



Friendship changes the phases of understanding (Fear Not blog) - Debbie Preece

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Couples from around the world participate in a mass wedding ceremony arranged by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church at Sun Moon University in Asan, south of Seoul, South Korea on Oct. 14, 2009. Moon, self-proclaimed messiah who founded the Unification Church, died at age 92 on Sept. 3, 2012. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

HUNTSVILLE, Alabama -- Remember the Moonies? Those purportedly brain-washed youth spending their time and energy in the service of God and submitting unblinkingly to the direction of their religious teachers?

Those white-gowned women marching in waves with their grooms to be blessed in mass weddings?

For some reason, they became one of the fringe fears of my teen years. They were people I pitied from afar for what I imagined to be their loss of autonomy, their zombied obedience, their blinkered devotion. I remember adults whispering about the de-programming centers to which some of the Moonies were spirited and un-brainwashed.

With the death Monday in South Korea (Sunday in the U.S.) of the Unification Church's founder, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, I have had occasion to remember and, well, to reprogram those prejudices.

A few years ago, Debbie Preece, then volunteering her time here in Huntsville to help establish the Madison County Coalition for Healthy Marriages, confided that she and her husband of 30 years, NASA physicist Rob Preece, were matched by the Rev. Moon as strangers. After three years of letters and phone calls to each other -- she was working for the church in D.C. and Rob was in graduate school on the West Coast -- they were married by the Rev. Moon in Madison Square Garden. With that news, I felt something shift in the attic of my mind.



Debbie Preece of Huntsville laughs about how young she and her husband, Rob, looked 30 years ago when they were married by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon in a massive ceremony with more than 2,000 other couples in Madison Square Garden. People have a lot of misconceptions about Moon's Unification Church, Preece says. (The Huntsville Times/Kay Campbell)

I'd already talked with Debbie long enough to know that she was not brainwashed, silly, benighted, controlled or unhappy.

And if she weren't any of those things, I realized I had to drag out that old trunk of notions about Rev. Moon's Unification Church and re-label a few things.

Yes, Debbie was devoted to the Unification movement, and still is, even as she and her husband are active in a Presbyterian congregation in Huntsville.

She is still glad that she was able to spend 10 years volunteering full time for the church in her 20s.

Her devotion is no more outlandish than is a nun's to the Catholic Church. It's not crazy to voluntarily undertake a disciplined religious vocation.

Are there repressively controlling religious communities that cut members off from family, friends and

new ideas? Of course, and it's likely some of the Unification's centers were like that. But I'm not convinced that the percentage of unhealthy religious communities is any higher than is the percentage of unhealthy secular communities. Human beings are a messed up species, and we like to bully each other, whether in God's name or just for the fun of it.

The deprogramming centers were often more oppressive than the so-called cults they counteracted. A *New York Times* article about Moon reported that upwards of 400 of Moon's followers were kidnapped and taken to the centers in the 1970s and '80s. A friend of mine once helped liberate a young adult woman from such a place.

It's always difficult to understand zealous, selfless dedication from the outside – whether dedication to a cause, a political ideology or a creed. Zealots scare those of us who live non-extreme lives.

We Earthlings seem to have a primal yearning for a return to the enfolding Garden, a place to belong, a loving family. Some of us will satisfy that need by joining non-demanding, coffee-brewing, hymn-singing groups. A few will venture into something more exacting. Surely we moderates need the zealots as much as they need us: That array of choices weaves a colorful tapestry of ways to construct a life.

Here's what I've learned this week: We must leave our gates open, our lines of communication operating, and our respect in place for the different ways human beings respond to their own callings.

As long as an organization helps a person live a life full of joy and kindness, surely we should respect it. As long as an organization can welcome new members without compulsion and release those exiting without acrimony, surely we should honor the right of each individual to choose a personal path, even if we don't understand it.

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