The Cult That Raised Me

BY EWAN WHYTE

When I was 11, my parents sent me to Grenville Christian College, a prestigious Anglican boarding school in Brockville. It turned out to be a perverse fundamentalist cult that brainwashed, abused and terrorized students. For decades, the school tried to intimidate us into silence. **IT DIDN’T WORK**

the first time I saw Grenville Christian College, I was 11 years old. It was an Anglican boarding school a few hundred metres from the St. Lawrence River, just east of Brockville. At its centre was an impressive four-storey stone building, originally built as a junior Catholic seminary in 1918. There was a large chapel on the west end of the building and some new additions on the east, with several trailer homes behind the school, hidden from view. It was summer 1980, and I was living with my parents in rural Ontario, in a small town near the Quebec border. My mother told me we were just visiting—that we were going to see the headmaster, Charles Farnsworth, who would provide me with what she called “child guidance and correction.”

We met with Farnsworth in the school cafeteria. He was a short, angry, small man, with greasy black hair and a pronounced Georgia drawl. He wasn’t particularly articulate; I remember, even at my young
age, being surprised that this person could be a headmaster at such an impressive school. My mother told Farnsworth I needed correction because I’d asked for a pair of jeans and to wear my hair longer than a crew cut. All I wanted was to fit in with other kids. When I requested these things, my mother said they were “the way of the world,” which was sinful.

Farnsworth responded by proudly telling us about his experience beating children. He spoke of it with a sense of delight, explaining how he whipped his own sons with a belt, and how good it was for them. He boasted about how he would frequently paddle students at the school. He sounded like a sports fan describing a game, going over the plays, the outs, the runs. About children, he said, “You have to break their spirit.” He was terrifying.

When we drove away from Grenville that day, I never expected I would return. My parents were too poor for me to attend the school, so I figured I was safe. A number of months after our visit, my mother excitedly announced that I was going to be a boarding student at Grenville, and that she would be teaching English and remedial reading there. What I didn’t understand at the time was that this expensive, impressive school, marketed as a respectable Anglican institution where wealthy Torontonians could send their children, was nothing of the sort. It was a cult.

I would spend the next few years enduring violence, isolation, humiliation and brainwashing at Grenville. It would take more than 25 years before this culture of abuse became public—and another decade before I and some 1,359 other former students got something resembling justice.

I was not a happy child. When my parents weren’t belittling me, they ignored me. My father was an ordained pastor with the United Church of Christ, while my mother was a devout Christian from North Carolina who’d taken courses in literature at Harvard and earned an MA in education from Boston University. Often moody and detached, she seemed to resent being a mother. She was also caught up in the Charismatic Christian Revival, an interdenominational movement that borrowed many elements of Pentecostalism and promised a personal, emotional connection with God that would inspire a Christian lifestyle.

The Community of Jesus, a Christian commune on the shores of Rock Harbor in Cape Cod, attracted some of the biggest players in the charismatic movement. When I was eight, my mother convinced my father to join the Community, which she’d heard about through one of her acquaintances. It was founded by Cay Andersen and Judy Sorensen, two American housewives who’d visited the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary, a Christian commune in Darmstadt, Germany. At the Community of Jesus, Andersen and Sorensen anointed themselves as “Mothers” and copied every aspect of the Evangelical Sisterhood, from their strict ideas of discipline right down to the fonts on their brochures. She moved us there for a year and a half, and I was forced to live in a house of unhappy boys, only rarely seeing my parents. The Mothers called parental love “idolatry”—the sin of loving anybody or anything aside from God—because they believed it made parents blind to their children’s transgressions.

Andersen and Sorensen claimed to “see things in the Spirit” about people or a situation, and said that God spoke directly to them about our sins and atonement. Everyone was subjected to daily “light sessions,” in which adult members spent hours publicly berating and humiliating the victim until they broke down completely. They were called light sessions because they were supposed to help us “live in the light.” At the Community, I found brief moments of peace—looking out at the salt flats, walking through shrubs lining the paths toward the water, and most of all, in lines of poetry. Poetry has always been an escape, a friend. I started secretly memorizing at least one poem a week.
They became part of me, part of how I related to words, meaning and time. These moments of eternity were short respites from the fear and pain that were woven into all aspects of my daily life. When I was 10, my father—never an enthusiastic acolyte of the Mothers—convinced my mother to leave. By this point, the child I was when I first arrived at the Community had been erased. The loneliness was crushing.

Just as my mother promised, I began my Grade 7 year at Grenville Christian College in the fall of 1980. Almost immediately, I knew that most of the staff and teachers I met were Community of Jesus people. I had seen many of them at the commune in Cape Cod, including Charles Farnsworth. I’d seen their rings—flat gold, with a Jerusalem-style cross stamped out of it. I knew they had sworn vows of obedience to the Mothers. I soon learned that my mother had struck a deal with Andersen and Sorensen: that she’d become a teacher at Grenville, I’d attend as a student, and my father would find a parish nearby. At Grenville, children were subjected to extreme verbal, physical, psychological and sexualized abuse, all in the name of the Community. We were beaten with paddles, publicly humiliated, creatively punished for a range of incomprehensible “sins.” We were isolated from our families and from each other.

Running the show alongside Farnsworth was his co-headmaster, Al Haig, who’d become involved with the charismatic revival. He’d been a teacher at Albert College in Belleville before his enthusiasm for speaking in tongues and talking about the movement of the Holy Spirit got him fired. He moved to New York to work for Norman Vincent Peale—Donald Trump’s one-time pastor and the author of The Power of Positive Thinking. Haig later ran a Pentecostal school out of a basement in Brooklyn.

Haig met Andersen and Sorensen in the 1960s, and was impressed by the Mothers’ preaching: the women once prayed for the Haig family dog, supposedly curing it from distemper. A few years later, Haig and Farnsworth were working at the struggling Berean Christian missionary school, which would later become Grenville. When the Mothers visited the school in 1973, Haig took their trip as a sign of divine intervention. From then on, the staff dedicated themselves to following the Mothers’ teachings. The majority of the staff took vows of membership to the Community of Jesus, attended retreats at their compound on Cape Cod, wrote reports to the Mothers and tithed 10 per cent of their earnings to the Community.

It was around this time that the Anglican bishop in Kingston ordained both Haig and Farnsworth as ministers. On average, the school paid $100,000 each year to the Community, and the Mothers appear as directors on Grenville’s Ontario letters patent. In 1983, Farnsworth took sole leadership. His henchmen were known as the A-Team, and his son Donald later taught math at the school and served as dean of men.

Like the Community, Grenville was organized around a rigid hierarchical structure. Orders from the top were akin to the word of God, and punishment was administered based on Farnsworth’s whims. Students with influential parents received more care, while staff children like me were disciplined with impunity.

Light sessions were the main form of punishment and control at Grenville. They were used when students committed serious violations, like smoking or stealing, but also to humiliate bedwetters or students caught masturbating. Even trivial infractions—being alone with a student of the opposite sex or simply having a bad attitude—were punished in this way. Staff would haul the offending child up in front of the whole student body and berate them for their “sins,” which were often incomprehensible to us—things like haughtiness, rebellion, hiddenness, covetousness, lustfulness. Sometimes, these sessions would take place in the chapel or dining room, where everyone could see everything, and students might even be encouraged to participate in the shaming. Other times, the punishment was in private with one or several adults, who would put their faces an inch away from the child’s and scream at them as loudly as possible—condemning, shaming, terrorizing. Farnsworth would occasionally take students to the boiler room and push them close to the open flames as a glimpse of the hell they were destined for if they continued to sin.
Light sessions often involved physical abuse, too. At Grenville, they used a long wooden paddle resembling a cricket bat. Staff kids and the occasional low-status boarder were beaten so hard that they bled, urinated on themselves or could no longer stand. This is what was going to bring children into the light and make us true disciples.

I was subjected to countless light sessions over my years at the Community and Grenville. Once, at the Community, I was feeling unwell at dinner and told the adult members in charge—whom we were forced to call Aunt and Uncle—that I thought I might throw up. I was told to eat what was on my plate: “We will beat you if you don’t.” I suddenly vomited on my plate and then on the floor. One of the adults struck me on my back and screamed at me to eat it. By the end of the ordeal, I was scooping it off the floor and into my mouth with my hands. Another time, at Grenville, I was locked in the walk-in freezer for an hour as punishment.

I knew I could not be friends with any of my fellow students. The staff created networks of informants: they extorted us to tell on each other for any transgression, supposedly to help our friends “see the light.” There was a lot of incentive to rat each other out—when we did, we were showered with praise and, best of all, kept out of the hot seat, at least for that day. There was little trust among the staff children, who were alternately pitied and shunned by the paying students. Even if close friendships did emerge, they were quickly broken, as friendship was considered a form of idolatry. Meanwhile, I rarely saw my mother. She lived in staff quarters, while my father lived in his parish nearby. I, on the other hand, slept in a cramped mobile trailer around the back with other staff children. When I did see her, I knew better than to complain. Her allegiance was with Grenville and the Community of Jesus, not with me. I was completely alone.

Another central feature of Grenville life was the punishing schedule of daily activities. First there were morning assemblies, which sometimes devolved into spontaneous light sessions involving the entire school. Then chapel, classes, extracurricular activities, late-night study hall and the dreaded unpaid “work-jobs.” We worked in the kitchen, served meals, cleaned the dorms, kept up the grounds, built and maintained structures, mostly during our so-called free time, after school and on weekends. Sometimes we were assigned jobs as a form of discipline, or “being on D.” Staff removed the child from class, forbade them from speaking to other students, and forced them to complete the most difficult, menial or demeaning jobs until they were deemed sufficiently repentant.

The Grenville board was a who’s who of old-money Ontarians, who attended lavish dinners, gave commencement speeches and made generous donations.
for more than 30 years. To prospective parents, Grenville billed itself as a respectable Anglican boarding school with a strong relationship to the Anglican Church. Henry Hill, the Anglican bishop of Ontario, was an episcopal visitor at the Community of Jesus. A later bishop, Peter Mason, also knew about the Community connection.

David Ardill, a paying student who attended Grenville in 1979, told me that his mother had no idea what the school really was when she sent him there. “Its true nature was all disguised. I would never have been sent there if my mother knew it was a crazy cult school. She was a straight-laced Anglican. They flew the Anglican flag. They read from the Anglican book. Wore the Anglican garb,” he said. The Anglican Church, however, denies any authority over Grenville Christian College. They attended for comment; they referred to a 2012 judgment that found that the diocese never had any jurisdiction or power over the school’s operations, administration, affairs, staffing, funding, enrolment, discipline or other student affairs, education criteria or curriculum. “The diocese assigned no tasks, had no power or control or legal right to intervene in the operation of the school,” they said.

In the 1980s, when I attended Grenville, I’d heard that tuition was around $20,000 per year. Many illustrious and wealthy Toronto families sent their children to Grenville, and the board was a who’s who of old-money Ontarians, the kinds of people whose lineage goes back to the Family Compact. They attended lavish dinners and gave commencement speeches and made generous donations. Sir Arthur Chetwynd, a Toronto-based aristocrat with ties to the Empire Club of Canada and the Royal Commonwealth Society of Canada, was a powerful promoter, introducing many friends to the school and sending his grandson Peter there for a year. The Royal Commonwealth Society funded an obstacle course at Grenville in Sir Arthur’s name in 1990, and the 1993 Grenville yearbook was dedicated to him and his wife.

Trevor Eyton, the Ontario senator who worked at Torys and sat on the boards of Coca-Cola, GM and Nestlé, was a strong supporter of the school. The singer Tommy Hunter sent one of his sons there. Rosemary Sexton, the Toronto socialite and Globe and Mail gossip columnist, was also a cheerleader for Grenville. She sent two of her kids to the school, and I remember her daughter receiving the special care given only to children of the rich and powerful. “The school itself had some wonderful programs and dedicated staff, and many students derived much benefit from attending,” she told Toronto Life. “That is not to diminish the suffering that those who were abused went through, which was egregious and unwarranted.”

Three successive lieutenant-governors of Ontario—Pauline McGibbon, John Black Aird and Lincoln Alexander—sat on the school’s board, and a fourth, Hal Jackman, Toronto’s great arts and humanities benefactor, gave a commencement speech at Grenville. I’m sure most of these families had no idea what went on at the school, as the administration monitored our mail and calls and imposed a strict code of secrecy. Even if they had heard rumblings, I don’t know if they would have believed them. For some, what happened at Grenville is still too much to swallow.

In 1995, Maclean’s sent journalist Scott Steele to write a feature story about Grenville. He says the administration provided him with a carefully controlled narrative. Parents used the piece to refute their children’s accusations of abuse. Steele later spoke to me to say how bitterly he regrets being used in this way, and he has apologized to other ex-students for writing the article in the first place. Reading a glossy, flattering magazine story about the school where we’d experienced so much terror compounded the trauma for me and so many other students.

In Grade 8, I was exhausted from the routine. I’d have a full day at school, then cross-country running practice (a rare source of comfort at Grenville). Then there was dinner, dish crew, then homework from 6 p.m. into the late evening. One night, I came back late to the tiny room in the trailer where I bunked with three other staff kids. When I found myself last in line for the bathroom, I lay on my top bunk and waited for it to become available. Someone turned the lights off, and I fell asleep. I woke up urinating in my bed. The other boys woke up, and the staff were summoned. They told me I was disgusting and sinful. I was given a choice of being beaten with a two-by-four or sleeping in my own urine until laundry day, which was six days away. I chose the latter. Each day, I had to make my wet and stinking bed, with the other staff kids in the room complaining. By the end of the week I was sick with intense chills, and berated intensely in light sessions for deliberately becoming sick in order to get attention. I half-believed what the staff were telling me. I thought I must be a terrible person who would burn in hell.

When I was 15, under instructions from Mother Judy Sorensen, Grenville staff suddenly moved me to a small, shoddy stone cottage that the school owned in nearby Maitland, where I would live with my parents for the first time in years. In this cold, unpleasant house, I was separated from the student body and endured frequent surprise light sessions from Farnsworth. At meals, I was forced to sit with staff at a table and subjected to more light sessions. I even received personal phone calls from the Mothers on Cape Cod. I realized that they all wanted me to become a brother in the Community of Jesus, and these efforts were designed to “turn me.” My mother had enlisted the Mothers and Farnsworth to keep me in the fold.

I refused to let it happen. Shortly after I turned 16, and as soon as I was legally able, I left both the Community of Jesus and...
y 20s were a decade of precarity and periodic homelessness. I had no contact with either of my parents; my mother remained a devout member of the Community until her death a few years ago. During my stretches of homelessness, I would sleep in the daytime because the night was too dangerous. I did a series of menial jobs to put myself through university, memorizing poetry and reading obsessively even when I should have been working. But I found it too difficult—financially and psychologically—to finish school. I eventually found some stability as a writer, and finally sought professional help. The first psychiatrist did not believe my story. He thought I was delusional and told me I was probably schizophrenic. I’ve always wondered how things might have gone if an adult had tried to help me. Perhaps I might have had a chance for a normal life. As it is, I’ve struggled with the long-term effects of complex trauma.

Meanwhile, Grenville continued to abuse children. A Brockville newspaper, the Recorder and Times, was ready to publish a story about the abuse in 1989, but it was quashed when the school got wind of it. In 1997, Farnsworth finally retired; he died in 2015 at age 83, denying everything to the end.

It was only in 2007, as rumours of abuse kept surfacing, that the OPP launched an investigation. Many former students reported feeling that the police were not on their side; when the OPP interviewed me, they accused me of lying about my story. In the end, they declined to press criminal charges. “It wasn’t in the interest of the public,” said Sergeant Kristine Rae in an interview with the Recorder and Times. “When you’re looking at historical allegations, you’re looking at the whole picture.”

The damage had been done, however. The school closed its doors in 2007, though it didn’t acknowledge the role of the investigation in its decision. “Changing demographics, declining enrolment and increasing operating costs have forced this decision upon us,” said then-headmaster Gordon Mintz at the time. (Mintz, meanwhile, had been ordained as an Anglican priest in 2001 and is now a chaplain in the Canadian Armed Forces.) The public exposure also encouraged hundreds of former students to come together on a now-defunct website called FACTNet, established as a forum for survivors from American cults to relate their experiences. It was incredibly cathartic—the first time many of us had spoken to others who had suffered at Grenville and the Community.

Our story finally reached the public eye thanks to the tireless efforts of Andrew Hale-Byrne. Andrew is a British citizen whose family sent him to Grenville in the late 80s for what they were promised was an elite education in a school that promoted traditional Anglican values. “I was told I had unconfessed sins that invited Satan to cause my dyslexia,” he says. “I was forced to undergo exorcisms in the chapel to rid me of the demons.”

Scared by his experiences at Grenville, outraged by the stories he heard from others, Andrew was doggedly determined to expose the abuse. He did extensive research and helped the Globe and Mail break the story a few weeks after the school closed. Then he retained a legal team, formed a class of 1,360 ex-students—including me—and launched a civil class-action suit. Named in the claim were the school and the estates of Al Haig and Charles Farnsworth. Andrew was the primary representative plaintiff.

In September 2019, after 12 long years of litigation, the class-action trial commenced in Ontario’s Superior Court of Justice. Our legal team argued that the defendants were systemically negligent and breached the duty of care and fiduciary duty it owed its students. We sought $200 million in compensation, along with $25 million in punitive damages. I sat in court for much of the five weeks with a rotating group of former students. We were there not only to bear witness to horrors past, but to make the case for the past’s insistent, debilitating and at times unendurable effect on our present lives.

The five weeks of trial revealed many instances of abuse, as well as an intense focus on sexual sins exquisitely tailored to destroy the natural sexual and emotional development of the pubescent teen. Andersens and Sorensen, unbeknownst to all of us at the Community, were lovers who nevertheless railed against homosexuality, saying they could “feel it in the Spirit” if a gay person walked onto the property. As a former member and United Church minister wrote in a sworn statement, the Mothers were so obsessed with what they considered deviant sexual practices that they forbade married couples from engaging in oral sex.

Always in mimetic rivalry, Farnsworth took the Mothers’ Christian sexual repression and guilt complex to an extreme level, preying sexually on students himself. One student, a staff child who was born at the school, recounted that Farnsworth constantly slut-shamed her and quizzed her on her sexual fantasies. Another former student testified how, after a classmate reported that the witness was gay, Farnsworth held 20 counselling sessions with him, calling him satanic and interrogating him about his sexuality. “I started to form this understanding in my mind that I was worse than a killer, and I was definitely going to hell,” he said. When the boy admitted that two neighbours had molested him as a child, Farnsworth was fascinated. “He wanted to know the age of the men who molested me, how frequently I was molested, where it occurred, what kind of sexual abuse. He wanted details.” Farnsworth informed the student that even as a young kid he had Satan in him—that he’d been running around all summer long in a Speedo, tempting these men to touch him. That Satan had a firm hold of this student even then, using this boy as temptation, a tool of evil. It wasn’t these men’s fault.
One paying student, Bradley Merson, told me about being light-sessioned several times by Farnsworth while naked. Another student testified that Farnsworth ran his hand up his leg and touched his penis. Two students described being injured and traumatized from excessive paddling. Once, when I was in Grade 7, Farnsworth saw me looking down a hallway—I think I had forgotten something. He accused me of having sexual thoughts toward the girls who were standing there. I was shocked and horribly ashamed to be accused of those things. I had not gone through puberty yet.

The legal team for Grenville and the estates of Farnsworth and Haig denied our claims in court. They argued that punishments were never abusive or imposed without justification. Furthermore, they insisted, Farnsworth did not foster an atmosphere of fear or intimidation, or isolate students from their families. The defendants also categorically denied that there was any “systemic campaign to promote and indoctrinate students in the teachings and practices of the Community of Jesus.” When Toronto Life wrote to the Community for response, their lawyer said that the lawsuit did not allege any wrongful conduct by the Community of Jesus or by anyone there. “The conduct that the author apparently alleges is said to have taken place some 700 miles from the Community of Jesus nearly 50 years ago,” he wrote. “No fair-minded person could expect comment about allegations about things that are said to have occurred a half-century ago in another country.”

The judgment finally came in February 2020. In her decision, Justice Janet Leiper clearly identified Grenville’s mission: to enforce on its students a way of living, using Community of Jesus practices, including violence, shame and humiliation for students who were insufficiently obedient, too haughty or too proud. She found that Grenville failed to meet the standard of care and ruled in the plaintiffs’ favour on every count. Her final conclusion is damning. “Grenville knowingly created an abusive, authoritarian and rigid culture which exploited and controlled developing adolescents who were placed in its care,” she wrote. “Some students ran away, hid or asked to be taken out of the school. Others were not believed or suffered in silence. I have concluded that the evidence of maltreatment and the varieties of abuse perpetrated on students’ bodies and minds in the name of the [Community of Jesus] values of submission and obedience was class-wide and decades-wide.” Her judgment will be followed by a separate trial for damages, although the defendants have appealed the ruling.

Grenville may be closed and dismantled, and the students finally granted their day in court, but the Community of Jesus in Cape Cod continues to operate. As late as 2000, Community leaders were writing to Grenville staff. Farnsworth, under the spiritual authority of Andersen and Sorensen, learned to follow their lead, surrounding himself with legitimators, acolytes, powerful patrons and supporters who would ensure he could do whatever he wanted.

Farnsworth’s son, Donald, who’s currently undertaking a divinity degree at Wycliffe College at U of T, objects to Justice Leiper’s decision. In conversations with Toronto Life’s fact-checking department, he said he had a fantastic time as a student at Grenville; he played basketball, ran track, acted in school plays. He acknowledged that Grenville was strict—he even admits that he once got the paddle—but he said that discipline helped him become a confident human being, and to acknowledge Jesus as his saviour. The same was true of the work-jobs, he said. The school had farm animals for a time, and Donald often had to wake up early to clean the barns. “It was quite a good experience for us to learn the value of manual labour,” he said. He admitted his father was “an authoritarian,” but insisted that he followed God and looked after the best interests of students and staff.

He disputes the abuse allegations, even though there were more than 1,300 plaintiffs. “Every single one of those allegations, when they claimed abusive behaviour, they were either embellished or totally made up,” he said. “And how do I know this? Because I was there. I was there the whole time.” He said the judge simply took the defendants’ word for what happened without external corroboration, and that most students would say they had a positive experience. Of the others—the “squeaky wheels,” as he calls them—he said: “This group had a few ringleaders with issues. And they might have had a terrible time at Grenville. Maybe we weren’t the right place for them. I don’t think we did anything to damage them, and we certainly didn’t do it intentionally.”

Despite the denials and repudiation, the successful trial against Grenville and the judge’s acknowledgment of the Community of Jesus’s influence have spurred me forward. I’m currently writing several other articles, and I’ve finished a book about my experience at Grenville and the Community. It was very different from my previous five books of poetry and art criticism—my research took me across Europe, where I visited every group that’s still associated with the Community. I reckon somebody has to do something for the children still inside.

None of the plaintiffs expect to get any damages—that’s not what the trial was about. We even learned that Grenville operated without insurance for 10 years, leaving many students, like me, with no possibility of restitution. But our brief day in court was enormously important. For me, the testimony of the expert witness, a psychologist and former psychology professor, about the degree of damage Grenville’s abuse caused, was an epiphany of sorts. That day, the courtroom was well-attended by former students, some of whom had flown in from across the country. Many were suddenly crying. Several had to leave the courtroom. For the first time, these former students heard someone in authority recognize that their suffering was real. For the first time, our voices were heard and believed.