FAITH

BREAKING AWAY

A weekend retreat for former fundamentalists gives them strength to rebuild their lives

BY ANNE BOKMA

ILLUSTRATION BY SANDRA DIONISI

As a kid, Kevin* was taught that everything in secular culture was evil. "Even the Care Bears were demonic," he says. A native of Ottawa, he went to a Pentecostal church twice on Sundays and attended a mid-week youth program where he learned about good "Christian character." At age seven, he was evangelizing door-to-door. TV was forbidden, and the only acceptable songs were ones that praised God. "We were always taught to be on our guard because the devil was actively pursuing our soul."

He learned to be frightened of hell, but nothing scared him more than the ever-present threat of the Rapture. He was told that true believers would be swept up into heaven during this great end-times event. Everyone else would be left behind to suffer the seven-year reign of terror, known as the tribulation, when the Antichrist would behead anyone who didn't receive "the mark of the beast." ▶

**Names and identifying details of all retreat participants have been altered at their request.*

DEVOUT AND OFTEN WELL-INTENTIONED PARENTS IN THESE COMMUNITIES FEEL JUSTIFIED IN THEIR USE OF POWER TACTICS TO BRAINWASH THEIR CHILDREN INTO BELIEF.

Like a lot of Pentecostal kids, Kevin had watched *A Thief in the Night*, a 1972 film about a young woman who wakes up to a radio broadcast announcing the disappearance of millions. She finds that her family has gone to heaven without her. The movie's apocalyptic theology played into every child's worst fear of abandonment and has been credited with terrifying a generation of evangelical kids into accepting Jesus at altar calls strategically held right after screenings.

"I'm 44, and that film still bothers me," says Kevin. He recalls a particularly stressful night as a young teenager when his parents were out late and he convinced himself the Rapture had occurred and he'd been left behind. "I got out the church directory and looked up the number of the family in our church who I thought was the most religious. When someone answered, I hung up. I was so relieved it hadn't happened."

Kevin is one of a dozen participants at Journey Free, a retreat held this past September in San Francisco. The four days are designed to help people recovering from authoritarian religions to shake off the shackles of guilt, shame and fear. The gathering is evenly divided between men and women who range in age from their 30s to 60s, and the setting is sublime — a stunning, multimillion-dollar home with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the bay. It's owned by a tech-industry employee and former retreat participant who offered to play host.

Journey Free mainly attracts former evangelical Christians, but also ex-Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics and Orthodox Jews. Some have just recently left the faith, but others departed decades ago and are still haunted by their past.

Kevin says his religious indoctrination left him ill-equipped for the responsibilities of adulthood. He didn't even plan for the future. What was the point? Jesus was supposed to return before he reached 20. He's also experienced episodes of depression and a suicide attempt. "I was raised to believe I was broken and in need of redemption. I thought I was bad and I was always going to be bad," he says. "I feel like life was robbed from me, that my childhood was taken away."

Psychologist Marlene Winell leads these retreats, which happen once or twice a year. She is the author of *Leaving the Fold: A Guide for Former Fundamentalists and Others Leaving Their Religion*, and she coined the term religious trauma syndrome (RTS). Winell says its symptoms closely resemble those of post-traumatic stress disorder (such as intense fear and issues around self-worth). She's been urging the mental health community to take it seriously for nearly 30 years.

"Even in the commonly used list of psychosocial stressors, amidst all the change and loss and disruption, there is no mention of losing one's religion," Winell writes in an article for a British psychotherapy association. "Yet it can be the biggest crisis ever faced. This is important for us [as therapists] because people are leaving the ranks of traditional religious groups in record numbers and they are reporting real suffering."

Winell isn't anti-religion so much as anti-dogma. The religious communities that cause trauma, she says, are those that prevent people from thinking for themselves and demand obedience — as opposed to those that respect differences and allow members to feel empowered as individuals. Mind control and emotional abuse may be most closely associated with cults, but "fear-based apocalyptic thinking" is a tactic that's also employed by strict religions where conformity is a must. Devout and often well-intentioned parents in these communities feel justified in their use of power tactics to brainwash their children into belief.

"No matter how altruistic its announcements, a rigid religion will produce judgment, because there will always be 'others' who believe differently," says Winell in her book. "Judgment leads to discrimination and, all too often, to persecution. Dogma can never bring us together to understand each other in our shared humanity."

Emily, a Chicago economist in her 30s, has an intimate understanding of how dogma can deepen division. She hails from a midwestern Baptist family who believes voting Republican is essential to salvation. (In the United States, the political strength of the Christian right was instrumental in President Donald Trump's 2016 election.) The "Antichrist guessing game" is popular in Emily's family. "Is it Obama? Is it Hillary? Whoever it is, you can be sure it's a Democrat," she says.

As a member of the Republican party's youth wing, Emily wanted to be a politician like former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and lead her country into the next war. But then she watched the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* and started to question everything she'd been taught. "I didn't know anything about climate change. . . . I was raised with visions of the apocalypse," says Emily,

LEFT: The daughter of missionaries, Marlene Winell grew up wanting to be an ideal Christian. RIGHT: Now 66, she leads retreats in San Francisco for former fundamentalists.

Courtesy of Marlene Winell; Marissa Palmer

who now views that end times prediction as a metaphor for the environmental devastation of the planet.

When she left her religion, her family was angry. "It was like a bomb went off," she remembers. "If you deviate, it's social destruction." One night, she awoke to find her mother at her bedside weeping and asking God to fight the demons that were leading Emily astray. Emily says she couldn't escape the idea that she was "a bad girl."

That kind of deep-seated shame is a legacy of harmful religion and represents "a turning against the self," says Winell. She observes that self-compassion is difficult for those who have had the doctrine of original sin drummed into them from birth. "Recovering from this unloving assumption is perhaps the core task when you leave the fold," she wrote. "It is also a discovery of great joy — to permit unconditional love for yourself and others."

Winell, 66, has made it her life's work to help others find that kind of love. The daughter of Pentecostal missionaries, she grew up wanting to be to be an ideal Christian. She attended a private religious boarding school where she spoke in tongues and wrote about topics such as "Why Dancing is Wrong." She began to question her beliefs in university where she met non-Christians who seemed like perfectly good people.

"Leaving the fold was then a long and wrenching process which tore at the fabric of my existence," she explains in her book. "'Losing' God was like losing parents. Family and friends were never the same afterwards, and I no longer had a readily available community. The magnitude of the reconstruction only dawned on me some ten years later. Every aspect of my life had to be reexamined, healed and redesigned. Feeling like a small child, I had to be born again in a very different way and learn to be a grown-up in this world."

That's exactly what the religious castaways who attend her retreats are hoping for: to figure out how to reconstruct their lives and be born anew. They were taught that their earthly life isn't as important as the one in paradise; to fear, rather than love, God; to be in the world, but not of the world; and to have faith like a child, unquestioning. Now, they are done with giving their lives over to the authority of God, church and family. They want to be the boss of themselves.

It's not an easy transition. For many, church was a place of shared values and rituals that gave life structure. When that foundation slips away, they can feel like bereft children who have lost the safety of a spiritual community and the approval of their mortal family. What helps is realizing they aren't alone, says Winell. "One of the reasons people like these retreats so much is because they have been lonely . . . with having changed so much and not knowing people who they can talk to with any kind of freedom."

During the retreat, participants are given about 20 minutes each to share their stories. As they talk, common themes quickly emerge: a preponderance of mental health issues, repressed emotions, frequent nightmares, guilt around sexuality and crushingly low self-esteem marked by

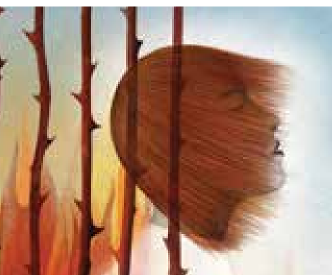
feelings of worthlessness and unlovability. Almost everyone admits to a perfectionistic streak, which isn't surprising when you're told to be like Jesus.

Andy, a New York music industry executive raised in his uncle's church, says he was always expected to project positivity. His family believed negative emotions were from Satan. "If I ever cried, I was told, 'Fix your face,'" he says.

Edgar, a man in his 60s who left the southern Baptist church many years ago, says religion "scared the hell into me." He dreaded getting into bed as a child because he was convinced the devil — "Old Scratch" as his mother called him — was under it. He's had a lifetime of nightmares. "Inside, I'm still a terrified little boy. Intellectually, I know it's a bunch of crap, but it still affects me."

She had always viewed her parents as loving people, but they were devastated when she told them she is gay. "It would have been easier for them if I'd killed myself," says Cecile. She points out that three years before, the Mormon church ruled that any child of gay parents cannot be baptized until they are 18, at which time they must renounce their family's "lifestyle." Cecile recently married her wife. Her parents didn't come to the wedding. She still struggles with depression but is realizing, "I'm a good person, and I'm not going to hell."

Clive, a teacher and ex-Morman, doesn't socialize much with the other participants and is last to share his story. When he finally breaks his silence, he reveals that he was part of a study on gay conversion therapy at a private



'I FEEL GUILTY IF THERE'S ANYTHING I LIKE ABOUT MYSELF. I WAS TAUGHT ANY TALENT OR GIFT I HAD WAS SUPPOSED TO BE FOR THE GLORY OF GOD.'

institution owned by the Mormon church. He was jolted with painful electric shocks to his penis while viewing images of men. It was believed that the therapy would change his sexual orientation. It didn't — Clive is married to a man — but it did scar him for life.

The next day, Clive is gone. No one is certain why he left, but there's the sense that more than 40 years later, it's still hard for him to share his story.

Peter, an ex-Catholic from Maine, confesses that he's always lived with the feeling "of not being good enough." People nod sympathetically.

Their feelings of repression, fear and inadequacy are compounded by rejection from their families. Felicity, a nurse from the Midwest, grew up in a Christian fellowship. She was close with her family members until she told them she was curious to explore other religions — she was shunned. On a visit home, her baby things and every gift she'd given her mother were packed up for her to take away, essentially erasing her existence. "I love you, but I can't have anything to do with you," her mother told her. Recounting this, Felicity breaks down in tears.

Fundamentalist faiths require that children become secondary to a greater good, explains Winell. "In the hierarchy of love, God is at the top." The Biblical precedent was set by Abraham, whose loyalty to God trumped any reluctance to bind his son to an altar and kill him.

Negotiating new relationships with family after leaving hardcore religions is challenging. Former believers may have a superficial connection or, rarely, bridged their differences and come to an uneasy but loving truce. "Sometimes, having a shallow relationship is better than nothing" says Winell. What's important is to "take care of yourself well enough so you are not so fragile and not so needy of their approval."

For others, any kind of familial relationship is a struggle, especially when the wounds cut deep. That's the case for Cecile, an ex-Mormon at the retreat. A California social worker with a long history of depression, she says she always wanted to be perfect "because that's what it took to enter the gates of heaven." At 20, she fell in love with another woman and felt so terrible about the attraction that she donated her kidney to a stranger to compensate for her guilt.

Not everyone at the retreat is Christian. Rebecca is an Orthodox Jew from New York City who is living a double life. At home, she wears a wig and modest clothing, keeps kosher and observes Shabbat. Here, she wears snug-fitting jeans, bright red lipstick and lets her thick, curly hair fall freely past her shoulders. Rebecca entered into an arranged marriage at 18 and bore eight children before she was 40. "Living in the shadow of the Holocaust, it was on us to repopulate the Jewish population," she says.

Domestic life was dominated by rules and rituals, including a monthly mikveh bath following the end of her period, a process she considered humiliating since it involved a rabbi inspecting a white cloth, called a *bedikah*, that she had to use to prove menstruation had ceased. When she left her husband several years ago, she took her youngest kids with her, but the terms of her divorce agreement demand that she keep an Orthodox home. She lives in fear of losing her children. "It's a struggle to raise my kids in a religious environment when I don't practise it myself," says Rebecca. "I'm not open at home or with the world."

Throughout the retreat, Winell introduces a series of exercises designed to boost self-esteem and generate self-compassion. When she instructs the group to make a

list of 25 things they like about themselves, several find it difficult. Felicity, the nurse from the Midwest, can only come up with four, and one of them is, "I make a good cup of coffee." Music executive Andy has a similar challenge: "I feel guilty if there's anything I like about myself. I was taught any talent or gift I had was supposed to be for the glory of God."

In her book, Winell writes that a poor sense of self is common because you tend to treat yourself how you were treated as a child. Imagining themselves as children can make self-love a little easier, says Winell as she conducts a guided meditation in which participants are encouraged to go back in time and take care of the child they once were. She tells them to picture their inner adult removing their little-kid self from their strict religious environment and bringing them into a new, loving home. "You can abandon the impossible task of changing what has already happened or making people love you in ways they could not," she writes. "Taking charge of your own life is central to recovery from religious indoctrination."

She details the specifics of that indoctrination with a chart. Arrows point to an illustration of a child's head, indicating the various brainwashing strategies that interfere with healthy development. They include: toxic doctrines that create fear, isolation from the secular culture, mistrust of science and psychology, and impossible expectations. All of this leads to repressed critical thinking.

In the most powerful exercise, Winell lays a large blanket on the floor and everyone takes a turn laying down to be tenderly swaddled like a baby. Winell places her hand on each head and whispers cooing words: "We're so glad you're here. Welcome to the world. You're so beautiful." The group lifts each person off the ground and gently sways them back and forth while adding their own encouragement: "You're so strong. You are going to be okay."

Andy, who was raised to express only positive emotion, is the first to be rocked. Within seconds, his eyes squeeze shut and his chest heaves with sobs. Everyone cries when they are in the blanket. The rocking ritual represents a sacred act of unconditional acceptance as each person experiences being reborn into this loving circle. "A major step in your recovery is to be able to accept that you are an innocent and basically good being," writes Winell.

After the tears, there is laughter. One night during the retreat, a talent show is held with ukulele playing, storytelling, a poetry reading and a comedy sketch. There's also a wine tasting and dancing — the type of stuff frowned upon by many strict religions.

And while no one here seems nostalgic for their former churchgoing life, some are able to excavate a few nuggets from the rubble. One mentions the overseas missions that gave her opportunities to serve. Someone chimes in that her religious indoctrination has allowed her to consistently beat her husband in "The Bible" category on *Jeopardy!*

Several participants note that one of the things they miss most about their former life is singing with others. So it seems appropriate that the retreat ends in song. Instead of gospel tunes about being washed in the blood of the lamb or meeting on that beautiful shore, the selections include *You've Got a Friend*, *What a Wonderful World* and *I Can See Clearly Now*. It feels as holy as a hymn sing.

The group gathers in a circle, and Winell congratulates everyone for having the courage to "discard their confining religions" and free their minds from "cages made in churches." There are hugs all around. These sojourners are no longer foreign to each other. They have found companions on their path to religious freedom, and their shared experience has fortified them to move forward.

Winell continues with a benediction: "It is no gentle thing to have the ground give way until there is nowhere to stand. You have lost yourself, lost the others you thought you knew and lost your way. . . This much is true: each of you must create your life. You have had much taken from you, and it must all be reclaimed."

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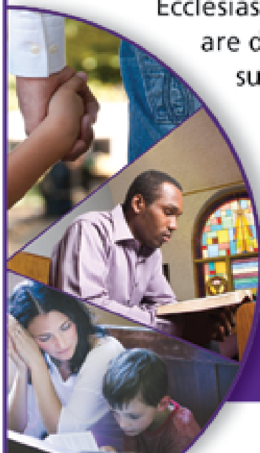

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