

Coping With Post Cult Trauma

Margaret Thaler Singer, Ph.D.

## **Coping with Post-Cult Trauma**

**Margaret Thaler Singer, Ph.D.  
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### **Introductory Comments**

Back in the mid-1970s, Dr. John Clark, Dr. Louis J. West, and I were among the first mental-health professionals to call attention to the psychological status of persons emerging from cults. Ours were clinical observations, based upon interviewing and providing psycho-educational consultation to ex-cultists.

We worked independently. I was in California, Dr. West was down in Los Angeles, and Jack Clark was in Massachusetts. I met Dr. Clark only after we had many phone conversations and had discussed the many hundreds of former members each of us had worked with. I had heard of Jack Clark and his work, and I phoned him one day to discuss what each of us had noticed. That conversation was informational and inspiring and started discussions that continued sporadically until his retirement a few years ago.

Also in the mid-70s, Dr. West and I once again were called together to take a look at the re-emergence of coercive persuasion and thought reform in the Patty Hearst case. Since that time, both of us have stayed very active being of aid in, hopefully, educating the mental-health professions and in offering help and counsel to former cultists.

### **Early Observations and Statistics**

Those early observations were all clinical observations that being in a cult was not necessarily for the welfare, growth, and mental health of the members. Drs. West and Clark and I were offering clinical consultation and assistance to help people understand what some of their groups' practices had induced in them.

Luckily, people have now started doing more detailed surveys—for example, the lowest estimates of how many people come out of cults and need some type of counseling. The lowest estimate was 36% of people need help. And this came from work that Mark Galanter did with a very biased sample of former Moonies who, on the whole, had been funneled to him through the management. Even under those circumstances, he said 36% of those who had emerged had serious emotional problems after leaving the group. Had he seen a more free [unbiased] sample, like the rest of us do, the estimate might be closer to the following:

- In a large survey he sampled in 1984 of approximately 800 respondents, Levine said that 50% showed emotional upheavals severe enough to warrant treatment during the first few months after they left a cult.
- In surveying 2,000 Transcendental Meditators, Otis found consistent patterns of adverse effects, and he concluded that the number and severity of these adverse effects correlated with the longer duration of meditation.
- Conway and Siegelman found that 52% of the people they studied who had been in cults experienced floating (in a minute, we will get into what floating means). And they found that 35% were unable to break the mental schedules of chanting, that they couldn't stop chanting even though they had left the cult and intended to stop.
- Lisman and Tannenbaum found that 60% of the people they studied who were former cultists received counseling after leaving the cults.

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- And in Sweden, Swartling recently reported that 50% of the people she had studied had psychotic-like symptoms upon leaving [cults], and 25% of the group that she studied had attempted suicide.

So you can see that the number of people badly affected by their times in cults is being substantiated—that Dr. Clark and Dr. West and I and those of you who have been here in this group all these years were not crying wolf. We were pointing a finger rather quietly and subtly at remarkable amounts of difficulties people had after leaving modern-day cults.

### **Common Effects among Former Cult Members**

After interviewing and working with more than 3,000 former cultists, I, with Richard Ofshe joining in to analyze some of the data, have concluded that almost all people coming out of cults suffer from a form of anomie for some period of time after leaving. This effect is the dealing with how to integrate three cultures: the culture you lived before you joined a cult; the culture you lived while in the cult; and the third culture, that of adapting now that you're out in the world. This sense of anomie is the experience of 'Who am I?' among that collection of three sets of value systems that somehow have to be dealt with.

The second most prominent thing that I have found in people emerging from cults, and particularly ones who have been in a long time, is the developmental lags in their social and experiential lives, with a need for a gradual reentry into dating, into doing complicated work, into returning to college. I often have to work with families and relatives, and even the ex-cultists, to give the person enough time. It doesn't have to be a great deal of time universally, but enough time that they can pull themselves together in various ways before they attempt complicated mental, social, and business enterprises.

I have a story that is both pathetic and amusing. When three young people I worked with some years ago came out [of the cult], they were in the Berkeley area. They decided they were going to take advice and do a very low-level job for a few weeks to a few months, to get healthy and get their minds squared away. One of them went out into one of the rural areas and was working as a dock loader, putting big sacks of potatoes on the truck. He called me and said, "Dr. Singer, you know, I'm just spacing out. I keep loading these sacks, and I float out somewhere, and I'm really not paying attention to loading these sacks of potatoes. I'm floating out into meditating again." And I got complaints from the two others who also went into highly routine jobs, loading a lumber truck and a paint truck. That situation cued me long ago to start looking at some of the impacts of highly repetitive chanting and other activities they did in cults.

Three, many are experiencing variants of post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD], in which recollection, avoidance, and arousal keeps coming into their minds; four, dissociative states; and five, a variety of panic disorders.

### **Effects Based on Cult Types**

And so, across time, I have sort of grouped cults in the following ways. No one cult just specializes in using dissociative-producing techniques or in doing high emotional arousal. They all use blends of those things. But you can sort of group the cults as behaving more one way than the other.

The groups that tend to produce the most dissociative problems when people emerge from them are the empty-mind or mantra meditation groups, the groups that use guided

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imagery, past lives, and various dissociative routines such as trance dancing, spinning, rocking, and speaking in tongues. These groups tend to produce what is often called *relaxation-induced anxiety*, or *RIA*. It has been known in professional literature for quite some time that not everybody responds well to trance or hypnotic inductions; not everybody responds well to closed-eye progressive relaxation. Early writers such as Otis began to comment that not all long-term meditators were doing well. The people studying primarily the progressive-relaxation mantra meditation and certain forms of hypnotic induction started writing about what they were calling *relaxation-induced anxiety*.

Three kinds of effects that are primarily dissociative producing come into people who indulge in these programs.

### **Sensory Effects**

The first [effects] are [that] people who have done a lot of those dissociative techniques have many sensory problems. They have, for example, sensations of floating, heaviness, tingling, numbness; feelings of heat or cold. The physiologists who have studied this situation say they feel that it [this result] is probably a shift toward the parasympathetic nervous system dominating during these periods or states induced by the closed eye, and so on. So those were the sensory experiences. And many people here at the FOCUS meeting have shared with me the kinds [of sensations] they have had.

### **Anxiety and Panic Attacks**

The second kind of relaxation-induced anxieties are motor in nature, in which there are body jerks, tics, spasms, twitches, uncontrollable restlessness, or bursts that resemble something like minor panic attacks, in which the persons feel their heart is racing, their palms are sweaty, and they're all ready to, but cannot, leave the situation.

There are many people in this room who have experienced *discreet panic attacks*, in which they felt they had any group of four of the following twelve features after having come out of cultic groups. This is the definition that is going to be in the *DSM IV* that is coming out soon: a discreet period of intense fear or discomfort in which any four of the following symptoms develop abruptly and reach a peak within about 10 minutes:

1. pounding heart
2. sweating
3. trembling or shaking
4. shortness of breath or a feeling of smothering
5. feeling of choking
6. chest pain or discomfort
7. nausea or abdominal distress
8. feeling dizzy, unsteady, light-headed, or faint
9. feelings of derealization, in which the surroundings briefly don't feel real
10. depersonalization experiences, in which persons feel detached from themselves and as if they're looking at themselves as an object
11. fear of losing control or going crazy; fear of dying
12. numbness, tingling, hot and cold flashes

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### **Cognitive and Affective Flooding**

The third type of flooding for people who have been in dissociative-producing cult practices is what I call *cognitive* and *affective* flooding, in which these people will, without cues and triggers from the environment, suddenly feel [for example] very, very sexual; very, very aggressive; very, very angry. There is just a flooding, without cues, of some kind of emotional turn-on.

So those people who have been in primarily mantra- and repetitive- and dissociative-producing cultic groups tend to have dissociative features, panic attacks, RIA [Relaxation-Induced Anxiety], and cognitive inefficiencies. This means that after many years of prolonged speaking in tongues, chanting, spin dancing, learning how to dissociate, people report that they have a great deal of trouble paying attention, concentrating. They complain that something is wrong with their attention, concentration, and memory.

These are some of the prices people pay for being in a group that teaches them how to spend many, many hours a day, many days per month, over many years, doing dissociative exercises.

Those of you who are sitting here and feeling, "Oh, my gosh! I've got everything she's talking about!"—don't worry. It eventually all goes away. It's a matter of time—learning to label what is happening, and getting some good psycho-educational explanations, including physiological descriptions and others, of what is happening.

The emotional-arousal groups tend to be more like the Bible-based groups, in which the group focuses on arousing fear and guilt. After leaving [such groups], people describe feeling intense and unwarranted guilt over almost anything, fears about all kinds of things, intense doubting every time they go to make a decision of any kind. Some of them also have panic attacks.

I hope I can get those of you who are physicians here to study some of the cult people who are in your nearby area and who have panic attacks.

### **Other Effects**

Now, regardless of the type of cult, whether it was the high emotional arousing of a negative kind of primary group, or primarily an empty-mind meditation, dissociative group, those things I wrote about in the 1979 *Psychology Today* article called "Coming Out of the Cults" are still operative today. People come out of groups, and they feel depressed for many reasons. They feel lonely. They find themselves doing phobic-like constriction of their social context because they can't trust their own judgment and they can't trust other people. They can't trust other people because they feel so badly ripped off by what happened those many years, and as the consequences of being in the cult or restrictive groups they were in. Regardless of the practices of the group, whether they were dissociative or arousal, most people, for a period of time, have a fear of joining groups. They fear going back to their old church, their old social life, any type of group activity.

Also, in many of the cults, they [former members] have learned to distrust medicine, dentistry, psychology, and learning. One of the most poignant effects is the distrust of the self; many people start blaming themselves, saying, "Why ever did I join?"

Part of exit counseling, part of the psycho-educational work afterward, is to help people come to analyze that step-at-a-time influence program and deception that led them into

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various groups, and the psychological and social situation that retained them once they were in those groups. People who were in groups that did a lot of inducing past-life memories have to sort out what was real history and what was contrived in the cult from past-life work, guided imagery, and so on.

In summary, almost everyone coming out of cults has some form of anomie. They have some developmental lags, in which they need to give themselves time to catch up with dating, social habits.

### Some Useful Definitions

Last year, I gave a talk to the FOCUS group, and I had a request from people asking whether this year, for the big public luncheon, I could go over some of the things I talked about with the FOCUS group because they wanted to hear it again, and they wanted it shared with other people. I began by talking about three terms that are used frequently in the post-cult life. Those [terms] are

1. triggers
2. flashbacks
3. floating

What is a trigger? A *trigger* is a cue, simply a cue in your present situation or in your thinking, that causes a remembrance. Triggers are often referred to by people as if they're some mysterious, arcane thing, as if some word, phrase, situation, picture, odor, touch has magical power and mysterious meaning. Quite the contrary. Your old cult leader did not place a mysterious suggestion that is going to go off like a time bomb. Triggers are merely partial recalls, partial memories that we all have, all the time. And the term *trigger* is an abbreviation of the phrase, "It triggered my memory of..." (fill in the blank). "It reminded me of when..." (fill in the blank). "It made me think, feel, recall, reexperience certain memories from my time in the group."

A *flashback* is the content that the trigger cues into awareness.

And *floating* is that dissociated experiencing of the cue and flashback. Floating is usually a period of feeling sort of conflicted, as if you are back in the cult. You suddenly have a cue come on, you have a flashback of a memory, of your time in the group. And for minutes, to hours, or even more than a day, you describe feeling in this floating state, meaning you feel as if you are back in the cult. You know you're here, and you're doing a lot of inside-the-head attempts to decide what you should do in the here and now.

Memory is a process, and a recall of the past is always a reconstruction of times past being recalled in the present time. Something going on now triggers a memory of something from the past. A number of persons erroneously think of human memory as like a video tape or a reel of movie film, and that everything that ever happened to us is stored on a reel in the head, and that we ought to be able to replay the past. This [view] is incorrect and is not supported by scientific research.

Now, what about the triggers from the totalistic cultic-group days? Depending upon the practices of the group, the personal experiences that person had while he or she was in the group—moments of speaking in tongues; of prolonged periods of chanting, over-breathing, trance induction, spinning, trance dancing, rocking; the philosophy of the group; and conflicts the person may have had from pre-cult days produce these forms of dissociation

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that we have talked about. Also, many cult leaders make the followers sit and listen to endless hours of boring lectures. I talked with some of the people who had been in the David Koresh Branch Davidians, and they told me that Koresh had made them sit, oftentimes, for 15 hours of unending speaking at them and strumming on the guitar, and they had to sit there.

Now what does this do when people come out of a group? Having to sit still—in a classroom, in a lecture, in a church service, in a public meeting—triggers resentment toward the person who is up there controlling you. Because while you're in the cult, you can't get up and leave, as you all know. There are intense social and psychological prohibitions about complaining, getting up and leaving, and so on. So many times, after you come out of a cult, the very [act of] sitting in a meeting calls up some triggers of resentment that you had back in the cult, where your body got all ready to flee, [but] you couldn't. You're all turned on to leave, and there is the anger and resentment [because you can't do so]. And part of post-cult adaptation is to recognize that desire to flee, talk about it, and realize you really were angry, as well as fearful, a great deal of the time in the cult.

And one of the things that is astonishing, over and over, even though I have heard these things many thousands of times, [is that] no matter how high up you are in a cult, your position, your post, your role is very transient because you hold that security only momentarily. Someone higher up can pull the rug [out], and everything that you have striven for in the cult is gone in a moment. So those people who act as if they are on top of the world in your old cult are just as anxious as you who were the underlings in the cult.

Another thing is that, after coming out of cults, people don't want to go sit at lectures at college. They don't want to go sit at church. They don't want to go to concerts. And sometimes, in working with the teenagers and children of people who have been in cults a long time, [we find that] a number of the children and teenagers who were made to sit for hours on end begin to pick and scratch and claw at themselves, and they do it surreptitiously under their clothes. They are so angry, they so want out of there, that the only thing they can do is turn that anger and that charge toward themselves. I have worked with a lot of that.

[Former cult members] also [might experience] triggering of music cues. You will be driving along the roadway and will hear a song that your old group used to sing, with their words. Those of you who were in some of the New Age groups that use a lot of music will begin to weep as you are driving along the roadway.

For those people who have dissociation, that just means psychological disengagement at the moment. You who have ever been teachers all know what dissociation is if you look around the class, and you realize that some of the students have spaced out. Their eyes are open, but they are gone mentally. That is called *dissociation*. They have just 'signed out' psychologically. They have disengaged. Survival in cults often depends on your being very good at just "going out." But when you come out of the cult, and you are in this world that moves along all the time, and you have to keep making decisions, and you keep spacing out, decision making is a disaster because you can't keep your mind focused long enough to keep planning ahead.

Also, there are what we call *reality-testing issues* after persons come out of a cult. [These are] moments of derealization in which the persons will be here in this room, they will be walking along the street, they will be anywhere in the world, and suddenly those hours and

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hours over the years of thinking they had lived in past lives pops into their mind. And suddenly, while engaging in the surrounding world, they have to try to decide, "Did I live back in 1561 in downtown Rome, or not?"

Also, after people come out of high-control groups, I have already mentioned the relaxation-induced emotional states [that] flood in. Sometimes, people have so split off their anger that, months after they come out of the cult, they are walking along the street, they are sitting somewhere, and tremendous anger floods into their awareness. They need to be able to realize they are not going crazy [when this happens]. This [intense anger] is a frequent response to the amount of containment, control, denial that they had to do to preserve themselves in the cult.

When are these flashbacks, the floating, the triggering most likely to happen? And when can you prepare yourself to avoid getting wiped out by the triggering, the flashbacks, and floating? When you are stressed, these behaviors are likely to happen; when you are anxious, uncertain, lonely, distracted, fatigued, ill. I work with a lot of people who have these moments of just coming apart, and I find out [from them], "When does it happen?" Often, it's late in the day. So you have to get people planning ahead, so that they are realizing what they should do by 3:30. [You help them] to become aware that when [they are] tired, a lot of this stuff is going to flood into their awareness, so that it is not as distressing.

### **Responses to Cult-Induced Changes**

Now, how to deal with all of these different cult-induced changes in your behavior that usually were adaptations to the type of stress, to the type of social and psychological pressure you [were experiencing].... First, education is most important. Learning to label: "This is a dissociative moment." You know, that sounds very academic, but [it's important to] know that you just psychologically disengaged, and not think that your memory is shot. And you can say to yourself, "I'm not going crazy. I'm not damaged for life. This is just a temporary dissociated moment. I can pick up where I was. It's just a thought. It's just a memory. I don't have to act on it."

Practically all of you have heard tales—and they do occur—that some single command said to a person causes him or her to go back to the cult. This happens the most often in certain heavy-duty, guilt-tripping groups, where parents will come, your friends will come, to visit, and they are going to take you out to dinner or to be with you for a while, and the family thinks the cultist is coming with them. And then the leader of the house or the leader of the group says, "Jonathan, I want to talk with you for a minute." And Jonathan does not come back out again. And if he does, he may say, "Mom and Dad, I can't go with you. My mission is here. I can't go."

People wonder what the magic cuing was. There was no magic cuing. I have asked people what happened that first two or three times when people came to work with them, to take them out and try to reconnect. And they say that the guru, or whoever, said a couple of things that made them feel so guilty. They would say things such as "You are a person of your word. You gave your word to me. You cannot break your word." And they said both the kind of trance-inducing property, and the guilt, and the fear flooded in so they could not leave. So don't think that the guru or cult leader has a magic thing. He was just pulling the plug, or let's say inserting every plug, to push every button of fear and anxiety by those things [he said or did].

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I often have to work with families to get them to realize that, when you have left a cult, you want to break with that group—that they are not a jolly bunch of boys and girls who are just coming to call. They want your body, to take it back to the factory to turn out more boots, more fancy jackets, to sell courses, whatever. And I have to sometimes be extremely firm with parents and families, telling them, "You don't say to the person who has just left a cult, 'But they are your friends that are calling; you have to talk with them.'" I look at these parents who keep saying, "Well, why not? They stayed with them six years; they must have liked them." I get the ex-cultist to sit there, and I say, "Do you mind if I tell your mother and your father?" (Or whoever it is that they are living with who wants them to get on the phone every time the good old cult calls.)

Another thing is that you have to prevent people who just recently left the cult from going back to rescue their brother, their husband, their wife, their child. Have them take enough time that they are in real good shape and really in charge of their decision-making [capabilities] before they think about that. And [it's also important to know] how to help people respond to these messages that the cult leader keeps sending them.

Now I will fuss at the therapists and pastors who don't understand cult life. Be very careful about staying in therapy with certain types of therapists. Be very careful of therapists who don't really know about cults, who don't know how dissociation is produced, who don't know the effects of hyperventilation, who don't know the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in these situations, who don't recognize panic disorders, and [so] blame you. They want to know why you were motivated to seek out the very cult that got you. And the therapist will say you must have had a lot of unmet dependency needs. No. The cult was very good at recruiting. You were looking to do something good for the world or yourself. You just happened to meet a really organized and unusually deceptive recruiter. Certain therapists keep blaming your masochism. First, they tell you that it is your dependency. Second, they tell you that you have streaks of masochism that they have to fix. And if they don't get you to stay in therapy to fix those two things, they start what I call "parent bashing," saying, "Oh, your parents.... They caused it."

And we now have a whole flock of therapists who are inducing false memories in people by telling them, "It was dear old Dad and Mother who must have been a hidden Satanist, and they hypnotized you so that you don't remember. But dear old Dad really abused you years ago. And your mother stood there passively and allowed it to happen." And not only do we have a surge of those kinds of uninformed therapists, there is a group of them telling their clients they were kidnapped by space aliens when they were little. A psychiatry professor from Harvard has written an introduction to a booklet that has been put out, saying, "Be sure and check your clients and patients for signs of alien abductions." When people seek psychiatric and psychological help after being in a cult, they need psycho-educational explanations of what happened.

Now, let me kick the pastors around a bit. Luckily, those of you who are here are among my favorite people because you understand there really are cults out there, and that they are not all good and fine groups. But I have had to help so many people check around and try to find a priest, a rabbi, a clergyman who understood that a cult leader could actually get a person to marry someone he or she didn't know. And then they come out [of the cult], and they go back to their old church, and the pastor says, "It was your willfulness," and they don't want to hear. This person really needs tremendous counseling. In churches whose belief systems are not in favor of multiple marriages, this poor person has to clergy-hop



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until he finds a person who will hear out the story of what happened in the cult. Because [in the cult] people *have* been induced to marry people they have never seen before, not only in massive ceremonies such as you see on TV, but also in small cultic ceremonies. Also, when they come out, people want to talk to pastors from their old world....

I want to say that I have been on a number of the Christian Network stations, and I am so pleased with most of the interviewers on those programs who say to me, "Dr. Singer, we have so many callers who say if a person just knew enough about the Bible, or their faith, or the Koran, or the Talmud, or the Torah, cults would never get them." And the interviewer says, "I know that's not true." There's no use arguing theology with a cultist. They [former cult members] need help understanding the social and psychological ways they were lead into and kept in the group. I would just love to send letters of endorsement with some of those interviewers I talked with during the Waco period, who really knew it is not the theology—cults are not all religious in nature—and that what is needed is an understanding and a discussion about the psychological and social manipulations.

Now, last night I talked with some of the [former] members about triggers. One of the best things to do is be sure you have a friend you can talk with now that you are out of the group. Someone who, when they notice that you sort of space out, will offer you companionship—not psychotherapy—just listening time. And they will *divert* you into an activity.

Also, as a former cultist, if you have just spaced out and some of your family or friends want you to talk about it, and you don't feel as though you can at the moment, learn to say, "I don't want to talk about that right now, please." Learn to respect your own fragility, and, as part of your cult recovery, be in charge of when you respond to whom about what.

There is a myth in our society that talking everything out is the only way to cure. And as I told the FOCUS people last year, "Forget it." If other things work better for you, there is nothing quite as good as *suppressing* something. You do not have to let your feelings out. I would have gotten in trouble years ago if I had let my feelings out. I would have said rude things to lawyers when I was on the stand.

Also, those of you who are former cultists, as well as [you who are] regular people, there is nothing wrong with avoiding things. When you are walking through a corridor, there was not a stone carving brought down with the Ten Commandments that said, "You have to respond to everybody on the street who tries to speak to you." That was not written in stone. Put your eyes forward, and go past people. Do not engage.

So you can suppress your feelings. You can avoid getting into all kinds of things. When something floods up inside you, *minimize* it a bit. Say, "I'm not going crazy. I'm just a little anxious." Learn to minimize some of these grizzlies that come up from the old days. And the thing that we talked about last night (and I have gotten remarks from a number of people in the corridors that it was helpful already): how to divert. If you dissociate, meaning you psychologically disengage—you are gone mentally—how do you get back? Get some sensory change. Give yourself a tiny pinch. No one will know you are doing it. Break up being caught [in the dissociative state]. The moment you feel [you are] hung up in a dissociative state, give yourself a tiny pinch; rub your hand—something that gets some sensory input that may break up that being on hold and dissociated.

The other thing I told people last night is that if I focus attention way far back there, I'm really doing it deliberately. If I am looking at my finger up close, I am really in charge.

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When people space out and dissociate, they sort of let their eyes roam and space out and focus on middle distance. Those of you who are parents, and friends, and spouses, brothers, sisters, who do not have an idea of what people are talking about [when they refer to] floating, dissociating: Try it. Let your eyes sort of go roving loose, and sort of focus in the middle distance—not up close, not off there. Doing that gets you as close to a feeling of what dissociating is like as I can describe. For those of you who space out, anything that gets your attention up close, some competing sensory thing, seems to break up the dissociation. Anything you do to divert helps break up that flooding of emotion and the emotional memories that come in if you are suffering more from being in a high-aversive-arousal group.

Having been a teacher for a little more than 50 years, I always over-prepare. And I can tell we are getting near the time [to close]. I want you to know there is a whole bunch of very important and even humorous stuff we are not even going to get to. I will, at some point, I promise, get it all written down because it is fun preparing to come and share a talk with you. I so enjoy being here, not just because of that wonderful standing ovation, but also the fact that you do not space out very much while I talk.

### **Question and Answer Period**

What I would like to do now is, if you have some questions, we will read them and make some responses.

**Q:** Do you know why I desire to talk to my old cult friends—one in particular, until he would no longer have control over me? It was like a challenge that I needed to conquer. When I dissociate, my world becomes gray and loses importance as well as beauty.

**A:** Just for your information, that is a very frequent description of people dissociating, and thinking they are in a gray corridor, or that there is sort of a gray fog between them and anything cheerful or colorful. Thank you so much; that is true.

Now why in heaven's name would you want to go back and talk to your old cult friends, "one in particular, until he could no longer have control over me? It was like a challenge I needed to conquer." All of us, hearing that, can understand. If you have been controlled for a long time, you want to check it out, like an athlete wants to pit himself or herself against a standard. How fast can they do the breast stroke? How fast can they run? You want your independence back. And you think, "If I can just talk to that guy who controlled me, I will get my independence back, because he got it."

Let me break up that myth. Work out, here, with other people, practicing sensing your own self. Self-esteem and decision making on your own are almost synonymous. So there is no use going back to try to get that guy to give you a sense of control. You already have started on the path when you think you want to go do it. But practice on somebody who is nearby who will be more reciprocal and more responsive, and not stuck in the cult mentality of having to control you. See, out here we take turns. We can take turns now, as much as I love to be a teacher.

**Q:** Is it typical to regress, or to be reluctant to rid oneself of some of the physical things of the cult? What do you suggest to once and for all separate the self?

**A:** Let me tell you a sad story. Do not throw everything away from your cult days, in case you decide to sue them [the cult]. I am not kidding you, and I am not saying go to court all the time. But I know a number of people in this room who, [either] themselves or [their]

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relatives, chucked out all their documents. Then, when the cult started after them and started being really punitive toward them legally, they did not have the documents they had chucked out into the dumpster behind their home or the apartment building. My suggestion to people is pack up your memorabilia, pack up your sari, your gong, whatever your group had, and put everything in a carton, and put the carton in a storage place, so you do not get triggered and remember it every day. But decide what to do with it when you are fully, fully away from the cult, fully in charge of your own life.

And I want you to know (and I want to thank all of you) that I have an extensive, extensive library of books from all kinds of cultic groups that help me in my work, and which I can loan to people who need these books from your old cult. So if you no longer want all those red and green bound volumes, you know, there are many of us who can use them for various things. But make that decision slowly when you want to chuck [these things]. But do get it out of [sight, away from] constantly reminding you.

**Q:** I have always wanted to know what you thought of the movie *The Manchurian Candidate*.

**A:** *The Manchurian Candidate* was great fiction, but it has nothing to do with how thought reform, coercive persuasion, mind control works. Nobody has ever said that coercive persuasion and thought-reform programs make you into a zombie that acts on a cue, looks into a candle, etcetera, etcetera.

That is a movie for fun to watch, but it makes fodder for the cults who try to say there is no such thing as coercive persuasion. They try to say all of the work that Lifton, Schein, Dr. West, I, and others did during the Korean War said you could only coerce people with a gun at the head in a prison setting. That is a big lie.

So, yes, I want to write an article or a book called *Yes, Virginia, There Is Thought Reform*. Because the people in this room know it exists. The courts know it exists. And in spite of what some of the handlers of people who are here in the corridors are being told, no court in this land has said that there is no such thing as coercive persuasion. No real academics have said it. And those of us who are suing two of the large associations are suing them, not on that issue, but because of in-house chicanery that a few of their members used.

But you may go away knowing that nobody other than the guy who created the book and the movie *The Manchurian Candidate* thinks coercive persuasion and thought reform produce that. For centuries, mankind has used various techniques to persuade other people. During the Korean War and earlier in China, programs got packaged to attack the political self of people and shift them over to the way Mao wanted them to be.

A variant of that, as an intense indoctrination program, was used during the Korean War. And what we are seeing now is what Professor Ofshe and I call the "second generation" of thought reform, meaning not *Manchurian Candidate* stuff, but what you all know exists: a step at a time, changing you without your being aware of the agenda the person running the thought reform program has in mind for you. So *The Manchurian Candidate* is entertainment, but it is very misleading in terms of what coercive persuasion is.

**Q:** Are there time-related, definable stages that walkaway former members go through? List possible stages.

**A:** To me, the first stage most people seem to be in is they simply look stunned. They are really feeling adrift. Because most walkaways have to pick a time [to leave] when it looks

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safe. I have had people tell me that they walked away after 10, 15, 20 years in certain groups when, during the middle of the night, they noticed there was not an armed guard at the door of the compound. They did not know where they were going. They just had known for a long time they were going to leave. And the opportunity was there, and they left.

Others have had to plan. There are many walkaways here. You had to plan. And the first stage for walkaways is this stunned feeling of "I left a whole organized life back there. Now what do I do?" One poor soul, and a very dutiful lady, came out of one of these high-control groups that she had been in for years and years and years. I have never met her, but she was so thought reformed that, guess what? She went to the airport. She bought her ticket. She called up the home base to tell the head honcho she was leaving, and where she was going. I mean the woman was truly brainwashed. This gentleman rented an airplane right away, and met her, and picked her up before she could get to family or anybody at the place where she was going. She was literally that obedient. She was still in that stunned state and did not know how to think ahead.

So the first stage of being stunned is then followed by "How do I go about making a plan of any kind?" I have worked with many walkaways who have not met exit counselors. And I give them a tablet and a pencil, and I say, "Let's plan what you are going to do the rest of the day." And I tell them, "You must buy an alarm clock, and you set the clock the night before." In spite of the fact these people may have more IQ than I have, and may be many years younger, and in more vigorous health, that second stage of "How do I make a plan?" comes after the stunned stage.

And then, as far as I can tell, people diversify at this point. I would like to put more time in and, maybe next year, collaborate with Paul Martin and others of you who are looking at it systematically, a variance of the walkaway. I want you to know that I also get calls from relatives of walkaways, who say, "My son has been holed up in a room here in our house for three years since he walked away from Brand X cult. He won't go out. He won't go to work. I can't get him to see a doctor. What should I do?" Now that is a tough one. There are a whole bunch of lost souls holed up in parental homes, and the parents just feel stymied. I have met some walkaways out on the streets who are street people in San Francisco because they had no home to go to, and they are just out on the street.

So, after stunned, then [comes the] "How do I make decisions?" [stage], and then all kinds of problems around what those decisions involve. Sometimes, the police have dropped off an ex-cultist nicely in front of my house, saying, "This lady will help you." And I have had to call parents and tell them that their young-lady daughter of 31 or 32 is here and doesn't have bus fare to get to Brand X town. And they say, "Oh, she is just running that number again. She gives the money to the guru. We are not going to give her a ticket." And bang goes the phone. So I dial them back, collect. You know, they get one phone call, on me, and then I call them back collect and say, "You haven't heard the whole story." And then I start really trying to induce a little guilt. Will they please listen to the kid? The big kid, now 31, is really, really out! And I am glad to say that, of the ones I called and did a guilt trip on the parents, never did those persons take the ticket and turn it into money and give it to the guru or anything. They honestly went home. And one of the ladies I helped is not here because she is busy following her graduate career elsewhere.

That is how I first made connection with International B'nai B'rith. The Moonies were dumping a lot of kids out on the roadway, not too far from where I live, and the highway patrol brought some of these people down and again said, "That lady will talk with you." I

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thought, well, since I could not find their parents in the phonebook, I knew this place B'nai B'rith. So I looked it up and called, and got them to try to help, and so on. Next year, I will have a more complete schedule of pathways [for help].