

Fade From the Truth:

A Tale of Learning then Unlearning the Beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses

by Alan Miller

Introduction

This is the story of my lifelong spiritual journey so far without all the confusing religious doctrines included. My story is true, but some of the fine details have been changed to maintain my personal anonymity. My name is not Alan Miller; I did not grow up in the wonderful city of St. Louis necessarily. Some names and occupations have been changed for the same reason. It doesn't affect the story whatsoever.

Without trying to sound paranoid, allow me to explain my predicament. I started writing my autobiography for personal therapy. I said that I would never publish this as it would cause my mother to feel the need to permanently shun me. But as I developed my story, I thought that even if I helped one other person avoid some pitfalls, I wanted to share the story.

So what's so terrible that my mother would never speak to me for the rest of her life? Absolutely nothing. But I and my mother belong to the religion known as Jehovah's Witnesses. Once you become a member of that religion, you are never allowed to disagree with their doctrines ever again. If you do disagree with anything and you cannot keep it to yourself, then the men in power within the religion will kick you out. If you ever quit or are kicked out of the Jehovah's Witnesses, all the other Witnesses are commanded to never speak to you again. While I am not sure that my mother will obey that command, I am not prepared to take that chance.

Even though the fine details are changed, any of the Jehovah's Witnesses that know me well would fully recognize this as my story after a chapter or two. But no faithful believing Jehovah's Witnesses would be allowed to read this book. It would be another one of those commands they all have to obey. The penalty for disobedience is the same as the one for disagreement with the doctrines, being kicked out of the religion and facing total shunning from Witness family and friends.

I technically still belong to the religion, but just so my mother is allowed to speak to me. My wife is also a practicing Jehovah's Witness. (Spouses are not commanded to shun a mate who leaves the religion- one small break.) There are perhaps millions of people in a similar situation as mine. They don't want to lose contact with their parent or grandparent or adult child or grandchild. I am currently what they call an "inactive" Jehovah's Witness. I don't participate in their religion in any way. They call it inactive, but many former Jehovah's Witnesses say that what I am is a "fader". Instead of quitting the religion, I simply faded from activity.

This is not a "how-to-fade" book. I thought of writing that book, but the Watch Tower organization can easily change the rules if such a book were to find some success. This is not a book about doctrines. Some are mentioned here, but no scriptures are used to prove, disprove, or even suggest beliefs.

Some readers may know nothing about Jehovah's Witnesses. I have done my best to explain things so that they can follow along. If you become curious about Jehovah's Witnesses after reading my story, you should know that all visitors are welcome at their Kingdom Hall for any of their meetings. No collections are taken; they just ask you to leave your brain at the door.

Chapter 1

A Foundation in "The Truth"

At the time of writing this, there were close to seven million of them in the world. There were about one million of them in the United States. Most everyone knows one of them. At the very least, most people are familiar with their work of disturbing people on a Saturday morning knocking on their front doors. They greet you with "Good morning, we were talking with our neighbors today about finding practical solutions to all the problems in the world until God brings about the destruction of virtually everyone unless they accept these WATCHTOWER magazines. Would you like a copy"? Many of you probably thought you would take their literature just to be polite and go back to bed and allow the pair of Bible-thumpers at your door to go away. Little did you know that you only made those Bible-thumpers put you on their "Return Visit" list so they could call on you again and again. They will be back, perhaps when you are opening Christmas gifts with the kids, or when you are starting to cut the turkey at Thanksgiving or most certainly on another Saturday morning when you are trying to get some sleep.

They are Jehovah's Witnesses. If you do know any of them personally or your child has a classmate who belongs to this religion, you probably also know them as devoted believers in God that avoid Christmas and birthday celebrations. Don't be fooled by their friendly "Bible discussions" and don't envy them for skipping some hectic holidays. No matter how polite they are, they view you as bird food as soon as God gets around to destroying everyone except them. That's quite literal, as they can tell you that the book of Revelation tells them that the birds will be feasting on the bodies of those that didn't want to serve Jehovah. They want you to become just like them to avoid becoming bird food, dedicating your life and earnings and weekends to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society.

And who the heck is Jehovah? That's God's name- no, it's not Jesus. Jehovah is the English version of the Hebrew name given to the God of the Old Testament, and Jesus is his son. Try to keep that straight because it really surprises them that they have been involved in this important work to save your everlasting life from the destiny of bird food, but you haven't even learned who Jehovah and Jesus are, as defined by the magazines they've been peddling to you for all these years. How are you going to avoid destruction if you don't read those WATCHTOWER magazines? God has been sending "His Witnesses" to you for years, they offer the only way you can live forever, and you don't even know anything beyond a couple of bizarre facts about them. Now, God is not doing a good job, or the Jehovah's Witnesses aren't doing the job right, or you are just not paying attention to the job they are doing. It must be you, because Jehovah God is perfect, just, loving, and wise. So perfect, just, loving, and wise that He wouldn't keep sending His Witnesses to you unless they were doing the job right. Perhaps you have been staying up too late on Friday nights and have cobwebs in your brain when they ring your bell.

I was one of them. I may have knocked on your door with the Watch Tower and Awake magazines and tried to save you from becoming bird food. The statement, "I hope that people learn from my story" is such a clique. It may be the best one I can use as I relate events from my life. "I hope to inspire some to action" could be another one, or "Maybe some will find hope." While any of those thoughts would work, I will simply go with, "I hope you like my story. I needed to get this off my chest." This will work too- "Here's my story about getting on the road to Damascus then making a U-turn."

In the mid-1960's a new campaign was born to Jehovah's Witnesses. It would eventually grow into a frenzy. I won't bore you with the details, but the Witnesses started believing that Armageddon would arrive in 1975 and that everyone who rejected their teachings would be destroyed by God at that time. Some members ran up their debt figuring they would never have to pay it back. Many ignored medical or dental concerns because the end was coming. By 1974 many even sold their homes and figured they could live off

the cash until the end arrived, and they spent their days doing an imitation of Chicken Little, telling people the sky was falling soon, very soon.

My mother, Veronica Miller, got caught up in all that. Her sister-in-law, my Aunt Lorna, was one of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and convinced Veronica that this was not a drill- the equivalent of the sky really falling was on schedule for 1975. Aunt Lorna did this by "studying the Bible" with Mom. "Studying the Bible" really means studying Watch Tower books of doctrine, using scriptures out of context to make it seem that the Bible supports that doctrine. So five years before 1975, my mother joined up. My father, Dan Miller hated it, but he was always at work at one of two jobs. He was a firefighter and a bricklayer. If he wasn't working, he was out drinking after work, so he didn't stop Veronica from preaching that the sky was ready to fall soon.

One thing Dan wouldn't tolerate was his children becoming Jehovah's Witnesses. Veronica was an adult, able to decide what nonsense to believe for herself, but children don't know any better. He said that Mom could not study the Bible with the children. But just like so many other parents, he didn't see any harm in Veronica taking us with her to the Kingdom Hall. (In their effort to be different from other religions, Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to call their buildings churches. If you want to piss them off, keep calling their religion and their building a church. Their reaction is priceless, almost as if they expect a bolt of lightning to strike you for calling it a church.) Dan thought that the Watch Tower taught its members that it was never okay for a woman to disobey her husband, so he figured she would never teach us the doctrine. He didn't know that the one exception to that rule was that it was good and even expected to obey God's law before any man's rules, even a husband's rules. Watch Tower was more than happy to explain to Veronica that it was God's law to teach the doctrine to your children, and that it wasn't wrong to deceive the unbelieving mate about it, because he didn't deserve the truth about such information, after all Satan was really controlling him when the unbeliever said not to indoctrinate your children. Witnesses were always blaming Satan for everything. Anyone opposed to any learning of the doctrines was "persecution from Satan's world", a foretold prophecy that proved Watch Tower was right about everything. It was also a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of course there would always be some concerned family and friends that didn't want you learning that the sky was falling in 1975 and that anyone who doubted would become bird food.

So Veronica started teaching us the Watch Tower doctrine in secret and took us to the meetings at the Kingdom Hall and dragged us around with her as she knocked on strangers' doors and told them the sky was falling. I truly believe that children raised by only one Jehovah's Witness parent will always find that parent trying to recruit them, regardless of what promises they have made to the unbelieving parent.

My story starts in the city of St. Louis in 1970. I was six years old, the youngest of three. Todd was seven, and Gloria was eight. Mom was so far sucked into "the truth" as the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses are known, that it totally consumed her life. When she invited us into her newfound happiness, of course we took to it. After all, if we rejected it we would soon become bird food, but if we accepted "the truth" then we would be in paradise. Watch Tower books had loads of pictures of people dying at Armageddon in some horrible way and others living in a Garden of Eden. Now at six years old, would you choose to be part of the picture where the earth opens up and swallows you, or would you choose to part of the picture where children are petting lions and kicking beach balls against the side of an elephant? There was no real choice. But we had to keep it a secret. That made it even better. We were not only going to get to live forever, but we were playing secret agent in our training sessions. What six, seven, and eight-year-olds could

resist that?

We "studied the Bible" by studying a book called FROM PARADISE LOST TO PARADISE REGAINED. We just called it the Paradise book. To give you an idea of the warped, yet convincing science taught by the Watch Tower, the Paradise book told us that the waters for the global flood of Noah's day came from the "water canopy" that surrounded the earth. This same water canopy had prevented men from ever really seeing the sun in its full glory or the moon and stars in the night sky. Supposedly, after the water fell, man saw the glories that are God's creations in the sky for the first time, same for the rainbow given by God as a promise never to flood the whole earth ever again. In other books, Watch Tower teaches that man's carbon-dating methods are all out of whack because the water canopy blocked the sun and other things that carbon-dating uses to date things. To scare us into just accepting such stories if we still doubted, the Paradise book reminded us that Adam and Eve were sinners who were not worthy of everlasting life and they would not be resurrected, and we were welcome to be tricked by the devil and join them as forever dead. If that works on many adults, it works even better on little kids.

The secret mission didn't last very long, though. Sooner or later, one of us was going to blow our cover. It was Todd. In some trivial matter, Dad was mad at him and lectured him. Todd fired back with "Oh yeah, we have a secret and I won't ever tell you what it is." All Dad had to do was turn to me, the youngest, and ask "What's the big secret, Alan?" I probably cracked in less than one minute. After all, Dad had awfully big arms. Oh he never ever hit us, but we always wondered when he finally would do so. I wasn't going to tempt fate and see if I could get him to break his nonviolent parenting. Dad didn't turn violent then either, at least not toward us or any other people. He did throw out the Watch Tower books. So after several months of secretly studying Watch Tower doctrines, we stopped. But we still went to the Kingdom Hall for awhile. That would come to an end too.

All congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses had a two-hour meeting on the weekend and a one-hour meeting on a weeknight and a two-hour meeting on another weeknight. These meetings were more important than anything. They were more important than overtime at work. Witnesses were told not to miss these meetings. If work required missing them, they were expected to quit their job. Children were to be at those meetings, too. If you ever hear how children of Jehovah's Witnesses excel at school because they learn to read early and learn to be public speakers, remember that they have a huge obstacle too- they are kept out late for those evening meetings. They are not supposed to be doing their homework at the meetings, but are to be paying attention to the information covered in the sessions. In reality, they are typical students who are really tired at school twice a week.

Kids are often severely punished at the meetings if they cry or act out enough to disturb the others around them. For some reason, Jehovah's Witnesses figure that kids should be able to sit through two hours of indoctrination without fussing. If they can't sit still, a parent is expected to take them to the back of the hall or outside and spank them. Supposedly, kids will be quiet in order to avoid the spanking. Some kids had to be whipped because this theory didn't work out so well on them. A parent would have to totally break their spirit with beatings before they would be able to sit still for two hours, and then it only worked because they knew what was in store for them if their parent dragged them out of the auditorium. You could hear some screaming on the way back, "I'll be good! I'll be quiet! We don't have to go outside!" Young and old alike would lock eyes with the child as he passed by their seat dragged by a parent and feel empathy as they saw his look of horror for the punishment he was about to receive. My brother, sister and I were pretty quiet and Dad didn't allow spankings, so we were spared. Still, it was pretty scary to see it happen to others. As we were their age, we locked eyes with a child in tow just as much or even more than others did.

The meeting on Sunday lasted two hours. The public talk (a lecture) was given the first hour then the WATCHTOWER study took the last hour. The WATCHTOWER study was where all members, young and old, could totally shine and share in the meeting. This was the study of an article in the magazine about some aspect of the doctrines. The article is typically twenty to twenty-five paragraphs and written at no higher than a sixth grade level. Paragraphs are read out loud and questions from the bottom of the page are asked about each paragraph. The Witnesses were supposed to pre-study the article so they can answer the questions at the meeting. Typically, answers were just read from underlined portions of the paragraph and kids had a chance to show their agreement with the doctrine and get used to participation in the meetings by reading their answers. While the audience members were encouraged to put answers in their own words, they were not allowed to disagree with anything or ask additional questions. The meeting conductor would throw in a few additional questions that allowed younger ones to give one or two word answers. You would hear the kids under eight years old start out with saying "Jehovah" or "Jesus" into the microphone quite often before they could get up the nerve to give longer answers, followed by thunderous applause if it was their first time answering. I don't remember my siblings or myself participating, but it must have happened. Mom would have wanted to show the congregation that her children were making spiritual progress. It was expected.

There were two weekday evening meetings. The book study was just like the WATCHTOWER study, but a chapter of some Watch Tower book was studied. The book study was divided up in smaller groups so that everyone had a chance to comment more often, thereby reinforcing their mind's agreement with whatever was said. It also allowed the elders to see who studied for the meetings beforehand. Book studies were usually held in someone's home. It was supposed to be a real privilege to have a book study in your home. The hosts cleaned and cleaned so nobody would talk about the condition of their home, especially the bathroom. They would have folding chairs all lined up in the living room and some of the twenty or so folks would often arrive earlier than they should so they could get the spot on the couch instead of the folding chairs. Many hosts would have coffee and/or sweet treats for everyone after the meeting. That kind of hospitality would make it harder to ever consider removing this meeting from their house and switching to someone else's house because they put out cake or crackers and beverages. Some hosts would try to gain a reputation for outdoing any other hosts in the congregation, and then people would want to change to the book study in their home. Book study typically started at 7:30 and was usually on Monday or Tuesday night. It ended after one hour, but was a great social club afterward, so the affair might last until 9:30. We were supposed to feel like a "spiritual" family group at the book study.

The other weekday evening meeting was the Theocratic Ministry School and the Service Meeting, held at the Kingdom Hall for the entire congregation. It was typically on Thursday at 7:30, lasting two hours. After the men would give some short Bible lectures, a few of the members gave five-minute talks in the Theocratic Ministry School. Children and adults were mixed in, all expected to be able to do this. Males would stand at the podium and address the audience with a Bible reading or a short lecture on some subject assigned to them, but females would give their talk by sitting at a table facing another female on the stage and the two of them would pretend to be in some situation where one has a question or concern and the other answers it with her Bible. Females are not allowed to "teach" the congregation, so this was their way around such a (supposed) Biblical rule. They taught another female on the stage and everyone in the congregation was just listening in.

The weekly five hours of meetings were referred to as the five fingers on your hand. All five were important. Just as you wouldn't want to have less than five fingers, a good Witness would not want to try to get away with just four or less hours of these meetings every week.

Anyway, at one of those Thursday night meetings, Veronica had her three kids with her, and we were either paying attention or falling asleep in our seats, when a very disruptive man came into the Kingdom Hall. It was our father. He was very drunk and very

upset that his kids were being indoctrinated into this religion. He wanted his kids out of there. Just as parents are embarrassed by their crying babies, Mom was extremely embarrassed by her husband causing a disturbance. Of course we all left with Dad right away just to end this spectacle. That was, for now, the end of my going to the Kingdom Hall. I would love to end the story now, saying I never went back, but it's just not the case.

Chapter 2

They Make the Best Educated People in the World

As already mentioned, Jehovah's Witnesses often think their own children are better students. They feel that spending time indoctrinating their children into the religion through books causes them to be better readers and that participation in their door-to-door recruitment and enrollment in the Theocratic Ministry School makes them better public speakers and more confident. Virtually all Witness children can recite the stories in the book, MY BOOK OF BIBLE STORIES word-for-word. The book contains simple morality stories from the Bible that teach them the doctrine with loads of pictures. From that book, they moved on to LISTENING TO THE GREAT TEACHER, a book about Jesus heavily steeped in Witness doctrine.

What's bizarre is that one of the biggest reasons that a parent will read these books with their children is that the parent gets to "count the time" spent studying Watch Tower doctrine as time spent recruiting. (They call going door-to-door selling Watch Towers "preaching" or "field service.") All Witnesses are expected to report how many hours each month they are engaged in the recruiting work. (More on that in another chapter.) Studying with one's own child is mandatory in the religion and parents are rewarded with up to four hours on their monthly field service report. Another reason is to help their children to become Jehovah's Witnesses. Parents cannot try to save strangers from being destroyed by Jehovah and forget about doing the same for their own children.

Statistics will show that reading with your children is vital to making them better readers. It's not the Watch Tower literature itself that makes Witness kids into better readers; it's just the reading of anything that does it. Let me relate my own example here. I was the youngest of three children. Many would suppose that by the time I got into kindergarten, I would already be able to read because I had older siblings. It didn't happen. My brother and sister weren't reading before entering school, so I was not really able to benefit from them. The television was my babysitter and best friend. But this was in the days before SESAME STREET. The programs I was watching were not the educational ones. There was I DREAM OF JEANNIE, BEWITCHED, ANDY GRIFFITH, GILLIGAN'S ISLAND, etc. Some of the stuff out of the mid to late 60's was legendary and quite fantastic to a child under five years old. So my sister, then my brother, then I went into kindergarten without any reading skills whatsoever. This whole "alphabet" thing was just a song I had heard, but it lacked substance. From day one in school, we started focusing on a letter everyday, starting with "A." I remember the excitement when day eleven started. I said to another boy in the morning that I was thrilled that we were going to learn "elemeno" today. The other boy laughed saying, "You are so stupid." If he were witty, he could have come up with some zinger like "You are so stupid that you probably think Sherlock Holmes is an apartment complex." Anyway, he told me that "L, M, N, and O" were four separate letters (not one mega-letter known as "elemeno"), then pointed to them on the alphabet chart on the blackboard. It was as if he had put a rubber band around my head and snapped some sense into it. I was sharp enough to get it right away. I wasn't stupid, just ignorant. How I wished someone had taught me that sooner.

My mother was a pregnant teen bride at age seventeen and I was the third child born before she even reached twenty-one. Dad was never home to do things with the kids, he was always working. Mom didn't have time to read with the first two children, with more babies coming, and didn't make time for the third one. She had barely grown up herself and was still getting the hang of being an adult. She wasn't one of Jehovah's Witnesses yet. But one year later, she was one. All of a sudden, she was reading with all three of

the kids. She was getting us to answer questions from a book. Even though it was kept secret from Dad, it was great to be absorbing something instead of remaining a dry empty sponge. So in first grade, I was reading about Spot running and Dick seeing Jane, and at home I was reading about Jehovah, Jesus, and paradise. I can imagine Witness parents spending that effort on their preschool children. Sure, the Witness kids would know how to read before they got to kindergarten. But the average parents in Japan or in Amish country read with their children. It has little or nothing to do with the material being read. Comic books might even do it better than the Bible and religious books. Certainly, books designed to improve reading would be more helpful than anything from the Watch Tower.

As far as Witness children benefiting from their public speaking, there may be some validity there. Adults would be better off joining Toastmasters but talking to strangers at their front door or speaking at the Kingdom Hall in front of over a hundred people probably really does make children more able to participate, speak, or debate in class. That will pay off as they get into High School, but what is the price of such training?

As I said previously, Witness children are kept out late two weeknights every week. They are expected to pay attention at the Kingdom Hall and not work on their homework during meetings. Many child-advocates would be outraged at such a situation on a regular basis regardless of the fact that it is done in the name of religion. The longest weeknight meeting is typically on Thursdays. Most schools have tests on Friday to wrap up the week. Think of how much better the Witness child might perform on Friday if he had a good night of sleep.

Witnesses are raised to disbelieve the science taught in the schools. They are taught that Adam was the first man who lived just over six thousand years ago, and there were never primitive humans. They are taught that all animals were created separately by Jehovah and did not evolve from lower life forms. They are taught that there was a great worldwide flood just over four thousand years ago and that life on earth is not millions of years old, nor is carbon dating accurate. Evolution is lambasted by Jehovah's Witnesses and all discoveries by archaeology are met with skepticism. Anytime science or history disagrees with what the Watch Tower claims as Biblical, the Witness will side with Watch Tower automatically. It is a requirement. Witnesses train their children to do their best to answer questions in school according to the curriculum but not to believe it. "Just tell them what they want to hear so you can pass the tests."

Also, any benefit from the public speaking may be cancelled out by the isolation of being a Witness. Mocking is common for the younger child as he is not allowed to participate in any way with holiday celebrations. No Christmas or Halloween, no wearing of the green on St. Patrick's Day. (I have seen Witness children actually feel depressed that they let Jehovah down because they accidentally wore green on St. Patrick's Day.) If a child is celebrating his birthday, Witness children are not to have any cake or join in the party. They are also not to participate in patriotic things either, so every single day they are found refraining from saying the Pledge of Allegiance or singing the national anthem at school, reminding the others that they are different ("freaks" in most any child's world). Imagine the daily pressures on a child in that situation. I was not fully a Witness as a child so I could participate, but I had a classmate who was one of Jehovah's Witnesses, Natalie. Natalie would leave the room during holiday or birthday celebrations and do some additional assignment in the hallway or the office of the school. Natalie was picked on a lot.

Witness children are discouraged from any extracurricular activities, especially anything that keeps them after school. They are to spend as little time as possible with "worldly" children. (Anyone who is not a Witness is "worldly.") Many parents do not allow them

to play outside of school with others who are not also children of Witnesses. They usually do not join in any sports and almost certainly do not join the chorus or learn to play a musical instrument. Chorus and orchestra typically violate a Witness worldview in many areas- they meet after school, they allow the child extended interaction with worldly ones, and they participate heavily in patriotic and holiday celebrations.

Many Jehovah's Witness parents consider homeschooling either for the entire education of their children or at least instead of public High School. They feel that this will limit their children's exposure to "the world." While it might be possible to give your own child a fantastic education in homeschooling, your average Witness parent is not going to bother for several reasons. They say the end is coming soon, so there is no real need to have a fantastic education. The Watch Tower says that college is unnecessary and it is demonized because it's just a place of drinking, drugging, fornicating, and independent thinking- all thought of as dangerous and evil. Many parents are "pioneers", meaning they engage in the religious recruiting work for seventy or more hours per month, so if they have homeschooled children, they take them with them in that work figuring it's the best possible training for them. That leaves little time for proper educating. But hey, if the end is so close, who really cared?

To make their literature more interesting, Watch Tower offers the AWAKE! magazine. In that magazine, many articles focused not on doctrine but on individual animals or on cultures and people. The articles were not really bad, but after teaching about the migration of the Monarch Butterfly or about how the people of some mountain village in Chile shear goats to make sweaters, they almost always ended with saying that in the near future, Jehovah will put an end to extinction or the destroying of the land and cultures. Actually, they always offered the same solution. "Jehovah will end homelessness, hunger, child abuse, unemployment, pollution, greed, etc. by destroying everyone who is not one of Jehovah's Witnesses, and it's going to happen very soon." That brings the mock theme of the U.S. Marines to reality- Kill them all and let God sort it out.

Also, Watch Tower told parents that reading all their literature all the time was at least the equivalent of a college degree. Imagine that. It is sixth grade-level writings which commands viewing experts in the fields of science and history with distrust, but it's just like going to a university because it regularly includes articles about animals and people.

Jehovah's Witnesses typically do not read the newspaper or watch the news on television. They do not get the least bit involved or even concerned with politics because it's all part of Satan's world. They are told to focus on the permanent solution to mankind's problems and learn how to improve their skills of making the WATCH TOWER and AWAKE! magazines sound more appealing as they attempt to sell them to people. That way, everyone will have a chance to gain everlasting life. They never decide how they feel about an issue if asked. Instead, they say they will research it, which means they will cross reference their Watch Tower literature to see how they should feel about an issue, and then simply agree with what they read. It would be extremely rare to see a Witness at a PTA meeting or a Town Hall meeting.

So much for them being the best educated people in the world. Even when it comes to the Bible, the subject I thought Witnesses were most educated about, I've discovered that I knew next to nothing about it until I read from sources outside of my Watch Tower library. Oh, I knew much about what Watch Tower said was in the Bible, but their use of snippets (scriptures out of context) could be compared to words cut from a newspaper to form a ransom note. Those snippets represent the Bible as much as that ransom note represents the newspaper. So I will conclude this chapter by saying that Jehovah's Witnesses can read and often overcome any shyness to public speaking, but they remain woefully ignorant and isolated and distrustful.

Chapter 3

Death, Divorce, and the End of the World

At the end of Chapter one, I said that my brother, sister, and I ended going with Mom to the Kingdom Hall. We went for just over a year by then. I was seven when Dad didn't want us going there anymore. But Mom still went, because it was now 1971 and the sky was going to fall in four years. Dad didn't change his life to be at home for us when Mom went to her meeting, so our parents introduced us to staying home alone. So imagine that, my nine year old sister was responsible for an eight and a seven year old. We were told to never answer the phone or the door, to stay away from the window shades, and to try not to make much noise. "Watch television, but keep the volume low. That's your babysitter." Those might well have been the words we were told. I had two playmates right there with me, my brother and sister. We could have enjoyed board games or building something together, but we were told to be quiet. "Just watch television, but not too loud." A horrible fear was instilled in us of making too much noise and letting anyone outside the home know that children were alone in the house.

Staying home alone remained in place for the rest of my childhood and teen years. "You are on your own for dinner" would often be part of it later as I grew older. Today, my wife cannot understand how I can be perfectly content to grab something out of the fridge and sit down to three or more hours of television. It's been my training. It's hard to complain, too. I was kept clean and well fed. I had a roof over my head. Nobody beat me. It was back in the day when a child sat still for long periods in class. Sitting still at home wasn't that hard at all. There was no interactive television, such as video games. I just sat and paid attention to the show. In some ways, I like this aspect of my personality- sitting quietly and being entertained. I can do this in front of a television, the internet, and thankfully with a book or magazine.

Further complications in life happened while I was still seven. Todd was diagnosed with Leukemia. Mom was at the doctor's office or the hospital for hours and hours, day after day. Leukemia was still a death sentence then. Doctors tried to offer hope that great strides in finding a cure were being made. Many victims do live through it nowadays, but not then.

Jehovah's Witnesses do not accept blood transfusions. This is not a book about doctrine and I am not going to cite even one scripture, but they say it's Biblical. A Witness would rather die than accept whole blood. They would rather let their children die than have them accept whole blood. They don't want to show disrespect to God, the creator of life, by accepting blood. Personally, it seems pretty disrespectful to God to just let a child die in an emergency where a simple blood donation would save their life. But that wasn't the issue with Todd. He was given blood transfusions because Dad insisted on it. Pity the child with two Witness parents. Similar to the military slogan on many U.S. Marines tattoos, "Death Before Dishonor," the Witnesses would say "Death Before Disobedience" when it comes to blood transfusions.

I learned to hate visiting hospitals while Todd was sick. He had been put into the hospital for several months early in his sickness. This included an entire summer when I was not in school. I went with my mother to the hospital. Gloria would go with our grandmother, but Grandma didn't want to watch two of us. Somehow, Grandma bonded better with Gloria so I was relegated to the hospital waiting room virtually each and every time alone. Maybe I could behave better by myself where Gloria needed supervision. Mom would be "upstairs" doing whatever parents do and I would play with blocks or other toys available in the waiting room. Security would watch over any children in the waiting room, but it seemed that most parents weren't cruel enough to make their

children wait there for hours on end, so I was typically the only one there. It was just more learning to be content by myself.

I wasn't ever allowed to go "upstairs" with my mother. The doctors were still not sure about the dangers of exposing healthy children to unhealthy children, so it was for my own good. So a hospital became a place to wait, a place to be by myself, a place that takes your brother and hides him and takes your mother away for half the day or more. I saw pictures of my parents and grandparents visiting my brother. Except for Todd, they all wore masks in the pictures. I didn't know what that was all about, but it made me sure that I would die if they let me see Todd just once. I decided I would be glad to just wear a mask like everyone else and take that chance, but I was never allowed.

I even got hurt once in the fall when school was back in session while Todd was still in the hospital. I fell off a swing at the school playground and was rushed to the hospital because I banged my head. I was excited that they would have to let me see Todd now, maybe I could share a room with him. No such luck. I was taken to a completely different hospital. I didn't have to wear a mask and nobody visiting me wore one either. The lack of masks made me figure that I wasn't sick enough to get into the same hospital as Todd.

To this day, I use this swing injury as an excuse if anyone questions my way of thinking. "No I wasn't dropped as a baby. As a child, I fell off a swing and landed headfirst onto concrete." This was back in the day of personal responsibility, so there was no lawsuit that made my parents rich, but one thing came out of my injury. If you have ever seen those rubber mats that look like giant jigsaw pieces around playground equipment, then you will be thrilled to know that I was the actual person who caused them to be ordered for the city of St. Louis. I don't think they invented them because of me, but all the public schools had them within a year of my accident.

Todd was finally released from the hospital. I didn't know it then, but the doctors allowed him to go home to die. He had enough strength to stand and walk and attend school and they had exhausted all efforts to lengthen his life. All I knew was that I had my brother back. I walked with Todd about three blocks to school, he was in fourth grade and I was in third grade. Our local little school only went up to fourth grade, so Gloria was going to a different school. Todd and I had been so close and I was thrilled to have him back.

Being the youngest of three, I had struggled to keep up with my brother and sister physically. I actually learned to ride a bicycle at the same time as Todd. We learned to be competitive with each other, but in a healthy way. I was always small for my age, never had a growth spurt. My size never bothered me, thanks to Todd. He inspired me to keep up with him at play and in sports. A couple of unfortunate instances insured that I would never be self-conscious about being short. The leukemia treatments made Todd lose his hair. Boys bigger than him started picking on him and some started fights with him just because he was bald. Todd did not have the strength to fight, so I fearlessly defended him and beat up a few of those boys. They were amazed that the smallest boy in third grade could beat up the biggest boy in fourth grade. I always had confidence after that when it came to standing up to bullies or walking through a bad neighborhood. As small as I was, nobody ever took my lunch money. I might walk outside of a bad neighborhood nowadays, but that's only because I am smart, not scared.

Mom woke me and Gloria up early one morning and told us that Dad had rushed Todd to the hospital but that he died on the way. She then reminded us about all that stuff she wasn't allowed to teach us about Jehovah resurrecting good people. She said we could see Todd again in "the new system" after God destroys the bad people. I am certain she was convincing herself along with us.

I may not have had years and years of childhood exposure to Jehovah's Witnesses but it was more than any other religious exposure. As a boy, I went with my grandmother to Catholic Mass one time. I asked her a bunch of questions like, "What are they saying?" She explained that the Mass was in Latin. I asked, "Do you speak Latin?" When she said no, I said, "Then why do you come here?" She never took me to Catholic Mass again. Christmas was when some older uncle would put on a Santa suit and come to the party at Grandma and Grandpa's house. Easter was about jelly beans and chocolate eggs. Jesus wasn't in those holidays; he was the guy that those Watch Tower books told us about. He healed people, gave food to starving people and said that Jehovah was God. All I really knew about religion growing up was that Jehovah was angry about everything. I took my chocolate eggs and Christmas toys, but I always wondered if Jehovah was angry with me for doing so. I wondered if Jehovah would let me escape becoming bird food so I could see Todd again. I didn't want to make Jehovah angry, but Dad and all my grandparents said toys and chocolate didn't make God angry. Besides, I really wanted toys and chocolate. If Jehovah couldn't understand that, there was just no pleasing him.

For Mom, the escape into the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses was much deeper. Dad found his escape in a familiar place. He went back to the bars. Gloria and I were more and more left home alone. We weren't allowed to learn about Jehovah, but Mom gave us a new project. The Watch Tower organization decided that Jehovah was very angry about tobacco. Jehovah hated smokers. Armageddon was coming really soon and Jehovah was going to destroy murderers, thieves, and especially smokers. Mom was a smoker. Just on the heels of losing her son, she was expected to quit smoking and then she could survive Jehovah's anger and see Todd again in just a couple of years in Paradise.

Mom and Aunt Lorna asked for help from me and Gloria to get Mom to stop smoking. We would keep telling her how cigarettes are evil Satan sticks that would get her destroyed by Jehovah unless the cigarettes killed her first. Well, it worked for a few years. I think Mom may have sneaked a few cigarettes, but she was not seen again with one in her mouth. At least she wasn't seen with one in her mouth until Armageddon didn't come, but that's a story for the next chapter.

Mom and Dad were leading separate lives. She had religion and he had alcohol. Other than the anti-smoking campaign, Gloria and I had neither of them really in our lives. Dad made a great attempt to fix this mess. He bought a camper. We took a grand trip that summer around most of the Great Lakes through Canada. It was nice. We played Monopoly or Scrabble or card games every evening; and we fished, and hiked in the woods. It was the closest we ever were as a family. But a few weeks of being a real family, then going back to the regular routine did not cut it for us. The camper was stolen from right in front of our house one day. I thought maybe it was a sign from Jehovah that he was angry with Mom and Dad for giving up so quickly.

The marriage was over. Officially, Dad admitted to cheating on Mom. Unofficially, Mom left Dad for the end of the world to come. Dad agreed to pay a rather high child support and they would split the equity in the house when it was sold. With Dad out of the house, Gloria and I also started going back to the Kingdom Hall. 1975 was biting at our heels so there was no time to waste. Oddly enough, after Dad was out, Mom and Dad started dating each other. I suppose Mom wanted everyone to avoid Jehovah's wrath, even her ex-husband.

I don't know that they actually ever would have gotten back together, but they were both teenagers when Mom first got pregnant. They had a good nine years together and two years of not-so-good. They probably felt that they owed it to each other to try to work it out. But one thing finally ended it; 1975 ended. The year to end all years came and went without Armageddon.

Mom and Dad agreed to never talk bad about each other to Gloria and me. They kept that promise pretty well. Dad took the blame

for the breakup of the marriage and they both said that the dating just didn't work out. Years later, Dad admitted that he called Mom after midnight on the morning of January 1st, 1976. He called and said "I'm still here." So that was one straw too many on the camel's back.

Chapter 4

Years of Turbulence

So the end didn't come when 1975 ended, but it was the end of many other things. The house was sold, Gloria and I changed schools when Mom found an apartment and started working full time. We stopped going to the Kingdom Hall. Mom's heart wasn't in it anymore. Mom and Gloria argued all the time and Gloria finally moved in with Dad. Gloria told me later that she blamed Mom for the turmoil in her life at such a critical age. She was finishing the eighth grade and felt forced to move away from her friends right before she started high school. She hated the Jehovah's Witnesses and that Mom was trying to get her opinion on everything as if she was an adult. Gloria just wanted to avoid that turmoil and looked for stability with Dad.

If you asked me then what I believed was the truth about why we are here and where we are going after this life, I wouldn't have had a clue how to answer. That's okay for a twelve year old, so I guess it was no big deal. I didn't understand the most basic thing about the Bible or religion and only knew what the schools taught about the holidays. Sure, I had been to the Kingdom Hall and learned about Armageddon and paradise, but it didn't happen. I learned that everyone was going to become bird food, but it didn't happen. I learned that the churches were evil, but that was because they said it wouldn't happen, and they were right- it didn't happen. The Bible was about God's master plan. God was either all about holidays or was angry about holidays, I was unsure which. Holidays were about candy or parties or presents. I knew the songs from Christmas specials and cartoons on television like RUDOLF THE RED-NOSED REINDEER or HERE COMES SANTA CLAUS, but I had no real foundation in the substance of what it was all about. It was like "elemeno" of the alphabet all over again. Religion was just songs with no substance.

Mom and Dad had argued all the time about religion, so I was going to keep my mouth shut. I decided there must not be a God up there, but I would just say "I don't know" if asked about Him. I suppose I really didn't know. While this lack of understanding is common in twelve year olds and getting more common among older ones today, I continued in my lack of understanding for the next eleven years or so. I always felt weird and out of place at holiday celebrations and I didn't want to know anything about the origins of any traditions.

I have to briefly explain how people leave or are kicked out of Jehovah's Witnesses. The Watch Tower organization expects total obedience of its members. Some of the rules about disfellowshipping and disassociation changed but I will explain the standards that I understood in my adult years. When one does not obey the rules, three of the elders form a judicial committee and meet with that one. It doesn't really matter what the rule was that they broke. Remember, this is not a story examining doctrine and scriptures. They say all the rules are Bible-based. The most common violations are fornication and adultery. But lying or gambling or denial of full belief in every word out of the Watch Tower leaders or a host of other violations will get one into a meeting with the judicial committee. If the committee determines that the member is unrepentant, then they are disfellowshipped. If a member leaves the religion on their own, or if they are found to have joined the military or another church (indicative that they left on their own) then they are disassociated. Today, there is no real difference between the two terms. An announcement is made that this person is "no longer one of Jehovah's Witnesses" and all the members are expected to totally shun them.

Total shunning means total cutting off from conversation. The only real exceptions are (1.) family members living under the same roof, and (2.) necessary family business such as funerals or caring for an elderly parent. Otherwise, mothers are to shun disfellowshipped sons and daughters or grandchildren that don't live under their roof. If one of Jehovah's Witnesses sees a disfellowshipped or disassociated member in a grocery store or in passing on the street, they will usually panic and try to change paths to avoid the former member. Even in common situations, it causes problems. A Witness waitress might ask to switch tables to avoid serving a former member. If the roles were reversed, the Witness customer might ask for a different waitress, or avoid the restaurant altogether.

Some family members do not shun former members as they are supposed to do. That is also a violation of the rules and subjects one to a possible judicial committee meeting. Some manage to claim that there is much necessary family business so shunning is not practical. Even there, Watch Tower expects them to refrain from ever eating with the former member. They have a scriptural reference for all of their rules, but many are pretty wild interpretations. If that's confusing, the next time Jehovah's Witnesses ring your bell on Saturday morning, ask about disfellowshipping and shunning. They will hate to explain it and will probably avoid your bell in the future after you've done that a couple of times. That's probably what you want anyway, for them to avoid your bell while you are sleeping in.

I explained disfellowshipping at this point because it happened to Mom. The elders of the congregation sought her out and Mom admitted that she had been smoking. Remember that a violation of the rules is not enough to get kicked out; the member also has to be unrepentant. I wasn't there and an explanation many years later was simply that she started smoking cigarettes again and was disfellowshipped, but the reality is that Mom left Jehovah's Witnesses when the end of the world didn't arrive. She resumed a normal life, which included smoking. When the elders hunted her down to either get her back or get rid of her, she chose not to do as they say. That's why she was disfellowshipped. Jehovah's Witnesses have no symbolic rosary to help them recite some prayers and get back in the good graces of God. They have to promise three elders that they see the error of their ways and will kiss their asses for the privilege to stay. Then the elders tell them they have lost the privilege to comment at meetings for awhile and they can stay. It's not hard to say what they want to hear, but they'll check up on you to make sure you meant it. But if you don't say what they want to hear, or if they don't believe you for some reason, or if you've repeated your sin (any violation of the Watch Tower rules is a sin) then you will be kicked out as unrepentant. Mom had stopped going to the Kingdom Hall and somehow didn't promise to kiss their asses. She says she was kicked out for smoking, but I say she lost faith in their teachings when their teachings were wrong about the end of the world.

I call this chapter "Years of Turbulence" because it was just a huge bunch of constant changes. All this trouble between my mother and father over religion, then when the dust settled she left it anyway. So many marriages break up over various things. My parents' marriage was broken up over religion and unfaithfulness. She left him for religion and he looked elsewhere, he was unfaithful to her, and eventually she was unfaithful to the reason she left him. What a stupid outcome. I don't know that these two teenagers that found themselves having a baby ever would have made it anyway. It's just a shame that thinking it was the end of the world brought an end to their world. Again, I would love to say that was the end of that. But it wasn't.

Mom and I moved around quite a bit. From sixth to eighth grade, I think we moved four times, once with a friend of Mom's and once with her parents. Each move was far enough that I had to change schools. I made a couple of friends in a couple of those moves but

mostly just kept to myself. It didn't seem to matter at the time. I was accustomed to being alone. I had television and a bicycle and Dad did pretty well at seeing me on at least two weekends a month.

Mom sowed her wild oats after her divorce. She went through a dating period that she had missed out on as a pregnant teen. She found love eventually with a man named Marvin Harris. Marvin moved in with us somewhere after that fourth move. Mom's Jehovah's Witness training was totally put aside. A Witness might weaken in their faith enough to commit fornication, but living together was way beyond a weakness. She broke a spell they put her under and lived like everyone else.

Dad had already married the woman he left Mom for and had another child, and was about to get his second divorce. Mom and Marvin got married after less than a year of living together. I could get sidetracked here and write about Dad's marriages or Mom's marriages or their needs to seek personal joy in their lives after the loss of their son. I could write about how screwed up Gloria was from all this or what would become of that baby that Dad just had with his second wife. I could write about Marvin's two boys from a previous marriage who were about my age and how screwed up they were. This isn't their story, though. I imagine mine was a typically very dysfunctional family like many others. All these fast changes came about in some very crucial years for me: pre-teen and teen. I'll stick with my story and how I may have been affected by these things, but I may jump a bit because it really isn't about all these typical dysfunctions either. The story is mainly about how the teachings and practices of Jehovah's Witnesses influenced all these things in a life and how they kept coming back. So that's where my story goes.

Mom decided to go back to the Kingdom Hall. The best way for me to explain this from my point of view is try to step outside of the family and look from the outside. Veronica lived by her own moral code and found herself as a pregnant teen once. She married Dan who guided her life and made all the decisions for her. But he didn't tell her how to feel or how to develop her own beliefs, so she found that in the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. They were just someone like her husband, making decisions for her so she didn't have to. When she got disillusioned, she left them. Then she found herself sleeping with men whom she wasn't married to. Perhaps she felt that she was repeating her teen pattern. When she married Marvin, he wasn't so different from Dan because Marvin also made all the decisions for her in life. But Marvin, just like Dan, still couldn't tell her how to feel or what to believe. She already knew who could do that, so she went back to the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses. It's either that, or they had put so much fear into her of becoming bird food when the sky fell that she just had to end that fear.

While I put a lot of confidence in my first theory about her need for someone else to guide every aspect of her life, don't think the second theory has no merit. Jehovah's Witnesses are constantly trained to fear their angry God. I've heard estimates that two out of three people kicked out of the Witnesses never go back, but many of them live thinking that Jehovah will smite them at Armageddon because they don't live by Watch Tower rules anymore. And remember that Armageddon is coming any minute now. (Granted, it has been coming any minute now since 1914, but that's a story for another book.) So, try to imagine every puff of a cigarette, or every time you orgasm, or every Saturday morning that you are not knocking on people's doors to sell the WATCHTOWER magazine, that you are thinking how God hates you for that. Any act of terrorism that you see on a television, you might imagine that God is going to do that to you if you don't stop ignoring His commands handed down through the Watch Tower. Even worse, imagine reading the WATCHTOWER magazine twice a month for years while you no longer live by its standards, then trying to forget that you used to obey the commands found there. That was my mother. She may have been disillusioned when the sky didn't fall in 1975, but she kept reading and eventually accepted their excuse for being "overly anxious" for the end of the world. The Watch Tower never ever says it was "wrong" about anything, even when their prophecies don't come true again and again and again. They instead say that "new

light" has revealed further information. Somehow, no matter how wrong they were in the past, their never admitting it allows the members to swear that the Watch Tower Organization is no longer wrong once new light is revealed, despite changes in their teachings again and again and again. Jehovah's Witnesses call their beliefs "The Truth" as previously explained and they would agree that "The Truth" is defined as the current teachings of the Governing Body. (That's the leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses; more will be said on that in another chapter.) I would add that the current teachings largely consist of denying their own past teachings.

So one day Mom casually asked me if I wanted to go back to the Kingdom Hall with her. Hey, I already said that I decided there must not be a God up there, but I would just say "I don't know" if asked about Him. Even putting that aside, how many thirteen-year olds would volunteer to go to church if they hadn't been in years and were told they didn't have to do it? Of course I said, "No, thank you." So Mom went by herself. She was shunned at the Kingdom Hall because of her status as a disfellowshipped person. She would sneak in silently, sit and listen for two hours then sneak out again, everybody pretending she wasn't there. Somewhere after several months of the silent treatment, the elders asked her about all of her sins while she was "out in the world." She would have confessed to smoking more tobacco and would have had to admit to fornication prior to marriage, perhaps to visiting another church (she was married in some church) and any other violations of God's commands that she wanted to unload from her conscience. The elders would have told her how Jehovah forgave her because she kissed up to the elders and admitted she wanted to do things the Watch Tower way, and then they would have made an announcement at the next meeting that "Sister Veronica Harris has been reinstated." After the announcement, everyone in the Hall was free to approach her after the meeting and hug her and kiss her and welcome her back to the fold and pretend they always loved her and never shunned her all that time. I say "would have" because I wasn't there for any of it. I didn't even know about the shunning and reinstatement process back then. I just assumed she went back to the Kingdom Hall and went right back to knocking on doors proclaiming the sky was falling with the others.

Something important to me did result from Mom going back to the Kingdom Hall. Marvin now lost his wife to the Jehovah's Witnesses, at least partially, just as it happened to my dad. He was used to calling all the shots for Veronica, but now he was competing with Watch Tower and he was going to lose. Don't let me mislead you here. Marvin and Veronica are still together more than thirty years past this point in the story, but things definitely changed back then. When Marvin fought back to gain control of Veronica, he found one area of her life he had left alone previously. He took a more active role in governing my life. Even after marrying my Mom, Marvin had let her decide how to raise me and what rules to implement. And I was a pretty good kid. I didn't smoke, I didn't drink alcohol, and I was still a virgin. I came home at a reasonable hour and I did well in school. That was no longer good enough. Suddenly, every single phone call I made or accepted was screened. I had to report my whereabouts at all times. The television had to be turned off at a certain time. I couldn't just take something out of the refrigerator, I had to get permission to have a snack. Although my homework wasn't checked (too much work, I guess), I had to report that it was finished every evening. My bicycle or television privileges were regularly taken away or I was grounded on a regular basis for some infringements of some rules.

I would love to report one positive part of my life as a kid with Marvin and Veronica Harris. For the life of me, I just cannot think of one except the same old song: I had a roof over my head, I was clean and well-fed, and nobody beat me. Mom was totally busy being a Jehovah's Witness again. (The grammatically correct way to say that is "being one of Jehovah's Witnesses again." But that asserts that there actually is a "Jehovah" and they are His witnesses. Again, to piss them off, always call them "a" Jehovah's Witness.) Since I no longer shared that part of her life, I shared her with Marvin when she wasn't knocking on doors. Since I wasn't so keen on being around Marvin, I just let him have her and went to my room (or for a bicycle ride when I had privileges).

Don't misread me here. I can agree that rules and discipline are fine for kids, especially as they enter the teen years. It's just that I was a nerdy goody-goody kid that didn't get into trouble, and somehow I was suddenly the devil's spawn according to my stepfather

and I needed to be constantly reminded who the boss was. My mother passively standing by just made it worse.

One story I remember well was where my music teacher offered to help me learn to play an instrument. He told me he needed a trombone player in the orchestra. I told him to give me a choice of any three instruments, not just the trombone, and I would pick one. He said, "No, just the trombone." So I declined his offer. I went home and shared that story with my mother. Instead of saying, "What instrument would you like to learn?" or "Why don't you give the trombone a try?" or any number of encouraging responses, my mother's single word answer to my story rings with me today. "Oh." That was all she said about it. There wasn't much more than that said about anything else going on in my life either. I had lost her to the Jehovah's Witnesses. So I did like my sister did. I moved out of the house and went to live with my father.

Once again, I could write about various things that molded my life. At this point, I could write about Dad going on his third marriage (and not the last) while raising the child from the second marriage. I could write about how I came to love getting drunk over the next few years, how I started smoking marijuana and cigarettes, lost my virginity, etc. I could write about how I lost my nerdy goody-goody attitude thanks to peer pressure, circumstances, my sister, my dad, and a host of other things. But these things are part of life. They play an important role in my life, but the only way I seem to be able to keep my focus when I try to put it all together is by sticking to a theme. So I will only mention enough of these life-molding side stories as necessary to make sense of how I became one of the door-knocking Jehovah's Witnesses. "Years of turmoil" is a good description for just about any teenager's life, so I will finish off the teen years in this chapter.

Dad had always paid a hefty child-support to Mom. Even when he was raising Gloria and Mom was raising me, Dad paid full child-support. He made a decent attempt to visit me regularly while I was with Mom. Mom did not try to visit me or Gloria. Her feelings were hurt. Her children had, according to her, abandoned her. Now that Dad had both children, he took Mom to court. They had an agreement that if she ever remarried, child-support would be cut in half. Because she had been living with Marvin for nearly a year before their marriage, Dad felt that he had paid too much due to the loophole. Because he now had both children, he figured that he should ask for something back. He did win his court case, but it was a token amount. I knew nothing about any of this at the time, my parents still sticking with their agreement to never speak badly of each other to the children. Mom called me one day and told me that Dad had taken her to court demanding money from her, and then she said that "No son of [hers] would do such a thing." Essentially, Mom disowned me. Dad had to explain the rest.

At the time, I didn't think that bothered me. Mom wasn't trying to visit me or Gloria at all and I had lost her to her religion long before I moved out on her. It didn't seem like any big deal to me, her decision that I was no son of hers. But as years went by, I kept coming back to that incident. I was abandoned by my mother and that had a profound effect on me. I believe it solidified my belief that there was nobody in the world to count on except yourself. Her abandonment didn't even last all that long. She remained aware of what was happening with me through her mother and I contacted her again when I was seventeen and she acted as if she never disowned me. Yet, everything changed from that point. When Dad initially explained what had happened, he took me out to dinner and kept ordering white wine and pouring it into my water glass allowed me to drink with him. Dad and I got drunk together and it was my first time getting drunk ever. Looking back on this entire incident, my mother disowning me and then getting drunk with my father to learn why, I feel that it's the major crossroad of my life. If Mom realized I had nothing to do with the money issues and never made that call or maybe if Dad had explained things without the wine, I truly feel that I would be on a completely different path today. I don't think I would be a rocket scientist or a brain surgeon, but I am confident that my path would not be that of a high

school dropout turned alcoholic turned Jehovah's Witness.

Anyway, it did happen. I learned to escape life's problems through alcohol. I held my grades together for awhile longer. I took the ACT college entrance exam in my junior year and scored 32 on it (which was in the 99th percentile) but I couldn't keep up the grades. I got so hooked into living for escaping life that I dropped out of high school in my senior year. Just months after dropping out, I got a letter from the state of Missouri - some program named me a state scholar based on my ACT score and previous grades. This would have meant great help in getting into a Missouri college if I hadn't dropped out already; probably a full scholarship. I never, to this day, told either of my parents about that letter. I felt that they would have been disappointed that I blew my chances. I joined the Navy and graduated from Boot Camp before I would have graduated from high school.

The Navy could have helped me to grow up and become responsible, but it really didn't. It's not that they didn't try. My intelligence was recognized and I was given training in RADAR electronics. I really had a chance to advance. Instead, I nurtured my love for alcohol as often as possible. I thought I had a good balance of work and drinking, but I really didn't. I made rank and lost it a couple of times. I drove home and briefly visited my family every year, but mostly had very little regular contact with them. Mom was fully absorbed in being one of Jehovah's Witnesses and Dad was fully absorbed in his own life and drinking. Despite my ups and downs, I was seeing the world in the Navy and enjoyed drinking the house wine in French restaurants, ouzo in Greek taverns, and rum on the beaches of the Bahamas. After five years, I reenlisted for another four years.

One thing while I was in the Navy- I always felt weird and isolated about the holidays. I never took vacation during the time from Thanksgiving through Christmas season. Holidays, I was either on duty on the ship or I was in some local bar at least one thousand miles from home. So from Christmas meaning toys and chocolate as a kid, I graduated to Christmas meaning beer or whiskey. I exchanged gifts with absolutely nobody. It was just kind of an agreement with co-workers and drinking buddies. The most anyone would do was take turns buying a round of drinks as a gift exchange. Thanksgiving meant turkey and stuffing served on a tray at work. Because it was a holiday, the nice tablecloths would be put out, but otherwise it was much like any other meal. There was absolutely no religion in my life and I had minimal contact with family.

Unfortunately, the delicate balance in my life of working and drinking couldn't last forever. I was restless in my sleep if I was sober or I was passed out drunken most every night. This caused me to start having tunnel vision and dizziness during the day. I managed to cut back on drinking just enough to make the dizziness go away. The personnel office on the ship told me that I would still be eligible for shore duty for a few years, but all the trouble I had gotten into because of drinking would disqualify me from being an instructor. I would probably be put in charge of recruits scrubbing floors, shoveling snow, painting and chores like that. Right before I was scheduled to transfer, I had a going away party. On the way home from the party, I had an accident and was arrested for drunk driving.

At this point, at the ripe young age of twenty-three, the story takes a sharp turn. So I will end the chapter on the "years of turbulence" and dedicate a whole chapter to the drastic course change.

Chapter 5

Finding God

I spent the night in jail for drunk driving and bailed myself out in the morning. I was already late for work and was going to be in trouble for that. Instead of reporting late, I went to get my pick-up truck from the impound lot. One thing in my pick-up that I didn't want to leave there was a .357 Magnum. It was still there. I checked into a local motel and decided to take an inventory of my life.

I'd like to relate what was going through my mind the few days I stayed at that motel but I really just cannot recall. I was not myself. I think I decided that the heavy drinking caught up to me, I made a mess of my life, I did not do well with the cards I was dealt. I folded and attempted suicide. I climbed into the bathtub so the blood would be easier to clean. I think that was pretty nice of me. I put my gun in my mouth and pulled the trigger. To this day, my recollection says that I pulled that trigger with all the might of my index finger. I sat in that tub for what seemed to be half an hour to an hour. It was probably only three to four minutes. I kept adding pressure to my trigger finger knowing that even though it should have already gone off, it would fire any second. But it did not fire.

Later that day, I acquired the idea that there was divine intervention when my hair-trigger gun did not go off. A brief description of double action revolvers might help here. The finger pulling the trigger first causes the hammer to be pulled back to the cocked position while aligning the cylinder with the bullet in it. Pulling back a bit further, the hammer is released to strike the firing pin and the bullet is on its way. But the double action can be eliminated by pulling the hammer back manually with your thumb and locking it back. The trigger will also move back to a position that holds the hammer lock. That leaves only the single action of releasing the hammer for the trigger to accomplish. I did that because it eliminates jerking the gun out of position. No point in missing my brain and blowing a hole in my cheek. On my gun, the trigger in that position only needed a very light touch to release the hammer. Just the skin contact my finger made with it could have been enough to set it off. The failure of such a simple mechanical action on a perfectly functional gun had to make me wonder what happened.

I kept the thought that God provided a miracle to save my life for perhaps the next sixteen to eighteen years. I truly believed that idea. In reality, I am sure it was my just not being able to go through with it, my not truly wanting to pull the trigger that prevented me from actually giving it any pressure at all. Sure, I was touching the trigger and my finger felt pressure, but it was pressure not to shoot. During that few minutes, I thought of how my family would feel about what I did, and somehow I lost the desire to go through with the suicide.

I went to visit friends nearby and they convinced me to go to the Naval Hospital. That seemed to make sense as admitting to a suicide attempt should minimize whatever trouble I was in for being absent without leave. The emergency room doctor was awestruck. He said he could not believe I had come so close and did not go through with the suicide. I told him, "So you are telling a patient who gave up on life for feeling that he was a failure that he failed at suicide." He apologized and realized he needed to improve his bedside manner. I was put under observation for a week in the psychiatric ward. There were daily group sessions of discussion, but no real treatment. The bulk of the time was spent listening to a male patient who was raped by other men and attempted his own suicide afterward. That's not that important to the story except to understand that these doctors and counselors had their "bigger problem" than me and just wanted to know that I was done wanting to hurt myself.

Without any direct consultation of any length, I figured out what happened and why it happened all by myself in the psychiatric ward during that week. I hadn't told anyone that I felt that God prevented the gun from going off. The ER doctor was so sure that it was incredible to get that close to suicide and not accomplish it. I have read enough now to know that it is more common than he knew. I had decided that God spared me for some reason, and that further, God was in direct control of my life. All I had to do was follow his lead. God led me to the hospital and was going to make every decision for me until I was ready to start making them for myself again.

I did not share my revelation with any doctor or anyone at all but kept it to myself. It seemed to me that God had made that decision also. Deep down, I am pretty sure that I felt that people who say God is in direct control of their life would be subject to many more tests and asked about hearing little voices. I didn't hear any voices, so why bother to mention that I was just the co-pilot in my head right now? I was returned to my ship at the end of that week.

My ship's officers busted me down in rank, something that had happened before. They wanted to discipline me, but the hospital interfered and insisted that I needed treatment for alcoholism. So they had not entirely forgotten about me, they just let me go back to work until my record reached the top of the pile then they actually wanted to do some good. Oh, but it had been weeks now. I was fully convinced that God had taken control and had not yet given it back to me, and told me to still just keep it between Him and me who was in charge in my head.

The Naval hospital had a six week inpatient program where an entire ward was full of sailors diagnosed as alcoholics. One doctor was in charge of about twenty people and was rarely seen by anyone. Counseling was done by amateurs who had brief training. I am not complaining. They did a pretty good job. They did help me to see that I had problems with emotions and was disconnected with family. There was nothing wrong with the program.

I am sure I needed it as I am an alcoholic. It just never addressed my suicide attempt. These counselors had the attitude that alcohol is the cause of all of our problems. All we had to do was figure that out and we could admit our powerlessness over alcohol and start to get better. The main solution to our problems would be to go to Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) meetings perhaps for the rest of our lives. I certainly never shared my revelation about God to these guys. So up to this point, only I was aware of God's intervention in my life and I needed to thank Him for it somehow. The A.A. meetings taught me what to do after I admitted powerlessness over alcohol. The A.A. program said to turn my life over to God and He would strengthen me. I was already there so I just had to figure out how to keep God in charge of my life.

Despite the passing of weeks, I had not talked to my family about what happened. I was encouraged to contact my mother and father and I told them each the condensed version of what happened; that I had made an attempted suicide and was in the hospital for treatment. Mom called the local Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses and asked them to send someone to the hospital to talk to me. Since I assumed divine intervention was still going on, I figured that the Jehovah's Witnesses that came were sent by God. Maybe they would know how to keep God in charge of my life.

That's an awesome feeling, that God personally cares enough to run your life and guide people to you who can help you. The Witnesses gave me a New World Translation Bible and some brochure. I read the Gospels in a couple of days. The two Witness men studied that brochure for about an hour each visit with me twice a week during that six weeks and cut back to once a week after that. I was sure that everything they said must have been true, after all this was divine intervention. It seemed to make sense, so I didn't question it. I don't remember exactly when it was during those six weeks, but somewhere in there, I shared my revelation about God running my life with the Witnesses and it seemed to make perfect sense to them. It even made sense not to tell any doctors or counselors for fear that I would be put back in the psychiatric ward for observation.

When I was released from the hospital, my ship had gone out to sea and I was assigned to the base barracks and spent my days

cleaning the piers and parking lots. I continued to study with the Jehovah's Witnesses and attended their meetings. One of the two men that called on me, Frank, practically took me into his family. He and his wife, Betty and their two children came to the Navy base and picked me up for the meetings at the Kingdom Hall and I would often go to their home afterward on Sundays for a meal or else go with a huge group of Witnesses to a local restaurant and they made me feel very welcome. Soon, instead of the two men, Frank and Betty had me studying with them at their home every week in a book called YOU CAN LIVE FOREVER IN PARADISE ON EARTH.

It was much, much later that I learned that Jehovah's Witnesses are required to report every month how much "field service" they accomplished. Field service is the recruiting work and selling of WATCH TOWER magazines and books that they do. Frank and Betty were "pioneers," which meant at the time that they were required to get ninety hours of recruiting and selling done every month. (I previously stated that a pioneer needs seventy hours of recruiting every month as that is the requirement at the time of writing this, but it was higher in the past.) This is totally unpaid volunteer work just to retain the title of pioneer. Pioneering is not required, but it elevates the person to a more honored status and it makes the member sure that Jehovah would be pleased with them and never ever want to destroy them and turn them into bird food at Armageddon. Frank and Betty were sincere in wanting to help me, but their main goal was to spend as much time with me as possible because they actually counted all that time I was in their car or in their home as part of their ninety hours. They were each counting somewhere between eight and fifteen hours a week on just me. All I knew was that this was the type of family attention I had never had but really enjoyed. Instead of toys and chocolate, it was like what children really deep down wanted for Christmas- love and attention and a real family something like Ozzie and Harriet Nelson or Ward and June Cleaver provided for their children.

My Navy ship returned from overseas. I was reassigned to work and live onboard. But by this time, things had changed. I had decided to get out of the military as a conscientious objector. I told my ship's officers that I could not work on RADAR and weapons anymore. That suited them fine and they had me work on cleaning and painting. I had already started the process to be classified as a conscientious objector and it seemed like a slow process at first. The process included being interviewed by a Navy lawyer, chaplain, and psychiatrist. I completed those interviews. The psychiatrist was a civilian who reported to the military with many years of training. I told him how months back, God took control of my life and now I had to serve God. He stated in his report that I was capable of making "dangerous decisions" that could place me or others at risk. I included that doctor's report in my request for discharge, but the military stated that they "lost" my paperwork somewhere in Washington. The second time I submitted the paperwork, I pointed out in the first paragraph of my request that an important psychiatric evaluation was included, that I could seek a medical discharge based on what it says, and I was processed out fairly fast. Had I pursued a medical discharge, it is likely that I would have had some medical benefits for the rest of my life. As it was, I figured the end of the world was coming so soon that I wouldn't need those benefits.

I stayed with Frank and Betty for a few weeks until I had a job and an apartment of my own. I could have gone home and stayed with either of my parents for awhile, but I felt that Frank and Betty were more of a family to me. I got a janitorial job working for one of the "brothers" at the Kingdom Hall.

Allow me to give a bit of insider information about Jehovah's Witnesses and janitorial/window washer jobs. They are like peanut butter and jelly; they just go together so well. I mentioned in Chapter 2 how the Witnesses discourage a college education because the end of the world is so close at hand. Witnesses take all kinds of jobs, but the vast majority of them are working in labor jobs or

low skill jobs. Janitorial and window washing work allows a Witness to attend all of the weekly meetings at the Kingdom Hall. Their men may be the only window washers on record who have at least five complete dress suits available to them. They typically turn down overtime if it will interfere with the meetings. Many are self-employed in these same fields or work for another Witness as I was doing. They feel that this type of work allows them also to avoid so many non-Witnesses while they work. The self-employed Witness could make a decent living, especially if he didn't bother to have any health insurance. They figure that Jehovah will keep them healthy enough to live until Armageddon any moment now. For similar reasons, many do not save money or invest in retirement.

I continued to study with Frank and Betty; I went to all the meetings, and I started going out in "field service," the magazine-selling and recruiting work that all Jehovah's Witnesses do. I worked with Witnesses and spent all my free time with Witnesses. I guess I felt like a pig in the mud. I had many questions during my studies. The vast majority of recruited Witnesses come from Christendom. To a Jehovah's Witness, Christendom is a negative term for all the Christian religions that teach "the lie" as opposed to "the truth" that Jehovah's Witnesses teach. All of Christendom and all other religions except for Jehovah's Witnesses belong to "Babylon the Great," which is Satan's worldwide empire of false religion, designed to confuse people and keep them from finding or believing "the truth" contained in Watch Tower literature which describes Jehovah's Witnesses' beliefs.

The method of teaching the doctrine from the literature included "proving" that Christendom was "the lie." My problem was that I never really learned any real religion. So, in order to prove that the lies were lies, I had to learn the lies. I had to learn things like how Christendom taught the Trinity and then learn why the Trinity was a lie. Frank and Betty thought that I was being stubborn for asking so much. They thought I should just learn how to parrot the answers to the questions in the Watch Tower books. I think they finally broke me down to doing that and I was ready to prepare to get baptized. So that was it. I blew my chance to get out of there. There was a clear warning siren going off in my head. I was hearing them condemning all other religions and labeling them as part of Satan's organization, but not allowing any negativity about the Watch Tower organization. If the reader wants to learn anything at all from my story, learn this: When you feel that something is wrong, go with that feeling. Figure out what is wrong before proceeding with whatever you are doing. Every "baptismal candidate" had to be approved for baptism. You don't just get baptized on Sunday and that's that. Each candidate received a book about Watch Tower organization structure that had hundreds of questions in it along with Bible scriptures that led to an answer in accord with the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses. The questions covered most every aspect of life and belief; from why fornication is wrong to why the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses is always right. The elders would ask the questions of the candidate in three one-hour sessions. If you didn't know the doctrines of Jehovah's Witnesses before studying all that, you would know it afterward. After covering all those questions, the elders would decide if the candidate knew the information well enough to "represent" Jehovah's organization and they would make sure he was attending most of the meetings and going out in the magazine-selling and recruiting work on a regular basis, reporting his total hours every month. That was a huge factor, because apparently survival at Armageddon is contingent on how much effort is put into selling Watch Tower literature. If the elders determined all was okay, then they would say the person could get baptized at the next large assembly of Jehovah's Witnesses. P. T. Barnum would have been proud of the Watch Tower organization for this whole baptism process. A candidate actually had to jump through all kinds of hoops and agree with all kinds of teachings and get permission to join as an official member just so that he could do even more free work for the organization. Truly, Watch Tower made suckers out of people. I got approved and I was baptized in the summer of 1988 at the district convention. Jehovah's Witnesses attend assemblies every year. They have weekend circuit assemblies of one or two full days of instruction and they have the larger yearly district convention every summer for a three-day weekend starting on Friday. They put suits and dresses on themselves and their children and sit still for hours on end to listen to talks and dramas and hear experiences of others who have braved some dangers to become Jehovah's Witnesses or faced some obstacles to preach "the truth" as a pioneer continually for decades. The assemblies may be far from home for many so they stay in

hotels in the area. For some, this is their only vacation. Window washing doesn't pay so much that they can afford much more. So after several hours of talks, the kids will swim in the pool at the hotel and get to eat fast food for a few days. Assemblies are also the place where teens and young adult Witnesses get to meet each other and look for potential spouses.

A big highlight of these events is the baptism, when new members officially meet the standards to avoid being killed by Jehovah at Armageddon. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that baptism is not for babies; a baptismal candidate has to be "spiritually mature." Everyone had to pass the test of those hundreds of doctrinal questions. But as time has gone on, they are letting children younger and younger become baptismal candidates. It has become common for preteens (I have heard of some as young as seven) to get baptized. I think Watch Tower has figured out that if you wait until a kid is an adult, he often won't want to become a Jehovah's Witness, so they have been asking children to decide that spiritual maturity is important to them. The parents go along because it's a real status symbol for a family to have a young baptized member. It indicates that the parents really are desirous of pleasing Jehovah. The male parent is often pressured to pass on some pressure to his children, so that the male parent can become a ministerial servant and later an elder in the congregation. Those are positions of status that allow the man to take on more responsibilities in the congregation. Every male member is supposed to want to do more in the congregation. Again, P. T. Barnum would be proud. I went way off-subject there. The baptism talk, a reminder to new recruits of the seriousness and importance of this step, is followed by all the candidates standing up and answering two questions:

1. On the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, have you repented of your sins and dedicated yourself to Jehovah to do His will?
2. Do you understand that your dedication and baptism identify you as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in association with God's spirit-directed organization?

I am not writing controversy here, just telling a story. I list the questions because of all those hundreds of questions asked of me ahead of time nobody mentioned these two additional questions. All of the candidates said "Yes" at the same time, so I did too. Then we went to the locker rooms, changed into swimsuits and got fully dunked in a pool of water on the convention floor. It was supposed to represent dying to our former life and coming out reborn as a servant of God, ready to do His will. I felt that at the time, but looking back, it now seems more like my former self dying and a robot being turned on. From that point on, I had to do whatever God wanted me to do. Luckily, the Watch Tower organization always knew just what God wanted me to do. Again, here was that warning siren in my head, and my ignoring it. Two questions came out of left field and I didn't stop to say "What's that about?" I may not have even actually answered the questions but just stood there in a crowd that said "Yes." I don't know, it was all a blur. It doesn't matter because I didn't say "No" or "I don't know." I was officially a Jehovah's Witness.

I did learn later that those two questions were available to me in the Watch Tower literature. It does say that they would be asked and my answer would be required but there are thousands and thousands of pages of Watch Tower literature, there were hundreds of questions to go over ahead of time to get baptized and these two were not mentioned there. The literature wasn't available in a searchable computer format yet, and even now that it is, there's just so much to look at. The elders knew I was going to be asked such questions, but they didn't see the importance of informing me about them. They just figured that I had been to one circuit assembly before and heard those questions asked of the baptism candidates. I don't remember everything that was said in a previous assembly which included some six hours of lectures each day. The second question is purely a legal one. Where "Christendom's" churches baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Jehovah's Witnesses baptize to connect someone with their legal corporation.

Well, there wasn't any time for worrying about things I should have caught or stopped to question. It was just the same as being

swept up in a whirlwind romance that ends in a storybook wedding. I was wooed by the Watch Tower, now I was married to her. But I was still in my honeymoon phase; it was still so new and exciting. Besides, God led me here. Why would I be suspicious?

Life seemed complete. I worked with Witnesses at night. I spent several daytime hours every week recruiting side-by-side with Witnesses. I attended five hours of meetings every week and studied for each of those meetings. My religion was not a weekend thing; it permeated every waking moment of my life. The end of the world was coming any moment now. I had life's highest purpose, telling other people how to live forever and avoid being destroyed at Armageddon. God chose me personally for this highest purpose.

Many people argue whether Jehovah's Witnesses are brainwashed. I can say with certainty that my entire thinking process was changed and I felt that my brain was "corrected." It had never occurred to me that I had not seriously addressed my suicide attempt, but had just put it behind me. I thought that the feeling that God had taken control of my life was a very personal feeling I shouldn't go around sharing even with my fellow Jehovah's Witnesses. In reality, I am sure I knew it just sounded nuts. Life prior to the Witnesses was like an automobile picking up speed and getting out of control when I discovered I had no brakes. All I did by becoming a Witness was to reduce the speed a bit so I could steer and installed a loud horn to make up for the lack of brakes.

Chapter 6

Even Deeper than Totally Immersed

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Jehovah's Witnesses refer to their own religion and its teachings and practices by the phrase, "the truth." It is no secret. They use this phrase when talking to each other, from their podiums in their Kingdom Halls, and in front of thousands at their assemblies. It is such a common phrase that virtually all of their active members say it and hear it every week, most on a daily basis. If one is raised as a Witness, he hears that phrase throughout all of his growing up. If one is converted to the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, the phrase is repeatedly heard as the conversion takes place. The phrase appears early on in training to become a Witness. Included in the life stories of Jehovah's Witnesses, printed in their magazines, are titles such as; "I Finally Found the Truth," "Jehovah Draws Humble Ones to the Truth," "The Beauty of the Truth," "My Escape to the Truth," "Power of the Truth", and "Staunch Fighter for the Truth."

What did all this exposure to "the truth" do to me? Since the phrase and other special terms are repeated so often, I allowed them to lock my brain fully into accepting them as facts. I was pretty regular at reading my Watch Tower literature. There were four new magazines every month to read and studying for every meeting involved more books and pamphlets. All changes to doctrine are presented in the literature, most often through the study articles in the WATCH TOWER magazine. Since the truths of the teachings were established facts in my mind, anything new printed by the Watch Tower organization was accepted as the truth. There was no room for doubt. And apparently, there were often changes over the years. New books were released to the members each summer at the conventions and many of the books explained subtle changes to the doctrines. Witnesses tended to forget that Watch Tower was a publishing company and every new book was a guaranteed "best seller" which reached millions of readers between the Jehovah's Witnesses themselves and their mandatory door-to-door work to "place" them with people. I know I felt educated by reading the literature. When a difficult doctrine was explained that didn't really fit well with my reading of the Bible, the experts who wrote the literature were good at telling it in a seemingly simple but actually confused fashion that made me embarrassed to admit I didn't understand. I accepted that the confusion must be mine. Harry S. Truman once said "If you can't convince them, confuse them."

I felt proud of the recruiting work that we called field service. I read of the Watch Tower organization fighting all the way up to the

Supreme Court of the United States for our right to do that work. I was so impressed that Watch Tower had fought so hard for our right to free speech that I forgot how they sneakily took away our freedom of thought. The average Witness doesn't even try to think and interpret the scriptures for himself but relies totally upon the Watch Tower organization. All the meetings I went to and all the time spent on questions had nothing to do with engaging in theological discussions of any sort; they were just constant reinforcement sessions where I was told what to think and believe.

Many recruited members do well in the structured life of a Jehovah's Witness. Some don't like such a life and don't do as well. I came from six years in the military. I took to it like a duck to water. All my initial questions and conflicting thoughts with the doctrines were left behind. Minor doctrinal changes didn't seem like such a big deal to me early on because I wasn't entrenched in some old doctrine. Besides, I was still sure that God led me to this religion and gave me the ultimate purpose in life of telling others how to find "the truth." As long as the changes were minor, I was fully onboard with changing the doctrines. Whatever Watch Tower said was fine.

Men eligible for marriage were in short supply among Jehovah's Witnesses. That may not be true everywhere, but it certainly was true where I was living- a small city in the deep south of the United States. It seems that single and divorced women are attracted more often than single or divorced men to Jehovah's Witnesses. Men typically come to the religion through their wife or girlfriend. There are also children of Witnesses that grow up and stay in the religion, but the ratio there is not so close to fifty/fifty. Lots of boys sow their wild oats and leave the religion in higher numbers than girls. Plus, the teen Witnesses are really restricted from dating and their parents certainly try very hard to keep them from having premarital sex, so the young ones tend to get married as adult teens just to address their hormones.

I was a single man in his mid-twenties. That was something rare and desirable. With many more single and divorced women in the Witnesses and with the Witnesses putting extreme pressure on the members to date and marry only other members, the men often had their pick of the women. A fifty year old man could often marry a beautiful 25 year old woman even if he was not much to look at and still lived in his parents' home. Sometimes, even an old man over sixty could snag a total babe under thirty years old. All you needed was to be baptized and have an income; sometimes a woman with an income didn't even care about the man having much of one to speak of. But younger men were the ones in highest demand and were snatched up quickly. If you were breathing and baptized, anything else like decent looks or income or your own home and good health were all just bonuses.

I didn't plan on being celibate for the rest of my life, but I was in the same predicament as the teens with the raging hormones. I didn't want Jehovah to turn me into bird food at Armageddon because I listened to my hormones. I would have to get married to have sex. I didn't date a bunch of women in a search for the right one, but I did enjoy all the attention I received from women who were between their upper teens and the mid-thirties. There was some unwritten rule that a newly converted Witness would not be a good spouse so I waited until I had been baptized for one year before dating. At that point, I asked out a lady I had my eye on ever since I started attending meetings at the Kingdom Hall. She was nineteen and had graduated high school a year ago and was pioneering.

In many social circles, Tasha would have been out of my league. She was a virginal, gorgeous young woman, considered pure and innocent. I was "experienced" in the sense that I had known women prior to being a Witness. I wasn't raised in "the truth" as she was. I was just a janitor while her parents made a pretty good living. But in a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses with the

demographics favoring me, I was in the elite league. She could have been the one trying to get into my league. Because it was an honor to serve Jehovah, her parents discouraged college and just wanted her to pioneer and find a "spiritual brother." Well, that's what I was. They did think she could try to do better than me, but they really didn't stand in the way with such a shortage of younger spiritual brothers. I don't think they could picture her with a much older man.

So I dated a hot young virgin and married her about a year later. We had a beautiful Kingdom Hall wedding and reception. Our very first kiss was after we were pronounced husband and wife. It was all very much like some princess movie cartoon from Walt Disney. Tasha and I started our life of serving Jehovah together. I was appointed a "ministerial servant" in the congregation shortly after marrying. It seemed that we would even have the "happily ever after" in our marriage.

I have mentioned the elders and pioneers many times so far, but a brief lesson in Watch Tower hierarchy is in order. A baptized member is called a "publisher" because they distribute literature to outsiders as they recruit. That right there should be enough of a red flag to people that Jehovah's Witnesses are unthinking drones for a corporation. Well, it isn't.

Pioneers are members that serve as full-time publishers. At the time of this writing, their requirement is seventy hours per month of literature distribution and studying with people to convert them. All members can become pioneers if they are approved by the congregation elders. To be approved, a publisher would need to be attending virtually every single meeting at the Kingdom Hall and stay "regular" in the recruiting work. Of course, they would also have to have financial support or be able to collect government assistance to be doing this unpaid work. There are plenty of Witness pioneers that make sure they stay poor enough to collect food stamps and/or welfare. They avoid full-time work in order to do the full-time recruiting work, sometimes at taxpayers' expense. I will grant, though, that most pioneers are women whose husband or parents support them. The title is especially glorified because most of the men in the organization with the rank of elder had to be pioneers in order to get that rank. So they tell the lower ranks how they should all do their best to become pioneers or to support one member of their family in the pioneer service.

"Pioneer" is the only title that women can achieve; all other titles are for men only. Wives often want their husbands to gain a title for the prestige that it gives both of them. It's really totally a Men's organization with the women doing most of the recruiting work. Men who pioneer become "servants" in the congregation much sooner than those who do not pioneer. Servants are the elders and ministerial servants.

The elders are the men in each congregation that run that congregation. Typically, there may be as many as six and as few as three in each congregation, sometimes more and sometimes less. They give the talks in the Kingdom Hall and organize the local recruiting work. They investigate and discipline all the members and make sure they never break any of the rules of the Watch Tower Society, which are quite extensive and they cannot possibly remember them all, so they read them in Watch Tower literature. The elders also travel to other congregations to give talks and give the bulk of the talks at the large assemblies. They are quite busy. They receive no pay for all they do, but they typically become big-headed in thinking that they are extremely important and have people's lives in their hands. The members are supposed to accept that Holy Spirit guides the things elders say and do.

Elders have specific titles within the congregation to indicate their responsibilities. The elder in charge is the Coordinator of the Body of Elders. There is also the Secretary, Theocratic Ministry School Overseer, Watch Tower Overseer, and Service Overseer. If there are less than five elders, some will assume more than one title. If there are more than five elders, some will not have these

specific titles, but all elders are supposedly equal. Of course, some elders are more equal than others.

An in-between step to elder is a "ministerial servant." He could also be called an elder-in-training (or a brown-noser). If the elders think that a man is doing his best to be a good Witness, and he gets out in the recruiting work every single month, possibly every single week, and he shaves before every meeting and he wears a nice suit and kisses the asses of the elders, then they will appoint him a ministerial servant. That means he gets the "privilege" of doing all the work in the congregation of organizing literature and records and collecting money and stuff like that. He is typically put in charge of cleaning and mowing the lawn. The elders may also ask him to give rides to and from the meetings to the elderly as the elders are often much too busy to be bothered with actually aiding the neediest members. The ministerial servant is used more and more to give talks as his ability improves. He is also taught that he needs to "reach out" for the title of elder, so he takes a bunch of crap from the elders.

The Circuit Overseer represents the Watch Tower organization and is assigned to about twenty congregations to visit for one-week periods twice a year. If he is married, his wife must continually pioneer and she accompanies him to all of these weeklong visits. In many urban areas, he has an apartment at a Kingdom Hall and can simply travel to his assignments on a daily basis. But often, the Circuit Overseer and his wife live out of their suitcases and stay with a different family each week while visiting each congregation. Circuit Overseers have all their expenses paid for by the congregations and receive a small amount of money and an automobile from the organization. The members are expected to provide meals for him and his wife and many of these meals turn into large gatherings, particularly the lunches during the week. The Circuit Overseer gives several talks during his visit and gets out in the recruiting work several days with the congregation members. He examines all the records of the congregation and reviews all their recommendations for ministerial servants and elders. He gives a report to the congregation at the end of the week and gives a written report to the organization.

The Circuit Overseer is generally feared by the elders. They ask, "How high?" when he orders them to jump. While the local elders run the congregation, the Circuit Overseer tells them whether they are running it correctly. He is primarily interested in their monetary contributions to the organization and their recruiting work. He also coordinates most of the work of picking which elders will be used as speakers at the assemblies. Many elders want those assignments, so they learn to kiss the Circuit Overseer's ass quite well. While the elders fear him, the other congregation members usually treat him like a visiting celebrity.

You won't find it in any of the organization's writings, but the elders and other members will often greet the visiting Circuit Overseer with a "green handshake." They will literally put money in his hand when they first greet him. Some will be discrete and quick with a folded bill, others will hand him a signed card in an envelope so that he will remember their kindness. Others will invite him and his wife to dinners or outings and pick up the check. While they are not supposed to be doing this to gain his favor, wherever money is involved, favor often follows. A ministerial servant that wants to be recommended as an elder knows that he needs the Circuit Overseer's support. Since the contribution boxes at the Kingdom Hall cause direct contributions to be anonymous, many men find it desirable to put that money in the Circuit Overseer's hand. That way, he assumes they are generous people. It is not expected, and to tell you the truth, I never bothered giving money to the Circuit Overseer. I might have been a rare exception though. I wasn't really interested in climbing the ladder of titles. I wasn't really interested in standing in front of thousands of Witnesses at the assemblies to speak. I did climb two rungs on that ladder eventually, but I only did that because I thought that was what Jehovah God wanted. I never felt that God told me to get involved in the politics and bootlicking involved in gaining the Circuit Overseer's favor to receive greater privileges and status. Somehow, they decided that I should get some of that privilege anyway.

There are many more titles for those that work for the organization. Several Circuit Overseers answer to a District Overseer.

Typically, the members (including me) don't understand all the levels after that, so I won't try to figure it out and drone on with all that. At the very top are the members of the Governing Body. They are supposed to be "anointed" which means they are among the one hundred forty-four thousand humans that, upon their death, God chose directly to rule with Jesus in Heaven.

That's the short explanation of the chain-of-command. Returning to my story, I had climbed the first rung of the ladder as a newly appointed ministerial servant. I was now going to be one of many who were put in charge of counting magazines and cleaning the toilets and making sure someone vacuums the carpet at the Kingdom Hall after the meetings. I was also going to be expected to improve in my ability to teach the congregation. Most studies show that public speaking is the number one fear of people, even before death. To advance in the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses, that fear had to be totally squashed. The door-to-door recruiters had to overcome that fear, facing angry late-sleepers or a Rottweiler at the door. The men in the congregation had to learn to face hundreds of faces at a time, and give talks as long as 45 minutes long. I learned like most Jehovah's Witnesses to give an appearance of boldness. If someone in the audience didn't look like they were enjoying my talk, I just stopped looking at them and found someone who was paying attention. If someone at their own door in the recruiting work slammed the door in my face, I learned not to take it personally. Jehovah was offering them everlasting life, but they were enjoying Satan's world instead.

I did well distributing the literature at the doors and I did well in talk assignments. It's kind of odd that a fairly shy guy like me could bask in one of mankind's greatest fears. I always enjoyed giving the longer public talks. I'm not going to say I didn't like the pats on the back from the members for those talks, but that wasn't the main reason I loved doing it. I really thought I had been carrying out an assignment that was a great privilege from God. Remember, God personally saved me from a bullet in my head and chose me to be one of His servants. What also felt good was that after giving a public talk, people in the congregation would treat Tasha and me to dinner at some nice restaurant.

I didn't contribute much money to the organization. I didn't have much money being a window washer, but I gave my share to make sure we paid the local bills at the Kingdom Hall. I didn't have the energy to work full-time and pioneer, but for the first few years of marriage, I supported my wife's pioneering until it was obvious that we needed two full-time incomes. Neither of us had any college or any real trade. The elder who I had worked for decided to close up the janitorial shop and go back to college. I went to work for myself, still washing windows and scrubbing floors. It wasn't the road to riches, but it paid the bills. Tasha landed a good clerical job at a hospital that typically would have gone to a person with a degree. We owned a couple of fifteen year old cars and lived in a trailer, but that was good enough. When one of the cars broke down, my mother gave me her old Honda, just twelve years old and in great shape. I was sure Jehovah had my back, no matter the problem.

I could fake boldness and confidence at the doors while recruiting and I could fake it at the Kingdom Hall in front of everybody. I didn't even think I was faking it. I thought Jehovah was giving me the confidence I needed. I even tried getting in front of everybody at one of the conventions once. I was given a part in a drama where I played an Israelite. (The conventions include these dramas every year, often based on stories from the Bible, but fictionalized to add some moral message.) I had a beard and wore a robe. But I didn't have to look at the audience, just at my fellow actors. I didn't even have to actually say my lines. They were pre-recorded so I just had to memorize and lip-sync them. I knew from that experience that I could never fake the confidence needed to look out at thousands of Witnesses and deliver a speech without a quiver in my voice. Besides, those assignments always went to men who gave green handshakes to the Circuit Overseer. Still, I gave my all to what I could do. At conventions, I always volunteered to guard the stage or count the members or clean the bathrooms, just not to do anything on the stage.

Tasha and I studied together most every week for our meetings. We would spend an hour or more every Saturday reading the lesson from the WATCHTOWER magazine that would be studied on Sunday. We would look up all the scriptures to prove to ourselves that the written material was supported by God's Word. Of course, just as we knew the sun would rise in the east tomorrow, we always knew the material would prove to be in harmony with the Bible. We got out every weekend in the recruiting work and enjoyed the time together. Typically, Jehovah's Witnesses always take a break at some coffee shop or restaurant. We always enjoyed the breaks, surrounding ourselves with other Jehovah's Witnesses. Everyone saw us as a thoroughly "spiritual" couple, and we were. We never missed meetings or assemblies, we only went to G or PG-rated movies and all our friends were Jehovah's Witnesses.

When we finally saved up some money, we took a trip to the Brooklyn, NY headquarters of the Watch Tower, "Mecca" for Jehovah's Witnesses. Bethel, as the place is called, was where all the literature was printed and where the Governing Body lived and worked. Bethel was full of Witness workers that also live there, receiving no pay but just a small monthly expense stipend. Most "Bethelites" were single young men. Women were only there if they married a Bethelite and then were approved to stay as a couple. All the Bethelites had to be pioneers before applying for the great privilege of working and living at headquarters and print the literature or provide basic services for the other Bethelites like cooking or cleaning. It all seemed to be run very similarly to the military with everyone running on a precise schedule from the moment they wake until the end of the evening. I was glad I had never decided to pursue a life at Bethel. Even though the structured life of a Witness initially attracted me, this place was way over the top. Many young adults came there just for the honor it gives them and their parents. A Bethelite was expected to stay at least a few years, but most expected to spend the rest of their life there. It was definitely not a life for me.

I was appointed an elder in 1994, having only been baptized just under six years. That was not typical; it was an awfully quick climb. Some men have to kiss the elders' and the Circuit Overseer's asses for many more years and give lots of green handshakes before they get that coveted title. It was even more rare for someone who wasn't born and raised in the Jehovah's Witnesses to advance that fast. I didn't have a father who was prominent in the organization and my mother, fairly unknown in the organization, was even kicked out once. Again, I figured that God maneuvered this for me because He recognized my dedication. I didn't even want the title because I knew a bunch of work came with it, but I thought God would be upset with me if I turned it down. I figured God wanted me spending more time teaching in the Kingdom Hall and less time cleaning the Kingdom Hall.

The other elders and the Circuit Overseer may have expected further climbing for me, but I already knew that I was high enough. I didn't feel that I had people's lives in my hands yet, but I did feel important. I guess my head was starting to get a bit bigger.

Somehow, God had extended my honeymoon. My entire life so far in the Watch Tower organization had been like a honeymoon; one good thing after another was happening for me. All I did to have this life was agree with everything Watch Tower taught me, surrounded myself with people who did the same, and made my religion the most important thing in my life 24/7. Oh, I did have questions and concerns but I learned to suppress them. There were problems, but I always got through them. How ignorant I was. I had yet to learn that problems always come to some kind of end, fires always go out eventually. But for now, I was still a prince in a cartoon fairytale after the wedding, heading off to his honeymoon. You don't start asking your spouse about taking out the garbage when you are still on your honeymoon. I was as deep as I could possibly get in my wonderful life. Of course, the honeymoon had to end sooner or later.

Chapter 7

Anamorphosis

A type of illusionary art is called anamorphosis, where the image is distorted in a way that makes it recognizable only when viewed in a specific way. Some of the best examples would be seen in sidewalk art. The artist paints a swimming pool and a diving board on the flat surface at the edge of a building and then stands on the board ready to dive into his art. If you are standing nearby, you see a man on a sidewalk standing next to a building with some kind of two-dimensional image at his feet. But if you were standing above the art in the right place, where a camera would be placed to reveal the art, you would see the artist jumping off the building into a fully three-dimensional pool. The artist must learn a few techniques to create the image and then get the audience to stand at the right spot.

For the sidewalk art, it really isn't much of a trick to get people to view the swimming pool. People want to see the illusion. All you have to do is tell them, "Stand right here." Clearly, people know it's an illusion and they easily move out of the right spot and see the image for what it is after they have been amused. But when photos are shown of the same image, some people have a hard time figuring out what they are looking at because the entire scene is not available and they cannot change their literal point of view. Some people want to know where in the world a diving board and a pool are put up against a building like that.

Imagine taking the concept of anamorphosis and applying it to mental perception. Give people a distorted viewpoint then guide them to the correct mental "spot" to allow them to see the complete "illusion" of a new way of thinking of things. Further, make sure they only see the "scene" in a limited way and are unable to move back to a previous way of thinking. If you can imagine that, you have some idea of what it's like to be a Jehovah's Witness.

I've written this book from the sidewalk, from a spot where we can see that it's all an illusion. Many people think they are too smart to be tricked by religions such as the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses. But even some rocket scientists have been taken in by the illusion that "the truth" creates. Most believing Witnesses do not understand why outsiders are so sure that Watch Tower is a lie, an illusion, all smoke and mirrors, a false prophet, a dangerous mind-control cult, whatever term they prefer to use. Most outsiders do not understand why the Witnesses cannot clearly see that it's simply some paint on a sidewalk. It's not a matter of intelligence; it's a point of view.

Many children raised as Jehovah's Witnesses have had their point of view defined by their parents and Watch Tower organization. They have never been allowed to contemplate another point of view. By the time they are old enough to even consider that their view is wrong, it is extremely difficult to overcome their Watch Tower-implanted fear of Jehovah to see clearly. They have been told that the entire world is blind and only Jehovah's Witnesses, standing in the right mental place, can see reality.

Many people who have been recruited as adults were looking for answers to life's deeper questions. They often pondered whether there could be any all-encompassing understanding of life and death and everything that exists. The Witnesses came along and figuratively said, "Stand right here." All of a sudden, all the answers were available to them.

I cannot speak for all believers or former believers about why they could not see past the illusion. I know for myself that I was in a vulnerable condition when I was asked to "stand right here" and see their point of view. If you will indulge me as I beat this illustration to death, some people have a hard time letting go. Even standing in the right place, they focus too keenly and continue to see the paint on the sidewalk for what it is. But if they are willing to keep standing there, they may relax their focus and suddenly see

the three dimensions where only two exist.

That's what studying Watch Tower literature did for me. I was willing to keep trying until I saw the illusion. I needed the illusion to be real. At the beginning, I was looking for validation, a reason to live. I latched onto that organization because it was better than killing myself. Even then, "the truth" seemed so bizarre. Once my perceptive "view" relaxed enough to see the illusion, it was as if I were unable to focus away from the illusion when I looked out furthermore. Somewhere early in the indoctrination process, I was convinced that it was important to never go back to where I was "standing" before I learned "the truth." As bizarre as a diving board on the side of a building leading to a swimming pool on the sidewalk must have seemed, it just had to be there.

Looking back, I've made some realizations. The Watch Tower organization told me they had all the answers to the questions I was asking. The problem was that they provided the wrong questions. They told me I was seeking a deeper spiritual truth when all I really sought was an ordinary truth. I hadn't actually started pondering, "Where does life originally come from and where are we going after this life?" I simply wanted to know, "Who am I?" How could I understand deep spiritual things until I learned basic things? Maybe I thought God had assigned value to me, but I had to learn to assign myself value first. Regardless of how true or false Watch Tower's doctrines were, seeking to accept and understand their version of deeper spiritual truths was sidetracking me for years from discovering myself and my true value. The question, "Who am I?" may not lead to an easy answer, but just being aware of the real question and asking it leads to the reflection and wisdom I have been seeking.

Sometimes when I was learning "the truth," a little voice inside my head should have been screaming. Instead, it was there whispering to me, quiet enough for me to ignore it. As a reminder, this book is not a lesson in doctrine, so I won't try to make a list of flawed reasoning from Watch Tower teachings. Still, when I was learning doctrines, sometimes it seemed that it was necessary to do Biblical gymnastics to make it all work out. A dream in the book of Daniel is supposed to have a second fulfillment indicating the time period when Jesus starts his rule on the earth, allegedly the year 1914. That is based on their claims of when events started before that dream took place and when they must come to an end by applying an unrelated rule from some other unrelated part of the Bible. But if I wanted to see the swimming pool, I had to relax my focus.

There was Watch Tower's reason for not celebrating birthdays that bothered me. In the Bible, they say there are only two specific birthday celebrations mentioned and people in power had other people killed at those celebrations. A pharaoh had the chief of the bakers hung and Herod had John the Baptist beheaded. I thought that doesn't mean that Jehovah banned birthdays. I would have thought he would have been more obvious and said so if that were the case. And I don't recall any hangings or beheadings at any children's birthday parties, and I am sure they would stop celebrating if that were ever to happen. Still, it wasn't a big enough deal to worry about whether birthdays were okay. I wasn't a kid, I wouldn't miss them.

Holidays were similar. If the Watch Tower forbids it, there was some way they were connected to the Bible. They were either part of false religion or else they were nationalistic, which meant that celebrants were putting their trust in the nations instead of in Jehovah and His Watch Tower organization. Again, that was kids stuff. I didn't give a damn about holidays, so that little voice just whispered, "Holidays are about family togetherness." I spent my life avoiding any serious family togetherness. An actual religious reason to expand that avoidance was just what I needed.

Watch Tower teaches the members that they cannot earn salvation. They replaced the word "grace" in the Bible with the term

"undeserved kindness." They say that everlasting life is a gift from God, reflecting his undeserved kindness toward us, but then they tell members to find "deserving ones" out there and recruit them to learn about Jehovah and receive His undeserved kindness. Oh how I wish I had caught that flaw in the anamorphosis. Even the work itself defies the doctrine. You cannot earn salvation, but you have to do a bunch of work for Jehovah to get the free gift.

Watch Tower teaches that the elders are chosen by Holy Spirit and that the Governing Body is spirit-directed. Elders make mistakes because they are imperfect men, so members have to be patient with them. The Governing Body is not made up of men who are "inspired" as the Bible writers were, so they may have made mistakes in the past, but members should just believe what they say now because they are spirit-directed. All I have ever been able to figure out from their explanations is that Jehovah leads well but men don't always follow well.

One of the hardest things I had a problem focusing on and accepting was Watch Tower's explanation for every last parable in the Bible, every hidden fulfillment of every last thing in the New Testament pointing toward Watch Tower itself. They insisted that the book of Revelation points to the Board of Directors of the Watch Tower Corporation and to the magazine distribution work of the members. They say that the recruiting work is done just as it was done in the first century after Jesus' death as recorded in the Bible. I don't think Paul and Barnabas were going door to door with magazines, but Watch Tower implies that the whole structure of the organization outside of the printing work is based on the New Testament. Elders are the "older men" mentioned in the Bible. Circuit Overseers are like the apostles, particularly Paul and those that traveled with him visiting the congregations and recruiting as they went. One single gathering of all the older men in Jerusalem and their making decisions shows that Jehovah blesses the permanent gathering and decision making process of the Governing Body.

All of these points can be argued. Any Jehovah's Witness worthy of the title of publisher could convince many people that I left out valuable points or twisted their concepts in the paragraphs preceding. They can do that because they are expertly trained by the Watch Tower to leave out valuable points and twist concepts or take quotes out of context. I did that too.

When Watch Tower said that Jesus was nailed to an upright stake instead of a cross, and this is simply based on one or two possible vague references in the Bible, I remember how I took up the fight for Watch Tower's claim. I would boldly declare how cross worship was wrong and soon the householder would forget how that wasn't even the original argument or else they would get frustrated with my ability to use the scriptures faster than them and give up. Either way I would have won in my mind. I would have proved that the Watch Tower was right and therefore that I was right.

Being sure that they are always right is what being a Jehovah's Witness is all about. If they ever catch you at your door on a Saturday morning, don't even bother trying to argue with them. Just go back to bed. While they think they are only there to save you from becoming bird food, the fact is that they are there to reassure themselves that they are doing the most important work in the world. In order to do that work, the Witnesses need to keep telling themselves just how right their doctrines are. If they stop proving it to themselves for even a few days, they might start doubting the doctrine. If you choose to argue, that suits them fine. The whole entire world can tell them they are looking at paint on the flat sidewalk, but they will see that swimming pool. They will do their best to convince you that it really is a swimming pool. It's just sad that they don't truly recognize that they are really arguing with themselves.

Chapter 8

Major Changes

In 1994, things were looking pretty good for me. I was a self-employed window washer/floor scrubber, I was married to a beautiful woman who shared my beliefs, and I was a newly appointed elder in the local congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. Tasha and I were always surrounded by friends, fellow Jehovah's Witnesses. We never had much money but we got by. My best friend Rich Campbell, who was also self-employed scrubbing floors and washing windows, also knew how to fix cars. When my car broke down, he would help me fix it and I would help him strip the wax on some floor on the weekend to pay for his help. As long as Tasha didn't get pregnant, I could manage most small problems that came up in our lives. If I could just cause nothing to change, life would go on like the cartoon fairytale with the "happily ever after" for Alan and Tasha Miller. But outside of the fairytales, things change.

I only mentioned pregnancy because that is typically what changes in the lives of many people to create new obstacles. It is not typically what happens for Jehovah's Witnesses however. We were so sure that Armageddon was right around the next corner that Tasha and I had decided not to have children. Back when the Watch Tower organization was telling the world that Armageddon would come in 1975, they discouraged members from having children. They said the world was such a terrible place right before the end, and it was so difficult to raise children to avoid the temptations of the world. Even though Armageddon didn't happen, they continued to tell members the same story about children. Raising children "in these last days" was extremely difficult. Many Witnesses did have children, especially after the end didn't come in 1975. It wasn't directly against the rules, but some of the most determined members (like me) who wanted to get into the paradise after Armageddon took the warning message from Watch Tower seriously. Besides, we really couldn't afford it.

We were living in a small southern military town. The fairytale ending became unrealistic when the Navy base closed. The financial situation changed dramatically for virtually everyone in town. There was no immediate impact on Tasha and me, but as 1994 progressed, my business was getting harder and harder. Clients wanted to pay less for my cleaning services. I had to accept their offers or lose their business entirely. Tasha still had a great job at the hospital that provided our health insurance, but they constantly talked about phasing out her department or reorganizing and requiring employees to have a college degree. I still felt that Jehovah was blessing my life, but I had to pay attention to His directions via prayers and look for His answers to those prayers. An important side-story needs to be inserted here as a way of understanding why I started changing. I was still a fairly new elder. I was all gung-ho to follow God's direction through the organization. If they said "Jump" I would jump. A judicial matter came before the body of elders. A young lady in the congregation was involved in fornication and wanted to talk with the elders about it. As explained in Chapter 4, a judicial committee of three elders needed to be formed. Also the son of the coordinator of the body of elders (the C.O.B.E.) got into some trouble and a judicial committee would also be needed to handle that case. Both of these young congregation members were teenagers over eighteen and were considered adults. An elder cannot serve on his own family member's judicial committee so that there are no accusations of bias. Our C.O.B.E. excused himself from both cases, saying that he would be too busy trying to help his son spiritually right now. The best friend of the C.O.B.E. insisted on being on the young man's judicial committee along with two older elders. They put two inexperienced elders (me and another fairly new elder) on a committee with an experienced elder to talk with the young lady. We met with the young lady right away and she confessed to the Watch Tower-defined sin of fornication and told us the details. While her sin was not with the C.O.B.E.'s son, it was clear that the two of them were running in the same circle of friends and knew the details of each other's case. Their sins both occurred at a party in the same home and our judicial committee was going to have to talk to the C.O.B.E.'s son.

It sounds silly as I write it, but Watch Tower trained their elders to distrust the members in judicial matters and ask others who know about the matter for their recollection. Also, Watch Tower trained elders to pry into finding out how many people know about a member's "sins" so that gossip could be minimized. By speaking with each and every person aware of the situation and asking that

they remain silent outside of the judicial proceedings, the elders hope to keep any information from tainting the congregation and the organization. (They don't want to make Jehovah's Witnesses look bad.) Further, Watch Tower trains the elders to minimize the number of elders involved for the same reasons; apparently, they don't even trust the local spiritual leaders to avoid gossiping. If one judicial committee determined that they needed to know the details about another judicial matter, then that one committee should handle both matters.

Despite the confession of our young lady, we would have to ask what the C.O.B.E.'s son knew. She would also have to speak with the judicial committee about his case. If he simply confessed also, it could have been two open-and-shut cases. But as distrusting prying elders, we had to prepare for the worst. We had to assume that someone might want to deny some or all of their sins and then we would have to use the young man or woman as a witness against the other.

We ended our discussion with the lady saying that as soon as we gathered some more information from others involved, we should be able to wrap this up in one more session.

So we phoned the C.O.B.E. and told him that we needed to handle both cases. He was kind of confused, but said we would discuss it at the next meeting. At the next elders' meeting, the C.O.B.E.'s best friend said he didn't see why our committee was trying to force itself onto both cases. We explained how they intertwined and he said "Then let's form a new committee for both cases. I want to be on that committee."

That was silly, we already met with the young lady and we were the new committee that should meet with both. If a brand new committee was chosen, the young lady would have to confess all over again. All of the elders, except for the C.O.B.E. and his best friend, agreed that we should not put her through that. The C.O.B.E. already said he would not vote on the matter, so it really only left his friend disagreeing with us.

The elders could not understand why he wanted to be on the judicial committee on both cases. Finally, he blurted out that he needed to be on the young man's committee and would just have to be on both to do that. He actually admitted that he wanted to know what happened and needed to be on that committee to know just that. After blurting that out, every elder (even the C.O.B.E.) basically said to give it up and let the first committee handle the matter.

So our committee did handle both cases- they both turned out to be confessions with no further witnesses called in. The young man was simply involved in heavy petting with a girl at the party (considered the sin of "loose conduct"). It seemed such a waste of time to worry about all the possibilities when it all turned out as it did. One rule for these matters is that committees divulge no details to the other elders outside of the committee. We simply inform them that the members were repentant of the stated sins of which they were accused. The C.O.B.E.'s friend wanted us to tell him all the details but we knew the policy and told him nothing.

I stopped to wonder why the experienced elders didn't simply put the C.O.B.E.'s friend on one judicial committee to deal with both matters at the start. The experienced elder that worked on our committee told me that they were hoping to isolate the two cases from each other to minimize any gossip about the C.O.B.E.'s son knowing about the young lady being involved in sex at a party. That way, they hoped to keep the young man's reputation cleaner since his father was an important elder. The young lady was fairly unimportant to them as her family was not "connected" in any way.

I learned from that case and from observing the experienced elders afterward that the elders would protect their own families

beyond the normal help extended to others. Sometimes, elders would even meet with their own families involved in Watch Tower-defined sins and dismiss the case without forming a judicial committee, but would not extend that same kindness to others.

I decided that I would extend that kindness to anyone in the congregation, connected or not, always if I could do so. We were supposed to kindly help people, so I would. If I were ever put on an "investigative committee" (two elders who gather information to see if a judicial committee of three was needed) I would almost always squash the matter. I would simply say that the person realized their wrong and we could inform the C.O.B.E. that there was no need to investigate further. If I were to become aware of Watch Tower-defined sin on my own (without another elder's knowledge) I would counsel the person myself and not even tell anyone about it. That's what the elders were doing for their families in my congregation and that's what I did for anyone.

My best friend, Rich, lost one of his biggest cleaning jobs when the client went bankrupt. He was single with no backup plan, but with nothing tying him down. Almost immediately, he moved to rural Kentucky where his father helped him get a job in the auto repair business. I wondered if moving away was the necessary thing to do. I continued praying. Well, an answer came. My dad, Dan Miller made a major effort to help me in my life. He sold me his work van for \$1, knowing it would help me out as my station wagon was on its last legs. He drove it down to visit me and flew back home a few days later. While he was visiting, he told me he might be able to help me back home to get on the St. Louis Fire Department. I wasn't sure if that was the right thing to do. But within days, my mother and her husband, Veronica and Marvin Hall, called me. Marvin said he was expanding his small mail-order business in St. Louis and needed a full time office manager and shipping clerk. He offered me the job. I truly felt that Jehovah was telling me to go to St. Louis. I took the job. Dad suggested that I still apply for the fire department to keep my options open. If the one job didn't work out, I would hopefully have the other. It fit with what I thought were Jehovah's directions so I did as Dad suggested. There would be an exam for the fire department in the early summer of 1995, and I registered to take it. I thought that Tasha would have a hard time with the big move. It would mean moving away from her entire family, but she was just as sure as I was that Jehovah was telling us what to do. We decided that Tasha would continue her job for now and I would move north without her to get established. She would stay with her parents and I would move into my dad's home in St. Louis. The major change would take place in January 1995 as that was when Marvin needed me to start work. That gave me a couple of months to wrap things up with my own business. It also kept me insured under Tasha's employer. If all went well, we would only be separate for six to nine months. I was rather surprised at what my Witness friends and fellow elders in the congregation had to say about our decisions to make major changes. "You are seeking material gain ahead of spiritual gain." "Jehovah doesn't approve of husbands and wives separating even for a short time. That allows temptation to creep into the marriage." Gossip of my supposedly troubled marriage started going around. The other elders said that my "qualifications" to serve as an elder would be called into question if Tasha and I lived separately. "It might "stumble" the members to see that one of the elders is separated from his wife." I had already felt that Jehovah had directed my path, so these well-intentioned congregation members confused me. Was Jehovah directing my decisions that were already made or were they my decisions against His will and He was directing others to point that out? Since I could not be sure, I figured that the original decisions were made prayerfully and that I had already given my word to my step-father, Marvin, that I would be there in January. I told congregation members that everything was fine in my marriage and that serving Jehovah was foremost in my plans. I figured that maybe they needed to pray a bit more and stop sharing their personal opinions as if they were God's will. I told the other elders that I knew the rules. If I moved out of the congregation, I would no longer be one of the congregation elders, so they didn't need to be concerned about my "stumbling" other members. They actually admired my standing up to them and their concerns without backing down, so they said they understood that I was doing what was best for my family and would write a letter of recommendation that I be reappointed as an elder in my new congregation in St. Louis. I actually was not that worried about such a

reappointment. Let me insert another lesson in how things work within the congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses. Elders and ministerial servants are appointed by the organization, but only in their local congregation. If one changes congregations, the elders in the new congregation can consider whether to reappoint him or not. Every member of a congregation has a file called his "publisher's record" that keeps track of how many hours he serves in the recruiting work. Anytime the publisher's record is forwarded to a new congregation, the old congregation elders write a "letter of introduction" about the member and his family to accompany it. The member is never supposed to see the letter, so the elders feel free to write everything good or everything bad they have to say. The letter will mention how eager to volunteer the member is, how often his family members miss an occasional meeting, how the members can or cannot be counted on in some situations, how well they comment at the Watch Tower study, even how well their children behave at the Kingdom Hall during meetings. In the case of elders and ministerial servants, the letter can make the difference in whether they are reappointed or not. I had started enjoying being an elder. Tasha and I got invited to more gatherings than before I was an elder. We visited several different congregations where I would give the public talk then we would be treated to lunch with the members. We got to meet many more Witnesses this way. The congregation I was in had plenty of elders, so the work load was spread around. Mainly, they expected me to lead a group out in the recruiting work every weekend and on some weekdays. Remaining an elder was not my main concern with this move. I figured that if Jehovah thought I was doing a good job and was needed, I would be reappointed. If I wasn't reappointed, then Jehovah was telling me to serve him in other ways, like going back to cleaning the toilets or mowing the lawn. I also knew that I had never really donated much money in the congregation and money was always a problem. I thought that maybe Jehovah wanted me to get a better job and a better living so I could donate more money to the congregation and to the worldwide work of recruiting.

In January, I made the move. I lived under my father's roof because he had plenty of room. I commuted to my mother's home where Marvin had established his mail-order business. For now, we would be working out of the home and shipping out of the garage until the business could support a move to larger facilities. This move meant that I saw both of my parents on a daily basis. Even though I had been married four years and my suicide attempt was eight years behind me, I felt that my father and Marvin handled me with kid gloves. They tended to avoid controversy with me. I can't quite relay the essence of what I felt, but I was sure that they thought about my delicate past and my choices of how to deal with it by becoming one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Neither really talked directly about it, but both seemed rather surprised that the Witnesses would appoint me as a spiritual advisor in their ranks. I felt this from them, but that little voice was once again whispering instead of screaming that something was wrong. My mother was just thrilled that I was an elder in the Witnesses. My little voice was drowned out by her glee. _____

I decided as a transition, I would go to the same congregation and Kingdom Hall that my mother attended. Witnesses are supposed to go to their local congregation assigned to the neighborhood in which they live. Often, more than one congregation meets in a Kingdom Hall at different times. They all have the neighborhoods divided up into territories that they recruit within. It's very organized so they can find more people to wake up on Saturday mornings. I had met the members at Mom's congregation on visits before, and I felt I would be more comfortable around Witnesses that knew me and her. I also felt that Tasha and I would meet new people in a new congregation together when she arrived later that year, so that's when I would go within my assigned territory.

I had visited different congregations while giving talks as an elder. I met many different members from different areas at conventions of Jehovah's Witnesses every year. This was the first time I actually "belonged" to a different congregation. I got to experience how each congregation tends to have a different spirit about it. Mom's congregation was in an upscale neighborhood and the members tended to drive minivans and large sedans that were never more than two years old. They didn't spend all their free time together. Many would only see each other at the Kingdom Hall and led semi-private lives.

The congregation members that did get out on Saturday for "preaching" did enjoy a long break in the late morning after an hour of the door-to-door work. They seemed to live for that break and the knocking on doors was just a necessary chore before the reward of gathering at a local breakfast restaurant named "Seven Brothers." The name is kind of ironic because the "brothers" would never be late at Seven Brothers, the "sisters" neither.

Jehovah's Witnesses refer to each other as "Brother" or "Sister" followed by their last name. I was not "Alan" or "Mr. Miller," I was always "Brother Miller" to the other members. It helps them to claim that nobody is elevated in status above anybody else. Even a Governing Body member would be "Brother Smith" without a further title. This is supposed to make everyone feel like one big happy family, but it always creeped me out. Many members were so used to it that they would let it slip in when introducing themselves to strangers in the door-to-door work. "Good morning, I am Susan and with me today is Brother Miller. We are bringing you good news from the Bible." If the householder didn't think Jehovah's Witnesses were a cult before such a call, he would tend to think so after such a statement. I tended to call people by their first names when I could, but during meetings I had to use the cumbersome title like everyone else.

The elders at Mom's congregation read my letter of recommendation that came with my publisher's record. They asked me how long I would stay in that congregation and I told them "No more than nine months." They decided not to officially appoint me as an elder as that would have to be approved through the organization and then I would move away. But they were glad to have me there and asked if I would take talk assignments as an elder while there. I accepted, still figuring that's what Jehovah was directing me to do. Mom was so proud when I would take the platform in front of her congregation.

Soon, six months had gone by. Marvin's move to larger facilities had made no actual process. It was still just him and me shipping out of the garage. I wasn't so sure that the business could make the growth jump to sustain anything larger, but the work was steady. I did take the St. Louis Firefighter Exam and since it takes at least a few years of waiting for openings in the department, I felt that was a very wise move. This job might not be the goldmine Marvin thought it could become. Things were stable enough that I asked Tasha to move to join me at my dad's home during the summer. It wasn't the exact plan we originally had where I would get us an apartment before she joined me in St. Louis, but we did it anyway. We really missed each other.

She gave her two weeks notice at the hospital and was able to extend her health insurance for six months past her employment, so we had that time to get our act together in our new location. I hadn't always been insured (and wasn't at this point) but I felt it important to keep my wife covered with health insurance. I am proud to say that every single day of our marriage, she has been covered. I trusted Jehovah to watch out for me, but I just felt it was irresponsible not to have coverage for my family. I guess I let my true self sneak in and listened to the little whispering voice on a thing or two.

With Tasha settled in with me, we went to the local Kingdom Hall on Sunday together to meet our new congregation, the third one in my years and only the second one ever in all of Tasha's years as a Witness. The neighborhood was in the heart of the city, a working class neighborhood. The Kingdom Hall was a building perhaps thirty to forty years old, very small, and as we walked in it was very crowded.

First impressions mean a lot to people. Tasha and I were getting our first impression and these people were getting their first impression of us. I suppose they and we had mixed feelings. We were meeting people before the meeting started and the place was so

crowded. People didn't automatically assume we were together as everyone was pressed against everyone. Many ladies saw a new young brother (I was thirty-one at the time) and wanted to meet him. Apparently, brothers were in short supply here. One woman, not wasting any time, introduced herself and said her marital status in the same breath; "Hi, I am Sister Sally Simpson and I am available for marriage." That threw me off more than just a bit. I actually reached my arm through the crowd and leaned far over enough to grab Tasha and pulled her next to me before I said, "Hi, I am Brother Alan Miller and this is my wife, Sister Tasha Miller." I didn't want any misunderstandings. It seemed that every lady I met reached out to my left hand to see my ring finger. Good thing a ring was there. I guess if they were married themselves, they were looking for an available man for their daughter or their sister or their friends.

Beyond that first impression, the congregation was lively and friendly. I didn't let being initially overwhelmed cause any premature judgments. I may have made a bad first impression on some members after the meeting. Sister Joyce Howard, a single lady, came up to Tasha and me and introduced herself and invited us to lunch. She was having the visiting elder who gave the public talk and his family over to her home for lunch and said there was plenty of room for us. We accepted. As it turned out, there must have been fifteen people in Joyce's home for lunch. Everyone except the elder and his family were from the local congregation. Someone asked me if Tasha and I were searching all the congregations nearby to find one we felt comfortable with and settle into. I answered, "No, we live right down the street. Even if we feel uncomfortable here, we're going to keep coming back to you all." Joyce laughed and understood I was just being humorous. Joyce would wind up being our very best friend in the congregation. But my little comment was heard around the entire room and it would get around. Some kind of gossip started going around that I didn't like the people here, but stayed anyway. So much for first impressions. Jehovah's Witnesses can be such back-stabbing petty people.

At the next meeting, Tasha and I met with a couple of elders and arranged for the congregation secretary to get our publishers' records forwarded. They would need Tasha's records from down south at our original congregation and mine from my mother's congregation. The letter of introduction from our original congregation and any other letter about me that Mom's congregation might have chosen to add would come with my publisher's record. While I had never seen it, I knew the letter was favorable, recommending me as an elder, and Mom's congregation should have had good things to say about me as well. The elders didn't ask if I had any "privileges" at my previous congregations ("privileges" means titles and responsibilities) so I didn't say that I had been an elder. I wasn't withholding information, they simply never asked. I just figured they would wait to see that letter before asking any further questions. It was very quick and informal. I didn't even know that it was another misunderstood first impression from the elders that would be compounded by the first impression from the congregation members I met at Joyce Howard's home.

More than three months went by since our move to this congregation without another word said about our transfer. While they were cordial at the meetings, the elders never approached me with any requests for me to take on responsibilities of any kind. Joyce Howard took us under her wings and helped us learn that the congregation was divided into various cliques. The groups were not cold to each other, they did intermix, but they tended to always separate, mostly into black or white cliques and young and not-so-young cliques. Many of them were extended family groups. Joyce said she had many gatherings at her home and always invited people from the various cliques. She said the congregation wasn't sure where to fit us in. She didn't know for sure what the elders thought of me, but she knew that they believed a man with less than ten years "in the truth" should not be an elder. She guessed that the elders probably were watching me to see if I was humble, having been appointed an elder so early on in another congregation. She said they might have been waiting to see if I was expecting an automatic reappointment. I was really not concerned about it and enjoyed the break. I had no talk assignments and didn't have to help with the microphones during meetings or distribute the literature afterward, things that most brothers called privileges. I would have been happy if things stayed that way.

Tasha and I were assigned to a book study meeting just up the street from my dad's house held in an elder's home. As explained in Chapter 1, the book study meetings were divided into smaller groups that would meet in someone's home. Your book study overseer is supposed to be your primary "shepherd," the one who is aware of your spiritual situation and ready to help you in any way he can. He also will tell the other elders anything they want to know about you when they meet and discuss who to appoint with privileges or who needs some kind of help. Our book study overseer, Brother Arnez, hadn't asked us anything about ourselves nor ever discussed anything beyond polite greetings. His reason, unknown to me at the time, was that he was about to leave the religion entirely, also leaving his wife and children. He was possibly severely depressed and ready to move away and disappear. Rumors would go around that he had a brain tumor that caused him to "flip out." The rumor would come with, "Why else would a man with such a wonderful spiritual family, a beautiful wife, and spiritual privileges walk away from all that?" I never saw him again, so I won't speculate further than to repeat what the gossipers were saying about him. I do know that his family heard from him a couple of times, so he wasn't dead.

One evening, Tasha and I walked to the book study. It was the very evening when Brother Arnez had just disappeared. There was no elder to start the meeting. The ministerial servant who could have filled in for him was running late and was not there either. I was the only adult baptized male in the room, but there were twelve women and children there. I knew procedure; any "brother" can conduct the meeting when no elders or ministerial servants are on hand. So when the time arrived to start the meeting, I stepped up in front of everybody and said we would start. The ministerial servant's wife said that her husband would arrive soon so maybe we could just wait. All the ladies, not really knowing me that well, insisted that we wait. I hope I have made it clear by now that the Jehovah's Witnesses organization is run by men, not women. I wasn't about to listen to the insistence of a room full of women. I told everyone that we would start now, on time, and it wasn't up for discussion. The ministerial servant didn't show up for another twenty minutes. By then, the meeting was running smoothly and I just continued to run things. He didn't say anything.

The next time at the Kingdom Hall, everything changed for me. The coordinator of the elders and the congregation secretary insisted on speaking with me after the meeting. Suddenly, I wasn't just some guy sitting quietly in his seat during meetings never bothering anyone. They said they heard about my conducting the book study meeting and wanted to know why I would "take over like that." I told them that any baptized "brother" should do the same because Jehovah would expect it. They told me they heard I didn't like the congregation and that I had mentioned something when I first arrived. They actually knew about my comment at Joyce Howard's home and briefly tried to explain what that rumor had grown into. I could barely remember the joke, but I explained how it was just a joke, and said they should have asked me directly about it instead of feeding into gossip and rumors. They asked if I had gone around telling others that I was an elder in my previous congregation. I said that Joyce was our friend, so Tasha and I said something to her, but I could not recall mentioning it to anyone else. They wanted to know why I wouldn't mention it. I said that such "bragging" of privileges was not really what I was about. "Nobody is better than anybody else, so what difference does it make?" It seemed like they wanted to hang me for either telling people my status or for withholding it from people. There was no pleasing them.

They changed subjects and asked why a couple of my monthly field service reports had such low hours. (I had reported one hour of recruiting for the month when Tasha and I both arrived in this congregation, Tasha probably reported two hours that month.) I said that I had to get Tasha moved and settled in, and I had to work extra hours on the following weekend to make up for the time off from work I took to move her. They even asked about why I was living in the home of my "unbelieving" father. I think I stopped short of saying, "What's it to you?" Instead, I took a deep breath and explained my circumstances that brought me here. For all I knew, Jehovah wanted these men to help me. They were supposed to be appointed by His spirit after all. There was no point in being short with Jehovah's questions through them.

I didn't know it at the time, but that meeting with the elders was my interview to see if they wanted to recommend me for reappointment as an elder. I was so mad at the way they made it seem that I said the wrong things or tried to take authority that wasn't mine. When the circuit overseer visited the congregation, he wanted to know all about this meeting I had with the elders. I still didn't know it was an interview and this was his follow-up interview. I just supposed they complained to him about what a troublemaker I was, but he seemed pleased that I would stand up to them. Shortly after talking to the circuit overseer, the same elders came up to me and asked me to accept an appointment as an elder. I told them I had to think about it. They couldn't figure why in the world I would have to think about it, so I told them I wasn't so sure if I could serve with them after the way they questioned me. They suddenly became different people and apologized for any harsh treatment in the past and said they really understood how fully tested I was and how I would make a great elder. Once again, that little voice in my head was only whispering to me, "Don't do it, enjoy the reduction in responsibilities." I ignored the voice and saw the appointment as directions from Jehovah. I said I would do it. An announcement was made at the next weeknight meeting that "Brother Alan Miller has been appointed as an elder in the congregation." It was received with genuine surprise. With Brother Arnez gone, there were five other elders with whom I would serve. One of them approached me privately later and told me that only two elders wanted to appoint me, but the circuit overseer talked them into it because I didn't back down to pressure from questions nor would I apologize for doing what I knew was right. The circuit overseer said we needed men who weren't scared yes-men. Apparently, he was tired of the ass-kissers with their green handshakes expecting a title. I told that elder I would have been fine if they hadn't changed their vote.

That whole experience early on in this St. Louis working-class neighborhood congregation allowed me to start developing views contrary to the ones I was expected to automatically accept as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Before this move, I felt that Jehovah truly directed the congregations to appoint the men best suited to run the congregations. I felt that Jehovah guided the men after their appointment to best serve the members. (I had already started to overlook how the elders showed favoritism to their families.) Now I was starting to think that the men are directed by opinions on how to apply the rules of other men, God was perhaps barely involved. I reflected on the uneasy feeling my father and stepfather had toward my own being an elder. What if they were right? Just eight years prior, I self-destructed and put a gun in my mouth. Now I was taking the lead in telling others how to get their life in order. Did I really know how to do that? Instead of God putting the best men in place, it was possible that the Watch Tower organization and its men just looked for more men following the rules, more yes-men.

It was confusing to wonder these things. The circuit overseer recommended my appointment against such logic. I wasn't a yes-man but was appointed. The little voice in my head didn't know what to say. It suggested that the circuit overseer only wanted me to be appointed because my record indicated that I was a good company man about doing the Watch Tower's assignments despite my not backing down to pressure. It was just a reappointment, not a new appointment. Whatever I thought it was I gave Jehovah and Watch Tower the benefit of the doubt. My little voice didn't want to address the thought that I was unqualified. Years later, I think I have it figured out. I was reappointed because the circuit overseer recognized that had I not been made an elder again, I probably would have been fine never being an elder and sharing the work load. I would have been quite content to kick back in a less active roll of just being there and cleaning the toilets after the meetings instead of shepherding the flock and taking a share in various assignments. I would have purged myself of any desire to be an elder at some later point.

So I made the best of it and served the congregation. Despite my ability to stand up for myself, I really was another company man doing their bidding. I just wasn't a totally spineless yes-man. I spoke up at elders' meetings when decisions had to be made, but I

always bowed to the majority like I was told was the theocratic way.

1995, that same year, a huge change took place that would allow me to seriously question the truth of the organization. Again, this book is not about doctrine, so I won't try to fully explain it. When the end of the world didn't come in 1975, the members were still reminded that it would come soon. They were taught that Jesus promised that all the events in the last days before Armageddon would take place within the lifetime of one generation. The Watch Tower explained that one generation was the people born no later than 1914. They continued strongly teaching that and reminding members the end would certainly come in the twentieth century. Well, that generation of people was getting pretty old and the end had not arrived eighty-one years later. There were only five years left of the twentieth century. Watch Tower would have to address that sooner or later so they chose to change their doctrine in 1995.

They put a couple of paragraphs in a study article of the WATCH TOWER magazine about how Jesus didn't mean what Watch Tower leaders had been saying he meant all these years, but obviously Jesus meant something else. It wasn't an admission that they were just as wrong as they were about 1975 or any other previous failed prophecy/prediction. It was more like it had come to their attention that they can be more right with this new understanding than they previously were. The end of this system would come right on schedule, but we just don't know quite when it is. It read like the new understanding was so logical and easy to follow. In reality, it was using a wild definition for the word "generation" and it was very difficult to understand.

When I studied the doctrine originally, it was heavily stressed that Watch Tower's teaching about the nearness of the end was not wrong. Now, I saw that they were avoiding the word "wrong" but they were still saying that their previous understanding was not right. Some of the members were quite excited about this change, this "new light" as most changes were called. They brought it to my attention and asked what I thought of it. I asked the other more experienced elders about it and was amazed that they simply thought it was no big deal. "They change things sometimes."

Well, the day comes when we studied the magazine article in the Kingdom Hall on Sunday. The paragraphs with this huge change in doctrine were covered just like any other paragraphs. The paragraphs were read aloud, the questions at the bottom of the page were asked, and someone answered them. That was it. In less than ten minutes, we were supposed to all change our long held beliefs that we were told were coming from Jehovah through Jesus through the Bible and believe something completely different from now on. (An interesting add-on thought is that this same doctrine about the "generation" Jesus spoke of was changed again in 2008 and slightly modified in 2010.)

I had been allowing the Watch Tower literature and lectures to prevent me from thinking for myself for all those years up until the time those paragraphs were studied. That ended the very moment it was breezed over in the Kingdom Hall like it was just another change. I didn't abandon doing what was expected of me. I didn't say anything to anybody about my new freedom to question things and think for myself, but I was not the same lemming willing to run right off the cliff if the other members did so. The words, "They change things sometimes" spoken by a fellow elder stuck with me. I had expected the end of the world to arrive so soon ever since I first embraced the doctrines of Jehovah's Witnesses, but now I knew it would possibly not come in my lifetime. I had taken the fire department exam already that summer and now I was glad I did. I had never counted on retiring before Armageddon. I knew I was going to have to change my priorities.

I will summarize the time from late 1995 to 2000 as it was just a series of big changes. I didn't get on at the fire department right away. The mail-order business with my stepfather, Marvin, didn't work out. There wasn't enough business. I went through a couple of jobs until I found a position in the laboratory of a printing ink company. It paid okay and it was a regular Monday through Friday job. Tasha also went through a few jobs as she was able to land administrative positions, but the companies would always restructure and eliminate staff without college degrees. She decided to start getting a degree. We had moved out of Dad's house to an apartment, but later, moved to a studio apartment to try to afford Tasha's part-time education and our changing employment situation.

I hate to use the term now, but one thing I did "religiously" was to go to the gym and workout every weekday morning before work. Tasha often went with me and would study her college classes while walking the treadmill. I was doing that to make sure I would be ready to pass the physical test for the St. Louis Fire Department when I finally got the call. I ran three to four miles a day and used the weight machines. I had ninety minutes before I had to hit the showers and get to work. I knew that the other elders would be critical of my dedication to this workout and my "secular goal" of getting on at the fire department. (Jehovah's Witnesses refer to things that are not related to one's spirituality as "secular" with a negative connotation.) I simply didn't tell them about it. If I had, they would have told me how I could have used ninety minutes a day to "preach the good news." Despite the changes in doctrine that indicated otherwise, they would have said the end was so close that I shouldn't bother seeking a career.

Eventually, Tasha had to miss some evening meetings at the Kingdom Hall in order to attend evening classes. The other elders finally asked what Tasha and I had planned for our future. I told them how she wanted a degree to aid in keeping employment and I was hoping to get on the fire department. Some of the elders said that the rotating schedule of a firefighter would cause me to miss meetings myself, and Tasha was missing them now. They said they might have to ask me to stop being an elder if I ever got that job. I remember my exact answer to that, "You guys do whatever you feel is necessary, so will I."

They never did ask me to stop being an elder. I got on at the fire department in 2000, just before my thirty-sixth birthday. My running and exercising every morning made the difference in passing the exam. I did start missing some meetings because of my firefighter schedule, but I retained my position as an elder. Tasha got her bachelor's degree a few years later and decided that she loved learning, so she continued to work but continued her education until she had a master's degree in education and now works as an elementary school teacher. I will back up a bit in the next chapter to before Tasha got her bachelor's and master's degree. All these major changes taught me to start thinking for myself, but that was just the beginning of my "unbecoming" a Witness.

One incident I must include from that period involved my best friend Rich, who moved to rural Kentucky when he needed work. I continued to be great friends with Rich. Tasha and I traveled on long weekends to visit him. I was the best man at his wedding. When he gave his first public talk as a ministerial servant, I was there. As a matter of fact, Tasha and I stayed a whole week and I gave the public talk at his Kingdom Hall the following Sunday.

One day, Rich called me and told me that a judicial committee had disfellowshipped him. He said that he had a habit of viewing pornography and had confessed his problem to the elders years ago and that they had been occasionally asking him if he had overcome this problem. He always said that he was fine. Recently, he confessed to still viewing pornography a few times over the past years. I asked him how he could have been disfellowshipped if he came forward with a confession without being caught. That seemed like full repentance to me. He said that part of the reason was that he had denied the problem a few times, and had accepted the assignments of a ministerial servant without confessing then.

I suggested that he appeal his disfellowshipping- a way to ask for a different set of elders from outside of his own congregation to look into the case and possibly overturn the decision if they saw things differently. As an elder, I saw good reasons why impartial elders might just overturn his disfellowshipping. Rich said that he just wanted to accept his discipline and get things right with Jehovah. Being disfellowshipped meant that his family and friends and all the Jehovah's Witnesses (except his wife) would have to shun him until such time as the congregation reinstated him. I told him that as his best friend, I would never shun him. I offered to stay in complete contact with him. Rich said that might jeopardize my remaining as an elder and that if his own elders knew about it, they might delay reinstating him. I understood and wished him well and said I was expecting a call from him some months later when we could resume communications. He was reinstated about 8 months later and transferred to a Spanish Language congregation shortly after that (where he is still currently serving as a ministerial servant once again). In Chapter 9, it will be clear why this incident was mentioned. I will also refer to this incident in Chapter 10 for another reason.

Chapter 9

Independent Thinking Leads to Apostasy

My faith in Jehovah and the Jehovah's Witnesses was pretty weak by the time I started working as a firefighter. I was doing my assignments as an elder, giving talks at the Kingdom Hall, and doing the recruiting work, trying to encourage others and offer counsel when people were not giving their best effort to Jehovah. It was more than a little hypocritical since I wasn't really giving my best. I decided to give Jehovah one more chance to show me that the Witnesses had "the truth," and at the same time I would try to give my best. I decided to become a pioneer in 2002, as explained in Chapter 1, a pioneer is a member that engages in the religious recruiting work for seventy or more hours per month. Despite the rotating schedule of a firefighter causing me to miss meetings at the Kingdom Hall, it did allow me to have regular weekday time to get out and knock on doors and distribute literature.

So I pioneered for a year. I talked to people of all kinds of faiths, beliefs, and disbeliefs. While I enjoyed that aspect of the work, I saw that most pioneers were only interested in getting their seventy hours of time in every month, not so much in relating to the people they talked to. People always had objections to Jehovah's Witnesses or to the Bible. Pioneers were just out to give canned answers to their objections, leave literature with people, ask for donations, and move on to do the same at the next home. They even have a book they carry that is loaded with "conversation stoppers" and answers to common objections. I wasn't much different than any other pioneer until I got to work more and more with one particular pioneer, Herman Wilson.

Herman got his time in, but it wasn't his focus. If an elderly person needed help carrying groceries or if people wanted to talk about their beliefs, Herman was there for them. Instead of instantly trying to get people to accept his view, Herman respected and listened to their thoughts. That's what they told us we were supposed to do at the training sessions at the Kingdom Hall, but virtually all of the demonstrations ended with leaving some piece of printed literature with the public, as the literature was supposed to answer all their questions. Herman enjoyed the fact that different people had different beliefs and wasn't quick to simply leave literature with them. I already knew Herman quite well. Our body of elders had been trying to get him to become an elder himself. He would have none of that. He wasn't interested in all that pressure to get the prestige. He just wanted to help people. I started emulating that attitude.

I really listened to people when I took Watch Tower literature to them. But it didn't feel like Jehovah's spirit was with me to do this; it felt more like I was enjoying myself instead of distributing the literature despite the spirit. I started having serious questions about doctrine from listening to people, so I would go to the library on a regular basis and read what some historians or theologians had to say. My rigid view that the Watch Tower had everything right was long gone. I fully saw that there were many different ways to view

the writings of the Bible. Still, I couldn't let go so easily. Watch Tower taught me that Satan was crafty and Watch Tower doctrines still seemed to be the only ones that made the entire Bible (as I knew it) to fit together like a properly completed jigsaw puzzle. I still feared letting go of my beliefs.

One day out in recruiting, I was finally able to let go of my fear of letting go. I was in the door-to-door literature distribution work with an older "sister" from the congregation. It was my turn to speak to the next "householder," what Witnesses call the people who answer the doors. A man in his fifties answered, totally answering to the stereotypical description of a hippy left over from the 1960's. His now-gray hair was down to his waist, with a bandana trying to hide the bald spot. He had various tattoos on his arms and a jean jacket with some kind of American flags patched here and there. I don't remember our conversation exactly, but he asked if God was so vain that He expected me to spend all my time praising Him in this door-to-door work, and if God wouldn't forgive all the ignorant masses out there for never believing the message of these strange Jehovah's Witnesses that come to their door with nice printed hand-outs. He went on to say that he felt that if Armageddon was truly so imminent, that God would do better than just deliver the warning with a few million nicely dressed nuts knocking on doors with literature that hardly anyone was likely to read, but God would have billboards, television and radio commercials, or maybe even deliver the word through some actual miracle. He asked how many Witnesses were spreading the word in Muslim parts of the world and whether Jehovah would really kill the children there for faithfully believing what their parents taught them. I knew the pat answers to his questions, but I was enthralled with his mannerisms and his way of free-thinking. I really didn't think he was wrong. Even the "sister" with me had nothing to add and enjoyed his philosophic view of everything.

After that encounter, I knew that God's Holy Spirit wasn't telling me to preach the word of Jehovah's Witnesses as a pioneer. Yet I still wouldn't let go all at once. I had only let go of the fear of questioning, but still retained the idea that I needed to give Jehovah a full chance to prove Himself to me. At the end of the first year of pioneering, Witnesses are sent to a two-week school to learn how to be better pioneers. It's supposed to be a huge honor to have gone to pioneer school. I went with the intention of quitting the pioneer work at the end of the school if Jehovah didn't change my mind.

The school seemed to contradict everything that I learned while working with Herman Wilson. It seemed to try reinforcing the idea that the preaching work (that I refer to as recruiting) was the absolute most important work in the world. It was supposed to be more important than helping the elderly or the needy. They taught us to listen to people, but only long enough to know how to place literature in their hands, and then get them to study the literature. They taught us to push for a commitment from people or else to just move along to new people. It also seemed that while they were saying that helping people was the most important aspect of pioneering, it was just lip service. In reality, time and productivity were really most important.

There was only one thing I really got out of those two weeks. While I did quit pioneering, I remembered that they encouraged us to consider moving to a location where we could be more useful. We could do that by moving to rural areas to help congregations there, or by transferring to foreign language congregations. Still thinking that Jehovah was possibly trying to reach me through the Watch Tower organization, I decided that might be His directions to me. Because of my job in the fire department, we couldn't move out to a rural area, but Tasha always wanted to go to an American Sign Language (ASL) congregation and she already spoke nearly fluent ASL (and I spoke virtually none). We were looking to buy a house, so we moved closer to the Kingdom Hall where the ASL congregation met.

In 2003, Tasha and I were in a new house. She finished her bachelor's degree and started working on her master's degree and we had transferred to the ASL congregation. I still hadn't shared with Tasha (or anyone else) that I was having severe doubts about Jehovah's Witnesses having "the truth" and how this move was really Jehovah's last chance to win me back. I did figure that since I would miss some meetings for my work schedule and since I didn't know the language, the elders at the ASL congregation would not ask me to be an elder. Well, I was wrong. They asked immediately, saying I would probably learn the language faster if I were an elder because of all the talk assignments at the meetings. If I was giving Jehovah His last chance, I had to be fully willing to follow whatever guidance He might be sending to me, so I agreed to serve as an elder.

The elders were right. I did learn the language a whole lot faster by having to deliver many short talks in the mid-week meetings. I didn't get any breaks by coming to this congregation. But the entirety of every meeting was spent paying attention to the words being said in a different language. I was so focused on learning the words and putting the sentences together when I was paying attention at the meetings that the repetitive message of Jehovah's Witnesses was not sinking into my head. In other words, I was in a dangerous mind-control cult but I was not focusing on the repetitive indoctrination that was necessary to keep members in fear of breaking away from it. I actually noticed that I didn't instantly come up with "Jehovah's Witness" sayings when asked questions by coworkers or people I encountered in the recruiting work.

Despite my mind's new freedom to think for itself, and despite my doubts in the doctrines of the Watch Tower organization, I continued to do a good job as an elder. Soon, I was giving forty-five minute public talks in ASL and was traveling to nearby cities to give those talks. I knew things were wrong in this religion, but I still felt that the members were sincere good people. I felt that maybe thinking for oneself wasn't all that important for everyone. I knew that I had enjoyed letting the Watch Tower organization do all my thinking for me when I thought God was guiding the organization. I had no outside friends, just friendly coworkers that often invited me to join them in social gatherings. But as an alcoholic and one of Jehovah's Witnesses, I felt out of place when I tried to go. Even though this was Jehovah's last chance to prove Himself to me, I wasn't getting any real reasons to leave. I figured that I needed to remain a Witness. That seemed to be the real answer to my prayers. The Watch Tower organization may not be perfect, but I thought I needed the structure and guidance.

Toward the end of 2005, I went to an elders' school. These schools took place every three or four years on a weekend. They were designed to look like spiritual training, but were mainly procedural training. At this particular school, they reminded us that elders' sins could be overlooked if the sins were considered small so they could remain elders. The details of the training focused on specifics about viewing pornography. Apparently, many elders were being removed because of internet pornography. This training was a big reminder that often, the elders gave preferential treatment to their own families and to themselves. I thought about Rich, my best friend. If I were to confess to viewing pornography as he did, the other elders might just bend over backwards to find loopholes to let me remain as an elder. But I knew that any non-elders that confessed to viewing pornography would face a judicial committee as Rich did.

The school made me wonder if remaining a Witness was not the answer to my prayers. I had one major thing holding me back. Eighteen years prior, I had convinced myself that Jehovah directly intervened in my suicide attempt and led me to the Witnesses. I lived with that thought. It became part of me. I never really got any serious counseling about why I put that gun to my head or why I didn't pull the trigger. At that point, I had never read a single psychology book or sought any professional help. I started dwelling on the incident. I decided that it wasn't God who didn't pull the trigger, but it was me. Somehow, that didn't comfort me.

If "the truth" was a lie, then all the beliefs that I had developed would need to be thrown away. It would mean that God didn't intervene in my suicide attempt. He had not given me a higher purpose. I wasn't high on His priority list. I wasn't serving Him by peddling WATCH TOWER magazines.

It wasn't just that He had not placed high value in me, I also felt devalued. I didn't fully understand it at the time, but I put myself between a rock and a hard place. I only saw two options: blame God for taking me at my most vulnerable moment and leading me into the Watch Tower organization, or remove God from the field and take blame for myself for being duped into the religion. As I faced reality, my mind put me back at the very moment after I put the gun down. Since I could not decide which of those two options to choose, I wallowed in each one of them. I was mad at God and mad at myself. I needed Him as my scapegoat just to keep from feeling worse about myself. I was more depressed when I decided that God wasn't there for me.

One thing I had learned as the internet became more common was that you could find anything on the computer. I made travel plans regularly on the internet. I would research information for my talks at the Kingdom Hall on the internet. There was a whole library of Sign Language videos available when I didn't know how to say a word, or even when I just wanted to remember the name of a song or an actor, I used a search engine and found the answer right away. So it was only natural that I would eventually search "Jehovah's Witnesses" on the internet.

The whole world changed for me with the click of a mouse button. If I had still been in an English language congregation, I might have remembered all the assemblies where "the evils of the internet" were highlighted. Watch Tower did not ban the internet from members, but tried to demonize researching anything about the Watch Tower on the internet. They said that a bunch of bitter apostates were out there serving Satan. Oh, I knew that message, but I wasn't scared anymore.

The dictionary definition of "apostasy" includes abandonment of one's faith or rebelling against it. The Watch Tower definition of "apostasy" is a bit different. In their elder's manual, PAY ATTENTION TO YOURSELVES AND ALL THE FLOCK, they call it a sin that involves "action taken against the true worship of Jehovah or his established order among his dedicated people." It would include promoting religious teachings that are opposed to teachings of the Watch Tower, and voicing any opinion at all that is critical of them. Watch Tower elders are instructed not to tolerate any deliberate action that could disrupt the unity of the congregation, or undermine any member's confidence in the doctrines or procedures. Deliberate actions include discussing the religion with former members or reading and viewing any materials they provide. The things I was doing at this point could cause me to get disfellowshipped even without abandoning the practices of Jehovah's Witnesses.

I started reading websites by former Jehovah's Witnesses. They quoted the Watch Tower literature and showed flaws in the literature. I learned how they took printed words found in other journals out of context and also left out important information. I learned that Watch Tower had expected the end of the world not just in 1914 and then in 1975, but also in 1874, 1925, and in the 1940's, and how they had always been saying that Armageddon was imminent. I learned that despite their saying that the United Nations is the image of Satan's organization and would be destroyed, and that Witnesses could be kicked out for involvement in politics, the Watch Tower organization was actually a non-governmental member of the United Nations for nearly a decade. They only withdrew because some members found out about it. Watch Tower not only constantly changed their doctrines, but misleading the members and being hypocritical was their standard mode of operation.

Many websites referred to Watch Tower as a mind-control cult. I looked into that. Probably the biggest help of all to me was finding

information on a psychological condition called cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable tension the mind experiences when trying to hold onto contradicting ideas simultaneously or when one's thoughts and actions and feelings are not all in harmony. I read that the mind attempts to reduce the dissonance by altering something in the ideas or by changing one's behaviors to act in harmony with the strongest ideas. The mind might also invent new thoughts or beliefs to reduce the dissonance.

Any disagreement with the Watch Tower could cause such dissonance. In my case, it was so important that God had directed me to this religion and that joining it was the best decision in the world, that any thoughts that it wasn't true caused a great deal of mental anguish, necessitating that I terminate such thoughts. I grant that I came up with the thought on my own that God personally cared for me and could have directly intervened in events in my life, but studying with Jehovah's Witnesses fed such thoughts. Since the religion I was in agreed with my thoughts, it was only accurate information that stood in the way and caused dissonance. The answer was to keep from looking at accurate information. Combine that with Watch Tower's suggestion that contrary information is from Satan and it turns out that it was not a natural thing to do, but rather a wonder that I ever looked at such information at all. It involved overcoming serious conditioning and serious dissonance.

While I was learning that "the truth" was not the truth, I was still pretty convinced that the people making up Jehovah's Witnesses are good people wanting to do good by others and that the Watch Tower organization was not much of a charity organization, but that they still tried to help their members out in times of need or disaster. I am still convinced that the people are generally good, but not better than the typical people in any group. While there is a mix of personalities and qualities, people tend to come to the aid of others, particularly family or friends.

While living in the southern United States as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, I personally saw how we aided one another after Hurricane Hugo in South Carolina and Hurricane Andrew in Florida. Witnesses, including me, volunteered time and money and hard work to help other Witnesses out. Many donated clothing, food, and even automobiles to their "spiritual brothers and sisters." In the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo, I became an expert at running chain saws to clear downed trees. In the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, I labored under the directions of experts to repair roofs. It was a great feeling to help others.

But by fifteen years later, Watch Tower had learned from the giving spirit of its members how to take advantage of the situation. When the 2004 tsunami hit Asian lands in the Indian Ocean, Watch Tower told its members that what was needed for the "spiritual brothers and sisters" in Asia was not people or canned goods, but money. That sounded logical because we really couldn't ship goods or people over so easily. The members were more than generous and despite the fact that only a handful of Jehovah's Witnesses were affected at all by the disaster, the money poured in. Watch Tower told the members not to earmark their money for the disaster relief effort but just to put it into the general funds of Watch Tower by dropping it in the boxes labeled "Worldwide Work Fund" at their local Kingdom Hall and to let the organization freely spend it on whatever was needed. Apparently, a tax-free organization like Watch Tower has to honor the donations requests of the members when they give to a certain fund, so they had more than enough money for actual disaster relief, but the money kept coming in. Letters read at the local Kingdom Halls about the grand relief effort kept the money going into the general funds. Yes, it was clear that Watch Tower had fully realized what cash-cows disasters could be.

When Hurricane Katrina struck the New Orleans area in 2005, Jehovah's Witnesses were ready to help their "spiritual brothers and sisters" once again. But this time, they knew they could get canned goods and people there. They were ready to rebuild houses or give their used car to a family in need. But Watch Tower had already set a precedent in previous disasters and fine-tuned their

begging during the tsunami relief. The letters started coming out saying "Just send money." Money did indeed get sent. But members in the United States drove down to the disaster area to help out and brought their canned goods and clothing and hammers and chain saws. More letters went out actually chastising the well-meaning efforts and asking that the members work only with Watch Tower's control so that the very best coordinated relief could take place.

In each state, Watch Tower has Regional Building Committees (RBC) that direct the building and remodeling of Kingdom Halls. Watch Tower insisted that members be "approved" by their RBC before going to the disaster area. They said they were particularly looking for plumbers, electricians, and carpenters. They insisted, once again, that the donation of goods ceased and that money was the only thing needed. They still insisted that the money not be earmarked but put into the general fund.

I might have missed how badly Watch Tower had twisted disaster relief into a way to boost revenue if not for personal involvement. In the very late part of 2005, Watch Tower sent out more of those letters asking for money, but also calling for more volunteer Witnesses to go to New Orleans in the winter. They requested that members who could give a week of their time to the relief effort during the winter of early 2006 would be needed to continue rebuilding homes and repairing Kingdom Halls and such. I contacted the RBC to get approval. With Watch Tower, approval not only includes skills but they look at your involvement in the religion, making sure you regularly contribute to the recruiting effort and that your elders speak highly of you. Seeing as I was an elder and had experience with two relief efforts in the past, I was approved and given a date in February to report. I would be taking a bus to New Orleans and it all seemed very coordinated. I put in for vacation from the fire department.

A few days before the date came up, the RBC chairman phoned me. He said that there wasn't enough room on the bus for me. He told me that they still had a huge need for plumbers and electricians and carpenters, and that willing laborers without those skills were being left behind. I told him that I could follow the bus in my own vehicle and could carry three other people and supplies or that I could simply report there on my own. The RBC chairman said there would be no place for me to sleep. I told him that I knew a family in New Orleans and could stay at their home, or I could do as we did in the Hurricane Hugo and Andrew relief efforts- simply roll out a sleeping bag and sleep on the floor of the Kingdom Hall. The RBC chairman said it simply was not allowed. The effort was supposed to be organized this way for specific reasons, although I heard none of those reasons.

He asked me if I could reschedule for another week. I told him I could not change my vacation, especially this late. I also felt that he would probably cancel on me again if they found enough plumbers, electricians, and carpenters to fill the bus so I really didn't want to try to change my vacation. A couple of weeks passed by and this same RBC chairman's wife phoned me. She was still looking for volunteers for another trip. I told her that I had already informed them I wasn't available. She understood then told me what a shame it was that I couldn't make the trip in early February. She told me how she went with her husband on that bus and a few other wives of other RBC workers went also. She told me how their two children went with them on that bus. She said they had a great time meeting people and serving food to the workers and how they spent the last day at a huge picnic. She described a family vacation to me.

I was dumbfounded. I was bumped off the bus to make room for skilled tradesmen despite the fact that I had experience and a strong back. I wasn't planning on going to have a great time or meet people, but to work. That's what I did at the other disaster relief efforts. I was bumped but wives and children of "connected" RBC people were not bumped. They had a huge picnic on the last day (of only seven) instead of spending another day breaking their backs accomplishing some good. This destroyed an illusion in my mind. I fully realized that Watch Tower was not the place for well-meaning people to fully help others out in times of need. It was a place where well-meaning people could be taken advantage of and where people of any privilege could take advantage of that

privilege.

Before I could decide what to do with my newfound information, one more incident helped me to be sure of the problems with the Watch Tower organization. A young lady in the congregation who was raised as one of Jehovah's Witnesses was trying so hard to be everything that she thought Jehovah wanted her to be. She was in her twenties and went into the full-time recruiting work (pioneering) after high school despite many offers of scholarships for track and field. She had not dated at all until recently because the organization told members that dating was only for those contemplating marriage. She tried to stay single and devote her life to serving the organization she thought was God's channel of truth. Finally, she gave in to her heart's desire for a mate because she had met a young man just like herself- fully devoted to the full-time recruiting work and to serving God and His organization, and he had never dated before. Both were in Sign Language congregations and had met at a convention.

This young lady came to me and confessed that she was involved in heavy petting with the young man. It wasn't even sex that the two were involved in, they were both still virgins. Unfortunately, prolonged heavy petting is considered the sin of "loose conduct" among Jehovah's Witnesses and can require a judicial committee to address the violation of the rules. I wanted to tell her to forget about it and just be careful in the future, but it was clear that she felt that she had committed some awful sin against Jehovah and must face the proper discipline in order to be forgiven. So the judicial committee was formed and I was the chairman since she had already confessed to me.

It was a simple case. She confessed when we met with her and the way these things are handled, she would have to step down from her pioneering work since no glorified titles can be retained by sinners (except the elders). She was very embarrassed by the whole situation and was going to be glad it was over. What a shame it wasn't over. Despite her insistence on bringing her terrible sin to Jehovah through the elders, the young lady was already changed by this matter. She was so fragile and didn't want anyone else to know what had happened.

One of the other two elders on the committee felt that we needed to make an example of her to the congregation. He said that there are many young ones just like her that need to know that it is easy to fall victim to our own treacherous hearts when getting involved with the opposite sex. He wanted to announce to the congregation that she was "reproved." That is the Watch Tower term for the discipline that occurs to an individual who was repentant of their sins when they met with a judicial committee. I told the other elder that no such announcement needed to be made. We could announce that she was no longer a pioneer, but to let the congregation draw their own conclusions as to why that was so. An "announcement of reproof" is only necessary when the matter is widely known.

The other elder said that the matter could become widely known. I disagreed and told him that if I were wrong, the procedure was to make an announcement later if and when the matter became widely known. Further, I told him that we shouldn't put people through a bunch of embarrassment and use them as warning examples to the congregation. He knew I was right, but didn't want to let it go. As the chairman, I told him we would not make such an announcement unless all three elders on the committee agreed to it, and I would not agree to it.

This elder decided to go around me. If congregation elders are ever unsure on how to handle a matter, they can call Watch Tower's "Service Desk" (the people who direct these matters) for procedural clarifications. This elder called Watch Tower on his own and

related the situation in some manner until they insisted that an announcement must be made that this woman had met with a judicial committee and was reproved. The "service desk" at Watch Tower called our coordinator of the elders and told him that the chairman (me) must make that announcement. I was told all this during a congregation meeting just minutes before the announcements were to be made and had to go out in front of the audience (and this young lady) on a moment's notice to do this.

The further embarrassment the young lady received from my announcement and people gossiping about her nearly destroyed her. She actually never spoke to me again because she initially came to me for help and I made that announcement. I think one good thing came out of that- she learned never to confide in the elders again.

Even though it had taken me a long time to realize that the Watch Tower did not have "the truth," it only took me a short while to know that the organization always puts itself ahead of the individuals and that any good people within were only good despite the Watch Tower. Further, I knew that remaining as an elder would not allow me to change things for the better. I knew my days as one of Jehovah's Witnesses were numbered.

Chapter 10

The Fade

How does one remove himself from a dangerous mind-control cult? I know that the urge came across your lips as you read this to say, "Just walk away." It does seem to be the answer. I did not live in a compound and nobody was holding a gun to my head or threatening my family. It actually is the correct answer to "just walk away," yet the vast majority of Jehovah's Witnesses who decide to leave will not do just that. I was no exception.

My friends were all Witnesses, my wife and my mother were Witnesses. Walking away would mean putting my wife through turmoil and risking being shunned by all other Witnesses. If it meant losing all my friends, I was okay with that. I really wasn't okay with my mother shunning me and my wife feeling that I had gone over to "Satan's world." (That's the entire world outside of Jehovah's Witnesses.) As I delayed deciding what to do, as I attended each meeting at the Kingdom Hall, I knew I could not stay. It was time to do something. I just didn't know what that something was.

In the summer of 2006, I called my father and asked him to meet me for lunch as soon as possible. I said I had important news to share with him. At this point, Dad had remarried and retired just a couple of years ago. I gave him a sense of urgency in my tone, so I assured him that nobody was dying or going to prison, but that my important news was good and it was just as important as any dire circumstances to me that I speak with him. He had moved several hours away from St. Louis, but we arranged to meet halfway.

Dad, with his wife Linda, met me at a restaurant that week without a clue as to what I needed to tell him. I told him that I wanted to tell him this before I chickened out and said nothing, then I proceeded to tell him how I had learned that Watch Tower was a dangerous mind control cult and that I needed to make a plan to leave. Of course he and Linda said "Just walk away." Of course I made all my excuses as to why I couldn't just do that. I hope I have conveyed to readers who never were Jehovah's Witnesses that such a suggestion is really radical.

I have heard Witness speakers use an illustration about elephants on how to raise and train children or how to train yourself to remain a faithful witness. Elephants have to have their spirit broken in order to start training them. They have to decide that they have no hope of breaking free by being taught helplessness. Only after they feel helpless can they learn to do as their trainer insists.

Young elephants have heavy chains wrapped around a leg and attached to large stakes driven deep into the ground. No matter how much they pull and struggle, the chain won't break and the stake won't come up. Once they are thoroughly convinced that they can never break free, the elephant one day gives up. Once that happens, the trainer can tie the elephant with a light-weight chain and can even just tap a short stake into the ground to anchor the chain. Even though the elephant grows large and strong enough to uproot a massive tree with a fifty-inch diameter or even snap the tree in half, it feels the slightest resistance of the chain and stops pulling.

The saddest thing is that this story is used in fables to illustrate that the elephant could break free if it just were able to believe in itself but it limits itself by past experience. Watch Tower speakers use the story to convince Witnesses that they can train themselves or their children to stop trying to break free of their chains. Witnesses can accept that their "trainers" know how to care for them and stop resisting the leadings of their elders or the Governing Body. Yes, Witnesses are told that breaking their spirit is a great step toward obedience, a desirable trait according to their "trainers."

That's how I (or typically any Witness) felt when I was told to simply "stop going to the Kingdom Hall." I had given up any thoughts of such a thing long ago and felt that I just needed to stay there. I believed I could not leave, therefore I could not leave. If you can imagine that enormous elephant rendered helpless by an ordinary tent stake sunk a few inches in the ground, then you might be able to imagine what a Witness feels when he confronts the idea that he can free himself from the Watch Tower.

Luckily, the analogy is not perfect. Elephants rarely but occasionally do realize that they can break free and do so. For humans, the analogy further falls apart. We are not elephants. Many people are of the mindset to never ever give up in looking for freedom when facing tremendous obstacles. Slaves will run away even if they are sure they will be put to death if caught. Prisoners look for cracks in the wall of their cell or flaws in the security system. Lawyers look for loopholes in the law. Disenchanted Jehovah's Witnesses look for ways out. People that want it bad enough keep looking for freedom.

I ended Chapter 9 with these words: "I knew my days as one of Jehovah's Witnesses were numbered." Despite my training, I was already looking for a way to pull that stake out of the ground. I just needed to know that the power was within me. Imagine what would happen if that young elephant were able to call out to elephants in the wild that had escaped before him. When asked how they escaped, they would answer that they simply gave it one more attempt and pulled the stake out of the ground or broke the chain. That would be the most important information the chained elephant could receive. He might starve with food just out of reach or die in a fire because of his bonds, but just knowing that others escaped would be a much more powerful incentive to pull on that chain a little harder.

By the time I spoke to my father, I learned that others had left Watch Tower before, but I really didn't know how they did it yet. I was still just learning about the errors in Watch Tower's doctrines and the manipulation that was being used. I told Dad and Linda that I needed time to "just walk away." I was relieved that I managed to tell someone my woes, and still confident that they would not betray my confidence. It made me more determined than ever to figure out how I would walk away.

Using the internet, I ordered some books and had them sent to my father's home. (I was too worried about questions from Tasha to have them sent to my own home.) These books turned out to be the common escape maps for Jehovah's Witnesses looking for help getting out of the Watch Tower organization. They were former Governing Body member, Ray Franz' **CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE** and **IN SEARCH OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM**, along with cult expert, Steven Hassan's **COMBATting CULT MIND CONTROL** and

RELEASING THE BONDS: EMPOWERING PEOPLE TO THINK FOR THEMSELVES. After I picked up the books, I read them at work and didn't tell Tasha anything about them. I am not discussing doctrine in this writing, so I will just say that any Witnesses or former Witnesses who have not read these books should do so. From them, I cemented my understandings that Watch Tower used mind-control tactics and twisted the scriptures to fit their teachings.

Even though the hugest part of my decision to leave Jehovah's Witnesses is tied up with doctrine, it's all very strange and not so interesting to read about. Even former Jehovah's Witnesses that remain Christians to some degree argue over the application of the scriptures toward the doctrine and some still believe much of what Watch Tower taught them. It suffices to say that Watch Tower kept changing the time when the end of "this system of things" would come and Armageddon would happen. They would never admit their errors when they changed the doctrine. They would just say that "the light is getting brighter as the [end] day draws near," as was discussed in Chapter 8.

I also joined an internet forum for former Jehovah's Witnesses. Even though such a place is anonymous, the people there became to me like the previously chained elephants that I could call out to, telling me how they had managed to break their chain. Among these anonymous people were teens and the elderly, people with their whole family still in the organization and people with no family at all in it, men and women who divorced over their religious differences, and men and women who managed to stay with their Witness spouse when they left the organization. Some were thrown out of the Watch Tower, some quit on their own, and some stayed in for family, or many faded.

Fading from Jehovah's Witnesses means different things to some of them. Generally, though, it means reducing one's involvement slowly so as not to raise any alarms among family, friends, and the elders. Some dared to fade more than others, depending on their situation. Many of the people I exchanged information with still went to an occasional meeting at the Kingdom Hall or perhaps just to the yearly Memorial- the one day that Jehovah's Witnesses celebrate, commemorating the death and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

I was most intrigued by those that managed to totally stop going to the meetings without losing contact with their Witness relatives. I decided that this was my goal. I only had one relative that I primarily cared to keep contact with, my mother. I also didn't want to shock my wife by coming out against Watch Tower too fast, and secondarily I didn't want to make her family feel obligated to shun me.

I knew that an important early step in fading would be stepping away from my assignment as an elder in the congregation. On the internet forums, I saw that there were a few ways to do this, primarily using the excuses of health, depression, work overload, doubt, or stating that one no longer qualifies to be an elder. My health was not an issue and I wasn't overloaded with work as a firefighter. I decided to present a combination of the remaining typical reasons: depression, doubt, and no longer being qualified.

I wrote a letter of resignation as an elder stating that I had doubts about changing doctrines. I said that my recent research showed me that the Watch Tower said the world would end in 1975, but then they denied saying it. I said that this led to doubt about any of the current teachings of the Governing Body; then I followed that with quotes from the literature that said we must trust and believe and have faith in the teachings. I said that if I had doubts in these men, I didn't really qualify to be an elder anymore. For good measure, I threw in a wee bit of depression over the fact that I had been denying my feelings and my obligation to stop being an elder. I won't put my letter of resignation here for all to read because it is heavily laden with doctrine and scriptures and quotes from Watch Tower literature. I emailed my letter to the Coordinator of the Body of Elders and to the congregation secretary. They agreed to meet with me immediately to discuss my resignation.

I found it odd at our meeting that, instead of addressing my issues, these two men tried to talk me out of resigning. If I felt I didn't qualify, and I listed good reasons for that feeling, then I could see them try to alleviate any doubts but still accept that I shouldn't be an elder anymore. They had no answers to any of my specific concerns. They just wanted me to pray and wait on Jehovah to provide the answers. To appease them, I promised I would do just that, but not as an elder. I would not withdraw my resignation. They told me that they would have to send my letter of resignation to Watch Tower for approval. I thought they were joking, but they said they could not accept it on their own. Remembering that my goal was to fade away quietly, I told them to do whatever they had to do, but that I was done being an elder this very moment. Without a choice, they accepted what I said, but then they asked me not to tell anyone that I wasn't an elder anymore until they got Watch Tower's approval. It all seemed like a silly game, but I cooperated.

Tasha was the only one besides the other elders that knew I wasn't an elder anymore. They graciously allowed me to tell my wife, but insisted that I not tell her any details of my resignation. Well, I didn't honor that part of the agreement. I did tell her that I was questioning the teachings and resigned, but that was all I said.

It seems like such a minor thing, but I wanted to feel that I was being "bad" when I went to the Kingdom Hall. I decided not to wear a suit anymore. I wore khaki casual pants and a nice shirt and tie with a sweater. If you are not familiar with Jehovah's Witnesses and their dress standards, you would know that not wearing a suit or even a sport coat is a big deal, not quite as bad as a woman wearing pants but a big deal. I wasn't daring enough to skip the tie because I was trying to just fade away quietly. I dressed barely nice enough that they didn't have to counsel me about it.

Women are always, always, always, expected to wear a skirt or a dress at the Kingdom Hall or while engaging in the recruiting work. Men can leave the jacket in the car if they like while recruiting, but are expected to have it with them at the Kingdom Hall at all times. If they don't have a jacket, they cannot be given any assignments such as microphone handler or attendant. The tie needs to be worn at all times when a man is worshipping or recruiting. The Watch Tower organization even requests that members keep their meeting clothes on after the sessions of the large conventions when they are patronizing restaurants, along with their lapel badges that identify them as Jehovah's Witnesses attending the convention. It's just a theory, but I think they want the members to remember at all times that they are different from non-Witnesses.

The Circuit Overseer visited our congregation six weeks after my resignation as an elder. During a typical visit, the Circuit Overseer would arrive on Monday and go over the congregation records. There would be a Tuesday and a Thursday evening meeting. He would meet with the elders on Friday evening and have a concluding talk on the weekend. He would also lead the recruiting and literature distribution work everyday from Wednesday through the weekend. I attended the Tuesday meeting, but was at work on Thursday. In the past, I would have traded shifts with someone during the Circuit Overseer's visit, but I didn't bother. I did not attend any of the week's recruiting sessions, and while I was still technically an elder, I saw no real reason to attend the Circuit Overseer's meeting with the elders, so I wasn't back at the Kingdom Hall until Saturday evening for the weekend meeting.

During the entire week of his visit, the Circuit Overseer did not call me or have one of the elders call me to set up any kind of a meeting between us. I did not seek him out and, apparently he did not seek me out. A half-hour after his final talk, I was walking out of the Kingdom Hall. The Coordinator of the Body of Elders (C.O.B.E.) said that I should talk with the Circuit Overseer. I waited another half-hour and told the C.O.B.E. that I didn't need to keep waiting if he was busy. The C.O.B.E. begged me to wait a little

more. So finally, about ten minutes later, I sat down with the Circuit Overseer and the C.O.B.E..

The Circuit Overseer and I did all the talking. The C.O.B.E. was rather dumbfounded at our tones with each other and said nothing. The Circuit Overseer started with, "I'm in a hurry. I have to leave for a dinner engagement."

My answer was, "Just go ahead and go then. Don't let me hold you up."

"Where have you been all week?"

"I'm sorry. What?"

"I have been here all week. I didn't see you."

"I was here on Tuesday and I am here now."

"But you didn't make yourself available to me during the week at all. I didn't see you out in field service (their word for "recruiting") and you weren't here on Thursday or Friday. Why not? You are still one of the elders."

"I'm not here to answer for my whereabouts. Jesus said that a shepherd with one hundred sheep would leave ninety-nine of them behind to search for the one that strayed and got lost. Well, don't you worry about the one if you don't know how to call him on the phone. You just go enjoy the ninety-nine. And I told [the C.O.B.E.] that I was done being an elder six weeks ago."

"Well, the Watch Tower Society approved your resignation. I don't really have anything to add to that. You have the publications in your Watch Tower library to help you get over your doubts and you have prayer. You need to make a decision what you are going to do, and make it soon."

His tone was clear to me- get out of the organization or get back in line. He was done and walking out the door. I stopped him with "That's it?"

"What else do you expect?"

"I suppose I shouldn't expect anything from the Watch Tower's representative. I served as an elder for over twelve years and you accept my resignation without batting an eye. Did they say to just give up on me, like you are doing?"

"They said to snatch you out of the fire." (That's a common phrase meaning to save a member from a course of certain disaster.)

"Oh, well. You gave that almost five minutes. I didn't expect you to refuse my resignation, but I did expect you to at least attempt to show some concern. I expected you to ask what research and prayers I might have already had over my concerns. Instead, I get less than five minutes of your time because you have a dinner engagement. If you had set up a time to speak with me, it wouldn't have conflicted with your schedule. I expected that much."

"Well, as I said, I didn't see you all week. I can spare a few more minutes now."

I should have said "Don't bother" and walked out. Instead, I mentioned one of my biggest concerns, the changing doctrines. I told him how my mother was disfellowshipped after Armageddon didn't come in 1975 and Watch Tower came up with a long explanation of how they were not wrong about it, but that it was actually the members who were wrong to "expect" the end of the world. I explained how she went back and now just goes along with whatever doctrinal changes come along. I further said that I see the same things happening again, Armageddon is pushed back further and further and we are just supposed to accept any explanations without questioning them.

The Circuit Overseer told me that I might consider studying with two elders and he walked out the door. I expected the C.O.B.E. to show some anger at me for my tone with the Circuit Overseer, but he seemed to understand my quick analogy of the lost sheep. (I had actually planned that ahead of time.) He shrugged his shoulders and said he was sorry this meeting went so badly.

The following week, an announcement was made that "Brother Alan Miller is no longer serving the congregation as an elder." I was officially done with that. During the remaining portion of that meeting, I raised my hand and commented in a question-and-answer session. Any members who get in some kind of trouble actually lose the privilege to comment during meetings, so I was demonstrating to the congregation that, despite the announcement moments ago, I had not committed some terrible sin. I was not in some kind of trouble and my commenting privilege was intact. At the end of that meeting, I told the C.O.B.E. I wasn't interested in studying with the elders.

Totally fading would include ceasing the recruiting work. The monthly "field service report" that each member turns in is more important than any other aspect of the Witness religion. Some members will lie and report some hours each month whether they actually engaged in the work or not. While I could simply have lied and reported one hour per month, I knew that sooner or later, I would have to stop reporting. I did that at the end of the month of the Circuit Overseer's visit. If I didn't turn in a report, the elders would call me, so I turned one in and wrote "ZERO" in the box for my total hours, then added the comment, "Stumbled by the Circuit Overseer." There was no need for any elder to call me and ask what happened, and they didn't call.

About five months after my meeting with the Circuit Overseer, another Circuit Overseer visit was scheduled, only with a substitute Circuit Overseer because the regular one was attending some kind of training. I attended the first meeting that week on Tuesday. After the meeting, the C.O.B.E. and the congregation secretary approached me. They hadn't really talked much to me in the entire five months, but they wanted to talk that evening. Their discussions were of trivial matters such as sports and the weather. It was very odd. They held their hands out to shake mine after about seven or eight minutes of that, then went on to greet other people in the auditorium. I never did get to meet the substitute Circuit Overseer.

I had to put that odd incident together in my mind. I think the two elders wanted to be able to tell the substitute Circuit Overseer that they had followed through on Watch Tower's instructions to "snatch him out of the fire." They made sure they were seen in the auditorium speaking to me for more than a few minutes, and were seen shaking my hand. Nobody would know what we talked about, just that we had talked. In five months, they didn't ignore me but they didn't really speak to me, but when the substitute Circuit Overseer would ask them about me later, I was certain they would say how they had tried so hard to help me. He would then probably say, "Yes, I saw you giving Brother Miller personal attention the other evening." Jehovah's Witnesses are all about appearances.

I am not upset that they didn't really try to help. They were there if I reached out to them for help. But really, what could they offer

me? All they had was more of the same old advice Witness elders can come up with: "Do more. Do more praying and Bible/Watch Tower reading; do more meeting attendance. Eventually, you will get back in line. Just do more." I wanted to do less and less so there was no need to talk.

If wearing a sweater instead of a suit and ceasing the door-to-door recruiting seem like baby steps to you, they are. I think that's part of the point of being one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Even the most minor deviations from the lifestyle are huge to the Witness. I went along like that for a few months and I think I was close to saying I had enough.

Tasha's Spring break from teaching occurs around the same time as the Jehovah's Witnesses Memorial of Christ's death. It's a meeting that no member should miss despite the fact that it's pretty much the same talk every year with wine and unleavened bread passed around, but virtually nobody drinks or eats unless they are "anointed." The anointed are people who "just know" that they have been chosen to be one of the one hundred forty-four thousand humans (based on the book of Revelation) who will rule with Jesus in heaven over the rest of the humans on earth. Watch Tower has discouraged people from believing they are anointed since the 1930's as the number of Jehovah's Witnesses was going to pass one hundred forty-four thousand. There are about ten thousand Witnesses at the time of writing this that still believe they are anointed, supposedly the rest of them died off. Typically, a congregation has none of the anointed attending so the wine and bread are just passed around the entire Kingdom Hall to everyone without anyone actually touching them.

Tasha and I went to Las Vegas on a vacation during her Spring break of 2007 and attended the Memorial at the local Kingdom Hall there. After the meeting, Tasha started talking with a Witness and was excited to make a new friend. She told me she wanted to go back to the regular meeting in a couple of days and go out in the recruiting work with her new friend. I was polite, but I just felt a snap in my brain when she was talking about wasting our vacation with Jehovah's Witnesses. I had been missing meetings here and there and taking my baby steps. I was sure I was ready to take some bigger steps.

I told Tasha I was done going to the Kingdom Hall on vacation or at any other time. I said that I had been reading materials that helped me to be an independent thinker. The actual term "independent thinking" is used in a negative sense and so strongly discouraged that one could actually say it is demonized in the Watch Tower literature. I told Tasha that the repetitive nature of meetings at the Kingdom Hall interfered with my independent thinking and I would not be accompanying her anymore to the Hall. She took it rather well.

I cannot say exactly what she was thinking, but I am pretty sure Tasha recognized that we had a wonderful strong bond in our marriage and she was afraid to lose me. I think she decided to let me "fade" away from Jehovah's Witnesses in the hopes that I would continue to be a loving husband. She wanted to keep her husband and her false hopes. When she asked if my decision to stop going to the Hall changed anything between us, I said that it didn't have to. Further, I asked one thing of her. I asked that she not be reporting anything about me to the elders. She agreed that my relationship with Jehovah was between me and Jehovah and she wouldn't try to report/spy for them.

Sometimes, we would go out for a meal and I would drop Tasha off at the Kingdom Hall for her meeting, and then come back two hours later to pick her up. We had a good strong relationship and I didn't want her to feel that it had drastically changed. But mostly, Tasha drove herself to the meetings without me. She told me that certain people asked about me and said they missed me. I

reminded her that these people still knew my cell phone number and they could call to set up a lunch or something. Of course, that never happened. Jehovah's Witnesses saying "We miss you" is a euphemism for "You should be at the meetings." Once when I picked her up, she passed on someone's "Hello, we miss you" and I asked Tasha, "Did you tell them I was right outside in the parking lot?" That will give you an idea how much they really miss someone.

I am pretty sure that this is the point when I got a bit too obsessive in my desire to learn about dangerous mind-control cults and why I had been a victim. I finished reading the books I ordered and started ordering more or going to the library and finding books about Jehovah's Witnesses, cults, and the Bible. I wasn't satisfied learning that one particular religion was not "the truth." I still wanted to know if there was "truth." I will write a sequel to this book if I ever find it, but don't be surprised if that never comes. Because I am avoiding doctrine in this writing, I will just say that I decided not to be part of any organized religion whatsoever.

My obsession didn't just include books. I decided to start meeting people from the internet forum of former Jehovah's Witnesses. Several people lived just a few hours drive from me. One man and his wife met me at a museum when they were in St. Louis. They were disfellowshipped and I knew that talking or having a meal caused me to risk being disfellowshipped. I felt a tiny bit of worry that some Witness I knew would see us, but that was silly. I put that worry behind me. Another fellow I met has since become my regular tennis partner. We live about four hours apart, so we meet halfway in a small town for tennis and lunch. I enjoyed meeting others who understood where I was coming from, so I started attending a monthly meet up of former Jehovah's Witnesses. We meet at a public restaurant and share our stories. It typically lasts about three hours.

It would be wonderful to say that I replaced the feeling of belonging in Jehovah's Witnesses with a new feeling of belonging with former Jehovah's Witnesses. To some degree, I did. But it still wasn't enough for me. I felt depressed and lost somewhat. I started drinking again. It wasn't much. I hid it from Tasha so she wouldn't think that leaving Jehovah's Witnesses caused depression.

It had been a full year since I had lunch with my dad and his wife to discuss my discovery that I was in a dangerous mind-control cult. I looked back and saw so much changed in that year. I should have been happier. It wasn't just that Tasha was still a victim, although that was a huge factor. I wasn't happy for myself. I think my research into Watch Tower and the Bible led me to a fuller realization that Watch Tower was just a multimillion dollar printing company whose "spiritual" decisions were actually accounting decisions to bring in larger returns. I thought that the depression may have been caused by a feeling of being duped.

I figured that I was used to the structured life of a Witness and I had dedicated my life to Jehovah, the God of Witnesses, and vowed to serve Him by serving Watch Tower. I was unofficially breaking that vow and pretty much leading a secret life. Oh, I didn't outright hide what I was doing from Tasha, but I didn't openly discuss it with her either. When I tried, she couldn't hear it. She literally put her hands over her ears and said "I cannot hear this." I saw how Witness training had affected her.

I tried something strange and radical for myself. When Tasha went out of town to attend the Summer District Convention of Jehovah's Witnesses for a long weekend, I thought that I might want to drink that same long weekend. To try to avoid it, I went out in the woods and had a ceremony of sorts. In a secluded area, I piled shreds of Watch Tower literature along with kindling. I figured if I had dedicated my life to Jehovah and Watch Tower at one time, I needed to undo that with an "undedication." Coincidentally, it was twenty years from the very month that I had attempted suicide. I started my ceremony.

I said out loud (with nobody within earshot anyway) "Twenty years ago, my life got sidetracked. I reached out to God for help, but a mind-control cult snuck in and took over. They led me to their altar and told me to dedicate myself to their organization. They left

out information and deceived me, so today I officially undedicated myself to the Watch Tower organization."

I imagined leaning over with a lighter and the shreds of Watch Tower books and magazines lighting with a sudden "whoosh." Actually, it had rained and the kindling was damp and Watch Tower paper doesn't burn so great. I had quite a time starting the fire. Even that seemed appropriate because it was so hard to break free from Watch Tower, but once I did there was no stopping me. My fire eventually became a large blaze, just like the figurative one in my heart. Any former Witnesses reading this should be careful. Remember that I am a professional firefighter. Firefighters love fire.

As I stared at the fire, I added more words to my ceremony. "Just as Watch Tower left out important information, I no longer concern myself with the information I supply to them. I am free to use deceptive methods to avoid their witch hunts and I may withhold information to prevent them from disfellowshipping me and possibly causing my mother to shun me for the rest of her life. Since I was not fully informed about false prophecies and disfellowshipping and the consequences of ever leaving the Witnesses, I consider my baptism invalid and hereby renounce it."

I poked the flames with a stick for awhile so that nothing remained of the burning papers and I got in my car and left. The whole thing sounds a bit nutty perhaps, but I have relayed the story to other former Witnesses and they understood my need for closure.

The Fade's Affect on Family and Friends

In 2007, I celebrated Father's Day for the first time since I was a non-Witness teenager. It's silly to think that such a celebration is wrong because it's like parent worship or honoring a parent instead of honoring God. Honoring parents is even within the Ten Commandments. I appreciated my father and got together with "his" family: Linda his wife, his mother-in-law, and his younger adult children from another marriage. I was so thrilled that I got gifts for everybody, but a better gift for Dad as it was his day.

That summer, I got a package from Dad and Linda that said "Do not open until [the date of my birthday]." It was the first birthday gift I had received in twenty years. (Some family members sent me a card every now and again on my birthday, but tried to respect my religious convictions as a Witness and refrained from gifts.) It turned out to be a sweatshirt but it could have been a box of rocks and I would have loved it.

When Christmas came, I joined Dad and his family again on the morning of December 25th and exchanged gifts. Regardless of one's religious beliefs, it just seems magical to have family gather together and share love and well-wishing and gifts.

As for my mother, I didn't mention anything at all about ceasing my involvement with Jehovah's Witnesses until she asked me about it. Tasha probably phoned her and said something to let her know I wasn't going to meetings anymore. Mom had just gotten back from her summer convention in 2007 and asked if I had enjoyed mine. I didn't dare tell her that I went to my undedication. I did tell her that I decided not to attend the sessions.

Mom said she felt guilty that she had fallen asleep during several of the talks during the three-day event. She said that there was "nothing new" in the convention and that she was very bored. I said she wouldn't miss anything if she wasn't there and that maybe she should consider skipping it next year or just going to the Sunday session.

Mom asked me directly, "Have you stopped going to meetings altogether?"

"Yes, Mom."

"That makes things difficult for your wife."

"That's not my fault. I don't prevent her from attending meetings and worshipping as she wants."

"Why did you stop going?"

"I felt that the meetings interfered with my independent thinking. I have decided to step away from the meetings and use my own standards to decide morality for myself. Plus, I find the content of the meetings encourages judging others. I just can't do that anymore."

"The meetings should help you decide how to apply the Bible to develop your own standards of morality and judgment. If you don't agree with something, you can research it in the Watch Tower literature."

"Yes, but examining Watch Tower teachings by only using Watch Tower materials just isn't enough for me. I have to step outside of it to see if they are wrong. The meetings don't really offer anything new, so I have to step away from the repetitiveness so it doesn't influence me."

That was followed by silence. I knew her Witness mindset had to process my words and she had to decide whether to be my mother or be a fully indoctrinated member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Finally, she reached some balance in her mind and looked for an excuse to avoid one extreme or the other.

"You are still in good standing, aren't you" You are still in the truth?"

Asking if I was "still in good standing" meant she was asking if I had not been disfellowshipped or had disassociated myself. She wanted to know if there had been any official announcement made that I was no longer one of Jehovah's Witnesses. My exact answer was "Yes, I am in good standing. I am still one of Jehovah's Witnesses."

"Good," she said. "Don't go do something that would cause me to have to stop speaking to you."

"You would actually do that?"

"You know it's in the rules. I wouldn't have a choice."

I don't know if Mom would follow the rules or not, but she indicated that she would, so she and I have just reached a decision not to ever discuss religion at all. We have a fairly normal relationship otherwise. Because of her, though, I maintain the fade from Jehovah's Witnesses. Otherwise, I would openly defy the religion and use my real name as author of this book.

Just after Christmas of 2007, my wife wanted to visit her family. We drove the thousand miles to stay at her mother's home. Her mother, Valerie, regularly attended meetings at the Kingdom Hall ever since Tasha was a little girl. Valerie never got baptized though, because of a technicality. Valerie, although never in the military, worked for the U.S. military. Watch Tower rules do not allow such a person to get baptized as a full member.

Tasha's younger sister, Ramona, became a baptized Witness as a teenager. I don't think she really learned Watch Tower doctrine or really cared much about religion, but her friends were getting baptized so she joined them. She later started hanging around with a non-Witness crowd and got pregnant before she turned twenty. Tasha helped her through the pregnancy and was actually in the delivery room when Ramona's son was born. The elders caught up with Ramona shortly after that and she was disfellowshipped for committing fornication. Tasha followed the rules and shunned her sister ever since. It had been more than thirteen years since they talked. To be honest, I didn't communicate with Ramona either, but I was never really close to Tasha's family. I wouldn't have gone out of my way to shun her as Tasha did.

During our visit, Valerie told us that Ramona would be coming by with her son. I had a chance to pull Tasha aside and suggested that she talk to her sister. Tasha resisted. I reminded her that everyone in her entire family communicates with Ramona except her. I reminded her that she was supportive of Ramona when she gave birth and only started shunning her because of Watch Tower rules. I must have gotten through to Tasha because she hugged Ramona and they sat together and talked.

I have a sad report to add here about Tasha's family. Valerie retired from her job that prevented her from getting baptized. She's now a full member of the Witnesses and she spends her days going out in the recruiting work. Ramona was probably pressured by her mother to go back to the Kingdom Hall. She sat in silence at meetings with her mother and her son until the elders determined that she was repentant of her fornication and reinstated her.

Before we headed home from that visit, I phoned my best friend Rich Campbell and asked if we could stop at his home at our halfway point and spend the night. I hadn't seen Rich since I had stopped attending meetings. He and his wife, Trudy, were happy to see us.

Rich and Trudy told me that Tasha had phoned them now and then over the last several months. They knew that I wasn't attending meetings and that I felt there were problems with Watch Tower teachings. During our visit, Rich talked about what a strength I was to him when he was "spiritually weak" and now wanted to help me.

I tried to reach a similar balance with Rich to the one I found with my mother. I tried to get him to agree not to "encourage" me about the teachings and I would agree not to "discourage" him about the teachings. I didn't manage to find that balance with Rich, probably because we were so close at one time and were able to talk about anything. Restricting that conversation brought our close friendship to an end.

Rich told me that he had thoroughly researched doctrine and cults and had come to the inescapable conclusion that Jehovah's Witnesses were right. I've noticed that is what is important to Witnesses- being right. Its part of what enables them to tune out automatically to anything that suggests they are wrong about anything. After a bit of questioning, I determined that Rich's "thorough" research involved reading one book about cults and then reading many articles from Watch Tower literature about why they were not a cult.

Rich wanted to know what I was going to do about "the truth." I asked if I was free to say anything to him without worrying that he would feel some obligation to report it to the elders. He was actually hesitant until I reminded him that I was prepared to risk my eldership to keep our friendship when he was disfellowshipped. He agreed to hear me out and keep it confidential, but only because I was not disfellowshipped, "but just this once."

We talked for awhile about doctrine but any valid points that I made, he just countered with standard Witness sayings like "The light is getting brighter as Jehovah's day (of destruction) draws near" along with "Wait on Jehovah to straighten that out." It seemed pointless. Finally, I asked him if he would be my friend if I was disfellowshipped.

His answer was that he had an obligation to stay spiritually clean and would have to protect his family (just him and Trudy). He indicated that, although I would no longer be welcome in his home, he would be there to apply Christian principles if I was in trouble and reached out for his help. Essentially, that meant if I was disfellowshipped, he would be first in line to help me get reinstated, otherwise he would shun me.

Rich tried to say that such a situation did not exist, so we should not worry about it. We still talk every now and then on the phone, but it's all very shallow. To know that my best friend cannot even hear my most basic thoughts and concerns about why I won't go to the Kingdom Hall is just too much for me. I couldn't even imagine wanting to reach out for his help if I was to be disfellowshipped because such a person wouldn't know me anymore. I knew when we spoke face-to-face that I would be mourning the loss of my best friend. One day, he will be appointed an elder, and he will feel compelled to stop even our shallow conversations.

In the summer of 2008, Tasha and I went to Florida for the District Conventions of Jehovah's Witnesses and a vacation. Tasha's best friend, Laura, had moved back home to Puerto Rico last year and would be visiting her brother and attending the Florida convention. Another thing Jehovah's Witnesses are never supposed to do is miss one of the conventions. So Tasha would attend with Laura and her brother Donald, and I would visit my grandmother nearby and enjoy the weather during the day and catch up with her in the evening.

On Friday evening, I had dinner with Tasha, Laura, and Donald, along with some of their friends. Laura and Donald were talking about the death of their younger sister just days ago. I was shocked and wanted to get the story straight so I asked more about what happened.

Their sister Loretta was thirty-five and lived at home with her parents all her life. She always said she was tired or not feeling well. She rarely had a job, and everyone assumed she was lazy and a hypochondriac. About a month prior, she developed some kind of new symptoms and was hospitalized. That's when she was diagnosed with late stages of some terrible blood disorder that would probably kill her. As soon as arrangements could be made, Loretta and her mother flew from Puerto Rico to New York to see a specialist, but Loretta died in New York. Her body was flown back to Puerto Rico just days before.

I had to know why Laura and Donald were here in Florida and not in Puerto Rico with their parents. Laura said that her plane tickets were nonrefundable and both of them said they had already planned to attend this particular convention. When asked if they couldn't simply have cancelled plans and lost money on tickets because this death was so sudden and difficult on their parents, they said their parents insisted that they "don't miss out on the spiritual food" of the convention and they would delay the funeral for a week until they got there.

I cannot even find the words to express my utter disgust with such a mindset. Laura and Donald are wonderful people caught in the web of Watch Tower. Tasha agreed with them that they weren't needed to arrange the funeral and that they might as well carry out prearranged travel. She's caught in that same web. I was probably upset because I might have thought just like them a couple of years before.

Jumping back a bit, I will continue the story of my personal fade from "the truth" that turned out to be a lie.

I knew that I couldn't continue hiding my drinking from Tasha or limiting it to every now and then. Sooner or later, I would lose control. In October of 2007, I decided to go back to Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.). I wrote in Chapter 5 that with A.A. meetings, I learned that I was powerless over alcohol and that the A.A. program said to turn my life over to God and He would strengthen me. That was over twenty years prior. I stopped going to A.A. nineteen years prior when I fully turned my life over to Watch Tower, thinking that was the same as turning it over to God.

Before going back to A.A., I discussed it with Tasha. As far as she knew, I was doing fine as a recovering alcohol, and I hadn't had a drink the entire time of our marriage. I had to let her know that just wasn't true, that I was drinking behind her back. She asked why I started drinking again.

I did my best to explain. I said that I had not addressed issues from over twenty years ago, and that all I really did was distract myself from those issues all this time. I felt that I needed to seek out others who could empathize with my problems. She didn't know it, but I was also explaining why I sought out other former Jehovah's Witnesses. I further went on to tell her that knowing that Armageddon is not arriving any time soon, I was finding it harder and harder to distract myself from the issues. Tasha asked if I wanted to talk to the elders about my drinking or any of my issues. I must have stuttered and found myself at a loss of words as I thought how that was one of the last things I wanted to do. I wished I had said to her that the elders are severely under-qualified to help depressed people, and that from personal experience, I knew all we were taught was to tell people to do pray more, to go to more meetings, read the Bible and the WATCHTOWER more, and do more recruiting. No matter the situation, that's really all the elders have to offer members. The A.A. that I left behind years ago was steeped in pseudo-religious traditions that crept me out a bit as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Most meetings opened with the Lord's Prayer and concluded with holding hands while reciting the Serenity Prayer that goes like this: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Jehovah's Witnesses learned that God hates memorized prayers. At every A.A. meeting, people who were not in "the truth" would relate how God or "their higher power" saved them or made a difference in their life or helps them to cope with their problems. The A.A. that I returned to in 2007 was still steeped in those pseudo-religious traditions. I was still crept out by them, but not as one of Jehovah's Witnesses feeling they are traditions of Satan's world, but just as someone who didn't want anything to do with religion anymore. I was able to block the traditions out and I eventually found an A.A. group for atheists and agnostics (although anyone is welcome to attend) which refrains from the memorized prayers and, instead of God, most members give credit to humans and to the support group itself for their sobriety. I really felt good about the group sessions where I could state my problems to other people. Most importantly, I wasn't drinking any alcohol. I could tell that, ultimately A.A. could only take me so far. One thing I was sure about as I started sharing my thoughts with others was that I was mad at God. I wanted to know why, in my most vulnerable moment years ago, he led me to a dangerous mind-control cult.

As a firefighter, I worked long hours and was at home for long hours. I found myself totally not motivated during those long hours at

home. I was sitting around the house and watching television, reading former Witness forums on the internet, and reading books about Christianity and the Bible and cults. There's nothing wrong with books, but there were bills to pay and leaves to rake; there were museums to visit or bicycle rides to go on. Many of the former Witnesses on the internet forums I visited went to therapists of some kind. I knew that I needed professional counseling. I checked my medical benefits and found that they would pay for most of the cost, so I started seeing a counselor. I can skim over the specifics of how that has helped me immensely because I have already reflected that help throughout all these chapters. I wrote this entire story from a changed perspective, as someone who has already dealt with his demons. As a matter of fact, as I put my thoughts on paper, I was able to let go of much bitterness about my past as it just became stories on pages of a book. My counselor helped me to see that being mad at God was better in my mind than feeling that I was a failure. I didn't want to think that I goofed up all on my own in joining a cult so I clung to the idea that it happened with God's intervention. But she helped me see past that to another way of looking at my past. I needed to forgive myself. I needed to recognize that it was me that didn't pull that trigger. It was me that overcame my demons and survived.

Sure, I took the path of becoming a Jehovah's Witness, but I was looking for validation- a reason to live. I latched onto that organization because it was better than killing myself. I need to claim a victory for myself instead of a failure or assigning blame to God. Just as I took away the power of the Watch Tower organization and took control of my own life, I now had to take the anger I had with God and dismiss it, just let it go.

I'm not going to say that I found God in some wonderful way through some other religion or through nature or through meditation. Nature and meditation are a huge part of my life, but not a personal preconceived notion of God and certainly not organized religion. Mainly, I just got back into life- its daily routines and its quiet moments and its ups and downs. Life without the stress that the sky is falling any minute now can really be beautiful.

The two decades in the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses were not a total waste. I learned much about myself while surviving. I stayed sober way more than ninety-nine percent of the time spent. I learned how to examine my beliefs and why I needed to do that. I married a wonderful woman and provided for her and myself. I put her through college. I landed a great career that I love. I overcame the fear-implanting cult and eventually broke free of its bonds. I have many victories to claim.

I am a bit scared when I realize that I am master over my own destiny. I still have some of those lingering feelings of doubt in myself. But no matter the problems, I survived it in the past. I will continue to survive.

Chapter 11

No "Happily Ever After"

Since successfully fading away from all involvement with Jehovah's Witnesses in 2007, they have virtually left me to myself. In early 2008, I was sitting at New York's La Guardia Airport waiting for a flight home when I spotted the Coordinator of the Body of Elders (C.O.B.E.) from my congregation waiting for the same flight. He was standing at the gate counter, probably trying to book an earlier flight as ours was delayed due to weather. I saw him make eye contact with me and then turn around hoping I didn't recognize him. He kept his back to me until he finished with the gate agent and then sat down in the crowd as far from me as a person could sit while still in the waiting area.

I found it silly and got up and walked right up to him to say hello. He nearly jumped out of his seat when I was standing over him with my hand extended for a friendly greeting. I didn't know that I had the power to make such a man cower. I believe he thought

that my "independent thinking" and avoiding the Kingdom Hall might be contagious.

I asked what he was doing in New York City. He said that he had attended a week-long school that Watch Tower had conducted and was on his way home. I asked if the school was about procedures and practical things and he said that was not the case at all. He said it was virtually entirely about spiritual matters and how to best stay close to Jehovah.

Well, I sat right down next to him and told him to tell me more. I imagine he knew what I was doing. I was giving him the full opportunity to share some of his bountiful spiritual feast with me. If a week at Watch Tower's headquarters built him up to stay close to Jehovah and I was still technically a member of the group he was assigned to oversee and keep spiritually strong, it should have been a great service of a minister to share some of that feast with me. Instead, he was clearly afraid to talk one-on-one. He said that he wasn't up to discussing it at the moment.

He really blew that chance. I sat next to him reading a book until we boarded the plane more than two hours later. The plane was half empty and he never attempted to come near my seat. When we landed and walked out of the terminal, I went to the left and he couldn't go to the right fast enough. One thing I know about Jehovah's Witnesses is that they hate to work alone. A pair of them can try to control a conversation, but one-on-one, it is harder. My C.O.B.E. already knew that I wouldn't back down to a circuit overseer and he was not even willing to try "encouraging" me to come back to the Kingdom Hall without another Witness as tag-team partner.

After that encounter, another year went by before he phoned me. He asked if I were willing to meet with two elders for a "shepherding call," what the elders call visits to members of their congregations to encourage them. This would be his tag-team. I simply said "No, thanks for asking though." That was it, the end of the conversation. I haven't been phoned again.

I ran into a lady from my congregation on the street recently. She tried to tell me how I should come back to the Kingdom Hall and not let the actions of men stumble me from serving God. I asked what she meant and she did her best to explain. It seems that the rumor going around about me, behind my wife's back, is that I had some huge argument with the elders and stopped going to meetings. I didn't bother to correct the rumor. I just smiled and thanked my Witness friend for her encouragement and gave her a quick hug. No matter why someone leaves, the members will always spread some story about it. This one allowed them to believe that a former elder still believed in Jehovah and His organization, but that his pride over trivial differences with men caused him to walk out. My best thought on that was "Whatever."

If I didn't make an attempt at offering some closure on my situation with Tasha, when you finish reading you may say that a final chapter is missing. So, what happened? In my opinion, when my wonderful story is made into a major motion picture, it won't say "Based on a true story" but rather "Inspired by a true story." That's because they will find it necessary to put the Hollywood ending into the story; the "happily ever after" part. That fictional ending might include a scene where I say something profound to Tasha and she agrees that "the truth" might not be the truth, and a summary sentence will be placed right before the credits reading something like this:

"Alan and Tasha Miller formerly disassociated from Jehovah's Witnesses two years later and have since helped dozens of other Jehovah's Witnesses to leave the Watch Tower organization."

That's Hollywood, though. Back in reality, the happy ending isn't always present. Tasha was still a Witness when I concluded this writing and I had no short-term hope that the situation would change. With her mother and sister deeper than ever in the religion of

Jehovah's Witnesses, Tasha may never want to realize the real truth, but I will never give up long-term hope. The same goes for my mother.

Neither of them will discuss the religion and its doctrines with me, but we have wonderful discussions about anything else. I continue to encourage them to think for themselves. They continue to warn me to be careful about what I read from "the world" when I state opinions that clash with their Watch Tower training.

It's kind of sad that Tasha and I lead part-time separate lives. She goes off to the Kingdom Hall to meet with Jehovah's Witnesses and I go off to meet recovering alcoholics and former Jehovah's Witnesses. Both of us would shudder to think of being in the other world. But we put that aside and tell each other "I love you" everyday. That's close enough to the Hollywood ending.

Tasha discovered this book on my laptop computer while I was still writing in Chapter 9. She simply wanted to know what it said about her. I told her to read it herself. Over the next few days, while I wasn't home, she snuck onto the computer and read it, but refuses to offer any comment.

I will never give up hope that Tasha will come out of the Witnesses one day. However, there are forces in this universe that are stronger than we can imagine. I used to think that actual truth was one of those forces. Unfortunately, truth only has the power people give to it. Each human on the face of the earth has their own balance (or imbalance) of beliefs, goals, and values, and must decide how much importance to assign to the various parts. For some with absolute conviction, mountains of evidence that they are wrong may be nothing to overcome. One of the greatest obstacles for people is admitting they are wrong. The longer they've been wrong, the greater that obstacle can become. My mother once stated that the most dangerous people are those that are wrong but convinced they are right. My stomach turned at the bitter irony.

If I had to choose the ending of a movie based on this book, I think I would have a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses approach me on the street offering me their WATCH TOWER magazine. They would go through their presentation and I would simply walk away and say, "No thanks, I am much happier now without it."

End