

Q&A with Jennifer Fulwiler: Talking her book, faith, marriage, family, and what to do when it's 5:30 and there's nothing in the oven

Jennifer Fulwiler is one of those funny, brilliant people with an amazing story and the talent to tell it.

If you don't know who she is, you could stop by her blog or pick up her recently released book, *Something Other Than God*, where she describes her spiritual and intellectual journey from atheism to Catholicism.

Or, if you are in the Baltimore/D.C. area, you can meet her in person...because she's coming to Washington, D.C. at the end of September! I can hardly wait!



Jennifer Fulwiler

In fact, I can't wait.

So I call her for an interview. I'm a little nervous, and right away Jen has a question for me: "Is this for print or are we on the air?"

"On the air? Oh, wow, no. Thank goodness, no." And suddenly I don't feel nervous at all because the idea of having to do an interview live is absolutely terrifying.

Then, because I can't help myself, I start gushing about how much I loved her book.

"You probably get tired of hearing people say that," I say.

"I worked on it so hard and so long that maybe in a hundred years I'll get tired of hearing that," she says. She tells me that she started writing the book in the summer of 2008. "I remember thinking, 'Wow, I need to be realistic. I don't think there is any way this can be published before 2010.'"

"Well, you've had a few things happen since 2008," I say. Because she has. Her family has

grown significantly—she’s the mother of six children 11 and younger.

So I actually call Jen Fulwiler twice

As I’m talking, I suddenly realize she isn’t. The phone is dead. I dial Jen’s number and we start again.



“What’s some of the best feedback you’ve received on the book?” I ask.

“You know, the greatest moments so far have been when I hear from people who were not solid in their faith,” she says. “Just yesterday I heard from a woman in England who had been raised Catholic and had fallen away. She said God used my book to reignite her faith and bring her back to the Church.”

On writing *Something Other Than God*



“If you had read this book yourself back when you were searching, would it have helped you find your way?” I ask.

“I think it would have, once I was at a point of openness. When I was staunchly opposed to faith and closed-minded, there was no book in the world that would have moved me. People who don’t want to hear the truth won’t hear it,” Jen says. “I do think this book would have helped me because everyone likes stories where people aren’t telling you what to believe. They’re just talking about how it happened to them.”

Jen talks about how she read her drafts through that lens, thinking of how she would have viewed it in 2004, considering whether it would have alienated her.

“I hadn’t thought of it,” she says, “but it was almost like a letter to myself of 10 years ago.”

Two faith journeys or one?

I ask about her conversion—and her husband’s. Although Jen and her husband, Joe, converted to Catholicism at the same time, they seemed in many ways to be on individual, separate journeys, supporting each other, but not pushing each other either.

"You bring up a really interesting insight about the fact that we didn't put pressure on one another," she says. "I think initially the reason behind it wasn't really a great thing. It was, to be honest, we didn't really care that much. We were speaking truths, we wanted to know the truth, but ultimately we just wanted to drive nice cars and make money. Now he and I are completely on the same page with regards to faith and if one of us were to lose faith now, that would be a very big deal."

She pauses for a moment. "Isn't that amazing how God can bring good out of anything?"



"You'll get over atheism..."

In her book there's a scene where she and Joe are on a plane, and they start talking about belief in God. Jen reminds him that she doesn't believe in God and asks whether it bothers him.

"You're reasonable, so you'll get over the atheism thing eventually," he tells her in the book.

"I'm actually a little surprised you didn't just walk away," I tell Jen.

"It's funny," she says, "I think that when people see us interact in person, there's a new color that's added to that exchange. We speak very bluntly to one another. We're constantly saying things that our friends are saying, 'Whoa, I'm surprised that that works.' I actually toned that conversation down."

"So his comment didn't upset you," I say.

"I knew that his number one thing in life, his real religion, was having a nice worldly lifestyle, and that was my religion, too," she says. "If he had said something like, 'I need to quit my job, we need to stop blowing all our money on vacations,' that would have been different. I knew that he was just talking and didn't really care."

Let's talk motherhood

I ask about her children. "What do they know," I ask, "about your conversion?"

"They know that we came into the faith," she says. "We don't dwell on our background a whole lot at this point, because our philosophy is to help them be really solid in our faith now. I do think—in our family culture—they know that we are very, very happy to be Catholic, and that we tried it another way and found it to be very lacking. I hope they sense our gratitude for our faith. We got a glimpse of what life could have been."

"Many of the people who read my blog are looking for advice on how to raise their children to have a strong faith," I ask. "What advice would you offer them?"

"Usually when that kind of thing comes up I say, 'I have no idea. Please pray for me,'" she says. "When it comes to raising the next generation in the faith, neither my husband or I grew up in that culture. I wasn't even friends with Catholics. I don't have that life experience. I will say, it's important to know your faith. It's important not to shy away from the questions. But I need advice from Catholics who grew up in that culture. It's a really scary feeling. We're just winging it."



"What is this craziness?"

"It must be interesting to be two only children raising a family of six children. What is that like?"

She laughs. "Every day we look at each other and we're like 'What is this craziness?'. It definitely is a challenge for us but we get through."

I explain that I'm one of six and my husband is one of seven, and that when we became parents, I realized I had no idea how to raise an only child. Should I sit and play with him for hours on end? Did I have to arrange for play dates?

Jen laughs. "Any time you think you have it locked down, God switches it up on you," she says.

Swords, Barbie castles, and a pub crawl

"Do your children know about your blog?" I ask. "What do they think of it?"

"Yes, they do, and in fact sometimes something will play out. The other day my son got a sword and knocked down his sister's Barbie castle and he said, 'You should write about that on the blog.' I think they perceive that it's a chronicle of their awesomeness."

"Were there any parts of the book that the publisher cut that you had really hoped to include?" I ask.

"There were a lot of great stories that were really funny and that I thought would add color to the book. There was one story about how Joe and I were dressed up as clowns on a pub crawl and the police got involved," she says. "But as I learned how to be a better writer, I realized you need to know your theme. If a story doesn't speak to your theme, it has to go. Ignatius (Press) was amazing. They didn't pressure me to cut anything."

Let's cut to the chase.

"OK, so it's 5:30. You have nothing in the oven. What are you making for dinner?"

"Oh, I love this question," she says. "I actually have a great fish recipe. Since fish freeze well, I keep fish in the freezer. I'll email it to you."

And she does. So here it is. Jen said she just puts all the toppings on when she places it in the oven.

So now you have a new recipe, a book recommendation (if you've already read it, go read it again), and plans for a fantastic evening in D.C. in September.

If I offered cappuccino and free babysitting, we could call this a full-service blog.



Info on Jennifer Fulwiler's visit to Washington, D.C.:

Jennifer Fulwiler is speaking at St. John the Apostle in Leesburg, Va., on Sept. 26, at the Risk Jesus Conference in Woodbridge, Va., on Sept. 27, and at The Catholic Information Center on Sept. 29.

(Note: This is a slightly abbreviated version of our conversation.)

You might also be interested in the review I wrote of Jennifer Fulwiler's book, *Something Other Than an Ordinary Read*.