



Confronting Witness Relatives

By Gary Busselman

"Once you accept that someone else is speaking for God, to doubt that source is the same as doubting God," (Sherry Veitenheimer, *The Spokane Spokesman*, Spokane, WA, Oct. 5th 1996, "Ex-Jehovah's Witnesses Tackle Custody Issue" By Kelly McBride, p. B1 & B4)

Once a potential recruit comes to actually believe that the Watchtower (Jehovah's Witnesses) does indeed speak for God and is actually his "only" earthly channel of communication with all the people on the planet, as they boldly claim, and that to please God, they have to become one of Jehovah's Witnesses, go door to door recruiting new group members and raising funds for the group leaders, they have become loyal members of the group and will stay such until they are treated so badly that they leave, or until they commit some infraction of one of the many written and unwritten rules and are "kicked out of the kingdom" by the local elders.

Many of us were treated badly, given incredibly tragic medical advice, expelled from the group, marked, snubbed, and shunned. Some of us have recovered. Many of us are in the process of recovery. A few of us stick around to try to help others who want to know how we recovered. We have found that our help has been most beneficial to those who themselves seek our assistance. Conversely, we have also found that our efforts are almost always badly received by people who do not desire our type of help.

Sometimes when we victims of totalistic groups like the Watchtower Society recognize what happened to us and our healing goes into the rapid gathering and processing of information phase, we get an overwhelming urge to try out our newfound realizations on our Witness relatives and acquaintances. For many of us this has backfired, or at least had unpredicted results. Results not always beneficial to our mental wellness and happiness. Results also radical in that they uncovered sometimes long-buried resentments and unhealed wounds that we were amazed to discover still existed. Old hurts popped to the surface. We were often baffled by their very existence, let alone the intensity and vividness with which they returned. Many of them, it seems, were not closely related to the Watchtower Society at all.

My encounters with my parents, brother, in-laws, and all other JWs who I ever exposed to involuntary information likely to cause a disconfirmation, was exactly the same. JWs are very well trained to kill the messenger if they don't like the message. In my experience, they don't like information that might cause their pseudo-personality and their apseudo-personality to meet. Sort of like a surprise mirror to a very obese person who unrealistically imagines themselves as slim and trim.

Two things are suddenly at risk. (1) The mirror; and (2) The person responsible for introducing the mirror.

My meetings with JW relatives all went exactly the same. They: (1) Personally attacked me, (2) Perceived the information as a specific attack on them personally, (3) Discredited the information itself without looking at it (even Watchtower publications), (4) Discredited the *source* of the information; and (5) Did whatever was necessary to drive me away from them including calling names and screaming threats.

My Witness father-in-law said, "Gary, you don't know everything," when I showed him that *The Watchtower* had changed the organ transplant doctrine in 1980, and other disconfirming information that he had not asked me for. Due to overwhelming evidence, I had to agree that I do not know everything. The issue now was not the information that I had just showed to him, but rather, whether I know "everything" or not. That is a non-issue, but it served as a conversation stopper and effectively served to discredit me in his mind. How could he accept information from someone who just conceded that he didn't know everything? He couldn't and he didn't. Later in my own home his personal attack became so invasive and personal that I asked him not to come back. To this day he has never tried to make any amends for his outrageous behavior.

In 1992 I went to see my brother who lives 1100 miles away. I had heard that he was not attending Witness group meetings anymore and I thought that this meant that he was "questioning" the organization. Wrong! Big time wrong! I had been there about five hours. He and I were talking privately for about the last hour and a half. I was telling him about our mother's possible prescription-drug abuse, and about my experience of leaving the Watchtower Society, when he stopped me and said: "Nobody can talk about anything in my house that I don't agree with or I ask them to leave, and that includes you." I just stood there and looked at him with my mouth open for a few seconds. He became red-faced and appeared very agitated. Then he gave me the big one when he said: "You represent everything in the world that I hate." I was rocked by that. Plus I was afraid of him. I happen to be aware that he has a history of being prone to violent behavior. I went downstairs and got my travel bag and came back up. He was standing in exactly the same spot. He said, "What are you doing?" I told him that coming there had been a mistake, that I love him and I gave him a hug. (Like hugging a post) I left and I have not seen or heard from him since. In 1995 Nancy and I were in his home town overnight and Nancy called his wife, Vicky, to see if they wanted to meet us for coffee or something and they said no. I have sent him by mail a copy of an old photo or a copy of the local weather report every six months or so since 1995, just to remind him that the door is open on my side. I think I'll probably quit that. It's not any fun, plus, it seems to be a waste of time and money.

The last time I saw my Witness parents, I questioned the Watchtower organization's climate relative to the mental health of the members, and my one Witness son in particular. To try to wound me and drive me away, my mother told me: "If we had known you were unhappy as a child, we'd have put you in a foster home." She then went into a violent screaming fit that was directed at me, including swearing, threats, and door slamming. That was early 1995, fully two years ago and I have not heard from them since. Again, they have made no attempt to make amends to me. I have written them a letter and have sent very non-threatening mail but they have made no attempt to contact me. There too, I think I'll quit trying to contact them. It's been a waste of time and very unpleasant.

I saw a side to some of the Witnesses and Witness relatives that I never knew existed and that I never want to see again. The experience changed my agenda somewhat. Some of those people I had wanted to help. Now, after the experience of exposing them to involuntary disconfirming information about their concept of God (The Watchtower Society) and witnessing their behavior towards me, *I do not any longer wish to rescue them*. On the other hand, the relationships that I once had with them that were, at one time, entirely on their terms, are fractured and now will no longer function. Not even on their childish terms. In every single case that has turned out better in some ways. The hardest part, like any loss, is the initial grief cycle. The emotional freedom gained by departing from an unsafe, stressful connection is considerable. Walking on eggshells around people who inform me of their rules right after I break one is not acceptable to me anymore. Been there! Done that!

I wanted to rescue my relatives and I failed. At first I blamed myself for not following instructions from counter-cult advisors and other well-meaning individuals closely enough. But now as I re-read some of their advice books and articles, what they were offering me was nothing more than the Watchtower Society upside down. Plus, so much of the advice was from people who had never been in my shoes, or even close, advising me how to do something that they had in fact not even done themselves.

One individual told me to conceal my motives for trying to communicate with the Witnesses and follow a baited secret agenda, hide what I really know about the Watchtower Society, and try to implant doubts about the Organization in their minds. That was a fun game while it lasted, but the Witnesses I talked to have been quick to see through my "questions," label me as a troublemaker, and look around for dirt to dig up on me to use to discredit me if I my name should come up again. (They are really quite effective at this.)

As a Jehovah's Witness at the door, I hid: who I was, why I was really there, who wrote the publications I was offering to them, and what my real agenda was. Many counter-cult advisors are recommending that similar strategies be used on the individual Witnesses. A surprising number of these strategies are nothing but copies of the very Witness behaviors that the critics are condemning. I had to evaluate and reevaluate my motives for exposing the Watchtower, and how I was doing it.

Granted, relating to the relative encounters, I would do some things different today. But that's with the benefit of hindsight. There are also other things that I would just leave undone. But, that's also with the benefit of hindsight. The bottom line is this: I did what I had to do because I had to do what I did. And not necessarily what I would do today. What I do today is not necessarily what I would do tomorrow.

The Jehovah's Witnesses recruit new members by exploiting vulnerabilities at one low point in the recruit's life, and disfellowship them by exploiting vulnerabilities at the next low point. I see new recruits and newly baptized adolescents raised by Witness parents as having the best chance of leaving or getting kicked out of the Watchtower. The castaways who were indoctrinated (most as children) with the Watchtower world view as their core beliefs seem the most likely to self-destruct upon leaving the group. The children of Witnesses (COWs) who reconcile any inconsistencies, apparent to them at a fairly early age and stay with the JWs through adolescence without getting disfellowshipped, seem to be pretty well fixed into it mentally and very difficult to affect a dissonance by involuntary exposure to disconfirming information. Of this group, more than a few drift to the fringes, or completely away from tiresome, ritualistic, group activity, but mentally remain loyal to the Watchtower organization. Because of all the guilt they live with relating to the inconsistency between their beliefs (that God requires them to support group "service" and "meetings" for His approval), and their current behavior, many are quick to use anger and rage to drive away any who would remind them of their self-perceived failure to satisfy God (i.e. the Organization). [See my article, "Walkaways/Castaways: the BOMB".]

This has all been a part of the recovery process for me. I completely lacked boundaries, self image, and esteem as a Society follower. I am now aware of where you stop and I start. I am aware that there are things that I do not have to accept. I have become comfortable in defining my boundaries and I have the confidence to enforce them to the exclusion of everyone who does not wish to respect them once they are aware of them. I used to think that an unhealthy relationship with another person, based entirely on rules, principles, and behaviors that I was really in opposition to was preferable to being alone. Now I would much rather be alone than compromise my boundaries and principles. Fortunately I have found many friends who also have pretty healthy boundaries and are willing to respect mine. I am not short of friends by any means. Plus, I don't have to sell myself short to have a relationship anymore and I have no more need to fear encounters with relatives.

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