

At age 20, I was married by the Unification Church. Here's how I broke away

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The author, center, during her 1995 wedding in Seoul. (Photo courtesy of Cara Jones)

When I was 20, on summer break from Princeton, I married the first man I'd ever held hands with. It was a rainy August day in the Olympic Stadium in Seoul in 1995. Our marriage had been arranged just a month before by the [Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the founder of the Unification Church](#). Even though I didn't know what to say to my new fiancé, our hands were having their own conversation. "I'm with you," his grip told me. "I'm with you, too," I squeezed back.

We stood surrounded by 10,000 other couples, in neat rows of black suits and matching white wedding dresses.

Earlier that year, I had submitted 8-by-10 photos of myself in my high school graduation dress, a coral knee-length one-piece with shoulder pads and gold buttons. My long, brown hair was pulled back in a barrette, revealing large cheeks and a fresh face. I put the pictures in the mail along with a silent prayer the Rev. Moon would find me a good husband.

Late one night, while I was doing mission work at a San Francisco church center, my parents called. They were former Catholics and well-educated professionals who joined the Unification Church in their mid-20s. At the time, we all believed that the Rev. Moon was sent on a mission from God to bring about world peace by uniting religions and people of diverse backgrounds together in marriage. Our shared belief bound us close.

At the time, I understood that every person was a child of God. As such, there was no one I couldn't love. If I struggled with my matching, it would be an opportunity for spiritual growth. My parents and some of my best friends were married this way and all created beautiful families. If it worked for them, I believed, it had to work for me.

"We have your match!" my dad announced.

As he said my soon-to-be-husband's name, I felt my throat tighten and my big toes scrunch. I knew that this young man's parents were leaders in the church, but I'd never met him.

"We're very happy for you, Cara," my dad cheered.

“This is a great blessing!” my mom sniffled.

Their happiness became my own.

At our wedding ceremony, just a month later, music burst through the sound system as the Rev. and Mrs. Moon, wearing crowns and flowing white robes, made their entrance through a bright pink curtain. In his booming voice, Moon introduced the heavenly significance of the day, and then he stated our vows, in his native Korean. I couldn’t understand what he was saying, but I was pretty sure it was something like: Do you promise to love God, humanity and each other?

“Nay! Nay! Nay!” I shouted the Korean word for “yes,” joining a chorus of thousands of others reverberating through the stadium.

I looked out at the blur of flashing cameras and thousands of spectators. Afterward, I wandered through the stadium, looking for my parents. Had they left? My heart quickened. Suddenly I was a kid again, anxiously looking for them, as I did when they were away on church missions. By the time I reached them, the bottom of my rain-drenched gown was covered in dirt. In my dad’s glasses, I saw myself for the first time since leaving a church dormitory bathroom hours before. My hair had frizzed in the rain; my faint makeup had washed away.



The author’s second wedding, in 2014 in Hopland, Calif. (Tara Arrowood)

In that moment, I wanted more. I wanted to feel pretty on my wedding day. I wanted my dad to walk me down an aisle. I wanted to free myself from my sopping wet wedding dress and maybe even the marriage I had just committed to.

Then I saw my father’s eyes crease to make room for a giant smile. My mom broke into a bellowing laugh as she bantered with my new husband. And I joined them.

People sometimes ask me, “How did you break out of that cult?” To me, the Unification Church never felt like a cult. It was an extension of my family. And how do you walk away from family?

I didn’t know how to leave the marriage or the church, so I quickly learned how to drink. Two years after my wedding, I would break my parents’ hearts when I told them my excessive drinking led me to cheat on my husband. They broke mine when they showed up at my college dorm my senior year and asked me to drop out.

In my first act of defiance, I screamed: “I will not!”

Princeton was my dad’s alma mater. I had once hoped it would give me an education and the credibility I would need to help spread Moon’s teachings in the world. But my parents feared my partying would destroy my marriage.

I wanted to bolt, to run from my dorm, to an open road where I could flee from them and their church. But I couldn't risk losing my parents. We eventually worked out a compromise that I would stop drinking and stay in school.

Three painful years later, my estranged husband and I met in a Connecticut diner and, over mint chocolate chip ice cream, decided to divorce. The hardest part about it was later walking up the stone steps of my parent's home to share the news.

By then I had transitioned from wine coolers to hard liquor. I started dating men who were too old or too young or who lived in other countries. One night, after yet another one broke up with me, I drank so much I ended up unconscious in a Boston park with my belongings stolen.

I was 36 before I had finally had enough and began the hard work of seeking therapy to heal myself and my relationships with my parents. Although cults are notorious for not letting people go, I realized that, for so many years, it had been me holding on. While my parents came to accept that I might marry outside the church, I couldn't move forward.

A friend once told me, "Marry someone who makes your socks roll up and down." I didn't think love could be that simple. Nearly 20 years after my first marriage, I finally found a children's summer camp director who made me reconsider. I knew by the way he held my hand the entire four-mile hike home from our third date that he was different from the rest. When, less than a year later, he got down on his knee and, with a shaky voice, asked me to be his wife, I fell into his arms and wept.

I asked my parents to walk me down the aisle.

The morning of my second wedding, I stepped into a lacy oyster-colored wedding dress that, this time, I'd picked out myself. I squished into the car with my parents. I found myself once again wobbly-kneed and breathless.

"It's been a long road getting here, Cara," my dad said, sensing my nerves as his voice cracked, "And you made it."

"Just remember everyone here loves you," my mom chimed in.

As a field full of guests stood to welcome us, I walked arm in arm with my parents toward my groom. There, under the canopy of a 500-year-old oak tree, I wrapped my arms around each of them. In that moment, I forgot about the 10,000-couple wedding, the drunken nights and all the ways we had broken each other's hearts.