

Recovery for My Children and Myself

By Gretchen Ward



In 2003, I was shocked to find out that the movement I had been immersed in for 25 years was a cult. Margaret Irons published a story on geftakysassembly.com written by the granddaughter of the leader, Geftakys, in which she detailed the abuse her family suffered from her father, his family, and the assembly where they lived. Nebraska assembly leaders warned members not to go on this website because it was full of lies. I was inspired to investigate more when a friend stated that she had given many years of her life to this group, and she wanted to find out what the truth was.

One night after a prayer meeting, my husband and older children were alarmed to find me reading the granddaughter's story. I explained why I was reading her story and also shared it with them. After reading this, I had so many more questions, which I discussed with my husband, an assembly leader, and with wives of the other leaders. I went to one more meeting, where I was shunned by my "friends" and followed by a leader until I left.

The truth is, I had been perplexed for years by the fact that life for our family did not work, and I continually looked for answers to the turmoil we faced. We were taught that full salvation awaited those who implicitly obeyed God by blindly obeying those in authority (church leaders, husbands, parents). This teaching kept me from trusting my own instincts. I now understood that we were involved in a cult, and I wanted to leave. My husband's response was to continue praying about

whether we should leave the assembly. I finally told him I was leaving with our children—with or without him. He agreed to come with us and look for a healthy church.

After leaving the assembly, I began talking with Margaret Irons, the moderator of the geftakysassembly.com website. She recommended the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) and Wellspring Christian Recovery Center as excellent recovery resources. We also found a wholesome evangelical church, where we met supportive friends. I confided in a friend that if only I would change, my husband (who was such a nice, kind person) would be different. I will never forget her words, stating that what he was doing to my children and me was not nice. The assembly taught that the way to a full salvation in heaven was obedience. If the wife obeyed her husband correctly, the children would be obedient, and the husband would be wise; any problems in a family were attributed to the wife's disobedience, the husband's lack of leadership, or a combination of the two. Once we left the closed world of the assembly, I began to trust my own God-given intuition and instincts.

We saw an evangelical counselor, who made things harder for our family because of his ignorance regarding power and control as it relates to trauma. Later, I found a Christian couple (who worked out of their church) who were able to identify ways in which the cultic trauma was impacting my husband and my present situations and relationships.

As my older children became involved with the youth group in our new church, they were ready to leave the cultic world and transition into modern society. This transition was harder for me, and my husband did not want to change. He physically left the assembly, but he never let go of the assembly mindset. Together, my children and I left the closed world of the assembly. We worked through our differences under the guidance of an evolving, healthy support system. My feelings at that time were best expressed by Gladys Knight in "Midnight Train to Georgia": "I'd rather live in [their] world than live without [them] in mine" (Midnight Train, 1973).

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Quite a while before we went to Wellspring, my oldest, kind-hearted daughter began acting out a lot. I knew if she was struggling in this manner, then something was terribly wrong at our house. One day, she looked at me and asked, "How long are you going to put up with this guy because I would really like to have a normal dad"? I knew my husband was not good for me, but I felt he was good for my children. Now, for the first time, I realized he was not good for them either. The more I realized how assembly life had hurt my children, the more desperate I was to find a way for them to have the life they deserved. At that time, my daughter and I tried to find her a suitable counselor, but we did not find anyone in the evangelical world sufficient for her level of trauma.

Many months later, I contacted ICSA and asked whether they had a counselor near us. They gave me Dr. Lois Svoboda's contact information. She and I talked on the phone, and soon I went to meet with her. She offered to see me and my husband (if he wanted to come), pro bono, if we were able to come to her town to meet. Every week through all kinds of weather, I drove my old car to see her (my husband rarely went). My discussions with Lois were invaluable. She recommended we go to Wellspring in Ohio, but the idea seemed out of reach to me because of the cost. She brought it up a couple more times and mentioned they had scholarships, so I began looking into the possibility of going there. Donors from ICSA and some of my family members helped us raise the funds for seven of my children and me to go to this program.

As my older daughter's life continued its downward spiral, I became frantic to help her and the rest of my children. Although I worked hard to bring my daughter help, I was not able to protect her from what was happening. One of our counselors, who took time to talk with her, said my daughter remembered things at a time when she was most vulnerable. It was devastating to watch her path unfold, and my heart broke for the pain I knew she was experiencing. The worse life became for her, the more I threw my energy into finding recovery for her and all my other children. I was inspired by

Stephen Curtis Chapman's words, "so sink or swim, I'm diving in" (Chapman, 1999). I worked tirelessly with no clear agenda except to help them find the life God had for them.

The fall before we went to Wellspring, two of my sons moved from homeschooling to neighborhood public schools. My older son went to a nearby inner-city high school and my younger son to a rural school. I was in close contact with their counselors, teachers, and other related people as they made this transition. They both did well. Later, as life evolved, each of the younger children moved into different school situations, while I went back to school.

In our previous life, my husband would set the family dynamics in motion and then blame me for any problems. As my children and I became more independent, he became angry and more aggressive. Our counselors encouraged us to live separately for a bit so we could each work on ourselves. The longer he was gone, the more peaceful our home and lives became. He kept wanting to come back, but by postponing his return, we stayed safe.

Eventually he threatened that, within a week, I must sign a contract with him and our pastor. In the contract, I must agree to live with and submit to him, as previously, or he would file for legal separation. A legal separation meant he would have half of our children. I knew he would not take care of them, so I went to a lawyer and filed for divorce. I knew how he would react to receiving divorce papers, so I went to the courthouse and filed for a protection order. Some friends put my children and me up in a hotel, so we were safe. My husband reacted as expected by going to our home (which our neighbors were watching) and by continually calling us. It was a scary and unsettling time for all of us.

The court hearing did not go well. I went into the hearing with a protection order, and I came out with new orders for coparenting and mediation, and no protection order. My intuition told me something was very wrong. That same week, three different acquaintances recommended a certain lawyer to me. I called this lawyer, discussed our situation, and hired him, paying him as I could. When I met with him and explained our story, he stated we should all get counseling and focus on our recovery. He prepared me for the fact that my husband would try to manipulate my children and me through the divorce process. Our support system grew to include YWCA, specialized lawyers, and counselors.

Our main income for a few years was a large, daily paper route my children and I did together in a rough area of town. When I filed for divorce, my father stepped down from being a deacon at his church, stating that charity begins at home. He came to our house at 4 a.m. on weekends to help us deliver more than 500 papers. I looked for community assistance to make ends meet. I printed out the list of available services and their contact information and worked through each one.

For most of their lives, my children had received excellent physical care from physicians and specialists at Boys Town National Research Hospital. Since I trusted them, I signed up for their parenting classes. My family had been a continual

support, and during this time my parents became even more of a lifeline. After filing for divorce, my children and I started going to church with them. I also began meeting with my YWCA advocate and went to the organization's domestic-violence and safety classes. In these classes I learned the difference between relationships governed by power and control and those forged through equality and respect. I posted The Power Control Wheel and The Equality Wheel in our home to reinforce these principles (The Power Control Wheel, 2013). We continued to build on a solid foundation with family, grandparents, pets, church, counseling, and healthcare providers.

My anger and pain energized my recovery quest. I felt like a blind woman walking into a new world, trusting my own intuition, my children's input, and professionals with an understanding of trauma to guide us.

Our next step was going to Wellspring's Recovery Center for 2 weeks. My older three children went first. My oldest daughter benefited from going to Wellspring, but her counselors felt her situation had gotten to a point at which she could not grasp what they had to offer. Dr. Martin invited her to come back when she was able. Little did I know it would be many years before she would be able to do this, and in the interim Dr. Martin passed away.

Later, while Dr. Martin was still there, my four younger children and I went. Education became the tool we used to move forward, because I believed that understanding the truth (not propaganda) does bring freedom. Wellspring used Robert Lifton's eight criteria of mind control in its education program (Lifton, 1991). We learned how cult leaders use mind control to trap talented, idealistic young people to work for the group's mission. As we understood what had happened to us, we were more able to let go of the past and move forward in present-day society.

After my oldest children's time at Wellspring, their counselors had helped me understand what each child needed. After talking with Dr. Martin, I became more aware of what my oldest daughter's struggles were as they related to the cult and her father. This awareness gave me insight into the behaviors of my oldest, special-needs son. In light of my new insight, I called my son's service coordinator to discuss his situation. She recommended a certain in-home counselor, skilled in understanding trauma and abuse. This man began seeing my son and eventually saw most of my children. He met with us individually, in small groups, or larger groups. It was a time of growth and change. It was also a painful time. The professional

input from our support system (including more special-needs support and services) worked synergistically, and our understanding of the past trauma deepened. As I faced the hard truth of what had happened, God poured new life into us.

I talked with counselors to understand the dynamics involved with my daughter's struggles and made sure my family did not "blame the victim." I stayed in close contact with her, attempting to be there for her and keep her as safe as possible. My anger and pain energized my recovery quest. I felt like a blind woman walking into a new world, trusting my own intuition, my children's input, and professionals with an understanding of trauma to guide us. I asked a wise mentor how to prevent my other children from such problems. He encouraged me, when I saw my other children struggling and I was unable to help them, to make sure I found them the resources they needed to succeed. This became my path. After many years, my daughter was able to reach out to a sobriety program, where she received excellent help. Step by step, her life transformed into what she had always wanted it to be.

Robert Lifton's eight criteria explain the calculated, physiological process of mind control and how trusting individuals can easily become trapped in an alter world:

- Milieu Control filters information flow and social interaction (Lifton, 1991).
- Mystical Manipulation attributes supernatural influence where there is none (Lifton, 1991).
- Demand for Purity sets unreachable standards and unreasonable rules limiting successful experiences (Lifton, 1991).
- Cult of Confession requires confession for undesirable thoughts and feelings and minor infractions, propagating false guilt and shame (Lifton, 1991).
- Sacred Science attributes unquestionable truth to closed 'group-think,' blocking alternative ideas as irreverent or unscientific (Lifton, 1991).
- Loaded Language is 'thought-blocking' group language, meant to quickly shut down critical thinking (Lifton, 1991).
- Doctrine over Person decrees each individual value according to the leaders' perception of their conformity to the group and its mission (Lifton, 1991).
- Dispensing of Existence occurs as the group decides who is saved, enlightened, worthwhile, or accepted (Lifton, 1991).

An essential part of mind control is repressing the individual's true self. The assembly labeled natural human development as sinful or rebellious and equated obedience with holiness. When individuals of any age are not allowed to express their own wants and needs, they will not be able to create their own ideas. People of any age living in these closed systems grow up with major disadvantages that often continue well into adulthood.

“...Erikson’s eight stages of healthy human development begin at birth and progress sequentially with age” (Erikson’s Stages of Development, n.d.). The related developmental stages,

potential outcomes of healthy development at each stage, and potential outcomes of unhealthy development at each stage are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Erikson’s Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development: Healthy and Unhealthy Outcomes

Stage	Typical Age for This Developmental Level	Healthy Outcome: Individuals learn	Unhealthy Outcome: Individuals learn
Stage 1	Infant	trust from meaningful response to their needs	mistrust from unmet needs
Stage 2	Toddler/young child	autonomy from healthy separation/individuation	shame/doubt from inability to separate/individuate
Stage 3	Preschool	initiative from positive interaction with environment	guilt from lack of positive interactions with environment
Stage 4	Early elementary	industry from positive communication with family/peers, resulting in competence and competence	inferiority from lack of positive communication resulting in feelings of incompetence and inferiority
Stage 5	Adolescent	identity from development of a strong sense of self	role confusion from a poor view of self
Stage 6	Young adult	intimacy because their strong sense of self is ready to share their life with others	loneliness/isolation because their poor self-perception is reluctant to share their life with others
Stage 7	Middle-aged adult	generativity from finding meaningful life’s work and service bringing feelings of usefulness and accomplishment	stagnation from inability to work productively causing lack of motivation and feelings of hopelessness
Stage 8	Older adult	integrity from life reflection resulting in acceptance of their past	despair from inability to meaningfully reconcile their past

Note: Contents derived from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/teachereducationx92x1/chapter/eriksons-stages-of-psychosocial-development/>

If healthy development does not occur in a timely manner, that development still needs to take place before the individual can progress through sequential stages. This happens in an honest, accepting, and encouraging environment. The poem “Children Learn What They Live,” by Dorothy Law Nolte, describes the power of positive, healthy interactions, which can occur at any age.

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

If children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy.

If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.

If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient.

If children live with praise, they learn to appreciate.

If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.

If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.

If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.

If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and others.

If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live. (Law, 1954, p. 1)

Gradually, each of my children entered the school system. We tried public and parochial schools and found our family's best fit was the inner-city public schools (equipped to teach many intelligences). My children needed to be able to access good opportunities to discover their passions and aptitudes. Over time, they became active in their schools with sports, activities, and friends. Our support system expanded to include public school teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors, and other supportive individuals. One of my children's teachers once asked me how I was able to have so many amazing children, while some parents struggled with only one child. My answer was that, at one time, each of my eight children was that one struggling child; and until they found what they needed, I never gave up on them or stopped believing in them.

My children watched me pursue a better life for all of us, and in doing so I paved the way for them to rise above what I was able to achieve.

Twenty-five years in a cult left us facing seemingly insurmountable challenges. Neither my children nor I chose to live in a cult, but it was my duty (as the functioning parent) to provide them with tools they needed to integrate successfully into present-day society. As a displaced homemaker, beginning a nursing career later in life was a difficult task for me. I spent many years working constantly to provide for my children while pursuing my own degrees and nursing career. I am thankful I put my children's needs first (a fact commended by our counselors). My children watched me pursue a better life for all of us, and in doing so, I paved the way for them to rise above what I was able to achieve.

My children understood the difficulties we were facing. They knew I could not pay for their college. We discussed how it takes focused energy to rise out of the culture of poverty. As a low-income, single mother and eight children, we had good health care and educational programs available to us. I believed using these programs would help my children recover well and enable them to become strong citizens able to give back significantly to society. They pursued scholarship opportunities, and the seven who went to college earned full scholarships. They each worked hard, and at this time five have graduated from college, two have their master's degrees, one has her doctorate, and two more will graduate from college in the next 2 years.

Throughout these many years of hard work, I often felt inadequate for the task at hand and did not realize the significant impact of this recovery on my family. As has been said before, "Life happens while we are doing other things," and during this busy time of recovery, our lives blossomed beautifully. ■

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About the Author



Gretchen Ward lives in Omaha, Nebraska. She is a single mother of eight grown children, passionate about supporting them in their individual endeavors. When her children were younger, she volunteered extensively, helping other families find excellent educational resources for their children (which also helped her children). Currently she volunteers with her church health ministry. She is an **RN** with an **MSN** (nurse educator), and board certification in wound, ostomy, continence, and foot care. Her commitment to her children has translated to her nursing career as she gives evidence-based functional care. She enjoys educating her students about the importance of basic wholistic care and how it positively impacts patients' quality of life. ■