

When Truth is Complex - On Telling the Story of My Upbringing in the Unification Church

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Cara E. Jones, Contributor Chief Storyteller @Storytellers for Good

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I tell other people's stories for a living. Maybe, in part, because I've been avoiding telling my own. I've been holding onto this for too long now.

So that's me. Almost twenty two years ago. In the front row. In the Seoul Olympic Stadium with 10-thousand other couples. In an arranged marriage. And in what feels like another lifetime. I grew up in a unique religious organization called the Unification Church whose members have been called "Moonies" and cult followers. My first marriage was arranged by the controversial founder, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, using 8x10 photographs. My then husband and I met a month before we traveled to Korea to be married.

When the marriage stopped working, I didn't know how to leave. So I denied my feelings, learned to drink and eventually cheated on my husband. My subsequent divorce felt, at the same time, like a divorce from my parents and the community I was raised in.

It took collecting 100 hours of film, writing thirty-seven versions of a short essay, then three drafts of a memoir, and five years to figure out what I wanted to say about this story. Then, another year to get the courage share any of it.

As a former journalist, I began telling this like any other cult story, highlighting all the sensational elements that painted the church, its founder and even my parents as villains, and me as the victim. I wrote this story through tears and pillow bashing, and regularly bothered friends to validate it.

"Send it," some would say. But I wouldn't. Some part of me knew that the anger with which I was telling the story was keeping me locked inside it.

So I began asking more questions and trying to understand my past, meanwhile working on the judgment, anger and fear that would unconsciously weave their way into my words. Slowly, a more nuanced and complex story began to emerge.

I discovered that my parents, who were early leaders in the church, had been drawn to it for reasons I never truly understood. Their work in the church helped them heal childhood wounds and they credit their faith for the success of their marriage, now nearly 47 years strong. It is definitely true that some of the church's beliefs and practices caused me a lot of pain. But it is also true that many of its values have positively influenced my life and allowed my family, now of 18 people, to stay together through battles that would have broken many others apart.

I have only been able to see and acknowledge these more complex truths in working on this story.

So many of our wounds from the past are stitched together with tape and string waiting to be undone with the slightest touch. For me, revisiting this part of my past, while painful, has been a path for deeper understanding and healing.

The author Paulo Coelho says there are two types of people: builders and gardeners. Our world is created by both. In the realm of story, the builders among us are called to reconstruct new lives with solid walls and boundaries, keeping the past at bay. For some, this is the only way forward. The gardeners are called to look at the entire landscape of their lives, to weed out what hasn't worked and to keep what has growing.

For so many years I tried to be a builder. I struggled to find love and move on with my life in judgment and denial of this story of my past. That approach, while valid for others, didn't work for me. Re-telling my story through the upcoming documentary [Second Coming](#) has allowed me, after five years of tilling, to embrace my past as part of a more vast life landscape. There, I have started to grow a family of my own.

It's in this garden that I hope our now five month old little girl will also thrive. And someday contribute to that rich landscape with sprouts of her own truth.

In the coming weeks, I'll be sharing more about **Second Coming**, a film that is shaping up to be just as powerful and complex as my journey to telling it. I'd be honored if you'd follow us [HERE](#) on our film's FACEBOOK PAGE. We can also keep you posted via [TWITTER](#) and [INSTAGRAM](#). Thanks for being a part of the adventure!



Me (left) with my parents, brothers and Rev. Moon in the early days