

When Endings Are Beginnings David's Story

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When Endings Are Beginnings: David's Story



Jill Mytton

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Relatively little literature exists regarding people born into and raised in high-demand groups and subsequently leaving. These people are often referred to as the second generation—although with respect to some groups it might be more accurate to call them the third or even fourth generation.

We hear from some who leave such groups and seem to have adjusted fairly well. However, we rarely hear the voices of those who have struggled or who are still struggling.

David's is one such voice. Although he has spoken out through his blog, he still wishes to remain anonymous because of fear of recrimination.

Now in his early thirties, David was born and raised in an Exclusive Brethren community in a small town in the west of England. He comes from a large family, but he is the only one who has left the group. He first contacted me some years ago, and I feel privileged to have been able to watch and listen as he moved slowly to the open door through which, last summer, he finally walked. Just before he left, David began a blog to record his thoughts and feelings, which he has continued since. It is from this blog that most of the quotes that follow are taken—with his permission, of course. Most of you know that I too was raised in this high-demand group and left many years ago.

David is a resilient, empathic, clever, and resolute young man whom most would describe as well adjusted. By exploring his difficult endings and beginnings, I hope to promote some discussion on how therapists can help people who were raised in

cults and then leave.



The Exclusive Brethren

The Exclusive Brethren emerged in the 1820s when John Nelson Darby, commonly referred to as JND, began the journey that would lead him to leave the established church, as he said, to “practice the teachings of Holy Scripture in their original purity.”

On the website that was live when David was in the Brethren but no longer exists, the Brethren described themselves thus:

Exclusive Brethren are believers on the Lord Jesus Christ. They hold the truth of His deity, and accept the authority of Scripture as the inspired word of God.

There are over 40,000 Exclusive Brethren worldwide, who gather on the first day of the week for the Lord's Supper and daily for reading of the Scriptures, and prayer for all who are in authority. Exclusive Brethren are located in over 300 local assemblies in 19 countries located in both northern and southern hemispheres. (Exclusive Brethren Christian Fellowship, 2015)¹

The Brethren, like many high-demand groups, practice separation from evil:

... recognising this as God's principle of unity. They shun the conduits of evil communications: television, the radio, and the Internet. Their charter is 2 Timothy 2:19 “The Lord knows those that are his; and, Let every one who names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity. (Exclusive Brethren Christian Fellowship, 2015)

Since David's leaving, the Brethren have rebranded themselves, and their website portrays a very different picture.

David describes the Brethren lifestyle as

...restrictive to the point of absurdity, without the consistency of other hyper-conservative sects. There's a lot of pressure ... to conform.... And not least, it gets more tiring than you'd think giving the impression that you believe every single ... pronouncement. (the survivor, July 15, 2007)

His blog is a remarkable piece of reflective writing as he contemplates the teachings of the Brethren and his place with respect to them.



Why Did David Choose to Leave?

David's decision to leave took many years. He left, he writes, because "In the brethren you fit into a mould. I got a sense of another person, that I could be using parts of myself that were repressed..." ("David," personal communication, May 19, 2008).

Early on, while still thinking about whether to leave, David writes,

The most frightening thing I have heard in years is "we'll do the thinking you do the doing" especially as it is treated as a statement of great wisdom. It's held to be a sign of someone barely Christian if they're questioning something that's been said; even the questioning is an ongoing sin... (the survivor, July 3a, 2007)

The Brethren say their rules provide a structure in which to live a perfect life. But David asks, how much value is there in being molded to fit that life? Asked by another member of the Brethren why he would want to leave, David replies, "...to gain congruence between my internal and external lives.... Humans are not made to accept ideas and reality clashing all the time..." (the survivor, July 12b, 2007).

He writes later about his need to feel integrity:

I am assured with great positivity that if only I could accept things as they are I'd find I was happy immediately. I'm sure that's true but it's hard to explain why I'm uncomfortable with modifying my mind to the extent that the acceptance becomes possible. (the survivor, July 14, 2007)



What Made It Difficult for Him to Leave

David refers many times in his blog to the difficulties he faced—for example, accepting that so much he had believed was without basis:

It took a long time to move from the feeling that my life could be different to feeling that it should be, as it's hard to really accept deep down that the rules that shape one's life are actually for nothing. One tends to make mental excuses for it all. ("David," personal communication, May 19, 2008)

He is also worried about some problems he has seen in other former Brethren. He writes, "I have sometimes wondered whether being among the brethren is permanently damaging to the psyche." (the survivor, July 6, 2007)

Many who have left seem obsessed, and the "us against them" attitude seems to be ingrained:

That's one of the scary things about contemplating leaving. Will I be obsessed too? Will I be able to leave it behind? Can I make a life for myself in which I don't ever think of myself as "used to be brethren? (the survivor, July 6, 2007)

He reflects on the losses that will be involved:

I would (and probably will) miss many friends after leaving, and that's without considering the agony of breaking up a family. ...the restrictions while in are matched by promised restrictions once out, in the form of an utter severance from everybody you know and care about. (the survivor, July 7a, 2007)

He faces the emotional challenge of leaving those he loves: "The pleas from loved ones are hardest to take ... this is heartrending on all sides" (the survivor, July 7b, 2007). And he recognizes that leaving results in a loss of a considerable network:

There is one benefit of being amongst the Exclusive Brethren that is extremely hard to replicate. That is the sheer number of people willing to share information and experience...

I am assuming that the sudden removal of that network must be among the hardest things to adapt to after leaving. (the survivor, July 11, 2007)

Part of David's fear of leaving is what he imagines are the difficulties of making a new life, such as getting a new job:²

How will they [the new potential employers] get an idea of my worth as a person when I have no pieces of paper to say I can do anything, and no people to call on to vouch for me? Will I get a chance?" (the survivor, July 11, 2007)

He talks about his lack of preparation:

...I have to seriously plan for life apart. For all my thinking, I find that I'm not well prepared. I don't actually know what to do next. ... Anyone who's opened a cage door for an animal will recognise the situation. Mostly, however much you think they'll run, they hang back in a corner. (the survivor, July 19, 2007)

At this point it comes forcibly to my attention that I was absent for many lessons in life. I have some serious catching up to do... (the survivor, July 21, 2007)

David also receives warnings of terrible consequences:

After I had stated that I was intending to leave the brethren, I had many dark warnings about the cold hard world outside, telling me that there was nobody caring, that everybody was, at base, selfish and nasty and ready to use me for what they could get and treat me as disposable afterwards. (the survivor, September 27, 2007)



What Helped Him to Leave

David finds writing his blog enormously helpful and comforting: "Writing about something that troubles me helps to clear my thoughts..." and "I expect to find myself quietly ushered out of the fellowship. I also expect to gain consolation from documenting the process" (the survivor, July 12a, 2007).

And, even before he actually walks away, David discovers that life outside is not as the Brethren would have him believe. In particular, he finds that new friends can be made—myself, for one:

One positive thing I have learned is that friends are not irreplaceable. (the survivor, July 3b, 2007)

I have been fortunate in having already experienced the kindness of strangers before ever leaving, which gave me the courage to make the break, and I have found so much more since. (the survivor, Sept. 30, 2007)

Once David leaves, his blog begins to record milestones (the survivor, September 30, 2007):

- Finding a flat
- Telling his parents
- Settling in
- First weekend
- Problems of life—clutter, food, money
- First visit to the proms
- Doing "forbidden and morally dangerous things"
- First non-EB visitor
- Being a host for the first time
- Still feeling out of place at a party

Lots of other firsts follow in quick succession:

- Holiday
- Birthday out
- Visit to the circus
- Bonfire night

- Christmas
- Visit to family
- Trip to Scotland
- Attendance at a marriage outside
- Religious service since leaving
- Music gig
- Trip to the funfair
- Flying lesson



What Was Hard About the Beginning

David doesn't want to be alone but is aware that he has missed many stages of social development:

I don't want to stay a recluse all my life.... But getting out and into interaction does prove slightly problematical. There are metaphorical billboards every other step that say "Stop! You don't know what you're doing!". Ok, they come from within my head, but they remain quite real.

Social activities have rules that are very strong even though they're unacknowledged. Some social situations, especially, seem almost like dances, with step following step reliant on each party knowing what comes next. And I find myself totally untrained in the basics, let alone the niceties.

...Surely, though, most people by my age have at least developed coping mechanisms, and have learned what to do in the majority of commonly encountered situations. I'm still encountering most of them for the first time. I wish there was a crash course in what people are expecting of me. (the survivor, September 2, 2007)

Rather poignantly, he talks about the affection his family shared—something he was part of for more than thirty years:

A day without a hug in my parents' home was rare, even though I often had the impression that we were unusual in that respect. We were a close family, and I imagine they still are. (the survivor, November 9, 2007)

Notice that last sentence. "We" followed by "they." It's been three months now, and that doesn't get any easier. I've had regular visits from brethren, ... but the people I care for most have stayed away, ... some of the family, I know, find the situation so

painful that I'm not sure whether seeing me in my changed position would make it better or worse. (the survivor, November 9, 2007)

He is experiencing mixed emotions—guilt, feeling bad, feeling good, sadness, happiness—as he calls it, a real muddle of positive and negative.



What Made It Easier—What Helped

David finds that people outside are not as the Brethren said they would be; instead, they have humanity and offer him support:

I hadn't bargained on calls from friends. I have spoken to four by phone since coming home from work, and none of them are brethren. ... It's quite heart warming. (the survivor, September 3, 2007)

He also finds that other former Brethren are not as he anticipated they would be. He describes his conversations with some of them:

It's not about bad-mouthing where we have come from, it's about the relief of people knowing what the little references mean, not having to explain, just being ourselves without being wary of being different. (the survivor, September 24, 2007)

Even the pain of his former life has a function; it helps him appreciate what he has now:

The real crux of the issue, though, is that we need the dark times to show up the light. Without struggles and sorrows, how can we appreciate the good in life? ... I can look back on various proverbial dark nights of the soil, and they both give me strength to get through the tough things of the present, and set the happy aspects in sharp relief. (the survivor, August 17, 2007)

He is beginning to find a way to navigate the choppy social waters:

So far, my prime principles are openness and watchfulness. If I don't know what someone means, I ask. If I suspect something is expected, but I don't know what it is, I ask. If I don't know the answer to a query, I say so.

People are kind, on the whole. And all I can hope is that before too long I will be natural enough that I can simply enjoy society without the strain of treating every encounter as a lesson too. One thing is for sure: if I stay home for fear of being different, I'll never get anywhere. (the survivor, September 2, 2007)

Blogging, he says, continues to help:

I hoped documenting the things that had been swirling around my head for so long would begin to change the reality around me. It has succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. Text in black and white has a power that spoken words don't, especially in a diffident and quiet voice such as mine. (the survivor, September 30, 2007)

"Blogging has changed my life" sounds like hyperbole, but it's the literal truth... (the survivor, September 30b, 2007) Useful things these blogs... (the survivor, September 30a, 2007)

A great part of David's strength, I believe, is that he can acknowledge both the sun and the shadow of his journey. He writes about his hope and achievement:

Now, to my surprise, I find that there are good people in the world, people who can be true friends, who can have a call on my time and a tug at my thoughts, and be a fulfilment in themselves. I shouldn't be surprised, and on a surface level I am not, but somewhere deep down I did think I was solitary, and that I would always feel a little outside the happy enjoyment that others seem to get together. It isn't so. (the survivor, October 23, 2007)

I have a strange background. I have believed odd things. My life has been spent a peculiar way. But here I am, and all that has shaped me. If I wish it hadn't happened, not only am I wishing myself away, but I am losing the opportunity to learn from it all. (the survivor, September 27, 2007)

Reality is precious. It's not pleasant in every aspect, but I wouldn't settle for protection from the unpleasantness at the price of delusion... (the survivor, September 10, 2007)

And yet he can accept that there is always a sense of loss:

I still get moments of sadness and loneliness, however 'grounded' and moved on I think I am, and however little reason there is to think that way.

In considering the whole thing, one fact became very clear: just because you don't like something, that doesn't mean you won't miss it when it's gone.

I spent many years chafing against the restraints of my life, the hypocrisy, the meaningless rules, and the knowledge that I didn't have to suffer them, that there was a price I could pay and be free, was part of that suffering. Yet as a thinker I also had a drive to make sense of what I could. So now I can feel bereft on occasion. Something I knew intimately has gone from my life.

So yes, I miss something I never liked. Miss it a lot sometimes. Whatever I thought of it, it was familiar, and the familiar has a strong pull. It pulls harder whenever something knocks my stability.

Nobody needs worry about me, I hasten to say. My life has plenty of fulfilment, and I still don't think I could swallow the transparent nonsense that comes with the stability and financial support. But I'd be fooling myself if I pretended there was no temptation at times. (the survivor, June 11, 2008)



Notes

[1] Much of the content of the former Brethren website is still accessible on the wayback machine, a site that archives most websites, at the following URL:
<https://web.archive.org/web/20090822210712/http://www.theexclusivebrethren.com/god-christian.html>

[2] At the time of this blog entry, David was working for an Exclusive Brethren company, and he recognized that to obtain a similar wage outside he would need to show his qualifications, which he didn't have because of the group's ban on higher education.



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About the Author

Jill Mytton is a Chartered Counselling Psychologist. Currently, she is a visiting lecturer in the School of Psychology, London Metropolitan University, and at the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, London, where she is also a research supervisor for doctoral students. She is currently studying for a doctorate at the Metanoia Institute affiliated with Middlesex University. She is listed on the British Psychological Society media list for Cults and Thought Reform and has been involved in several TV and radio broadcasts. Her primary research interest is the mental health of second-generation adults (SGAs)—i.e., those born or raised in cultic groups. She has presented at several conferences, including INFORM London, April, 2008; the annual Division of Counselling Psychology conferences in Dublin, 2008, Leicester, 2012, London 2014, and Harrogate 2015; and the ICSA annual conferences in Geneva, 2009, Montreal, 2012, and Stockholm 2015. She was born and raised in the Exclusive Brethren, leaving at the age of 16, when her parents decided to leave. Apart from a small private practice, she also runs an email support group for former Exclusive Brethren and has become a point of contact for leavers of several groups.