

they frequently worry over how to right the wrongs they did.

### **Perplexities about Altruism.**

Many of these people want to find ways to put their altruism and energy back to work without becoming a pawn in another manipulative group. Some fear they have become "groupies" who are defenseless against getting entangled in a controlling organization. Yet, they also feel a need for affiliations. They wonder how they can properly select among the myriad contending organizations -- social, religious, philanthropic, service-oriented, psychological - and remain their own boss. The group consensus on this tends to advise caution about joining any new "uplift" group, and to suggest instead purely social, work, or school-related activities.

### **Money.**

An additional issue is the cult members' curious experience with money: many cult members raise more per day fund-raising on the streets than they will ever be able to earn a day on any job. Most cults assign members daily quotas to fill of \$100 to \$150. Especially skillful and dedicated solicitors say they can bring in as much as \$1,500 day after day. In one of our groups one person claimed to have raised \$30,000 in a month selling flowers, and another to have raised \$69,000 in nine months; one testified in court to raising a quarter of a million dollars selling flowers and candy and begging over a three-year period.

### **Elite No More.**

"They get you to believing that they alone know how to save the world," recalled one member. "You think you are in the vanguard of history .... You have been called out of the anonymous masses to assist the messiah... As the chosen, you are above the law. They have arrived at the humbling and exalting conclusion that they are more valuable to God, to history, and to the future than other people are." Clearly one of the more poignant comedowns of post-group life is the end of feeling a chosen person, a member of an elite.

It appears from our work that if they hope to help, therapists -- and friends and family--need to have at least some knowledge of the content of a particular cult's program in order to grasp what the ex-member is trying to describe. A capacity to explain certain behavioral reconstruction techniques is also important. One ex-member saw a therapist for two sessions but left because the therapist "reacted as if I were making it up, or crazy, he couldn't tell which. But I was just telling it like it was in The Family."

Many therapists try to bypass the content of the

experience in order to focus on long-term personality attributes. But unless he or she knows something of the events of the experience that prey on the former cultist's mind, we believe, the therapist is unable to open up discussion or even understand what is happening. Looking at the experience in general ways, he may think the young person has undergone a spontaneous religious conversion and may fail to be aware of the sophisticated, high-pressure recruitment tactics and intense influence procedures the cults use to attract and keep members. He may mistakenly see all the ex-cultist's behavior as manifestations of longstanding psychopathology.

Many ex-cult members fear they will never recover their full functioning. Learning from the group that most of those affected eventually come to feel fully competent and independent is most encouraging for them. Their experiences might well be taken into account by people considering allying themselves with such groups in the future.

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# **Coming Out of the Cults**

## **Part two**

Margaret T. Singer, PhD

"Now, look, Rosemary," I said. "Tell us concretely exactly what it was that happened, and what you were feeling." With effort, she told us she had been using the Xerox machine when the paper jammed; she didn't know how to fix it, felt inadequate, was ashamed to go and ask. Instead, she stood silent and dissociated before the machine. Under pressure now, she found ways to tell the story. In cult days, she had been encouraged to generalize to vague categories of feeling, to be imprecise, to translate personal responses into code.

People affected by floating are immensely relieved to learn that others have experienced these same flashbacks, that they can be controlled, and that the condition eventually diminishes. Those who still float for a long time -- it can go on for two years -- are generally the same ones to have reported severe depression, extreme indecisiveness, and other signs of pathology before entering the cult.

### **Blurring of Mental Acuity.**

Most cult veterans are neither grossly incompetent nor blatantly disturbed. Nevertheless, they report -- and their families confirm -- subtle cognitive inefficiencies and changes that take some time to pass. Ex-cultists often have trouble putting into words the inefficiencies they want to describe. Jack, the physiology graduate, said, "It's more that after a while outside, something comes back. One day I realized my thinking had gradually expanded. I could see everything in more complex ways. The group had slowly, a step at a time, cut me off from anything but the simplest right-wrong notions. They keep you from thinking and reasoning about all the contingencies by always telling you, 'Don't doubt, don't be negative.' And after a while you hardly think about anything except in yes-no, right-wrong, simpleminded ways." Ira, the factory worker, or Jack, now working as a hospital orderly, have to take simple jobs until they regain former levels of competence.

### **Uncritical Passivity.**

Many ex-cultists report they accept almost every thing they hear, as if their pre-cult skills for evaluating and criticizing were in relative abeyance. They cannot listen and judge: they listen, believe, and obey. Simple remarks of friends, dates, co-workers, and roommates are taken as

commands, even though the person does not feel like doing the bidding, or even abhors it. One woman had gotten up in the middle of the night to respond to the telephoned command of a near stranger: "I borrowed my dad's car to drive about 65 miles out into the country and help this guy I had just met once in a coffeehouse to transport some stolen merchandise, because he spoke in such a strong and authoritative way to me on the phone. I can't believe how much I still obey people."

When this behavior comes up in our group sessions, we discuss the various cults' injunctions against questioning doctrine or directives, and the effects of living for months or years in situations that encourage acquiescence. Ex-members of some of the more authoritarian cults describe constant urging to "surrender your mind'... accept ... melt ... flow with it. Don't question now, later you will understand." Reluctance or objections are reprimanded: "Don't be negative, don't be resistant, surrender."

Joan had been the nemesis of many college teachers before she joined a cult. "I was into the radical feminist group at school; I was a political radical; I was trying to overthrow the system. In three months, they recycled me and I was obeying everybody. I still have that tendency to obey anybody who says 'Gimme, fetch me, go for .... "' Ginny was described by her family as having been "strong willed. It was impossible to make her do any thing she didn't want to do." Now, she complains, "Any guy who asks me anything, I feel compelled to say yes; I feel I should sacrifice for them; that's how I did for four years in the group."

### **Fear of the Cult.**

Most of the groups work hard to prevent defections: some ex-members cite warnings of heavenly damnation for themselves, their ancestors, and their children. Since many cult veterans retain some residual belief in the cult doctrines, this alone can be a horrifying burden.

When members do leave, efforts to get them back reportedly range from moderate harassment to incidents involving the use of force. Many ex-members and their families secure unlisted phone numbers; some move away from known addresses; some even take assumed names in distant places.

At the root of ex-members' fear is often the memory of old humiliations administered for stepping out of line. Kathy, who had been in a group for over five years, said, "Some of the older members might still be able to get to me and crush my spirit like they did when I became depressed and couldn't go out and fund-raise or recruit. I had been unable to eat or sleep; I was weak and ineffectual. They called me in and the leader screamed at me, 'You're too rebellious. I'm going to break your spirit. You are too strong-willed.' And they made me crawl at their feet. I still freak out when I think about how close they

drove me to suicide that day; for a long time afterward, all I could do was help with cooking. I can hardly remember the details, it was a nightmare."

It appears that most cult groups soon turn their energies to recruiting new members rather than prolonging efforts to reattract defectors. Still, even after the initial fear of retaliation has passed, ex-members worry about how to handle the inevitable chance street meetings with old colleagues, expecting them to try to stir up feeling of guilt over leaving and condemn their present life.

Fear may be most acute for former members who have left a spouse or children behind in the cults that recruited couples and families. Any effort to make contact risks breaking the link completely. Often painful legal actions ensue over child custody or conservatorships between ex and continuing adherents.

Even reporters who have gone into a cult as bogus recruits to get a story, staying only a few days, have felt a terrible compassion for the real recruits who stay behind. One, Dana Gosney, formerly of the Redwood City Tribune, wrote that it took him three and a half hours to extract himself from the group once he announced he wanted to leave. He was denied permission to go, he was pleaded with, he was told the phone did not work so he could not contact a ride. Eventually, he says, "Two steps beyond the gate; I experienced the sensation of falling and reached out to steady myself. My stomach, after churning for several hours, forced its contents from my mouth. Then I began to weep uncontrollably. I was crying for those I had left behind. "

### **The Fishbowl Effect.**

A special problem for cult veterans is the constant watchfulness of family and friends, who are on the alert for any signs that the difficulties of real life will send the person back. Mild dissociation, deep preoccupations, temporary altered states of consciousness, and any positive talk about cult days can cause alarm in a former member's family. Often the ex-member senses it, but neither side knows how to open up discussion.

New acquaintances and old friends can also trigger an ex-cultist's feelings that people are staring, wondering why he joined such a group. In our discussion, ex-members share ways they have managed to deal with these situations. The best advice seems to be to try focusing on the current conversation until the sense of living under scrutiny gradually fades.

As I suggested above, returnees often want to talk to people about positive aspects of the cult experience. Yet, they commonly feel that others refuse to hear anything but the negative aspects, even in our groups. Apart from the pleasure of commitment and the simplicity of life in the old regime, they generally want to discuss a few warm

friendships, or even romances, and the sense that group living taught them to connect more openly and warmly to other people than they could before their cult days. As one man exclaimed, "How can I get across the greatest thing -- that I no longer fear rejection the way I used to? While I was in the Church, and selling on the street, I was rejected by thousands of people I approached, and I learned to take it. Before I went in, I was terrified that anyone would reject me in any way!"

Conditioned by the cults' condemnation of the beliefs and conduct of outsiders, ex-members tend to remain hypercritical of much of the ordinary behavior of humans. This makes reentry still harder. When parents, friends, or therapists try to convince them to be less rigid in their attitudes, they tend to see such as evidence of casual moral relativism.

### **The Agonies of Explaining.**

Why one joined is difficult to tell anyone who is unfamiliar with cults. One has to describe the subtleties and power of the recruitment procedures, and how one was persuaded and indoctrinated. Most difficult of all is to try to explain why a person is unable simply to walk away from a cult, for that entails being able to give a long and sophisticated explanation of social and psychological coercion, influence, and control procedures.

"People just can't understand what the group puts into your mind," one ex-cultist said. "How they play on your guilts and needs. Psychological pressure is much heavier than a locked door. You can bust a locked door down in terror or anger, but chains that are mental are real hard to break. The heaviest thing I've ever done is leaving the group, breaking those real heavy bonds on my mind."

### **Guilt.**

According to our informants, significant parts of cult activity are based on deception, particularly fund-raising and recruitment. The dishonesty is rationalized as being for the greater good of the cult or the person recruited. One girl said she had censored mail from and to new recruits, kept phone calls from them, lied to their parents saying she didn't know where they were when they phoned or appeared, and deceived donors on the street when she was fund-raising. "There is something inside me that wants to survive more than anything, that wants to live, wants to give, wants to be honest," she noted. "And I wasn't honest when I was in the group. How could they have gotten me to believe it was right to do that? I never really thought it was right, but they kept saying it was okay because there was so little time left to save the world." As they take up their personal consciences again, many ex-members feel great remorse over the lies they have told, and