

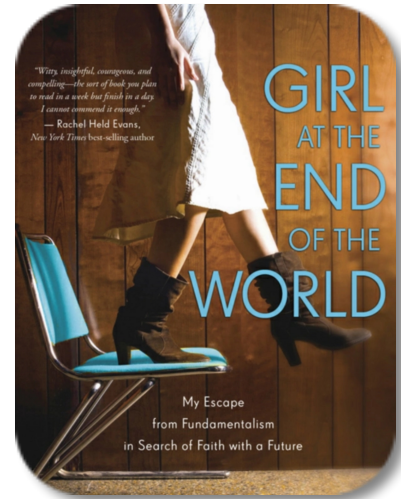
Girl at the End of the World

My escape from fundamentalism in search of faith with a future (a summary by Pat Evert)

Brainwashed

I am ready to die for Jesus. I am nine years old. If I can preach on this street corner and withstand the heckling of sinners, I'll show everyone I'm ready to be a martyr for the Lord. "Look here, man!" a lady shouts. "What you're doing to your little girl is wrong! This is brainwashing!" "Don't be afraid to think for yourself!" she shouts before Dad blocks my view.

George Geftakys—known as Papa George to family—claimed his authority came straight from God. Which was just another way of saying he ordained himself. Conveniently, self-ordination also meant Papa George was the final authority on everything and answered to no one. From our grass-roots start as a Bible study in Papa George's living room, The Assembly—as we came to be known—grew to include about fifty sister Assemblies throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, Europe, and Africa. **In the beginning, The Assembly was vibrant, energetic, and revolutionary.** As with most revolutions, the idealistic dream that had initially ignited our little band of born-again Christians gradually hardened into a rigid lifestyle. **Ironically, by the mid-eighties, we had morphed to become nearly indistinguishable from the legalistic, organized religion we'd rejected in the first place.** Cults aren't so much about beliefs as they are about methods and behavior. According to cult researchers, it is the emotional seizing of people's trust, thoughts, and choices that identifies a cult. **Fundamentalism that becomes cultish destroys the God-given freedom of each person.** Usually this is accomplished through fear. I don't dare say it aloud because Mom will scold me for desiring "things of this world," but if I'm being honest, all I really want is a television, a Happy Meal, and a Christmas Barbie.



Apocalypse Prep 101

Dad is putting together an apocalypse survival plan. He makes me promise to keep it a secret. At Hillcrest Park in Fullerton he showed me a spot and said, "This is where I want you to go if your mom and I get arrested by the Antichrist." But just in case we get separated, you need a safe place to hide until we can send someone to get you. And I also have a secret family password for you! Mephibosheth." Spoiler alert: Jesus didn't return in 1988. And then we went on to preach that we needed to stay ready anyway

because maybe God wanted to save more souls before “the wrath that was to come.” The truth was that my parents ran a strict missionary training home, and we had anywhere from six to ten people living with us at all times. Living in my home was sort of like living in a Christian commune—except with way more PMS and apocalypse stockpiling.

Christian Commune

In our home, privacy didn’t exist. In fact, people who were serious about being Christians in The Assembly were strongly encouraged to give up their “worldly independence” and live communally in training homes. Zero privacy was an important part of being devout in The Assembly. To help her run the household, Mom appointed a Head Steward who made sure everyone completed her daily and weekly stewardships. When housemates neglected their duties, overslept, or missed meetings, the Head Steward doled out consequences, usually in fifteen-minute increments of extra work. Additionally, the Head Steward was responsible for overseeing the spiritual health of each housemate and reporting back to Mom and Dad. **God doesn’t want me to be happy, I remember. He wants me to be holy.**

Grand Masters of My Destiny

Each year on my birthday, Grandma Betty summoned me to her bedroom for an appointment. I would sit stiffly on the edge of her blue-flowered love seat while she interrogated me. For being deathly frail, Grandma sure had plenty of energy for meddling in everyone’s business. How was my walk with the Lord? Was I reading my Bible daily and praying? Was I confessing my sins? Was I ready for Jesus’s return? And the big one: Are you redeeming the time? **“Redeeming the time”** meant living in a state of constant readiness because, as Papa George often warned us, “Ooohhh, the shame of it all!” if Jesus returned and we were listening to secular music or something. All this emphasis on “redeeming the time” meant I’d been preparing for my death since the day I was born. My future was clear: either I’d prove myself worthy of being Raptured, or I’d die during the Antichrist’s global takeover. I realized that, in The Assembly, anything that made me feel good was probably sinful. My destiny has been chosen for me. I am to be an obedient little missionary, saving as many souls as possible before the End of the World.

Bible Boot Camp

This was not your crafting, canoeing, sing-around-the-campfire summer camp. No, no. We believed in *edification*. We learned good character by digging trenches in the rain, reading the Bible for hours, and camping in tents. Assembly Bible camp was more like a boot camp for holiness. This is the chief marker of cultish fundamentalism: **everyone must obey**. Fundamentalism isn’t so much about belief as it is about behavior. Mainly, fundamentalism is about sameness.

Love Is Patient, Love Is Violent

The next day when I look in the mirror, my bottom is bruised. It hurts to sit down. It hurts to walk. God desires truth in the inward parts, I remind myself. My parents spank me

because the book of Proverbs says it will save my soul from hell. Even though Dad says I'm a Christian because I asked Jesus into my heart, the Bible says God chastens His children. My parents hurt me because they love me. In The Assembly, Grandma Betty taught parents to spank their children until the "will is broken." Children, Grandma said, were inherently wicked sinners. Hard, daily spankings were the only way to save my soul from hell. "God chose the Geftakys family to do a great work for Him," Aunt Grace says. "We don't question the work of the Lord, do we?" "Do we question the Lord's servants?" We soberly shake our heads.

School at the End of the World

Attending public school was out of the question. Dad called public school a "bastion of the State" and said its primary purpose was government indoctrination. Dad wanted us, as children of God, raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. So Mom opened her own school—essentially a glorified home school—and called it Cornerstone Academy. I get spanked every day at home and bullied every day at school.

Left Behind

When I was eight and worrying about the Rapture, I asked Jesus into my heart every day. Shortly after Dad laid out our survival plan, I grew more desperate. I hadn't felt the Jesus Sigh in a long time, and I wanted to make sure God still loved me.

High School Is Where the Sinners Are

Dad is sending me to public high school because I am ready to recruit my generation for the Lord. My mission: start a Bible study club so Dad can come preach to the lost souls of Sunny Hills High School. As the weeks passed at public school, my failure as a firebrand of faith was overtaken by bigger challenges. For example, the heathens weren't throwing me to the lions. This was a problem. How was I supposed to rescue the perishing when they kept trying to befriend me? As far as I can tell, The World isn't going to hell in a liberal hand basket. In fact, it is mostly already saved. The most popular group at Sunny Hills High School is the Christian club—a discovery I breathlessly report to Dad. "These kids are more enthusiastic than I am," I tell him. "They wear Scripture T-shirts to school and do this thing called Prayer at the Flagpole!" And there was another problem. Boys. How to explain that I didn't go dancing because, um, that led to fornication? And that since I was saving my first kiss for my wedding day, I couldn't date either? Also, they were probably going to hell. So would they like to come to Bible study with me?

God Knows If You're Wearing a Thong

To hear Brother Bart talk, female immodesty is responsible for practically every societal ill. Nothing seems to rile him up more than the putrefactions that are visible female curves. But the only thing I am learning from Modesty Awareness is how to have a harsh, critical view of my body—my "vile flesh," as the King James Version of the Bible calls it. It struck me as terribly depressing that here in 1992 the rights of women in The Assembly were no more advanced for us than for Nora in Ibsen's 1879 play. The

modesty rules, the purity commitments, the roles required of us because we were female—there was no end to the controls men placed on our lives.

An Escape Plan

I am 16. A guidance counselor told me I had a fair shot at a private university if I continued to pull in excellent grades. A private university! It was a whisper of hope, a chance at having a future away from my family and The Assembly. Until my teachers suggested it, I'd never considered that an Assembly-free future could be unlocked by my intellect. The question was whether I could live both lives: doing enough to please Dad as the good Assembly girl so as not to arouse his suspicions while also creating a secret escape plan for myself. It was risky. It was downright rebellious. Escape was my only hope, even if it meant abandoning my calling to recruit my Lost Generation for the Lord. I've racked up over thirty hours of consequences in commitments to school. I want Dad's approval, if only so I can escape to college without provoking his wrath. **If I could have anything, I'd want freedom. All of my life I've been told what to do, who to become**, how to become it—and now, I want to become it on my own. College, life, love—is all just around the corner, a whole other world waits for me. I know I'm terribly selfish but these yearnings, these glimmerings of hope, these blossoming dreams will never become true. I want to get AWAY! If I argue further, I know they'll start taking away my other "privileges": talking on the phone, swimming on the school team, driving, doing volunteer work. If I get too rebellious, they might pull me out of high school altogether. At least if I obey for now, maybe I can still attend a local college.

Cult Girl in Love

Ever since Dad forbade me to leave home for college, I'd kinda given up on school. Boys became my reason for living. All my feelings of not being good enough, of never having enough love, dissipate in the glow of his affection. I want to stay right here in this moment forever. This euphoric feeling—it is everything. Inside, something has shifted on its axis. I want more of that bliss. One kiss and I am hooked. Falling in love didn't make me less angry about being forced to resign the newspaper job. Having a boyfriend was a poor consolation prize for being stripped of my dream of going away to college. And I had made another mistake: believing romantic intensity was intimacy.

I am in the emergency room. I roll over onto my side and wish the bronchitis would get worse so I'd have to stay in the hospital. I don't want to go home. I don't want to go back to my life. Dating was forbidden in The Assembly, we believed in courtship—which was just a fancy way of saying church leadership approved and arranged marriages. In The Assembly, it isn't just about remaining an intact virgin; it is about being completely pure—no kissing, no hand holding, no hugging, no touching of any kind.

Surrendering to God and Man

"Being in The Assembly makes me sad. I feel trapped." Mom thinks about this for a moment. "Well," she says, "what helped me was full surrender. I completely, unequivocally surrendered to God." I fasted from boys and poured all my love into God. Both Papa and Grandma are fond of loyalty tests, often intentionally pitting people

against each other to determine the most devout Assembly member. But the most dreadful realization of all is that **as a woman, my entire identity is defined by my relationship to men. Being a woman in The Assembly means nothing less than total subjugation.**

Thought Virgin

In The Assembly, we didn't date. We courted. We didn't fall in love. We followed God's will. I was supposed to guard my heart so I didn't commit emotional fornication. In other words, it wasn't enough that I was a physical virgin. I needed to be a heart virgin, a soul virgin, and a thought virgin. In order to prove himself worthy of marrying me, Matt had to live in a brothers' training home, receive formal indoctrination into The Assembly, faithfully lead a campus Bible study, serve on summer mission trips, and regularly meet with my grandfather. I had to attend sisters' retreats and learn the biblical guidelines for becoming a submissive wife. During my sophomore year of college, Dad finally gave his permission for us to court. But we had rules. Matt was allowed to take me out for dinner twice a month, and I had to be home by ten o'clock in the evening. We could not hold hands or kiss. We weren't allowed to discuss our future together, and most of all, we weren't allowed to discuss our relationship with anyone but my parents. We followed almost none of the rules. We fell in love hard and fast.

The Selfer's Prayer

This time I'm in trouble with my family. Grandma called this meeting because I was asking too many questions. Uncle David was still preaching and being financially supported by The Assembly, even though he continued beating my cousins and aunt. I wanted to know why. Uncle David had beaten my cousin Rachel so severely she'd lost partial hearing in one ear and a judge had granted her a restraining order against him. I asked why this wasn't being addressed. "Your husband's frustration is understandable," she says. "You have not submitted yourself to his leadership. I want you to kneel here until you are fully submitted to your husband." I am breaking. Again. I am surrendering. Again. I pray until Grandma is satisfied. She thinks I am weeping for my sins, but I am weeping because I finally realize that **I will never be free**. I see life stretched in front of me, and I weep for all the dreams I'll never fulfill and for the children I will bring into this oppression.

I left and went to a women's shelter. Despite what I've been told about godless feminists, this one is nicer to me in five minutes than my own grandma has been to me my entire life. The Assembly was my faith, my family, and my friends. Leaving The Assembly was like leaving an entire way of life. When church is everything, leaving feels like a horrible, unimaginable divorce. We feel as if we're abandoning our homeland and entering another culture as an immigrant. We have no friends, no outside contacts. We think and speak differently. I probably would have stayed in The Assembly for my whole life. But I became a mother. And becoming a mother saved me. Suddenly, I was no longer fighting for myself—I was fighting to save my children.

Will the Cycle Be Unbroken?

At my oldest daughter's first birthday I received a revelation. *You don't have to break your daughter the way you were broken.* Being a mother in The Assembly means back-to-back pregnancies because we are "strongly encouraged" to avoid contraception. Motherhood also means attending four to five weekly meetings, providing hospitality to frequent visitors, and participating in evangelistic outreaches. The Geftakys family is coming undone right in front of everyone. Despite flimsy efforts by Assembly leadership to stop him, my Uncle David has continued beating my aunt. One day, she simply runs away.

A Break That Heals

Matt and I decided to stop running from the truth and instead to go on a hunt for it. That hunt proved to be a turning point for us. We were finally willing and prepared to stop kneeling to The Assembly and the man who ran it and start standing up for a life we believed in. It is January 2003. Matt and I go to confront my grandparents. "What happens in my family is my business!" Papa snaps. "I'm under no obligation to answer questions from anyone!" "We think you are obligated," Matt replies. "As the founder of The Assembly, you decide who is financially supported by your ministry. Your son David is a full-time pastor in The Assembly, and yet for years after his abusive behavior was reported, he was still not removed from leadership. We've talked with people who lived with David, and we're here today in hopes that you'll acknowledge the part you and Sister Betty played in covering up the domestic violence. We're simply here to tell you that unless you can be honest with us about what is going on, we can no longer be in The Assembly." "Did you know about the abuse occurring in your son's family?" Matt asks. Papa clutches the arms of his chair so hard his knuckles turn white. "I will not answer that!"

We changed our phone number, cut off all contact with everyone still involved in The Assembly, and moved to a different city. It was a sudden, difficult break, but it also felt strangely clean.

Religious PTSD

I was having panic attacks and body shakes. I begin seeing a therapist. "First, your brain needs to feel safe before it can start healing itself. Right now, your brain is still on guard. It perceives threats. Reading the Bible and attending church are anxiety triggers for you." Everything in The Assembly was about control, control, control. Rae, on the other hand, is trying to teach me to let go, let go, let go. Ask yourself, "what do I need to do to take care of myself in this present moment?" Maybe recovery didn't have to be complicated. It didn't have to be fraught. The gentler I was with myself, the safer I felt.

The safer I felt, the less anxiety I experienced. My attacks slowly lessened, first in intensity and then in frequency. Healing was just a breath away. I want to experience God pursuing me for once. I am tired of seeking, striving, and knock-knock-knocking on heaven's door. I no longer want to know that silent, capricious, harsh God who would just as soon throw me into the fires of hell as save me. I am challenging God to pursue me like someone who has never been exposed to the Bible. Love me, God. I dare You.

If You Can't Find Jesus, Look for His Mother

Which hero of my faith can comfort me as my body leaks postbirth blood and my breasts swell with nourishing milk? I need a woman's touch, a woman's understanding, a woman's empathy to comfort me as I watch my babies suffer in the hospital. Jesus has sent His mother to comfort me. I'm going to the Catholic church because I don't know where else to find a way to God that feels safe. Maybe the Mother of God can lead me back. I feel the silly tears come to my eyes. I hate this chasm of theology widening between my husband and I. It breaks my heart that where I find solace is where Matt finds reminders of The Assembly. The priest convinces me that arguing with Matt isn't my job. It isn't my responsibility to convince anyone of anything. My journey to Catholicism is mine. **Am I willing to go on this journey no matter who comes along?** If God has drawn me here by His unconditional love, then I can trust God to take care of everything else.

I Am Not Afraid

It wasn't enough to leave The Assembly, or even to find a new church to call home. I **had to actively untangle myself from the fundamentalism inside me.** And I still do. Like most children raised in a high-demand environment—whether that's as a result of religion, alcohol, violence, or poverty—I find myself often living on hyperalert, constantly scanning for potential threats. After all, I was raised to see threats everywhere—out there, yes, but also in here. To be honest, being a fundamentalist was almost easier because I didn't have to think for myself. Sure, lack of freedom sucked. But at least I could always blame someone higher up when things went wrong. Now, I have to take responsibility for my own life and, um, wow: **this whole living-in-freedom-thing is riddled with discomfort!** I have to make my own decisions, figure out what I like and dislike, and even (gasp!) make mistakes. I've learned there is no direct, nonstop flight to my own well-being. God is big enough to meet us anywhere. The more I choose to believe God loves me, the more loving I believe God is. **I am no longer a victim being acted upon.** I am now actively participating in loving God, loving myself, and loving others. I once heard a story about a woman who asked God to move a mountain. God said okay, and then He handed her a shovel. I think that's a good analogy for how my story ends. I'm still shoveling. I'm still uncovering, sorting, reexamining. But I am working on it. And giving it a rest. I don't believe in perfect closure. But each day, I can choose to take care of myself.