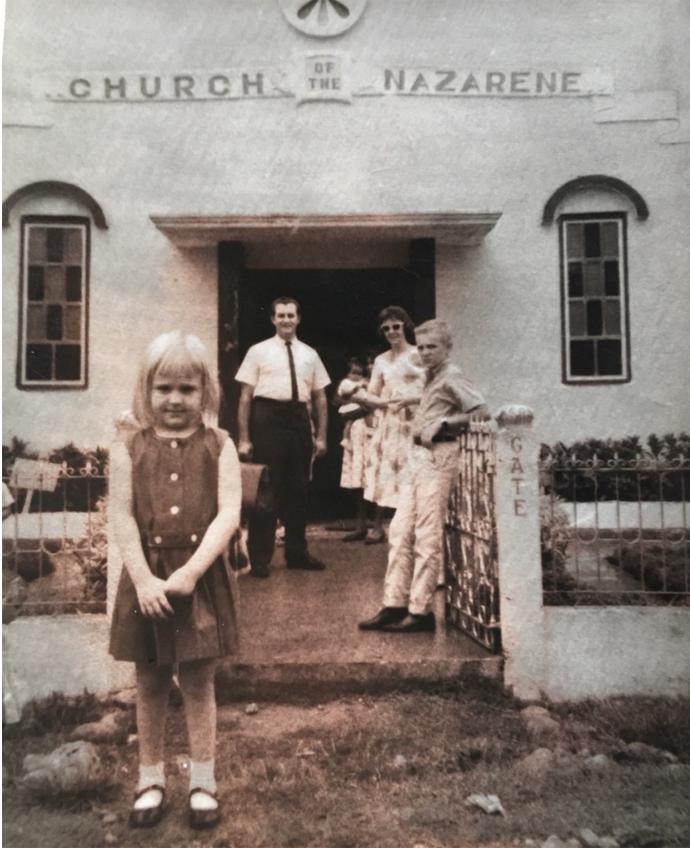


MATERIALS

Jesus Camp Queen

Angela J. Latham



The author as a child, standing in front of a church her father pastored when he was a missionary in the Philippines.¹

I finally watched *Jesus Camp*, the documentary about fundamentalist church camps for kids.² I heard about the movie a long time ago from friends who seemed both dismayed and disdainful even as they recommended it. My son was unambivalent. “Don’t watch it, mom. It’s disturbing.”

I suppose to most people, the movie depicts a strange, unlikely reality—just another alternate universe you can visit through the magic of Amazon Prime. But to me, watching *Jesus Camp* was like watching home movies of my childhood. As the daughter of a fundamentalist minister and missionary, my childhood summers always included such camps.

Our camp days, like those in the film, began and ended with church services in which we were reminded of our sinfulness and asked to commit our lives in service of the gospel of Christ. In

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between services we had several hours of Bible study classes. In the afternoons, we were allowed free time during which we could hang out, play softball, go swimming. I usually preferred swimming. Though dancing, card-playing, going to movies, and reading comic books on Sunday were against the rules, members of my church were not, on principle, opposed to a lap around the pool. They were opposed, however, to “mixed bathing,” an activity “unbecoming to a holiness lifestyle.” “Mixed bathing” was—is—swimming in the same body of water as a member of the opposite sex to whom you are not married or closely related. You could swim with your parents, your siblings, and even first cousins. Beyond that, you were entering . . . dangerous water.

The proscription against mixed bathing was felt most keenly by and most stringently imposed on the females of our sect. As a girl, I used to be very self-conscious and guarded in my behaviour if a boy came into a swimming area where I was wearing a bathing suit. Sure it happened sometimes if one got careless. But if it did, I was then responsible to keep my distance and not display myself in a way that would create too much temptation. For me and no doubt other girls in my church, this sense of caution extended well beyond poolside or beach. By listening to older women talk, and the accusatory way that sermons characterized “worldly women” and their wives, I learned that I should protect men from their own instincts in my presence. Their urges were so much harder for them to control than were my own, so I was largely responsible to safeguard their virtue as well as mine. This kind of thinking meant that when something happened, tragically, like, say, a pregnancy without a wedding, the mother-to-be was usually presumed culpable. This mindset also meant that I had a pretty limited range of fashion options, and many years of my youthful beauty were wasted dressing an awful lot like my mother.

The problem of mixed bathing was easily solved at church camp. The sexes were segregated; the girls could swim from 1 to 2:30, the boys from 2:45 to 4:15. Trouble was, the pool was surrounded by a wire mesh fence that you could still easily see through. We rented our church campgrounds from some other more liberal denomination. Maybe that goes without saying. Had we owned our own campgrounds, we would have had a pool that couldn’t be seen by passersby. So when our church rented the campgrounds, camp counsellors draped black plastic sheeting all around the fence surrounding the pool thereby preventing not only mixed bathing, but mixed viewing. Somehow, the sight of all that black garbage bag plastic remains one of my most vivid memories of Jesus camp.

Make no mistake. I loved going to camp. The isolation I felt at school didn’t exist at camp. Here, I was “in.” My status as preacher’s daughter was a stigma among the godless with whom I attended public school—this was before homeschooling became so popular. But my status as preacher’s daughter was a badge of honour at church camp. Certainly, all the camp staff knew who I was, that I was a sweet little denominationally specific born and bred girl, not some random Sunday school child brought along in hopes that she might be “saved.”



Author as a child, standing in front of a church her father pastored in southern Indiana, United States.



Author as a teenager wearing a "Jesus is Lord" promotional t-shirt distributed by the church denomination in which she was raised.



Sunday school children standing in front of a church van.

By the time I was in high school, I was a Jesus camp veteran of many years. I knew most of the other kids from southern Indiana who were raised like me, and we saw each other annually at camp as well as regional church events. I felt close to the staff who ran the camp and hoped one day to be a church leader like they were, or more likely, married to one.

One of the rituals kids at Teen Jesus Camp looked forward to most was at the end of the week, when a camp king and camp queen were announced. I had longingly watched the older teenage girls who, each year, comprised a court of smiling young women from among whom a queen was chosen and crowned. Little did I know but, the summer I turned seventeen, my own coronation was imminent. I went to camp that summer with my usual enthusiasm, happy to see friends and to experience something I knew would bring me closer to Jesus. The time passed quickly, and by about the third day, I was summoned by Pastor Paul, head of the Young People's Society, Southwest Indiana District. He told me the wonderful news: "Angie, you have been nominated to be a member of the camp court!"

I do not know who nominated me or why, but the remaining part of the selection process was fairly straightforward. Pastor Paul would interview each princess, and then a queen would be chosen, presumably by him. I remember the interview clearly:

Pastor Paul: "Angie, your selection to the camp court is a great honour to you and reflects well on your character and commitment to Christ. I have one question for you: What has been the most meaningful experience of camp for you this summer?"

Angie: "Why, Pastor Paul, it would have to be that, you know, last year, some of the kids who were always down at the altar at the end of services because they had been struggling in their spiritual lives, you know, people like Jim Cardiff and Danny Sims

(the former of whom I had a crush on). This year, they're the ones—having stayed true to their commitment to Christ—they're down at the altar at the end of services praying with others. That is the real joy of this week for me . . . to see that kind of spiritual growth and commitment."

Pastor Paul *(radiant smile, breathless pause)*: "Thank you for your answer. That is wonderful, Angie. See you at the ceremony."

As I left the interview, I knew I had nailed it. I couldn't think such a prideful thing then, but I can now. I had learned nothing if not to be demure, humble—in a word, "Christ-like," or at least the female version of such. I ran back to my cabin where my best friend, Jenny, was waiting to hear how it went.

Jenny was such a great best friend. She was one of the kids who always felt more or less an outsider at church events like this, though, because her family wasn't "saved." She was from an "unchurched home." This was almost as bad as being from a "broken home." It meant she wasn't as likely as me to be chosen as camp queen or even as a princess. This was lucky for me in a couple of ways, not the least of which that it meant I could borrow her prom dress to wear to coronation. Being from a godless home meant she could go to prom, whereas I couldn't because of the evils of dancing. Jenny had worn this lovely, long, baby blue, gauzy gown to prom only a couple of months earlier. I had admired it so when she wore it while clinging to the arm of Greg Moore, her less than handsome but still acceptable prom date. Now she arranged to have the dress brought to camp for me to wear. I felt like a queen the minute I put it on.

The ceremony was scheduled for after dinner and before the evening service. Everyone crowded into the small chapel where the preaching services were held. The camp staff dispensed with the coronation of camp king first, for no one cared as much about that part of the competition and it would have been anti-climactic to put it at the end. Gary Dodd, a cute boy, but short, was chosen. He seemed happy enough about it, but I couldn't focus on him as I knew my own glorious moment was close at hand. Sure enough, Pastor Paul turned to the three young women, including me, who were standing on the left side of the platform and solemnly stated that it was time to announce the queen of the Southwest Indiana District Teen Camp . . . Angie Latham!

The applause felt so lovely, and the tiara was nicer than you might think. It was the first time I had ever received a dozen long-stemmed roses.



Author wearing tiara after being crowned camp queen.

The thrill of being crowned camp queen was quite something. Curiously, I felt especially triumphant upon returning home laden with my winnings and discovering that Mark, one of my brother's college friends was visiting. Again. Mark was at least five years older than me, and to my eyes incredibly sophisticated and handsome. I suppose he could be arrested today for his advances toward me. We had often ended up entangled on the sofa or floor late at night during his frequent weekend visits over the past two years. I say this knowing full well that it tarnishes the image of purity I have so far created of myself. The thing was, in a legalistic culture that was also quite prudish, rules were set, but not so explicitly as to be awkward to speak of in public services, the usual venue for such discussions. You could date a boy, and you couldn't have sex with him. Enough said. In between, there was a lot left for you to figure out for yourself what kinds of affection constituted "going too far." I was only fifteen and very naive about boys, let alone men, when Mark started teaching me a thing or two. At some point though, I had started to feel used by him, and I had recently made it clear that I no longer wanted to be part of a no-strings-attached, nice weekend away from dorm life for him. My smug satisfaction arriving home laden with roses and tiara and having him, of all people, there to behold me in all my glory was hardly a fitting response from one so recently crowned as a model of Christ-like femininity.

Mark was a ministerial student at the college I would also attend, where I would later be a professor, and where I would leave in what I like to call my "blaze of glory." My ignominious departure in the wake of a divorce from all that was my religious heritage and by then livelihood as well was still several years away. There were many things that foreshadowed my fall from grace had I been paying close attention. The small, private, church-based college was where my father attended and my

brothers. I never thought about going anywhere else. It was what we did in my family. Even my best friend, Jenny, was persuaded to go there, something that I am sure bewildered her unsaved parents as had so many other things about the sect she had joined.

Though the euphoria of being crowned camp queen was delightful in itself, I was overjoyed to be embarking soon on what turned out to be essentially a much longer version of Jesus camp—church college.

Living in residence at a fundamentalist church college had many parallels to my experiences in “Jesus camps” throughout my childhood. The rituals of church and chapel services, prayer before classes, and constant talk about salvation and other spiritual topics—these were the most apparent similarities. So too was my never-ending quest to achieve the ideal of Christ-like femininity. This meant being compliant though strong in character, humble though poised and confident, and beautiful though never aware of such. It meant a lot of other things too, but my head hurts already.

Church college was all that I hoped it would be. I was surrounded by people who believed like me and wanted to prepare themselves for Christ’s work.



Author (far right) and other members of a college “drama ministry” team.



Author and friends from a church-sponsored evangelical ministry team for college students.

It seemed to me that everyone here loved Jesus and that this was a place I could thrive. Getting to know people was quick business without all that front-end work of finding out where they stood on spiritual matters. I could achieve intimacy, or what seemed like it, instantly. I could cut to the chase in friendships and romantic relationships; I was enraptured. I took full advantage of the sense of belonging I now felt, to make friends by the score and of course, date lots of boys.



Author and friends.

Early in my first semester of college I realized that I could be popular—a status I had only achieved on a small scale before, and certainly not in secular settings such as high school.



Author (second from right) and friends wearing collaborative costuming for a college party.

But secular didn't apply anymore, and long gone were the days of being an oddball religious freak in the eyes of schoolmates. Soon I realized—with my camp queen victory fresh in recent memory—an even more glorious prize could be mine! I had only to attend the college homecoming queen coronation to imagine that one day I too would stand in that lineup of fresh-faced young women. I too would come to represent all that was pure, gracious, and lovely in a subculture that placed undue emphasis on such traits in the ones who bore and raised its children.



Author (second from left) and other members of the college homecoming court.

Freshman year through senior year, when I was at last eligible to be elected to homecoming court, passed quickly, but not without incident. I had my share of bad boyfriends, ineffective teachers, and dismal days, just like everyone else. There was really only one Heaven, after all, and it wasn't in Kankakee, Illinois. What's more, the difficulties I occasionally faced helped me become even more adept in developing the qualities expected of me as a young woman in a strict religious culture. Nothing allowed one to display her virtue so well as to graciously overcome some hardship, no matter how small. Looking back, though I was oblivious at the time, I see that to the degree I perfected my angelic persona, my actual identity became more brittle. Only after my fragile façade at last shattered did I fully comprehend the price I had paid for my dissembling.

There were several early hints at the dissonance that would lead me later to abandon my attempts to be a model of Christlike femininity—the very traits that brought me so much glory at Jesus camp and its later manifestation, church college. One of the first times I recognized that I was experiencing some kind of identity leakage was when I dated Brett, a boy who played a mean saxophone and who had a number of issues with his father. Brett hung out with the music major crowd. Social segregation at the college was quite stringent, especially at meals. While I was dating Brett, his group adopted me for a time and seemed to like having me around. I was less sure about them. Eating meals with them was like lunching with the lions at the zoo. They constantly vied for superiority over each other, usually with cutthroat banter that was mostly about music minutia that seemed to me couldn't possibly matter to anyone but themselves. Still, I sat through these bloodthirsty conversations smiling pleasantly, offering an occasional unrelated thought, and mostly trying to keep the peace. Maybe that's why “sweet” became the word they invariably used to describe me. At first I felt affirmed by this, but after a few months, their label too forcibly suppressed my increasingly sarcastic self, a sarcasm no doubt emboldened by hanging around with the likes of them. I didn't prize the edge that was developing in my personality, and I had made it a matter of prayer. Still, I resented the shocked way they responded when some barbed comment came unbidden from my mouth. Before long, my relationship with Brett was “on the back burner” as he liked to say. I can't say whether his breakup with me was the result of my actual self being less sweet than the one he signed on to date, or whether his mother didn't approve of girls whose shoes didn't perfectly match their outfits. Either way, I guess I was better off, though I am still inordinately attracted to men who play their instruments well.

Despite my occasional lapses, the “sweet” label Brett and his friends gave me seemed to stick, both in my head and in the way others perceived me. And my popularity with outsider groups like the music majors undoubtedly increased my voting block when the time came for students to nominate the women they felt deserved to represent them as members of the homecoming court. By the fall semester of my senior year, I and presumably most of my female classmates were keenly aware that The Vote was coming right up. We pretended not to be, and never spoke of such things. It would have been immodest.

Being elected to homecoming court was the ultimate reward for years of trying to be the best Christian girl you knew how to be, at least according to the rules of our sect. In other words, it was a reward for living very, very carefully. Future homecoming queens never appeared at breakfast without makeup or with too much makeup. Future homecoming queens attended church regularly, promptly, and sat in a pew well-situated to be seen from all parts of the college church. Future homecoming queens occasionally but not too often, travelled the long aisles of said church to pray publicly at an altar about some spiritual matter. In sum, future homecoming queens took up very little space, were no trouble at all to have around, and were nice to look at.

Even in presidential election years, students at the college were more likely to cast a vote in November for Homecoming Queen than for the President of the United States. On the day when the student government organization set up tables near the cafeteria, plunked down yearbooks to serve as catalogues, and handed out slips of paper on which to write the names of nominees, young women like me anxiously went about our business trying to look nonchalant. Oh, everybody except Caroline Smith. She hung around the polling area quite shamelessly. Caroline was pretty enough, and her dad was filthy rich—the president of JCPenney or something. But she didn't quite have the right balance of traits. Something about her was unseemly. I couldn't put my finger on it then or now, but I knew she didn't stand a chance against the likes of me. I almost felt sorry for her in all her pretty designer clothes.

The homecoming court polling area was open from lunch through dinner, and then the coronation committee sequestered themselves to count ballots. This took a couple of hours. I was a resident assistant, and this happened to be the night when it was my turn to sit at the reception desk of McClain Hall, the dorm where I lived and worked. By about nine o'clock that evening, Susan Gibbons, president of the Women's Residence Association, made her rounds. Susan was a squat, badly complexioned girl. Nice as she was, she had no hope herself of being elected to court. When I saw Susan approach me, I felt as I had that moment years earlier when Pastor Paul announced my name as camp queen, the same impending sense of victory and validation.

“Angie, you have been selected to be one of the five girls on the court for Homecoming Queen,” Susan gushed. Clearly she took what pleasure she could from being the bearer of good tidings, bless her heart.

“ME?!”

“Yes! You!”

As though I needed convincing.

I instantly began to imagine the glory, the overwhelming joy of this honour. Perhaps I would even be queen! But just to be on the court came with such a delightful set of perks that I was already in bliss. Court members got sittings with a professional photographer, and their faces graced a multi-page spread in the college yearbook. Each wore a long sash across her flowing gown. Special dinners with high-ranking school officials and a seat on the float in the homecoming parade were givens as were, yes, roses and a tiara.



Author (far right) and other members of the court on a float in the homecoming parade.

My first impulse, on learning of my good fortune, was to run to my dorm room and tell Jenny, my best friend and now roommate. This had been a habit with me since at least as far back as my Jesus Camp Queen nomination.

In all my years of exhausting self-monitoring, you would think I might have at least thought twice before barging into our dorm room with my wonderful news. Couldn't I have imagined that Jenny might not be as happy as I was since she had not also been chosen? As I blurted out what Susan had just told me, I saw her wince slightly, but she quickly covered any misgivings with a smile and warm congratulations. Only later that night, when I heard sobs in the bunk below mine, did I realize her pain. Once again she was the outsider, while I was chosen as the beloved daughter in a world where adoration was reserved for a select few. It would be a long time before I came to know her kind of pain for myself.

The events of homecoming week were as exhilarating as I had imagined. Indeed, the coronation was only one of several festivities, though it was easily the most glamorous. Hundreds of people attended the ceremony and listened intently as the professor who supervised the campus radio station read each of our names in his big, radio voice. He told notable things about us as we each floated across the stage in our long, white gowns. Just like beauty queen contestants, we each got our turn on the runway, built just for the big event.

A photo taken of me at the time shows me looking out over the audience teary-eyed and radiant while a recording of my father's voice saying wonderful things about his little girl played through the speaker system.³



Author listening to a recording of her father's voice during coronation ceremony.

Too soon the moments passed, and it was time to announce the queen!

It wasn't me. That's the long and short of it. Some other missionary's daughter got the biggest batch of roses and the red velvet robe. I can't say I was terribly disappointed, but I did wonder about it. Maybe I should have stuck with one boyfriend instead of dating so many different ones. She had had the same boyfriend all through college. Maybe that played as more wholesome somehow. Then again, maybe it was her big brown eyes. Who knows? I was still glad to be one of the chosen, even if not The Chosen.

A few years after college, graduate degree in hand, I was invited back to my alma mater to teach. Soon I was asked to host the homecoming coronation. I enjoyed my new role, though I had come to question a ceremony that celebrated certain traits in women that I was learning through bitter experience were hindrances to their overall well-being. I was especially interested in this year's ceremony though, because Cindy, one of the majors I advised and a cast member in the play I was directing, was a member of the queen's court. In fact, she had had her visit from the coronation fairy during one of our rehearsals. Cindy was a kind and loving young woman, and it was no surprise that her classmates perceived in her the traits that had come to be expected in members of the homecoming court. I liked Cindy because, in spite of all the rules of our church, she still knew how to have fun. She also had a way of making other people feel as though they really, really mattered.

A few days before homecoming, Cindy and a group of other students travelled in one of the college vans to Indianapolis where they were to join other members of the college choir in singing at a gospel music convention. I too travelled to the convention. After inching along for miles in traffic that was clearly misplaced in the middle of Indiana cornfields, I knew an accident must have happened up ahead. As I approached the crash site, I immediately recognized what was left of the college van that had been transporting our students, all of whom by now had been taken away to local hospitals. I got out of my car in a panic and asked if anyone was seriously hurt. I didn't even know that Cindy had been in the van, but I recognized the name of the young man the police officer said had been killed instantly in the rollover. A few hours later, Cindy also succumbed to her injuries. The memory of her death still brings a lump to my throat. I don't think of her as much as I used to, but I pay quiet tribute to her every time I pass mile marker 163 on Interstate 65 near Lafayette, Indiana. The crash site isn't marked as so many are these days, but I know it on sight and sometimes in my dreams.

A few days later we were supposed to have homecoming. But how could we? The tragedy created a terrible sadness that seemed to cling to the very leaves of trees on campus. This was to be a time of celebration, but as a member of the homecoming court, Cindy would be conspicuously absent, and the other students killed in the accident left behind many grieving friends. Nevertheless, someone decided that the show must go on, and specifically that the coronation would proceed. I reluctantly agreed to fulfil my role as emcee.

As I welcomed everyone to the ceremony, I stood only a few feet away from where, not so long ago, I had looked tearfully out upon a similar crowd. Then as now, the audience gathered to celebrate those they believed to be models of Christ-like femininity. Determinedly I read the names of each member of the court, and my quavering voice broke only when I announced Cindy's name, while roses and a tiara were placed on a table in her memory.

As soon as the ceremony was over, I ran sobbing into the dark behind the auditorium. I cried alone there for a long time, just hiding in the bushes.

Something was so terribly wrong here, but just what I couldn't have told you. I now see that my grief wasn't just for the loss of Cindy, but for my loss of self as well. It would take me years to grasp the dimensions of my grief. I would eventually escape my ill-considered and by then crumbling marriage and this culture that engendered and would have me stay in its wreckage. But as punishment, I would escape alone. My son—who was right after all to advise me not to revisit the places the movie, *Jesus Camp*, would take me—was hostage for many years in these same, sad places.



Author's son around the time of the events that prompt this narrative.

Only when my beautiful boy was taken from me did I fully comprehend the price I had paid, not for my sins, but for my virtue. For now, all I knew was that the carefully kept purity and well-managed personas of people like Cindy and me and so many other young women I had known really came down to this. We were lovely to behold, a comfort to our loved ones, and a source of pride to those who claimed some affiliation with us. But in the end, tragedy of some kind would inevitably strike, for no one goes unscathed. Still, somehow our agony was compounded, if only by an inordinate sense of surprise.



Author and son.

After a while, I wiped my tears away and pasted on a smile that even Pastor Paul wouldn't have believed. I walked over to the cafeteria, where the festivities were already underway and where a

lifetime ago I had played peacemaker among the bickering musicians.

I still have my tiaras. Both of them. I don't know why I kept them, all things considered, but I did. I have a scholar's view now of traditions like Jesus Camp, and spectacles like homecoming queen coronations. But no matter how well I can dissect these rituals intellectually, I carry within me a more profound and visceral understanding that people get lost in such pageantry. For there is still a young girl waiting somewhere back in time. She stands beside a swimming pool fence that is strangely draped in black, garbage bag plastic. She carries roses and wears a tiara and sweetly smiles, but her blue eyes are brimming with tears.

Notes

1. The filmed version of this performance contains additional photos not embedded here nor previously presented in live performances. These photos are from the author's personal collection and are uncredited due to uncertainty about the identity of photographers.

2. The film version of the script differs in that it opens with this voiceover content:

This is a story about a story I can't tell. It's pieced together from memories that resurfaced in the long aftermath of a legal judgment that denied to me custody of my six-year-old son.

That story was and still mostly is, too painful to tell outright. So here's a story I can tell you.

But only you.

3. The film version of the script includes the following clip of a recording of the author's father speaking at the homecoming coronation ceremony: "Angela Joy, this is your dad speaking. We're proud of you tonight. We picked your name before you were born, and it's fit the description very well. You've been a real joy to us ..."