

## ***An Embarrassment of Riches: Paradoxes of Growing up Pentecostal***

A Book Proposal by Diane Awbrey

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### **Purpose**

In *An Embarrassment of Riches*, Diane Awbrey explores the quirks and eccentricities of her counter-cultural Pentecostal upbringing and unearths rich teachings and practices that—in spite of legalism and fear—built a strong foundation for faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This memoir challenges others who may have had similar embarrassing or painful childhoods in Christian fundamentalist traditions to reconsider the basis of their faith, or their rejection of it, and look beyond the legalistic surface for the truths and practices that celebrate humanity, diversity, and beliefs shared by Christians across many historical movements.

### **Audience/Readership**

*An Embarrassment of Riches* is intended for people interested in personal spiritual journeys. Although it may appeal most to readers who were raised in fundamental or legalistic Christian traditions who have since struggled with questions about those experiences, any reader interested in the life journey of another human being may be interested in it.

### **Length and Tone**

*An Embarrassment of Riches* is organized in five sections with a total of 20 chapters, roughly 1,800 – 2,000 words per chapter. The tone of the book is reflective, sometimes humorous, and engaging.

### **Title Comparisons:**

Lauren Winner, *Girl Meets God*

Rhoda Janzen,

*Mennonite in a Little Black Dress*,

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*

### **An Embarrassment of Riches is . . .**

Similar, but within, not across, religious traditions.

Not instigated by personal crisis, rather based on reflection and observation over time

Similar in reflection and meditation on meaning; different in that the focus is less on Awbrey as protagonist and more on lessons learned in reflection; also, not a rejection of the tradition but a reasoning with it.

### **About the Author**

Diane Awbrey teaches at Evangel University, the Assemblies of God's flagship liberal arts university, where she specializes in British Literature. Born a fourth generation Pentecostal, Awbrey was raised by Assemblies of God ministers. Her father was a district superintendent and a general presbyter. Her mother led the National Women's Ministries department and spoke nationally and internationally for the church. After graduating from Evangel, Awbrey drifted in and out of the Pentecostal movement. Her path included graduate studies in literature (University of Missouri, M.A. 1984, Ph.D. 1995), a two-year missions assignment in Brussels, Belgium, teaching appointments at not only an A/G Bible School but also Quaker and Roman Catholic colleges, and as a deacon in an "open and affirming" Congregational church in Burlington, Vermont. She is married to a cradle Episcopalian journalist. They reside in Springfield, Missouri.

### **Marketing Strategies and Potential Endorsers**

The recent publication of Mary Karr's *Art of Memoir* draws attention to memoir as a literary genre. But spiritual memoir has been popular at least since the writing of Augustine's *Confessions*. Pentecostalism is one of the fastest-growing Protestant communities in the world. However, the experience of many of the themes in *Embarrassment of Riches*—emotionalism, legalism, literalism, celebrity, and apocalyptic thinking—are recognizable among other church traditions and should resonate with readers outside the Pentecostal bubble.

## Potential Endorsers

Scott Cairns, poet, Seattle-Pacific University

Barry H. Corey, Biola University President, author of *Love Kindness*, Tyndale, 2016

Warren Farha, Eighth Day Books Proprietor

Marla Konrad, World Vision Communications Director, Canada

Jonathan Merritt, blogger, author, and commentator on culture/religion

Martin Mittelstadt, Program Chair, Society for Pentecostal Studies

Clare Vanderpool, Newbery and Printz Award Winner

George O. Wood, former General Superintendent, Assemblies of God

Gregory Wolfe, *Image: A Journal of Art and Faith*, Editor

## Working Table of Contents

### Section 1: [Don't] Check Your Mind at the Door: Emotionalism

The most recognizable element of Pentecostalism is the emotionally charged services. This chapter details my early personal experiences with key Pentecostal milestones, salvation, water baptism, and baptism in the Holy Spirit (speaking in tongues). Although many Christians criticize emotional churches for shallowness, the emotionalism impressed on me not only the value of a personal relationship with God but also that of relationships among Christians. In some ways, James K. A. Smith's recent exploration of desire is a return to the best of the emotionalism in my tradition.

### Section 2: To the Pure, All Things Are Mostly "Impure": Legalism

The Pentecostalism of the 1960s and 1970s remained culturally separate from the mainstream. I spent my entire childhood and teenage years explaining to non-Pentecostal friends why I couldn't attend school dances or go to movies with them during sleepovers. On the other hand, this cultural separation weakened the call of the crowd to me and strengthened my own sense of personal responsibility when faced in adulthood with decisions about drinking, sexuality, and other popular cultural practices.

### Section 3: All You Know is not All There Is: Literalism

Literalism takes many forms. One is the tendency to look at the world singularly—only one way of living is "correct," only one interpretation of the text is possible, only those who believe as we do will make it to heaven. Another version is to read Scripture literally and take only its surface meanings as the inspired truth. The antidote? Learning the interplay of literal and figurative language in Scripture and even in the words of Jesus. Looking for that one and only way to do or be leads to perfectionism in which the notion of "perfect" translates as "never failing at anything." The upshot of this thinking is that every mistake, every missed goal, every dropped opportunity feels like moral failure. Often, this kind of thinking emphasizes scarcity over plenitude and eventually arrogance over humility.

### Section 4: White Shoes and Worship Bands: Celebrity Culture

For all their separatist tendencies, Pentecostals reflect much of the larger culture in their celebration of celebrity. The rise of Hollywood's influence on mainstream culture was mirrored in our church through the celebration of high-profile pastors and televangelists. In the most publicly embarrassing episode in A/G history, the fall of major TV preachers had less of an effect on me than the steady demonstration of those in leadership around me that being called to something requires commitment and diligence but delivers rewards unmatched by fame or wealth. Service, not celebrity, was the lasting message of my experience with Assemblies of God ministers, teachers, and missionaries whom I still revere today.

### Section 5: An Eye on the Prize: Apocalyptic Fear

Fear was a common motivating factor in salvation messages and behavior modification in my childhood. Where will you be when Jesus comes? What will you be doing? Will you be taken in the Rapture? Underneath all the fear mongering, global conspiracy theories, and apocalyptic predictions, however, pulsed an expectation for the miraculous to burst into the mundane at any moment. Although living in constant expectation (dare I say fear?) of the Second Coming could be overwhelming at times, it bred a habit of keeping an eye on long-term, eternal values in spite of the constant distractions of the present.

## Conclusion

I am a living paradox, a walking amalgam of the legalistic, spontaneous, emotionalism of my Pentecostal upbringing, and the thoughtful, literary, more sacramental worldview of my adulthood. I find deep value in my Pentecostal roots; I would not be who I am or where I am in Christ without them. So this is not the story of a rejection of one tradition in favor of another as if life required an "either/or" choice. Instead, I see it as an embracing of the "both/and" of a paradox: seemingly contradictory life-shaping realities that both turn out to be true.

***An Embarrassment of Riches:  
Paradoxes of Growing up Pentecostal  
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# ***An Embarrassment of Riches: Paradoxes of Growing up Pentecostal***

***Diane Awbrey***

***2018 Draft***

## **Introduction**

A high-pitched wail like the long screech from a tea kettle in full boil pierced the silence. It came from the pew directly in front of us. My friend Georgia gasped, jumped, and gripped my knee with her hand, her manicured nails digging into my skin. Georgia and I had met in graduate school a couple of years before, and we had linked up in St. Louis this particular weekend for a mini-reunion. We were attending a college choir concert in an Assemblies of God church in St. Louis featuring students from the Bible school where I was on faculty. The choir had just finished a throaty and sombre rendition of “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” and a holy hush had settled on the crowd assembled in the mid-1980s pie-shaped auditorium.

Overpowered by the Presence in the room, the middle-aged woman in front of us, in her pink and blue polyester print dress and mousy brown bouffant hair, shook a wrinkled hanky over her head, trilling and wailing in joyful, babbling ecstasy. For me, a fourth-generation Pentecostal, this response, although not typical, was not startling. For Georgia, an Eastern Orthodox Christian, the surprise nearly knocked her off the pew. And then the worst happened: We got the giggles. Hers from embarrassment and surprise; mine from seeing the absurdity of such an outburst as it must appear to her.

As the daughter of a Pentecostal preacher, I had been in more raucous services than a choir concert in St. Louis. And from all accounts, the experiences I had had were tame compared to those in the “old days” of my Pentecostal parents and grandparents. In their experience, people survived falling on hot stoves in the center of a sawdust-strewn tent or knocking their heads on rough-hewn benches as they were slain in the Spirit and fell to the ground in a trance-like state. Jericho

marches—with much waving and shouting as the congregation trooped around the sanctuary— healing lines, and testimony services were the norm. Most services I had attended included at least one person shouting: the preacher under the anointing, a little old lady like the one who had felt the Spirit come upon her in St. Louis, or a song leader exuberantly leading “I’ll Fly Away” or “Power in the Blood.” In every service, during prayer time, every person in the congregation vied for God’s attention through vigorously loud prayer in English and in indecipherable syllables known as “praying in tongues.” Pentecostalism, at its core, is an emotion-charged tradition.

At the turn of the century, my great-grandmother Clara Musgrove (d. 1927) encountered the Baptism in the Holy Spirit in early “revivals” on the dusty plains of Western Kansas. Charles Parham’s 1901 revival in Topeka, Kansas, spread like prairie fire through the state, and several pockets of “Holy Rollers,” as they were called, had sprung up in rural communities. Aimee Semple McPherson preached and healed her way across the state, and several small churches of other traditions, including my great-grandmother’s Church of the Brethren, felt the spark of Pentecost kindle their congregations.

As soon as Great-grandma Clara was thoroughly converted, she began to pray for her son Berry. Lean-faced and spare-framed, Berry was a liquor-drinkin’, woman chasin’ gambler. His wife Lutie had died in childbirth, and he had reverted to what the Pentecostals called the distractions of “the world.” When his mother Clara invited a local school teacher, Ruby Hays, to attend church with her, however, the Holy Spirit may have found a chink in his armor of resistance.

Ruby (1906 – 1984) was the youngest of the 23 children of James Hays, the last daughter of his second wife. Her father was 51 when she was born. Her mother died when she was 12, and her father, James, when she was 14. Petted and spoiled by older siblings, Ruby was befriended by Clara Musgrove. Clara’s son, Berry, who lived in the same boarding house as Ruby, encouraged the relationship between the women but dragged his feet on attending church, still angry with a God who had allowed his first wife to die.

Regularly, faithfully, and loudly, in her Pentecostal way, his mother prayed for him. Early in the mornings, on his way from the bar to his room at a boarding house, he passed his mother's small-frame bungalow. Sometimes, he could hear through the open window her pleas to God for his salvation. Although he had been out most of the night, drinking and carousing, and was just heading home to sleep, his mother was up early, pleading with God for his lost soul. Eventually the Holy Spirit found His way into Berry's heart. When he finally relented and prayed the sinner's prayer, my Grandpa Berry was instantly delivered from his addictions to alcohol, gambling, and womanizing and called into full-time ministry. In 1925, he and my Grandma Ruby married.

Thus began my family's journey with Pentecostalism. Berry and Ruby had six children: Leota, Robert, Derald, Marva, Donny and Roger. My parents, Derald Musgrove and Peggy Collins, both children of the depression and too young to participate in World War II, were raised on prairie revivalism in Pentecostal homes. They met at Central Bible Institute in Springfield, Missouri, preparing for ministry in the Assemblies of God. They graduated and married in the summer of 1951, spending their honeymoon as church camp counselors on opposite sides of the camp ground. This is true Christian commitment!

By the time my sister and I joined the family, my dad had become a youth leader in the Kansas District Council of the Assemblies of God, where he and mom would eventually serve a total of 39 years in ministry at every level of district leadership. All we knew, growing up, was church on Sunday morning, church on Sunday night, church on Wednesday night, and youth group as often as we could manage to congregate. Our church calendar held two major events a year: five weeks of summer camp in June and July and youth convention at Thanksgiving. Every two years, we made the trek with thousands of others to General Council, the biennial business meeting for the whole fellowship. My formative years pre-date the Charismatic Renewal of the 1970s, so my earliest experiences resonate deeply with both the enthusiasms and the excesses of early Pentecostalism.

Because we were so entrenched in the inner workings of the fellowship, I came to accept many practices of the faith without question. I had only one close non-A/G friend in grade school. I

balanced my church friends with my non-church friends in high school, and eventually, I became an undergraduate at an A/G college. Although I sometimes questioned certain practices of our tradition, usually when I couldn't go to school dances or run to the latest movie with my school friends, I generally found the Pentecostal world I lived in a happy, safe, and nurturing place to thrive. I experienced a richness of spiritual teachings, social variety, and to a certain extent some cultural diversity through the stories and experiences of missionaries.

But in graduate school, I finally began to see the world from the point of view of those outside the movement. For the first time in my life, I would introduce myself without expecting to hear the familiar, "Musgrove, huh? Is your dad . . ."? In fact, I realized I had developed a hitch between my names during introductions. "Hi, my name is Diane (*wait for it, wait for it . . .*) Musgrove," because inevitably the questions of family lineage would begin. At the University of Missouri, no one—absolutely no one—had ever heard of my dad, nor did they care that he was a minister. Slowly, I began to see how people outside the bubble that had been my Pentecostal upbringing viewed our insular world. Thus, at that St. Louis concert, my friend Georgia's unfiltered reaction to the Pentecostal message in tongues gave me a rare glimpse into what we must look like to others.

To outside eyes, I discovered, Pentecostal practices of my childhood were embarrassing. Boisterous singing, shouting, preaching, weeping and noisy altar services—to outsiders, these are the practices of people who lack control, rationality, dignity. My high school friend, Cindy, raised in the formal, hushed tones of Congregationalism, finally confessed (40 years later) her revulsion and fear when she attended her first Pentecostal service with me. Yes, the tradition was fraught with emotionalism, legalism, anti-intellectualism, celebrity worship, and an outdated, fear-driven dispensationalism. In spite of these deficiencies, it is the rich and fertile ground in which my love of God, my faith in Christ, and my joy in literature, music, and other intellectual pursuits were allowed to grow. After much reflection, rejection, and rumination on the practices of my childhood faith

tradition, I find that truth runs like a nutritious vein of truffles throughout the roots of my Pentecostal heritage.

Today I hold a Ph.D. in Renaissance literature. I'm married to an Episcopalian journalist (try to guess which of *those* monikers my parents were most skeptical of). Although at one time or another I have attended almost every type of Christian church —Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Church of Christ, Quaker, Congregational—I have never really left my Pentecostal roots. After all that wandering, I find myself back in the heartland of the Assemblies of God teaching at an Assemblies of God university where I try to instill in my students the value of their Christian faith integrated with the highest of liberal arts ideals.

The question is how did I get here? How did I make the transition from growing up in a Pentecostal preacher's home to achieving an advanced degree in literature from a secular university without casting aside my denominational birth certificate or losing my faith?

The answer for me came not from rejecting my faith or cultural upbringing but by processing it. Like hunting for truffles in the gnarly roots and matted underbrush of a European forest, I found the delectable truths in my Pentecostal upbringing lying under the loam of 30 years of constant changes in church practice, layers of literary forays, and my own trekking in and out of the tradition. Although I may not always attend an intentionally Pentecostal church or fully practice my faith within a Pentecostal community, I find the foundations of my faith have been well-nurtured in the full gospel of Pentecostalism.

A series of paradoxes informed my intellectual and spiritual development. Where others saw emotionalism, I discovered relationship; where others saw legalism, I found liberty in obedience; where others encountered anti-intellectualism, I received a reverence for words and the Word; where others promoted celebrity, I learned humility; where others panhandled fear, I learned the practical wisdom of faith, hope, and love. A rich inheritance indeed. The narrative of that journey lies within the pages of this book.