



“You asked me where I’m from, and that raises some questions as to how I ended up in Florence.

My parents lived in Indiana and were divorced right before I was born. I grew up with a single mom and three siblings. We were poor, but at six years old, you don’t really know what that means. All you care about is, does my family love me or not?’ And I definitely felt loved and secure and all those good things. So, life was good.

Then my mom started having some health complications. The connection between that and what follows is unclear to me, but at some point, in the midst of that, she began believing that she was hearing God speaking to her directly and answering

just really mundane questions. Not big decisions—just everyday questions of ‘should I do this’ or ‘should I do that?’

But what started out as somewhat benign—strange, maybe, but benign—gradually developed into something more significant. By 1996, the message she said she was receiving was, ‘You need to move your family to Arkansas where you’re going to find a home and meet a guy named Ken who will be your next husband.’

So, we all packed into a van—my mom, three siblings, and my aunt—and made our way to Arkansas.

What we didn’t find in Arkansas was a place to live or a man named Ken.

As a six-year-old, I was sad to leave what I knew at home, but excited to be on this road adventure. When I thought of Arkansas, I pictured a desert—like a ghost town. I thought the whole state of Arkansas was just sand. Of course, it wasn’t. At that time there was no questioning from me about whether what my mom was saying was true or real—as a child, you just assume the adults around you are telling the truth.

But something really significant happened through that experience—which is something like truth dying, or at least our ability to think truthfully. My mom claimed to have received this infallible prediction: we would move to Arkansas, find a home, meet Ken. None of that

came true, but there was never a moment of ‘Maybe something’s wrong because that didn’t happen, let’s rethink this.’ My mom just said that she had received some new messages and that things had changed. At that point, my family was sliding down a slope that was impossible to stop.

That sliding continued for about four years. Eventually, my mom gave up looking for a home and Ken in Arkansas, and we kept going south to Texas, where my grandparents lived. We moved in with them for a fairly short period of time, then moved in with my uncle and his new wife.

Somehow we all ended up in a mobile home in rural Texas and became increasingly secluded. The messages that my mom believed she was hearing became increasingly bizarre and ‘sophisticated.’

Rather than just random commands or messages, the group became formalized into a cult with dogmas and teachings. My mom would be sitting there talking about these messages and ideas, and the group developed from there. The aunt that traveled with us from Indiana to Texas was in it from the beginning. My mom’s brother, who was the owner of the home we moved into, was not—he sensed something was off in the beginning. His wife, though, came in and he followed not too far behind.

It’s worth saying that—at least from what I recall—my mom was not the strong, dominant or charismatic leader people typically think of when it comes to cults. She was very physically frail and suffered ongoing health problems. It seems inconceivable that someone like her could end up with the kind of control she had, but I think there was some combination psychological and spiritual things going on in the background.

It’s almost never the case that a cult like this forms and everyone’s lives get better as a result, instead invariably, a moral depravity starts to emerge. In the earlier years, there was a Christian foundation, my mom read the Bible and we grew up in a morally strict household. Part of the Christian ethic that my mom certainly was raised with—by her parents—is that you love others and you have compassion on those who are weak. There’s forgiveness, even when there’s wrongdoing. And obviously you don’t steal, hate, murder, lie—all of those things. But gradually, after the messages started, morality completely inverted to where anything that was wrong before was essentially encouraged now.

For example, both of my aunts, either said or did things that were out of line with the cult. They were both significantly abused—physically and emotionally for this. There was no

forgiveness or redemption. From that point on, they were both referred to with derogatory names and dehumanized. Just this past week I found a diary that I kept in 1998 and '99 that references them as “it,” as non-human.

The decline of the group continued, and everybody bought into it—everybody except for my oldest brother.

My mom took me and my siblings out of school when I was in third grade, so we hadn't been to school in years. But he went back. He sent himself to school, finished up high school and got a job, but was still living at home.

And so, one night my mom started talking about how he was going to—she was hearing now that he was going to die. And the assumption was that something was going to happen to him—a car accident or something. That didn't happen. And so then that changed to, “Well no, he's going to have to be killed.” And my mom believed that once that happened, it would be a catalyst for all the things that we were told were going to happen but never did.

And so a plan was made, and he was murdered by members of my family in 2000.

About six months later, my mom started saying, ‘Well actually, it's not just him—it's all of us.’ We had to commit to taking our own lives as a group, and we talked about various means of doing that.

Then, just in time, that changed to just my mother would need to commit suicide, and then she would come back to life in three days and usher in all the new things.

And then one night, she killed herself.

At that point, both my sister and I were holding two completely contradictory beliefs at the same time: the first, ‘This is really bad and we need to get out’ and secondly, ‘I hope in three days I'm going to see my mom again.’

Her not coming back was the turning point where everyone began to realize what she was saying wasn't real. That was March of 2001.

A few months passed, and then one of my aunts got invited to a Christian revival. She went one night, and after that she brought my sister and I. We went, and through that experience, we decided to talk to the pastor of that church. One night we met with him, and then that

immediately led to, calling the police. And at that point, things were finally sort of broken off—officially ended, in a way.

It felt like coming out of a dark cave. It was like I had spent years in complete darkness, and now, finally, there was light.

I was reunited with the Christian gospel—which I had known since I was very young, but had since come to hate. I left out that part—but we despised Christians. I remember at one point, sitting in a chair and just tearing pages out of a Bible I had found. For whatever reason, to us, Christians were bad people. But being reunited with that message just immediately struck me as the exact opposite of everything I had known. It was the light that brought contrast to the darkness.

In place of the hatred, there was love. In place of self-righteousness, was humility. In place of the lies, I had discovered something founded on truth.

The life and teachings of Jesus—his dying in our place to offer us forgiveness and life—immediately took me in and forever changed my life.

Of course, along the way there have also been many people in my life who have helped me in countless ways and to whom I am extremely grateful.

I can honestly say my story is not one of, 'Hey, I faced some incredible adversity, but I was just so strong and figured out that next step and how to climb that mountain and got myself out of it.'

There are people with that kind of story, and there's something great about those stories. But there's a limitation to them in that if you're not the person who has that kind of grit or inner strength or whatever, maybe that's not possible for you.

But I genuinely see my story—I think accurately—as one in which God took someone who was badly broken in many ways—spiritually, emotionally, morally, mentally— God took that boy and made him into something new.

And God can do that for anyone."

-Colton Cauthen, Owner, Jack's Books