

## Interview with Amy and Jonathan on *Runaway Radical*, Spiritual Abuse and Hardcore Christianity – with Brad Jersak

**Brad:** When you sent me an advanced copy of *Runaway Radical*, perhaps you remember me politely telling you I'd add it to my to-read stack. Before filing it in my inbox, I made the 'mistake' of reading page 1. I wasn't able to put it down after that ... I read until I had to break for sleep, then finished the book before getting out of bed again! Jonathan's journey totally captured me. Would you please give our readers a brief summary of this book that so captivated me?

**Amy:** I do remember your telling me that you were a "bit buried" and then a few hours later you sent a note saying you made the mistake of thinking you could read just a little bit. Your quick and vigorous response really bolstered me because you were the **very first person** ever to read *Runaway Radical*. And the fact that your response has been replicated many times over is more than we could have imagined when we decided to tell our story.

The best and briefest summary of *Runaway Radical* I've heard is this: It's a young man's journey from idealism to realism to fatalism to faith.

The catalyst for the book was desperation. It was a mother's desperate attempt to woo her son back into the land of the living. When Jonathan returned from what was supposed to be a year of missionary service in West Africa— and it was more a rescue than a return—I thought I would be so relieved and happy that I would drop the issues that forced him home. But instead the injustice kept me awake at night. I started writing a letter to the leaders of Jonathan's church outlining the abuse he had endured from the mission agency in West Africa. My husband, Jonathan, and I met with the church leaders and their answer to Jonathan's abuse was to swear him to secrecy. That blow was worse than the first. When I saw the toll silence was taking on Jonathan, not just on his faith but on his mental and physical well-being, I became desperate. To me the only antidote to the destructiveness of silence is to tell the truth. So I knocked on his bedroom door one afternoon (he was sleeping through most days back then) and said, "Let's tell your story." We started jotting down notes on a legal pad that day.

**Brad:** One facet of the book was your exposure of and insight into real-life spiritual abuse in the Evangelical world. We often think of 'religious slavery' in terms of crusty old forms and rituals that have been gutted of meaning—wool pants on oak pews reciting who knows what in King James monotone. Yet *Runaway Radical* showed us how spiritual abuse can flourish in the vision-driven ministries of evangelistic movements and foreign missions. Am I being fair? What were

the marks of spiritual abuse that you saw in that context? I mean, how did it work? And what were the effects?

**Jonathan:** I think religious slavery is especially prevalent in cause-oriented ministries. Any group that's hell-bent on carrying out a mission at all costs runs the risk of using and abusing others to accomplish their goals. I've talked with so many missionaries who look back on their experience on the field and feel exploited, manipulated, and taken advantage of by those in authority over them.

In my case, I was being scammed before I even left home. After I had raised the necessary funds to live in Africa for a year, the leader of the mission organization nearly doubled my fundraising goal, claiming he had miscalculated my living expenses. This was my first indication that something was off, but I did as I was told.

Once I arrived in Africa, I discovered that a major project advertised on the organization's website (a fully-functional kitchen addition to the local orphanage) was unusable. Many of the other projects I had been assigned either fell through or were nonexistent, yet I was forbidden from seeking out other opportunities to help in the community. In fact, every aspect of my life was under their control—what I did, who I spent my time with, and even what I said on my personal blog.

When I finally told them I'd had enough, the leader of the organization told me I was being "prideful" and I needed to think about all the people I would be letting down if I left. He booked a flight that wouldn't leave for another month and demanded that I write a series of blog posts praising the ministry and soliciting donations in the meantime. In the end, it took third-party intervention to get me home, and the mission organization pocketed every last penny I had raised.

**Amy:** I think "religious slavery" is an accurate way to characterize not only the physical constraints placed on Jonathan in Africa but the spiritual constraints set by his church once home. He went to Africa to serve orphans and schoolchildren and the poor but his servanthood was twisted into servitude. One way the head of the mission agency got us to comply with such suffocating restrictions was by telling us they were in place to protect Jonathan from danger, when the real danger was coming from within the mission organization. What was being done to him, Jonathan finally admitted, was not for the sake of his own protection, as we had been told, but to secure ownership. "I am not free," he said, "I am under house arrest."

But it was how his church back home handled the abuse he endured in Africa that delivered the final blow to Jonathan's faith.

If a bad thing happens and it will reflect badly on a church, the expedient thing to do is blame the victim. That way the incident is self-contained; one person is at fault and no one else is affected. In Jonathan's case, there was no way to deny the severe trauma he experienced: he was severely underweight, sick much of the time, his conscience had been violated, and he began to feel trapped as if he would never get home. The response from church leadership was, "It is obvious Jonathan has suffered; we just don't believe the conditions warranted it." That's like saying, "We can't deny what we see right in front of us, but we'll pretend not to see all that led up to it." Or worse, the implication is that there is some weakness in Jonathan, and that this wouldn't be the exact same outcome for any other 20-year-old in the exact same situation.

Again, it's the victim who is responsible for his trauma. Jonathan's pastor used Scripture to condemn him as a promise breaker; he questioned Jonathan's manhood and his parents' sanity. But just in case there *may have been* any wrongdoing, forgiveness is rushed so that the issue is resolved, crossed off the checklist, and on to the next item of church business.

**Brad:** On the other hand, you and Jonathan really both came clean about his own part in the debacle. There was a kind of hard-core Christian zeal that sounded very 'righteous' but ultimately seemed to degenerate into self-righteousness and, dare I say, Messiah complex. It sounded like self-inflicted religious slavery, just waiting for a harsh taskmaster to come along. Where does that come from? Indoctrination? A particular temperament? A life-stage? And anyway, what's wrong with being zealous and active in our faith?

**Jonathan:** I think I was just desperate to be a "real" Christian, and in my mind, a real Christian suffered. That's why I put up with so much abuse in Africa and why I agreed to silence when I got home. I wasn't so much a messiah as I was a masochist.

All I wanted was to be used by God, so it wasn't a stretch to allow myself to be "used" by the mission organization as well. I really think the more devout you are, the more susceptible you are to spiritual abuse. I was so harsh and unrelenting toward myself that I readily internalized abuse from others.

Of course, when you believe the mark of a true Christian is how much suffering you can take, you start seeking it out. You submit yourself to controlling leaders who push you to the brink. You land yourself in dangerous situations meant to test your faith. Hardship becomes a sort of

badge of honor, and suffering becomes a way to prove to yourself and everyone around you that you're actually taking the words of Jesus seriously.

**Amy:** I'm not sure I'd characterize Jonathan as someone just waiting for a harsh taskmaster to come along. As I say in *Runaway Radical*, he started out as a humble monastic. The zeal (or at least the angst that led to the zeal) didn't really surface until he was 19 and had just returned from his second mission trip, ten days in Honduras. It was the first time he witnessed suffering on a large scale. That's when I began to notice his anxiety and despair; he started to question whether or not God saw the suffering in the world. He went searching for answers. What he found—in the sharp words of authors challenging him to lose his life for the sake for others—was that it was up to him to see and relieve the suffering in the world. It was also possible, according to the radical literature, that it was his fault there was suffering in the world in the first place, an imbalance created by his middle-class life of privilege. That's when he went from humble monastic to Old Testament prophet. There is nothing wrong with being zealous and active in your faith, but Jonathan's motivation began to change—from internal to external, from love to guilt, from freedom to bondage. That led him to embrace a new form of legalism—one that's harder to spot because it's disguised as compassion. And legalism, old or new, always ends in despair.

**Brad:** I'm afraid these stories are more common than we'd like to imagine. And they often end in bitterness and cynicism. But this story has a redemptive trajectory. It reminds me of Patrick Kearney's work on 'anatheism,' that is, finding faith after loss of faith. Anyone who has experienced severe disillusionment almost needs to enter an atheistic detox of diseased religion. Some are able to pass through it and find faith, or at least peace, on the other side. Could you give some guidance for those who feel stuck or whose loved ones might be suffering post-traumatic religious fatigue?

**Jonathan:** It's a scary process. I remember when I was back in the States, I confided in a mentor about feeling like I needed to take a break from everything Christian for a while. He gave me this foreboding speech about how I was going down a dark path he'd seen many people my age go down, one that never ends well. His answer to my hurt was "more Jesus." But at the time, I could barely distinguish the words of Jesus from the words of the Pharisees.

To find healing, I needed to do a bit of spiritual purging. That meant no church, no reading the Bible or praying until I was ready to engage those things again. That may sound like "backsliding" to some people, but it all depends on how you measure progress. For me, it was absolutely essential. I needed to sift through my beliefs to find the ones worth keeping. I lost some along the way, but my view of God is healthier for it.

**Amy:** One of the most helpful resources for me was Kathy Escobar’s website and in particular her writings on the stages of faith (included in her new book *Faith Shift*). Kathy gave me a framework to understand what Jonathan was going through; his crisis of faith was an important stage *toward* authentic faith, not a detour from faith or even the end of it. We are desperate for those we love to go back to what they were or even what they believed; we give unhelpful and simplistic advice like read your Bible more, go back to church, etc. We rush them through the healing process to allay our own fears. Kathy helped me to understand that Jonathan needed time and space. She gives practical advice, what to say and not to say to someone experiencing a crisis of faith, which again— if allowed to resolve at its own pace—is a path *toward* something more authentic, not away from it.

I’ve discovered that disillusionment plays a significant role in most people’s stories. That’s been one of the biggest surprises for me: how many readers have said, “This is my story.” The object and nature of the idealism often differ, but the fervor with which they approached it and the disillusionment that followed is nearly identical. One reviewer said that *Runaway Radical* was “a coming-of-age story as moving and meaningful as Salinger,” and I was really grateful that someone picked up on the fact that this is the classic *Bildungsroman*—a young person ventures out into the world, suffers a great loss, and comes to maturity through disillusionment instead of through enlightenment. And sometimes the protagonist’s mother loses her illusions, too.

Amazon link: <http://www.amazon.com/Runaway-Radical-Young-Reckless-Journey/dp/0718031237>

Runaway Radical Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/runawayradical>

Amy’s Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/AmyHollingswrth>

Jonathan’s Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/JonHollingswrth>

Amy’s website: [www.amyhollingsworth.com](http://www.amyhollingsworth.com)