

WALKING

in

THE

LIGHT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ALANA BURNS

MEGAN PHELPS-ROPER WAS BROUGHT UP IN THE NOTORIOUS WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH, WHICH PUBLICLY PREACHES HATE AND PREJUDICE. BUT NOW SHE'S AN ACTIVIST FOR TOLERANCE AND LOVE, WITH A TED TALK THAT'S BEEN VIEWED EIGHT MILLION TIMES AND A BESTSELLING MEMOIR THAT'S SET FOR THE SILVER SCREEN

SOCIAL MEDIA OFTEN comes under fire for being the cesspool of the internet, a place that breeds hatred and intolerance as much as it does laugh-out-loud memes. But it can also bring about a lot of good in the world – as Megan Phelps-Roper discovered. For Phelps-Roper, Twitter is the place where she learnt love is always a better comeback than loathing, where she found a new self, a new life and a new career... and even a husband. "I love Twitter!" she says. On Twitter, as in life, Phelps-Roper walks in the light. But she didn't start off that way.

If her name sounds familiar, it's probably thanks to the three documentaries filmmaker Louis Theroux has made about the church she grew up in, the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, which many class as a hate group. Founded by her grandfather Fred Phelps, Westboro's congregation is still mainly made up of Phelps-Roper's family, and came to fame thanks to its habit of picketing the funerals of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The members would march up and down, singing hymns and carrying signs with slogans like "God hates fags" to spread their message that God was directly killing Americans as punishment for the country's increased acceptance of homosexuality – along with fornication, abortion and all the other fundamentalist flashpoints.

Far from being deterred by the disgust these antics generated, Fred Phelps, a lawyer and preacher with a nose for publicity, relished it. He soon realised that the cruder the language he used to spruik his beliefs, the greater the media coverage and public outrage. Every tragedy, from 9/11 to the death of Princess Diana, became an opportunity to declaim God's justice – along with a chance to rewrite popular songs in celebration. Elton John's "Candle In The Wind" tribute to Princess Diana was reworked, with the lyrics declaring, "It seems to me you lived your life/Like a harlot full of sin..."

"At Westboro, we loved the ire of outsiders," says Phelps-Roper. "It was a sign that we were doing the right thing." And the ire came in spades, often accompanied by violence. Theroux's first documentary, which came out in 2007, was titled *The Most Hated Family In America*. And he focused on Phelps-Roper in particular as one of the first generation of Westboro grandchildren. She and her siblings (all 10 of them) and numerous cousins grew up on the picket line, believing that their signs were somehow teaching sinners the error of their ways, and dutifully listening to their grandfather's fiery sermons.

As a tech-savvy millennial, Phelps-Roper was a natural choice to become the church's online spokesperson, and her quick wit and charm – not to mention the oddity value of a wholesome-

looking, cheerful girl who quoted hellfire-and-brimstone Bible verses – quickly secured her thousands of followers. Some were even celebrities: in 2009, she attracted the attention of director Kevin Smith, comedian Michael Ian Black and actor Rainn Wilson after tweeting on World AIDS Day to celebrate the death toll of the disease on gay people. Smith launched a "Save Megan" Twitter campaign and appeared at Sundance Film Festival with a sign inspired by Westboro's most infamous placard, which flatteringly read, "God hates Phelps. Except Meghan – God thinks Meghan's hot" (although it not-so-flatteringly misspelt her name).

"I could be very aggressive on Twitter," she says. "And at Westboro, I was raised to be wary of the kindness of strangers who didn't believe what we believed. But people kept coming at me with kindness. It's an extremely powerful force." And like water gradually carving out a canyon, that force slowly changed her mind. "When people are behaving in wrong or destructive ways, we tend to want to react harshly

or punish them. But change comes from the opposite – from connection and reaching out. Choosing a gentler path is often the fastest way to change hearts and minds."

And Phelps-Roper's heart was changing, thanks in large part to her Twitter conversations with a mysterious stranger. They started out the same as any other: he asked her questions about the church, she answered with humour in an attempt to win him over to their beliefs. But soon she and the man she knew only as CG

were exchanging book and film recommendations and playing Words With Friends. They chatted endlessly, and his world view, which centred around compassion, sowed the first seeds of doubt in her mind. He asked her why Westboro dismissed the grieving families of the dead soldiers whose funerals they picketed; why God hated gay people; why everyone was classified so simply as either good or evil. And her rehearsed answers, complete with learnt-by-heart Bible verses, just didn't seem enough anymore.

Meanwhile, the church was slowly being taken over by Steve Drain, one of its few members not belonging to the Phelps family. He started his bid for power by attempting to dethrone the family members he thought posed the most threat, beginning with Phelps-Roper's mother. He instigated discipline procedures against her, and severely reduced the rights of all women within the church. The power games, so contrary to >

"WHEN PEOPLE ARE BEHAVING in DESTRUCTIVE WAYS, WE TEND TO REACT HARSHLY. BUT CHOOSING A GENTLER PATH is OFTEN THE FASTEST WAY TO CHANGE HEARTS AND MINDS"

what Phelps-Roper had always believed the church was about, brought on a moment where she questioned everything she had grown up taking for granted. What if we're not the chosen ones, and we're just being needlessly cruel to people? What if we're all completely deluded? The moment was world-shattering. It was impossible for the then-26-year-old not to share her concerns with her younger sister Grace, then 19. After miserable months of worrying about hurting their family, and how they would survive outside the church that was all they'd ever known, in November 2012 the two finally packed their things and left. They had no hope of meaningful contact with their family again, nowhere to live, no jobs and no knowledge of how to live their life outside the church's belief system. "Your life is so enmeshed with these people whose beliefs you no longer share," says Phelps-Roper. "And it's not just giving up the beliefs, it's also the collateral damage to your relationships and your community. There's a lot of fear."

Yet she and Grace embraced their new lives, going to live first with a nearby cousin who'd already left the church, then, when chance encounters with family members grew too painful, in a small town hundreds of kilometres away in South Dakota. On a mission to understand the world through books, Phelps-Roper frequented libraries and loved, she says, seeing shelves upon shelves of books written by "all these people who have tried so hard to figure out the best way to live in the world. What have they learnt? And what can I gain from reading all these books I'd just dismissed out of hand?"

Constructing a new perspective from scratch was no easy task. "At Westboro we couldn't trust our feelings, we couldn't trust our hearts because they were inherently evil. So when I left, I had to constantly interrogate my own reactions. Is that an instinctive reaction? Is it based on evidence? And if so, what is the evidence? What's the evidence on the other side? I just try to think as much as possible about how my own mind is

working, and whether I'm being fair. It's not something that happens overnight. I needed new memories and to develop new instincts." It's an exhausting and ongoing process, but, says Phelps-Roper, "It wasn't nearly as difficult as I thought it might be to get over the idea that gay people were weird. It was liberating and exhilarating." Mainly, she says, her philosophy now revolves around the simple – and Biblical – idea of loving your enemy. "That has really become a big part of how I see the world," she says. And it's no contradiction with her new life as a non-Christian that it stems from the Bible.

"The Bible isn't the infallible, unquestionable truth, but just another book of humans trying to find the best way to live in the world. There are all these things in the Bible that I love and think are beautiful and that inform my world view. And I can find the things that are true to me." As she was exploring her new beliefs, she was also exploring the new world of romance – she and CG, whose name, she discovered, was Chad, finally met in person and began dating.

At the same time, the world had started to notice her absence from the church's media appearances, and in early 2013 she wrote a statement on Medium about why she and Grace had left. The response she received was overwhelmingly positive, even from those the church had routinely targeted. And she began to spread her wings. "When I left the church, initially I wanted to hide," she says. "But David Abitbol [who runs the influential Jewlicious blog and with whom she'd regularly sparred on Twitter] invited my sister and me to the Jewlicious Festival. And I wanted to meet this community of Jewish people we'd been antagonising to try to understand who they are. David said, 'You can come, but you have to speak.' I was like, 'Not a chance.' But my sister said we had to do it."

Abitbol also explained a key Jewish concept to her: "He taught me this idea from Judaism called *tikkun olam*, which means to repair the world. It's the idea that every person living has an obligation to see the brokenness in the world and try to do what they can to repair it. And he said, 'You spent a lot of years of your life adding to the brokenness in the world, and anything you can do to try to repair it, you should do.'" So she did, doing an "in conversation" event with Abitbol at the festival and answering questions from the audience. Again, the response was more loving than she had expected or felt she deserved. "That entire process was so valuable – it was therapeutic, and it really forced me to think about things from

"YOUR LIFE IS SO ENMESHED WITH THESE PEOPLE WHOSE BELIEFS YOU NO LONGER SHARE. IT'S NOT JUST GIVING UP THE BELIEFS, IT'S ALSO THE COLLATERAL DAMAGE"

many different perspectives. The value was finding the meaning in my own story, and finding ways of doing good. We did a lot of awful things, so I'm finding a way to redeem that."

Abitbol was the one who told her that leaving the church was the most Westboro thing she could have done. "They're the ones who taught you to stand up for what you believe in, no matter what it cost you. They just never imagined you'd be standing up to them," he told her. He also helped her start her work with the Anti-Defamation League and other organisations fighting hate. "I was trying to reach out to the communities that we had targeted, the LGBTQ community, the Jewish community, other Christians, and trying to repair those breaches," she says. "I felt I owed them an explanation – we impacted a lot of people when I was at the church. I heard from a lot of people that it helped so much to understand where we were coming from and why we were doing what we were doing. And I needed to apologise. A lot of people who came to me in anger and frustration and hurt, I've been able to find reconciliation with, and that's a huge, huge part of my healing."

She's also providing help to an unexpected group: the police. "Several years ago, I started working with the FBI and other law enforcement organisations on extremism and radicalisation, trying to help illuminate that mindset, how people come to these groups and how their minds can be changed."

Her experiences led to a TED Talk that's garnered almost 8.5 million views, and an essay she initially wrote for Chad to explain her upbringing. "During that process, I found there was a lot of value for me personally," she says. And so the essay led her to write a book, *Unfollow: A Journey From Hatred To Hope, Leaving The Westboro Baptist Church*. "Writing is very therapeutic, but I don't think that's enough of a reason to publish a book – I hoped it would be useful to several different communities." The book is her apology for the harm she did – her practice of *tikkun olam*. And given that the remaining members of Westboro will certainly read it, it's also, she says, "a trail of breadcrumbs for my family. I don't expect them to change their minds, but I hope it introduces doubt and illuminates the destructiveness of some of our beliefs, and encourages them to find better ways."

Thankfully, her story has a happy ending. Phelps-Roper and her Twitter friend Chad got married, and they now have a one-year-old daughter. "Sølvi is the joy of my life, and Chad is the

best dad – we absolutely love being her parents. And it's a huge blessing to be able to do work that I think is important. I would never have believed in a million years when I left Westboro that I would be able to have a life with as much joy and wonder and purpose as I do now."

The book has already been snapped up by Hollywood, with Nick Hornby writing a screenplay and Australian movie powerhouse Bruna Papandrea set to produce. "Before I agreed to let them start the process of making this film, they both stressed the importance of not making demons out of the church and showing the humanity of the people inside. I believe they'll do everything they can to make it a complex, nuanced story."

That nuance is summed up in the epigraph to the book, which is from *The Great Gatsby* and forms another vital plank of Phelps-Roper's personal philosophy: "Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope."

"I love that so much," she says. "It's very easy to look at a person doing terrible things and just write them off as hopeless. But we see ourselves as being on a journey, we work on our flaws and hope to improve – we don't generally write ourselves off. So we need to do that for others; see that there is hope for them to change and grow and be better."

This is something, she believes, that the modern world needs to be better at. "I saw someone refer to the Westboro-isation of politics. And there are so many parallels there. It's a very natural human tendency to see people in our own tribe as good and the people who oppose those values we hold dear as a threat. At Westboro, there could be no legitimately good-willed, good-hearted person on the other side of the debate. And as much as I love Twitter and social media, it is set up as an echo chamber. If you only follow people who agree with you, the idea that good people could disagree on these things just becomes more and more impossible – and the more the other side's bad opinion of you pushes you more deeply into your own ideology."

This "us vs them" mentality, with each side howling insults at each other from across an unbridgeable divide, seems like an immutable fact of modern discourse – but Phelps-Roper proposes several solutions. "A huge part of what we can do to address this is to deliberately cultivate a following that is across these ideological divides. And we can't assume bad intent. People you're talking to have come to their opinions based on a lifetime of experience, but you don't necessarily know what that is. If you want to change their minds, listen and understand where they're coming from, make a connection."

She clarifies: "I don't mean accept racism or misogyny, but deliberately expose yourself to people who think differently than you do, and step back and be more deliberate about how you are responding and addressing and communicating with them. There's a lot we can learn from each other." E

Unfollow: A Journey From Hatred To Hope, Leaving The Westboro Baptist Church (\$32.99, Riverrun) is out now

Words: Hannah James

