Traumatic Abuse in Cults: A Psychoanalytic Perspective

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Abstract

Using his ten year experience in Siddha Yoga under the leadership of Gurumayi, the author presents psychoanalytic concept-ualizations of narcissism in an effort to develop a way of understanding cult leaders and their followers, and especially of traumatic abuse in cults from the follower's perspective. A psychoanalytically informed treatment approach for working with recovering cult followers is proposed, consisting of providing: 1) an understanding of the leader's extreme dependence on the follower's submission and psychological enslavement; 2) a clear, firm, and detailed understanding of the leader's abusiveness; and 3) an exploration of normative and/or traumatic developmental issues for the follower, as part of a process of making sense of and giving meaning to the follower's experience.

When I began graduate school in social work in September of 1994, it had been just two years since I moved out of the spiritual community, the ashram, I had lived and worked in for more than 10 years, up until my 40th birthday. In those two post-ashram years, while still considering myself devoted to the guru and the spiritual path I had chosen, I did a good deal of soul searching, much of it through the process of psychotherapy. One of the uses I made of psychotherapy was to explore my career options, and I eventually chose to seek the necessary education and training to become a psychotherapist myself. In my first social work field placement, many of the clients I was assigned described terrible histories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in childhood, and in some cases were involved in ongoing abuse, either as perpetrators or victims. Many of these clients were struggling to recover from devastating addictions. Although my own life has been something of a bed of roses in comparison with the suffering these clients have known, I soon discovered I had a deeper connection to their experiences than I at first realized.

I had always portrayed my participation in Siddha Yoga (also known as SYDA), to myself and others, as an idealistic commitment to a noble spiritual path, dedicated to spiritual

awakening and upliftment in the world. Just after school began, my perceptions were shattered when I learned of an incident concerning a friend of mine, a young woman just turned 21, who was sexually harassed in the ashram by one of its most powerful male leaders. When she sought help from Gurumayi, the now 48-year-old female Indian guru who is the head of the ashram, Gurumayi told the young woman, with contempt and disdain, that she had brought the harassment upon herself. Through her chief assistant, Gurumayi warned the young woman, "don't ever tell anyone about this, especially not your mother." The woman's mother, who had made substantial donations to the ashram over the years, was a long-time devotee of Gurumayi's. After two years of intense inner conflict, the young woman finally did tell her story. As a result, many others began to speak out, eventually contributing to an extensive exposé of SYDA in *The New Yorker* magazine (Harris, 1994). Published just two months after I started graduate school, the article revealed a Pandora's box of well-documented abuses by the leaders of SYDA that had been going on for more than 20 years.

In the two years prior to the publication of the article, I had slowly and painfully begun to acknowledge to myself and others that there were aspects of SYDA and its leaders that I found unethical and disturbing. In particular, I had witnessed and personally experienced Gurumayi verbally and emotionally abusing her followers, publicly shaming and humiliating those with whom she was displeased in cruel and harsh ways. I had heard her tell lies and witnessed her deliberately deceiving others. I witnessed her condoning and encouraging illegal and unethical business and labor practices, such as smuggling gold and U.S. dollars in and out of India, and exploiting workers without providing adequate housing, food, health care, or social security. I was aware that for many years, Gurumayi, and her predecessor, Swami Muktananda, had been using spies, hidden cameras, and microphones to gather information about followers in the ashram. I had heard whispers that Muktananda, contrary to his claims of celibacy and renunciation, had extensive sexual relations with female followers, which he then lied about and attempted to cover up with threats of violence to those who sought to expose him. Later, after I exited Siddha Yoga in 1994, I came to recognize in Muktananda's and Gurumayi's behavior toward their followers the hallmarks of abuse: the

use of power to seduce, coerce, belittle, humiliate, and intimidate others for the ultimate purpose of psychological enslavement and parasitic exploitation.

I had deeply suppressed my doubts about SYDA for many years, but they suddenly and dramatically crystallized when I heard the story of the young woman I knew. In the phrase, "Don't ever tell anyone about this, especially not your mother," I heard a chilling echo of the voice of the incestuous father, the battering husband, the sexual harasser, the rapist. As Judith Herman says, in her seminal work entitled *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), "secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense" (p. 8). It was hearing these words, "Don't ever tell," that broke for me what Ernst Becker (1973) has called "the spell cast by persons -- the nexus of unfreedom." I recognized that, like many of my social work clients who were abused as children by their parents, I too had been subjected to abuse—by the person I called my guru.

In this paper I will: 1) present a psychoanalytic conceptualization of the psychopathology of the cult leader; 2) discuss ways that cult leaders manipulate, abuse, and exploit followers; and 3) present theories about individual relational and also broader cultural factors that influence the individual's psychological organization in ways that may contribute to vulnerability to cult participation. I draw from various psychoanalytic schools, including object relations (both Kleinian and Middle School), interpersonal, self psychology, intersubjectivity and contemporary relational schools. As a former participant in a cult, and now an observer of cults working as a psychoanalytic therapist with former cult members, it is my hope that the psychoanalytic formulations I discuss here will be helpful to others concerned with understanding cult phenomena.

What Is a Cult, and Why Do People Get Involved in Them?

Cult experts estimate that there are several thousand cultic groups in the United States today and that at least four million people have at some point in recent years been in one or more of such groups (Langone, 1993, p. 29). The former Cult Awareness Network, before being taken over by the Church of Scientology in the late '90s, reported that it received about 18,000 inquiries a year (Tobias & Lalich, 1994). Those of us interested in the phenomenon of cults have attempted to define our terms in various ways (see, e.g., Langone, 1993, p. 5). In this paper, I am defining a cult largely on the basis of the personality of its leader. In my definition, a cult is a group that is led by a person who claims, explicitly or implicitly, to have reached human perfection; or, in the case of a religious cult, who claims unity with the divine; and therefore claims to be exempt from social or moral limitations or restrictions. In the language of psychoanalytic diagnostics, such people would be called pathological narcissists, with paranoid and megalomaniacal tendencies. Without the cult leader, there is no cult, and from my perspective, in order to understand cult followers, we must simultaneously seek to understand cult leaders. I will attempt to describe the interplay of psychological dynamics between leader and follower that can enable cult leaders to dominate and control followers and enable cult followers to be seduced and manipulated into submission.

The questions most often asked of former cult members, usually with incredulity, are "How did you get into something like this? And why did you stay so long?" The unspoken subtext seems to be, "How could someone like you end up in something like this? There must have been something wrong with you." Certainly, people who join cults are not seeking to be controlled, made dependent, exploited, or psychologically harmed when they first commit themselves to membership. Cult members actually come to embrace and even glorify these kinds of mistreatment in part because their leaders, and their followers by proxy, have mastered the art of seduction, using techniques of undue influence (Cialdini, 1984). As Hochman (1990) notes, cults, by employing

> miracle, mystery, and authority, promise salvation. Instead of boredom—noble and sweeping goals. Instead of existential anxiety—structure and certainty. Instead of alienation—community. Instead of impotence —solidarity directed by all-knowing leaders. (p. 179)

Cults prey upon idealistic seekers, offering answers to social problems and promising to promote bona fide social change. Recruitment addresses the anxieties and loneliness of people experiencing personal problems, transition, or crisis by holding out the promise of transformative healing within the framework of a caring and understanding community (Tobias & Lalich, 1994). Cult recruitment often takes place in sophisticated settings, in the form of seminars featuring persuasive, well-credentialed speakers, such as successful professionals, respected academics, or popular artists, writers, and entertainers. Cults target members from middle-class backgrounds, often directly from college campuses, and the majority of members are of above average intelligence (Hassan, 1990; Kliger, 1994; Tobias & Lalich, 1994).

In recruitment programs, speakers and members present various kinds of misinformation about cult leaders, including concealing their existence altogether. Otherwise, the leader may be represented as a humble, wise and loving teacher, when in reality he or she may be a despot in possession of a substantial fortune, generated from member donations and (often illegal) business activities. The apparent leader may be only a figurehead, while the identity of the actual leader is concealed. False claims of ancient lineages may be made, or the leader is falsely said to be revered and renowned in his or her own country. Cult leaders rewrite and falsify their own biographies. Recruitment programs generally do not, for instance, inform participants about leaders of the group having criminal records, or a group's history of sexual abuse of members, or the group's involvement with illegal activities. Seduction in cult recruitment typically involves strict control and falsification of information.

The Psychopathology of the Cult Leader

Thought reform, or mind control, is another important component of my conceptualization of the seductive power of cults, although it is not a psychoanalytic concept. The psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (1987) studied the methods used by the Chinese Communists during the Korean War to turn war prisoners into willing accomplices, and called these methods thought reform (see also Hinkle & Wolff, 1976; Schein, 1956; Singer, 1979). Thought reform techniques are readily found in use in any cult, yet it is my belief, based on my own exposure to and study of various cults, that many cult leaders are not necessarily students of thought reform techniques. One might argue that meditation and chanting, for example, are techniques specifically designed to control others, and they can be. But they are also ancient traditional spiritual practices. Cult leaders who require their followers to perform mind-numbing, trance-inducing practices may do so while fully believing that such practices are for the greatest possible good of the follower. In religious philosophies that emphasize detachment and transcendence, for instance, trance states are highly valued as avenues toward these spiritual goals. Such religious "surrender"—to a sense of one's wholeness, one's connectedness to life, to a loving and creative spirit both within and without—is not necessarily the same experience as submission to the domination, control, and exploitation of a particular group and/or leader. The urge to surrender, as understood by Ghent (1990), a leading theorist of contemporary relational psychoanalysis, can be a move toward inner freedom, and does not necessarily lead to submission, or enslavement.

Cult leaders, however, practice forms of control, such as intimidation and humiliation, which demand submission. In Ghent's view, masochistic submission is a *perversion* of surrender. Cult leaders often use the idea of surrender as bait, and then switch to a demand for submission. Nevertheless, in so doing, they may not actually be practicing mind control in any conscious way. They may simply be behaving in ways typical of pathological narcissists, people whose personalities are characterized by paranoia and megalomania—characteristics, by the way, that are readily attributable to one of the modern masters of thought reform techniques, the totalitarian dictator known as

Chairman Mao. Totalitarian dictators study and invent thought reform techniques, but many cult leaders may simply be exhibiting characteristic behaviors of the pathological narcissist, with the attendant paranoia and mania typical of this personality disorder. Thought reform is the systematic application of techniques of domination, enslavement, and control, which can be quite similar to the naturally occurring behaviors of other abusers, like batterers, rapists, incest perpetrators, in all of whom can be seen the behaviors of pathological narcissism.

I base my formulation of the psychology of the cult leader in part on the daily close contact I had with Swami Chidvilasananda (Gurumayi) of Siddha Yoga between 1985 and 1992. I also support my hypotheses with information gained from extensive work with psychotherapy clients who have described their cult leaders' behavior in detail, as well as on my extensive reading of biographical accounts of other leaders of cults.[1] I propose, following the profile of the pathological narcissist delineated by Rosenfeld (1971), a leading figure of the contemporary Kleinian school in London, and similar formulations from the American self psychological perspective of Kohut (1976), that the cult leader profoundly depends on the fanatic devotion of the follower. This dependency is deeply shameful to the cult leader, because, based on traumatic aspects of her own developmental history, any dependency has come to mean

[1]There are those who would consider Freud a cult leader, and psychoanalysis, his invention, a cult (e.g., Storr [1996]). While I think that equating Sigmund Freud to, say, Jim Jones, is absurd on its face (and Storr takes far too complex a view to make so reductionist an assertion), it is true that generations of psychoanalytic thinkers following Freud have struggled to evaluate and reform residues of positivism, determinism, and authoritarianism in psychoanalytic theory and practice (see especially Fromm [1959], and Mitchell & Aron [1999]). Today, many increasingly prominent psychoanalytic schools are actively seeking to expose and reject authoritarianism in theory and treatment. These include the following contemporary schools: object relations, interpersonal, relational, intersubjective, postmodern, feminist, and contemporary self psychology, to name a few. In fact, one of the most radical critiques of psychoanalytic authoritarianism comes from one of the leaders of its most orthodox institutions, Owen Renik, the editor of *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* (see Renik, 1993).

despicable weakness and humiliation to her. Developmental trauma in those who in later life can be termed pathological narcissists typically consists of being raised, by parents or other caregivers, under extreme domination and control, accompanied by repeated experiences of being shamed and humiliated. The pathological narcissist identifies with this aggression and comes to despise his own normative dependency, to be contemptuous of dependence, which is equated to weakness. Manically defending against deprivation and humiliation, he comes to believe that he needs no one, that he can trust only himself, that those who depend on others are weak and contemptible. Thus the cult leader, largely unconsciously, compensates for his inability to trust and depend on others, and defends against the intense shame he feels connected to need and dependency, by attaining control over his followers, first through seductive promises of unconditional love and acceptance, and then through intimidation, shaming, and belittling. This serves to induce the loathsome dependency in the follower, and the cult leader thus contrives to disavow his own dependency, felt as loathsome and shameful. By psychologically seducing, and then battering the follower into being the shameful dependent one, the cult leader maintains his superior position and can boast delusionally of being totally liberated from all petty, mundane attachments. These processes of subjugating others, and inducing in others what one loathes and seeks to deny in oneself are extreme forms of manic defense against the shame of dependency.

In fact, the cult leader does not escape dependency. Instead, he (and also, in many cases, she) comes to depend on his followers to worship and adore him, to reflect his narcissistic delusion of perfection to him as does the mirror to the Evil Queen in the tale of Snow White. One of the ways in which this perversion of dependency is often enacted can be observed when the cult leader claims that because he needs nothing, he is entitled to everything. Thus, cult leaders claiming to be pure and perfect, without any need or attachment, use manic defenses to rationalize and justify their dependence on extravagant and grandiose trappings such as thrones, fleets of Rolls Royces, and the trust funds of their wealthy followers.

For the cult leader, his ability to induce total dependence in followers serves to sustain and enhance a desperately

needed delusion of perfect, omnipotent control. With many cult leaders, (e.g., Shoko Asahara [Lifton, 1999]), the dissolution of their delusion of omnipotence exposes an underlying core of psychosis. Sustaining a delusion of omnipotence and perfection is, for the cult leader, a manic effort to ward off psychic fragmentation. Again it is useful to consider that this kind of pathological narcissism and defensive mania is often seen in persons whose childhood development was controlled by extremely dominating, often sadistic caregivers, or whose developmental years were characterized by traumatic experiences of intense humiliation. Cult leaders then create elaborate rationalizations for their abusive systems, while unconsciously patterning those systems from the templates of their own experiences of being abused.

Cult leaders succeed in dominating their followers because they have mastered the cruel art of exploiting universal human dependency and attachment needs in others. The lengthy period of dependency in human development, the power that parents have, as God-like figures, to literally give life and sustain the lives of their children, leaves each human being with the memory, however distant or unconscious, of total dependency. Cult leaders tap into and re-activate this piece of the human psyche. Followers are encouraged to become regressed and infantilized, to believe that their life depends on pleasing the cult leader. Cult leaders depend on their ability to attract people, often at critically vulnerable points in their lives, who are confused, hungry, dissatisfied, searching. With such people, cult leaders typically find numerous ways to undermine their followers' independence and their capacity to think critically.

In a religious cult, the leader is perceived as a deity who is always divinely right, and the devotee, always on the verge of being sinfully wrong, comes to live for the sole purpose of pleasing and avoiding displeasing the guru/god. The leader's displeasure comes to mean for the member that he is unworthy, monstrously defective, and, therefore, dispensable. The member has been conditioned to believe that loss of the leader's "grace" is equivalent to loss of any value, goodness, or rightness of the self. As the member becomes more deeply involved, his anxiety about remaining a member in good standing increases. This anxiety is akin to the intense fear, helplessness, loss of control and threat of

annihilation that Herman, in her discussion of psychological domination, describes as induced in victims of both terrorists and battering husbands:

> The ultimate effect of these techniques is to convince the victim that the perpetrator is omnipotent, that resistance is futile, and that her life depends upon winning his indulgence through absolute compliance. The goal of the perpetrator is to instill in his victim not only fear of death but also gratitude for being allowed to live. (Herman, 1992, p. 77)

Extending this formulation to cult leaders and followers, the cult leader can be understood as needing to disavow her dependency and expel her dread of psychic dissolution, which she succeeds in doing insofar as she is able to induce that dependency and fear in the follower. The bliss that cult members often display masks their terror of losing the leader's interest in them, which is equivalent for the follower to "a fate worse than death."

Herman's motivation for writing *Trauma and Recovery* was to show the commonalities

> between rape survivors and combat veterans, between battered women and political prisoners, between the survivors of vast concentration camps created by tyrants who rule nations, and the survivors of small, hidden concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes. (Herman, 1992, p. 3).

Tyrants who rule religious cults subject members to similar violations.

To recapitulate, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the cult leader unconsciously experiences his dependency needs as so deeply shameful that a delusion of omnipotence is developed to ward off the toxic shame. It is urgent to the pathological narcissist, who knows unconsciously that he is susceptible to extreme mortification (the sense of "death" by shame), that this delusion of omnipotence be sustained. Manic defenses help sustain the delusion, but in addition, followers must be seduced and controlled so that the loathsome dependence can be externalized, located in others

and thereby made controllable. The leader can then express his unconscious self-loathing through his "compassion" (often thinly disguised contempt) for his followers' weakness. Manically proclaiming his own perfection, the leader creates a program of "purification" for the follower. By enlisting the follower to hold the shame that he projects and evacuates from his own psyche, the cult leader rids himself of all shame, becoming, in effect, "shameless." He defines his shamelessness as enlightenment, liberation, or self-actualization. It becomes important to the cult leader, for the maintenance of his state of shamelessness on which his psychic equilibrium depends, that there be no competition, that he alone, and no one else in the group, feels shameless. So while apparently inviting others to attain his state of perfection (shamelessness) by following him, the cult leader is actually constantly involved in inducing shame in his followers, thereby maintaining his dominance and control. I have called this sadomasochistic *danse macabre* the "dark side of enlightenment" (see Shaw, 2000).

The Question of Pre-Existing and Induced Pathology: Blaming the Victim

As a psychoanalytically informed psychotherapist, I seek to identify what kinds of ideas about the psychological organization of former cult members might be useful to consider when seeking to help this population recover from traumatic cult experiences. Are there any generalizable common denominators in terms of psychological organization and/or life circumstances that can be useful in understanding how best to help this population? In addressing these questions, it is necessary to confront two major themes: 1) pre-existing pathology and induced pathology, and 2) the question of blaming the victim.

Theorists such as Fromm (1965), Becker (1973) and Berger (1967) have sought to understand the dynamics of dominance and submission, sadism and masochism, that are built into the human character and which are triggered in individuals and societies exposed to certain influences. Fromm, and later Becker, were moved to explore these human traits by the horror of Nazi Germany; Berger's interest was oriented to the history of religion. These ideas about man's vulnerability to certain "pathological" behaviors can be used to suggest that those who become cult victims are predisposed to submissive, sadomasochistic behavior.

More recent theorists have been concerned with the phenomenon of blaming the victims of rape and battering for asking for, or failing to put a stop to, the abuse they have suffered (Herman, 1992; Kliger, 1994). McNew & Abell (1995) and Silver & Iacano (1986) use the term "sanctuary trauma" to describe how one who has already experienced severe trauma, such as rape, often experiences a secondary trauma in what was expected to be a supportive and protective environment, such as in a police station, a courtroom, or a therapist's office. Herman (1992) notes that "those who attempt to describe the atrocities that they have witnessed also risk their own credibility. To speak publicly about one's knowledge of atrocities is to invite the stigma that attaches to victims" (p. 2).

The literature on working with former cult members stresses, for the most part, that the pathology induced by the cult itself must be acknowledged, and the former member must be helped with the array of problems resulting from this

induced pathology, before any pre-existing, underlying pathology is assumed or explored (Addis, Schulman-Miller, & Lightman, 1984; Clifford, 1994; Giambalvo, 1993; Goldberg, 1993; Goldberg & Goldberg, 1982; Halperin, 1983; Hassan, 1990; Kliger, 1994; Langone, 1993; Langone & Chambers, 1991; Martin, 1993; Martin, Langone, Dole, & Wiltrout, 1992; Tobias, 1993). To do otherwise, for these authors, invalidates the reality of the client, constituting a stigmatizing message from the therapist that the victims' traumatic experience has more to do with their psychopathology than with the violations perpetrated by the group.

I strongly agree that cult victims can be inappropriately stigmatized or pathologized. However, I suggest that clinicians risk creating a false dichotomy when we polarize the issues of pre-existing pathology and induced pathology in cult victims. On the one hand, anyone who has ever struggled with dependency, with separation and individuation, and with conflicts over active and passive wishes and fears—in other words, any human being—can be vulnerable to seduction into a cult. These struggles are universal developmental issues, not evidence of psychiatric illness, and all human beings are potentially vulnerable to regression to dependency, to the sense of smallness in the face of a great power, as in childhood (Deikman, 1991). On the other hand, the concept of "blaming the victim" is misused, and unfair to the client, if it encourages clinicians to overlook pre-existing factors which may have contributed to the client's cult victimization. As a former SYDA member once said to me, "they were selling, and we were buying." A person with a history of developmental trauma would have quite different reasons for "buying" into a cult than would someone who, for example, joined because he was born to parents who raised him in the cult. In recovery, the latter person will be concerned with quite different issues, such as resentment of his parents, grief about loss of education and social opportunities, for example, than the person whose history of developmental trauma is what led him to embrace cult membership in the first place.

Herman (1992) notes that "trauma forces the survivor to relive all her earlier struggles over autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy" (p. 52). Individuals leaving cults will be faced with the need to rework these

developmental tasks, and many other tasks related to coming out of isolation. If these struggles were particularly difficult or traumatic for the individual prior to cult participation, there is a good chance that they will become significantly problematic during the recovery process and will need to be carefully worked through.

Psychoanalytic Concepts Related to Cult Participation

Kohut and the Concept of the Selfobject.

Having made the case for the importance of considering the psychological history of exiting cult members in working to help them recover from their cult experience, I now discuss various psychoanalytic concepts I have found useful in my work with former cultists.

Christopher Lasch (1979), in describing the "culture of narcissism," used the example of the writer Paul Zweig, a Siddha Yoga (SYDA) devotee, to illustrate his ideas about "the void within" that individuals in Western society have been struggling with in the post-WWII era. Prior to his involvement in SYDA, Zweig (1976) spoke of his growing

> conviction, amounting to a faith, that my life was organized around a core of blandness which shed anonymity upon everything I touched . . . [of] the emotional hibernation which lasted until I was almost thirty . . .[of persisting] suspicion of personal emptiness which all my talking and my anxious attempts at charm surround and decorate, but don't penetrate or even come close to . . .(quoted in Lasch, pp. 21-25).

Zweig goes on to say: "[When] the experience of inner emptiness, the frightening feeling that at some level of existence I'm nobody, that my identity has collapsed and no one's there" becomes overwhelming, Zweig encounters Swami Muktananda, or Baba (Father), the original founder of Siddha Yoga. From Baba, he learns to anesthetize his "mental busyness, . . ., obsessive thinking and . . . anxiety." (quoted in Lasch, pp. 21-25)

Cushman (1990) notes that

> inner emptiness is expressed in many ways in our culture, such as low self-esteem (the absence of a sense of personal worth), values confusion (the absence of a sense of personal convictions), eating disorders (the compulsion to fill the emptiness with food, or to embody the emptiness by refusing food), drug abuse (the compulsion to fill the emptiness with chemically induced emotional experience of "receiving" something from the world). It may also take the form of an absence of personal meaning. This can manifest as a hunger for spiritual guidance, which sometimes takes the form of a wish to be filled up by the spirit of God, by religious "truth," or by the power and personality of a leader guru (p. 604).

The hunger for spiritual guidance and relief from varying degrees of despair and fear are often what impels people to explore religious and secular self-improvement groups. Yet the leaders of these groups typically do not attempt to help the seeker explore and make sense of the difficulties that have led him to seek spiritual consolation or self-improvement. Rather, the cult leader exploits the seeker's emotional vulnerabilities and seduces the seeker into a state of dependence. Promising the acquisition of success and power, salvation and redemption, or relief from frustration and inhibition, the leader persuades followers that the leader's self-proclaimed perfection can belong to the follower as well. All one must do is totally embrace the leader's ideology. In cults, this always means securing the leader's favor by enthusiastically agreeing to recruit others to the leader's program.

While Zweig's malaise, referred to above, may provide a recognizable snapshot of the *zeitgeist* of his pre-guru days (think Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate)*, Zweig is also implicitly referring to the untold story of his own unique psychological history. Yet Zweig strikingly omits a psychological analysis of his distress, apparently satisfied that the struggle to make sense of and deal with his despair is rendered unnecessary and irrelevant by the magical euphoria granted by contact with his guru.

I have found the work of Heinz Kohut, the founder of the school of self psychology, whose ideas about narcissism have been highly influential, to be particularly useful in thinking about the allure of cults (see also Kriegman & Solomon, 1985). Kohut coined the term selfobject to refer to providers, initially parents, of basic psychological functions required by infants in order for the sense of security, vitality, and connectedness to develop and consolidate. Dedicated and loving caregivers, using their capacities for empathic attunement, perform three crucial functions for the developing child's sense of self: 1) by mirroring, taking delight in, the child's efforts to connect and be recognized, the child comes to feel basic self-worth; 2) by providing a model of strength and effectiveness the child can idealize, the child internalizes a sense of security; and 3) by encouraging the sense of belonging and sameness, what Kohut called twinship, the child feels comfortable in and a part of the human community (not isolated and alienated). The successful collaboration of parent and child in negotiating these selfobject needs would lead to the child's experience of a firm sense of self as a center of initiative and agency, with the confidence to develop ambitions and ideals, and to realize them. Good enough selfobject provision is the basis from which an individual learns to sustain and regulate adequate self-esteem (healthy narcissism) throughout all the vicissitudes of maturation. Selfobject provision (or more simply, parenting, when it is children that are being provided for) is by nature empathic and respectful, as distinguished from the controlling, dominating, scapegoating and/or exploitive behaviors characteristic of pathologically narcissistic provision.

Selfobject experience is vitalizing, and provides a sense of connectedness. Different cults offer different kinds of selfobject experience. One common denominator is the offer of unconditional love, especially in spiritual groups. Another is the offer of purpose and meaning. Both of these experiences are vitalizing and can help dispel the sense of disconnectedness. For those whose development is marked by chronic deprivation of selfobject experience, or for those even temporarily deprived, the offer of these kinds of experiences at the right moment of vulnerability can be irresistible. Whether or not selfobject provision has been adequate in development, humans are potentially vulnerable, either because of early deprivation, or later due to

unforeseen life circumstances, to the experience of alienation and isolation. When such vulnerability is present, the glamorous, charismatic cult leader can come to represent for many a longed-for, impossibly perfect selfobject parent who banishes powerlessness and loneliness.

Another highly seductive idea advertised in meditation-based cults is that "it is not necessary to be logical, rational, or even reasonable. The ultimately dominant criterion of what is good is a totally subjective feeling state. The goal of life becomes a good feeling, a never-ending high" (Garvey, 1993). This is not as hedonistic as it sounds. The search for this kind of unending happiness is often fueled, consciously or unconsciously, by a sense on the part of the recruit of unending failure and defeat, in vocational and/or interpersonal realms of his life. Many, who in their development, have not experienced adequate selfobject provision, live with the sense that they can never win, that nothing about them is ever good enough. They have developed a powerful emotional hunger, like that which Zweig describes, which the cult leader appears ideally suited to satisfy. Loyal members of a cult believe that their leader has magically transformed their lives and relieved their longing and suffering. On that basis, they will staunchly defend their leader even when his or her crimes are exposed. The "good feeling" of their initial conversion experience might consist of feeling "redeemed," "coming home at last," having been "lost, but now found," or being "saved." These intensely emotional experiences are attributed directly to the power and will of the leader. In the SYDA group, members were repeatedly instructed to refer all questions and doubts to their original conversion experience, and to "trust their own experience"—meaning to ignore, discard and feel ashamed about doubts and questions. In this way, objectivity—e.g., any negative information about the leader—is devalued. The guru, along with one's own subjective feeling state, is idealized. The bunker mentality response to any critical information about the group and its leaders then becomes: "That isn't my experience."

There are strong reasons for this need to banish objectivity. If one believes that the guru's power has healed one's pain and satisfied one’s hunger, then for some, keeping the pain from returning means preserving the guru, at any cost. The pain of life that has been magically erased by the guru may

indeed return if one rejects the guru. It may, and often does, return, along with many other warded off emotions, and these will need to be experienced, felt, understood, worked through, and made meaningful, if real transformation, not magic, is to occur. This is part of the complex process of human self-development that the cult solution can only pretend to address. For many who successfully exit cults, the process of transformation and expanded self-awareness they sought when they joined the cult only really begins once they have left the cult.

The history of SYDA provides a good example of how far devotees will go to defend the person they perceive as their savior. In the early 80s, the Siddha Yoga community was shocked to learn that Muktananda, a monk in his late 60s and supposedly a lifelong celibate, had been secretly having sexual relations with western female devotees for at least ten years. While many women thought of themselves as willing participants, others felt coerced and traumatized by the experience. Often his victims were female children in their early teens. Many who were SYDA devotees at the time heard these allegations and ignored them, in spite of wide acknowledgment among those closest to Muktananda that they were true. When several devotees spoke out publicly about Muktananda's sexual abuses, two loyal devotees were dispatched by Muktananda to threaten these whistle-blowers with disfigurement and castration (Rodarmor, 1983). Nevertheless, to this day, Muktananda is worshiped by SYDA devotees as a deity.

Fairbairn and the Moral Defense

I link this determination to protect the cult leader at all cost to one of the most central formulations in the work of Fairbairn, the influential British Middle School psychoanalyst. Fairbairn (1943) spoke of a "moral defense," a way that developing children who are being neglected or abused by (or receiving inadequate selfobject provision from) their caregivers will subconsciously agree to "bear the burden of the badness." By excusing and protecting their abusers and blaming themselves for the neglect/abuse they are exposed to, these children choose, speaking metaphorically, to live in a world ruled by a benevolent God ("good" parents), where there is at least hope for redemption, rather than to confront the helplessness and hopeless despair of living in a world ruled by the Devil ("bad" parents). The child feels, "if it is *me* that is bad, there is hope. Maybe I can try to be good. But if it is my *parents* that are bad, there is nothing I can do -- I am doomed." Cult followers are in a similar position once they have become dependent on their leader. In cults, the leader depends on her ability to persuade her followers that she is always right. If anything is wrong, the follower is always to blame, never the leader, and the leader never lets the follower forget that those are the rules. By blinding themselves to the corruption and abuse of their leader, and taking on a sense of sinfulness, guilt and unworthiness in themselves, followers sustain their tie to the leader, and along with that tie, their hopes for redemption and salvation. Cult members are constantly obsessed with how they are perceived by the leader, whether they are good or bad, up or down. While obsessively striving for the leader's approval, they must also learn to accept the leader's need to humiliate others and to be ready at any time to assume the guilt and shame the leader constantly seeks to project on to others.

Fromm and the Magic Helper and Miller and the Prisoners of Childhood

As the world watched the rise of the Nazi Party in the 1930's and 40's, a literature developed during and after the Holocaust which attempted to come to grips with, among other things, how virtually an entire nation of people, the Germans, could be persuaded to give up their morals, values, autonomy, and integrity, by one man, a charismatic megalomaniac named Adolf Hitler. Many authors have attempted to find explanations for this inexplicable horror.

The ideas of Erich Fromm, the prominent interpersonal psychoanalyst whose work was quite popular from the post WWII era and into the 1960s, as presented in his book *Escape From Freedom*, are particularly relevant here. (Also see Becker [1973], especially the chapter entitled "The Spell Cast by Persons—The Nexus of Unfreedom." and Berger [1967], particularly the chapter entitled "The Problem of Theodicy.")

Fromm (1965) examines the relationship of human developmental processes to social, religious, economic, and political forces in the environment. He notes that the process of individuation frees a child to "develop and express its own individual self unhampered by those ties which were limiting to it. But the child also becomes more free from a world which gave it security and reassurance" (p. 46). Fromm continues:

> If the economic, social and political conditions on which the whole process of human individuation depends, do not offer a basis for the realization of individuality . . ., while at the same time people have lost those ties which gave them security, this lag makes freedom an unbearable burden. It then becomes identical with doubt, with a kind of life which lacks meaning and direction. Powerful tendencies arise to escape from this kind of freedom into submission or some kind of relationship to man and the world which promises relief from uncertainty, even if it deprives the individual of his freedom. (p. 52)

Fromm is describing the predicament of a life which lacks meaning and direction, in a society which offers too many dead-end destinations. This is where Paul Zweig found himself—adrift in Lasch's "culture of narcissism."

While Fromm speaks of the securing ties that are lost in the process of becoming separate, there are those who would argue that many children possess little more than false security, at best. Alice Miller (1981) suggests that the development of the true self, the goal of separation and individuation, is thwarted when parents excessively need and use their children to fulfill their own egoistic wishes. These are not only mentally ill, abusive parents, although such

parents certainly exist. These are also well-functioning, often well-meaning parents, who like all humans, have flaws, weaknesses, and blind spots. Parents, according to their own habits, values, and emotional needs, can teach a child to judge his own natural needs, feelings, and attempts at self-expression, as sinful, destructive to the parent, and shameful. Such children learn to hide or suppress these rejected parts of themselves and to develop a personality that is disconnected from their real feelings, but which is focused instead on skillful accommodation to the needs of the parents—in essence, an act of self-annihilation (Winnicott, 1960). Such children know that to maintain needed ties to parents, they must develop the ability to attend to the parents' needs at the expense of their own. While the developmental conflict between attachment and separation invariably elicits feelings of isolation and powerlessness, these feelings may be especially exacerbated when the child's drive to separate is threatening to a needy and narcissistically vulnerable parent, or thwarted by neglectful or sadistic parents. Miller sees the problem of the child who becomes a prisoner of the narcissistic parent as a pervasive cultural phenomenon of our time.

In my own work with former members, I have often encountered the conditions described by Miller, as well as other, more concrete disruptions in family stability prior to cult involvement. Such disruptions include divorce, the premature death of a parent, parental or sibling mental illness, parental alcoholism or other addiction, abuse and neglect, or incest. Often in these cases, children blame themselves for the disruption, as in Fairbairn's "moral defense" referred to above, and they develop a sense of badness, guilt, and unworthiness. They are then left vulnerable to selfobject hunger, to longing for the sense of being totally good, totally loved and accepted. By no means do I wish to suggest that every cult member will have such a background. I do observe, however, that many cult members have experienced some form of disruption in the stability of their families, which they have not sufficiently been able to integrate psychologically, and for which, unconsciously, they blame themselves. Seeking freedom from unconscious guilt and shame, the promise of purification and ennoblement through devotion to a cult leader can seem like finding an oasis in the desert. The abuse and punishment they receive from the cult leader then seems like the appropriate price to

pay to achieve the longed for redemption, or freedom from conscious and/or unconscious guilt.

For the person who is tormented with anxiety about separation from dependence, whether this torment stems from larger social forces, or more specifically from within the relational matrix of the individual family, Fromm considers masochism to be one of the primary mechanisms of escape. When the parental and/or social environment cannot provide the security required for the separation effort, then adopting the masochistic stance of feeling small and helpless, or overwhelmed by pain and agony, can be a way of avoiding and protecting oneself from having to fight what would only be a losing battle. Between self-annihilation, which provides a kind of control, and unsupported separation and independence, which feels out of control, self-annihilation may seem like the less terrifying of two evils.

Those who become self-annihilating often turn to self-injurious behaviors. However, annihilation of self is only one side of the attempt to overcome unbearable feelings of powerlessness. There is an alternative to outright self-destructiveness which bears more directly on the subject of cults:

> The other side is the attempt to become a part of a bigger and more powerful whole outside of oneself, to submerge and participate in. This power can be a person, an institution, God, the nation, conscience, or a psychic compulsion. By becoming part of a power which is felt as unshakably strong, eternal, and glamorous, one participates in its strength and glory. One surrenders one's own self and renounces all strength and pride connected with it, one loses one's integrity as an individual and surrenders freedom; but one gains a new security and a new pride in the participation in the power in which one submerges. One gains also security against the torture of doubt (Fromm, 1965, p. 177) (italics mine).

Fromm calls the power one submerges oneself in the "magic helper." When one feels helpless and hopeless to express and realize one's individual potential, dependence on a magic

helper provides a solution which shifts the emphasis off the self, which is experienced as empty and worthless, to the magic helper. The magic helper, in our fantasy, has all the answers, can take care of everything, and loves and accepts us perfectly, thereby confirming and validating our existence. Merging with the magic helper banishes emptiness, loneliness and anxiety—and magical security is established. Then separation, individuation, and its accompanying terrors can be averted altogether. One can join a cult and effect a kind of separation from one's family and background—but the actual task of individuation is not undertaken. The pseudo-separation attempt degenerates into a regression to deeper levels of dependence and enmeshment.

Before further elaborating Fromm's concept of the magic helper, it is important to note that Fromm, who was himself deeply interested in spirituality and religious mysticism, did not intend to suggest that the idea of God is always and only a delusional, masochistic idea. On the contrary, Fromm saw the magic helper concept as a perversion of spirituality and did not intend his concept to be used as an argument against spirituality or religion.

In the relationship to the magic helper, "the question is then no longer how to live oneself, but how to manipulate 'him' in order not to lose him and how to make him do what one wants, even to make him responsible for what one is responsible oneself" (Fromm, 1965, p. 199). Paradoxically, obedience and goodness are among the most common methods used to attempt to manipulate and control the magic helper. Yet the enslavement to the magic helper that is then experienced is resented and creates conflict. This conflict must be repressed in order not to lose the magic helper. Additionally, people who pose as magic helpers eventually and inevitably demonstrate their imperfection, if not their complete fraudulence. Thus, the underlying anxiety about the authenticity of the magic helper, or about losing him through not being worthy, constantly threatens the security sought for in the relationship. This is a real double bind. As Berger (1967) notes, "the masochistic attitude is inherently predestined to failure, because the self cannot be annihilated this side of death and because the other can only be absolutized in illusion" (p. 56).

Kliger (1994), in her study of devotees of a leader named "Guru," demonstrates that it is precisely this conflict in the

devotees that results in the high degree of somatization she found among them. Unhappiness and dissatisfaction amongst members was considered by Guru to be hostile, a threat to the community. Guru demanded that devotees show a happy face at all times, claiming that their unhappy faces made him physically and psychically ill. (This is also what Gurumayi teaches her SYDA staff.) Because the devotees were stigmatized by Guru for any expression of dissatisfaction, devotees suppressed these feelings, which then emerged through somatization. Physical illness was more acceptable to Guru, because he saw himself as a healer and could use a devotee's illness to demonstrate his power. If his healing efforts failed, however, devotees' illnesses were deemed a manifestation of their resistance, proving that they were hostile to Guru's mission. Punishment by shunning followed, which led either to devotees' further submission, or to their excommunication (Kliger, 1994, pp. 232-233). These kinds of shizophrenegenic mixed messages were pervasive in SYDA as well. For most of those SYDA members that I knew personally who worked directly with Gurumayi, attempting to please her would eventually lead to breakdowns in physical and mental health. Gurumayi resented people who were confident, and she was contemptuous of people who were weak. Trying to be what Gurumayi wanted you to be so that she would remain pleased with you was impossible, because she changed the rules at whim. It was common for staff members to disappear suddenly because they had been sent to rehabilitation centers for various addictions or disorders, or to a SYDA center in Honolulu for rest. In cults, breakdown is often the only option for members who have humiliated and diminished themselves as far as they could, and who unconsciously seek some sort of escape from the leader’s insatiable demands for further abasement and submission.

When the magic helper is a drug such as heroin, the annihilation of the self may culminate in the death of the body. If it is food, the self is concealed in obesity, or enslaved to anorexia and bulimia. When the magic helper is an idealized but traumatizing parent who is ambivalently both hated and totally depended on, annihilation of the self manifests as the inability to separate and individuate.

What makes cults so insidious is that when the magic helper is a cult leader, the annihilation of the self, the loss of one's

own voice, personal values, and integrity, can be paradoxically experienced as a triumph, a conversion from hopeless badness to potential perfection.[2] Again, SYDA provides useful material in support of this point. In SYDA philosophy, the "ego" is devalued as something small and selfish that must be surrendered to the guru, to be magically transformed into pure awareness of the transcendent "inner Self," which is one with the guru and with God. The sense of "doership," of taking credit for or enjoying the fruits of one's own actions, is in particular a sure sign of "wrong understanding." The right understanding is that whatever the guru says or does is a direct expression of God's will, and that everything good flows from the magic grace of the guru. By surrendering the ego and the sense of doership to the guru, the sins of pride and selfishness are supposedly expiated. Practically, this means that experiencing oneself as a center of agency and initiative, as a creative person capable of taking pleasure in the use of one's own talents and skills, should be a source of shame—because nothing belongs to oneself; it all belongs to and comes from the guru. On the other hand, one must always be ready to confess and take credit for one's sins and transgressions—which in this system, are the sole property of the follower and his small, impure, selfish ego. The cult leader depends on maintaining the smallness, guilt, and shame of her followers as an essential means of sustaining her own delusion of impeccable perfection. And the cult follower can come to believe that his enslavement is the highest form of liberation, his alienation the highest form of connection.

[2]This dynamic is elaborated by Benjamin (1988) in her seminal study, written from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic in the pornography classic, "The Story of O" (pp. 51-84).

Conclusions

In my work with former cult members, my aim is to help them make sense of their experience in a way that feels meaningful. The psychoanalytically informed therapist will seek to facilitate former members' ability to bear the many losses they have experienced, not the least of which is the loss of belief in the cult and its leader. Former members may also have guilt to bear, along with intense fears about their future. As they become better able to bear the many kinds of pain connected to their cult experience, they can begin to regain hope and belief in their own ability to go on living and growing. To facilitate these goals, I focus initially on developing a clear picture of the abuse and exploitation they have been subjected to in the cult. It can be helpful during this process for the follower to speculate about the psychology of the cult leader, using the psychoanalytic theories I have discussed here, to develop a plausible psychological understanding of the leader's behavior. As the extent to which he has been manipulated and controlled becomes clearer to the former member, I will proceed to invite him to engage in a further psychological exploration of his own history, with the purpose of determining if there is any significant developmental trauma that may be connected to the cult involvement. If this is the case, there may be retraumatization that needs to be worked through as part of the exit and recovery process. There may also be ways in which earlier traumatization contributed to vulnerability to recruitment which can be helpful to understand, especially in terms of building healthy relationships in the future. When the personal context and meaning of the leader/follower relationship is illuminated fully in therapeutic work, the follower can come to feel confident that he can avoid painfully repetitive experiences, and instead create new relational experience.

Once the nature of the cult leader's abuse has been elaborated and clarified, and a useful psychological explanation for her behavior has been developed, my focus in helping the former member make sense of his experience will oscillate between exploration of psychological factors emerging from the specific familial matrix of the individual, psychological factors arising from universal developmental issues, and social and cultural factors that may have specifically influenced the individual. Any of these factors, in

an infinite variety of combinations and proportions, may be useful to consider when seeking to help former cult members make sense of their experience.

The community of professionals concerned with the destructive impact of cults is not monolithic. Neither is psychoanalysis. The theoretical formulations I have brought to bear on my work with former cult members are selected from a formidable variety of psychoanalytic theories, and represent personal choices that reflect personal values. Even if there were "one" correct psychoanalytic theory of cults, it would be only one of many theories from many other disciplines that could be relevant and useful. My contribution here is not meant to represent "the" position, psychoanalytic or other, on cult participation. Rather, I hope to generate interest in the potential for psychoanalytic therapy to be helpful to those who exit cults, and in the potential for psychoanalytic theories to be helpful to those who study cults.

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