

BLACK SHEEP

JOE BARDIN

ONE BENEFIT OF BECOMING THE FAMILY BLACK sheep two decades ago was that I no longer *had* to attend family functions. Once the mandatory became voluntary, I almost never went to anything. Birthdays, Thanksgivings, bar mitzvahs, weddings sped past like mile markers on a freeway, as the momentum of my freedom grew.

When my oldest brother, Jacob, invited me to the bat mitzvah of his youngest child, I was prepared to pass on it, too. But then he said: “Just because we see the world differently, does that mean we’re never going to share any important times together?” This alignment of logic and love was a rare occurrence between us, and I couldn’t turn him down.

About 25 years ago, my family tried to have me deprogrammed. I walked in my parents’ front door in Washington, D.C., for a visit, and they were all waiting for me—my mother and father, Jacob and his wife, who lived in Bethesda, M.D., and my next older brother and

younger sister, who had materialized from New York City. There was also a bearded, black-coated rabbi, sweating for my sins in the July heat. My parents hadn't yet come around to the concept of air conditioning for the downstairs. "It's only two months when you really *need* it," my mother would tell the shocked Israeli relatives when they came to tour the nation's capital.

My father gazed at me with owl-like brows and studious, lawyerly intensity meant to convey a bottomless well of caring so long as I knocked off the bullshit. My mother, uncomfortable showing emotion, pursed her mouth with eyes wide, as if holding back hysterical laughter—a Crockpot ready to blow. My siblings were more peer-like, less authoritative. But an expression of rigid pity spread uniformly across the family unit, like some kind of genetic marker, some isotope tracer, delineating precisely that particular strand of ancestry; *Poor Joe, he can't deal with life*. Or maybe they were just scared for me and couldn't give or didn't want the vulnerability of expressing it.

Though I was 23, the rabbi talked *teen* with me, sprinkling his conversation with "you know," and "man," and "cool" this and "cool" that. As if my life choices really came down to semantics. My ultra non-overprotective, unconcerned-to-the-point of-being-emotionally-disengaged parents must have been freaking out to hire such a goof.

Just months earlier, in April 1993, the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, had gone up in flames. And still in everyone's rear view was that shocking litter of corpses, the Kool-Aid drinkers, sprawled on the ground in Jim Jones' Guyana. As I learned later, my parents were being advised by a so-called "cult deprogrammer," a man whose market value exploded with the levels of hysteria he could stimulate. My parents were just a small piece of side-business for this "expert," who also advised Attorney General Janet Reno in Waco, where he was no calming influence, either.

But I couldn't see my parents' fear, only their abrupt, ill-conceived attempt to define me in their own terms. By fighting them, I only reinforced the notion that my identity was in some sense family property to be negotiated collectively, which, apparently, up until that point, it had been. In the drama of the accusation of cult and brainwashing, family dysfunction is an often-unnamed accomplice.

The objectionable organization I'd involved myself with was an immortalist group based in Scottsdale, Ariz., known as People Unlim-

ited. There was no threat of mass suicide, only of radical life extension, or at a minimum, finding stimulation and satisfaction outside of the approved expected sources of Judaism, education and career.

The rabbi had a video about cults that my parents wanted me to watch. I refused vehemently as a matter of principle: I wasn't in a cult; the video was an insult. Then I gave in to their insistence, if only to get beyond it, but there was really no getting beyond it, so I refused all over again. They pounced on this point of resistance, as if a general refusal to watch a video on my part throbbed at the heart of our conflict. I agreed to watch.

Given the buildup, the video's content and production value were a letdown. Someone had cobbled together footage from various groups whose unifying transgression seemed to be strange practices conducted in poor lighting. One group, for example, embraced some radical form of flying yoga. They didn't really fly - they sat cross-legged on the floor and bounced. An ominous voiceover revealed that many came away with damaged tailbones.

No one else in the room saw the irony in chronicling odd, ritualistic behavior as dangerously deviant. Singing to candles on Friday night? Eating matzo - unleavened bread - for a week and *liking* it? Blowing a ram's horn on Yom Kippur in a synagogue full of D.C. lawyers, not a shepherd in sight? And above all, the idolatrous worship of texts - we prayed to hand-printed parchment, didn't we?

I continued on my way and my family continued on theirs. My mother published a piece in a national Jewish magazine about losing her son to a cult. The magazine never contacted me to fact-check - who would know better than Mom? The certainty of this judgment extended to the community at large. I once came across an article online from the student newspaper of the Jewish high school I'd attended, earnestly warning the other kids about not allowing themselves to be brainwashed like Joe Bardin.

The term "cult," although typically deployed in the context of victimization, is also a bullying one, used to isolate and demonize difference. Though many, many groups could fit the definition, the only ones that get labeled cults are those that hold some sort of deviating point of view. Are there small, fringe groups with malicious intents? Undoubtedly, there are. But as the sex-abuse scandal in the Catholic

Church amply illustrates, the exotic dangers attributed to cults are readily available in mainstream organizations.

Even in the most murderous cases such as Jonestown, the deadly exit choreographed for the victims was, in fact, an accelerated application of the most common of church lessons—*that the better life is on the other side*. (So why not go there? They did). While mainstream religion offers ample ideological basis for what is considered cultic behavior—blind faith, hierarchical authority, separation from others—the best emotional training, it can be easily argued, is the family unit itself. Where else do the opinions and sensibilities of individuals so dominate others as a matter of course?

I understood all of this intellectually, but it hurt me deeply that my family considered me brainwashed, without agency. I argued with them when we talked, and often when we didn't, debating them in the mirror, while the tap ran, battling my own genetic reflection. Once, on the phone, my mother's berating became so intolerable that I hung up on her, which I had never done before in my life. A few moments later, someone knocked on the door of my Scottsdale apartment and I jumped, as if she had teleported two-thousand miles to take to me to task.

My mother went back to school, to Howard University, and got a degree in social work. It seemed to give her some perspective. She stopped haranguing me and we spoke more often. She said: "What's *normal* anyway? A setting on the washing machine."

She told me about her work with D.C.'s troubled youth. But then she got involved with helping young people that had left an oppressive bigamist community in Colorado City, on the Utah/Arizona border, who didn't know how to function in society. My mother was never comfortable expressing her feelings directly. When I would visit from college, she would say that the cat really missed me. So when she spoke of the lost, forlorn kids of Colorado City, or any other cult activity, I knew I was still somehow the subject, even though I lived in Scottsdale, ran my own freelance copywriting practice, published occasionally, paid my bills, voted in elections, etc.

My mother's good work got her connected with a delegation of anti-cult officials from the People's Republic of China. They came to D.C. to learn more about how to deal with their own cult—the Falun Gong.

In return, they invited her to attend a cult conference in China, which she did, reporting mostly on the copious amounts of interesting foods she was served. The irony of a totalitarian regime labeling a resistant startup religion a “cult” captures perfectly the subjective convenience of the term; a cult is, fundamentally, whomever you *really* don’t like, probably because you feel threatened by them.



Today I am in my 48th year, which means I have lived longer with an immortal or unlimited outlook, than with the mortal mindset I was born into. People often say I look younger than those years, but for the most part, I don’t feel young or old, and tend to gauge the age of others poorly; the meaningfulness of that distinction has blurred.

What has clarified is my communion with my own physical form. That in fact, though language itself resists this singularity, there is no me and my body – I am it (though that doesn’t sound right, either). The concept of mind/body connection only contributes to the confusion, describing two entities in a transaction when, in fact, it is really just one body, being.

Good things come with this awareness of wholeness – freedom of feeling and emotion, a release from self-negation, a loosening of the reigns of the self in general. But the best part is simply feeling real. This makes sense to me; this is the conversation I belong in. My view is that as human beings we are too good for death, and that any capitulation to it is a woeful undervaluing of us.

It’s gratifying to see scientists now engaged in efforts to cure aging as a whole, which is clearly the next frontier for medicine. But I don’t view radical life extension and physical immortality as a fundamentally science-driven enterprise. Moving out from under the shadow of the inevitability of death brings about a spiritual awakening of the physical body. I suspect it is this awakening in people, that we are more than just fodder for the natural selection process, which is driving science and not the other way around.

I’m certain that the reason all religions address immortality in some form is because it is in us to do this. Unfortunately, the posture of unfulfilled longing has become our archetype, to the point where the

fulfillment of this innate longing is seen by many, both religious and non-religious, as a heresy. And perhaps it is.

What makes my heresy sustainable is my community, People Unlimited. Like anyone who has been forced to go beyond family norms to realize a deeper authenticity, I would love to receive my parents' blessing, and to know they value the depth of my choices, which really haven't been choices at all, but something more organic, an identification and its unfolding. Still, it is undeniably thrilling to be on this journey with such dedicated fellow travelers.



Several years passed since my mother attended the cult conference in China, and my parents and I settled into a superficial yet peaceful communication, in which we avoided the dangers of depth. But living with the sensibility of having no end made me get more intimate with myself. As with anything – a car, a home – one relates more intently to a keeper. I became increasingly sensitized to the food I ate, the thoughts I entertained, and even the words I spoke. The prospect of living forever carrying the pain of neutrality towards my parents felt exhausting; to make this journey I needed to travel light.

I could feel how my conflict with them was constricting me, keeping me leashed to their opinions, which I was powerless to change. Also, underneath it all, though I did not feel very close to them, I loved them. To resist them, I had to deny that love, which required more of the emotional suppression I was seeking freedom from in the first place. Opening my heart to them was the only way I could *stop* being their child, eternally subject to their approval and embittered by their disapproval; to disown them as parental authorities, I needed to reown them as people. Attending my niece's bat mitzvah was an opportunity to do this.

My parents had downsized from the three-story house I lived in during middle school and high school, to a fifth-floor apartment overlooking a leafy stretch of Connecticut Avenue. Seemingly all the old furniture, books and wall hangings had been crammed in, so that they lived with nothing new. I slept in the study on a foldout futon couch.

There was also a desk and shelves filled with books that had “cult” in their title. All of them, in some sense, about me.

For a moment, looking at those books, the stigma of *cult* stung me all over again, like I’d been convicted of some wrongdoing without a fair trial, with no trial at all. But sometimes justice is the enemy of progress, and I knew better than to try to reopen that old case.

During my stay, I confessed to my parents that I loved them and wanted only the best for them. I acknowledged their influence in my life, which was considerable. I’m a writer because of my mother. I think big because of my father. I cried a lot, and they a little, and they thanked me. I recalled how, when I was small, my father regularly came home from work after I was already asleep. He would sit by my bed and recite the Sh’ma Yisrael, “Hear O Israel,” in my ear with such passion that it felt like a blessing. He would be moved to adlib, whispering that I could do and be anything, and kiss me goodnight. I reminded him of this, in regard to living forever. Touched by my remembering, he was baffled by my literalness.

During an emergency hospitalization about a year earlier, I couldn’t eat for a few days. With my palate cleared, my sense of smell became so acute that normally hidden scents, like hand sanitizer and laundry detergent, were overpowering to the point of being nauseating. I had not been in a synagogue in twenty years. Now, for the bat mitzvah of Jacob’s youngest daughter, Rina, a lovely, bright-hearted person, absence had cleared my liturgical palette, and without the familiarity of routine, I was shocked by the repetition of the prayers, a seemingly obsessive, even *brainwashing*, praise of God.

The unfortunate Torah portion for that Saturday was all about the do’s and don’ts of animal sacrifice. Inevitably, the archaic nature of the material prompted a sermon on why this was in fact relevant today. The sermon was given by a relative, a respected Jerusalem-based scholar, whose rising career depended upon his considerable skill in rendering the obsolete as current, and he did it well.

To my way of thinking, life is too long to not speak one’s mind. So on the ride home, I remarked on how repetitious the service seemed, how it obsessed over acknowledging the one true God, which in a fundamentally monotheistic culture now seemed like a battle won long ago. Back in my parents’ apartment, as my mother set the lunch table with the same cutlery I grew up with, I raised the issue again. Despite

my better judgment, I was still seeking some kind of common ground; we were family – could we see things *that* differently?

My mother said something cutting, as only she could, having to do with my own beliefs, her words so steely it was all I could do to catch my breath. Conversation over. After lunch, I apologized to her. I'd long ago removed myself from the intimacy of her tribe. To hear me critique that tribe's rituals, as an outsider, was, for her, intolerable.

On the flight home, I felt a piercing tenderness for my parents, a love that ached like a radio signal humming through my bones. I wished I could pull them up by their roots, ingrown over the years into a complex cage of fixed routine and thought, and transplant them into richer, more open soil. A sadness came with seeing more for them than they saw themselves. But the sadness was not so great as to make me want to only see the world they had opened my eyes to, so we'd only have the same things to look at.

ly more famous than Donald Trump—certainly Mickey Mouse’s fame is far more enduring—I’ll take bets on this. In a few years, maybe less, no one will know who Donald Trump is—but Mickey Mouse, he’ll be important to people forever. He’ll be important to whatever descendants people have!) The atheist can fantasize that a world is going to emerge (somewhat like Europe is rumored to be these days) in which everyone is a natural-born atheist. I doubt it’s going to happen. Europe is temporary—in so many ways (alas). It’s not so much God that matters. He’s a red herring, really. It’s everything else around God that counts—the cultures that surround God (as it were), the details that each religion is specific about. That’s what we kill each other over, for example: the different ways we prepare food, wear clothes, who (or what) we’re willing to sacrifice (or not sacrifice). How we treat the infidels—anyone who doesn’t believe in what we believe in.

It’s times like this that I feel like I’m from Mars. (So it’s nearly all the time that I feel this way, I’ll admit it). It’s not that I’m lacking in faith, unlike my fellow humans—that’s just not possible, I think. It’s something else; it’s where I keep my faith in my head. It just doesn’t seem to live quite where it lives in other heads.

Literature is directly all about psychology. Did I mention that? And psychology, perhaps, is how we compartmentalize what we think about: what we allow to co-exist in the same thoughts with what. That’s a big part of what we are, anyway.

In psychology, we get to name these things: this syndrome, that syndrome. In literature we get to make it real, to live. So we can understand ourselves. Finally.

JOE BARDIN

Faith for me is a physical experiencing, a kind of future seeing that is inseparable from creation, because we’re doing/making something that hasn’t happened yet, but it is in us to do this. So to the degree that literature is an act and experience of creation, it is inseparable from some form of faith. Whether you are producing literature or consuming it, you are in the presence of faith.

This faith is not a hope, or some stubborn, unfounded belief, or an egotistical insistence that my way is the right way, or that all my images will play out as I’d like them to; they will not. This faith

is an access point to what we already are but haven't manifested. Though there may be no proof, there is nevertheless substance and alignment, feeling and purpose. And then the creation comes.

My growing sense is that no one fulfills any significant intention of creation without large doses of faith. Though writers are champion doubters, capable of spinning intricate fantasies of disbelief, there is that core that knows and always knew. In this sense, faith is what we can't escape of ourselves, no matter how much we equivocate. Though there may be no tangible proof for it, it is that essential element of identity without which you are not you anyway, so why not just accept it?

Though doubt might seem eminently more reasonable, provable and replicable, it is actually an absurd indulgence when it drives you to embrace and enforce your own oblivion. I don't believe there is some external force that insists on my annihilation, but if there was, I certainly won't be a party to it in my own intellect. If this sort of doubt registers as a passive naturalistic kind of death urge, then faith is an equally innate but less unexercised movement towards life and light.

MARLENA BONTAS

I believe there is a deep connection between faith and literature. The most obvious one is the Bible, as there is a great narrative built around the time before and after Christ.

The Book of Revelations is closely related to my poem, 'I slaughtered your horses', because it emphasizes the need to control and keep people emotionally needy.

The rider on the black horse has this overwhelming power over others to control the rations of food, because he is holding a pair of 'scales' in his hand. This rider is also able to sustain 'scarcity'. In my poem, I allude to control and scarcity, two themes that fit well with the portrayed father figure.

I've grown up in a deeply religious environment which shaped the way I write. When your life, as an adult, is dedicated to 'God', you have no power anymore over your own suffering. You only get strong if you pray and cleanse yourself of sins. My poem tries to deal with the the theme of control that religion has over us. When we are dependent on a higher being to live our lives, we