

# Growing Up ADVENTIST



**We were  
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what does  
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now?**

# San Francisco Bay Blues: *Growing Up in Missional Adventism* | BY STERLING SPENCE

School and church taught me two contradictory views: think for yourself, and believe like us.

My parents were sailors, both licensed US Merchant Marine masters. They sailed by the stars without a GPS device and lived on a thirty-foot trimaran. In the 1970s, the two had fled out of the Golden Gate on the San Francisco winds, leaving behind the counter-culture of the sixties and the celebration of that

father had visions of the Bible, a book he hadn't read, opening in front of him, and a small voice urging him to look in the Gospels for answers. The two of them finally found what they were looking for in Australia from an Adventist pastor. They were baptized into the church and born to a new calling. They sold their boat and returned to the San Francisco Bay to birth me, and also a



*Snorkeling with my dad on the outer island of Onoun in Chuuk State.*

medical mission called Canvasback.

In one generation, my family went from being wild sea rats to raising me, a dyed-in-the-wool little Adventist boy.

I went to school at a K-12 Adventist academy; at ten years old (the age of enlightenment), I was dunked in the tepid water of our church's baptistry;

renaissance dancing around the funeral of the church. They were looking for God, but not the Christian God of stuffy America. They wanted answers for a new world, and so, for seven years, they went searching across the ocean.

During that time, they experienced the kind of miracles only found in the wilderness. They were caught in a hurricane and blown across the sea for twenty-three days. A little bird became an answer to prayer after it showed them the way home. My

and at sixteen I became a Pathfinder Master Guide. I suppose that makes me about as Adventist as you can get.

I wasn't converted by some Revelation crusade. I didn't choose my church. It was given to me as a gift, just like my identity as a San Francisco Bay Californian. That meant there was an unavoidable culture clash. San Francisco started the conversations of marriage equality and women's rights long before Adventism was even

ready to admit that there was such a thing as a gay man. This distance between contemporary and religious culture means that I, like many in my generation and in generations before, started wondering, from early on, whether or not I belong in this church. We were born Adventist; what does that make us now?

As far as I was concerned while growing up, all that Adventism had done for my parents was to make them boring. In their wedding photo, they were dressed in flowers, my dad has a shaggy beard, and my mother's hair reaches down to mid-thigh. It's a classic summer-of-love shot. Then Adventism hit, and the next thing you knew, my mom's hair was bobbed above her shoulders and she was dressed in an unholy dress-suit but-

toned up to the throat. Instead of sailing the open seas, they moved ashore and spent their days in an office building. They worked late and, in order to promote the mission, spent a lot of weekends traveling to churches.

Each Saturday I would be sitting in a foreign Sabbath School clutching a familiar *Primary Treasure*, hoping to make some single-Sabbath friends. It wasn't a lonely thing; I actually met people quite easily. We Adventists sure do love a good mission story, and my parents had plenty to tell. Canvasback sailed doctors out to remote islands in the Pacific, so there was always some adventure of running from storms or herding seasick doctors aboard to rush off to save lives. The best part for me was that I got to go along, and

then I could tell the stories. My head was filled with adventures.

During the school year, my folks would take me out of classes for a month at a time. I'd squeeze in workbook lessons between free-

diving and running around with kids in loin-cloths. I learned to gamble by playing rock-paper-scissors with little shells and bits of coral. And it was in this context of church and island that I was taught my faith.

Surrounded by conservative donors and thrill-seeking doctors, I learned the tenets of Sabbath keeping, pork avoidance, and the overarching demand to convert. I was taught "Missional Adventism," a version intent on proving its uniqueness. It placed huge importance on inter-

ventionist prayer because it came from situations where there was nothing we could do—like when the ship was out of water and all that was left to do was to pray for rain. It sought a personal God because service in a foreign culture can be very lonely work. Most of all, it found the great spiritual journey as the most important task of existence.

Whenever I returned home and the boredom of suburban life set in, I could turn to the adventure of my spiritual journey to feel as though I was doing something significant. Youth pastors and rallies used this adventure to market faith. We were told that it was supposed to be so exciting and important that we would ignore our raging hormones and deny the allure of the big



My mom cut off her long hair when she became a missionary. Our hairstyles match.

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city. Just like most teenagers I knew, I found that it only half worked. I struggled with the confines of the church.

Northern California Adventism isn't the Bible Belt, but it also isn't a base of radical creativity and questioning. The school and church taught me two contradictory views: think for yourself, and believe like us. As they tried to be progressive, the stifling tendencies hung as heavy as the combined weight of all the post-mortem publications of Ellen G. White writings. We academy kids were never sure where the boundaries were, but like good Adventists we only half-heartedly acted out, as if we were asking permission to rebel.

As I entered high school and started the questioning stage, I found that, despite growing up in this version of Christianity, it just wasn't how I experienced religion. I didn't hear God's voice, I didn't see the links people tried to point out between prayers and changes in the world, and

band, they came to our shows, which was excruciatingly embarrassing, but in hindsight, showed their support. So here's what confused me: the doors were open for me to walk away from the church. I didn't like Adventism. I would have told you I wanted out. But I didn't leave. I stayed in Pathfinders. I went on mission trips with my high school where I knew our humanitarian work only thinly disguised the motivation of baptizing teenagers. I played in the praise bands, and when the time came and I could have chosen any kind of school, I went to La Sierra University because it just felt right to stay Adventist.

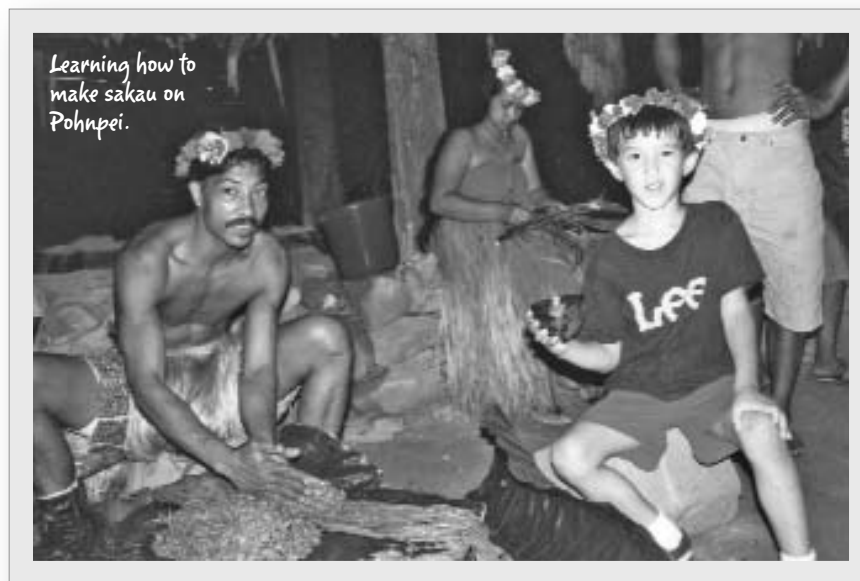
The problems I was running up against in my religion were rooted in my early experiences aboard the Canvasback ship. As much as we were a band of evangelist missionaries, we also offered something more desperately needed. When the ship docked in the transparent waters of the Micronesian lagoons and women came

out to the beach holding their babies, they weren't waiting for Bibles. Those islands had a 50-percent child mortality rate. They wanted help with the here and now.

I remember watching from the deck one day as my father came running full speed across the beach, his white Canvas-

back trucker hat flying off into the waves. A baby had been brought into the clinic near death, and we had supplies aboard that the doctors needed immediately. My dad was in his sixties then. We used to play baseball in the backyard, and he would only jog-walk around the bases. I'd never seen him run.

The image of him sprinting across the coral stuck with me through high school and cement-



I couldn't look at the people I met in the islands and believe that my worldview was better than theirs. I found myself a missionary kid who was unable to relate to the worldview of missionaries and, in a more general sense, the worldview of Adventism.

My parents weren't the over-sheltering type. They didn't cry if I decided not to go to church or to pierce an ear. When I started a punk rock

ed in my mind that the physical work we did was urgent. Though I had heard that the end times were upon us, we didn't run like that to church. The religion I had been taught was about another world outside of this one, a spiritual plane that could be tapped into with prayer and Bible study. I was starting to struggle with that vision. The world I saw was a tangible realm of poverty and sickness, and in the Gospels I was seeing a narrative of a God who entered into that reality and worked in the dirt.

I entered university fully hoping to lose the rest of my faith. I spent five years at La Sierra, one of which was as a student missionary in Micronesia. I was introduced to a political theology, one that was rooted in community involvement and liberation. The rat-infested basement of La Sierra Hall, where the offices of the great minds of Adventist theology were relegated, started to feel almost sacred. They turned me around. The academic culture I found was one where disagreement was all right. Adventism was less about conforming to a set of beliefs and more about a culture. We could discuss Adventism as liberating and hands-on while knowing full well that it wasn't those things in most churches. We could be Adventist and not agree with the General Conference. In fact, we could be Adventist and not agree with the pastor at our pulpit or even with each other. I was given an understanding of why I hadn't been able or willing to leave the church and a working answer for where I belonged.

For those of us who are born into our religion, it isn't just something voluntary; we don't choose to be Adventists. It is as much a part of us as our last name. Walking away wouldn't be like changing clubs; it would be like leaving a family, and in some ways, that's something you just can't do. My last name is Spence, and to be a Spence means that I grew up in a family that sailed across the ocean. It means that my Saturdays were spent in a church pew. It means that when I look at the world around me, I find that service is more important than doing whatever makes me happy. I might find that I relate to another

family more, or I might really dislike a cousin, but that doesn't mean I'm not a Spence. I can change my name and never talk to my relatives again, but that history will always be mine.

I see my discomfort and disagreement with Adventism in the same way. My thoughts are born and bred by Adventism. My disagreements



*Canvasback Missions used to invite folks to view the boat for fundraising. I had to get dressed up for this one on the Sacramento River.*

with religion are disagreements with Christianity as I perceive it, filtered through Adventist lenses. I was born to this; it made me who I am, and so I am an Adventist.

For an increasing number of us, staying or leaving isn't what makes us SDA. The cultural and political wars of the church will rage on. We will be proud some days and incredibly disappointed on others. Still, this can't take away our identity. Being Adventist is our birthright. So for me, I'm here for the long haul, and I suppose that's all right with me. ■

**Sterling Spence** graduated from La Sierra University with a



double major in management and religious studies. He now works at Canvasback Missions and is completing an MA program at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

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