



ATTENDING THE SPIRITUAL FAMINE

Two 'Apostates' Visit a Jehovah Witness Religious Convention

It started out as a great adventure. Two good ex-Jehovah Witness (JW) friends making a Sunday afternoon trip to another world in the summer sun. Our mission: to attend a District Convention of Jehovah's Witnesses and see if what we saw while being raised as JW children was an accurate perception. Did JWs still struggle to remain awake during the talks, was there still "seat saving," had the message changed at all, and were children still being beaten into submission? What we found was sometimes surprising, oftentimes predictable.

When we first arrived we couldn't find a public restroom where we could change into our proper attire (modest "sisterly" dresses down to our ankles), so we drove to a remote field to disrobe. Once we arrived at "The Ranch" we noted that Brenda's car (a cute little convertible) didn't seem very theocratic and we might be picked out as apostates. Darn, why didn't I rent a minivan? Undaunted, we drove in laughing like two hyenas. How exciting to be able to go to an assembly for the first time and *look forward to it*, knowing we could leave at any time! We wouldn't have to sit through three days of idle torture like those poor people inside.

The parking lot was nearly empty because we arrived 10 minutes late (gasp!)—after the main talk, "Godly Obedience," had begun. As we walked towards the entrance, we saw a man in a tie and suit sitting in his car smoking a cigarette. He quickly tried to hide it from us. Brenda had half a notion to jot down his license plate and turn him into one of the elders, but with empathy we "turned the other cheek." Heck, we probably could have used a cigarette when we were JWs too!

The next person we encountered was a young girl, perhaps seventeen. She was sitting outside the facility, completely alone. We were surprised to see her wearing a halter sundress (hmmm, didn't know that was allowed!). The frown on her face, radically dyed hair, and miserable look of isolation made us wonder if she was quite possibly a rebel in distress and soon-to-be a dissenter. We recognized the gloomy, pained look that infringed upon her youth. You go girl!

The mood as we walked inside was incredibly somber, save the loudspeaker which blared in every corner of the convention site. The "volunteers" who sat at tables at the entry looked less than enthusiastic. Most were young people. We surmised that they volunteered so they wouldn't be so confined to their seats in the auditorium. No one cracked a smile at us unless we smiled first. We thought we might have stood out—we didn't have name badges—although Darlene carried her New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures and Brenda carried a *Watchtower* magazine in her hand so we would blend in.

Trying to find a seat turned into an ordeal. As before, seats were saved six or more to a row and no one, and I mean no one, offered to allow us to sit down. We searched high and low through three sections of the stadium before we found two seats together while warding off the glares we received (for being late). As we tried to get to our seats in the middle of the loong row, no one



even moved or stood up to let us in. They left their belongings on the floor in front of them, forcing us to step over their belongings, legs, food. One lady even left her infant on the floor, forcing another JW to precariously step over the child! The baby rolled around on the concrete floor during the talk. We feared he/she could roll into the space between the cement floor and row of chairs below it. (I brazenly caught this on videotape until the mother swooped up her child.)

The spacey look on people's faces was quite amusing. At least six people in our immediate vicinity were about to fall asleep. You know the drill—eyes blinking closed slowly, head bobbing, chin on clenched fist, slowly rubbing forehead or eyes.

I videotaped a boy playing with his necktie (his only entertainment), poking his sister with the tip of it to get her attention. Of course, the sister gave the boy a killer stare, which instantly sucked the playfulness right out of him.

It was humorous to watch the audience clap to questions posed by the speaker, as though someone was holding a cue card up that said, "OK, clap now" (the clapping wasn't at all enthusiastic but rather obligatory).

I've paraphrased some of the speakers' comments and my comments appear in parentheses after each one:

- Serving Jehovah is even more important than family (duh, isn't this obvious by their shunning policy?)
- The qualities of Jehovah make us know what kind of person he is... (person?)
- We must imitate Jehovah with mercy and graciousness to attract others (They might want to rethink that disfellowshipping thing, then)
- We serve as a fine example in all we do (Yeah, right! No one would even offer us a seat!)
- *Jehovah will harass those who harass us. Will we feel bad? NO!* (This was a direct quote. It made us shudder; such an obvious display of Christian love!)
- The time (Armageddon) is just around the corner... (They could have just replayed a speech tape from thirty-five years ago and used it. It was the same regurgitated message we had heard as children.)
- There are two kinds of people in this world: robbers and victims. (JWs are the victims, obviously, and "worldly people" are the robbers. Everything is so black & white to them!)
- *Obedience to Jehovah's organization...*obedience, obedience, obedience (The word was drilled into one's head throughout the talk multiple times.)

Referring to Question #12 of their study, the speaker asked:

How should Jehovah's exacting exclusive devotion have affected Israel? He then answered, It involved every aspect of their lives: their dress, their grooming, their thinking, their conduct, their worship; every part of their lives was to be affected by this command. Doesn't this sound familiar to our dedication to Jehovah today?...Now did that mean that their personal freedom was subdued? They had no individuality and they were suppressed in some way? No, it did not!



At least he acknowledged how every part of their lives were consumed, but his subsequent question totally contradicted the first few statements. I'm not sure how you can live with "every aspect of (your) lives affected" and not be suppressed, not lose some individuality. I wish I could have asked him to elaborate how this was possible.

Another speaker stated:

As long as we are teachable, we can be usable in Jehovah God's service. As soon as we become unteachable, we become unusable.

Unusable? Is that all we as humans want to strive to be is "usable"? What of a developmentally delayed adult? Are they also unusable and essentially useless?

We learned 4,590 people attended (including us two apostates; and yes, there were young "brothers" walking up and down the stairs counting heads) and 38 people were baptized that weekend; 20 "brothers" and 18 "sisters." When the speaker said the brothers were gaining on the sisters, everyone laughed. It was the only laughter we heard in nearly two hours of somberness. It wasn't even a funny comment, really, but when you are physically and emotionally restrained for so many hours, you might find humor in anything! It's called delirium.

Darlene suffered through a blister so we could walk around the hallway and watch two "brothers" with earpieces, who we thought to be JW security, follow our every move. One came right up behind Darlene and stood there to see if he could hear what we were whispering to each other. No personal boundaries! Others patrolled the hallways holding up signs that said, "Quiet please," so no one would communicate. For a moment I thought I was back in elementary school. Such control! The little girl inside of me who had been forced for nine years to sit stoically at all assemblies desperately wanted to run through the hallway and scream, "I won't be silenced and you can't make me!" Nah, nah, nah, nah.

During the song, we stood and hummed Rock and Roll songs or anything we could think of to keep pace with the tired old music they've played for decades. The people who were nodding off were probably grateful to have any movement rejuvenate them.

Fortunately, we saw only few children scolded or restrained on a parent's lap (and no beatings—at least not there), so the society may have cracked down on all the physical child abuse at assemblies (or perhaps kids just get it when they get home). Most kids had fallen asleep, draped across the chair like misshapen lumps of Playdough. One mother did box her toddler into a corner between a wall and trashcan and get into his face and "scream" under her breath: "Knock it off--now!" (Great bullying tactic, mom.) Another man took his screaming, thrashing, clearly exasperated child outside. Darlene posed in the foreground and waved so Brenda could take "beautiful shots of the Rocky Mountains," when in actuality she was taking video of the father and wailing child. Alas, he became suspicious of our video camera and moved inside with his unruly but totally normal child.

Out of the Cocoon

Toward the end of the day, we noticed sisters in very high heels heavily guarding the Worldwide Work contribution boxes, placed strategically near all exits (hmm...perhaps one must pay in order to be able to leave?). The boxes were hefty—approximately 3 ft tall x 2 ft wide. The Watchtower sure must have expected a lot of moo-la!



I remarked to my friend that I wished I had written a check payable to “Jehovah God *only*” for \$6.66 and slipped it into the contribution box, just to see if the (Watchtower) society would cash it. Next time I will.

We left some ex-JW Meetup cards (www.meetup.com) in the women’s restrooms before we left. We wondered if anyone would even touch them to throw them in the trash. The paper could be possessed by demons, you know!

Not far from the convention center, we saw a license plate with the letters “JWS” on it. Honestly, they might as well drape a Watchtower bulls eye around their necks. Imagine the horror their child(ren) must feel with that public display. I was so excited about the license plate idea, though, I might just have to look into getting one that says “JW apostate.” On the way home we stopped off at a McDonald’s where we saw several JWs strutting through, still wearing their name badges like badges of honor and neckties that choked the smiles right off their faces.

As we drove with the top down in casual attire and felt the sun’s rays warming our naturally happy faces, we laughed aloud with disbelief about how little had changed in over thirty years. The boring, monotone talks and funeral-like atmosphere validated everything we had seen and felt as children. Our perceptions as children were totally accurate.

Oh, to be free! There’s nothing like it.

(OK...You Can Clap *Now*)

©Brenda Lee, 2005, author “Out of the Cocoon: A Young Woman’s Courageous Flight from the Grip of a Religious Cult,” www.outofthecocoon.net