

Grief Journal

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I grew up in a cult in Harlem. An actual cult. A living and still breathing cult. You don't grow up thinking that you are in a cult. Certainly, there would be much opposition if anyone ever accused you of being in one. I was born into a church pastored by my maternal grandfather (The "g" is not capitalized on purpose). Like many whose roots began in the Pentacotal Assemblies of the World, church was our entire life. We were there multiple nights throughout the week for multiple hours. Before I was born, my grandfather also began a parochial school as an extension of the church. This was the beginning of the isolation. My Father (School Principal), Mother (School Secretary), sister and I would commute everyday from Eastern Long Island to Harlem for 2 hours each way everyday in order to attend this school and church on Sunday's and some evenings. My teachers were members of the church. My graduating class of 4 (including myself) were members of the church. Any boys that I was allowed to date were members of that church. My world was small. But, it was perfect to me because I had no reference point. I was the poster child of "sheltered".

Guess what? I was also 1 in only 10,000 that Jesus was returning for. After a painful few years of tarrying services and tremendous guilt that I was the only one in my family that wasn't "filled", I finally was given the gift of tongues and was now a part of the 10,000. Now I'm safe! How did I know about all of this? Well, my grandfather was the ONLY man of God on Earth at that time who was God's appointed messenger. There was no other Pastor on Earth who could discern the Bible and lead people to eternal salvation....right? I was not allowed to go to any other churches, listen to Gospel music, have close relationships with anyone outside of my church, go away to college, and many other constraints. My relationship with Jesus was not really developed because it was all contingent on my grandfather's access to Jesus. I did not grow up having a

personal relationship with God. He was a theologian, a Bible scholar, a literal genius, but was he riddled with demons! This all sounds so bizarre now, but this was my reality for 19 years of my life.

The spiritual abuse would have been enough on its own. But, there was also the sexual abuse that he inflicted upon many of the girls and women in the church. The girls and women were coerced to comply because he was “The Man of God”. In the year 1988, he was arrested and convicted of rape and sexual molestation for two minors and two women. He was on the front page of every paper and headlining every news station. The headlines read something like this, “White Pastor of Black Church in Harlem accused of rape”. He subsequently appealed the conviction and won. The second trial, he was acquitted of all charges. “This was God! Look at what He did for THE Man of God.” said everyone at the church. Little did I know and little did they know, that he was in fact guilty of those charges and many more.

As the years progressed and my friends became older, he began to approach them suggestively. That is when I knew it was all true. They began pushing me away and not speaking to me for months and sometimes years. Until I continued to press the issue and they broke down and told me what he had been doing to them. I would later find out that he had gotten one of them pregnant and made her have an abortion.

The pain, confusion, embarrassment, horror, and guilt were only a fraction of the emotions I felt. How could my grandfather, the “Man of God” do this? I finally mustered up the courage to tell my parents and they believed me. In fact, they had already come to the realization that he was guilty of the acts sooner than I did. I would love to say that

we left the church that very same day. But, we actually were there for a couple more years before we mustered up the courage to leave.

I will never forget that Tuesday night. During Bible study, he was preaching sexually inappropriate things from the pulpit about fathers needing to teach their daughters how to masturbate. (I know. I cringed when I wrote it.) Thankfully and collectively, we said we cannot stay here anymore. My parents, sister, and I left that night knowing that our lives were forever going to be changed in that one moment, in that one decision.

Leaving meant that no one from there would ever speak to us again. My Grandmother, aunt, uncle, cousins, and friends would no longer communicate with us. He would forbid it. My grandmother would sneak out and meet us until he had a private investigator follow her and then all communication stopped from her. I ached for my Grandmother. She passed away 16 years ago. He passed away 3 years ago. My mother lost both of her parents in one night. My parents lost all of their income in one night. The rug was pulled out from under me in one night. I lost my faith in church, family, friends, and love all in one night. I hate to confess that I lost my faith in God. Everything I was taught about God just crumbled beneath me. I had to start from scratch in every aspect of my life. I dare say I was struck with immense grief, anger, confusion and I greatly mourned the "loss". I often refer to those years as my "Wilderness Years".

The grief was tremendous and the pain was tangible. But the Love of God....!!!! I couldn't imagine God would see fit to take "everything" away from me. It took me a couple of years to realize that the Hand of God was working on my behalf during that tumultuous time. I was freed and delivered from spiritual bondage and was not held captive emotionally any longer.

The grief touched every part of my life and was pervasive throughout all of my relationships, including my relationship with God. Had I not gone through any of that, I wouldn't know my Savior the way that I do. I would never know the fullness of what He had in store for my life. My marriage and children would never have come into fruition. My father would never have started his own church and I would never be ministering and walking into my calling. Pain would have been something that I could have peripherally spoken about, but not really understood the magnitude had God not taken me through those first 19 years of my life. I do feel as though I have suppressed and compartmentalized many of those emotions for survival purposes. But, I do not hesitate to use it as a source of reference if I need to minister to someone.

The counseling sessions that are a requirement for this class have been beneficial to me. Although I am a counselor by profession, I never received counseling for anything that I endured. I am able to see how much my past experiences have shaped me as a minister and how I am jaded in my thinking in certain areas. I have a hard time trusting Pastors. I don't put too much weight on people who are gifted in ministry. I care more about what their life reflects. It is hard for me to stand firm on a belief, because I was wrong for 19 years about what I knew for sure was true. I grapple with how "fake" churches can be at times when issues aren't dealt with. I struggle with my calling because of all of these biases.

"Am I really who You want to use God?" I ask. He always says, "Yes!" in return. "But God, I have so many broken pieces and I don't think I can do this." I respond. He said to me, "I know! I am the Potter and you are the clay. Read Jeremiah 18:1-4." I fall before Him in humility and gratefulness for how He has seen me through and brought me out.