

Preacher's Kids: Unplugged

By Leslie D. Lanagan, an unashamedly grateful and bitter child in equal measure. The Church indivisible is both complicated and extremely divisible. My story is about being caught in the middle, and trying to put it all back.

Episode 1: Growing Up in a Ministerial Family

What was it like growing up as a preacher's kid? Did you feel pressure to live up to certain expectations or standards?

The problem with being a preacher's kid is that your parents don't agree on how you should act, and neither do the parishioners. You are left to your own devices to pick up everything that's going on in the room. Unfortunately, I am very good at that. It's not that I am disinterested or dispassionate about other people's problems. It's that people never ask me if I'm ready for their deepest traumas because they open up to me. I was sitting on the Metro minding my own business when the conversation with a child went from "I like your shoes" to "my dad is dead" in four minutes flat. Then, her mother told me all about her father's death and how she had been sexually abused as a child. These are the secrets I keep, but I'm only comfortable telling you about the ones I hear on the Metro. I will never see those people again. I am the "Overheard" column, I'm just picking up real pain in the world vs. "I have a soulmate. Her name is Tallulah and she is my iPhone." You ride the Metro around Washington you meet vets that have been torn up and spit out by life. I stop and talk to homeless people all the time. Yesterday it was someone who'd been begging for three days in front of Safeway and I was the only person that actually stopped to talk to him. People just walk by him like a potted plant. Minister's kids are trained to notice and show up for people like that, the ones everyone else ignores. It is something you can't turn off, even if you become an atheist. Your frequency is dialed in at preacher's kid, because you don't know anything else. It's the blessing and the curse- the ability to see so much pain in the world that yours doesn't really matter. There's no such thing as competitive suffering, it's just that my childhood was relatively idyllic compared to my friends. Things didn't start getting weird until I came out as queer. I was shunned, and I think my dad got fired because of me. It was 1995. Different times.

How did your parents' faith influence their parenting style, and how did that shape your own values and worldview?

Faith didn't come into it a whole lot. You're on your own spiritual journey, especially after you turn 13 and are confirmed. It's similar to being Jewish and having a bar/bat mitzvah. Everything surrounding me was my behavior. I'm ADHD, Autistic, nonbinary, disabled, mentally ill..... so, you know, average. So, because we were all on our own faith journeys, it had more to do with presenting a united front. Getting along in public when we were not getting along at home. Trying to understand everything that was happening at the time my father left the church is a goat-roping clusterfuck because I was never a part of the conversation. The Methodist church is not going to tell you that your kid can't be queer. They're going to tell you that you can't be a pastor with an out queer kid. But I wasn't the one that outed me. So, if anyone thinks that my dad got fired because of me, that is categorically untrue. If I had anything to do with his being fired, he can blame my friends at HSPVA and Clements. Turns out, they weren't very good friends after all. I wasn't accepted until my senior year, where I found a group of people that sort of liked me, because no one could figure out why I even had a seat at the table with a popular jock.

I still feel empty inside sometimes. I had to watch her kiss a lot of people. She never had to watch me even once. Or if she did, it didn't bother her the way it bothered me, because it was a relationship worth mourning. If she didn't mean anything to me, I wouldn't have been sad. I still remember the day my dad arrived with a post card that said he had found Meagan's phone number for me and that it was okay for me to call her IN CANADA. (Be impressed. This was expensive in the 90s. Like, I'm sure some of our calls were more expensive than Yeezy's okay? Dealing with all of that when my father had just left the church and my house had burned down five years before and I was being emotionally abused by a grad student when I was 14. It was a lot. I gave up a lot. I was written off as a queer kid and not a valid candidate for ministry. So, I decided to take it on the road and make a printing press/media company that caters to any spiritual journey. Being close to the source takes many forms, and how you get to the Source isn't as important as getting there. Pick Jesus, or don't. But pick someone. Everyone's egos are getting in the way.

Episode 2: The Double Life of Preacher's Kids

As a preacher's kid, do you think there was an expectation for you to be perfect or embody certain virtues? If so, how did you navigate those expectations?

Constantly, and when I came out as queer it was worse. Not only were people insinuating I was gay to my face but talking about me behind my back. I have no doubt that I caused problems in my father's ministry that I wouldn't have caused if I was straight- although that's up for grabs because people think autistic people are jerks, anyway. Maybe I just dodged a bullet by the church hating me on principle instead of getting to know me and hating that instead.

Can you share any humorous anecdotes about the challenges of being a "good" ministerial child?

The nursery at First United Methodist Church is right over the chapel. I was in charge of keeping Lindsay in the nursery. During the pastoral prayer, the absolute quietest moment in the service, the congregation hears "LINDSAY LANAGAN! GET YOUR BUTT UPSTAIRS."

Episode 3: Faith and Identity

How has your faith influenced your personal identity, particularly in terms of values, morals, and ethics?

Frankly, it sucks. You don't get to be a real person. You get everything from your parents and siblings projected onto you. None of my friends at Annual Conference were gay. None of my friends even believed gay couples were real. That they could have lasting and healthy relationships. Now, queer people are overrepresented in the autistic community, so congratulations. A lot of the time when you're picking on a queer person, you're also picking on an autistic person. It's a good look, Hoss.

Have there been times when your faith conflicted with other aspects of your life (e.g., relationships, career choices)? If so, how did you navigate those conflicts?

The Methodist Church has done everything it possibly can to look open and affirming and has grown leaps and bounds since I was a child. It just wasn't early enough to help me. My entire childhood they were "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors....." And at least six feet of bullshit piled right next. None of it was true until recently. I was absolutely screwed out of a great career as a minister, so I just want to write books about theology and anything else that interests me. I'm the type person that would like to go on a working vacation with Reza Aslan. I'm not a partier. I'm a scholar.

Episode 4: The Impact on Mental Health

As a preacher's kid, do you think the pressure to be perfect or live up to certain expectations contributed to any mental health challenges?

I had suicidal ideation for every single one of my teenage years because you don't know what's going to happen when you come out in the church and the horror stories clutch your throat before you can speak.

How has your faith influenced your approach to mental health and wellness? Have there been times when seeking help felt like admitting weakness?

You can't fight with Evangelicals. You can only outsmart them. So, instead of going to Joel Osteen's Church and Backyard BBQ Pit, I follow Brene Brown. She's a better pastor than nearly everyone in the nation..... and she doesn't have an MDiv. She's just an educated Episcopalian. I am also an educated Episcopalian. If he was still alive, you could ask George H.W. Bush. :P

Episode 5: Unplugging from Expectations

What does it mean for you to "unplug" or break free from the expectations that come with being a preacher's kid?

When I get there, I'll let you know. The feeling of being "on" is relentless, and I can't turn it off. I feel like everyone is watching all the time, that I'm still a political pawn because I always have been. I'm so sick. So sick of all of this. So I'm flipping the script and reaching out to other creative people who have grown up in the church, like Stephen Colbert & Jim Gaffigan. Even Trevor Noah has great lines about religion because even though he's never really practiced religion, he's observed a whole lot.

I think that preacher's kids in the black church have it worse than I did, because my parents didn't actively persuade me to go into ministry one way or the other. In the black church, there is much more emphasis on preacher's kids taking over for their parents. None of my interest in theology comes from my dad. I have just found that, in fact, I spend a lot of time thinking about the Roman Empire.

How has this process of unlearning helped you develop your own identity, values, and sense of purpose?

The church will break you. It absolutely will. How did we get to a place where so many denominations are focused on fear? How did we get to a place where people live in a comfort zone this big to keep themselves from going to a place they don't even know exists? The power of God is inside us, the North Star that tells you where to go. You just don't hear it until you get still. If you don't, you're moving to someone else's rhythm..... and friends don't let friends clap on one and three.