

Our Gifted Teens and The Cults

by Sandy Andron

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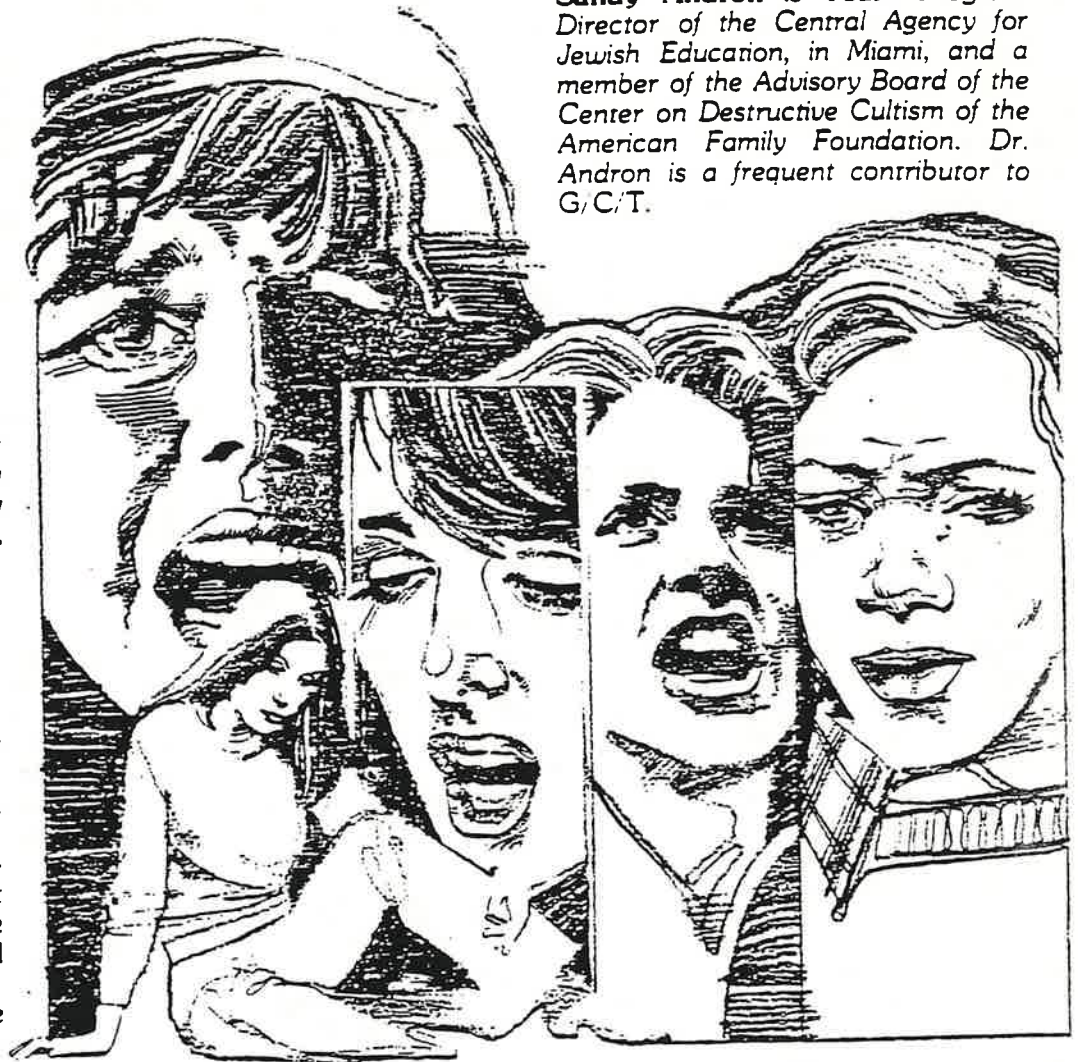
Upon examination of the target population of the cults, with the exception of the Jonestowns and some South American "voodoo-like" cults which proselytize the impoverished socio-economic have-nots, we find that it is the middle and upper classes which seem to be the most vulnerable to the magnetic attraction of the cults. It is hypothesized that the lower economic factions are generally more street-wise and can recognize a hustler or come-on. In response to the question, "What have you done for your community or society that's really worthwhile?", the economically deprived youth is likely to respond, "What has society done for me?"

As concerned adults and educators, then, we have four questions which we must address in order to focus on both the problem and its possible solutions. They are:

1. Do the cults actively recruiting our gifted?
2. If so, why should the cults make a special effort to attract the gifted?
3. What makes the gifted more vulnerable than the average teen (when it would seem that intellectually the reverse should be the case)? and finally,
4. What can be done to combat the problem?

In response to the first question, the answer is a resounding, "Yes!" From all the studies which have been done, we find that the cults focus on the gifted and creative almost everywhere we look. Let us not forget that the street-corner spokesmen of the anti-establishment movements of the 60's were articulate, if somewhat confused, advocates of their causes. They were gifted (most of them), dissatisfied, angry individuals who were capable of drawing peer group crowds.

The most highly sought-after group is the 18-26 year bracket and as educators we are all well aware of the extreme pressure that peers can exert at this particular level. The lonely, the unhappy, the confused, the anxious, the youth in transition all turn to their peers for acceptance, for support, for solutions, for guidance and counsel,



and for social moorings. The highly trained, supportive, "at-peace-with-himself" cult missionary is there like the proverbial spider with his web to ensnare the unsuspecting, hungry, searching teen-age "fly." And what manner of individual is ideally suited to this role of peer-counselor? Who is best able to lend a sympathetic ear to the troubled teen? And who is the one capable of adapting any problem to "I had a similar situation happen to me just recently, where....."? It is, in fact, the verbally gifted young adult magician who can turn black into white, anxiety and tension into tranquility, and a Korean Moon into a Messiah.

Is it any surprise then that the gifted are the ones sought out, recruited and trained in the hypnotic techniques which enlarge the cults' numbers,

enrich the cult coffers, and demoralize the broken families of the cult inductees?

You can see the cult position you say, but the gifted what about them? How and why are they so easily taken in? A look at nearly any list of "characteristics of the gifted" or "traits common to gifted/talented/creative children," immediately reveals the Achilles heel of the gifted teen. The gifted youth is one who often is naive, has a liking for structure and order, has intellectual curiosity, has empathy for others, is often self-critical, has need for emotional support, is attracted to the mysterious, is willing to take chances and risks, is honest in his search for truth, is basically adventurous, is not always liked nor appreciated by peers, and on and on and on. Who then is

going to be more susceptible to the loving, accepting, inviting, challenging, dare-to-be-different siren call of the cults? I dare say our gifted are walking prey. And the hunters are out hunting in packs.

An Approach to a Solution

This being the case, what should our approach be to combat the effects of these predators who would, in capturing our children, draw our very blood?

The answer to this question is both simplistic and complex at the same time. On the simple side it is obvious that we can't have our religious education focussing on areas of study which exclude ethics and personal commitment to religion. It is further obvious, that anti-culture flourishes in a vacuum and that if we fill the vacuum there will be no necessity for a teen to search elsewhere for answers. *This is the key.*

One teenager who left the cults was quoted as saying that the religion she grew up with might be compared to reading the label on a can of food, while the cult offered her the nourishment of the product. Are we giving our youth something to read or something to eat? Are we serving an intellectual need devoid of nutrients? Are we giving our teens a chance to serve? Drop-in centers? Retreat centers? Counselors for guidance? Charismatic role models? Camp experiences? Cult-encounter educational programs? Resource people and hot-lines to contact in times of crisis? Peer group encounter activities? Home experiences where religion is evident - where warmth, joy, enlightenment and commitment are a way of life? Are we taking our kids to the synagogue and church, or sending them there? When religion, school and Little-League conflict, where are our priorities? Which one gets cancelled? Do we recognize the teen years as critical transition years, aware that a body is weakest in a state of transition? Is religious education affective as well as cognitive?

Are we conscious of the fact that the level of sophistication of the cults is extremely professional? A survey of brainwashing methods used on American troops revealed that some of the methods are directly akin to those administered by the cults. A look at the recruitment times and techniques is also revealing. They strike the first week on campus (a period of

insecurity), during final exams (a time of anxiety), at graduation time (when there is concern for the future), the week after Thanksgiving recess (when homesickness sets in), at vacation spots (out of the flow of routine), where teens are on bikes or carrying guitars (both symbols of rootlessness) and at many, many other periods of transition.

They attack with questions of "Would you like to improve the world?" "Would you like to understand life and its meanings?" "Is the establishment giving you satisfactory answers?" "What are you going to do if you can't get a job when you graduate?" "How are you going to meet your parents' expectations?" "Can you cope with...?" and more.

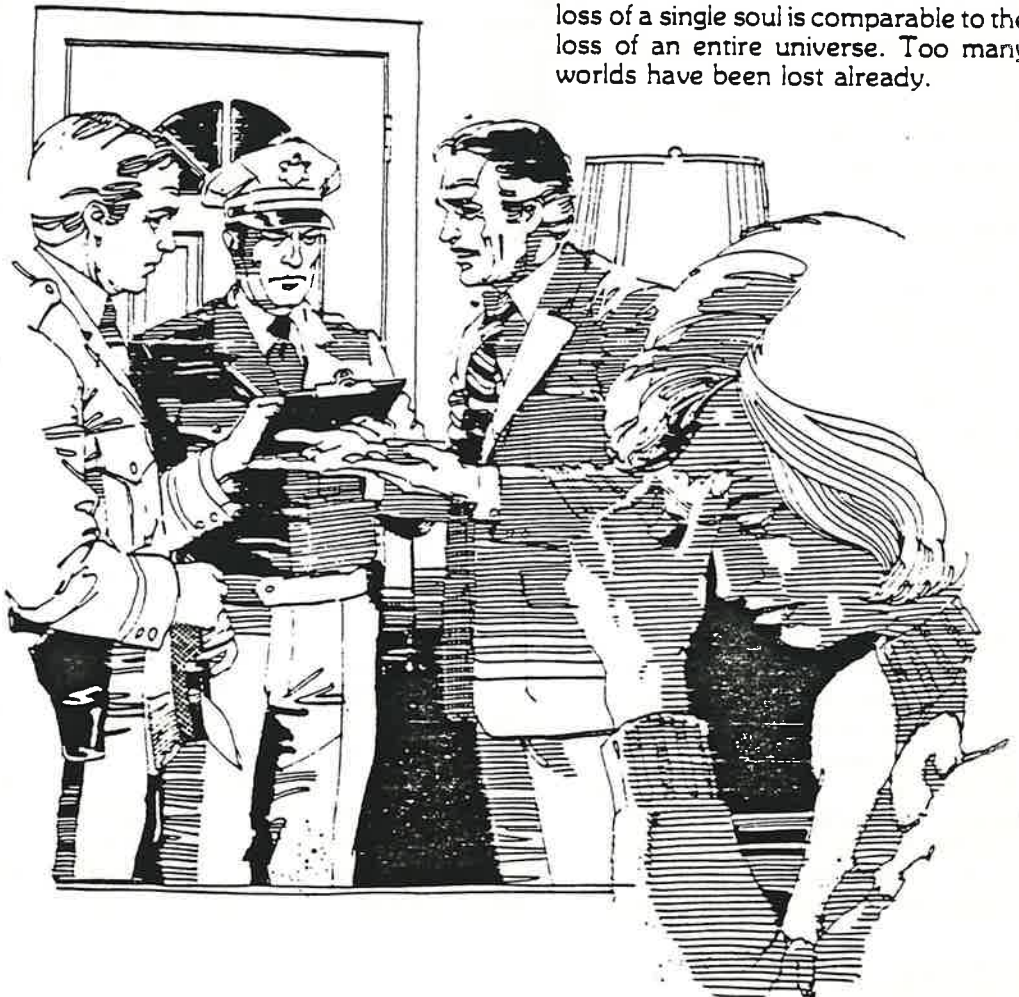
They dwell upon unemployment, poverty, injustice, petty demands of parents and teachers, the irrelevance of school, and the problem of meeting expectations. They offer unconditional love, instant friendship, eternal security, perennial childhood (there's always someone to give answers and solve problems), a sense of total belonging, militant puritanism in a world riddled with problems of drugs and sex, the comfort of blind belief, and simple answers to the problems of a

complicated world.

They stress the failure of the establishment with its Watergate, divorce rate, and energy crises. And they challenge those outside of the establishment by playing on their sense of fear and guilt. These are complex issues. To much of the above, the cults offer a panacea and our kids are flocking to them in droves. The anomaly is that they are offering many of the right things for all of the wrong reasons with disastrous results for established, organized religions.

If the cults are offering love in the absence of self, then we must provide love with the fulfillment of the self. If they offer a life of childhood free of all obligation, then we must counter with a life of maturity and acceptance of responsibility. If they offer acceptance thru the generation of fear, then we must reply by providing security through reverence for the individual and the divine.

When buttressed by solid religious experiences in home and at school, we will be on the right road toward neutralizing the destructive effects of the cults. We haven't the luxury of time. The Talmud tells us, *Kol hameabb refesh ahat k'ilu ibbed olam malai*. The loss of a single soul is comparable to the loss of an entire universe. Too many worlds have been lost already.



"Dissociation occurs in a lot of other sorts of pathology, but usually it's in relationship to a specific kind of expression, like someone who's afraid of anger and all of a sudden someone is shouting at them. But it's time-limited, situation-limited, and usually while you may dissociate in one area, they recede, work on it and next time they come back and they're not doing it. The people who have had cult experience very often dissociate and don't realize that it's what they're doing because it's treated (within the cult) as a natural phenomenon. It's even encouraged at times. It's something that's relatively easy to install if you have control over the person's environment long enough, and you can build it in there real quick."

*** "Everyone is there at one point, susceptible for a short period of time, but it only takes a short period, probably a day to enter this pipeline into the cult industry," Christianson says. "That's getting their attention; they also have to hold your attention."

"They do it with social reinforcing strategies, positively reinforcing a person's every move in the right direction to keep him coming back, moving very quickly to manipulate the environment, to cut off his old sense of reality, and the way that is done is to get people to think of themselves as very special, that they're on a special mission, and other people aren't quite as significant anymore—they're on the outside. They're outsiders now and you're with us as part of the inside group. This is a subtle way to get them to cut themselves off from friends and family and other people who aren't with the group. The group must create an entirely different sense of reality. What a person is going to do from day-to-day is going to be dramatically

different in terms of diet, waking hours, dating behaviors, marital decisions—all of this is going to be orchestrated by the group.

"So now you've got their attention, you're maintaining their attention, you're starting to split them off from their old touchstones to the outside world, and now you're going to start creating a new language, and it's called the loaded language. There are certain key words, specific words, that are in common everyday language that take on new meaning. All groups have this to maintain membership, any group, but destructive cults tend to do so that there's a sense of specialness and the key words become highly charged emotionally so they mean something very special and that gives a sense of oneness to further maintain membership and further split the person off from reality, whatever that may have once meant, finishing college, or whatever."

The cultic brain surgeon is now standing, scalpel poised, ready for the final incision, the cut that will irrevocably cut the cord between the new recruit and the old way of life.

"We all have second thoughts about making decisions, and to further split a person off, you have to deal with their doubts,"

Christianson continues. "When you join a destructive cult, where it's going to affect the rest of your life—whom you marry, whether you have kids, whether you have sex, with

whom you will have sex—you may be inclined to wonder if you made the right decision. Well, in these groups they teach you various ways of dealing with your doubts. They don't have handouts to tell you the rules; it's taught socially in a group setting, and very subtly, they're very slick. They equate thinking critically and logically with being a negative person, someone who's always thinking on the black side and who's never positive, and they equate these two things falsely. I mean, thinking critically isn't the same thing as just being a real blacker, someone who only thinks of the negative side of life.

"Whenever a person raises a question—'Well, what about this?'—they're hounded incessantly as being negative, and that negativity is labeled as Satanic, that Satan is working on you, or you're backsliding. You get punished for thinking critically. That way they get you to stop doubting openly in public in their group sessions, but now they deal with it in your head, because people think in words, even silently.

"They've got to get you to internalize your own police force, to police these doubts, to convince you that Satan is working on you all the time and you must safeguard yourself from doubting."

Time to put away the cattle prods. Missions One, Two, and Three have been accomplished. Now it's time to install a self-triggering jamming device, to block out Radio Free Me. In Eastern-oriented religions, it's meditation, a concept alien enough to the West to draw a certain amount of skepticism and bad press. However, in the increasingly more active homegrown cults, with Christian leanings, speaking in tongues is more and more frequently used to jam out the landslide of doubts and guilt that begin to pile up as the cult experience lingers on. Speaking, or talking, in tongues is simply a fairly standard fundamentalist Christian practice of allowing the holy spirit to use your body as a concert amplification system for a higher purpose.

"They teach you consciousness altering strategies so that whenever the red flag comes up and you detect that you're being negative, or critical, then Satan is working on you and you literally are in an altered state of consciousness so you start doing what you've been taught to do, which is meditation, or speaking in tongues, or repetitive praying, which is another form of chanting—and you're to do this until the doubt goes away.

"My idea is that there is something called cognitive dissonance: an upset over two conflicting beliefs. Cognitive dissonance is a head process, an intellectual process that

results in a great deal of emotional upset all over the body—you might feel jumpy, jittery, vomit, or have a headache. The emotional and physical response is so uncomfortable that it drives a person toward a solution. It's very difficult to deal with being upset with something when your body is tearing you apart. It's an intellectual process, which results in great emotional upset and you feel it all over your body. The body displays the emotions; you don't feel upset in the heart,

but typically in the gut. Sweat, jumpy. The physical upset is going to drive you to a solution. You're going to confront it sooner or later. These routines that the cults teach upset that natural instinct to drive to a solution because meditation and speaking in tongues gives you a sense of physical calm. You can't be upset physically if you're able to meditate because it distracts from the uncomfortable images, the even-spaced breathing. It makes you feel calm again and if after 15 minutes to six hours later you're still upset, then you continue some more and you never have to deal with the conflict. You, in fact, have literally no motivation to deal with that intellectual conflict because you're not upset. They effectively demotivate people to act on their own upset and so they never have to resolve conflicts."

What this really converts into is a sort of Dorian Gray syndrome, whereby cult members are put on hold—problems, doubt, guilt, and all—until the point at which they leave. Then, the house of cards comes tumbling down, perhaps slowly at first, but the danger of a cave-in, an implosion, is always there.

(The case which prompted this article drew attention to the "walkaway" from a cult.)

*** To understand what is happening to a walkaway, according to Christianson, is to understand what had happened to the person when first recruited into the cult, because that control mechanism, that initial implant, remains in place after one leaves. Only the shell, the physical person, has left the cult.

*** Walkaways, Christianson says, perceive themselves as failures within the boundaries of a perfect system, a system that they couldn't measure up to.

"Most walkaways are apologists for the cult. They see themselves as failures and they live with that—'I was a failure and I have to return to the world by myself.' Also, sometimes they're tossed out. Just like in any industry, when productivity drops.

"The cult mentality is a black-and-white one and that automatically leads to a suicidal situation. There is no gray. You're either in or out, there is only good and bad. There's nothing iffy in cults. You know where you stand. The structure is bare-bones. That has the effect on a person's judgment of reducing options. A problem with suicidal people is that typically they're blind to other options, and if a person is a walkaway, he's wondering if he's a failure and what to do with his life.

"When a person has lost an entire way of life, an entire reality, it's a rather devastating loss. The natural reaction to a loss is sadness or deep depression, which very often sets a person up for suicidal problems.

"In walkaways there's a risk of emotional upset, and in some it will take the form of violence to self or others.

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CULTS: WHAT'S HAPPENING TO THE KID NEXT DOOR?

by Tom Kinney MADISON MAGAZINE 5/84

A 1984 Wisconsin murder trial in which the defendant was a "walkaway" from a destructive cult stimulated this article. Excerpts below give valuable insight into the destructive cult phenomenon and the growing problem of the "walkaway."

*** Cults have flourished in our midst since the late Sixties, freelancing in the spiritual sweepstakes at will initially, but peaking in the Seventies as the media started to catch up with their spotty track record. Now, in the Eighties, we're starting to see new dangers associated with cultic and former cultic involvement. The aftermath. Among early cult members to be sucked in, there is a second generation growing up, born and raised cultic. There is an awakening suspicion that an even greater danger may be posed by the existence of countless secular, limited cults which may be no bigger than a household, an extended family, but the same smallness, the lack of expansion-orientation carries its own threat, that of implosion. There are hints of Satanic and occult cults possibly involving mutilation and maybe even human sacrifice.

But the most immediate apparent danger is that posed by walkaways. They're called walkaways because they took a hike, leaving cults after prolonged periods of involvement, without any program of reckoning whereby they could understand the mind control techniques endemic to cult activity which rendered them vulnerable for suggestion in the first place. They are lost someplace in transit, between in and out, one place and another, like a ship of fools, a voyage of the damned cursed to travel empty highways alone in search of a destination that doesn't exist.

Suicide for some is the last exit out of a hopeless psychological maze into which they had been led by a charismatic but self-motivated guru, such as The Way's Dr. Victor Paul Wierwille (theological doctoral courtesy of estimable Pike's Peak Bible U.), and who started in the same fertile hinterlands of mid-America as Jim Jones, but only expanded to significant size after moving to California in the twilight of the hippie movement, picking up converts among the burn-outs. He is now headquartered in New Knoxville, Ohio, from where he manages a worldwide religion industry. Somehow, according to mind-control experts and personality theorists, false messiahs like Wierwille have managed to devise behavior modification strategies that, as UW psychology intern Darryl Christianson puts it, "put to shame any inpatient step system, or social reinforcement step system used to help people be more responsible on the outside world. They are really slick."

***"In a cult you are engaged in a relationship with a group of people who selectively let you know bits of information at a rate which they think that you're going to accept without disengaging. They impair your judgment by dieting routines, fatigue routines, medication, chanting or speaking in tongues so that piecemeal your judging capacity is reduced over weeks. At the rate that they are able to reduce your judgment they give you closer and closer access to what it is that you

are truly going to be involved with. So they are manipulating the consent. That's part of the undue influence, they orchestrate this process without your knowledge."

***"The challenge is to not only recruit them, but to hold the membership, because I think lots of groups gain members, but holding them for long periods of time is amazing," Christianson exclaims.

"They use methods that are much like industry. They put forward these ideas by advertising. They typically have many fronts and they have many activities which are accepted in the community such as self-improvement courses, social activity groups that are very appealing. That simply is the TV advertising side of their industry, to have various front organizations that seem legitimate. On a personal level, it's just one person approaching you with a personal contact.

"That's the front end of it. You have to capture someone's imagination. At that point the person has, according to available research, no particular psychopathology: only 10 percent have any kind of major personality problems or any problems with reality. About a third of the folks may have some transient problems such as depression over a loss of some kind. The rest of the folks, about two-thirds of those who eventually do enter these destructive groups, are simply going through transient developmental problems: a recently incurred loss, such as a girlfriend, a death in the family, they've failed an exam, a divorce, which just makes them more susceptible to the pitch, the PR, the advertising."

Those criteria, Christianson says, would make any of us vulnerable at some point in our lives.

"The typical recruit isn't any different than the rest of us, yet a lot of people look at the bizarre nature of cults and think you'd have to be very strange to be involved in one. So what is happening now, typically, is what often happened to rape victims: they end up blaming the victim. Even parents search themselves and feel guilty, wondering what they did wrong to produce a child so weak-minded that they would get involved in such a bizarre activity as a destructive cult."

Madison clinical psychologist Dr. Edwin Morse concurs with Christianson. Morse is a long-time student of personality theory and mind control techniques, dating back to a stint in Korea in 1953-54. He has worked with George Kelly, one of the foremost personality theorists in the country, and has a minor degree in developmental personality. Morse has also worked with cult victims professionally.

Both Morse and Christianson point to a diagnostic statistical manual (DSM III specifically) guideline enacted in 1980 that states: Atypical Dissociative Disorder—"This is a residual category to be used for individuals who appear to have a Dissociative

Disorder but do not satisfy the criteria for a specific Dissociative Disorder. Examples include trance-like states, derealization unaccompanied by depersonalization, and those more prolonged dissociated states that may occur in persons who have been subjected to periods of prolonged and intense persuasion (brainwashing, thought reform, and indoctrination while the captive of terrorists or cultists)."

*** Morse is also an expert hypnotist, having studied under two of the foremost hypnotists in the world and has practiced it professionally for 14 years. He maintains that in a relatively short time frame, cults can make one do what hypnotism can't: go against your personal integrity and do things you ordinarily wouldn't.

"If you have total control over a person's environment for 24-72 hours, you can take their personal feelings and personal choices away from them without their knowing it," Morse says. "There are ways in which if you captivate the individual's total environment for two to four days, you can get control of that person's free choice, and that's one of the things people don't recognize about these cults.

"It may start very slowly, but it's a rapid kind of thing, and very quickly you have the person under your control. Cults do the same things that POW camps did in Korea. First of all, they split you from your normal environment. Secondly, they give you absolutely no privacy. Third, they constantly feed you a certain kind of ideological patter. Fourth, as a part of that, they tell you of all the things that are going to make your life new, beautiful and wonderful.

"But, it's so intense that without privacy and all those things you need (to put your thoughts together) you can't do any of your own personal integration, and the way you handle it is by dissociating. When you dissociate in that kind of context you become narrower in your mental focus and open to becoming very suggestible. It's a very insidious and rapidly working process."

What is created in the cult victim is a sort of state of pathology by proxy. Without any evidence of a pre-existing pathology, you are led carrot-and-stick-like into a dissociative state in which the decision-making process is lifted from your hands. When you walk from the cult, unless you receive some kind of outside help, such as deprogramming, you remain in this state.

***"Dissociation comes about for the same reasons, whether from cult phenomena or from other kinds of phenomena," Morse says. "What it is is so much of an emotional impact that the person doesn't know how to deal with it so they leave it, in a sense, in their mind. Cult people are trained to do this over and over. They're taught how to do it voluntarily if somebody is questioning them about themselves. They're taught numerous mechanisms with which to dissociate.