“Lost Boy”

By: Brent W. Jeffs with Maia Szalavitz

“A very young child thinks virtually any family situation is normal, since that’s the only life he knows” (Jeffs, 55). Brent Jeffs was one of the many young children who happened to be raised in a polygamist family under a polygamist cult that shattered his entire childhood and tainted his life forever. This story is a full memoir of Brent’s memories during his distressing life growing up in the polygamous Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) and how he finally absconded. Through endless years of physical, emotional and sexual abuse from his uncle and mothers, Brent was constantly forced to remove himself from his body and demolish his sense of self. Growing up in a family of twenty children with three rival mothers was nowhere near delightful for young Brent, and ultimately stunted his ability to feel special, cared for, or worthy. As Brent got older, he was able to leave this torturous cult where he then became a “lost boy,” who had to find out how to go about a normal life outside of the church. “I had never known what I wanted to do with my life or what my purpose was” (Jeffs, 146). He began experimenting with drugs and alcohol to erase his trauma-filled recollections of his past. On his journey to find himself again, he was able to meet his “anchor,” and soon to be wife, Jody. “She was an anchor for me, creating real stability for the first time since I had left the church” (Jeffs, 175).

The unfortunate crisis of being born into this heinous cult disrupts and obliterates Brent Jeff’s ability to find self-identity and self-worth at a young age. In regards to the book, “Stigma,” written by Erving Goffman, Brent had to encounter his “master status” of being a member of a polygamist culture in his childhood, which he couldn’t escape at the time. Out of the three main types of stigmas out there in society, it’s palpable that young Brent was a stigmatized individual in regards to the “tribal” type that associates with religion, background and culture. Everybody in Brent’s town in Utah identified him and his family as the “plygs,” which was known as a derogatory and offensive name used to describe polygamist people. Brent couldn’t leave his house or enter the real world or even go shopping without being stared up and down by people around the town. Growing up, Brent’s family simply taught him that “normal” people were seen as corrupt and wouldn’t be saved by God, brainwashing him to feel special and important.

During these traumatic encounters in the real world, Brent eventually reached a discreditable stigma when he noticed that those around him in his neighborhood and in school were noticing his differences due to his religion. Because his peers might not have known his stigma right away during Kindergarten, it was revealed at some point shortly after when he was then discredited by his peers. Soon after, Brent was sent to a polygamist private elementary school known as the “Alta Academy,” where he was able to experience another stigma known as “mixed contacts,” or people with whom he could relate to in regards to polygamy. Brent recollects his memories in the text saying, “best of all, I didn’t have to hide my background or feel like I was some kind of a freak, the way I’d sometimes felt in kindergarten among outsiders in general” (Jeffs, 72).

All of these different instances in Brent’s life triggered how difficult it was and still is for him to really discover his true identity when his peers around him were already embracing knowledge of themselves early on. The moments in Brent’s life when he could have potentially discovered his identity were all trampled by moments of fear like when Vera, his fathers’ third wife, would verbally put him down or when he was raped by his uncle and leader of the FLDS, Warren Jeffs. “Vera would hit us with these large wooden Lincoln Logs toys, which were an inch and half square and one to two feet long. They really hurt (Jeffs, 49). The start of Brent’s loss of self ultimately began when his power-hungry, brainwashing, and polygamist uncle raped him at the age of five until the age of seven. During a young age where the act of sex hadn’t been exposed to him yet, Brent was forced to live in constant fear and misunderstanding of why this was happening to him. During his elementary ages, Brent responded poorly to people who tried to control him and he found himself at times wanting to just remain invisible. “If you weren’t complaining or causing trouble, you weren’t very visible. Dogs that didn’t bark—or children who withdrew into themselves—didn’t get attention” (Jeffs, 68). As individuals, it is said that society and our relationships around us shape our understandings of our emotions, our behaviors and ourselves. With that being known, it is no mystery why Brent struggled with associating himself as someone of importance given the unfortunate relationships he had growing up with polygamy.

As the polygamist church progressively became more unbearable and things became more prohibited, Brent was finally able to become a “lost boy” and remove himself from the revulsions within the cult. During this time, Brent went through a phase of resocialization, where he had to unlearn old attitudes, values and behaviors from his past and replace those with new ones in order to find his sense of self. This process helped him see each and every evil associated with the cult he had lived in for his entire life. Getting back into the real world brought Brent through waves of post-traumatic stress, panic attacks and fortunately, the calming presence of his wife, who helped him through the process of getting past his harrowing remembrances.