

I have never regretted my time in the Moonies

As told to Gabriella Jozwiak

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Growing up in the 1960s and 70s, I was drawn to an alternative way of life. I was the son of a businessman and I wanted to discover the meaning of life beyond materialism; I felt religion may hold the answers. After school, I trained as an accountant, but hated it. My plan was to live in a bread delivery van that I'd converted and offer people handyman services in return for payment in kind.

One day, a man knocked on my van and invited me to join his community for a weekend. They were the Moonies, named after their Korean founder Sun Myung Moon, and they were operating from a farmhouse just outside Reading. The community of 15 was led by a local man and his wife; it was clean, drug-free and essentially Christian, all of which appealed to me. By the end of the weekend, I had agreed to stay for six months.

When Moon called us to America six months later, I didn't hesitate; I was barely in touch with my family by then and I thought the apocalypse was coming. I suppose I'd been brainwashed.

Much of my time was spent travelling between Moonie centres along the east coast, preaching on the street corners of nearby towns and helping to establish new communities. Five years after I joined, Moon

declared that I should marry. He paired couples at random; no one questioned his judgment. My bride was to be a young Austrian girl called Heidi.

We had no contact until the wedding day. Moon performed the ceremony in a hall in Washington with 700 couples and, after the vows, I was made to cane my wife as hard as possible. It wasn't in my nature to do that and I didn't enjoy it, but you didn't question Moon, and his men were watching us closely.

Soon afterwards, my superiors told me I was being posted to Korea for seven months. I realised then that I would be cut off from the world, and that I had been controlled for years. I also couldn't see myself being happy with Heidi. I was desperate to escape. I acted quickly. I was trusted to run errands alone in the van, so I knew I could leave the site without arousing suspicion. It was my only means of getting away.

I had always known that my dad had put some money in a US bank account for me – just enough to cover a plane ticket. Still, it all felt like an enormous risk: I believed everything the Moonies told me, particularly the threat in the movement's teachings that if you left, you exposed yourself to losing control of your life.

But I knew I couldn't stay – it was now or never. I packed my few belongings into a tea chest when no one was around and drove out. The guard on the gate waved me through, as he always did.

As I drove away, I felt relieved to be leaving, but not euphoric: I was lost. For years, I had nightmares of being recaptured. When I finally arrived at my father's house in Maidenhead, he couldn't understand how I could return with nothing after so long: no job, money, wife or children. I was 41.

The church never contacted me, but Heidi called twice to say she loved me and that I should come back. For her, my disappearance was a slap in the face, and I regret causing her that pain, but she would have been reassigned to a better choice. Our "marriage" wasn't recognised outside the mission.

My father stood by me. He installed me in the basement of a bedsit he owned in Reading, where I became the landlord. I never joined another church.

I remarried twice. The first marriage ended after 18 months, but my fortune changed when I met my second wife in the late 1980s. She was one of my tenant's sisters, and we've run the property together ever since. I'm 80 now, and losing a battle with cancer. If I had stayed with the mission, I might still be in Korea. I have never regretted my time in the Moonies, but I'm relieved I found the courage to escape.