



Runaway Radical: A Young Man's Reckless Journey to Save the World

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Travel the world, change lives, save souls. (Note: Results not typical.)

A young idealist heeds the call to radical obedience, gives away all of his belongings and shaking off the fetters of a complacent life, travels halfway around the world. There he discovers, among the poor and the fatherless of West Africa, that he has only surrendered to a new kind of captivity.

There is no doubt that young people today are fully invested in social and human rights issues. They start their own nonprofits, they run their own charities, they raise money for worthy causes. Books on saving the world abound, topping the bestsellers' lists, fueling the drive to prove not only commitment to the world but devotion to God.

Now there is a new crop of books starting to emerge, detailing the consequences of trying to save a world that is not ours to save. But none of these books tell the story that *Runaway Radical* tells; this is the first book to highlight the painful personal consequences of the new radicalism, documenting in heartbreaking detail what happens when a young person becomes entrapped instead of liberated by its call. His radical resolve now shaken, he returns home to rebuild his life and his faith.

Runaway Radical serves as an important and cautionary tale for all who lead and participate in compassion activism, in the art of doing good— both overseas and at home— amidst this new culture of radical Christian service.

Runaway Radical: A Young Man's Reckless Journey to Save the World Details

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From Reader Review *Runaway Radical: A Young Man's Reckless Journey to Save the World* for online ebook

Lady Jane says

Like many other readers, *Runaway Radical* resonated deeply with me because of experiences in my own young adulthood.

The mother and son co-authors tell the story of Jonathan's youthful, zealous, idealistic pursuit of Radical Christianity and subsequent exploitation and abuse by African and American Christian leaders who regarded him as an asset to advance their personal success, until he objected to corruption. Ultimately, Jonathan experienced a crisis of faith when the formula in which he invested did not produce the outcome he expected.

Jonathan and his mother told his story soon after his return to the U.S., after he completed at least the first layer of prayerful re-evaluation of his experience and relationship with God. Jonathan's story reveals his own missteps, as well as the abdication of oversight by those in his life who should have given him critical feedback regarding his plans. Everyone in Jonathan's life, including Jonathan, appeared to have a personal stake in Jonathan fulfilling his Radical call; doing so enhanced their own appearances of success.

I am in my 50s and even as recently as several months ago sobbed and cried while praying over my desolate 20s. My generation was encouraged in college, especially at Urbana conferences, to move to inner cities and join inner city churches, in order to be "salt" and "light" while living among the poor. Without counsel, covering or companionship, I answered the call. I am still processing those years with God and my understanding of what was lost, crucified, found and developed continues to be refined. Because of this, I wonder if *Runaway Radical* will become a better book if Jonathan -- without his mother -- revises and updates it in the future to incorporate the new perspective that will invariably come with age and greater experience.

Nicole Tera says

I didn't think writing a simple book review would be so hard to do. Usually I can't write fast enough when I read a book that strikes a chord with me. But I read this book, *Runaway Radical*, the day it came out and it's been over a week since and I still feel unable to write a review on it.

I think that's because Jonathan was so honest, and so truthful, and his story so closely mirrors what I have experienced, and felt, that I feel as if he's told a piece of my story I did not think I could ever tell — although silence seemed unjust, unbearable.

Jesus never sugar-coated or edited His message to get more followers when He invited people to walk with Him. He told the truth — if you want to follow Me, there will be pain, and there will be hatred, and there will be loss, and there will be death — but there will be Love.

On the contrary, most Christian writers want to "sell" something to you — to as many people as possible — so they will talk about their faith but not their doubts and their convictions but not both the failures and successes of actually attempting to live out those convictions.

This book is different.

Jonathan Hollingsworth did as the rich young ruler was unwilling to do — he sold what he had and traveled around the world to give to the poor. But the result was not what you might expect.

We're often told there's some sort of vending machine equation to Christianity. Insert the currency of sacrifice and you will be rewarded with miracles, success, fame, etc. The more you give, the more you will be blessed.

But what about when that doesn't happen?

What happens when we give up everything to live the radical Christian life and — unlike the advertisements we've read in the form of best-selling books — we get crushed, shut down, crucified?

Think about it, have you ever heard a modern-day story like that before?

Read this book and you'll know why you haven't. It's not because it doesn't happen.

You might think that if abuse were truly happening, you would know. But if you've ever been a victim of any form of abuse, you will know that is not true — abusers are often very, very good at what they do.

The signs of spiritual abuse are often subtle. There are no bruises or broken bones. There is no test that can be administered and sent off to a lab. There is often no "proof" or "evidence" at all.

But it is no less damaging than any other form of abuse. In fact, because it is done in the name of God, the name of "church" and "ministry," and such an easily silenced secret, it is uniquely destructive and often fatal to the victim's faith.

Yet here is a story from a man who has been knocked down, crushed with hopelessness, silenced, and has risen again to speak hope.

I believe that as a result of Jonathan giving his heart to God, unrestrained, God shared His heart for the abused with Jonathan. I do not believe what happened should have ever happened, but I also do not believe Jonathan's sacrifice was in vain — was a waste.

He did not fail, just as Jesus did not fail when they hung him on a cross. The religious leaders hated Him, too. But the lies weren't true. They can strip and beat and spit on and shame and hang and kill. But there is a resurrection after the crucifixion. The truth will set free.

And isn't that the original radicalism — true "radical Christianity" lived out — love crucified to set the prisoners free, to make the dead alive, to show a grace that is not counterfeit but real and costly and encompassing and for those of us who have realized most that we are in need of it?

Yes! God's grace is not for those who earn it, but for those who have realized at last that they cannot earn it — by shunning evil or by doing good — and yet are in desperate need of it. And so we ask God to take us up in His arms, like a father would take up a helpless infant, that we might rest our head against the heart that was pierced and broken for us, and know such a love.

Even when we cannot believe such a love exists, for us — because that is what abuse does.

Abuse says that we are unlovable. But it is a lie.

Abuse puts victims in a prison that they're told will get smaller and smaller until they are crushed, if needed, if they try to escape or ask for help.

Abusers tell us this lie because what they have imprisoned us with, essentially what they have built their empire with, is so fragile, in the big scheme of things, and the truth we have is so powerful actually, that they are living in constant fear and feel they have to make others more afraid to retain their illusion of power, their success.

But one courageous person in the possession of truth, like Jonathan, or Amy — or you, or me — could make it all crumble, set free all the prisoners and destroy forever all the prisons they've used to build their empires.

Because one person, no longer silent, could begin a revolution of truth-speakers, of victims who no longer believe whatever lie, whatever fear, once kept them silent.

Thank you for your courage, Jonathan. Keep speaking hope and truth. When you tell your story, you tell a bit of mine — a bit of all of ours. And, one day, I believe, we will all be free. And whole.

Rachel says

Out of the 112 books I've read in the past 6 months, this one's the worst by far. I saw that this was the Patheos book club pick and thought it sounded like something my interfaith book club might like. We might like it in that we can all agree that the main author (the mom, deciding to overwhelm her son's story) is a terrible person. She's every privileged, white, lazy Christian that you've ever met. She starts off just complaining about how terrible it is that her son was so altruistic (because, you know, Jesus was never altruistic). SHE ACTUALLY SAYS THAT YOU SHOULDN'T GIVE MONEY DIRECTLY TO THE POOR BECAUSE THEY'RE DIRTY AND YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'LL DO WITH IT. She hates that her son wants to spend time with the needy. Later in the book, she confesses that she and her son were fighting while actually writing the book, and it really colors all the judging she does. Then this horrendous experience in Africa happens, and she blames his radical altruism above even the man who took advantage of Jonathan. Never mind that she raised him in a Christian bubble away from the real world, with Christian homeschooling and Christian colleges. Never mind that the only person who is to blame for exploiting you is the one doing the exploitation. She was happy when he finally gave in to her point of view (and calls it his own original thinking) and blamed his wanting to actually go out and help people instead of staying at home and feeling self-righteous. It's like reading Orwell's book 1984 from Big Brother's point of view instead of Winston's. You can witness a bright, young person who is breaking free from a mold get turned into a brainwashed ordinary Christian with no interest in good works.

Now that I have that out of my system, I can say that it's an informative read, but not for the reason I read it. I wanted to know more about how missions can go wrong, but it's only a small sliver of a book. This confirms what I think about a lot of mainline Christians. Not all, but a lot of them. I now know that I will avoid Amy Hollingsworth, most evil psychologist in the world, like the plague.

Sommer says

This book was very interesting and thought-provoking. I haven't read anything like this before and I think this an important story for Christians to read, especially those involved in mission work. I'm sorry that Jonathan had to go through such a depressing situation, but I'm glad he and his mother shared his story. This was definitely a eye-opening read.

Sarah Hyatt says

I'm giving this one four stars for the overall message. It might be overly generous but though overall I felt things were lacking, there were sentences that were spot on.

The writing jumps around quite a bit and the changing point of views get confusing. The book is also short, and I think overall it could have benefitted from, oddly enough, either more or less distance on the part of the author. I see the motivation to write down all of this stuff immediately, but maybe more time would have made it more grounded and more developed. I felt at times like the authors were rushing to get the (important) message out so quickly that ideas weren't explored adequately enough. It's not purely topical, but also not reflective/introspective enough to be a memoir.

However, any book that wants to challenge the mentality in Christian culture to DO SOMETHING GREAT is a book I will welcome. I don't necessarily agree completely with the authors' conclusions - it is legalism, yes, to define yourself by the things you do, but I think there is a missing piece that is being overlooked which is that Doing Things is a path to fame. Christianity can be a career path, and one that lets people fulfill their desires to be beloved and special and admired. For the author, it seems like these were things he wanted from God (do something big enough and God will notice) but honestly his motives were more pure in that regard than many people.

Christie Hagerman says

My heart broke for this young man. I saw him through the eyes of a mother, proud of those steps her young adult is taking out into the big, bad world with a sincere hope to make it a better place. I saw him through the eyes of a missionary, having seen the good, the bad, and the ugly of this giant machine we call Christianity, from the inside out. I saw him through the eyes of one of the leaders who has encouraged young people to "go big or go home," rallying them not to settle for status quo but to run as hard as possible and not look back. I just wanted to go find this guy and give him a big hug, telling him how sorry I am that he went through what he did.

His mother starts the story, leading us through situations no young person should ever have to endure, shining light on what happens when radicalism goes too far. Jonathon's brave but shaky voice joins in, and I can only admire him even more for sharing his story after so many negative reactions he experienced.

This book serves as a warning to Christians leaders, and it brings up questions we may have to struggle to find the answers to. It has definitely caused me to understand why some red flags have popped up for me in the past and why we need to look more deeply into how we are training eager young people to share the Gospel.

I received an ARC of this book from netgalley.com and the publisher in exchange for my honest review.

Jodi says

This is an important story. It should be on every Christian's shelf, right next to the copy of *Kisses From Katie*. I don't say this because they are doppelgänger experiences of American Christians on the African continent, but because God can be present and triumphant in different narratives in different ways. I applaud truth-telling.

Jen Bradbury says

In recent years, much criticism has been lobbed at short-term mission trips and in particular, at their value; At whether they do more harm than good. To that end, books like *When Helping Hurts* have helped those of us in the church figure out how to do missions well.

Much of what's been said critically about short-term missions has been focused on the harm done to those we serve. We seldom hear about the harm that short-term missionaries can encounter themselves.

Runaway Radical by Amy Hollingsworth and Jonathan Hollingsworth shines a light into this void. Through excerpts from blog posts, first-person accounts from Jonathan, and reflections from his mother, Amy, *Runaway Radical* tells the story of Jonathan's failed missionary experience in Africa and the damage it did to his health, psyche, and faith. To be sure, it's a story that needs to be told – of missions gone bad and of a manipulative and some would even argue, abusive church.

Runaway Radical is packed with wisdom – especially in its later chapters, when it talks often about the damage that can be done by legalism, which the authors define as “trying to achieve spiritual results with a prescribed set of actions, by being good or by doing good.” According to Jonathan and Amy, legalism is the “enemy of grace”, which is something that “allows for possibilities.” In their words, “God sent the law so that we could define good and evil. But God sent Jesus so that good and evil no longer defined us. And if the burden to not be bad has been lifted, so has the burden to be good.”

Despite the wisdom *Runaway Radical* contains, I fear few will keep reading it long enough to find it. The writing is choppy, overly detailed, and at times, utterly confusing as it alternates between Jonathan and Amy's voices – something that can make persevering through this book difficult. That said, if you're willing to do the work of wading through that, this book will be helpful to those considering working abroad as short-term missionaries as well as to their families.

Hannah Notess says

It's been more than 10 years since my not-as-planned overseas volunteer experience, and there's a part of me that still wonders, "What if I'd just done x or x differently? Maybe it would have worked out better?" Reading this brought back that experience and made me see it in a new light - made me realize the weight and expectations I put on overseas volunteering made it that much more difficult.

I'm a big fan of stories of faith that aren't usually told, and this definitely falls in that category - stories of mission-trip-gone-wrong need to be looked at in a more complex light.

I also want to mention this one moment in the book where the mother likens her son's hyper-spiritual obsessive phase to her own struggle with an eating disorder when she was younger. That comparison really rang true for me, and isn't really a thought I'd heard expressed elsewhere.

In a way I think this book jumps too quickly to a single explanation: "I traded one form of legalism for another and that's what went wrong," but then again not that much time has passed since the experience. Still, it's thoughtful and really important story, I think. Definitely worth reading if you've had a mission trip or church experience that went bad in ways you didn't expect, despite all good intentions.

Deborah Hall-hertle says

Story of a hurting young man's desire to save the world for Christ and the disappointments he experienced abroad and in transitioning back home. Church leaders on both ends didn't know how to help this young man through his dreams of being a missionary and the reality of what he faced. Most missionaries face disillusionment somewhere along the way. Johnathan is very open and honest about his lack of preparedness for the position in a foreign culture and the difficulties he faced when he came back to the USA without a successful outcome. It is a difficult story to read but there are lessons well worth learning as we sort through our own illusions of what life is going to be like and the disappointments we face along the way.

Beth says

Content was good, 3.5 stars, but I wasn't a fan of the structure.

Amanda Geaney (Christian Shelf-Esteem) says

I read Runaway Radical completely in just two sittings. To me, this book was like watching something awful unfold before your eyes and yet lacking the ability to look away. Not that the book was bad, because it wasn't, but I found it to be completely unsettling. I leave for my first short-term overseas mission trip in two short months. Therefore, Jonathan's story of a mission trip gone bad weighs heavy on my heart.

Runaway Radical is written by the mother-son team of Amy and Jonathan Hollingsworth. Amy's voice details the story from a mother's point of view, her son's desire to serve God, his heart for the poor and downtrodden, and the mission trip that rocked his faith in both God and their church leadership. Much of Jonathan's suffering stems from self-imposed legalistic standards coupled with the church leader/mission organizations abuse of power. The anguish and helplessness Amy feels in the aftermath of his abuse drips from the page.

To me, the authors' motivation for the writing seemed to be equal parts cautionary tale and healing for Jonathan. The warning against legalism is clear and strong. Having been snared by legalism in my youth, it was easy for me to relate to Jonathan's desire to be good, do more, and sacrifice bigger in order to please God. Jonathan's shift towards radicalism develops over time. It seems to me that when he shaved his head,

moved into his closet, and started giving away his worldly possessions, the red flags would have been raised for me as a parent. Instead, his parents allow him to pursue his passion all the way to West Africa. Within days of arriving, Jonathan can sense that something is off. Instead of the mission work he went expecting to do, the mission organization uses Jonathan as a spectacle to draw crowds, which enabled them to reach more with their prosperity gospel. When he finally returns home, he is not the same young man that left—he's broken. The process of co-authoring *Runaway Radical* was a sort of therapy for Jonathan suggested by his mother. In hindsight, Jonathan shares where his beliefs went wrong, how he was used, and God's presence through it all.

While I did not agree with all that was shared, like the heavy use of dream interpretation, the story was thought-provoking. It was also tragic, humbling, and grace-filled. I give *Runaway Radical* 4/5 stars.

**I received a review copy of this book through the Family Christian Blogger Program. I was not required to leave a positive review. All opinions are my own.

Jenny Wells says

A story that exemplifies why, "Doing good" instead of "don't do this" has become the way legalism is disguising itself as how to live radically for Jesus. My heart ached for this mother and son as they chronicle his (and her enabling, thinking she's doing the right thing) deep commitment to "answer the call" and "follow Jesus to the ends of the earth" thinking all the choices he made might save the poor. The foreboding is felt from the beginning. I wasn't as happy with the end as it became more theoretical than continuing in a memoir vein. But its message is so important. I would encourage any parent who thinks their children being "sold out for Jesus" is the pinnacle that you hope they'll reach as young adults to read this book first.

Tina says

Wow! A must read for all. It's one I actually may read twice

Jennifer Wilson says

FTC disclaimer: I received an advance reader's copy of this book from Family Christian in order to provide a review.

It was the late 1990s. I was at in a sea of a thousand college students. The index card in my hand felt so obvious. I folded it so no one saw I still had it as the buckets went down the row to collect these cards from other students. I was at a conference and nearly everyone filled out a card saying they pledged one year of their life to full time Christian work. I didn't know if I could do that. Rather than lie and sign my name to something, I didn't return it. I still have that card, unfilled out, and stuck in the Bible I took to that conference. It's stayed in there for seventeen years as a reminder. First it was a reminder of guilt. Now it is a reminder of I'm free to be a Christian without the promises and works.

In *Runaway Radical*, Jonathan Hollingsworth reminded me so much of myself at his age. I recently tweeted to him that his book showed me where I went wrong in college. Yet, in some ways, like the author, I'm still

trying to get it right. I grew up in a legalistic church. No movies. No dancing. I became legalistic in relationships with men and gave up dating for God's standard. Yet, the husband I felt God was going to lead to me didn't appear. (As I write this, I am 41 and getting ready to be married for the first time. What would it have done to my faith at age 20 to know I would have to wait another two decades for marriage?) Over time, I began to see the rules as legalism. I began to shed the don'ts, but in the process, I picked up the "do"s. Go on mission trips. Care for the least of these. I remember feeling called by God to go on a missions trip in college. I remember a few nights before I left I got on my knees to beg God to consider I was willing to do that for Him, and wouldn't it please be enough, did I really have to go? I had to. And it was a very difficult time. These are the missions trips you don't hear about in church. I had a lot of financial support. I returned and spoke in churches of the good parts of the trip, the difficulties swept under the rug. This is why this book resonated so much with me.

One of the lines in the book says something to the effect of he learned to be sold out and extreme for Christ, but what about teaching us to be average Christians? I'm sorry to say, I'm still learning that. I'm twice the age of the author, but I'm still figuring out it's okay to be a normal person and a Christian. It doesn't make us any less of one if we have jobs where we work for secular employers. It might FEEL wrong, but I learned years ago that we are to serve God where we are going, not go and serve. Yet, I still heard little about that. Go. What if we stay? Not all missions organizations are the same. Some, like the author of Runaway Radical, would be better if we stayed away from them rather than partnering with them. Not everyone is cut out to be an overseas missionary. You could be allergic to a key ingredient in food of a certain country. What happens when you feel God calling you to something and you fail? Does it mean He failed you? Did you not hear Him? This book wrestles with these questions and more.

I can't tell you how highly I recommend this book. It is one of the books that I believe will stand the test of time and become a classic, and hopefully even required reading for future missionaries. God does call some people. I have several friends who are foreign missionaries. But make sure the "Go" is from God and not from guilt because we as Americans have so much and there are millions in this world without the luxuries that we have because we were born into this country.

Before you go, read this book. I know I wish I would have.
