

A Project of Homeschool Alumni Reaching Out

Here's What Joshua Dolezal Wrote About His and Rachel Dolezal's Christian Fundamentalist Upbringing

Posted on June 17, 2015 by R.L. Stollar 13 comments



By R.L. Stollar, HA Community Coordinator

As I wrote yesterday, we are covering Rachel Dolezal's situation because she is a homeschool alumna. She grew up in what New York Daily News described as a "strict, cult-like Christian family."

(<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/rachel-dolezal-grew-strict-christian-family-book-article-1.2260238>) As reported by both the Coeur d'Alene Press and the New York Times, Rachel was homeschooled (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/us/rachel-dolezal-nbc-today-show.html>) through Christian Liberty Academy

(http://www.cdapress.com/news/local_news/article_385adfeb-76f3-5050-98b4-d4bf021c423f.html?mode=jqm). Her father, Larry Dolezal, worked for Creation Ministries International and was charged in 1999 with felony theft though the charges were later dismissed

(http://missoulian.com/uncategorized/judge-tosses-charges-against-former-lincoln-county-official/article_c63c8743-8ccc-5228-87ff-b0066a53bd99.html).

I have also heard testimonies from numerous homeschool alumni who grew up knowing the Dolezal family that frequent and significant child abuse occurred in the family. The parents allegedly forced both Rachel and her older, biological brother Joshua to beat their younger, adopted siblings with plumbing supply line and two foot long glue sticks, a practice inspired by Michael and Debi Pearl's book, (<https://homeschoolersanonymous.wordpress.com/tag/to-break-down-a-child-pearl-style-discipline-week/>) To Train Up a Child (<https://homeschoolersanonymous.wordpress.com/tag/to-break-down-a-child-pearl-style-discipline-week/>). (Forced sibling-to-sibling corporal punishment (<https://homeschoolersanonymous.wordpress.com/2013/09/17/sibling-v-sibling-giving-the-child-the-rod-libby-annes-story/>) is sadly not uncommon in some homeschooling circles.) Such a practice conjures up troubling images of Larry and Carri Williams, another homeschooling family that abused to death their adopted child (http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/11/hana_williams_the_tragic_death_of_a_n_ethiopian_adoptee_and_how_it_could.html), Hana. According to my sources, infant spanking (in public in their church parking lot, even) and blanket training (<https://homeschoolersanonymous.wordpress.com/2015/05/20/blanket-training-is-about-adults-not-children/>) were also common in the Dolezal family. Additionally, Rachel's adopted brother Izaiah Dolezal has himself raised public allegations against his parents (<http://www.nbcrightnow.com/story/29310159/new-information-about-spokane-naacp-president>) involving physical punishment, forced labor, and isolation in out-of-state group homes. With this background in mind, now comes the latest development in the Rachel Dolezal saga: Dolezal's older brother Joshua is awaiting trial on charges he sexually abused a black child. Insinuations have been made (http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/06/16/rachel-dolezals-brother-author-joshua-dolezal-faces-trial-for-alleged-sexual-abuse-of-a-black-child/?tid=pm_pop_b) that the parents spoke up now to retaliate against Rachel's attempts to get her brother charged for abuse.

While this whole situation is a mess, it is interesting to note that several of Rachel's claims have been corroborated by Joshua, the older brother who now stands accused of sexual abuse. In 2014, Joshua Dolezal wrote a memoir entitled *Down from the Mountaintop: From Belief to Belonging*. Its description is as follows:

A lyrical coming-of-age memoir, *Down from the Mountaintop* chronicles a quest for belonging. Raised in northwestern Montana by Pentecostal homesteaders whose twenty-year experiment in subsistence living was closely tied to their faith, Joshua Dolezal experienced a childhood marked equally by his parents' quest for spiritual transcendence and the surrounding Rocky Mountain landscape. Unable to fully embrace the fundamentalism of his parents, he began to search for religious experience elsewhere: in baseball, books, and weightlifting, then later in migrations to Tennessee, Nebraska, and Uruguay.

In his memoir, Joshua recounts growing up in the Dolezal's conservative, Pentecostal home and church. He recounts a raging father, a mother with extreme suspicions of medicine and doctors, home-birthing with birth certificates listing Jesus as witness to the births, and much more. He also

recounts — which is relevant considering the aforementioned history of sibling physical punishment and the Pearls — a desire as a teacher to beat his students with a cane. He also seems to believe his sister's sanity when it comes to allegations of domestic violence against her ex-husband.

The following excerpts from the memoir stood out due to their relevance to the recent developments in the Rachel Dolezal saga:

1. Larry and Ruthanne Dolezal are “radical Christians” who associated themselves with the Jesus People.

If you were to ask these men and women what creed they follow, they would say they go where the Spirit leads. Ask them to define this

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-07-13-am.png>)

Spirit, they might speak of the groundswell of faith in San Francisco when hippies began calling themselves the Jesus People, touting radical Christian faith. Some of the men and women in this room would remember similar groups cropping up in Seattle, branching out along the highways and dirt roads to small towns like Troy. My parents would remember this. They would

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-07-21-am.png>)

2. The church Joshua and Rachel grew up in was a conservative Pentecostal one, emphasizing speaking in tongues.

Our church was the kind with loud preaching and tambourines jingle-jangling through the worship service. We gathered in an abandoned Forest Service building on a hill overlooking Troy, a space we shared with the Catholic church, which met early in the morning and dispersed an hour before we arrived to set up a hundred metal folding chairs facing a piano and a screen where the words to our worship songs appeared, magnified and bathed in light. It was there I learned about revival meetings where a woman with the gift of tongues might speak in Chinese, not understanding a word coming out of her own mouth, learning after

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-10-14-am.png>)

the service that a man from the Sichuan Province had heard God speaking directly to him, in his native dialect, in her voice. It was frightening to imagine the voice of God rumbling through my own vocal chords. It seemed like a superpower, a way for the body to feel proof of what the soul believed. I clapped and sang along with the others, waiting for the Spirit to take possession of me, but this seemed beyond my strength, like the games of catch in the backyard, where I could never quite throw hard enough.

The sermons at the Troy Christian Fellowship were much like my father's coaching, impatient with mediocrity, constantly calling me to higher living. One morning the preacher worked himself into a sweat, pacing before us as if the church were a giant dugout, our buttocks clenched against the hard chairs. There was no stage, and he was not a tall man, but he seemed to tower above us. His text was the book of Exodus, where God delivers the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and calls Moses up Mount Sinai to receive the commandments the people are to live by. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," the preacher quoted

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-10-21-am.png>)

from memory, his voice rising to a shout as he finished the verse, “for I the Lord thy God am a *jealous* God.” He stopped to let the words sink in, a vein bulging from his shiny forehead as he stared us down. He went on to tell how even as Moses stood on the mountain receiving the bedrock of Hebrew law directly from the mouth of God, the people grew impatient and melted their own earrings and made a golden calf, which they worshiped as their liberator.

“Imagine,” the preacher hissed, his voice fallen into a whisper. “Imagine yourself as a father who has brought up his child in the truth, only to watch him turn away, only to watch him destroy his life at the card table or cast all his passion into gathering riches or grow so proud with learning that he says, ‘There is no God.’” The preacher clutched his Bible to his chest and crouched as if he’d caught a hard grounder in the groin.

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-10-28-am.png>)

3. Both Joshua and Rachel were home-birthed; her parents did live in a tipi and desired to isolate their children from the outside world.

My mother grew up without a television, and when she and my father married, living in a tipi for a year before building a house on the land they purchased on a mountain overlooking Troy, they shared a vision of home as a refuge from the outside world. My sister was born there, delivered by my father, as I had been. In our living room the couch

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-12-14-am.png>)

4. Homesteading and Pentecostalism in the Dolezal family date back several generations.

Pentecostalism in my family began with my great-grandfather J. L. Mussell, who homesteaded in the sagebrush near Nampa, Idaho, and pastored an Assembly of God church where sheep ranchers and sugar-beet farmers and their hired men gathered. One of them was my grandfather Rupert, a

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-14-45-am.png>)

5. Larry and Ruthann believed in faith healing and were anti-medicine and anti-doctor.

mother stitched on my grandmother's sewing machine. With their faith blazing strong, my parents thought nothing could go wrong.

But after summer turned to fall, my mother miscarried and nearly hemorrhaged to death. She wanted no meddling doctors, no false priests. If it was God's will she should die, then so it must be. My mother grew so weak she could no longer open her eyes, her jaw fallen slack and ashen. She recalls lying beneath a bloodstained blanket, right up against the void, ready to yield if it was her time.

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-15-29-am.png>)

6. Joshua Dolezal grew up reading Frank Peretti and was worried about being demonically possessed.

show. I'd been raised to think of faith in masculine terms, as a holy struggle. For years I was haunted by the Armageddon films I'd seen in Bible studies, cars abandoned on the highway after the rapture, Soviet soldiers marching into American towns and breaking down doors to slaughter families in cold blood when they refused to renounce their beliefs. My parents bought Frank Peretti's Christian thrillers *This Present Darkness* and *Piercing the Darkness* and I read

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-17-10-am.png>)

with amazement about angels and devils battling unseen in the air around us. One demon was described as a vulture sitting atop a woman's head, its talons sunk deep into her brain as she unknowingly did its bidding. Even though I didn't believe the world really worked that way, it was a difficult image to shake, and I sometimes found myself watching my teachers, imagining birds of prey clutching their skulls. Then again, how would I know if my own brain were seized by a demon? Even in everyday life the stakes seemed high.

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-17-19-am.png>)

7. Larry Dolezal flew into rages.

If I knew my father was working outside, I often spread my quilt on the cement floor in the space between my bed and the freezers, where I could lie hidden from sight. Once, after peering through the windows to my room while I was hiding in the crevice, my father searched the entire house, hoping to enlist me in spreading a truckload of horse manure over the garden. Stymied, he finally barged through my door curtain in a rage that left him speechless when he found me on the floor in my pajama pants reading *White Fang*. Towering over me, his face nearly purple with anger, he gasped that I was to stop dillydallying, get dressed right now, and come make myself useful. In time I would learn

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-18-11-am.png>)

8. Joshua Dolezal claims that his parents claimed "Jesus Christ" as the witness on his birth certificate. He was born at home with neither doctor nor midwife present. And his parents adopted four children to be more "pro-life."

My mother sometimes called me a survivor of the holocaust on the unborn, since I was born after *Roe vs. Wade*. Her distrust of clinicians was so strong I was born at home, without a physician or midwife and only my father and the one witness noted on my birth certificate—Jesus Christ—to see me through. Near the end of my senior year, my parents adopted the first of four children, determined to show their commitment to the pro-life cause, and I joined the crusade. It seemed simple: life began at conception; any attempt to thwart it was murder. One day in an effort to get

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-19-31-am.png>)

9. While teaching a sixth grade class, Joshua “longed for a good stiff cane” to beat his students.

the carpet. Once I gripped him by the shoulder and led him out into the common room, his cowlick bobbing as we walked, his buckteeth pressed into his lower lip in the usual smirk. When I pointed at the floor, he slouched against the stone wall and pretended to read. I returned to the others and had nearly quieted them when Effinger let out his goofy laugh and pointed toward the windowed door. Sebastian had flattened his nose

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-21-56-am.png>)

and tongue against the glass, his eyes crossed and both hands waving from his ears. I longed for a good stiff cane.

But this was a progressive school, and I used the full range of nonviolent discipline. Some days I withheld recess. If that

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-22-03-am.png>)

10. While teaching a sixth grade class, Joshua threw a student against a wall.

As soon as I had coached one pair back on task, the others had run amok. I had no new threats to give and searched myself in vain for new rewards. Even Nacho and Martín, two students I could usually count on, were laughing. "I can't help it, teacher," Nacho said. "It's a *fracaso*." At that moment Gadea yelled again in pain, and before I could think I had Sebastian by the ear, lifting him from his stool and jerking him across the room—*owww, owww*—where I threw him against the wall, stuck my finger in his face, and hissed, "I've had enough of your crap for a lifetime."

His face crumpled. The others fell silent as he sobbed. I got

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-23-32-am.png>)

11. While Joshua and Rachel were children, their mother Ruthanne disappeared to flee her husband for a day.

When I was six or seven years old, my mother left my father. I remember how the house felt without her: the way it feels to watch rain streaming down the windows without turning on the lights, the way some winter days seem to break without dawn. And I recall bumping along the mountain roads in my father's pickup looking for her. My sister sat between us. We watched hills of purple fireweed roll by, saw the churn of Kootenai Falls, spun through the parking lots at all of the trailheads where my father thought she might have gone to think things through. The next day my mother came back and our lives went on as before. Recalling this now, I understand why my sister first resisted all talk of divorce. She imagined her son in the pickup and the empty house. She saw my

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-24-48-am.png>)

12. Joshua testifies to the domestic violence Rachel experienced from her ex-husband.

He wrote back: "Protecting my wife is my business, not yours. No one lives with her but me and our son. I don't want you putting ideas in her head."

He was reading her messages. Things were worse than I'd thought.

My reply: "'Protecting' your wife becomes my business when your wife is my sister and your control interferes with her life. I will defend her right to privacy and freedom. You have no right to deny her that."

Still nothing from her, so I called.

"What's going on? Can you talk, or is he home?"

"It's OK," she said, "but I wish you wouldn't write. It makes everything worse."

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-26-51-am.png>)

“Makes what worse?”

“He hasn't hit me yet, but he's thrown me by my hair twice.”

“What? That bastard. I had no idea.”

“I'm scared. The other day I was walking out of the bathroom and he bumped me with his hip and I fell down. He said, 'Look—I can knock you over with nothing but my skinny little ass.' And he wakes me at three in the morning by licking me. Sometimes he's on top of me before I'm even awake. He's done that before, but now it happens every day. It's freaking me out.”

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-26-56-am.png>)

13. Joshua testifies that his family refused to help Rachel during the domestic violence and engaged in victim-blaming.

She refused to leave. He was trying to do better, she said. Things would work out. Love was a decision.

I read everything I could find about domestic violence: the wheel of power, the isolation, the intimidation, the guilt, the victim's denial. I murdered him hundreds of times in my sleep. "It's not about you," my friend Martha told me. "It's about your sister gaining control of her life. You've got to break the isolation wall first. Whatever you lose in pride, she gains in support."

So I called all of the family friends, told them about the hair pulling and the licking and the prison of that house. They wrung their

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-29-02-am.png>)

hands and said they were sorry. And went about their lives. "God hates divorce," one woman told my grandmother in the grocery store. My grandmother had also been unsympathetic to my aunt when her drunk husband was beating her two weeks into their marriage. "You wanted this," she had told my aunt. "Live with it." But there in the produce

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/screen-shot-2015-06-17-at-1-29-56-am.png>)

Similar to what I wrote yesterday, **none of these revelations should be construed as dismissing the wrongness of Rachel's cultural appropriation or the lies stated by her regarding her history.** But like 's statement yesterday

(<https://homeschoolersanonymous.wordpress.com/2015/06/16/the-media-is-doing-exactly-what-rachel-dolezals-abusive-homeschooling-parents-want/>), the revelations add an extra layer of complexity to this whole story that needs to be considered.

tagged with domestic violence, Down from the Mountaintop, Featured, homeschool, Joshua Dolezal, Larry and Ruthanne Dolezal, Rachel Dolezal, sexual abuse

- Child Abuse

13 comments

Pingback: The Media Is Doing Exactly What Rachel Dolezal's Abusive Homeschooling Parents Want | Homeschoolers Anonymous (Edit)

Justin Stroud June 17, 2015 5:54 am (Edit)

I should very much like to see this gentleman's birth certificate.

Reply

Pingback: Understanding Rachel Dolezal (Edit)

Jodi June 17, 2015 3:14 pm (Edit)

Well written! Thank you for bringing attention to the parent's continuing disrespect of their children and how their beliefs are the foundation for thier bad behavior. There is no need, except for their own, to be in the spotlight.

As Josh's ex-girlfiend, I am very familiar with the stories he recounts in his book. One summer we took a trip from Pella to Troy so I could better understand his roots. I believe it was more for him since I already understood what it meant to grow up in an abusive fundamentalist christian home. I'm glad I went because I had the chance to observe Josh process his childhood memories as an adult. It was good for him. I even had the pleasure of meeting his sister, Rachel and her son.

Of course, abuse follows us into adulthood and can take decades to resolve, but I'm concerned about the connections being made among all of the distinct issues in the media surrounding this family. For example, what does it mean to have grown up in an abusive and a religiously mind-twisting home? Does that mean someone is going to become a sex abuser or a pathological liar? No, it doesn't. However, it is important to ask how it has affected a person's life.

Josh went on a quest to find out for himself what the "truth" was. He did this through education and travel, etc. He had been isolated. He needed to find out for himself what the world was about and what was the right way to live for him. He questioned, even though, or because, he grew up being told there was no other truth. Do not discount the importance of these life choices. He broke out of a repressive belief system and culture and became a highly educated person and learned how to think critically, and has gone on to teach others to do so as well. He had the option to accept his parent's way of life without question, as many people often do.

I knew, as well, at a very young age that my parents were not the type of people I wanted to emulate. I suppose the abuse made that an easy choice. The central theme for my childhood as well as Josh's is how our parents used religion to control us. It was used to justify abusive

behavior. It was used for any purpose, at any time and twisted for any purpose the abuser might have had. Like Josh, I created my own beliefs and values system through questioning people and myself and exploring the world.

So, although childhood abuse from religious christian fundamentalist parents has harmed me beyond what I can tell you, it has strengthened me in many ways, as I hope it has Josh as well. I've learned lessons that some people will never learn in their lifetime. I am different because of it and in ways that I'm proud of. We have done more than survive; we have become highly educated individuals with strong characters and convictions. Some people grow through adversity and others whither. Either way, I would have preferred to not have been abused.

I hope Rachel and Josh's stories draw more attention to child abuse and religious fundamentalism. Likewise, I hope attention is called to how our society turns the other cheek. This is where Americans can stop child abuse. When someone turns the other cheek, he/she condones it and enables the abuser.

Reply

Rose June 17, 2015 8:33 pm (Edit)

Jodi, it is so good to see someone else write about child abuse and religious fundamentalism... About how turning the other cheek condones and enables abuse. Here is my rant on the topic of Rachel Dolezal... I so badly want to believe my birth father is not my birth father, that those sick genes are not a part of me, I joke that my mother had a one night stand with George Carlin during his drinking days because I so wish he was my father. We have so much more in common that I do with that disgusting POS my mother was married to. I'd love to find out she had an affair with just about anyone and that he really isn't my birth father. I can totally identify with this woman. I even changed my name to distance myself from my birth family who I have nothing to do with because I accept that they are toxic to me. I'm betting if she had changed her name, she would be attacked for yet another deception. All of you who have not survived the kind of abuse that makes it so easy to empathize with this woman should be grateful you are in a position where you can self righteously judge this woman who has, despite her abuse, created a life that is good and meaningful. Just keep in mind that with each of your cruel words and judgements against her, you are aiding and abetting her abusive parents. I know there is a whole different argument to be had from the perspective of black cultural issues and for people who are arguing from black perspectives I can understand that those issues are complicated. But, most of the white people bashing this woman are just upset by her deception without knowing anything about black culture.

Reply

[solipsisterthinks](#) June 17, 2015 9:46 pm (Edit)

Why does his otherwise very open and disclosive memoir never refer to any physical abuse from his parents? (Just finished reading it yesterday. They were clearly religious zealots and repressive, but there's not a word in it about physical abuse. The closest would be his dad

becoming enraged when he spent much of a day looking for Josh to come work outdoors and found him reading. Nothing about physically abusing him when he found him.)

Reply

C June 18, 2015 3:21 am (Edit)

He's quite a bit older than the adopted siblings correct? Perhaps the physical abuse started later on? Maybe due to reading books such as *To Train Up A Child* (according to the other article sources say the adopted children were abused in ways that look a lot like what is described in that book).

Or perhaps the physical abuse started early and he just isn't okay with writing about that. I know that earlier in my life, a book I would have written about my life would not have included my parent's physical abuse.

Brooke June 17, 2015 8:54 pm (Edit)

Jodi, just jumping in to say that I believe the previous comment from Marilyn was intended for the Homeschoolers Anonymous page itself regarding their reporting of Rachel's story and not for you as a commenter. As a reader, I appreciated your insights on Josh as well as your candid and brave discussion of your own experiences. Also, there are a lot of grumpy commenters out there in the anonymous world of the internet, so don't take it personally They love to vent!

Reply

Jodi June 17, 2015 5:13 pm (Edit)

Thank you for your comments. You certainly don't need to post anything I write. I especially understand that, if you do not feel I am credible. Given the publicity, I would be skeptical myself of anyone claiming to be the ex-girlfriend. I do not have all the facts because I haven't been scanning the news and I only know of my time with Josh. I don't even pay much attention to the news and I was told about the news stories last night. So, I don't know what she has admitted to or not. You are the first person I have written to about this and I have to admit that it hurts that you have decided that I'm not credible. I put myself out there big time because you appeared to be credible and insightful. You don't have to post my writing because I can post that elsewhere, but please do not call into question my credibility! I am so offended!

Reply

Chris S June 17, 2015 8:10 pm (Edit)

Jodi, the person who questioned your credibility speaks only for herself. She is not the person, R.L. Stollar, who posted the original piece. As someone who is close to a victim of homeschooling, I want to thank you for coming forward. Your information helps put Rachel Dolezal's situation into needed context.

Reply

R.L. Stollar June 17, 2015 8:46 pm (Edit)

Hey Jodi, the other commentator was responding to me and the comment appeared under your comment. So sorry about the confusion! (I deleted her comment so as to avoid further confusion.) As the author of the post, I very much appreciate you sharing your thoughts and your thoughts are certainly welcome.

Reply

Cindy K June 17, 2015 9:04 pm (Edit)

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Reply

Cindy K June 17, 2015 9:06 pm (Edit)

(Listen to all of the stories, and tell your own boldly and honestly.)

Reply

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