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Continuity

1. Early in my life I learned that there was one thing that could kill a festive mood at a dinner party. And that was to talk about me; to talk about my life, my life as the daughter of a cult leader.
2. There was very little that was jovial or light hearted about the first 28 years of my life. So I avoided that topic at all costs. It was too painful. And nobody could understand. So I became a master at diverting attention, diverting the conversation onto somebody else, but not me. I so rarely talked about my life that, on the rare occasion when I would slip, and somebody would kind of push for me to divulge...I couldn't just casually and comfortably share it, I would vomit the story, and it would go something like this.
3. Well, I grew up outside of Chicago, and my dad pastored, actually a wonderful church there, that through the years evolved into a 50,000-member cult. It operated and still operates under the guise of an Independent Fundamental Baptist church, but those who have left, the followers who have tried to leave, the outsiders, even the media, it was on 20/20 last year, have recognized that it is clearly a cult.
4. Every member was in complete obedience to my father. They didn't dare disagree or be disloyal, for fear of being publicly ridiculed, or punished, or banished for doing so. They didn't go on a vacation without asking my dad's permission, and if he had said to "drink the Kool-Aid" I'm not kidding, they would have.
5. My dad lived a double life: one of a righteous family man, and dynamic speaker in the public eye; but one of sordid sexual secrets privately. Secrets that only my siblings, and me, and my mom knew. He hated my mom; hated her; treated her terribly; abused her and even turned his own children against our mother. We hated her. He told us she was crazy. We thought to make him happy, we'd hate her too.
6. Our home was filled full of turmoil, hatred, stress, strife, and as a little girl, it was isolating, it was intense, and it was frightening. He had affairs. He had a mistress for many years, the wife of a Sunday School teacher. [He] built her family a beautiful home right around the corner from our house. You could see their family from our back door. It was, it was craziness living one way, preaching another.

7. My brother (my older brother) he became another version of my father. He took a, he pastured a church in Texas; was found to have been having affairs with 14 different women. Ah, divorced that current wife [and] married one of the 14. My father tried desperately to cover it up; moved him to another church where he was found to have had 17 affairs with different women, and he had just recreated what he had seen my dad live. And my dad did nothing but cover it up.
8. I felt like I had one main responsibility as a child. It was simple but daunting; and that was to keep all the secrets. There were so many. You see he had taught us that the best way to please God was to please him because he was God's man. And he taught us that to please him, we *had* to keep all the secrets. We could never even tell our best friends what went on in our home because we might be the cause of the destruction of his ministry.
9. I literally feared my very life if I ever talked about my dad's ministry or about what went on in our home, for fear that it would hurt his ministry. I was so afraid. And the greater the secrets the greater the fear, and the greater my determination to keep quiet.
10. I gott'a tell ya, the money part of it was pretty nice. As a kid, I mean think about it: tithes and offerings from 50,000 people. Hello! It created a lavish life style for our family. My father owned most of the city where the church was. He owned a college, two high schools, two grade schools, a cemetery, lots of buildings; he was very wealthy. And even into our adult years, he owned *us*. He owned our homes, our cars, our furniture, he owned our lives and we didn't dare cross him because we were too afraid we'd lose everything.
11. He died a multi-millionaire. He left nothing to his children. He left everything to the organization, which my younger sister and her husband now lead. And they still perpetuate his legacy: the strict rules, the undying loyalty, and they still try to keep all the secrets.
12. I *never* understood why was I the only one of the four kids, so tortured by the hypocrisy; so disturbed by the mind control over thousands and thousands of people and so determined to find a better life. Why was I the only one that insisted on answers to my questions. And, why was I the only one that ultimately broke away and cut ties with the brain washing, the oppression, the fear, the secrets, and the life that had never been my life.
13. I finally walked away when I was about 28 years of age, then being estranged from my entire family. And I did not see my family again until many years later at my dad's funeral. Ok see what I mean? Not a story to share at a dinner party. I really got to the point after I left them and I couldn't talk about me. For one thing, who would understand. For

- another thing, it was too hard. It hurt too bad. So I made a mental note, and permanent marker that said “must never talk about my life” and for many years I didn’t. I couldn’t. However, wonderful things have happened through the years since I was in therapy. A lot of therapy, deprogramming; freedom from the mind control, and I began to heal and learn and accept, and forgive.
14. And even learn to be thankful for that bizarre life that I have because I realized I was learning some amazing lessons from not only being there, but for having the guts to leave. And I now have values that are deeply carved in my very soul from that experience. Values you don’t get from reading a book or from a workshop, or from another person. Values that are only this deeply engraved when you’ve lived what I lived.
 15. Because my dad was a cult leader, I now embrace three values and no one will ever take these away from me. The first one is freedom. Freedom to explore my own interests. Freedom to live within my own value system. Freedom to determine my own value system. Freedom to believe what I believe, and never stifle what I believe. Freedom to disagree. Freedom to ask questions, and to require honest answers. Freedom to learn who I am and freedom to love who I am.
 16. The second value was truth. I learned pretty quickly that I wasn’t going to be very free until I dealt with what was true, and that was hard for me. Truth was a scary word for me, because, I mean my entire life, I had never been allowed to speak of what went on in our home.
 17. I had never told even my best friends what went on in our house. Being truthful was one of the scariest things I could think of. I learned that secrets grow in the dark, but when exposed in the light of truth they start to lose their power.
 18. Mary Vernon, my dear amazing therapist in Dallas, Texas, who nurtured me, and who loved me through years and years of healing; she used to say to me, “Linda, you are only as sick as your secrets. You are only as sick as your secrets.” So I stopped keeping secrets. And as scared as I was in my late 20’s I finally began to deal with what was true. I finally began to speak what was true and eventually learned to live openly only in truth.
 19. And the third value is courage. Did you know that actually can’t have freedom or truth if you have no courage. Courage is a requirement for both. You may desire to live in complete freedom and complete truth, but if you’re lacking courage you will live in neither one.
 20. In my late 20’s I had a tiny shred of courage. Not much. It was all I needed because my desire to live and be free and honest was so great that that teeny shred of courage that I had was enough to allow me to walk

away. I have a plaque on my desk that I have had for years and it's gone with me everywhere I've ever moved. It says, "the secret to happiness is freedom, and the secret to freedom is courage." And that resonated with me.

21. I know I wasn't going to be happy unless I was free, but I knew I wasn't going to be free unless I could muster up some courage to get out of there. I had to cling to, and act upon that tiny shred of courage in order to finally leave a cult; the only friends I'd ever known; my childhood connections; my history; my family. Knowing that in doing so, I would finally have what I had longed for my entire life, and that was freedom [and] truth.
22. Freedom, truth, courage: three words that may be kind of trite and over used by some people. To me, they are the air that I breathe; values upon which I insist on living and loving in my life. Oh, and one other thing that I actually now value? Sharing my story. Talking about me. Who would have thought. I now recognize that it's in sharing my story that I can so passionately share with you my values. Values gained for 28 years at an emotional prison that kept my heart under lock and key and kept my mind from knowing what, what I knew. You know I sometimes wonder if perhaps living in the absence of our values is what can most clearly determine what indeed our values are, and for me I really believe that the absence of and the denial of, created the presence of. For so many years, I was denied freedom truth and courage. And now, I will never let them go.
23. Not to worry. You're still not going to find me at a dinner party talking about my childhood. Not gonna happen. You won't find me sitting around elaborating over my father who took a wonderful church and turned it into a 50,000 member cult. I still know that's a mood killer. I get it. But you will find me here, and at other appropriate settings, especially if I can help somebody talking about my life with sincere gratitude for all that I've learned, in spite of and because of living in the absence of freedom, truth, and courage, and thank God, I now have, I know am, all three.
24. Thank you.
25. [applause]