

The Fourth Way

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The Fourth Way:

The Fourth Way (or TFW) is an esoteric philosophy that is similar, in some respects, to a “hippie cult”. It has communes, feature-length films that are arguably propaganda, and other elements of a subculture.

TFW is an interesting part of the backstory of my family.

Walter Gustafson and TFW:

My father's father, Walter Raymond Gustafson, got into TFW heavily circa the 1970s. I don't know how, but he was a collector of rare and occult books. He may simply have happened upon it in a pile of dusty tomes.

Walter had a son with the same name. Walter Jr., a biological uncle to me, was developmentally disabled and doesn't play a major role in the story. I'll refer to my grandfather here simply as Walter.

Note: My brother Ray's first name came from our grandfather's middle name. The name went further back than that in the family. It isn't clear that it'll be passed down from here.

Walter was seen, at one point, as one of the top minds in the country. He was hand-picked to do some Cold War research. He had 3 Masters and was a PhD Fellow in Physics, but didn't finish his thesis. He decided to work instead.

I'm not sure that Walter ever met other TFWers. Other family members did meet them eventually.

In 1973, Walter's daughter Judy, one of my aunts, was on a bus with other family members. A Coca-Cola truck struck the bus on the way to Machu Picchu and Judy was killed.

Walter seemed to focus on his children after that - they were young adults at the time - and started to instruct them in the ways of the philosophy.

Some family members saw this as Walter becoming more concerned about the well-being of his children or more interested in keeping the family together. My father John feels that Walter became more controlling. It's possible that both things were true.

Uncles:

Judy had been SO (significant other) to a man named Stuart. Years after Judy died in 1973, Stuart eventually married Judy's sister, my aunt Marilyn. Stuart and Marilyn broke up circa the 2000s.

Marilyn had been married or SO to a man named Lance before Stuart moved from Judy to her.

Carol was married to a man named Larry. Carol and Larry broke up circa 1993.

All three ex-uncles became interested in TFW and remained close to Walter despite the breakups. He liked to spend time with them and they looked up to him.

At one point, Larry lived on Walter's property, and he credits Walter's philosophical guidance for his success. Larry became a renowned copper sculptor. After he lived on Walter's property, he never needed another job.

My cousin Jason's parents are Marilyn and Lance. My cousin Ian's parents are Marilyn and Stuart.

TFW and Abuse:

All 3 ex-uncles were abusive alcoholics. Lance once fired a bullet at Jason.

At one point, Jason could no longer live with Lance. My parents took him in for a while and he was like a big brother to Ray and I during this period. This was circa 1995 to 1996.

Eventually, Jason moved in with a friend and, after that, he went back, surprisingly, to Lance's home.

My father believed that TFW was a contributing factor to the alcohol and the abuse. The rest of the family didn't talk about this part much.

John's experience:

My father John had become an alcoholic in young adulthood.

John said later that Walter used to take him to wine and dine with factory owners who wanted multi-million dollar contracts. Later in life, he explicitly blamed Walter for his alcoholism.

John became as interested in TFW as his brothers-in-law were. He approached it more intelligently and less on faith. I think that he found the Eastern philosophy parts intriguing.

When I was 8 years old, John had a breakthrough. He decided that TFW had been helping him to justify things and to avoid change.

The trigger was a 2nd DUI charge. The realization of what had happened and what might happen came as an epiphany.

John quit drinking cold turkey after drinking heavily daily. Cold turkey withdrawal can kill some people, but he managed it somehow.

Editor's note: I had an aunt in-law who smoked heavily for decades. One day she just put down the cigarettes and stopped. Some people, like John and my aunt, are strong-willed enough to do this. Most are not.

John then sent scathing letters to his father. He condemned TFW both to Walter and to others in the family as a Satanic and elitist cult.

John said there were things in TFW that had encouraged narcissism on his part. Even decades later, he said that TFW was so dangerous, there were parts of it that he wouldn't tell me about.

Marie's perspective:

John's wife, my mother Marie, never bought into TFW at all. She was a traditional Fundamentalist and was suspicious of what seemed to be a cult.

Marie tried to evangelize Walter in a wild-eyed Baptist manner. Walter didn't take well to that. He once told Ray, "Don't become a bigot like your mother".

Walter and my mother were worlds apart in terms of world views. The fact that they didn't see eye to eye isn't surprising.

Holidays:

John's relationships with the TFW members of the family were strained after his break with TFW.

Marie, Ray, and I continued to attend Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings at Walter's house, regardless. My dad wouldn't come until years after I was 8, but he eventually did so.

While Walter was alive and even for a couple years or so afterward when only John's brother Gene or other family members lived there, everybody went there for Christmas and Thanksgiving.

There were a few disagreements on these occasions, but it wasn't as explosive as you might imagine. I think that people made an effort to be civil and were proud of the effort.

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