



Turn of Faith

When I was a child, I knocked on doors as a Jehovah's Witness. It was later that I crossed a very personal threshold. By Joy Castro

Adopted at birth in 1967 by a family of Jehovah's Witnesses, I was asked from an early age to behave as much like an adult as possible. Three times a week in the Kingdom Hall in Miami, my brother and I strove to sit perfectly still in our chairs. Our mother carried a wooden spoon in her purse and was quick to take us outside for beatings if we fidgeted.

At 5, I sat onstage in the Kingdom Hall in Surrey, England, where my father's job had taken us. Nervously pushing my memorized lines into the microphone, I faced my mother, who was seated across from me. We were demonstrating for the congregation exactly how a Bible study with a "worldly" person, or non-Witness, should go.

I had played the householder before — the person who answered the door. That was easy: you just asked questions that showed you didn't know the Truth. Portraying the Witness was harder: you had to produce the right Scripture to answer any questions the householder might ask.

But we had written our parts on index cards and rehearsed repeatedly at home. I was well dressed and shining clean. I said my lines flawlessly and gave looks of concern at the right times. Finally, the householder agreed with everything I had said: her way of life was wicked, and the Bible clearly proved that Jehovah's Witnesses were the only true Christians who would be saved at Armageddon. Her look was grateful. Then she smiled, becoming my mother again. Everyone clapped, and she glowed with pride. At last I could go out in service.

From the age of 5 until I was 14, I knocked on the doors of strangers each week with memorized lines that urged them to repent. I didn't play with worldly children. I didn't have birthday parties or Christmas mornings. What I did was pray a lot. I knew the books of the Bible in order, by heart, and could recite various verses. My loneliness was nourished by rich, beautiful fantasies of eternal life in a paradise of peace, justice, racial harmony and environmental purity, a recompense for the rigor and social isolation of our lives.

This bliss wasn't a future we had to work for. Witnesses wouldn't vote, didn't involve themselves in worldly matters, weren't activists. Jehovah would do it all for us, destroying ev-

eryone who wasn't a Witness and restoring the earth to harmony. All we had to do was obey and wait.

Shortly after our return to the States, my father was disfellowshipped for being an unrepentant smoker — smoking violated God's temple, the body, much like fornication and drunkenness. Three years later, my parents' marriage dissolved. My mother's second husband had served at Bethel, the Watchtower's headquarters in Brooklyn. Our doctrines, based on Paul's letters in the New Testament, gave him complete control as the new head of the household; my mother's role was to submit. My stepfather happened to be the kind of person who took advantage of this authority, physically abusing us and forcing us to shun our father completely.

After two years, I ran away to live with my father. My brother joined me a tumultuous six months later. We continued to attend the Kingdom Hall and preach door to door; the Witnesses had been our only community. Leaving was a gradual process that took months of questioning. I respected all faiths deeply, but at 15 I decided that I could no longer be part of a religion that condoned inequality.

After she finally divorced my stepfather, my mother moved out of state and married another Witness. Our occasional correspondence skates over the surface of our strained détente. I feel for her struggles. A smart, capable woman, she subjugated her will and judgment, as the Witnesses teach, to her husbands'. If she damaged my brother and me or failed to protect us, she did so out of fear and belief. She wanted to save us from certain destruction at Armageddon, from a corrupt and dirty world. She wanted nothing less for us than paradise.

I love my mother, but I also love my "worldly" life, the multitude of ideas I was once forbidden to entertain, the rich friendships and the joyous love of my family. By choosing to live in the world she scorned — to teach in a college, to spare the rod entirely; to believe in the goodness of all kinds of people — I have, in her eyes, turned my back not only on Jehovah but also on her.

It's strange when Jehovah's Witnesses come to my door now. I know discussion is futile; they have a carefully planned response for any objection. Finally, I say, "I'm an apostate," and their eyes widen at the word: someone who has willfully rejected Jehovah, far worse than a worldly person, who is simply ignorant of the Truth. A threat to the faith of others, an apostate deserves to be shunned, as we were forced to shun our disfellowshipped father. The Witnesses back away from my door. ■

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