**From *Cults in Our Midst***

**by Margaret Thaler Singer with Janja Lalich**

**San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995)**

## Chapter One: Defining Cults*

Twice in less than fifteen years we have been shown the deadly ends to which cult followers can be led. In 1978 aerial photos of 912 brightly clad followers of Jim Jones, dead by cyanide-laced drinks and gunshots in a steamy Guyanese jungle, were shown in magazines and on television and have reappeared with each subsequent anniversary of Jonestown. And in early 1993 television news programs showed the Koresh cult's shoot-out, then several weeks later its flaming end on the Texas plains. How many more Jonestowns and Wacos will have to occur before we realize how vulnerable all humans are to influence? In the time between these two episodes, nearly a hundred cult children and mothers died from lack of care in Indiana and there were reports of numerous other children and adults abused in cults. A California-based cult tried to murder a lawyer by placing a rattlesnake in his mailbox because he'd won three cases against the group. The Rajneesh cult in Oregon attempted to poison the water supply in the town of The Dalles and harm public officials in Wasco and


Note: chapter references not included with this excerpt. Please see the original.

Jefferson counties for carrying out the laws of the state, which the group didn't want applied to them. Cult members who once were ordinary citizens have been persuaded by each of these other groups to carry out their demands--including murder, suicide, and other violent acts--at the behest of the cult leader.

The cults whose names you tend to recognize are more visible because of their size, their flagrant behavior, and, for some, their self-destructive tendencies. But there are many other groups that are subtle and sophisticated, yet just as insistent and just as dangerous. A multitude of cultic groups is actively recruiting, flourishing, and gaining money and power in the United States and throughout the world. These groups influence, exploit, and abuse their members or followers through deliberate mind manipulation, or thought-reform processes. These influence techniques can be used in a number of contexts or settings.

In this book, we will be looking at two main categories of groups. The first is made up of cults and cultlike groups that expose their recruits and members to organized psychological and social persuasion processes designed to produce attitudinal changes in them and to establish remarkable degrees of control by the group over the lives of these recruits and members. These cults deceive, manipulate, and exploit their members and hope to keep them for as long as possible.

The second category consists of commercially sold large

group awareness training programs and other "self-improvement," psychology-based, and miscellaneous organizations that use similar intense coordinated persuasion processes but ordinarily do not intend to keep their customers for long periods of membership. They prefer that adherents buy more courses and products and bring in more customers, staying around for perhaps a year or two.

Thus, groups in both categories use thought-reform processes. The originators of cults and thought-reform groups tend to conjure up coordinated programs of coercive influence and behavior control using ages-old persuasion techniques in order to change people's attitudes around a vast array of philosophies, theories, and practices. These masterful manipulators appear to be aware that they need to put into place a packaged set of influence techniques, tactics, and strategies in order to convince others to follow them and go along with their bidding. Not every one of these groups meets the definition of a cult, but along with cults, all of them use thought-reform techniques as part of their group dynamic. (See Chapter Three for a more detailed discussion of thought-reform processes.)

Do you have any idea how many cultic groups are disguised as legitimate enterprises--as restaurants, self-help groups, business training workshops, prosperity clubs, psychotherapy clinics, martial arts centers, diet plans, campus activities,

political organizations, and so on? Rather than withering away, as many people believe, cults and groups using thought-reform processes have grown like mushrooms after a rainstorm.

Currently, depending on how one defines a cult, there are anywhere from three thousand to five thousand cults in the United States alone. Over the past several decades as many as twenty million people have been involved for varying periods of time in one or another of these groups. And not only are the cult members affected, but millions more family members and loved ones worry and wonder, sometimes for years, about what has happened to their relatives or friends.

Not everyone who is approached by a cult recruiter ends up joining the group, and not everyone who joins stays forever. But enough do join and stay for long enough periods of time to make cults a pressing societal problem that merits serious inspection. And I’m not talking about a philosophical debate or a hot exposé on a television talk show. The threat presented by cults goes much deeper than that. I'm talking about the very real threat to public health, mental health, political power, and democratic freedoms--as well as a concern over growing consumer issues--that become apparent as we learn how these manipulative and often unethical groups and programs have spread into not just the nooks and crannies but also the major sectors and institutions of our society.

Cults are no longer solely a concern for parents who observe their idealistic, and in some cases disaffected, young adult children being recruited, as was the case in the 1960s and 1970s. For since the eighties and nineties, we have seen cults seduce citizens of all ages and all income brackets. In the past, cults gained a foothold by attracting the so-called marginal people--the unaffiliated, the disenchanted, the disgruntled of each generation. But some of today's cultic groups have so professionalized their approaches and techniques of persuasion that they are moving way beyond the fringe and into the mainstream.

I have interviewed more than three thousand persons who have been in one or another--or in some cases in several--of the multitude of cults in the United States, as well as hundreds of relatives of cult members. I've also studied dozens of persons who have been involved with other high-control groups, and numerous persons, usually women, who have had their lives taken over by a single individual who controlled them as much as if they had been in a cult. From this life experience and more than fifty years of study, research, and clinical practice, I can only say that whenever I think I've heard it all, along comes new evidence that is even more outlandish than the last.

In this book, I attempt to explain how ordinary citizens leave their everyday lives and become part of groups that carry

out acts ranging from bizarre and unethical to self-destructive and murderous. Cults seem to have no end to their peculiar practices. And some cult leaders seem to have no end to their unconscionable behaviors and their capacity to abuse their followers. Cult members seem to have a human stamina almost beyond comprehension. And after they leave cults, most former members have a boundless spirit and unbeatable will to heal themselves, reclaim their independence, and come out on the positive side of the most horrific experiences--a spirit and a will that I can only admire and uphold, more and more with each person I meet.

## Definitions and Characteristics

The noun "cult" tends to impart an image of a static organization. But like people in other groupings, people in a cult interact in special ways, and these ways may change across time. It is in their inner workings where cults tend to be unusual, so it's not always easy to grasp the differences between an open society or organization and a cult. Sometimes people fail to consider how cults work because they mistakenly either write cults off as filled with a bunch of crazies or think cults are just like regular groups they attend, such as the local Rotary Club, the PTA, or the Loyal Order of the Moose.

The usual dictionary definitions of a cult are descriptive

of certain aspects. But I also want to convey what life in various cults consists of and to convey a more dynamic picture of the processes that go on.

I prefer to use the phrase "cultic relationships" to signify more precisely the processes and interactions that go on in a cult. A cultic relationship is one in which a person intentionally induces others to become totally or nearly totally dependent on him or her for almost all major life decisions, and inculcates in these followers a belief that he or she has some special talent, gift, or knowledge.

So for our purposes, the label *cult* refers to three factors:

1. The origin of the group and role of the leader
2. The power structure, or relationship between the leader (or leaders) and the followers
3. The use of a coordinated program of persuasion (which is called thought reform, or, more commonly, brainwashing)

What is labeled a cult by one researcher may not be identified as such by another. For example, some researchers count only religion-based groups, discounting the myriad cults formed around a variety of doctrines, theories, and practices. Using the three factors of leader, structure, thought reform allows us to assess the cultic nature of a particular group or situation regardless of its belief system. So let's expand on

these three factors to amplify our understanding.

**Origin of the Group and Role of the Leader**

In most cases, there is one person, typically the founder, at the top of the cult's structure, and decision making centers in him. (There are some female cult leaders, but most are male, and so for simplicity, throughout this book, cult leaders will be referred to as male.) These leaders typically have the following characteristics.

Cult leaders are self-appointed, persuasive persons who claim to have a special mission in life or to have special knowledge. For example, leaders of flying saucer cults often claim that beings from outer space have commissioned them to lead people to special places to await a spaceship. Other leaders claim to have rediscovered ancient ways to produce enlightenment or cure disease, while yet others claim to have developed inventive scientific, humanistic, or social plans that will lead followers to "new levels" of awareness, success, or personal and political power.

Cult leaders tend to be determined and domineering and are often described as charismatic. These leaders need to have enough personal drive, charm, or other appeal to attract, control, and manage their flocks. They persuade devotees to drop their families, jobs, careers, and friends to follow them. Overtly or

covertly, in most cases they eventually take over control of their followers' possessions, money, and lives.

Cults leaders center veneration on themselves. Ethical priests, rabbis, ministers, democratic leaders, and leaders of genuinely altruistic movements keep the veneration of adherents focused on God, abstract principles, or the group's purpose. Cult leaders, in contrast, keep the focus of love, devotion, and allegiance on themselves. In many cults, for example, spouses are forced to separate or parents forced to give up their children as a test of their devotion to their leader.

**Structure: Relationship Between Leader and Followers**

For a simple visual portrayal, imagine an inverted T. The leader is alone at the top, and the followers are all at the bottom, with sometimes a string of lieutenants to help maintain the status quo.

Cults are authoritarian in structure. The leader is regarded as the supreme authority although he may delegate certain power to a few subordinates for the purpose of seeing that members adhere to the leader's wishes and rules. There is no appeal outside of the leader's system to greater systems of justice. For example, if a schoolteacher feels unjustly treated by a principal, appeals can be made to a higher authority within that school system. In a cult, the leader has the only and final

ruling on all matters.

Cults appear to be innovative and exclusive. Cult leaders claim to be breaking with tradition, offering something novel, and instituting the only viable system for change that will solve life's problems or the world's ills. For example, an Arizona-based group purported to have found immortality and tells its followers that they too will live forever--but only by staying with the leaders, known by the initials of their first names, CBJ (Chuck, BernaDeane, and Jim). At one time, CBJ reportedly had thirty thousand followers worldwide. Meanwhile, another group professes that by living with the group and learning a secret breathing method, members will eventually be able to live on air alone. Almost all cults make the claim that their members are chosen, select, and special, while nonmembers are considered lesser beings.

Cults tend to have a double set of ethics. Members are urged to be open and honest within the group and to confess all to the leaders. At the same time, members might be encouraged to deceive and manipulate outsiders or nonmembers. In contrast, established religions teach members to be honest and truthful to all and to abide by one set of ethics. The overriding philosophy in cults, however, is that the end justifies the means, a view that allows cults to establish their own brand of morality, one that often is outside society’s norms. For example, one large group introduced

the concept of "heavenly deception"; another introduced "transcendental trickery"; and some of the neo-Christian groups introduced terms such as "talking to the Babylonians" or refer to outsiders as the "systemites." Language such as this is meant to justify a double set of ethics making it acceptable to deceive nonmembers.

**Coordinated Program of Persuasion**

Later, I will describe the techniques of exploitative persuasion, that is, the various thought-reform processes used by cult leaders and cultlike groups to induce people to join, stay, and obey. Here, I describe certain general characteristics of this crucial factor in the definition of cults.

Cults tend to be totalistic, or all-encompassing, in controlling their members' behavior and also ideologically totalistic, exhibiting zealotry and extremism in their worldview. Eventually, and usually sooner rather than later, most cults expect members to devote increasing time, energy, and money or other resources to the professed goals of the group, stating or implying that a total commitment is required to reach "enlightenment." The form of that commitment will vary from group to group: more courses, more meditation, more quotas, more cult-related activities, more donations. Some cults have been known to dictate what members wear and eat; when and where they work,

sleep, and bathe, as well as what to believe, think, and say. On most matters, cults promote what we call black-and-white thinking, or an all-or-nothing point of view.

Cults tend to require members to undergo a major disruption or change in lifestyle. Many cults put great pressure on new members to leave their families, friends, and jobs to become immersed in the group's major purpose. This isolation tactic is one of the most common mechanisms of control and enforced dependency used by cults.

**Cults Are Not All Alike**

Cults are not uniform nor are they static. Cults exist on a continuum of degrees of influence, from more to less extreme. There are live-in and live-out cults. Groups vary in levels of membership and degrees of involvement: for example, members on the periphery of a group usually are not privy to the costs, contents, and obligations of the later stages of membership and have little knowledge of the real purposes of the group or the amount of power wielded by the leader. Even within the same cult, rules, restrictions, and requirements may change from year to year, or from location to location, depending on outside pressures, local leadership, and the fancies of the leader.

The manner in which controls are put into place, the extent of control over details of behavior, and how blatant these

controls are also vary from cult to cult. In most live-in cults, every detail of life comes under group scrutiny. For example, there are dress codes, food restrictions, and enforced marriages or relationships. In such cults, the members generally live together at the headquarters or at locations around the country or overseas and work for cult-owned enterprises. On the other hand, there are also cults whose devotees appear to remain active in quite a few major aspects of the outside world, earning a living outside the cult. But for all practical purposes these individuals live under rules governing crucial features of their personal life, such as with whom they may associate, what happens to their money, whether they can raise their own children, and where they live.

Cults basically have only two purposes: recruiting new members and fund-raising. Established religions and altruistic movements may also recruit and raise funds. Their sole purpose, however, is not to simply grow larger and wealthier; such groups have as goals to better the lives of their members and mankind in general, either in this world or in a world to come. A cult may claim to make social contributions, but in actuality these remain mere claims or gestures. In the end, all work and all funds, even the token gestures of altruism, serve the cult. (In Chapter Four, I explore these very significant differences between cults and legitimate social, business, or religious groups.)

In sum, the term cult is merely descriptive, not pejorative. It refers to the origins, social structure, and power structure of a group. The conduct of certain cults, however--especially groups that tend to overtly exploit and abuse people and engage in deceptive, unethical, and illegal conduct—has, on occasion, provoked the surrounding society into a critical stance.

* * * * *

Although cults have existed at different times in the United States, aggressive recruitment by certain cults in the late sixties drew some public attention to cults. Then the tragic mass suicide-murders in Jonestown in 1978 focused intense, worldwide attention on the cult phenomenon. People began to wonder how someone could get such total control of people that they would drink cyanide on his instructions. They saw another leader marrying thousands of strangers in mass weddings. They read of a leader requiring his followers to switch marital partners and then submit to vasectomies. They learned of another leader instituting a "flirty fishing" policy by which women followers went into the streets as prostitutes to lure males to the group gatherings where they could be led to join the cult.

Various researchers' reports indicate that it's fair to estimate that between two million and five million Americans are involved in cults at any one time. Naturally, membership counts are rough. Some cults puff up their membership rolls in order to

seem larger and more effective than they really are; others count as members every person who ever signed a petition sponsored by the group, bought a raffle ticket on the street, took a personality test, or purchased a book. Another group classifies as associate members everyone who ever signed a 3x5 card at a free dinner. Another counts as associates all who have attended a lecture, while some count only persons who have advanced through an initiation ceremony. Still other groups are highly secretive about their membership, revealing little or no reliable information. And there are countless groups, with anywhere from two or three followers to a dozen or more, that we learn about only indirectly or from members who leave. In general, cults do not stand up to be counted.

## Cult Types

Remembering that many of the better-known cults in the late 1960s and early 1970s tended to be religious cults, some people mistakenly think that all cults are religious. Another factor that may feed that idea is that many of the groups incorporate as churches to obtain tax and legal benefits afforded those entities in our society. However, it is not at all the case that all cults are religious. A cult can be formed around any content: politics, religion, commerce, self-improvement techniques, health fads, the stuff of science fiction, psychology, outer-space phenomena,

meditation, martial arts, environmental lifestyles, and so on. Yet the misconception that all cults are religious has left many citizens unaware not only of the variety of cult content but also of the plethora of cults, large and small, that has spread throughout our society.

Today, in fact, the fastest-growing cultic groups competing with the religious cults for members are those centered around New Age thinking and certain personal-improvement training, lifestyles, and prosperity programs. These latter cults are most likely to be the kind you or your friends may have come across or been influenced by, perhaps even seduced by, for a period of time.

A pied piper with sufficient determination and a touch of charm, charisma, seduction, or simply good salesmanship skills can, with enough time and effort, secure a following around almost any topic. Regardless of the type of cult, leaders and their followers induce the sad, the lonely, and the disaffiliated to join, as well as those who merely are available and who respond to an invitation at some vulnerable point in their lives.

In the United States, there are at least ten major types of cult, each with its own beliefs, practices, and social mores. The list below is not exhaustive, but most cults can be classified under one of the following headings:

1. Christian and neo-Christian religious

2. Hindu, Buddhist, and other Eastern religious

3. Occult, witchcraft, and satanist

4. Spiritualist and mind science

5. Zen and other Sino-Japanese philosophical-mystical orientation

6. Racial

7. Flying saucer and other outer-space phenomena

8. Psychology or psychotherapeutic

9. Political

10. Self-help, self-improvement, and lifestyle systems

Cult names suggest further groupings and emphases. Some start their names with "The," implying that theirs is the only way to be, to think, or to live. Examples include The True Believers, The Way, The Walk, The Process, The Foundation, The Body, The Farm, The Assembly.

Other groups emphasize the concept of family: The Family, The Love Family, The Family of Love, The Rainbow Family, The Forever Family, The Christ Family, The Lyman Family, The Manson Family.

Images of siblings provide other family models, such as Brother Julius, Brother Evangelist, Brother David, Great White Brotherhood, and countless other Brotherhoods (or sometimes Sisterhoods).

Many groups are designated simply as churches or temples: the Peoples Temple, the Church of Armageddon, with such variations as the Word of ..., the People of ..., and sometimes using "Bible" in their name.

New Age and psychotherapy groups take names such as The Center for Feeling Therapy, the Sullivanians, Alive Polarity Fellowship, Direct Centering, Sun Arts, Arica, Silva Mind Control.

There is a plethora of Eastern-based groups, whose names are often formed around the name of the guru or mission. Both personal and other kinds of names abound in groups representing a variety of philosophies: Alamo Christian Foundation, Ecclesia Athletic Foundation, Bubba Free John and the Dawn Horse Communion, Emissaries of Divine Light, Kashi Ranch, Blue White Dove Foundation, and the No Name Group.

This listing could go on and on, exposing the sheer numbers and scope of the cults around us. Yet, on one level, all cults are a variation on a single theme. And in a sense, that theme has nothing to do with belief. In cultic groups, the belief system--whether religious, psychotherapeutic, political, New Age, or commercial--ends up being a tool to serve the leader's desires, whims, and hidden agendas. The ideology is a double-edge sword: it is the glue that binds the member to the group, and it is a tool exploited by the leader to achieve his goals.

To understand cults we must examine structure and practice, not beliefs. As will be explained in later chapters, the thought-reform techniques used by skillful manipulators to ensure compliance and obedience among their followers is, in the final analysis, what makes cults so worrisome and harmful.

## Who Joins Cults?

When we hear of cults, scams, and individuals being controlled and influenced by others, we instinctively try to separate ourselves from those persons. It seems a point of valor and self-esteem to insist that "no one could get me to do such things" when hearing about situations of intense influence. Just as most soldiers believe bullets will hit only others, most citizens tend to believe that their own minds and thought processes are invulnerable. "Other people can be manipulated, but not me," they declare.

### The "Not Me" Myth

People like to think that their opinions, values, and ideas are inviolate and totally self-regulated. They may grudgingly admit that they're influenced slightly by advertising. Beyond that, they want to preserve the myth that other people are weak-minded and easily influenced while they are the strong-minded. Even though we all know human minds are open to influence--whether or

not that is a comfortable thought--most of us defensively and haughtily proclaim: "Only crazy, stupid, needy people join cults. No one could ever get me to commit suicide or beat my kids or give my wife over to a cult leader. No one could ever talk me into anything like that."

As I hear people say that, I silently ask, "You want to bet?"

People also cherish a fantasy that manipulators confront, browbeat, and argue people into doing their bidding. They envision Big Brother wearing storm-trooper boots, holding guns to people's heads, and forcing them to change their beliefs, alter their personalities, and accept new ideologies.

The average person looks down on those who get involved in cults, get taken in a scam by some operator who bilks people, or remain in an abusive group or relationship for long periods. That only happens to weak and silly people, the person boasts, generating a category called "not me" in which to place the victims of cults, scams, and intense influence. There is an almost universal aversion to accepting the idea that we ourselves are vulnerable to persuasion. I have heard this from journalists, college professors, neighbors, passengers seated next to me on a plane, people I talk with in the street, graduate students, gardeners, salesclerks, and so on. Neither education, age, nor social class protects a person from this false sense of

invulnerability.

Several years ago when I was lecturing in Switzerland, a Swiss psychiatrist opened the program saying: "We have such an educated, close-knit, middle-class society, we have no cults here. Cults will never get an inroad in this country." I then provided literature containing the street addresses of various large, internationally known cults, as well as many small ones, operating in Zurich and other Swiss cities. Few, if any, countries in the world are without cults.

**Yes, You**

Despite the myth that normal people don't get sucked into cults, it has become clear over the years that everyone is susceptible to the lure of these master manipulators. In fact, the majority of adolescents and adults in cults come from middle-class backgrounds, are fairly well educated, and are not psychologically disturbed prior to joining.

Research indicates that approximately two-thirds of those who have joined cults came from normal, functioning families and demonstrated age-appropriate behavior around the time they entered the cult. Of the remaining third, only about 5 to 6 percent had major psychological difficulties prior to joining a cult. The remaining portion of the third had diagnosable depressions related to personal loss (for example, a death in the

family, failure to be admitted to a preferred university or training program, or a broken romance) or were struggling with age-related sexual or career dilemmas.

Certain family backgrounds may render some young people more vulnerable than others to the lure of cults. Cults offer instant, simplistic, and focused solutions to life's problems. Some families unwittingly foster a combination of indecisiveness and rebelliousness that makes the cult seem like a perfect solution to a young person seeking escape from the frustrations of the family situation. In such families, children are often constantly encouraged to be adventurous, be activists, be independent, go against the grain, buck the system. Yet whenever the offspring become active or choose an affiliation or rebel in some way, they are berated by these same parents for choosing the wrong activity or friends, doing the wrong thing, making the wrong decision. Pushing their children too much and too quickly to grow up and be adult, parents tend to be less than helpful to these young people facing a variety of decisions. The children feel left to their own devices, and at the same time lack confidence in their own decision-making abilities. A number of cult members are found to come from such family backgrounds.

Another kind of vulnerability, or stress factor, evolves when a person, especially an adolescent or young adult, feels overwhelmed by the sheer number of choices that need to be made,

the ambiguity of life at this age, the complexity of the world, and the amount of conflict associated with many aspects of daily life. In addition to facing many pressing personal decisions, many adolescents are attempting to come to grips with their overall values, beliefs, and purposes.

Many former cult members report that certain classes they took late in late high school or early in college contributed greatly to their bewilderment. They commonly describe classes, teachers, and experiences that they felt destabilized their views of the world, leaving them frightened by the complexity of making seemingly endless decisions. Feeling lost and alone, they felt the need to find affiliation and some simple ways to make their life work. Without intending to make such a choice, they found themselves swept along into a group that offered simple and guaranteed paths to follow, as was the case for the following student.

> "Mary," an undergraduate at a campus of a large state university, was feeling low; she didn't know what she wanted to do when finished with college. But most of all, she was in three courses--psychology, sociology, and political science--in which the teachers were young, radical, and disturbing to Mary's outlook on life. She had begun the classes expecting to learn historical facts, read works of famous persons, have good class discussions. But this year,

things were different.

The personal outlooks and worldviews of the instructors seemed overwhelmingly pessimistic, nihilistic, and demoralizing to her. Each in his own way told her there was no reality: everyone sees whatever they thought they saw, all things are relative, there is no right and wrong, and so on. The psychology instructor was involved with a New Age group and had the class meditate lengthily as part of each class period. Mary found this puzzling, as it seemed the instructor was really teaching a religious philosophy rather than general psychology. But at least, she felt, it was not as demoralizing as the other courses in which she was told life is pointless and meaningless.

A man in the school cafeteria invited her to the place where he lived. It turned out to be the local ashram of a guru. There Mary was told there was one, true, easy path to follow, which the guru would share with her. After a number of visits, Mary dropped out of school and moved into the ashram. Ten years later her parents finally lured her out of the group. In counseling afterward, Mary told me that the university instructors had so destabilized her world that the guru group sounded like a dream come true: a sense of purpose, meaningfulness, paths to follow, things that were agreed upon as good and bad. She later realized that when

she met the guru group she was an easy subject to recruit into their ways.

Mary is typical of many college students who lack the social or familial stability to fend off the seductive lure of simple answers and whose susceptibility to cult recruitment increases as their view of the world around them becomes unsettled.

Something similar happens to adult joiners. Many adults today are overwhelmed by the confusion and apparent coldness of our society: the senseless violence, the rampant homelessness, the lack of meaning, widespread loss of respect for authority figures and for other humans in general, the vast numbers of unemployed and marginalized, the insecurity and instability of the job market, the loss of family communication, the lessening role of the established religions, the failing sense of community or even neighborhood. No less bewildered than the adolescents, many mature adults are finding less and less to hold onto in today's technoculture. What does this create but ripe recruits for the multitude of manipulators and swindlers?

Nevertheless the fact remains that apart from unsettling socioeconomic conditions and certain relevant family factors, <u>any</u> person who is in a vulnerable state, seeking companionship and a sense of meaning, in a period of transition or time of loss, is a good prospect for cult recruitment. Although most contemporary

cults primarily recruit young adults, preferably single, some--especially the neo-Christian cults--seek entire families, and even the elderly are targets of some groups.

What do these cults offer to lonely, depressed, or uncertain persons? In one form or another, each cult purports to offer an improved state of mind, an expanded state of being, and a moral, spiritual, or political state of righteous certainty. That supposedly beneficial state can be reached only by following the narrowly prescribed pathways of a particular group master, guru, or trainer. To grasp that approach to life, the new recruit--the "babe," the "preemie," the "trial member," the "spiritual god-child," the "lower consciousness one," as certain groups label the beginner--must surrender his or her critical mind, must yield to the flow of force, must have childlike trust and faith. (The special methods used to manipulate recruits into such an accepting state of mind will be explored in detail in later chapters.)

## Why Do People Join?

Those of us who have studied modern-day cults have found that there is not one type of person who gets enmeshed with cults, but rather a person who is experiencing a combination of factors nearly simultaneously. I have found that two conditions make an individual especially vulnerable to cult recruiting: being

depressed and being in between important affiliations. We can be especially vulnerable to persuasion and suggestion because of some loss or disappointment that has caused a depressed mood or even mild to moderate clinical depression. And we're especially prone to this kind of influence when we're not engaged in a meaningful personal relationship, job, educational or training program, or some other life involvement.

Vulnerable individuals may be lonely, in a transition between high school and college, between college and a job or graduate school, traveling away from home, arriving in a new location, recently jilted or divorced, fresh from losing a job, feeling overwhelmed about how things have been going, or not knowing what to do next in life. Unsettling personal occurrences are commonplace: A high school senior is rejected by the college of her choice. A man's mother dies. A woman decides to sell her condo and travel after an unhappy ending to a long-term relationship. At such times, we are all more open to persuasion, more suggestible, more willing to take something offered us without thinking there might be strings attached.

A depressed and temporarily unaffiliated person will be more likely to resonate to the offerings of a cult recruiter, particularly if the offering fits with a personal interest or the person feels at liberty to check something out. Some people will respond to printed notices on kiosks and bulletin boards, others

to media ads offering lectures and group meetings. Besides tapping the responses to those luring but deceptive ads, cults also use one-on-one recruiting techniques. In most cases, the actual recruitment grows out of such one-on-one contact between a cult recruiter and a temporarily or situationally vulnerable person.

Some of the larger cults have training manuals for recruiters and carry out drills on where and how to approach prospects, much as sales trainers train new salespersons. For example, former cult members who had been involved in recruiting while in their various cults told me the following:

• One cult member was directed to get a job in the registrar's office at a nearby university and to target anyone who came to drop out of courses. Such persons were considered to be depressed and needy and more likely to accept invitations to the cult house near the campus than someone doing well at school.

•A female recruiter was instructed to stand outside the student counseling service and invite the lonely to the cult for a dinner-lecture and evening of fellowship.

• A number of other recruiters were sent to tourist attractions in San Francisco, such as Fisherman's Wharf, or to the French Quarter in New Orleans, or to the tour-bus stations in major cities to look for visitors with British flags on their

backpacks who were alone. (The British flags identified English speakers; it is usually too difficult for English-only-speaking cult members to persuade and manipulate someone who does not speak English.)

• Recruiters were sent to social events at various churches to approach people who were standing alone. The recruiter was to invite the person to go have pie and ice cream or some similar treat, or to offer the person a ride home--anything that would ingratiate the person.

Each cult has its own lures and tactics for getting new members and recruiting the type of person it's looking for. The techniques just outlined are used by cults targeting mostly the under-thirty crowd. They often use these young adults to solicit funds on the streets of cities around the world and to recruit more members. These cults engage in direct solicitation from the gullible public, whereas other cults turn to their own members as a means of getting money, seeking out, for example, the elderly with pensions or property, or professionals with decent salaries and good connections. Other groups want to recruit members into their pay-as-you-go programs and therefore target employed persons with money-making skills to whom the cult will sell "courses," gradually hooking these people into greater and greater commitment to the group, as well as selling them more and more expensive courses. Some of these recruits end up leaving

their jobs and working for the cult to pay for the courses.

Courses used to lure people into cults range from how to communicate, how to "scientifically reduce stress in your life," how to manage your office and become a millionaire, how to "get control of your life," how to become a martial arts teacher, how to "live forever," how to detect if you have been abducted by space creatures and join with those who have, how to reach perfect enlightenment and govern the world, how to live past lives, and on and on. The courses are as varied as the themes around which cults are formed. Offerings are worded as if the group were specifically made to benefit you. You, the new member, usually do not learn the full story (and real purpose) of the cult until long after becoming embedded in the group. One of the central criticisms of the current crop of cults hinges on their deceptive recruiting methods.

Recently I was consulted about two separate situations that I believe show the worldwide ramifications of this problem. First, I interviewed two Russian students who had been brought to the United States by a cultic group under false pretenses. They had been promised full scholarship to a university here. Instead, once they got here, they were put out in tourist areas to recruit new members.

Then I talked with some people who were trying to help a German family who had come to Berkeley to speak with their son,

who had come to the United States to work in a summer camp. While on vacation in San Francisco, the young man had been recruited into a large cultic group. For eighteen months the family attempted to contact him, finally coming to America. But even while here, they were never able to be alone with him. In the course of the family's visit to Berkeley, the group sent the son off, some hundred miles away. In desperation, the family began to picket the group's local house and called local television stations. Eventually, the family had to return to Germany with no resolution in sight.

**Myth of the Seeker**

Another myth surrounding those who join cults is that these people go out looking for a cult. Cult apologists capitalize on this notion and claim that people seek out the very group they end up in. Some of these apologists are academicians who describe cult members as "seekers," because these researchers only study members after they are already in the group. In their claim that the cult member went out looking for a guru or self-appointed messiah, the apologists avoid attributing any agency to the cult. Instead, they describe a cult as if it were the Washington Monument, sitting still, waiting for tourists to visit. In fact, the cult leader, after securing a few followers, trains them to go out and recruit new members. Voluminous popular and academic literature counters the seeker theory, calling attention to the

active, sophisticated, and unrelenting proselytizing engaged in by the majority of today's cults.

As we have seen, a cult can be defined in many ways, but for our purposes and to explain most modern-day cults, it is necessary to think of a process, not an event, and to view life in the cult as a process. Processes evolve, unfold; something goes on between people. There is an interaction, a transaction, a relationship established.

The act of joining a cult results from a process put in motion by a cult recruiter. Cult practices make it clear that recruits are propagandized and socialized to accept the life conditions of the group. These conditions are revealed slowly, and recruits do not know where they are going when they start. How can they be seekers for a particular result when they are unaware of the final patterns and contents of the group they join?

Those who put forth the seeker theory tend to look only at preselected surface features of cults and claim that members had set out searching for the specific group they became involved with. Seeker theorists fail to study the cult’s actions, the persuasion and influence techniques used. In working with several thousand individuals who had been in a cult, not one of them has told me that he or she went out looking for a guru to set him or her up in prostitution, flower selling, cocaine dealing, gun

smuggling, child abuse, or living off garbage, which were the ways these various individuals ended up while in a cult. They had not been seeking that.

Former cult members commonly reveal that perhaps they were looking for companionship or the chance to do something to benefit themselves and humankind. They say they were not looking for the particular cult they joined and were not intending to belong for a lifetime. Rather, they were actively and/or deceptively pressured to join, soon found themselves enmeshed in the group, were slowly cut off from their pasts and their families, and became totally dependent on the group.

**Blaming the Victim**

At a recent meeting of the American Psychiatric Association a young psychiatrist approached several speakers on the platform who were about to conduct a seminar on cults. He confidently asked if they were "going to explain why cults attract people with borderline personality disorders." He said he had not worked with any ex-cult members, but that he "knew" that only borderline or psychotic persons--"strictly pathological types"--joined cults. The speakers invited him to be sure to stay and hear the program.

Two well-known social phenomena--the “just world concept" and "blaming the victim"—can help us understand what is going on

in reactions like the one just described. Social psychologists have studied both these widespread human reactions and trace their origins to primitive times.

Basic to the just world outlook is the widely held belief that if a person obeys the rules of society, nothing bad will happen to him. Rule breakers, on the other hand, get punished. Punishment comes in the form of bad luck, disasters, illness, and loss. Thus, victims of any disaster, crime, illness, or misfortune automatically fall into the category of blameworthy person. This primitive reasoning goes something like this: "Since I feel protected from evil and misfortune if I just obey the rules--because it is a just world--then I can separate myself from those who come to harm. They must have done something bad to have bad things happen to them."

Blaming victims is an almost universal response to misfortune happening to others. Women who get raped are often blamed. People will say that the rape victim was wearing a short dress, was out after 10 P.M., and was in a neighborhood where she should not have been. Therefore, the rape is her fault. The same attitude is often taken toward victims of muggings: "Well, he was wearing a good suit in a bad neighborhood." Any parent reading this realizes how often she or he has fussed at a child, blaming the young one for some misfortune. Across time this same parent has no doubt been blamed for her or his own misfortunes. What

husband has not said, "If you had not been driving in that part of town, you wouldn't have gotten a nail in your tire"? Or what wife has not said, "If you had worn your jacket, you wouldn't have caught a cold"?

Similarly, when somebody gets into a cult, the tendency is for society to say there must be something wrong with that person. There must be some personal defect; otherwise he or she would not have joined such a group. Since the public continues to regard cult members as stupid, crazy, and weak-minded, the near-universal public response is: "It's his fault. He went out looking for what he got." In our society, there is a strong taboo on being victimized through scams, influence, and deceptions, and this makes the cult victim even more scorned.

We also have a tendency to blame families and relatives, saying or implying they must have failed in some way, otherwise their offspring would never have joined a cult. One woman came up to me at a talk I was giving in London and said, poignantly, "We parents are made to look like the abusers and the menace."

The tendency to blame victims prevents both lay and professional persons from seeing that most individuals who become involved in cultic relationships are a type of victim insufficiently recognized and understood. If a man in the jungle walks near a river and a crocodile bites his leg, the unlucky victim will be blamed for getting close enough to the water that

a crocodile could harm him. Few will take the time to learn that the crocodile was lying in wait, hidden, and the man had no idea danger was so close. So, too, when an old lady is bilked out of her money by a swindler, her friends are prone to say it was her fault for being gullible. So it is also when a person becomes involved with a cult. The person is blamed for being a seeker, gullible, or mentally aberrant. The actions of the cult are overlooked in the appraisal.

The general public now recognizes four classes of victims. I don't encourage people to think of themselves as victims forever, as has become popular in certain segments of the self-help movement in the United States. Nevertheless, I think the victim analysis is helpful to show how getting duped by a cult is as common as buying a pair of shoes that don't fit.

The first class of victims includes the victims of violent crimes; the second class, the victims of natural disasters and serious illnesses; the third class, the victims of terrorists and kidnappers; and the fourth class, the victims of civil torts, able to seek redress through the courts for personal injuries, malpractice, and other wrongful things that have happened to them. But I see also a fifth class of victims: those who have been in situations of "enforced dependency" (as I call them) as a consequence of having been subjected to thought-reform processes. In essence, a thought-reform program is a behavioral

reconstruction program, a program of systematic manipulation using psychological and social techniques (see Chapter Three). It is commonly known as brainwashing, and, yes, it does exist. The cult member falls into this fifth class of victims.

* * * * *

We all are being influenced all the time. And we are all potentially vulnerable to a cult's pitch, especially as our society becomes more and more commercialized, violent, and alienating, dishonest and corrupt, polarized and globalized, almost without structure. To counter the blaming mentality, we must, as a society, seek educational and informational preventative programs to teach about open versus deceptive recruitment and to expose the manipulative and unethical techniques used by various cults to keep members guiltily bound to the group. If you buy a pair of shoes that don't fit, you can usually return them. But once you join a cult, it may be years before you get out.

For me, Waco was a replay of Jonestown, when 912 people died at the direction of their leader, Jim Jones, in a remote South American jungle. Jones also ordered the murder of U.S. Congressman Leo J. Ryan and four journalists who had gone to Guyana at the behest of relatives who had tried for years to get the world to heed the conditions of slavery under which their loved ones were held. Of those who were forced by Jones to drink

cyanide-laced Fla-Vor-Aid, 276 were children, many of them sent to live with his group in California, but then were transported by Jones to the jungles where they died.

I was shocked when, less than six weeks after the Jonestown tragedy, a man at a party attended by university professors and their families remarked, "Those people in Jonestown really got what they were looking for. What kind of insanity leads people to join a cult like that? I guess cults keep some of the demented and stupid off the streets. No one could ever argue me into one of those groups." I talked with him about how cults evolve and operate. But he had said aloud what many people think: that only the demented and crazy get into cults.

For a time in Spring of 1993, the Waco cult became the center of attention, much as Jonestown had in 1978. A big splash in the news, then people back off from noticing cults and the exploitative persuasion that surrounds us all. After the horror of Jonestown receded into the past, journalists asked, "Are cults still a big thing or did they die out after Jonestown?" Then after Waco, they asked, "How many more cults are there like that one?" But even when told there are many others, the journalists join the average person in not comprehending that--as we shall see in the chapters ahead--they or a member of their own family may already be enmeshed in a cult.