

The Journey of Mary Woodard (Kochan)

A Meeting in Bethel to Exiting the Organization

In the fall of 1989, I traveled alone by car from my home in Douglasville, Georgia to Brooklyn New York. I spent the night with my sister who lived in one of the massive human filing cabinets that so many poorer New Yorkers call home and drove the following morning, by invitation, to Bethel in Brooklyn Heights. Concentrating on the unfamiliar route and the harrowing New York traffic, I was unprepared for the sight that suddenly greeted me from the harbor. The Statue of Liberty! And I was equally unprepared for my own reaction: the sting of tears, the catch in my throat, and the welling up in my heart of an unaccustomed love. Immediately I put my hand to my mouth. "Oh, no! This could not be! Here I am on my way to the world headquarters of Jehovah's Organization and I am committing an act of idolatry on the freeway." That evening on the promenade, I "confessed" my sin to a Bethel elder, Rick Hudson. "Don't worry", he said, "your reaction was normal. The Statue of Liberty represents a lot of human values. It is not unusual for people to be very moved at seeing it."

My reaction was normal. Normal. Me. A normal response to "human values." There was much to ponder in those simple words.

Of all the things I was searching for during this trip to New York, "normal" was right up there near the top of the list. My first breakdown had happened in Math class on the first day of 7th grade. The prior summer had been an exciting one for many of my classmates and the classroom was a sea of tittering and giggling. All around me, 13 year-old girls were sharing the secrets they had learned. For many it was the summer of the first boyfriend, the first handholding, the first kiss. There was something curious and magical that they were discovering. And I knew that I was not discovering it. I was different, very different, not normal. I was not curious and it was not magical. It was ugly and tasted like the beer that my uncle drank and stank like the cigarettes that he smoked and felt like his fat hands groping for me. In 7th grade I learned to get drunk.

My uncle was not my only abuser and drinking was not my only escape. We call them "escapes", these prisons of compulsive activity we build to hide from our own thoughts and memories. Busy, busy, busy. Too busy to think. Four kids would be busy enough, you'd think. Homeschooling them, working part-time. Busy enough? "I don't know how you do all you do," my friends would always say. I was one busy woman. Even without the meetings, even without going door-to-door. There were all those coupons to cut out and refunds to send for and all the cooking and baking that had to be done from scratch. My vain attempts to overcome the poverty that dogs so many Witness families. Not to mention being prepared for every meeting -- well prepared. It never took long for the Theocratic Ministry School Overseer to figure out which of the sisters could give an excellent substitute talk; as they say: "If you want to get something done, give it to a busy person."

We Witnesses took pride in being busy. We had, after all, the most important work in the world to occupy us. This old system beckoned with all its allures: education, career, hobbies and entertainment. But like a good Jehovah's Witness, I subordinated every other desire to getting

the Kingdom work done to the best of my ability. And my ability was considerable. It was not merely the Theocratic Ministry School Overseers of various congregations who recognized my talent for explaining the Society's teachings. Other friends knew that I was the person to take on return visits and Bible studies to answer questions or handle objections. My knowledge of Watchtower publications was encyclopedic and my use of the New World Translation deft. I was loved and it is no exaggeration to say that I was admired among my wide circle of Witness friends.

Still I was as alienated from them as I had been from the giggling gaggle of girls in my 7th grade Math class. My Witness friends were happy, or so I thought. And well they should be. After all the Watchtower was always telling us that we were happy people, joyful people, specially blessed people. We had "the truth"; and we were the only ones who had the truth. We were the only ones who had the hope of living forever in Paradise on earth. Other people did not have that hope. I knew that because when I went from door to door and talked to them about it they told me they did not. But my Witness friends and I loved to speculate about the wonderful conditions we would enjoy in the coming Paradise. We were the only ones who knew that God's proper name was "Jehovah" and we pitied all the people outside of the organization deprived of a relationship with God because they didn't even know His name. Is it any wonder that Jehovah's Witnesses would be the happiest people in the world, with such important, life-saving work to engage in, exclusively possessing the truth, having a superior Bible education, knowing God by name and enjoying the hope of living forever in Paradise.

The terrible secret I had to keep from my friends was that I was not happy. Or course, there is a problem any time the leaders of a group have to keep telling the members how happy they are. But I didn't know that. I thought the problem was with me. I thought all the other Jehovah's Witnesses were happy and I was the oddball. With the leaders telling everyone how happy they all are because of all these special things they have from God, if you don't feel that way, how can you even tell anybody about it? It will just be a sign of your lack of spirituality or a symptom that you are hiding some secret sin. Of course, I was hiding something. I was hiding the stuff that had happened to me when I was a kid and if I would have had the right to feel the way I really felt instead of having to pretend to be happy all the time, I might have dealt with it sooner. But as it was the combination of trying not to know what I knew and trying not feel what I felt proved to be too much. At the age of 37 I had a serious, debilitating breakdown. It felt terrible, but it was one of the best things that ever happened to me, because if it hadn't happened I might still be a happy-looking Jehovah's Witness.

My breakdown resulted in my admittance to the mental health unit of a hospital in June of 1989. There are all kinds of people in such a ward and some of them are very obviously very sick. I looked around and thought, "I am not anywhere near as bad off as these people; I'll be out of here in just a few days." It took about three days for a new realization to dawn: I was in a safe place and I had never been in a safe place before in my life. I was filled with the oddest desire, "I never want to leave this place" and finally had to admit, "I must be sick after all because well people do not want to live in a mental hospital!" I wound up spending a month there and I left with a new strength manifested in my resolve to separate from my Witness husband -- a man who had found some way to physically hurt me nearly every day for 15 years.

I dutifully began to get back into the routine of meetings and field service that had been my life for 37 years. I was now a divorced mother with four very traumatized children. I had finally been forced to begin a process of emotional healing that I had been putting off for years. It was a process which required that I surrender to it and that for its sake I surrender the Jehovah's Witness superwoman image that my friends admired. I was aching for honesty and it had to start with me. I started saying that I was unhappy. I started telling my female Jehovah's Witness friends and some elders that I was depressed, that I was battling thoughts of suicide, and that the life I was living as a Jehovah's Witness was not giving me the peace and joy and satisfaction the Watchtower kept telling us we had. When I started saying these things, I thought I was the only person in this one big happy Jehovah's Witness family who was so messed up. But I didn't care anymore. I was so hungry for truth and I was so on the edge of taking my life that I had stopped caring about all the pretending, I just didn't have the energy for it. To my great surprise other women started coming up to me in the Kingdom Hall and asking in a low voice, "What was it like in th hospital, because I don't feel very good either."

If there was one thing that I had learned to do as one of Jehovah's Witnesses it was to read and study. I started devouring books, reading about child and spouse abuse and recovery and about what constitutes abusive and manipulative communication. I began sharing what I was reading with other women who had revealed their own hidden wounds. It was as though I had discovered a secret sisterhood of shame within the organization. And I found that all of us "sisters" shared similar fears and hopes.

We all feared going to the world for help. There were two components to this fear. For one thing, we did not want to "bring reproach on Jehovah" by exposing the dirty laundry of our congregations to outsiders. This was especially true for those of us whose abusers had been other Witnesses, either within our families or without. But even those of us whose abusers had not been Witnesses felt ashamed to go outside of the organization for help. After all, we devoted considerable time every month to telling people that they could find all the answers to life's problems here. We shouldn't need help from outsiders.

The second component of our fear was the suspicion we held of the motives and spiritual alliances of "worldly" people. Worldly counselors might question our faith, subject us to criticism while we were in a vulnerable condition. Worse, they might be used by Satan to trick us into questioning or doubting the Society. We were well indoctrinated with the understanding that their methods were based upon dangerous "pagan" philosophy.

Hence our hope, our deepest desire, was to find help and healing within God's organization, from those we had been taught to trust with the oversight of our spiritual lives, from those men appointed to care for us by God's "holy spirit." We went to elders and we bared our souls. We told them about our abuse, we told them of our secret self-loathing, we confessed our addictions and compulsions. We waited for the healing words.

And sometimes they came. There are a few real heroes among Jehovah's Witness elders, men who by grace or natural empathy said all the right things to some victim of child abuse: "You have honored me so much by confiding in me. I am so sorry this happened to you. You did not deserve this; it was not your fault." But most of them did not know what to say and it was not

their fault that they did not know. The elders are not trained for counseling and most of them have no more than a high school education. Even the ones who were approachable and comforting had neither the experience nor education to deal with the issues that child abuse had raised in the lives of the victims. There was a standard, one-size-fits-all recommendation for anyone with problems of any kind within Jehovah's Witnesses. What training elders did have was designed to teach them to make and administer this recommendation: Mental health was to be found in living the Jehovah's Witness life and following the routine of study, meetings and field service.

Regardless of whether or not the initial response of the elder they confided in was healing or not, the recommendations for dealing with the depression, self-loathing and family dysfunction caused by child abuse were fairly uniform. Sisters were told that meeting attendance and field service would help them to keep their mind off their problems. Reading the Bible and the Society's literature would fill their mind with upbuilding thoughts. Against the natural feminine inclination to commiserate with other women, we were warned against violating the prerogatives of elders by giving "spiritual counsel" to other women. Victims whose abusers were other Witnesses were further hampered by slander warnings. Such were the recommendations of "God's organization", passed on to them by God's appointed shepherds to whom they were taught to be submissive. If these recommendations failed to bring about peace of mind and emotional healing, whose fault would that be? A survivor of abuse who initially aroused caring concern all too often shortly found herself labeled as rebellious if her dysfunction prevented her complete application of the elder's sincere recommendations to bury her troubles in theocratic activity.

My research into this problem and my own pursuit of mental and emotional health was revealing that more was needed. Victims needed to talk and to have someone listen-- someone with whom they could enter a therapeutic relationship. Such a procedure allows people being counseled to transfer elements of their other relationships to the counseling situation. The counselor functions as an ally to the person seeking help, first gaining trust, then using his education and experience to bring objectivity to this intense personal exploration. This is delicate work for which both insight and training are necessary. The association between the parties is carefully bounded and contractual. Healing occurs in stages and periods of emotional instability or even volatility are natural parts of the healing process.

I decided to distill some of my research into brief written form so that my friends could use it and share it with those elders who were willing to listen and try to help. In this paper called "Moving Forward: Help for Witnesses Handling Issues of Abuse and Victimization in Their Lives," I outlined what I had come to understand about the way this problem was manifested: Compulsive behaviors, disruptions to normal functioning, depression, and even some behaviors considered seriously sinful (such as substance abuse and promiscuity) were all things that could bring a Witness into contact with elders either in their "judicial" role or in seeking to render spiritual comfort. They would obviously be better equipped to assess the needs of members if they were able to take abuse history into account. For the victims, self understanding required acknowledging this history and dealing realistically with its impact. This meant time for reflection and attention to the process of healing had to be given the necessary priority in their lives.

These needs conflicted with the culture of the Watchtower organization in a number of ways. Admitting weakness and need contradicted the "happy" image that we cultivated before the world. Pointing to child and spouse abusers within the organization revealed holes in our carefully crafted squeaky-clean image. But the most hazardous organizational teaching for victims and those who cared about them had to be the constant trumpeting of the impending end of the world.

There was little sense among Jehovah's Witnesses that human thriving was desirable or even attainable in this "present system of things". Many suffering Witnesses had despaired of personal flourishing and contented themselves with "hanging on until the end." Many elders shared these convictions about what was presently possible. They saw themselves as having the role of helping members to function well enough to get by, to be able to work at some menial job, attend meetings and go from door to door. They did not want to lose anyone from their congregation by suicide any more than they wanted to lose anyone from their congregation by having to disfellowship them for immorality. They warded against these things by encouraging fellow Witnesses to endure whatever pain they were going through and keep active in field service, expecting relief in the "new system" after Armageddon -- always right around the corner. This mentality made seeking real health and well-being here and now an act of disloyalty to the organization's direction.

Elders disagreed among themselves about how to deal with abuse victims in their midst. Those rare elders who were determined to make themselves available to listen and to learn about these issues were often accused by fellow elders of being unbalanced in their response, spending too much time in counseling sessions and neglecting other duties. It is overly simplistic to view these men as harsh or unfeeling. Some of them were. But many were simply overworked to the point where concern for a general appearance of good order in the congregation took priority over genuine care for individual needs. These were men who usually had full time secular jobs, wives and children. They spent the same hours in meetings and field service that all active Witnesses spend, a demanding burden in itself. The additional responsibilities of their position put them under an almost inhuman work load. It is hardly surprising that an elder who placed considerable emphasis on doing individual counseling with abuse victims would be perceived by other elders as unnecessarily increasing their work load in other areas. In addition, elders who wanted to consider past abuse or current depression as mitigating factors in "judicial cases" found themselves in conflict with other elders who did not want their judgement corrupted by "worldly psychology."

A number of victims and elders sympathetic to them, including the ones helping me, immediately saw the value in what I had written. But other elders were unhappy that I wrote anything about what I was going through. The fact that I would put my experience and what I was learning in written form seemed to them to be a gross presumption, as though I was attempting to take over some elevated spiritual role in enlightening my fellow Witnesses, a role that belonged solely to the anointed Governing Body. Nothing could have been further from my own intentions, but when I began getting phone calls from JWs in Florida and Tennessee to my home in Georgia, I was a bit worried and by the time phone calls were coming from New York, California and Washington State, I started to get scared.

There is no "freedom of the press" for individual Witnesses. Behind the walls of the Watchtower, the Society's publications have not merely pride of place, but exclusive place, in educating the Witness population. Members are expressly forbidden from publishing and distributing their own material on any subject. I realized that the wide distribution my writing was getting was evidence that it had tapped into a deeply felt, hitherto unaddressed need but I was also aware of how irregular the whole thing was.

I could offer the perspective of a victim, but what I had to say was no more than a single personal account, however enlightening or compelling. What elders and other victims longed for was help from the Watchtower leaders, spiritual food at the proper time dealing with these issues. I do not recall whether it was I myself or one of the elders dealing with me who first made contact with the Watchtower writing department to ask for direction. But it was not long after we made this contact that we discovered that my paper, "Moving Forward" was known to them. At first I thought I was going to get into trouble for having written it and for allowing others to distribute it but the result was opposite to my expectations.

The number of cases surfacing and the volume of calls for help was becoming such that the writing staff wanted to pursue it as a subject for articles in their own journals. Soon I was corresponding regularly with two of the writers, Rick Hudson and Lee Waters. It was by their invitation that I made my visit to the Brooklyn offices of the Watchtower Society.

Lee Waters took me to meet Harry Peloyan, the coordinator (editor) of the Awake! magazine. Lee first floated the idea of doing a personal story article about me, using it as a vehicle for talking about issues of abuse. But from this I demurred. I knew too many other victims and I did not feel adequate to represent all of them. I told Harry and Lee that an article giving more general coverage to the subject, or perhaps a series of articles about different aspects of abuse and recovery would better address the problem than focusing on one person's story.

Both men expressed surprise that I would draw back from the "honor" of having my story told in the pages of Awake! and being held up as a faithful example to millions of readers. But focused as I was on the needs of other victims, this position seemed very natural to me and it would prove very Providential. It gave these men a conviction regarding my honesty and a sure sense of my integrity. It engendered a certain trust between us and a feeling of camaraderie that was to be crucial for future developments.

For one thing, Lee felt at ease telling me about other victims who had contacted the Society. Through him, I received validation of my own sense of the breadth and depth of the problem within Jehovah's organization and the uncertainty of men at the very top as to how to deal with it. He let me know that his own position was one of advocacy on behalf of those who were suffering from mental and emotional problems. He had to be wary of opposition from some quarters at the top. Although he never revealed the details of this struggle or the individuals involved he made it clear that the concept for what was to become the Oct. 8, 1991 Awake! would have to be carefully threaded through an approval process that threatened to abort it at several stages.

Lee Waters was particularly well suited to the task. He had been the chief architect of the book "Questions Young People Ask." Research for this book had given him some familiarity with current psychological literature. While he may not have used the most scholarly sources, he read broadly in the literature directed at highly educated non-specialists. He grasped complicated material with a ready inclination to make practical, pastoral use of it. He had deep faith in God as he understood Him. While cynical about much that went on at the top of the organization, he was confident of the power of love to heal and help and confident that with his position and influence he could be of real assistance to those he was pleased to consider his spiritual family.

When Lee sent me a draft of the magazine articles, asking me to critique them without letting anyone else see it, I felt incredibly privileged. My sense of expectation was intense. This magazine would change everything for victims within the organization -- or so we thought.

For victims, the release of "Healing the Wounds of Child Abuse" was a triumph. It meant that some of the friends who seemed the least functional according to the Witnesses' work ethic, centered on meeting attendance and door-to-door activity, were now to be viewed as valued members of the community. They were to be commended for persevering through the pain of hidden wounds, dealt with in a compassionate manner, encouraged to seek help when needed -- even from outside of the organization -- and allowed to make their own recovery a priority.

For those elders who had been trying valiantly to serve child abuse survivors the magazine was also a welcome justification for what they had been doing. It responded to the criticisms of their fellow elders and validated their efforts to advocate on behalf of victims.

The impact of the magazine is hard to exaggerate. I soon heard from Rick and Lee that record numbers of letters were being received at the writing department, expressions of thanks, personal testimonies, requests for help. It was as though the heart of the organization had suddenly opened in a new embrace of caring. I was thrilled to be part of it and to a great extent that thrill and hope for change carried me through the coming months which became a time of great personal trial as my own recovery entered a concentrated and laborious phase.

By the end of 1992, I was well along in healing and strong enough to face the disappointment that Rick Hudson, Lee Waters, and other elders of my acquaintance were beginning to feel along with many survivors. The open-heartedness of the organization was fading fast. What we had accomplished seemed to be unraveling and there was a return to harshness and legalism.

This was especially hard to fathom in view of what had come to light over the previous year. Prompted by the welcoming attitude of the article, many survivors had surfaced and begun to discuss their issues with elders and with others, including qualified counselors outside of the organization. Every point made in the Oct. 8, 1991 Awake! was validated by the experiences of people living these realities. Reports coming into headquarters clearly demonstrated the extent of the problem, both in terms of sheer numbers and range of abuse reported.

There could be no denying that there were many thousands of people affected within the Witness population in the United States. The abuse they reported ranged from an isolated incident of fondling from a non-family member to being raised by a raging or alcoholic parent, to repeated

acts of incest over years, to ritualized abuse. Some were abused outside of the organization, others reported one or more Jehovah's Witnesses, including men in responsible positions, as their abusers. There were elders too among the survivors, men whose pastoral functioning, depending upon the progress of their healing, could be severely compromised or immeasurably enhanced. There was an alarming rate of use of psychotropic medication among Witnesses; some women reported that a dozen other women they knew within their congregations were on Prozac.

Along with the revelation of the sheer magnitude of the problem was coming a dawning awareness of the needs of the victims of abuse. Scholarly and popular literature on these topics was readily available to any inquirer. The path to healing was not only clearly documented from the standpoint of the counseling profession, the way was lit by the personal accounts of other survivors offering encouragement and hope to anyone grappling with painful memories. Without a model for health, there can be no discernment of illness and no goal for treatment, but a model of health was available. A failure to deal with these issues within the organization could never be blamed on lack of knowledge.

The period from late 1992 through early 1993 seemed like a backlash against everything that had been accomplished in this area. Lee Waters began to resign himself to the gradual consignment of his articles to Watchtower oblivion. It was as though, after one short year, massive organizational compassion fatigue had set in. Witnesses began to complain that the old model cure-all of meetings and field service was being promoted again.

This became blatant in the March 1993 Awake! article "Drawing Close to God Helped Me Cope." The article was the personal testimony of a woman who had dealt with a series of personal disasters in the areas of her health (diabetes), family (divorce, estrangement from extended family and her own children, mental breakdown of her son) and finances (foreclosures, inability to pay bills). Her answer to the problems was always to pioneer, clearly the only source her self image. She was oblivious to what was obvious in the article: that her husband and children and her finances suffered from neglect due to her obsession with pioneering. Her obliviousness was understandable: she was an ill and unbalanced person. But why were the Awake! editors and the Governing Body (who supposedly read and approved every article) holding up this identifiably disturbed person as an example to the Witness population? I remember throwing the magazine across the room in anger and calling Lee about it. He thought the article was an embarrassment and agreed with me that it was "ministering insanity to the Witness population" but he weakly opined that maybe it there was someone out there who would find it encouraging anyway.

By the summer of 1993 my own questioning was racing toward a crisis. I was beginning to question why, if we had the truth, the people in the organization were such a mess. I was pouring over the New Testament ("Christian Greek Scriptures", I called them then). Nothing seemed to fit. I still suspected that something was wrong with me spiritually because I couldn't seem to make the Witness life work for me; however, I started to take some consolation in the fact that it did not seem to be working for a lot of other people either. I saw in the Bible a power for healing and transformation that we Jehovah's Witnesses seemed to be ignoring. I began talking with other Witnesses and especially with other survivors about the forgiveness available because of the death of Jesus. I was absorbing the real truth-the Gospel - very slowly, and I was

passing it on. I did perceive that the people who were calling me for help needed to hear about Jesus and I discovered one of the best ways to get the point across to them was to ask them to read -- aloud -- Galatians 2:20 in their Bible, and to exaggerate the pronouns as they read it. I did this with dozens of Jehovah's Witnesses and it never failed to be profoundly moving for them to read: "I am impaled along with Christ. It is no longer I that live, but it is Christ that is living in union with me. Indeed the life that I now live in flesh I live by the faith that is toward the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself over for me."

At the time I did not know what an awfully awkward translation that was, but still there were those words "for me" and I saw that those words meant everything. This is what I started telling other Witnesses, too. I had always adored Jehovah God; but now I sensed that I had to be careful how much I talked about Jesus when I was around other Witnesses. When I heard love songs on the radio, I would think of Jesus. I did not know that I was in the only ostensibly Christian religion that considered falling in love with Jesus to be evidence of spiritual malady.

Make no mistake, I was still a very loyal Jehovah's Witness at this time; I still believed that this organization was being uniquely used by God to preach their unique "good news of God's Kingdom." But the watershed incidents that would bring me to question that were building up. That summer one of the new convention releases was announced with the provision that Witnesses were to line up for it with pioneers at the head of the line and other Witnesses behind them. I pictured in my mind a strapping young pioneer man, supported at home by Witness parents eager to advance his Bethel application. Who would be in line behind him? A Witness woman with several years in "the truth" whose unconverted husband allowed her to bring their several small children to the convention alone. She would be standing at the rear of the line, holding a babe in arms and hoping that she got to the book table before one of her toddlers needed to "go potty." Then there was the elderly Witness woman whose 24/7 job was the care of her invalid husband. She would be at the rear of the line too, pushing her husband's wheelchair, their donation for the book, budgeted dearly from Social Security, clutched in her arthritic fingers. Something was dreadfully wrong with this picture. This was not the Christianity I saw in the Bible.

At this time, I was concluding my treatment program with a psychologist, Dr. David Saltzman, who was kindly treating me pro bono. He always presented himself to me as an agnostic even though he told me his father was a Baptist minister and he spoke of the professional time he gave away as a "tithe". As I regained my stability and my need for his care was coming to a close, we began to discuss philosophy. Even though he had never identified himself as a believer and his approach with me was strictly secular, I maintained my Witness wariness when we got into discussions like this.

One day he was explaining existential questions to me and he presented this intriguing invitation: "Let's take a ride on a beam of light." Now I knew that Einstein had developed the theory of relativity by imagining what the universe would look like traveling on a beam of light, so I understood that David was asking me to engage in some speculation for the purpose of uncovering a truth. With great suspicion I asked him, "Where do you want to go?" He said, "What do you think? Do you think that if the price required to redeem humanity had been that Jesus would have died forever, if His crucifixion would have ended His existence, do you think

He still would have done it?" The last thing in the world I was expecting this man to ask me about was Jesus. So that was the first shock. Then on top of that there was this bizarre question. From an orthodox Christian standpoint this is a bizarre question. But it's pretty weird even to a Jehovah's Witness! The thing that was so extraordinary about this question was that I couldn't think to myself: "What does the Watchtower say about this?" I was thrown totally upon my own resources mentally and spiritually. I felt like my mind was whirling in confusion. I sat there pondering and suddenly I had the answer. It was so clear. And I said to David, "Yes, he would have done it." Then he asked me, "How do you know?" And I said, "Don't laugh at me, okay?" He said, "I won't laugh at you." And I said, "Because I would have done it." Then he leaned back in his chair and smiled and said, "You see what existential questions can teach us even if they are not grounded in reality."

I admit that I walked away from him that day totally blown away. I had looked inside of myself to answer a question about Jesus and no one had ever told me I could do that. The words "Christ in you" do not appear in the New World Translation and I was completely unfamiliar with the idea, yet I had looked inside of myself and found Christ there. I didn't even know how this had happened, I did not know that putting my faith in Him for forgiveness was a work of His Spirit in my heart. But I did know that David had given me proof that there was something different about the relationship I had with Jesus from what the Watchtower was always telling me it was.

For the first time, I began to feel like I had to get away from the Jehovah's Witnesses in order to think straight. I was still talking frequently to my wide circle of Jehovah's Witness friends but I was changed. My fear of the organization was beginning to be replaced by a new boldness. Some of them started to warn me about independent thinking and caution me that perhaps the privileges which I had been given had gone to my head. Soon, I was called by the local elders to come and answer some questions because I had been accused of apostasy. I had told some people that salvation was to be found in the very person of Jesus Christ instead of in our organization and for this disloyalty I was going to be put on trial. It was a critical situation; my three younger children were visiting with my ex-husband. If I did not act with prudence, I might never see them again. Even though I had legal custody, I knew that once I had been identified as an "apostate" they would feel justified in trying to get my children away from me. My oldest daughter was at home with me but I did not know how she would react, how thoroughly she was indoctrinated. I had Jesus but I was on the brink of losing everything else. I started stalling for time to put off the apostasy trial and I was able to get a few days' delay. I dared not do anything until my children were home.

I decided to call a man who had left the Witnesses a few years before. This was terrifying in light of all the warnings I had imbibed for years: that those who leave the organization are completely evil and under the control of Satan. In any event, I figured that I could always hang up the phone. After a very enlightening conversation, this man gave me some written information exposing the organization's false prophecies and I asked my oldest daughter to read it. She did and she was prepared to leave the organization also. One down and three to go.

That weekend, while my ex-husband took my three youngest children to a JW convention, I went to my first meeting of former Jehovah's Witnesses. I heard the heart-rending testimonies of many who had lost their families to the JW deception. All the time I listened I knew that they

had my children. When finally my children came home they looked at me in terror shrinking away from me when I tried to embrace them and screaming. "You've left Jehovah. He is going to kill you at Armageddon. Don't talk to us! You're an apostate; we can't listen to you." They held their hands over their ears, crying hysterically.

It took a few days for my little girl's fears to be relieved; for them to see I was still their mother and not some kind of demon. My teenage son, with ample assistance from his father and other Witnesses remained in a state of confusion and distrust for several years. Right after I got my children back, I wrote a five-page letter of disassociation. The conclusion of the letter said, in part

"It is excruciating to realize at the halfway point of my life, that I have been so misled. ... I know the vicious things said of those who leave. I've said such things myself. True, some may leave to pursue immorality, self-indulgence, or for personal glory. But I now know that many who leave do so after an agonizing struggle with the deepest issues of integrity and conscience. ... Do not mistake this letter for the recognition of any authority on your part over me and my family. Your participation in this unscriptural system gives you no legitimate authority. ... However, my recognition of my freedom from your authority is not personal disrespect. Nor is my disassociation from Jehovah's Witnesses based upon any animosity toward or disappointment with, any man or group of men in the organization. My feelings for all with whom I served and for whom I have labored and prayed remain tenderly affectionate. They would ever be welcome in my company or in my home. Toiling and loaded down, I wish they could find the refreshment I have found in Christ. I only pray that God someday unite us in the body of believers in His precious Son.

Giving that letter to the elders ended over 35 years of association. I knew that within the next few days the announcement would be made in all of the local congregations that I had left and that all of my friends around the country would, from this time on, consider me to be dead. I had left behind not only my friends, but all the work I had done on behalf of victims. What I had seen, even when I was on the inside, was still an incomplete picture. Lee Waters often hinted at turf wars and power plays within the leadership. These things were validated by the published stories of men who had once served at Bethel: Raymond Franz, Randall Watters and others. But they did not address the inside controversy over handling abuse cases, having left before the explosive revelations that led to the publication of the Oct. 8, 1991 Awake! I worried that my leaving might discredit that magazine in the minds of some people at headquarters and with those few elders who knew of my involvement in it

I moved forward with my life, into a loving marriage, academic and career successes, new and joyous friendships in Christ. My children became free to enjoy celebrations of life and God's goodness to us and in recent years they have been joined by grandchildren. Yet, even in the midst of all this happy bustle, my thoughts often turned back to the calls and letters I had received from so many hurting people. I wondered if the Watchtower's hard-line policies toward victims of abuse would be ameliorated or become more adamant. What intrigues among the "Bethel family" would play out in suicides, divorces, disfellowshippings and other personal tragedies for my dear Jehovah's Witness friends? It would take someone with a real inside track to fill in the details of that story. It would take Barbara Anderson

End