tell you that loving other people helps.

Knowledge, like life, is a gift and a responsibility. If all the knowledge we gain does nothing but make us boastful and arrogant and heroes in our own minds, then it would be better if we knew absolutely nothing.

Knowing doesn't really help me belong anywhere. Loving does.

Knowledge doesn't bear all things, believe all things, endure all things, hope all things.

Love does.

It opens a space for others to belong.

So tell me how to make space for you, and please, I'm asking, try to make space for me.

Let's be patient, let's be kind, let's be gentle with each other, and let's try this again, making space for each other.

Dear Professors:

Do you think that just because you went through this pain, all of us need to go through it too?

(Performer embodies professor.)

“During my master’s program, I almost walked in front of a bus.”

(Performer stops embodying professor.)

Or are you telling me that you haven’t forgotten how it feels?

(Performer embodies professor.)

“Hopefully none of you get to that point.”

(Performer stops embodying professor.)

I’m not asking you to make it easy. I’m just asking you to be here with me.

Take me seriously when I say it’s hard. More often than not, I’m too ashamed to ask for help. I’m ashamed to admit I have failed. How am I supposed to tell someone that I’ve sat at my laptop for hours and the words for this stupid paper still won’t come? No one else is having trouble. How am I supposed to get past the point of proving myself?

Dear professors, you are very, very smart, and most of you are very kind. So why do you say such thoughtless things about people like me? Like I said, I’ll admit my faults, but can you admit yours?

To Whom It May Concern:

Do I want a PhD?

(Performer laughs wildly, gradually sinking to stage floor.)

No.

I’m not the only one.

I’m just the one who’s writing to ask for some changes.

Hi God:

Thank you. It's been a good talk.

(Performer stands and begins to move couch and whiteboard toward center stage.)

There is no place on earth that will fit all the pieces of me, all the pieces of Grace. I think that would be true for anyone. There's only place I will ever really belong, and that's with you.

You are my nexus.

You are the connecting point of all my identities, the grounding for my aspirations. You are the X on the map that all my wonderings lead to.

I am a writer. You are the Word: the poetry that ties the universe together, the root and meaning of all language.

I am an artist. You are the Sculptor of the world. You made me: thus, I make.

I am a thinker. You are knowledge and wisdom in every sense, the genesis of thought.

I am human. You are Creator, yet you know, intimately and deeply, what humanity is: how it looks, feels, tastes.

I am all these things and more, all these questions and not one answer. So you, Christ, are my nexus: the connection between all my dreams and the most important point on the map of my identity. An X marks the spot.

You're the place I belong.

(Performer writes "Hi God, thanks" on whiteboard.)

Thanks for listening.

(Lights fade into blackness.)

APPENDIX B
PROGRAM

Department of Communication Studies University of Northern Iowa

Presents

Hi God

Written and Directed by: Grace Mertz

in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the Master of Arts degree in Communication Studies

Performed in UNI Interpreters Theatre
on the 7th, 8th, and 9th of November 2019

Production Staff

Director	Grace Mertz
Playwright	Grace Mertz
Artistic Director	Dr. Danielle Dick McGeough
Designer/Technical Director	Josh Hamzehee
Production Coordinator	Josh Hamzehee
Electronic Engineer	Michael Rueber
Stage Manager	Desiree Allen
Assistant Stage Manager	Tim Matheson
Lighting Operator	Tim Matheson
Technical Operator	Desiree Allen
Tech Crew	Desiree Allen, Tim Matheson, Kenzi Ramer
Properties Crew Chief	Desiree Allen
Graduate Production Assistants	Grace Mertz, Shreya Singh, Alex Sojka
Graphic Designer	CHAS PR
Photographer	UNI University Relations
Emerita Producer	Dr. Karen Mitchell
Emerita Founder	Dr. Phyllis Scott Carlin
Head, Department of Communication Studies	Dr. Christopher Martin
Dean, College of Humanities, Arts and Sciences	Dr. John Fritch

About the Show

In “Hi God,” metaphor, comedy, and brutal honesty collide as Grace, a graduate student, figures out how to be a person of faith in the academic world. In an eclectic night of performance featuring ramen noodles and con men, Grace writes a series of letters to God and invites audiences to reflect on their own complicated relationships with knowledge, faith, and belonging.

In this program, you’ll find a letter I’ve written. You’ll also notice a blank piece of paper inside your program. This is an invitation to write your own letter—to the performer, a professor, God, or someone else important to your academic experience. Feel free to write before or after the show, then either:

- a. Leave your letter in the basket by the door.
- b. Give it to who you are writing it to.
- c. Keep it for yourself. If you need a pen, ask I.T. staff or your neighbor!

Director’s Note

Hi friends,

I’m a long thinker and a fast writer. That means that I’ve been thinking about this experience since I started my undergraduate degree in 2014, and I’ve only recently tried to put words to it during my master’s degree. “Hi God” is an imperfect reflection of my experience as a Christian in the academic world, but it’s a start.

As I wrote this show, I had the opportunity to talk to many other graduate students and academics about the issue of belonging, and I was amazed at the vast number of us who feel out of place in some way. Academic culture offers incredible opportunities for community and growth, but it’s also a breeding ground for some damaging narratives about relationships, the cost of success, and the purpose of knowledge.

So how can we overcome the struggles and change for the better together? I’m still working through that question, and I’m inviting you into my process tonight. I spend a lot of time talking to God about how it feels to be lonely, but it’s important to me to talk to you, too. Please feel free to stay and share questions, insights, and stories with me after the show.

If you get one thing out of my performance, I hope it’s that you’re not alone if you question your place here. That’s why I’m sharing my story. Can’t wait to hear yours.

-Grace