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## Called To Be Apart

EMILY ROGERS

**M**y mother believed in miracles. She believed that faith could move mountains, that there is a divine plan for the universe, that Jesus never fails. My mother believed that if she was the best little girl in the world, nothing bad would ever happen to her. Most of all, my mother believed in creation — not just that God created the world, which went without saying, but that God’s followers could create their own world in the midst of this one, like the one she created for herself and her family, a mighty fortress where “they” could never hurt us.

In the 1960s it seemed to us that “they” were taking over the world. The perceived threat made our microcosmic community ever more vigilant and separatist. Over Sunday roast-beef dinners after church, the grown-ups complained about “rabble-rousers,” but I had only a vague idea who they were talking about. I may have grown up in the sixties, but the sixties were not a part of my childhood. “We are called,” said my mother, “to be apart.”

During my grade-school years, my little brother Danny and I went to the dentist in Seattle’s university district, which teemed with faded, unisex teenagers, long-haired and glassy-eyed, clad in torn jeans and foreign-looking jewelry. On the

bus, Mom would point out the window and mutter, “Oh, good night, what’s wrong with that fellow? Be sure you never look like that.” We never went to the university district for any other purpose, and seeing these unkempt people, these *bad* people, made going to the dentist a cheap thrill.

It didn’t take much to thrill us. Mom thought *The Brady Bunch* was “nasty” because it showed a husband and wife reading the newspaper in the same bed. In later years, Mom would rage against the racy lyrics of John Denver, who sang, “Let me lay down beside you.”

One day our second-grade class was sent home early because somebody named Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed. I had no idea who he was. Grandma told us he had something to do with the black children who had arrived at our school by bus on the day I’d started first grade. Before that, the only black people I’d ever seen in our neighborhood were the men who came every Tuesday morning at seven to pick up our garbage. I surmised that King had something to do with the new kids and the gargagemen, and I knew that we were supposed to love them, as we had to love everybody, because Jesus did: “Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.” We should love King, too, Grandma said, and pray for his soul,

even though he was a “card-carrying Communist.”

My operative definition of a Communist — gleaned from sermons, news broadcasts, and Sunday-dinner conversations — was “somebody who doesn’t believe in God.” I always pictured King holding a little card saying, “I don’t believe in God.” I was confused when I heard a reporter refer to him as “the Reverend.” I felt bad knowing he had gone to the lake of fire and brimstone. Being shot to death seemed like punishment enough.

So the sixties happened, but not to me. “We are *in* the world,” Mom said, mantra-like, “but not *of* the world.” We were different. And we liked it that way. We liked being special, the salt of the earth, the city on a hill, the light that refused to hide under a bushel. We were proud of not belonging. For in our hearts, we knew we were better than “they” were. *They* might pursue shallow goals like color television sets and “keeping up with the Joneses.” *We* knew better: *Store up for yourselves not treasures on this earth.* *They* could be easily led into Satan’s endless labyrinth of lies: women’s lib, world peace, free love. *We* remembered our roots, our heritage, the sacrifices made by those who came before. “It was good for our mothers, / and it’s good enough for me,” we sang. We sang a lot. Sometimes it seemed all we did was sing. But we never moved while singing, which would be dangerously close to dancing, one of the worst sins of all.

It was easy to differentiate “us” from “them.” *They* danced, smoked, drank, swore, and went bowling and to the movies. *They* played cards, listened to popular music, and watched television. (Debates occasionally erupted within our congregation over whether merely possessing a television set was a compromise with the devil; the intensity of these disputes was equaled only by that of the annual discussions of whether a Christian Christmas celebration could properly include Santa Claus.)

I was devastated the day I discovered a neighbor girl shuffling a deck of playing cards. Such cards, I was told, contained occult images; even to touch a deck made it possible for demons to enter your body and possess you.

“You should witness to your friend,” my Sunday-school teacher advised me.

But I was uncomfortable inviting classmates to church. I knew their eternal salvation hinged on whether I had the courage to invite them, but how could I possibly reveal to outsiders the strange little world I inhabited?

There were other, more subtle signs that someone wasn’t saved — like singing off key. “When you’re saved,” Pastor Bob said, “the Lord gives you the gift of song.” The salvation of anyone lacking in musical ability was highly suspect. No problem for anyone on Mom’s side of the family. She sang and played the organ; my older half-sister Amanda sang and played piano and violin. Mom’s brother Milton directed the choir. My four cousins sang in close harmony worthy of a barbershop quartet. As for me, I played my first song on the piano by ear when I was three, picking out the notes with my pointer finger after listening to Amanda and my cousins rehearse for a church

performance: “Surely goodness and mercy / shall follow me / all the days / all the days of my life.” I liked the song so well that when Amanda gave me a pair of identical dolls, I named them Shirley Goodness and Ann Mercy.

Dad, on the other hand, was tone-deaf. When my father sang, the sound resembled the chanting of medieval monks. He chose to stay silent, knowing he brought enough ridicule upon himself simply by existing. You see, my father was *foreign*.

“You can’t help what you’re born with,” Grandma would say, “but you can help what you die with.” This must have come as welcome news to my dad, who could not help having been born in India, one of those countries so lost that we were obligated to send missionaries to it. Dad had been raised in a family of mismatched half-castes: people of mixed British and Indian ancestry. His father was an Anglican, his mother a Catholic who visited Hindu astrologers on her way home from confession, paying them to remove the curses from her jinxed half-breed family — “just in case those Hindu fellows turn out to be right about Shiva,” she said.

No, Dad could not help any of that. But at least he’d had the good sense to convert to our church after falling in love with my mom, and to become an American citizen. “Becoming American is just like being born again,” Mom said. “You can wipe out whatever you were before and start fresh. You don’t look back.”

*Old things are washed away. All things become new.*

I memorized a lot of Bible verses. Every year, our Sunday school gave a prize to the child who’d memorized the most, and I collected prizes. This didn’t make me popular with the other kids in church, even though the party line was that there were no cliques in our church, because “there are no cliques in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

I followed the rules of our world well, probably as well as anyone did — until the day of the big revival meeting when I was eight. I remember the evangelist demanding that we bow our heads and close our eyes: “Every single one of you. No one looking around. No one.” *He can’t tell you what to do*, I thought to myself. *He’s not your dad*. I opened my eyes and looked around the stadium. Thousands of grown-ups had all bowed their heads, just because this man had told them to. All except my father. His eyes were open.

Dad never told Mom that he’d caught me peeking during prayer, and I never ratted on him. From then on, whenever the congregation prayed, I’d keep my eyes open. Logic told me I couldn’t get in trouble, because the only way people would know I had peeked was if they were peeking, too.

My next act of mutiny was to stop singing. I would hold the hymnal and mouth the words soundlessly. “I don’t know what’s gotten into that girl,” Mom would say. “*We know* she’s musical.” The relatives marveled at my failure to sing. Since I could play virtually any tune by ear, I was obviously not tone-deaf. At least I hadn’t inherited *that* from my father’s side, though they believed I had inherited almost everything else from him: my stubbornness, my inability to remain silent, my distaste for religious fervor, my tendency to bronze quickly in

the summer. (“You might want to keep her out of the sun,” I’d hear from time to time. “We wouldn’t want people to think she was from somewhere else.”)

My list of vices lengthened as I grew older. Our Sunday-school teachers told us tales, illustrated with felt cutouts stuck to an easel, of heathens in hot, faraway lands, and of the missionaries who labored heroically to save them.

“Millions belong to false religions,” said Mrs. Hubbard. “Their children are brainwashed. They don’t even *know* the Good News about Jesus! If we don’t tell them, who will?”

One day I raised my hand. “Mrs. Hubbard?”

“Yes?” she said, beaming. I was her prize student because of my ability to memorize Bible verses.

“If they don’t know about Jesus in the first place, then isn’t it kind of mean for God to send them to hell? And what about the people who were born before Jesus even showed up? And what about the ones who died before the missionaries got there? How could it be their fault if they didn’t even know?”

After a pause, Mrs. Hubbard responded, “Well, some people who study the Bible believe that those who haven’t heard the Good News get a second chance right after they die. But those who hear the truth and reject it are most certainly condemned.”

“In that case,” I said, “wouldn’t they be better off if we didn’t send missionaries in the first place?”

That was the first time a Sunday-school teacher sent a note home to my parents.

The notes multiplied along with my sins:

“Today your daughter said that if God looks only on the inside, not the outside, we should be able to come to church in our swimsuits.”

“Today your daughter said it wasn’t fair for Anne Frank to go to hell, because it’s not fair for the Nazis and their victims to end up in the same place.”

“Your daughter has been reading parts of the Bible that are inappropriate for children and telling the other kids about it.” (“The king desires no marriage present except a hundred foreskins of the Philistines.”)

At my grade school, I encountered a different dilemma. Science forced me to learn falsehoods: that dinosaurs existed, that the world is billions of years old, and so on. I was confused, because I knew my mother expected me to get straight A’s *and* resist the devil’s lies. I asked her how I should handle science class.

“Memorize it,” she said, “but don’t believe it.”

I thought my mother was a genius: some things can enter your mind without penetrating your soul.

**O**ne advantage of being raised fundamentalist is that it makes the task of adolescent rebellion much less dangerous. Whereas my classmates had to drop acid to get attention, all I had to do was insist on going to the prom.

“Can’t you just go out for a nice dinner and come back home?” Mom begged.

I thrust my camera into her hand. “Take the picture, Mom.”

“But I don’t want to remember this!” she whined.

“Most moms *like* taking pictures of their daughters dressed for the prom,” I said. “Why can’t you just be normal?”

Mom reluctantly snapped two pictures and spent the evening praying for my soul while my boyfriend and I danced to “Disco Inferno.”

Two years later, I walked down the aisle of the family church, wearing a long white gown and holding my father’s arm. The boy in the prom pictures waited for me at the altar. It must have appeared a conservative ceremony to anyone watching, but I knew what it really was: an insurrection. Entering into the sacred institution of marriage was the only way I could escape the smothering restrictions of home. My husband and I ran through a shower of confetti into a van covered with toilet paper and shaving cream. We drove off, toward a life of choices and freedom.

Emotionally, I had left the church long before. It had happened incrementally. I never had the kind of religious experience that everyone around me seemed to be having — and, I must admit, I wanted it. I came to believe that everyone was faking it, fooling the world, but most of all fooling themselves. Mom wondered if my defection was the fault of Dad’s relatives: English and Indians, Catholics and Anglicans, agnostics and drug smugglers. Or perhaps, she thought, it was the Pastor Paul scandal: during my senior year of high school, nude photos were found of Pastor Paul and his secretary, spanning five years and numerous sexual positions. (The last we heard of the pastor, he was performing quickie marriages in Vegas.)

Mom’s speculations were all wrong. Even before poor Paul was caught *in flagrante delicto*, I was no longer surprised that Christians had genitalia and the urges that accompany them. There were enough other inconsistencies to keep me awake at night, such as why we didn’t give coins to street people when the Bible clearly states, “Sell all you have and give the money to the poor.” Or why we had to sit still when the Psalms say, “Dance before the Lord.” Or why wives had to submit to their husbands when the Bible says, “In Christ there is no male nor female.” I wonder at times whether I left the church because I didn’t believe its teachings, or because I did.

*(end of excerpt)*