

OUT OF FOCUS

*My Story of Sexuality, Shame,
and Toxic Evangelicalism*

AMBER CANTORNA-WYLDE

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“Amber’s power and presence as a storyteller have never been more electric—or more necessary. Her deft hand and compassionate voice help create the breathing space we need in a world that favors extremes over nuance and winning over community. Amber has a hard story to tell, but the journey leads her—and us—to a joyful and thriving existence every person deserves to experience.”

—Flamy Grant, award-winning drag queen singer/songwriter

“In *Out of Focus*, Amber Cantorna-Wylde shares her incredible story through the epicenter of toxic, anti-LGBTQIA+ evangelicalism to an affirming, holistic spirituality with profound authenticity and bravery. Her insights are captivating, her wisdom is deep, and her message is one that will continue to bring healing and hope to countless queer people who are seeking a life-giving faith. Every queer Christian and ally should read this book!”

—Brandan Robertson, pastor and author of *Filled to Be Emptied: The Path to Liberation for Privileged People*

“Amber’s story is not uncommon, but it *is* uncommon to find someone who has the courage to be so open and transparent. Amber’s story offers important lessons and insights for everyone, and for those who have experienced something similar, I believe it will serve as a source of healing.”

—Liz Dyer, founder, Real Mama Bears

“*Out of Focus* is a damn powerful read, no matter how you look at it. Amber generously shares many heart-wrenching glimpses into her story—ones that all of us in the LGBTQ+ community of faith deeply resonate with. Her unabashed honesty is incredibly healing, as countless queer people will see themselves in her struggle. Her courage to shed light on ideologies and people who continue to do harm to the queer faith community is breathless and a call to action. I’m joining her in that call. Read this book, and you will too.”

—Stacey Chomiak, author and illustrator of *Still Stace: My Gay Christian Coming-of-Age Story*

“When Amber first contemplated sharing her story in 2016, a transgender pastor told her, ‘Amber, embedded in your identity is a responsibility to be a voice for change.’ I believe this book is a fulfilment of that prophetic pronouncement. Reading her accounts of her first love, coming out to her parents, and her struggle with health issues—no doubt partially caused by the stress of living with rejection—should move one to empathy. But what deeply impresses me about Amber’s story is the important role I think it will play in the rising tide of LGBTQ+ awareness for the world, including, hopefully, the church.”

—David Hayward, The Naked Pastor,
www.nakedpastor.com

“As someone who was raised in an evangelical culture and then espoused its tenets to my own children and scores of youth group teens, *Out of Focus* hit me with a double punch. Amber’s story illustrates the mental toll of living as a standard bearer of impossible expectations while underscoring the generational consequences of a system built on misogyny, bigotry, and damaging messages. *Out of Focus* masterfully connects the dots between the seemingly virtuous lessons preached in American churches and the guilt, shame, and desperation black-and-white thinking breeds in so many congregants. It is required reading for anyone longing for a more inclusive and—dare I say—Christlike Christianity.”

—Cynthia Vacca Davis, professor, journalist, and author of
Intersexion: A Story of Faith, Identity, and Authenticity

“Amber Cantorna-Wylde is open and frank about her upbringing in the conservative evangelical church. Her emotional journey from a dutiful daughter to queer liberation is at times heartbreaking, but ultimately, she came to terms with the incredible human being God created her to be. This book is a must-read for anyone who is grappling with or has left a faith tradition based on manipulation and judgment. Amber’s narrative is compelling and gives us all hope.”

—Nicole Garcia, Faith Work Director,
National LGBTQ Task Force

“Everyone should share in the empowering encouragement that *Out of Focus* offers to its readers. Amber Cantorna-Wylde illuminates a way forward toward renewed self-love and acceptance by boldly and courageously telling her story of love, heartbreak, challenges, and ultimate triumph. Thank you, Amber, for shining hope and exposing those dark places of rejection, pain, and shame that are still being inflicted on so many today through religious stigma, bias, and discrimination. By bringing the trauma that is caused by harmful religious messaging out into the light, many will know that they are not alone! And many lives will be saved!”

—Jane Clementi, cofounder, Tyler Clementi Foundation

“Amber Cantorna-Wylde’s writing is raw and engaging, inviting readers into the emotional depths of her experience. This memoir doesn’t just tell a story—it illuminates the painful realities faced by LGBTQ+ individuals within the Christian community. It also highlights the strength required to forge a path toward acceptance and love. Amber’s story is a beacon of hope for those struggling with similar issues and a compelling call for change within the broader Christian world. As a pastor for over forty years, I highly recommend this book.”

—Ray Waters, founding pastor, The Village Church

“Amber Cantorna-Wylde’s *Out of Focus* is an important and gripping account of delayed self-discovery and eventual overcoming. As someone who knows firsthand the impossible pressure to hide one’s inner life that comes with being raised by parents who work in evangelical ministry, I relate all too well to her protracted and painful process of learning to trust herself and reclaim her own story. That story powerfully exposes the extent to which embracing one’s queerness after striving to be the ‘perfect’ evangelical child takes a toll, and I believe that its telling will help younger people learn to love and accept themselves after facing the unfair and impossible burden of choosing between authenticity and faith-based, hellfire-enforced family demands to conform.”

—Chrissy Strop, coeditor of *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church* and senior correspondent, *Religion Dispatches*

This book is dedicated to Kelly Loving, Daniel Davis Aston, Derrick Rump, Raymond Green Vance, and Ashley Paugh, who lost their lives in the Club Q shooting on November 19, 2022. It is dedicated to those who knew them and loved them, and to every person who has lost an LGBTQ+ loved one to the hands of homophobia, transphobia, and violence.

Finally, it is dedicated to each and every one of us in the LGBTQ+ community who feel alone in our journey and who fear for our safety every day. May the words in this book bring you comfort, and may they shed light on the harmful ways that bad theology directly links to death. May those in positions of power have the courage to use their privilege to create lasting change. And may each of us in the LGBTQ+ community find the love, safety, and belonging that we each so fully deserve.

You are seen. You are held. You are loved.

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FOREWORD

Matthew Paul Turner

One of the things I remember most vividly about the fundamentalist church I belonged to as a child is the way my pastor's voice sounded whenever he spoke the word "homosexual" from the pulpit. Now, all of my former pastor's sermons were loudly presented and included moments when he'd scream the promises of God at us. But any time the Lord "pressed upon his heart" to yell at us about what God's promises were for homosexuals, he'd pronounce the word as if it tasted bad, like he was grossed out and gagging just uttering the word. And he never just simply said the word; he always added four or five modifiers in front of it, a handful of adjectives that forewarned the congregation that he was about to say what he believed was God's least favorite word.

That pastor's proclamations about homosexuality created an environment at my church that wasn't just bigoted toward LGBTQ+ people, but a toxic, violent, and harmful place for people who weren't cisgender heterosexual. That pastor's belief system didn't just affect my understandings about homosexuality while I was at church, but also at home—because my parents held the same ideology. Whenever something about homosexuality was mentioned on the news or was being discussed during a talk show, my father's disgust was visceral.

When I first began to fear that I wasn't straight at age seventeen, the loathing my church and family had long expressed for gay people became internalized as self-loathing. Every nonstraight thought that bounced through my mind tempted my curiosities and, at the same time, caused me to feel an uncanny amount of hatred toward myself. I thought for sure that God couldn't wait to throw my sorry soul into the lake of fire, a scenario that—more often than you might think—I'd imagine and fear and believe wholeheartedly was my future.

That cycle became my journey. I was a church cliché in many ways. Like so many LGBTQ+ people who grew up in some kind of evangelical church, I existed in an unhealthy reality that ebbed and flowed between overwhelming fear and anxiety in the best of times to at least two different occasions in which I spent time ideating self-harm. Most of the time, I walked with shame and secrecy as my companions. For almost thirty years, I lived like that, battling seasons of depression, fighting anxiety and occasional panic attacks, believing that I was destined to live my entire story without ever experiencing what it felt like to be fully known.

I was still closeted when I became familiar with Amber Cantorna-Wylde. Upon hearing her story, I felt two very distinct emotions: on one hand I felt so much joy that somebody had found the freedom to wiggle free; and on the other hand, I battled feeling jealous because somebody had found the freedom to wiggle free. Despite my complicated feelings, I reached out and invited her to be a guest on the podcast that I was doing at the time with a friend. As we were recording that segment, I remember marveling at Amber's bravery and her kind yet stoic presence. Yes, I felt jealous, but I also felt excitement for all the ways I imagined her story would help so many closeted folks like myself.

I was forty-six years old when I came out, several years after that interview. It was by far the scariest thing I'd ever done in my life.

Even though I was a middle-aged man who'd long let go of his once tightly held evangelical belief systems and had, for many years, wholly embraced a progressive theology that was fully LGBTQ+ affirming, accepting my own gay orientation was a layered and complicated struggle for me.

At the time, I was married to my best friend, Jessica. She and I had three incredible children. And while our marriage wasn't perfect, the love and connection that Jessica and I shared with each other was deep, earnest, and real. The thought of wounding Jessica's spirit or causing my children pain overwhelmed me. But the truth is, the longer I avoided my own story and the decades of trauma that my religious ideologies created, the less present I was for the people I loved the most. In my forties, I hit a wall in which I began losing elements of who I was. I became a shell of the human that Jessica fell in love with and married.

It was during therapy that I began to realize that the trauma I carried and allowed to diminish me was slowly becoming a trauma for every member of my family. Eventually, Jessica and I knew what we had to do. But gosh, doing it was so much harder than we'd imagined.

I knew that I was going to lose a lot in the process of telling my truth. And in those moments when I was still imagining all the things that I'd lose, it was impossible for me to consider that I might also gain something in the telling of my truth. But I pushed through every fear, sometimes very clumsily so. And as a friend told me in the days that followed my coming out, "Matthew, you survived the telling. You survived."

One of the first people to text me after I came out was Amber.

But becoming free enough to speak your story out loud is just a beginning. In my first therapy appointment after I came out publicly, after I'd cried about all the things I'd experienced in the last few weeks, my therapist said, "The scariest part is over, Matthew; and now we can begin working on the hardest part—you learning how to love yourself fully and completely."

It's on that journey, the one that put me on a path toward loving myself fully, that I began to get brave.

At some point between coming out and writing *Out of Focus*, Amber Cantorna-Wylde found love for herself, the kind that makes you strong and brave and powerful.

That's what you're about to experience in the pages of this book: a brave and powerful pontification, a story and a telling that are stronger and more potent than the evangelical toxicity and hate-mongering they call out. Amber's truth in *Out of Focus* is light for a church overcome with fear, and life for the souls that fear has tried to diminish.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The story you're about to read is my own very personal journey of growing up in the heart of the evangelical movement and discovering that who I was meant to be did not fit within the confines of my religion or family system. I have gone to great lengths to be as vulnerable, honest, and transparent as possible. While no one's memory is perfect, I have relied on hundreds of letters, emails, photographs, and journal entries to support the documentation of my story so as to convey it in the most authentic and truthful way possible. At times, events or conversations were combined for narrative flow; quotation marks are used as tools for presenting recollections and should not be regarded as verbatim quotes from individuals. I recognize that their memories of the events described in this book may be different than my own. In addition, the names of many of the people close to me as well as some places have been changed or disguised to protect privacy.

One name has not been changed. That is the name of my father.

In all my years of LGBTQ+ advocacy, I've been careful and intentional about protecting the name, position, and privacy of my father. It felt important at the time for numerous reasons. A lot has changed over the last decade—culture has shifted, data and resources have expanded,

we've lived through a Trump presidency and a global pandemic, and the organization of Focus on the Family continues to perpetuate messages about queer people that harm their relationships, their families, their employment status, their mental health, their proximity to faith, and their most basic human rights.

After seven years of working with queer people who have been harmed by religion, it felt critical to my spirit in writing this book to speak loud and clear. To hold accountable institutions that harm innocent people. To call out complacency and complicity. To tell my story. To hope for change.

I know that by naming my father, I open myself up to a host of criticisms, hate mail, misunderstandings, and backlash. I do not name him with malice or because I desire to be cruel or to attempt revenge for my suffering. Rather, I do it to call for justice, equality, safety, and equity for LGBTQ+ people. May my voice and my story be used to reduce shame and isolation for queer people who come behind me, and may they feel a little safer in the world because of it. May this story soften your heart, open your eyes, and call you into deeper justice and love.

Trigger warning: Self-injury is described in detail in several chapters of this book. Each paragraph in which it is discussed is marked with an asterisk (*). Mentions of suicide, although not discussed in detail, are marked with an asterisk as well. Please keep yourself safe and skip these paragraphs if you feel that reading about self-injury or suicide may trigger you.

PROLOGUE

On November 19, 2022—the eve of the Transgender Day of Remembrance—a twenty-two-year-old entered Club Q in Colorado Springs just before midnight, killing five and wounding more than seventeen others before being taken down by patrons. This tragic loss of life and safety has shaken not only the Colorado Springs queer community, of which I am a part, but the LGBTQ+ community at large. Once again, we were the target of a hate crime—desired to be erased from existence.

This is not the first time. The Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, in 2016 took the lives of forty-nine people and injured fifty-three more, making it the deadliest mass shooting in US history at the time. Countless other individuals have lost their lives to violent homophobia and transphobia. Some names we are familiar with, like Matthew Shepard and Tyler Clementi. Many (especially transgender women of color) go unnoticed, unrecognized, and are all too quickly forgotten. The fact that the horrific Club Q assault took place in Colorado Springs feels symbolic of hate coming full circle—from the harmful beliefs and teachings of evangelical ministries headquartered in my hometown to an assault rifle in the hands of a young adult taking innocent lives.

Just five days after the massacre, a message was spray-painted on Focus on the Family's property: *Their blood is on your hands. Five lives taken.* This message, written on a stone wall featuring the organization's name, speaks to the deep level of oppression, disempowerment, anger, fear, and grief that LGBTQ+ people have experienced for years as a by-product of the exclusionary teachings that Focus on the Family has taught and propagated for decades. *It has to stop.* The narrative must be changed. Far too many lives have been taken, both by hate crimes based in toxic rhetoric, and by internalized homophobia and transphobia programmed into queer people from infancy—all in the name of God and love.

The teachings of Focus on the Family value and elevate certain families while simultaneously tearing others apart—teaching tough love, shunning into submission, and reparative therapy in order to fix, change, or heal queer people of their detestable desires. When it doesn't work (because it *doesn't* actually work), parents are instructed to kick queer children out of the family unless they change, in an effort to save their own souls from damnation by association.

I've experienced these teachings firsthand. Raised inside this institution as the daughter of a prominent Focus on the Family employee, I was reared on James Dobson's tough love and molded to put family and God above all else and at any cost. Because of this inside exposure, my childhood was intensively shaped by this organization and its teachings. I was programmed to believe that if I followed a certain formula, my life would be blessed by God and I would be used for greatness. I did all the things. I followed all the rules. I had daily quiet times, I spent hours in prayer, I fasted, I served, and I was active in church. I did discipleship training programs and service trips. I dedicated my

life, my time, and my passions to God, suppressing my own feelings and desires in order to serve others. I strictly followed the tenets of purity culture, never dating or even having my first kiss until I was in my twenties. I did everything I was taught to do. But instead of leading to a life of happiness and “blessed-ness,” it deteriorated my mental health, chipped away at my confidence and self-worth, and led me into a downward spiral of self-hatred, self-harm, and suicidal ideations. What was supposed to keep me focused on my family ended up tearing me away from them, causing me to be disowned by the people I needed to love me the most.

My story is not uncommon—not yet. I meet people every day in the advocacy work that I do whose stories share similar threads of abandonment, discrimination, and ostracization at the hands of those who claim to love them. It’s tragic and it’s lethal, taking something as pure and simple as love and turning it into a weapon of division that religion and politics use to pit conservatives against liberals, parents against children, and theology against basic humanity.

In 2016, when I first contemplated sharing my story, a transgender pastor looked me in the eye and said, “Amber, embedded in your identity is a responsibility to be a voice for change.” Those words resounded in my soul as if they were directly from the Divine, and they’ve never left me. I’ve been striving to be that voice ever since.

We are at a point in history when urgency, accountability, and calling out injustice, oppression, and complicity are critical. It’s time to fight for the dignity and life of *every* human being, and not allow our voices to be silenced. I still believe that embedded in my identity is a responsibility to be a voice for change. In this season of urgency, I also believe that *revealing* my identity—my proximity to Focus

on the Family and the fact that I was raised on the inside of this system—is how I *continue* to be a voice for change. In doing so, it is my hope that by living into my responsibility, we can someday all live freely, safely, and unashamed.

My father is Dave Arnold, executive producer of *Adventures in Odyssey* and *Radio Theatre* at Focus on the Family, and this is my story.

PART 1
TOXIC EVANGELICALISM

Chapter 1

MY ADVENTURE IN ODYSSEY

“Hi, this is Chris! Welcome to *Adventures in Odyssey!*”

The enthusiastic greeting, followed by the easily recognized *Adventures in Odyssey* theme song, was the backdrop of my life from the time I turned three. I can still hear Chris’s cheerful voice in my head, as well as those of other classic characters like Mr. John Avery Whittaker, Connie Kendall, and Eugene Meltsner. I was barely seven the first time I got to play one of the audio characters.

“We’re ready for you, Amber. Let’s head on back to the studio and get you set up.”

Hopping off my stool, I followed the recording engineer back to the booth where a world of “discovery, imagination, and excitement” awaited me.

“Have a seat right here, honey, this microphone’s for you,” my dad said, placing the headphones over my ears and adjusting the wide black strap on top, my head bobbing a bit at the weight. As an earphone went over each ear, the suction muted all sound, causing the world to go silent. Then, a loud, clear voice from within the earphones broke the dead air. The voice came from a man on the other side of the glass where all the engineers sat in front of the mixing board, ready to record.

“Okay, Amber, let’s test the microphone. Do you have your script?”

“Yes, but I already know my lines.” I smiled with pride.

“All right, then here we go!”

I was a homeschooled second-grader. While most kids listened to the popular kids’ audio drama *Adventures in Odyssey* on the radio or (in the early days) on cassette tapes, I was watching it be created in real time. My dad was one of the original *Adventures in Odyssey* staff members, and I loved visiting the recording studio at the Focus on the Family headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he worked. The script on the music stand in front of me was another chance to venture into the enchanting world of Whit’s End and create something that was listened to by Christian families around the world.

I knew every episode by heart. I could tell you every title, story line, and cassette or CD package it was released on. I used them to help me fall asleep at night, make cleaning my room a little easier, and gauge the remaining time on a road trip.

The excitement of playing one of the characters was matched only by seeing the details of how the episodes were created. I loved watching the actors record and listening as the voice parts were mixed with music to create smooth transitions between scenes. I’d sit behind the mixing board with my dad and watch as actors like Hal Smith, Will Ryan, and Katie Leigh did multiple takes to get the energy just right in a scene. My favorite part of the creation process was Foley (the sound effects). The Foley room was full of props and square cutouts in the flooring, each revealing a different type of carpet, tile, concrete, or walking surface to mimic different environmental sounds. Scattered around the room were a variety of shoes, jackets and coats, ropes, bells, boxes of cornstarch, and pretty much anything you could imagine to create the sound effects that make a story

come to life. My dad always came home exhausted after Foley days when he and a coworker acted out each scene and recorded it with a mic to pick up the footsteps, handshakes, sighs, hugs, and doors that opened and closed—all in effort to auditorily transport you to that place in your mind’s eye. It was magic, and I loved it.

But the “world of discovery, imagination, and excitement” didn’t just live within the fantasy of *Whit’s End*; it also lived within my everyday life at home with my parents and younger brother, Daniel. From the time I was very young, I was taught the utmost importance of one thing: family.

“Cherry Coke, Daddy! Cherry Coke!” my toddler heart begged from inside the nursery of our home in Kalispell, Montana. I pulled at my dad’s pant leg and looked up at him until he relented. Smiling down, he picked me up, threw me up in the air, and caught me. I’d giggle and say, “Again, Daddy! Again!”

For as far back as I can remember, I was the apple of my father’s eye. From butterfly kisses to Looney Tunes and Saturday-morning cuddles to Cherry Cokes, we shared a special bond that can only be created between a dad and his little girl. He found joy and a connection with me as his only daughter, and with a twinkle in his eye, would often look at me and say, “I’m so proud of you, Am.”

My parents worked hard to instill the values that Focus on the Family (FOTF) deemed important. Following the complementarian model of family relationships, my dad went off to work while my mom was the homemaker who raised my brother and me. We were the quintessential family. Homemade meals eaten around the table together, family devotions, a clean and cozy home, and systems for

just about everything that kept our lives running in clock-work fashion. That's how you focused on your family.

With James Dobson held up as an expert filled with wisdom that allowed him to speak on God's behalf, Focus on the Family was revered as the prime authority on family, marriage, and social issues. Wondering if that movie is okay for your teenager to watch? Read the review on *Plugged In*. Need something wholesome and clean to entertain your kids? Let them listen to *Adventures in Odyssey*. Having trouble with one of your children acting out? Read Dobson's book *The Strong-Willed Child*. It was the institution that had all the answers to your faith and family needs.

Founded by James Dobson in 1977, FOTF was originally based in southern California. Its mission statement was, "To be led by the Holy Spirit in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with as many people as possible by nurturing and affirming the God-ordained institution of the family and proclaiming biblical truths worldwide."¹ What many people don't know is that prior to founding FOTF, Dobson was a protégé of Paul Popenoe—an atheist eugenicist. Paul Popenoe, who founded the American Institute of Family Relations in 1930, advocated for the forced sterilization of "weaklings" (people with mental illness) in order to improve the race by preventing the "unfit" from being born. In a 1915 article in the *San Francisco Examiner*, Popenoe is quoted saying, "The only hope for permanent race betterment under social control is to substitute a selective birth rate for nature's selective death rate. That means—eugenics."² In an effort to make straight, cisgender, healthy White people dominant, Popenoe promoted sterilization procedures that were performed on thousands of people.

But preventing procreation of the “unfit” was only part of the eugenicists’ plan. They also had to increase production of the “fit”—White middle-class families. By the middle of the 1930s, the Great Depression was at its height and both marriage and birth rates were in significant decline. So in order to prevent “race suicide,” Popenoe shifted his focus from sterilization to marriage and family therapy.

Although Popenoe was not religious, evangelicals became his professional allies in a quest to promote patriarchal and complementarian family values. Popenoe focused on working with religious leaders in “pastoral psychotherapy”—enter James Dobson. Dobson served as Popenoe’s assistant at the American Institute of Family Relations. Dobson then launched a film series titled *Focus on the Family*, which Popenoe widely acclaimed. It released in Santa Cruz in 1979, not long after Popenoe’s death. While Popenoe is not well-known and may generally be forgotten, his legacy lives on in Dobson and the tenets that FOTF advances.

Popenoe’s racist, homophobic, patriarchal idea that healthy White people should be the Super Race not only influenced Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich,³ but it continues to influence millions of evangelicals today due to the global influence that FOTF maintains. The central idea is that in order avoid “race suicide” and ensure that White Christians stay the dominant race and religion, they should breed as many “culture warriors” as possible. These culture warriors would, in time, grow up and defend the same beliefs as their parents. In *Jesus and John Wayne*, Kristin Du Mez states, “Outbreeding opponents was the first step to outvoting them, and in their reproductive capacities, women served as ‘domestic warriors.’”⁴

Encouraging women to stay home and raise children kept straight White men in positions of power and women out

of the workforce, ensuring the continuation of patriarchy. It also created a breeding ground that, through homeschooling, molded children from infancy into exactly what evangelicals wanted them to be—sexually pure, patriarchal, homophobic, Christian nationalists, who use their strong beliefs and voting power to fight the culture wars at hand—from integration in the mid-twentieth century, to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, and most recently, critical race theory in schools.

This piece of history is important to understand because of how it influences my story—and perhaps yours too. In our household, everything came down to one foundational principle: love and serve God above all else. This, by default, included raising a godly family. The ways that eugenics were embedded in these two principles were subtle, but the roots were strong.

My parents made modeling these values their top priority. With the belief that family is more important than work, they strove to be present in the lives of me and my younger brother as we grew up. Thankfully, working at FOTF allowed my father more leeway than many when it came to being an active parent. He'd often be the one to tuck me into bed at night and read or tell me a story. My favorites vacillated between the "Pizza Man" where he'd roll me out like pizza dough and throw me up in the air, and the board book *The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear*. My dad could do *all* the voices. Then, always praying with me for sweet dreams and protection, he'd often end by singing:

You're sugar and spice, you're everything nice
And you're Daddy's little girl⁵

I never doubted that I was loved.

Leaving our safe home near relatives in Montana and accepting a job at FOTF on the outskirts of Los Angeles to launch the *Adventures in Odyssey* radio drama was a risk for us. It was frightening for my parents to move to a big, metropolitan city and leave the comfort of their small-town rural upbringings. They were young parents making a major move with an almost-three-year-old and a baby on the way. This was *not* their ideal place to raise a family. But they did what they believed God was calling them to do—and thirty-five years later at the time of this book’s writing, my father is still employed by FOTF.

My parents were both grateful when FOTF relocated to the beautiful city of Colorado Springs in 1991. Anxious to get away from the inner-city feel and into a smaller town, my parents purchased a home in a quiet neighborhood on the north end of the city, only a short drive from the new FOTF headquarters. Situated across from the Air Force Academy, the FOTF campus was a prime location with a beautiful and open view of Pikes Peak and the Rocky Mountain range. Colorado Springs was the epicenter for many major Christian ministries, so it quickly felt like home, and we put down new roots.

Early on, my mom made homeschooling my brother and me her passion. My parents did not want us to be exposed to all that takes place in a public (“secular”) school and could not afford a private Christian school. Homeschooling kept us close to the nest and allowed my parents to tailor our education, making sure the curriculum they chose mirrored their Christian beliefs, especially on topics of creation vs. evolution, history, science, and biblical studies and worldview. Homeschooling was popular among Christians in Colorado Springs (for the reasons named above), so we flourished in that environment. Our

mornings always started with individual quiet time with God, followed by getting dressed and being ready for family breakfast and devotions at 7:00 a.m. My mom prepared a detailed schedule to keep us on task each day, which regularly included networking and co-ops with other home-school families, doing art projects and crafts, and going on field trips.

Our days were highly structured, but after lunch, Danny and I could often be found lying on our beds, listening to an episode of *Adventures in Odyssey*. Like a Christian Disneyland for the ears, the twenty-five-minute radio programs kept us occupied and engaged, while teaching us Christian morals like honesty, integrity, and service to others. Although it was a nice break in our day, my mom knew that allowing time for us to listen wasn't just entertainment; it was another avenue for us to learn the values she and my dad were trying hard to instill in us. They used the episodes as a springboard to teach us overarching principles. The episodes taught everything from manners and respect, to loss and grief, to relationships and dependence on God.

In 2014, my father was involved in creating an entire *Adventures in Odyssey* package (twelve episodes) called *The Ties That Bind* “exploring questions about God’s design for marriage and family, loyalty, redemption, commitment, and love.”⁶ Issued with a discussion guide, it provides questions that correlate with each episode to guide parents on how to talk to their children about “God’s design for marriage and family.” It released in conjunction with FOTF’s *The Family Project*—a twelve-session study for adults designed to explore the biblical foundations of the traditional family. The *Adventures in Odyssey* version for kids targets six- to twelve-year-olds. This package, released well after I became

an adult (and about two years after I came out), speaks to the calculated way evangelical messages are intentionally being instilled in the hearts and minds of young children. Molding young minds through entertainment is the ultimate achievement. As the children of one of the original creators of *Adventures in Odyssey*, my brother and I were spotlit to be examples of just how well this teaching method worked. And it *did* work. We absorbed it all.

When *Adventures in Odyssey* celebrated its tenth year in 1997, FOTF hosted a special event at headquarters called “New Year’s Eve, Live!” where an episode of the show was recorded in front of an audience. Key actors were flown in from Los Angeles, and my brother and I both played a part. Families from all over were encouraged to attend, which meant lines were long, the house was packed, and people buzzed with excitement.

When everyone was in place and ready to begin, the lights went down and the famous theme song came up playing loud and clear. All of us bantered through our lines together, musicians played to transition us from scene to scene, and a couple of guys did live Foley on the side throughout the show so people could see how the sound effects were created in real time. The crowd was fully engaged.

Following the recording, we all sat behind a long table as families lined up to collect autographs. They bought T-shirts, CD packages, and the newly released book, *The Complete Guide to Adventures in Odyssey*, working their way down the line so that each of the actors could sign their mementos from the day.

“Will you sign this for me?” a cute little girl in pigtails asked me, with her Odyssey T-shirt in one hand and her doll in the other.

“Of course,” I said with a smile, asking her doll’s name as I personalized her T-shirt for her. I was an early teenager at the time, but remembered my doll-playing days well.

As a little girl, I loved dressing up my dolls and playing house. When I was young, a Cabbage Patch Kid affectionately named Holly Dolly was my favorite. As I got a bit older, I gravitated toward the popular American Girl dolls. I’ve known many people who already knew they were gay by their elementary years—but not me. When I was that age, I imagined a future family very similar to the one I was being raised in. I dreamed of my someday husband, a cozy house, a family of my own to homeschool and raise on the same FOTF foundation I was reared on, and loads of holiday traditions.

My mom had a gift for making the holidays meaningful, special, and full of symbolism. My parents fed our imagination and cultivated our inner child by letting us believe in the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, and the Easter bunny. I remember one year they even went so far as to use powdered sugar to make bunny tracks on our carpet. We did progressive Easter meals, Fourth of July barbecues, birthday celebrations, and Thanksgiving feasts.

In our younger years we even went trick-or-treating—the most memorable being the year I strung a metal coat hanger through my braids so they stuck out like Pippi Longstocking’s. But as we got older, trick-or-treating was outgrown and replaced with what became known as the Great Pumpkin Dinner. A combination of pumpkin-carving with friends, a meal made up of all things pumpkin, and a viewing of *It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, this tradition is one that I’ve carried into adulthood, often hosting a new group of friends each year to enjoy the fall festivities.

But Christmas was my favorite time of the year. From the time I was a toddler, my dad disguised himself as Santa Claus and came to visit us in his red suit each Christmas Eve. Pushing nostalgia as long as I could, I begged him to continue the tradition long past my believing years. The kid in me loved our traditions, sometimes longer than the rest of my family did. They wanted simplicity; I wanted stability. Perhaps there was a piece of me that felt grounded by the rhythm and routine of traditions. Even when emotions swirled inside of me that I couldn't understand or speak aloud, knowing I could count on a certain calendar of events gave me a level of certainty that I needed—an “okayness” that said because these holiday markers happened, things were all right somehow.

As a kid, I was oblivious to these deeper emotional connections, of course. What puzzled me was why Santa always came at the exact time that my dad ran to the store to get 7UP for the Christmas Eve punch. As we grew, we loved sitting on his lap for an annual photo and counted on the matching pajamas he brought in his sack. Oddly, I don't remember all four of us ever having the same pajamas. My mom and I had always had a matching set, and my dad and brother had a matching set. Perhaps all four of us matching strayed too far from gender norms. Regardless of how we matched (or didn't), we went to bed each Christmas Eve snuggled up in new flannel warmth, smiling at the fact that Santa had come for yet another year. Trying hard to create not only a family bond, but also fond family memories that we would look back on for years to come, Mom would often tell me, “Amber, friends will come and go, but your family will *always* be there for you.”

I believed what she said. Trusting her, I shaped my view of the world around the concept that Cherry Coke and

Santa Claus moments would always be there, and believed that focusing on my family should take priority above all else. I had no idea that in the future, my family would teach me something very different.