

CRAZY FOR GOD

*How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found
the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All
(or Almost All) of It Back*

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DA CAPO PRESS

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Table of Contents

[Praise](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[PART I - CHILDHOOD](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[PART II - EDUCATION](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[PART III - TURMOIL](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Chapter 55](#)

[Chapter 56](#)

[Chapter 57](#)

[Chapter 58](#)

[Chapter 59](#)

[Chapter 60](#)

[PART IV - PEACE](#)

[Chapter 61](#)

[Chapter 62](#)

[Chapter 63](#)

[Chapter 64](#)

[Chapter 65](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[INDEX](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

PROLOGUE

You can be the world's biggest hypocrite and still feel good about yourself. You can believe and wish you didn't. You can lose your faith and still pretend, because there are bills to be paid, because you are booked up for a year, because this is what you do.

One morning in the early 1980s, I looked out over several acres of pale blue polyester and some twelve thousand Southern Baptist ministers. My evangelist father—Francis Schaeffer—was being treated for lymphoma at the Mayo Clinic, and in his place I'd been asked to deliver several keynote addresses on the evangelical/fundamentalist circuit. I was following in the proudly nepotistic American Protestant tradition, wherein the Holy Spirit always seems to lead the offspring and spouses of evangelical superstars to “follow the call.”

A few weeks earlier, after being introduced by Pat Robertson, I had delivered a rousing take-back-America speech to thousands of cheering religious broadcasters. And not long afterward, I would appear at a huge pro-life rally in Denver. Cal Thomas—once the vice president of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, later a Fox News commentator—would introduce me as “the best speaker in America.” The “anointing,” someone said, was “clearly on this young man!” They were saying that I was a better speaker than my famous father.

At that moment, the Schaeffers were evangelical royalty. When I was growing up in L'Abri, my parents' religious community in Switzerland, it was not unusual to find myself seated across the dining room table from Billy Graham's daughter or President Ford's son, even Timothy Leary. The English actress Glynis Johns used to come for Sunday high tea. I figured it was normal. They were just a few of the thousands who made it through our doors. Only later did I realize that L'Abri attracted a weirdly eclectic group of people who otherwise would not have been caught dead in the same room. My childhood was, to say the least,

unusual.

When Gerald Ford died in January 2007, I recalled that on the day he had assumed the presidency, his daughter-in-law Gayle was babysitting my daughter Jessica as her job in the work-study program at L'Abri, where Mike Ford, the president's son, was a student.

Mom and Dad met with presidents Ford, Reagan, and Bush Sr. and stayed in the White House several times. In the 1990s when my mother Edith—then in her eighties—heard that George W. Bush might run for the presidency, she exclaimed, “What? But Barbara asked me to pray especially for young George. She didn't think he had what it took to do anything.”

Given the fact of my family connections to the Republican Party, it was somewhat ironic that when James Webb was elected to the Senate from Virginia by a razor-thin margin in 2006, giving the Democrats their first new majority in years, I was credited with helping Webb. Or, to put it another way, judging by the hate e-mail I got from my father's fundamentalist followers and other assorted Republicans and conservatives, I deserved some of the blame.

I had long since left the evangelical subculture when I wrote an op-ed for the *Dallas Morning News* that was picked up by several hundred blogs and posted on the front page of James Webb's campaign Web site. I had defended Webb against a series of scabrous attacks wherein his novels were smeared and he was even labeled a “pedophile” because he had described a sexual tribal ritual. I noted that Webb is a serious novelist whose work has been widely praised by many, including Tom Wolfe, who called Webb's books “the greatest of the Vietnam novels.”

I also took the Republicans to task for doing to Webb what they had done to another war hero, Senator John McCain, back in the 2000 Republican primaries. I went so far as to say that, in disgust, my wife Genie and I were switching from being registered Republicans to independents.

A few days after this op-ed was published, I wrote another piece,

this time for the *Huffington Post*, about the reaction to my departure from the Republican Party. This was picked up by dozens of Democrat-friendly blogs. As the congratulatory e-mails poured in, I was reminded of the welcome given new believers when they convert from some particularly hideous life of sin. Then the *Drudge Report* and dozens of other right-wing and/or evangelical outlets alerted their faithful to my treason.

Furious e-mails flooded in. They fell into two categories: The evangelical “Church Ladies” said they hadn’t read Webb’s novels but were shocked by his immorality nonetheless and went to three- and four-page single-spaced quivering lengths to justify the Republicans’ tactics; the second group were simply profanity-spewing thugs. The Church Lady e-mails contrasted markedly with the insults. It was as if I’d stumbled into a Sunday school picnic at a Tourette syndrome convention.

“As a Christian the best question you could ask is what would Jesus do? He wouldn’t give Webb’s books a pass just because he’s a veteran. . . .”

“Mr. Schaeffer: Don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out you FUCK!”

“Mr. Webb has no excuse for using profanity. . . .”

“Good fucking riddance—you fucking cry baby!”

“I have never read any of Mr. Webb’s novels. However, the excerpts [in the *Drudge Report*] are very disturbing. . . . As for the Bible, yes it has all the things you mentioned: rape, murder, adultery, masturbation, etc. However, the Lord did not give us graphic details. . . . And I hope as Christians we can remember that and be a voice crying out against ALL the ugly things. . . .”

“We don’t need your lame ass motherfucking comments or your support. . . .”

When combined, the hundreds of e-mails seemed to boil down to: “Do what we say Jesus says—and if you don’t, we’ll kick your head in!” The reaction confirmed why any sane person would run, and keep on running from the right-wing/evangelical /Republican morass as far as their legs would carry them, something I’d been doing for more than twenty years. But I had brought this upon myself. The truth is that, with my father, I had once contributed mightily to the creation of the right-wing/evangelical /Republican subculture that was attacking me.

My life has been one of all-consuming faith—not *my* faith, but the faith of others that I seem to have caught like a disease and been almost obliterated by. What does God want? I am still trying to find out. And having once been a “professional Christian,” my vision is muddied by the baggage I carry. Every action, every thought, every moment I stumble into is judged by an inner voice. Everything seems to have a moral component: eating—because there are hungry people; sex—don’t even start. What I write, don’t write, who I talk to, don’t talk to, and how I raised my children, their characters, accomplishments, failures, whether they “love the Lord” or not, everything points to my relationship with God, real or imagined.

The habit of fundamentalist faith persists in my gut, even long after I rejected it. I’m meeting my agent Jennifer on the Upper West Side. She thinks I’m sane. I pretend I am. But somewhere in the back of my mind is a vague unease. She isn’t saved. She’s some sort of lapsed something. Should I be doing anything about that? Will God bless my next book deal if I deny him before men, or in this case before my agent? When Jen asks me to tell her about my new book, shouldn’t I ask her if she wouldn’t like to accept Jesus first?

It turns out that it was easier to move beyond my parents’ beliefs intellectually than to abandon my gut responses. So who instilled those responses? In other words, who were we? It depends on what moment you choose to become a fly on the Schaeffer wall. People are not as one-dimensional as the stories about them. There is no way to write the absolute truth about any family, much less my family.

The only answer to “Who are you?” is “When?”

Author's Note: I'm sure I have placed some events in the wrong years or have written that something happened in one place when it happened in another. This is a *memoir*, not a biography. (I have also changed some people's names to protect the more-or-less innocent.) To footnote this story or to have done research into dates and places and to correct the chronology would have been to indulge the conceit that my book is an objective history. It is not. What I've written comes from a memory deformed by time, prejudice, flawed recall, and emotion.

Being raised inside a miracle tends to make you feel singled out. I wanted to fit into the world. I still do. And yet the darkly weird moments of my childhood did not cancel out the light.

When I walked down the back road from our chalet to the village of Huémoz it was impossible to get anywhere without stopping to look at the view. I don't think I once left Chalet Les Mèlèzes, charged up the back steps, then ran down the back road without at least one view-absorbing pause. Sometimes I'd stop and stare at the mountains so long, I'd forget what I'd been planning to do. The view of the Alps always seemed like a special reward to our family for doing God's will. "If we had stayed in America, we'd never have a view like this," Mom would say.

Fifty years later, when I fly back to Switzerland I sit on the left-hand side of the connecting flight from Zurich to Geneva. That way I can see our valley, pick out my mountains.

Before I moved to America, there was never any doubt about which way I was facing; down to the Rhône Valley with its patchwork of fields, orchards, roads, and villages miles below, up to the flower-studded hayfields and steep forest-clad hills behind our village, or across the valley to the peaks towering over everything. We were *Les Américains* on the edge of a tiny village, fundamentalist Christians running a mission called L'Abri, surrounded by Swiss peasants who hated the fact we'd invaded their farming community. Our theology taught us that we were mere sojourners in an alien land, temporary subjects of earth, citizens only of heaven. We were separated from the world, even from all those other born-again American Christians back home who, to outsiders, must have looked very much like us. But to we Schaeffers, most Protestants were the "other." Perhaps they were part of ministries that asked for money rather than really trusting the Lord to meet their needs. Perhaps they had compromised on some point of theology. We

did the Lord's work in the Lord's way.

Living with a mother and father who defended their theological ideas all day, in a household where lunch and dinner were often two or three hours long as the discussions continued—"discussions" is not really the right word, since what happened was that a guest would ask a question and then Dad, Fidel Castro-like, would hold forth for several hours—I grew up with a gift for verbal communication. By the time I was nine or ten, I could mimic my parents and compose an articulate answer to almost any theological question. And I had a flair for vocabulary that maybe only a dyslexic raised with no TV, and who had a mother who read out loud, could acquire. Adults who talked to me told my parents that I was the most well-spoken child they had ever met. What they didn't know was that my verbal abilities were like a circus trick. Professional proselytizers were raising me: sweet, sincere—but preoccupied—proselytizers.

On any given day from the time I was about seven on, you could have asked my parents where I was and they would have had no idea. They literally lost track of me, more or less forgot I existed, except at one specific time of the day. At bedtime, Mom read me nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels by people like Louisa May Alcott and Jean Stratton Porter. Mom also read Dickens, C. S. Lewis, Sherlock Holmes stories, and everything by P. G. Wodehouse and all of Mark Twain (with the exception of his ramblings about why he was an atheist and his speculation about how many tens of thousands of years an angel's orgasm lasts). And Mom read every book of the Bible to me so many times that I still know more about ancient Israel than modern America.

Dad was born in 1912 to “working-class ignorant pagan parents in Philadelphia” (according to Mom). Mom was born in China in 1914 to “dear and sensitive highly educated missionary parents.” (Mom again.) Mom lived in China at a China Inland Mission compound until she was five, as a privileged colonial in a walled compound with a Chinese nanny and other servants whose job it was to care for and amuse the little foreign girl. Then her parents sailed back to America, where her father taught Greek and Hebrew.

When Mom’s parents had come back to America in 1919, it was meant to just be for a one-year furlough. But my Mom’s mother had a heart condition that prevented her from returning to China. Mom’s parents lamented this and argued with the China Inland Mission board, who made that decision.

When Mom got to America, she says that she felt like a displaced person, certainly not Chinese but not American either. My mother’s memories of her early childhood are remarkably vivid, even at ninety-two when she has forgotten so much else. Mom remembers arguing with children who knew she had lived in China, and who would taunt her with the ditty “Chinky-chinky Chinaman sitting on a fence, trying to make a dollar out of fifteen cents!” Mom would counter: “And he could, too!”

Mom pined for the life in the Chinese compound, at least as she thought she remembered it. Perhaps that longing shaped her fierce desire to found her own mission to recreate something her family had lost—that golden childhood time just beyond reach. In Mother’s nostalgic memories, life in China became a sacred time for her. Mom recalled life in a compound filled with friendly Chinese converts, the “needy” Chinese who came to her parents. Her memories were so vivid that at age eighty-three, Mom even wrote a lovely children’s book about her life in the compound, *Mei Fuh—Memories from China*.

Mom's older sisters Janet and Elsa had been dumped in mission boarding schools and hardly saw their parents until they moved back to America as young teens. A few years after returning home, Aunt Janet joined the Communist Party. Later, Aunt Elsa married a mental patient who tried to murder her. Janet left the Communists and hooked up with the Closed Plymouth Brethren, a sect so "separated" from the world that she stopped sleeping with her husband. And as the sect got crazier, she went right along with them, stopped "fellowshipping" with her two sons, wouldn't eat in the same room, and finally moved out, because she couldn't even be under the same roof as her family of "unbelievers." Meanwhile, Aunt Elsa's husband Ralph mistook her for a vulture and shot at her. (He missed.)

Jessie, my mother's mother, had been married and widowed. Mom told me that her mother said her first marriage was the only time she was in love, that she was fond of my mother's father, my grandfather George Seville, but nothing more. I think my mother's tremendous passion for life, for anything she did, came from a rebellion against her genteel parents' lukewarm relationship. Perhaps Mom was determined to be hot where her parents were cool.

Compared to Aunt Janet, my mother was sane. Compared to Aunt Elsa, she was lucky.

When she was a teen Mom used to sneak out to dance. Mom's professor father and blueblood mother were genteel to a fault and easily fooled by their daughter, whom they spoiled. Her dad made a point of always serving her as if she was an honored guest. Pictures of Mom when she was little show her exquisitely dressed and always posing, dramatically and with a secure sense of her own extrovert charm.

My mother was raised as a devout fundamentalist Christian. But her parents' version of fundamentalism was an educated and cultured fundamentalism. They read the Bible and believed it was literally true in every detail. But they also spoke several languages, and Bible reading was accompanied by plenty of P. G. Wodehouse, chunks of recited Shakespeare, funny limericks, amusing puns, and a deep interest in

classical music and art.

Mom was a “Mediterranean” beauty with dark eyes, a softly rounded nose, high cheekbones, and long waist-length black hair that she wore up in a bun. She was not tall, but her figure was perfect. She may have been partly Jewish.

There was a family theory about her maiden name Seville. Mom’s father’s people came to America from England in the early nineteenth century. (Her mother’s people came over on the second voyage of the Mayflower.) It was thought that George Seville’s family may have been Jewish. There was a Seville family connection to Scotland. When the Spanish Roman Catholics were persecuting Jews, they made them take last names, and the Jews took the names of their cities. Then Spaniards were wrecked on the Scottish coast after the defeat of the Armada. And so—as our family theory went—maybe one of Mom’s ancestors was one of those Spanish/Scottish Jews. That would have suited Mom perfectly. She loved all things Jewish and in the 1970s wrote a book—*Christianity Is Jewish*.

Once, when my mother was in her late sixties, I saw a man come up to her on an airplane and ask her if she was Audrey Hepburn. My mother didn’t really look like Ms. Hepburn, but she was so beautiful, and exuded such energy, that people assumed she had to be somebody.

Mom was very aware that she was special. She would, from time to time, talk about what *could* have been, what she *could* have done if she had had less-strict parents, what she *might* have been if she hadn’t married Dad. What *if* she had finished college instead of dropping out to marry my father to work and put him through seminary? What *if* she had married money? “There were *lots* of wealthy and cultured young men, and not so young too, who wanted to have me.”

Mom lived her life in tension between her unrealized ambition to be recognized for something important, refined, and cultured and her belief that God had called her to do Christian work that required her to sacrifice herself, not least her image of who she really felt she was when the cultural elites she admired, or at least envied, mocked

fundamentalism.

Mom sometimes stamped her foot (literally) if H. L. Mencken's name was mentioned. And she would say of his anti-fundamentalist satires: "But *we're* not like that! He would *never* have written those horrible things if he had ever met *me!*"

My mother loved culture. I don't know if this was because she loved books, art, and music for their own sake, or if this was part of her desire to not be mistaken for "just some fundamentalist" or "one of those American Christians," as she sometimes called other believers.

When we went on our vacations to Italy, Mom brought books and read out loud to us on the beach, in our rooms, even at dinner. Bertie Wooster, Huck Finn, Shylock, Aslan, Peter, Susan, and Lucy, not to mention Odysseus, Prince Caspian, or the Little Prince, got tangled up in many a Mediterranean sunset, accompanied us up to Mom and Dad's bedroom, then lurked in the shadows as we sprawled on my parents' bed for "just one more chapter, *please*, Mom!" before sleep.

My mother was a great and expressive actress and read better out loud than anyone I've heard since. Every book she read lived. And Mom never said so specifically, but it was clear that reading was a necessity, not a luxury.

When Mom and Dad traveled to England, Mom would visit Blackwell's Children's Book Shop and come home laden with Penguin and Puffin paperbacks. And since those included everything written by such luminary children's authors as E. Nesbitt, who set her stories in Victorian England, I grew up knowing more about the monarchy, the difference between a scullery and parlor maid, hackney cabs, and how to make and serve tea properly than about American daily life, unless you count life on the prairie with Ma and Pa or life on the Mississippi as observed from a raft.

Mom *loved* books. And my mother never read down to her children. She always was reading books "meant for slightly older children." By the time I was nine or ten, Mom was reading me classics, from *Wuthering Heights* to *Pride and Prejudice*.

Once I started to read for myself, I discovered that Mom had given me a flying start. The world was literally an open book. As I turned the pages, I met many familiar friends.

Mom was a music lover, too. And she could not enjoy anything unless she shared it. If my parents were going to a concert, we children were taken along. Each year, Mom bought tickets to three or four concerts at the Montreux classical music festival. She also took our family to several ballets over the years, to several operas and many chamber orchestra concerts, and to all sorts of recitals. And she did this even back when we had very little money, when we were sometimes eating meatless meals for months if giving to the mission was down. We had no car and often couldn't afford a taxi ride to the station after a concert. But my mother got us there somehow anyway.

My first encounter with opera was watching *Don Juan*, which my parents took me to at the Paris Opera House when I was seven and traveling with them on one of their speaking trips. We were in the cheap seats, what seemed like miles from the stage. But Dad handed me his binoculars and, though I fell asleep, I woke up in time to see Don Juan sinking into the flames of hell, singing his way into oblivion. I was hooked.

There was a tension between what Mom believed and her wider interests in art, music, and culture. Mom could not ignore the sorts of people who were most certainly *not* fundamentalist: the artists, composers, and choreographers she so admired, or the sorts of secular people she might bump into at concerts and in museums. So I think my mother spent a lifetime trying to change the image of Bible-believing Christians. She decided she would be so wonderful in every way that her example would undo all the damage done to the image of what it was to be a Bible-believing Christian set by those other, all-too-ordinary Christians.

Mom wanted her children to know that she could have done lots more glamorous things than “just be a missionary.” And Mom never wanted to look like what she was: a pastor's wife. She dressed with taste and style for every occasion. And Mom was never more

animated than when she was talking about the cultured, wealthy, or important people she met. She would not just mention their names but would go into detailed stories of their lives, as if she was reading (or writing) a novel about them. I think Mom wanted to *be* one of them.

My mother's favorite people were those who were famous for some cultural achievement. She met the great violinist Yehudi Menuhin on the beach in Italy once and was more or less in a swoon for weeks while telling us in detail what he had said, what she had said. . . . And more than half a century later, when B. B. King gave her a backstage pass for a concert at the Montreux Jazz Festival, Mom—at age ninety—wore that laminated security pass around her neck for the better part of a year, as if it was priceless jewelry.

My mother saw her mission as nothing less than repairing the image of fundamentalism. Sometimes this image-repair just involved serving exquisite high teas or reading good books. At other times it got complicated. For instance, in 1986, to launch her book *The Gift of Music*, Mom raised fifty thousand dollars—"To reach out to the kind of New Yorkers that no other Christians ever reach"—and rented Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, hired the Guarneri Quartet, and invited her friends from all over the country to join her for a concert followed by a reception.

When Mom met people, then told her children about her encounters, the story line was always the same: They were lost, and Mom saved them. Or at least she had changed them. Mom's favorite phrase was "Before he met me, he said he never knew there were Christians who were so. . ."—fill in the blank—cultured, knowledgeable about art, music, food, clothes, compassionate, and refined.

My mother took Dad to his first art museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art. "Now Fran talks all about art, but when I met him he knew nothing, my dear, nothing!" Mom helped Dad "deepen his faith" after he became a Christian. Mom showed Dad how to have an always-use-real-silver-and-good-china-and-put-candles-on-the-table-at-dinner, cultured family, since his parents had been "so working class."

My mother became the basis of “Elsa,” the mother in my first novel, *Portofino*, and the rest of the *Calvin Becker Trilogy* (*Zermatt* and *Saving Grandma*). And I still see the world through her eyes. She was there at every stage, including mop-ping up my vomit—without recrimination—when I took some bad peyote buds after smoking pot when I was fifteen.

Whatever I believe, or say I believe now, the shape of my life is defined by my mother’s prayers—whether these have actually been answered or whether the force of her personality was enough to make it so. In that quietest inner place, my mother is still young, beautiful, and present, leaning forward listening with rapt attention at a concert, or with a book on her lap, eyes sparkling and opening up the universe of *Treasure Island*, or as poor Oliver picks his way through the harsh Victorian urban underworld.