

Why I Joined the Unification Church

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Full transcript



Kaori has owned and operated two successful food businesses, and authored two books, *Mochi Magic* and *Let Your Passion Pay the Bills*.

Hosts: We mentioned in your intro that you grew up going to school at a Unification Church school. Where was that and what was that like?

Kaori: I was in what was originally called the Sunshine School in the Bay Area, located in Hayward, California. After third grade, we moved to a new building, which is the Unification Church building in San Leandro, California - the main building in the Bay Area - and the name changed to the Principled Academy. I continued to go there until eighth grade, so I was there from preschool all the way through.

Hosts: Were you in school with other kids from the church?

Kaori: Yeah, for sure. In the beginning it was pretty much 75% Unification Church kids and 25% other kids and families who were interested in the school. Then I think starting around fifth grade it became more like 50-50.

Hosts: What was that like, especially the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade into, I'm assuming, a public school?

Kaori: Thankfully, quite a few kids from the Principled Academy transitioned to Arroyo High School, which is the high school I attended, also in the San Leandro area. So I did see a lot of familiar faces, but going from a small classroom of twelve kids to a huge classroom was quite a big transition. I had some people I knew before I went in, so I stuck with them for ninth grade and the rest of high school. Sports were a big bonding point for me and other students there - I really enjoyed sports a lot.

Hosts: Was there something specific about going to a Unification Church school that you think was different?

Kaori: Yeah, I definitely feel that way. I'm trying to picture if I went to a public school - you could say I was in a bubble, but it was a very wonderfully nurturing bubble of caring staff. Every morning we'd have morning service focused on a good character trait, and we'd listen to stories. A lot of schools, I feel, are missing this, and I'm passionate about having more character-based education in schools - teaching kids about responsibility, trying to think of others before yourself, empathizing with other people. I think this kind of character-based education would be really valuable to have in schools. It really helped raise me up into who I am.

Kaori: The founders of the school are Christina Sayre and Dr. Mose Durst - huge figures in the movement. Dr. Durst helped me become a really good writer. He was teaching college-level English in seventh and eighth grade, so when I went into high school I was super prepared. We'd look at different wars and always examine the social, political, economic, and government aspect of every single thing. We got used to asking, how can we frame this? We'd read a story and look at it from a social view, from a

political view, and then ask how those all come together. I felt kind of ahead of people.

Hosts: That sounds amazing. I'm so jealous - I loved language arts as a kid. Do you think that perspective was there because of the values the school was trying to instill? You don't get many middle and high school kids taught to look at conflicts from multiple angles and ask how that might influence how people react in a given historical context. Unificationism is really about bringing two sides together oftentimes, right? Do you think that's unique, or maybe a stronger emphasis than at a typical school?

Kaori: Yeah, I do feel like it made us very worldly and able to understand things happening in the world from multiple perspectives. Things happen, but what is behind that? What's causing that from different aspects - political, social, economic? We also did oratory in seventh and eighth grade, so we'd stand up in front of the class and present an article we'd found. That was really good for public speaking and developing confidence as well.

Hosts: I remember around middle school my teachers were surprised at how much my perspective of the world was a little broader than some of my peers. At home it was nothing new - it's what we'd talk about, God's perspective and universal values. It was interesting how that differed from other students and how they approached their papers or history.

Kaori: Yeah, for sure. I feel like I was taught from an early age to look at things and not see black and white - to look at things from many different perspectives. I think that did make me a more open-minded person, less like, this is the only right way and we have to shun everything else.

Hosts: Could you share a specific example of where you felt you were more open to hearing about a different perspective because of your upbringing?

Kaori: At my school, Christina Sayre would organize a lot of things that were public service but also opened up my mind to the fact that there are many people doing good things in the world. Just because they have a certain belief - maybe a Christian background - they're still good people doing great things. There was one African American Christian lady who was really good at giving; she would always give so much to other people, food and clothing, and Christina had her come and speak. We'd go to old people's homes at Christmas time and sing to them - we'd practice singing - and the older people would give us little crafts they made, little crocheted things, candy canes. It really taught me the value of older people's thoughts and not just, oh, they're old, whatever, I know everything. It taught me respect for elders and the value of taking care of older people. It was a beautiful experience to be able to sing to them and offer something, because they're in an old people's home and maybe they don't have family or younger people around them. I realized how much benefit I get from serving other people.

Hosts: That's great to learn quite young, that it was built into your school - it wasn't just academic, it was moral.

Kaori: I really love that, and it was part of my upbringing, so it all feels very normal. I don't have an example of being in a public school, so it's hard to know what the huge differences were, but there was a big character element there that I really valued.

Hosts: Do you think that love of service as a child influenced your decision to go into cooking as your career? A lot of people think of food as caring for others - at least in my household, food is how we express love. I think anyone with a Korean parent can identify with that. Do you think there's a connection?

Kaori: Yeah, I get a lot of value from teaching people things and adding value to their life with new skills, whether that's cooking or inspiring them business-wise. It's hard to say if it's my own character, because my dad is similar and my mom also teaches cooking classes. But I do feel like from an early age - and a lot of UC kids can resonate with this - there's a value and almost a gratification of putting others first, just serving other people and using your skills to benefit the world or the people around you. Not just as a duty, but as something actually very gratifying. It's a good feeling to help other people and to serve them.

Kaori: A cute example: when I was starting Kaori's Kitchen, before I got into team building with Google and going to San Francisco, I started by doing cooking-around-the-world classes at my old alma mater, the Principled Academy. I was teaching kids how to cook. I'd come once a week and we'd do a different dish from a different country. It was just really nice to be able to give back to the school and teach these kids, and I still connect with them - I saw a few of them when I visited the Bay Area. It kind of came full circle.

Hosts: You were able to give back. I definitely feel warm and fuzzy inside hearing that. Also, more children who know how to cook can only be a benefit to the world.

Kaori: Yes, for sure.

Hosts: So you mentioned Kaori's Kitchen and the team building for Google. You worked for some high-profile companies. Can you talk a bit about how you started that business and how it expanded?

Kaori: Sure. Let's start in 2015. I had done Landmark, the Landmark Forum. It opened my mind - in my head I was kind of on a one-track course: I'm going to be an English teacher, that's all I'm going to do, I'm good at writing and reading. But Landmark opened me up to the possibility of just declaring what I want to be and what I want to do, and then creating it from scratch.

Kaori: Before I took the Landmark Forum, there was a cooking school opening in my area called the Seasoned Farmhouse, maybe a ten-minute drive away. I was really inspired by it and interested, so I emailed the owner and said, do you need any help? Can I intern or something? She said, sure, you can help prepare for the class, help during the class, help clean after, and the class will be completely free. So I did that for a few classes, and then I realized - wow, people are paying \$65 for a class, and if that's ten people, you're making \$650 in four hours, or maybe five hours if you include shopping, prepping, teaching for two hours, and cleaning for another hour.

Kaori: It was kind of an eye-opening moment. I helped out with a class once where the lady was not even a professional cook - she was a local news broadcaster, but she was using her background of Middle Eastern cooking to teach a class. It was a lightbulb moment where I realized I don't need all these credentials. I don't need to go to culinary school to be a cooking teacher. So I went to Landmark and declared for myself that I'm going to be a cooking teacher. From there I did a few classes at Seasoned Farmhouse where I was interning - I did a ramen class - and then there's a Franklin Park Conservatory nearby, so I reached out to them and did some more Asian classes; we did a soba class.

Kaori: Looking back, I'm like, oh man, I was pretty risky, because sometimes a week before I would learn how to make a dish and then teach it. It was a little bit crazy the way I was doing things, but I learned a lot through the process. My style is: just schedule it. Because I'm a procrastinator, I know I'll get into my mode where I'm like, okay, I have to do this now, I have to learn this, and I'm going to make it happen. But if I don't schedule it, I'll keep procrastinating. So that's my style - be brave, sign up to do things, and then figure it out.

Hosts: That's a great tip for all you procrastinators out there, including me. Similarly, if I just start something and don't plan it 100% all out, you will rise to the occasion - or you won't, and that's okay. You'll learn something from it.

Kaori: Yeah, for sure. It's definitely fly by the seat of my pants a little bit. That's my style. At the same time in 2015 I was studying to be an English teacher for high schoolers, so I got my master's in English education, and in 2015 or 2016 I taught ninth graders in English for a year. It was very gratifying - I built a lot of good relationships - but at the same time very grueling emotionally, dealing with classroom management and kids who didn't want to be there. I had about half honors and half regular English. I built my love for each of those kinds of students, but I realized I want to have a family and I want a more flexible schedule. I don't want to be nine-to-five and not have access to my kids.

Kaori: So when we moved to California in 2016, I decided I'm going to stop teaching for a while and try out this idea of having a cooking class business and see where it takes me. I reached out to a few schools - a Catholic school and also the Principled Academy - and pitched my idea: hey, can I teach cooking around the world as an extracurricular for your school? They advertised it to their parents and whoever was interested signed up. We had maybe twenty kids at Principled Academy and about fifteen at the Catholic school. I'd come once a week, so I was working only two days a week. But if you have ten kids giving \$25, that's \$250 for a day. It adds up when you have a subscription style - cheap for them, but it adds up across all the people.

Kaori: As for the team building - I signed up for a few platforms that specifically catered to companies in the area, especially since San Francisco is a huge corporate area. I'd put a picture of ramen or an emoji - we did ramen emoji classes - and a description and the cost per person, and companies would sign up through there. I had a Yelp page too, Kaori's Kitchen on Yelp, so they would directly contact me to sign up. Then I'd schlep all my things to San Francisco. It was a lot, but we'd make \$1,000 to \$2,000 sometimes for a two-hour event, so it was definitely worth it.

Kaori: A big part of my success is definitely my mom helping out. I was pregnant with my first child, so when I'd go and do the classes, my mom was helping out pretty much every time. That was actually great, because all that helping out - now she's doing classes on her own and having a good income for herself in California while I'm in Ohio. All that assisting me gave her the confidence to be her own teacher.

Hosts: Wow, that's amazing. You gave your mom financial independence. Greatest gift.

Kaori: Yeah. It's definitely work - it's not passive work, it is a class - but compared to doing another really intense job, it's not as bad and you can make quite a good amount from it.

Hosts: I've seen you give seminars or talks on your business to our community - to other second-generation Unificationists, first-generation Unificationists. Why is that important to you, to pass on that knowledge?

Kaori: I think it's important because a lot of times people think business is such a big endeavor and that you have to be so certified to start a business - they get caught up in the details. It's kind of sad, because so many people have skills and passions they could be sharing with others and making good money from. Even I was getting caught up in, oh, I have to go to culinary school and spend \$50,000 and become this certified teacher. Our own fear gets in the way of starting things. It's fun - you get to share your passion with others and make good money off of it. It's just a really good combination.

Hosts: That's a win-win for sure. I haven't read your books yet, but they're definitely on my reading to-do list. So pivoting back to your faith and your upbringing - you talked about there being times you've questioned the beliefs you were raised in. You describe it as overall positive, your upbringing in a Unification Church school, but I'm curious about the church itself. What was it that finally clicked for you, and what did you question?

Kaori: The leaders in our movement are not always perfect, because they're human. Things that have happened with leaders - In Jin Nim and her husband - and just the sad-to-see dysfunctionality in a family that I thought must be perfect. I realized, oh, nobody's perfect. It was kind of a wake-up call. It allowed me to see past things that aren't black and white. The way people are raised can have a big impact on how they are as adults. The True Family went through so much because their parents were always in the public light and they barely had time with them, and they had so much pressure simultaneously to be ideal and perfect. That's kind of a formula for a dysfunctional childhood, unfortunately.

Hosts: Just for our listeners who aren't familiar with the term True Family - that refers to the children of Father and Mother Moon, right?

Kaori: Yes. I think Unificationists are quite idealistic, but a lot of times ideals don't always work out. We have these ideals and we're striving towards them - they are good ideals, and a lot of times they do yield positive benefits. But there was a lot of disingenuousness going on, a lot of lack of honesty, and eventually everything had to come out.

Hosts: I think for some people, seeing and hearing those things is very confrontational to our expectations, especially when it comes to what we believe in and what we expect of our leaders representing those ideals. For some people, when they're confronted with that, it's like, oh my God, no, it was all lies, and they kind of abandon what they grew up with. What helped you take a more compassionate viewpoint - looking at them as human and able to make mistakes? Sometimes people aren't able to do that.

Kaori: That's a good question. Only recently I learned this, but I was studying real love. You know how people who are drowning - if you see someone splashing you in a pool, you feel kind of mad, and then you turn around and they're actually drowning, not splashing you; that's why the water is coming in your face. In the past few years that analogy of people drowning has stuck with me - the reason people do these things or act out or suddenly do something shocking is they're probably suffering a lot on the inside. That perspective has really helped me when people do things or say things that are upsetting or I don't understand. I try to think about what they're experiencing and how that could be impacting their life. They're probably drowning, really struggling with something and not getting help for it. That's why they either pull other people down - because when you're drowning, you pull other people down to try to get air - or they're just flailing and they need help and don't even know it sometimes.

Hosts: Wow, thank you for sharing. That's not an easy perspective to take. That's quite a mature perspective for a young person. I think that was back in 2012 when a lot of things came out about Reverend and Mrs. Moon's family - and that was around the time our founder, Reverend Moon, passed away. There was a lot of internal turmoil, especially among our young people. It takes a strong character to be able to conjure up that kind of compassion and see it from not the obvious perspective. The easy perspective is to blame and shame. A much harder one is forgiveness and compassion, and moving forward with your own values and your faith, not letting it be affected by somebody else and their decisions.

Kaori: Yeah. The drowning analogy I didn't learn until a few years ago. But when that happened with the True Family - the reason I stuck with the Unification Church is because I saw my community was so good. I saw so many good people in my community, and I feel like I have really great parents. They didn't do things perfectly, but overall my childhood and upbringing was really good, and I appreciated my school. So maybe people at the top have made mistakes, but the proof is in what it's produced for my life -

such a great community and upbringing, and so much love at the same time.

Hosts: How would you describe what it's produced for your life?

Kaori: I had some kind of guideline for my life. I'm trying to imagine what my life would be like without knowing the Divine Principle or the value of purity before marriage - I feel like I would just be very lost and easily swayed by all the different popular ways to view things. That strong belief in the goodness of God and the goodness of family, and a kind of blueprint for what we're trying to build - I felt pretty clear growing up what I wanted to build, what I was about, what my parents were trying to do.

Hosts: And now you're married with two kids. I'm curious how your beliefs and those values have translated into building a family. It's not always easy to translate what was good from your upbringing and know you're doing a good job transferring what you want with your kids.

Kaori: Overall, I think my upbringing and real love and other tools we've read along the way have helped me take the approach of understanding. There's a book called Good Inside too, which was very helpful.

Hosts: Oh, yes - Dr. Becky. I'm a big fan.

Kaori: Yeah. Kids are good inside, so when they act out, there are other factors going on that could be causing that. Maybe they need a lot of love. Maybe they need one-on-one time. If you have two kids, sometimes you take one of them out and just give them love and attention. Kids act out for a reason - the behaviors are for a reason - not just because they're bad kids or because you're a bad parent. There are ways to instill more love and support that can help them feel better and more balanced.

Hosts: That doesn't sound too different from your analogy about drowning, right? Maybe it's that adults also act out because we're not getting something we need to nourish ourselves. How has your spiritual life been challenged as a parent?

Kaori: I definitely struggle a lot with guilt and shame, and seeing myself from God's perspective. There are a lot of ways you can feel guilty as a parent.

Hosts: Yes, I totally understand what you mean.

Kaori: There's a lot of worry. I almost feel like it might be too much for our generation. There's a term called intensive parenting, and I feel like our generation is going through that - we feel so responsible for everything: how our kid is developing emotionally, physically, mentally. We put a lot of pressure on ourselves. We don't want our kids to end up in therapy or depressed or suicidal. There's a lot more fear now around raising kids well. So I do struggle with worrying about my kids' well-being. Am I doing a good job? Especially when I get angry at them or if I yell - oh man, I don't feel like I'm doing a good job. So it's constantly challenging. I have to develop so much patience for my kids, and love. I can really see how having a family develops your heart, because you're pushed so much to grow it. Whereas if I decided not to get married or have kids, I wouldn't have to grow my heart - well, depending on what profession I went into. I respect people who go into those professions.

Hosts: But you get a break at the end of the day.

Kaori: Oh yeah, that's true. You get a break.

Hosts: You get to clock out. A lot of teachers sometimes won't have their own kids because they have kids all day.

Kaori: I totally understand that, because you're growing your heart so much in the classroom that you probably want a break at the end of the day.

Hosts: Can I ask - at least for me, I've found that in the course of parenting, in the course of being confronted with moments of trying to stretch your heart and develop more patience and compassion, it's crucial to develop a compassionate practice for yourself. Do you have any practices that help you to also practice that same compassion? They say you can only love others as much as you love yourself, right?

Kaori: Yes, that's so true. I truly do believe in meditation. I meditated in college - I joined a small meditation group, and it helped me so much to tap into the tagline, or the mantra, that we chanted: love is all there is. It was Baba Nam Kevalam, and we'd chant it with different tunes. It kind of healed my heart. Love is all there is at the end of the day. God loves us, and even if we make mistakes, love is all there is. That really healed me, I think, and helped with my faith in God as well - kind of seeing the softer side of God.

Kaori: And recently I did this thing where - I was feeling sad. I think I have a hard time sometimes

expressing my emotions because I feel that I'm being weak. But I just let myself cry and be sad. It almost was scary - it felt hopeless, like, oh my gosh, I'm going to let myself cry, I'm this despairing person, what am I doing? I don't want to be this sorrowful, emotional person. But then I just laid in bed for thirty minutes and cried, and after that something lifted and I felt normal again. I was able to go back downstairs and felt so much lighter. I didn't really know why I was sad, but through the crying and letting myself be sad, I realized what was at the core of it - a certain person said something judgmental about my parenting, and that made me really sad. Just releasing those emotions instead of holding onto them.

Hosts: Can I ask a little bit about the meditation also? That's not something I was exposed to as a kid growing up in our movement. In your experience, how is it different from prayer?

Kaori: I'm still figuring out prayer. My prayers can still be a kind of rote, sort of like, I need to hit these certain points. Other times my prayers can be really good and honest. But for me, meditation is just making space in your busy mind - almost like a clearing. Suddenly your mind has time to breathe and is not constantly inundated. You can have many thoughts during meditation; that's totally fine. You can still have a good session while having tons of thoughts in your head. But it puts your brain in this mode of, I'm observing my thoughts and I have this space. It just gives my brain a break.

Hosts: I like that analogy. I feel the same way when I practice meditation. For me, prayer can be a very active thing - sometimes you're thinking, am I saying the right thing? Am I doing the right thing? How am I even supposed to feel? Although there is a little bit of that also in meditation, meditation is more about being quiet and making space to let things come up or receive something, in a way that doesn't always happen during prayer, because we're actively putting energy out into the world.

Kaori: That's so true. I remember one session in particular - I was doing the OM meditation, where you say OM on a certain frequency at a certain pace. I felt so dumb when I started doing it, like, who can hear me? You can't do it quietly - they say if you can't feel it resonating in your chest, you're not doing it right. So you have to say it out loud, you can't just whisper it. And with long meditation, people who do this for sixteen hours a day, there's a certain point where your body goes past the pain and the discomfort and you're actually resonating with the meditation; you're not just focusing on your body feeling weird. I remember sitting with it - I think it was a 45-minute video where you're just saying OM the whole time - and I just started bawling. Tears, shaking, just tears coming up. I didn't even know what was coming up. There was no thought, no, oh, I'm crying because of this specific thing. It was just a release of emotion. I remember feeling so relaxed after - more relaxed than any yoga I've done or any movement or exercise. It's different from prayer, because in prayer I'm looking for answers, looking to receive some kind of inspiration.

Hosts: Right. And with meditation it's more about being completely present without expectation, and just seeing what comes up for you.

Kaori: Yeah. I definitely relate to it sometimes being even more relaxing than yoga.

Hosts: I'm also curious - this ties in with one of our next questions, which is, what do faith and spirituality look like for you now? But how does a meditation practice fit in with your Unificationist practice? Some more conservative Unificationists might say, why would you need meditation, why do you need something else?

Kaori: For sure. I did feel like it was a missing piece. When I was in college and I learned how to meditate, I felt like I could finally receive God's love - a very gentle love. A lot of Unificationist principles are very theoretical and can be kind of harsh sounding. But I try to take into perspective that the words from True Parents are also delivered to a certain audience. You have to think about who the audience was at the time. Maybe it was a group of people who really needed to hear a harsh, fatherly-love kind of thing. But then sometimes we read those words just as someone looking for God's love, and it can make you judge yourself more. You need to think, what do I need right now? What kind of words do I need to read to nourish myself? With meditation I felt this very gentle, love-is-all-there-is. God loves me. I don't have to do X, Y, and Z to be loved - I can just receive his love right now in this meditation.

Kaori: Unificationists tend to be quite different types of people - very unique people. Our parents' generation, some of them are very heady and intellectual; others are extremely spiritual. There are these very vast differences. Even the Unification practices are quite varying - very intellectual, and yet very spiritual with things that don't even make sense from an intellectual perspective.

Hosts: Are you thinking of a specific example as you say that?

Kaori: I mean the things that happen in Korea.

Hosts: For our listeners who might not know, there is a spiritual retreat center in South Korea. It's beautiful - in the mountains, fresh air, beautiful buildings, trees. It's a place you go for a period of time to

focus on your spiritual life, kind of disconnect from the world. Like Jared Leto does those kind of things - it's not unique. You know that story, he was in a retreat center when COVID broke out, and he got out and had no idea what was happening, why everything was shut down.

Kaori: I hadn't heard that.

Hosts: You hadn't heard that? I thought it was quite funny. So it's a place where you go to focus on that aspect of your life, and there's a schedule, which is pretty normal - you go to a Buddhist retreat at a temple, it's a spiritual setting, you're doing spiritual practices. We have certain spiritual practices that, again, come from Korean spirituality - Confucianist, mixed in with newer Unificationist practices.

Kaori: Yeah, it was interesting. I realized it's actually not just Unificationists - a lot of the stuff we do is based on Korean tradition.

Hosts: Some shamanistic practices.

Kaori: Yeah. And I'm a big believer in spirituality. I feel differences - if I get Reiki healing done on me, I can feel the difference in how my soul or my spirit feels, just feeling more light. So I'm definitely not against spiritual things, spiritual practices.

Hosts: I was just saying the movement does have a lot of different aspects to it. We're trying to embrace - what is it? Reverend Moon talks a lot about religion and science embracing each other as brothers, brothers and sisters. There aren't a whole lot of people who talk about that anymore. Einstein discussed his spirituality, how it felt conflicted, like it didn't match up with his scientific life and his scientific brain. He couldn't quite marry the two. So it is an interesting movement in that we have all kinds of people, as we've kind of displayed in this podcast - people who are business-minded but also spiritual, or 100% spiritual but also have a realness to their life and family situations.

Hosts: I think this is our final question. What keeps you inspired today? What are the sources you find inspiring for your spiritual nourishment?

Kaori: That's a good question, because it doesn't always look perfect. I don't think as a mom I find enough time to nourish myself spiritually. Even at church we need to take care of the kids in the kids' room, unless you switch off with your spouse - if your spouse is there. Maybe that's a reminder to nourish yourself spiritually and that it's important. I don't read that many books. I watch videos on YouTube.

Hosts: Are there any YouTubers you find inspiring, or podcasts? For myself, I get really deeply inspired by TV - I watch a lot of Netflix and HBO Max, and I find it nourishing because I'll have realizations from the dumbest shows. It could be one of those as well.

Kaori: Recently I've been going to the gym and doing this thing called 12-3-30, which I think was popular on TikTok, though I don't watch TikTok. It's been really good for me. It's a 12 incline, three miles per hour, for thirty minutes, and then you're out of the gym, but I still sweat. I put Great British Bake Off on my phone right above the treadmill, and I watch it. It makes the time go by so much faster.

Hosts: Oh, we're big fans of Great British Bake Off. My husband still keeps up to date, so it's going on in our house as well. He's British, so he needs his children to be educated in the steep tradition.

Kaori: Exactly. I like British humour - it's really funny. I can relate to it a lot. Just kind of dirty jokes, but setting a very proper tone.

Hosts: No soggy bottoms. Grind those nuts. Oh man. I think that's a great note to end on. Well, thank you so much, Kaori. This has been such a treat. We've known each other peripherally for a while, so to sit down and talk to you has been a pleasure.

Kaori: Thank you so much. It's really nice to chat with you both and reflect on my own upbringing.