

My childhood in a cult is hard to imagine - but my survival is truly unbelievable

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The ATI cult and the 'Quiverfull' movement defined my life, until I was old enough to break away

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For the longest time, I didn't know how to explain to people how I grew up.

Raised in Minnesota, my family went to a suburban, evangelical church in the Assemblies of God denomination: most people would consider it conservative, but it was more mainstream than where we ended up. My siblings and I wore shorts during the summer, listened to music and watched Full House on TV.

My family's transition into the Advanced Training Institute (ATI) cult - the homeschool offshoot of Bill Gothard's Institute in Basic Life Principles now infamous because of its association with the Duggar family - was slow. The institute teaches a rigid hierarchy where God comes first, men come second, women are third and children are at the very bottom. As with many people who join cults, my parents were drawn in by the teachings of a leader - Gothard - whose charisma and sense of moral certainty they ultimately found impossible to resist.

In the third grade, my parents decided to start homeschooling and were introduced to the ATI curriculum by a family friend. It didn't seem so out of the mainstream at the beginning. When we first attended Gothard's seminars, for instance, we were crowded into the St Paul Civic Center with thousands of other families who didn't seem all that different from us. Before long, we were attending a relatively large church in Minneapolis founded on ATI principles, where most members considered it their duty to give birth to as many children as possible to strengthen God's kingdom - what would later become known as the "Quiverfull" movement. (With only four kids, our family was one of the smallest in the church.)

An emphasis on controlling every aspect of a woman's physical appearance was central to the ATI lifestyle, and conforming to Gothard's personal tastes was an obsession shared by women and men. This meant wearing our hair (our Biblical "crowning glory") long and keeping our curls touchably soft and loose. Gothard even made it known he strongly disliked the "wet look" (women wearing too much gel in their hair), and I was even once pulled aside at an ATI training institute in Oklahoma and told to start wearing less product.

At church, women were supposed to wear head coverings to show our submission, though the guidelines weren't strict. (Some women would just pin Kleenex to the top of their heads.)

Ankle-length skirts were required for women and girls at all times. In our family, one of the more "liberal" in our church, we were usually allowed to wear pants at home (when we weren't around other ATI families and for activities like horseback riding), but jeans were strictly forbidden.

We girls came to learn that policing our bodies, in addition to getting married and having babies, was our primary role in life. Even before puberty, we were required to swim in oversized t-shirts and shorts that came past our knees (while boys wore regular bathing suits), and were taught by our wisdom books: "when a man looks lustfully at a woman, a flood of impulses travels through the optic nerve to the back of the brain", causing testosterone to surge, violent crime to go up and otherwise "godly" men to stumble.

So when, in the seventh grade, I developed breasts and they grew to DDs, it felt like nothing worse could have happened. Finding shirts baggy enough to hide their size was a constant struggle, and it seemed like nothing I could find fully concealed the fact that they were attached to me. I remember begging my mom to take me to the mall, where I spent hours looking for bras that would minimize their size. My closest ATI friend and I would frequently buy the same clothes when we went shopping together, in the way teenage girls do. But while my parents were frequently pulled aside by other members in our church to be told my clothing was causing men to "lust" after me, my less-curved friend never became a target of church leadership like I did.

The obsession with keeping men's eyes off of women's breasts didn't end with trying to force me to hide mine. During an eight-week-long, all-female training program, my sister was chastised by an older woman because a flower in the patterned fabric of a vest she was required to sew came too close to her breast. (She got lucky though - unlike some other students, she didn't have to destroy it and start over.)

Dating was out of the question. If a young man in the church saw a young woman he was interested in, we were taught that the

man should go to his father first and ask them to pray and decide whether he felt the relationship was God's will. If he decided it was, the man's father would then approach the woman's father and ask him to pray and decide if *he* felt it was God's will. If both fathers were in agreement, the children would then be allowed to embark on a closely-supervised "courtship" intended to lead to marriage.

The father of another girl in our church found a partner for her after becoming concerned that, unmarried in her mid-twenties, she was failing in her biblical mandate to have as many children as possible. At their wedding, we were all handed a printed program that explained the couple's journey to marriage and the daughter's initial resistance to her father's choice; clearly meant to inspire the young women in the room, it explained that she had, at first, no interest in marrying the man her father had chosen. But after she prayed and decided that their marriage was God's will, she'd agreed to the union. I'll never forget the palpable discomfort in the room when the couple was supposed to kiss at the altar ("saving" your first kiss for the day of your wedding is common in ATI) and, after a strained peck, the bride cringed, pulled back and, as her new husband continued to try to kiss her, pushed him away.

Women were under enormous pressure to marry, but men, we were told, could get a special exception to stay single if it was God's will. Gothard himself liked to say that as he explained to us at a weekend retreat I attended to learn how to be a "godly" woman, God specifically set him apart for singleness, freeing him of the obligation to get married. (In retrospect, given the 34 women who've come forward saying they were sexually abused by Gothard, many of them as children, it's even more disturbing.)

Though we'd been raised to believe that college wasn't part of God's plan for women, I started researching colleges and searching for loans I could apply to in earnest around age 16. Our local public library was my salvation, since our family's computer had long since been outfitted with a special web blocker designed for ATI families that blotted out virtually all of the internet. But at the library, I could spend hours indulging my nascent interest in design by browsing fashion websites and looking through back issues of fashion magazines. I took advantage of every opportunity to learn more about the world outside of ATI - even trying to arrive early to orthodontist appointments whenever I could to sit in the waiting room and steal a few precious moments with the piles of teen magazines.

I became fixated on applying to design schools in New York and, though our ATI filter wouldn't allow me to apply to universities from home, I quickly learned that most websites through which I could apply for student loan applications were allowed. My parents might have prevented me from applying had I started two years earlier, but disillusioned by a sex scandal involving our church's pastor when I was 17 and worn down by years of me questioning my father's authority and the strict confines of ATI, my parents agreed to let me go if I would pay for college myself. Despite the fact that I was largely shooting in the dark when it came to filling out my applications (especially in the applications for financial aid), I found a design school that was willing to accept me and, when I finished homeschooling at age 18, I moved east to New York.

At school, I quickly shed my "homeschool image" and clothes, dyed my hair whenever I wanted, drank and went to clubs with a fake ID like everybody else. The transition might have seemed abrupt to an outside observer, but after years of secretly envisioning my life the way I wanted it to be outside of ATI, the experience was tremendously liberating. I eventually finished my degree and moved back to Minnesota, but today am rarely in touch with anyone from ATI or my old church here.

Today, a lot of my friends don't have any idea what I went through - and everyone in my family has since left the movement. Looking back, I realize I'm lucky to have emerged relatively unscathed, and to have a close relationship with my parents and siblings that's stayed intact even as we've all transitioned back to living more normal lives.

I know my past is something many people can't relate to - and many struggle to understand even after it's explained to them. It's extreme, out-of-the-mainstream weirdness is something that makes it hard for most people to wrap their head around. And maybe that's a good thing.

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