The first individual I observed was a young white female bartender, probably late twenties to early thirties. The bar was a small one near my hometown, mostly rural but close enough to city life to offer diversity. She was dressed in jeans and a tank top that left her midriff exposed. Her tattoo was on her lower back, depicting—as best as I could tell at least—a woman holding an hourglass sitting in the center of a web.

My first thought was to laugh. The depiction reminded me very readily of a black widow spider. I found myself looking for any flies trapped within the web. Then a more symbolic idea hit me: would any flies trapped in the web be men? As it turns out, there were not flies of any kind anywhere in the tattoo’s web. The idea, however, continued to intrigue me. The woman was clearly at ease in her surroundings. Part of this, I’m sure, had to do with extensive experience. Even so, she had an innate self-confidence that you could see and feel in the way she talked, gestured, and walked.

One of the patrons at the bar was one of those annoying people that do their best to drink themselves into a stupor, but cannot handle the alcohol required to do so. He became louder and more boisterous as the night progressed. The bartender handled him with more ease than most male bartenders that I have seen. I got the distinct feeling that she was very used to be in control of her environment, and the man knew it. Needless to say, she got him to stop drinking alcohol for the night and got two glasses of water down him before he left.

This entire scenario gave me a lot of insight into her character. She is strong, independent, and confident. She is used to having control over her surroundings. Relating to the tattoo, I thought of a couple of possible meanings. The most obvious and shallow meaning, in my opinion, could simply mean that she is a type of “black widow.” By this, I mean that she embraces certain feminist ideas regarding women and their relationships with men. Based on her demeanor, I would guess that she is the dominant person in her relationships, and has no problem getting rid of men that do not hold to that. The other idea I considered was more symbolic. The hourglass the woman in her tattoo was holding, though it reminded me of the black widow spider, may simply have represented time.

Returning to the possibility that she was at least a moderate feminist, perhaps the tattoo represented that her time was now, that her life and destiny was her own to control. The web could also play into this; drawing from documentaries that I had watched as a child, I recalled that the black widow female was dominant to the male, and the mating ritual was often completed by her killing and eating her partner. Evoking the image of a black widow, then, could represent power and dominance to the woman. Maybe it was a statement to men, that they would have to be equal to her own innate strength and independence if they wanted to have a hope with her.

The other individual I observed was in a very different environment: a Bible study. He is also young, probably early to mid-twenties. The tattoo, in dark blue ink, was around his wrist: John 3:16. Not a big tattoo, not glaringly obvious, but definitely making a statement. This particular Bible study was comprised of adolescent and young adults. This man was calm and relaxed, spoke softly, laughed often, and welcomed everyone. He was genuinely kind and outgoing. He is what most churches would consider the model Christian.

Except for the tattoo. Most older Christians would balk at the idea of having a tattoo. My grandmother is one of these individuals on occasion, though she has softened her stance in recent years. I’ve heard many arguments from Christians against tattoos, calling them worldly and sacrilege and a host of other unsavory titles. I cannot help but notice, however, that recent years especially have seen a rise in tattoos among Christians.

In this particular young man, it was definitely a statement of commitment. That particular verse is one of the most well-known in the Bible. I think his statement, however, was not only directed at the secular population, but also at the preceding generation of Christians.

I think he was trying to say that tattoos are okay, an acceptable form of expression and capable of delivering a powerful message. He did not make any attempt to hide the tattoo. In fact, he almost flaunted it as he gestured. It speaks to the need of the younger generation for independence and variable forms of self-expression. He embraces Christian values, but wants to lead them forward into a new phase. There are a lot of older Christians that believe they should not change at all, and there are many that believe they have to become worldly and popular to attain high membership.

This man was seeking an intermediate state. In the modern world, forms of expression are everywhere. Music, painting, drawing, dancing, film, writing, and a host of others serve as modern conduits of the sense of self and community. Tattooing is a part of this. I remember learning about cultures in Africa and Asia that used tattoos as symbols of status, particularly in marking boys that had passed into manhood. These younger people, embodied by this man, are seeking a common culture amongst themselves. They want a common form of expression. I do not think they desire this just to try to make others understand them. Equally powerful is the drive, the need, to understand and define oneself. Above all, I think that was the message this young man was trying to convey.