Faithful Few – Food, Flip Charts, and Fundamentalism

Our lives were shaped by the strict views of our parents. Intending, originally, to simply find a more devoted way to live while getting away from the harmful influences of society, they ended up creating a life that was nothing less than radical and extreme.

Our family—dad, mom, two older brothers, and me—lived under harsh conditions often, and without modern conveniences such as electricity, telephone, radio, television, and indoor plumbing because we believed the world was about to end. I was isolated, home schooled, and taught to wear long dresses, and broad-brimmed bonnets.

At age 16, I had to face a world in which I was not prepared to live. I struggled to adjust and find a way forward in life without casting away my faith along with the extremism. It took many years, a lot of heartbreak, and many mistakes, but I eventually found a full, balanced, and vibrant life.

The Softer Side of Radicalism

It’s good, and important to take care of our health and to be vigilant about what we put in our bodies. It’s great to have high standards and to stand up for what is right. However, it is possible to go beyond good to extreme. My family started out trying to follow worthwhile practices for health and Christian living, but somehow ended up becoming unbalanced in our pursuit of what was good, and veered off into extremism. Our religious extremism, though not violent, was still harmful. Under the guise of standing for right, it disposes one toward inflexibility, and dogmatism. It undermines love and healthy relationships.

The background to this story is that my family and I were invited to the home of a kind lady who had taken great pain to prepare a meal for us, doing her best to honor our very strict beliefs. I was 15-years-old at the time. Joyce happily announced, “There’s no eggs, no cheese, no milk in anything. I think I got it all right!”

However, Mom and Dad countered, “Yeah? But now, did you use butter, margarine, or oil in preparing the food?”

The lady had thought better than to use butter, so she had used margarine in some things, and oil in others. We told her we did not eat margarine and,
upon questioning further, found out that the oil she used was Canola oil, instead of Corn, Safflower, or Olive oil, and so those two things effectively eliminated everything she had prepared. Crestfallen, but still wondering if the meal would have been suitable to our standards if it were not for those things, she asked, “Well, what if I hadn’t used margarine or Canola oil—could you have eaten it?”
“No, we still could not.”
“Why?”
“Because—what kind of salt did you use?”
“What? Salt! I used salt!”
“That’s the whole point—you used salt. Show us your salt.”
She got the salt off the shelf, and as expected, it was the regular rock salt available in grocery stores. She was informed, “No, you’re supposed to use sea salt.”
She asked, “Okay, if I had gotten sea salt, could you have eaten the food?”
“No,” was the reply. “We still couldn’t.”
“Why?”
“What kind of water did you cook the vegetables in?”
“What are you talking about?” she asked incredulously. “I used water!”
We gave her a study right on the spot about regular tap water and the dangers of drinking it with all its added chemicals. We carried much of our communication materials—books, flip charts, and self-published pamphlets—with us knowing that we had to be ready at a moment’s notice to instruct on a wide variety of issues, and so we were well prepared. Overwhelmed, the lady asked wearily, “So if I had done all of that, could you have eaten the food?”
“Well, there’s still one problem left.”
“What’s that?”
“What kind of pots did you cook it in?”
Incredulous, she went and got her pots and—no surprise to us—they were made of aluminum and Teflon. She learned that we used only stainless steel and cast iron because the aluminum and Teflon released dangerous chemicals into the food during the cooking process.

High-Cost High-Standards
Joyce sat down in complete defeat—she finally had gotten the point: no matter what she did, it was never going to be good enough to meet our high standards. Of course, we thanked her for trying, and she, the wonderful person that she was, did not become angry or insulted, but she did not invite us to come back.
I secretly felt ashamed of what happened that day. Though the exchange was carried on with some degree of good humor, the fact that she tried so hard was scarcely noticed as far as I was concerned. It was, but only in a beside-the-point way; the real point was sticking to the standards, to what we thought and believed, no matter how minor, no matter what was disregarded in the process.
The incident made me wonder how anybody could truly want to follow this kind of a religion—if, indeed, it was real religion. How would it make the majority of the people in this world feel about being able to be a part of it?
Of course, I immediately found these thoughts confronted by answers my training supplied: “wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to
destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the
gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that
find it” (Matthew 7:13, 14), and “Many are called but few are chosen”
(Matthew 22:14). So, my religious logic told me, the answer is that there
have always been only a faithful few.
I had no answer for that, but somehow it seemed to me to be an extreme,
faithful few.

Balance and Alignment
Even though I sensed at the time that something was wrong, it took many years
and painful adjustments in my way of thinking to truly understand what had been wrong. First, of
course, I was misapplying scriptures speaking about salvation matters to minute details of diet.
Furthermore, we were completely out of balance with our religion, which led us to do exactly what Jesus
said some of the religious leaders of His day did: “strain at a gnat and swallow a camel” (Matthew
23:24). Actually, Christ’s description points out what is at the heart of extremism—becoming so
consumed by a particular concern or belief as to be blinded to everything else, especially the things
that count the most—the “weightier matters” of “mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23). When love for God and one another is the source
and motivation for what we do and how we relate, religious extremism is far less likely to exist!

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