**Chapter 2**

**A Prison of Shame and Fear: Understanding the Role of Shame in Cult Indoctrination and Recovery**

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on understanding how fear and shame create a psychological prison that inhibits healing from the relational trauma of subjugation, viewed specifically in the context of cults and cultic relationships. Fear and shame are what bedevil all traumatized people, as they struggle to feel safe in a world where they have felt the trapped, helpless, powerlessness of traumatic experience. This chapter explores how shame plays a part in successful cult recruitment; the role of shame in the cult leader’s psychology; the use of shame in cults as a means of control and domination; and the ways that shame haunts those who leave cults.

Keywords: cults, PTSD, shame, fear, trauma, traumatic narcissism

Author’s Introduction

This chapter was originally presented to the 2018 Annual Conference of The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. ICSA is a not-for-profit organization whose international conferences are attended by people who share, almost always because of their own experience of cult involvement, a common interest in relationships and groups that form on the basis of coercive persuasion and undue influence. These are essential terms used by cult experts, to refer to how leaders of cultic groups systematically violate the boundaries of those upon whom they prey, promoting alienation from any attachment other than to the cult.[[1]](#footnote-1) The general public typically conceptualizes what happens in cults as brainwashing, roughly translated from a phrase used by the Chinese Communists describing the thought reform techniques that were developed under Chairman Mao (Lifton,1961). The terms used above, coercive persuasion and undue influence, capture more specifically the predatory characteristics of cultic groups led by traumatizing narcissists.

Participants at ICSA conferences include former cult members; people born and raised in cults; family members who have experienced disconnection from cult-member loved ones; and academics and legal professionals interested in cult phenomena, often stemming from their own personal cult experience. Also in attendance are exit counselors. Once known as “deprogrammers,” these are experts, usually not mental health professionals, who use their own experiences with cult participation to develop lawful and ethical strategies for helping families extricate loved ones from cults. The more familiar practice of “deprogramming,” notoriously involving kidnapping and coercion, has long been rejected by most of those in the ex-cult community.

Usually in attendance at these ICSA conferences are most of the relatively few licensed mental health professionals from around the United States (and some from other countries), who, like me, regularly work with cult survivors and family members of cult participants. Many of the people who have left cults, who eventually come to see one of us for psychotherapy, have had frustrating experiences with other therapists. They report that their previous therapists did not seem to understand what they had been through. They often say that the therapist seemed overly focused on finding out what was dysfunctional about their upbringing, or in their patterns of behavior, that had led them to “join” a cult. To be clear – very few people have ever actually sought to “join” a cult. People get involved in communities, and follow leaders, whose practices and missions they believe will be beneficial, for the self and the larger community. It is only after leaving these groups that people come to identify them as cults. These no doubt well-meaning therapists, who are certainly not wrong to want to help the survivor explore what vulnerabilities might have contributed to their involvement, likely did not realize how shaming their inquiries and their conceptualizations were; or how traumatized, dissociated, and dysregulated their ex-cult patient really was. The patient herself often doesn’t fully understand the extent to which she has been harmed, or the confusion that arises from trying to sever ties with previously beloved authority figures and peers in the community. Ex-cult members fresh from leaving a group are betrayed and broken-hearted, but they have been indoctrinated to dismiss their feelings. They need attention to their here and now fears, their feeling of stigmatization, and their practical concerns for starting their lives all over again. They will benefit from historical exploration, but later, when they have begun to break with their indoctrination and allow themselves to experience a full range of affective states.

Two experiences of my own are illustrative of some of the ways mental health professionals can misunderstand cult survivors.

The group I worked and lived in full-time for over a decade (I use the pseudonym Shakti Yoga), which I came to think of as a cult when I finally left, was a New Age version of a Hindu guru cult, popular in this country until scandals involving the guru significantly diminished the amount of followers. Those scandals became public in the media just after I severed my ties with the group, and just as I began my graduate degree in Social Work. I was outspoken about leaving the group, and as a result I was quickly shunned by all the people, everyone, with whom for the last decade I had lived and worked. Many were people I cared about, people with whom I thought I had been close.

Some months before I decided to end my relationship to the group, I had gotten up the courage to tell my therapist at the time that I thought the guru was cruel. For me at that time, saying the word “cruel” out loud, about the person I still thought of as my guru, represented a huge leap out of dissociation. My therapist responded by suggesting that perhaps I meant that the guru used “tough love” tactics as a way of helping me and others grow. I had to emphasize strongly that what I very specifically meant to say was that the guru was cruel, sadistically cruel. Fortunately, this therapist was open to exploring this with me.

When I finally did leave the group in 1994, and after receiving some vague threats and having my email account hacked, I became frightened that some effort could be made by the cult to undermine my effort to get my MSW degree. In a state of shame, fear and confusion, I decided to speak to my advisor at the school. My advisor was a fairly experienced social worker, with a private psychotherapy practice. As I told her my story, I perceived with increasing alarm her worried, skeptical demeanor. Embarrassed, I was anxiously trying to explain my situation, until finally a light bulb went off for the advisor, and she said to me, “Oh, wait – maybe this is like domestic violence?” I was deeply relieved, because yes, domestic violence is very much what it was like. I was afraid that having left this abusive group, and spoken out about it, that I would be stalked and harassed, as other enemies of the group had been in the past, quite extensively. I asked the advisor if she would help support me in the program were I to be harassed by the group in any way. With what I thought was still not 100% conviction, the advisor nevertheless said she would be available to help if something arose, and to keep her informed. Fortunately for me, probably because of the embarrassing exposure of the group in the news media at that time, I was not targeted for retaliation and I completed my MSW unharmed. Putting to good use computer and typing skills I had serendipitously taught myself while living and working in the Shakti Yoga community, I wrote a final paper for my degree entitled “Traumatic Abuse in Cults: A Psychoanalytic Perspective” (Shaw, 2003), put it online, and soon began my work with cult survivors, which continues to the present.

In both the anecdotes above, I had to work hard to gain the understanding of the persons from whom I sought help. More than 25 years later, I continue to experience that few psychoanalysts and psychotherapists grasp the extent to which cult survivors have been traumatized, or how this traumatization has occurred and how it presents. Cult survivors struggling with acute PTSD often find themselves having to educate their therapists, whom they perceive as clueless and incredulous. Too often, a therapist learning about a patient’s cult involvement will assume and focus on pre-existing psychopathology or traumatic family of origin experience. These kinds of factors usually prove significant and meaningful eventually. But they are not the first and foremost therapeutic concerns for those who have been for any length of time exposed to the acute traumatic stress of life under the control of a cult leader. Re-entry into the world beyond the insular cult can be perilous in many ways aside from emotionally, in terms of physical health, financial well-being, being in a safe environment and many other concerns. Eventually, the cult victim must be helped to recognize the cult leader as a malignant, traumatizing narcissist if he is free himself from the undue influence that has led to his belief in the leader as omnipotent – the belief that has led the follower to embrace his subjugation. The undue influence at play in both cult recruitment and in maintaining member loyalty create a situation of extreme disorganized attachment for the follower (see Stein, 2016). Followers live in terror of displeasing the leader, the authority figure, who has seduced and manipulated them into total dependence. Most followers who leave these groups find themselves, sometimes for long periods of time, overwhelmed with fear and shame.

I hope that this chapter, originally addressed not only to helping professionals knowledgeable about cults, but to cult survivors themselves, will contribute to raising awareness within the larger mental health community of what is often the shattering, traumatic impact of cult involvement on the lives of those who leave their communities, and on their friends and families. My focus is on understanding how fear and shame inhibit healing from the relational trauma of subjugation. I hope the reader will recognize that what I describe here is broadly applicable to many kinds of relationships.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A Prison of Shame and Fear: Understanding the Role of Shame in Cult Indoctrination and Recovery.

I keep a framed print in my psychotherapy office of a medieval drawing by Albrecht Dűrer. I first learned of this drawing when I was reading *The Courage to Be*, a book by the mid-20th Century Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich (Tillich, 1952).

[Insert Illustration 1 Here: The Knight, Death and the Devil, by Albrecht Dűrer, 1513.]

The drawing depicts a knight, solemnly riding toward his goal, with focus and determination. The reason the drawing is mentioned in a book about courage is that over the knight’s right shoulder, one can see that he is being followed by Death – an old man on a pale withered horse, prominently displaying the hourglass he holds, with time slipping away. Following the Knight just at the rear of the horse is the Devil – a horned beast. Fear of Death and the Devil are what could stop the Knight from reaching his goal. Who is there to support the Knight on his lonely quest? A strong horse is there to carry him, and a playful dog is there for loving companionship. Not even the most fiercely determined Knight can succeed without the support of another, and some kind of loving companionship.

Though my intention in this chapter is to focus mainly on the meaning of the Devil in this drawing, I preface those remarks with a few thoughts on the other titular character: Death.

Death.

Knowing that one is inevitably going to die can be a source of fear and denial, or, it can be an inspiration to strive to make the most of living – to live courageously. Dűrer’s Knight is striving to take advantage of being alive, even with the knowledge that death eventually erases it all. This was a theme, in a different context, that Stephen Mitchell, whose work inspired the creation of the school of Relational Psychoanalysis, explored in his moving paper, “The Wings of Icarus” (Mitchell, 1988). In that paper about narcissism, Mitchell invoked Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy, which described three kinds of people. The first is one who is in denial of death, and is consequently battered by the reality of death when it breaks through the denial. Metaphorically, he is devastated when the sandcastle he builds on the beach is destroyed when the tide comes in. The second person uses the ephemeral nature of existence as a reason to avoid investing in anything unless he can be assured that there will be little or no risk involved. For this person, it is impossible to enjoy playing at building sandcastles on the beach, knowing they will only be ruined, and he doesn’t even bother trying.

The third person is Nietzsche’s tragic man. Stephen Mitchell wrote that this man is

“aware of the tide and the transitory nature of his productions, yet [he builds] sandcastles nevertheless. The inevitable limitations of reality do not dim the passion with which he builds his castles; in fact, the inexorable realities add a poignancy and sweetness to his passion” (ibid., p. 195).

Cult participation is something else: a fourth way to live, if you will. It is not just a way of denying death, as with Nietzsche’s first man, or of being afraid to live, like the second man. It is an effort to believe that one’s life is so grandly purposeful that there is no cause for any kind of existential struggle with the problem of mortality. The delusional claim made by all cult leaders is that they have transcended everything, they exist somewhere above and beyond everyone, and all you have to do is follow them with complete submission, and you can attain what they claim to have. With such individuals, the denial of death is an extreme kind of mania. In their narcissism, they perceive Death as a rival by whom they refuse to be humiliated, and over whom they believe they will triumph. It is common in many cults for the leader to proclaim that he will choose the exact moment of his death, and that death is merely a choice he makes to leave his current body before coming back and picking up where he left off. Many male cult leaders have explained their predatory sexual behavior in terms of a secret sacred ritual, in which the insemination of special chosen ones will ensure that the leader’s power will live on after he “leaves his body.” Those in cults whose members commit mass suicide have taken manic denial of death to its gruesome endpoint.

Readers not familiar with cults will be surprised to know how many thousands and thousands of highly functional, intelligent people have found themselves seduced by these offers of total transcendence. Ask any of those who leave cultic groups what drew them to get involved, and the answer will invariably be that the group seemed to offer purpose and meaning in dramatic, vibrant, even ecstatic ways. According to the cult leader, the transcendent experience of the world he claims to experience and to offer is infinitely superior to what he characterizes as the mundane, empty world – or the rotten, evil world - in which the follower once lived. Many people give everything they have to cult leaders, believing they are making their lives meaningful by doing so. They subjugate themselves, and make their world smaller and smaller, believing they are in fact enlarging themselves. In a cult, one lives a life based on a delusion of transcendence that supports the denial of death.

I do not mean to suggest that transcendent experience is always delusional, or without value. The human capacity for ecstatic experience is clearly built into our DNA. Ecstatic transcendent experience, however, is value-neutral. By that I mean it is neither good nor bad intrinsically, no matter how pleasurable the experience is in the moment. There have been many charlatans, con artists and predators who are able to manipulate others in ways that trigger ecstatic experiences. One who has such an experience does not automatically become healed, enlightened, pure, or even good. One need only look to the adoration and worship masses of Europeans directed toward Adolf Hitler. Hitler was selling a form of transcendence, the purification of the world, and the promise of it resulted in millions of people overlooking, and in fact implicitly and explicitly justifying, perpetration of some of the worst horrors in human history. The transcendence offered in cults, any group that can be called a cult, is based on a false promise of glorious purification, in one form or another, internal or external. It is always a defense against and a denial of the inexorable imperfection and finitude of human existence.

As a non-religious person myself, and taking some artistic license here, I imagine The Knight as a sort of existential humanist – humanism that reflects the belief, or really the faith, that human life has intrinsic value and meaning. This more broadly defined Knight, an Everyman like the Hero that Joseph Campbell identified in the ancient myths of cultures from every part of the world (Campbell, 1973), does not let the consciousness of mortality deter him from moving forward. He holds “the dialectic of meaning and mortality,” as articulated by psychoanalyst Irwin Hoffman (Hoffman, 1988). Hoffman, in words that could serve as another way of describing Nietzsche’s tragic man, writes that “[t]he very annihilation that jeopardizes our sense that anything we care about matters, paradoxically, is what infuses caring with the meaning that it has” (ibid., p. 18). In other words, the more deeply we love, the more we desire, the more keenly we could feel the pain of what we have to lose, or of what we may never attain. Nevertheless, the Knight does not submit to nihilism and meaninglessness; nor does he escape through pseudo-transcendence or the worship of false idols. His courage is his faith that life is meaningful, that life as it *is* is worth living – which is the opposite of what cults profess. Cults claim that the only life worth living is the superior, perfect life purportedly being lived by the leader. For ex-cultists, no matter how tortured life as a follower might have been, life beyond the cult may seem pale and meaningless, compared to the manic grandiosity of being in the cult. It is often for this reason that many who leave one cult find themselves soon falling into another.

The Devil.

More space could certainly be devoted to Death, but now I want to try to give the Devil his due. As I sit with the psychotherapy patients I work with, many of whom have experienced either growing up in traumatic environments, or living in the environment of an abusive cult, and sometimes both, our conversations invariably become centered around the sense of shame. The sense of shame is accompanied by fear – fear of one’s own feelings; fear of living freely, fear the “other shoe” is always about to drop, fear of shame itself. I’ve come to think of that horned beast, the Devil, that follows the Knight as he tries to fulfill his quest, as the shame and fear that could overtake and hold him back, every step of the way. The fear of not being good enough, which so easily blends with the feeling of being not good at all, has both feelings, shame and fear, intertwined. Fear and shame are what bedevil all traumatized people, as they struggle to feel safe in a world where they have felt the trapped, helpless, powerlessness of traumatic experience. I explore here how shame plays a part in successful cult recruitment; the role of shame in the cult leader’s psychology; the use of shame in cults as a means of control and domination; and the ways that shame haunts those who leave cults.

What makes shame so bedeviling for some? Judith Herman, the author of *Trauma and Recovery* (Herman, 1992), in a 2007 lecture on shame, distinguished shame states from the feeling of guilt. She wrote,

“Whereas shame is focused on the global self in relation to others, guilt is focused on a specific action that the person has committed. Shame is an acutely self-conscious…painful and disorganizing emotion; shame engenders a desire to hide, escape, or to lash out at the person in whose eyes one feels ashamed” (Herman, 2007, p. 8).

Shame is present very early in human development. The child that looks to the parent with the expectation of a joyful gleam in the parent’s eye, and finds instead disapproval, anger, disgust - or disinterest, indifference, disdain - feels shame. The shame is a feeling that the whole self, heart, mind, body, is undesirable, bad, unlovable. Because the parent is an attachment figure, without whom the child cannot survive, and without whose love the child will feel starved for recognition and connection, the shame is felt intensely. Just think what the child’s world feels like if the feeling of being recognized – seen, known, understood – is withheld extensively. Terrified, desolate, isolated, exposed and rejected – for the young child (possibly even for the infant?) it may be like bursting into a million pieces, as the psychoanalyst Ferenczi imagined (Ferenczi, 1932/1949), or as the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott described, it might be like an agony of endless, infinite falling (Winnicott, 1974). The experience of utter helplessness that goes on and on evokes deep, searing shame – as though the suffering can only be explained as due to one’s own badness. If the parent quickly responds to the shamed child with renewed tenderness, and the breach between them is mended and connection re-established, the child can learn to regulate and tolerate shame states. When these moments of disconnection and dysregulation go unrepaired, that person develops vulnerability to chronic re-activation of dysregulated shame states. In the absence of consistent attunement and empathy, their drive to live and grow is always straining against their shame and the need to defend against it.

Shame in Cult Recruitment.

A person with a history of chronically dysregulated shame states could be particularly susceptible to the alluring promises of liberation made by cults. Cult recruitment efforts are aimed at preying on doubts, fears and all kinds of insecurities that some people may have felt all their lives, but that most people feel at one time or another. The point at which a person is exposed to the recruiting efforts of a cultic community can often be a time of emotional upheaval. Some people will have been struggling with a sense of shame about not living up to expectations, either their own or those of others, in work or love; some may be seeking to end shameful compulsive behaviors and addictions. Some struggle with loneliness; or alienation from family. In these cases, there is a sense of shame related to feelings of inferiority or inadequacy; one feels isolated by the shame; ashamed of the isolation; and afraid there may be no cure. Shame could also be part of a healing process from a discrete traumatic event, such as a rape; it could be a PTSD symptom. Shame could be experienced as a nagging feeling of dissatisfaction with oneself; or it could appear as immobilizing self-loathing. The intensity of the shame can run the gamut. Cult survivors who were not born and raised in a cultic community but who enter as adults very often recognize that the point of entry for them took place at a time in their life when they were experiencing a pronounced sense of shame, confusion, or disappointment about themselves.

On the other hand, many people enter cultic communities at what seems to be a relatively stable point in their lives. Perhaps things are going along well enough, and they learn through a friend or acquaintance about some kind of training or seminar that sounds like an interesting way to pursue personal growth or professional fulfillment. Maybe it’s a meditation class or yoga class, or something they learn about from a therapist; or they might be in couple therapy and a weekend intensive is recommended. Often people in this group believe they should be able to be more powerful, more successful, have a more successful, fulfilling life. Shame is not prominently in the picture for this population, at least not in the foreground.

For the first group, those struggling with shame, entering the community will temporarily *relieve* the shameful feelings. They often feel they were lost, and now they’re found. For the second group, their participation in the community will soon lead to awareness of shameful feelings they didn’t know they had. They too will come to believe they had been lost, and only in the community they now belong to do they feel found. When they are securely recruited and the initial burst of hope and joy ends, the cult will make a point of showing them just how shamefully wrong they have been about all their prior beliefs. In both cases, the now indoctrinated recruit has been persuaded that their life was a sad mess and they were a shameful nothing before they saw the light and became a true believer.

Cults activate the human attachment system, the primordial human longings to be recognized by attachment figures, those needs that for our infant and child selves are about our very survival – the needs to feel recognized rather than ashamed of being unrecognized and unwanted, to feel safe and connected rather than alone and afraid. When we speak of love-bombing - the way that a cultic community invites new recruits and sells them on involvement with the group - this is what we are really describing. We are being told, verbally and non-verbally, whether we consciously knew we were seeking it or not, that our basic human need for loving connection and recognition – the sense that we are recognized as valuable, desirable people, and that we can feel safe – is going to be met. Remember, it is the opposite experience – of not being recognized, desired, valued – that is the basis of shame. Cults don’t just promise to improve us, enlighten us, enrich us, and so on. The bait, the allure of cults is that if we follow the leader, we can become like the leader. If we follow the leader, maybe we too can become free of shame, strong and more confident like him. Soon enough, there’s a switch, and that formulation devolves to “if we abjectly submit to the leader, and shamefully confess our sins again and again, maybe the leader won’t subject us to the ultimate humiliation: maybe we won’t be banished.”

Shame(lessness) in the Psychology of the Cult Leader.

Cult leaders present themselves as and believe themselves, delusionally, to be shameless. The delusion of omnipotence is a bulwark against the shame of traumatic impotence and powerlessness that the leader is always manically struggling to suppress. This presentation of shamelessness is constantly in tension with the need to prevent any possibility of seeming weak, vulnerable, dependent. Robert J. Lifton presented a vivid example of how brittle this carapace of shamelessness is, in his book *Destroying the World to Save It* (Lifton, 1999).Lifton noted that when the Japanese guru, Shoko Asahara, who had controlled many followers who were academics and scientists, was arrested, jailed, and finally put on trial, he collapsed into schizophrenia. Asahara was humiliated and bullied as a child; he was ashamed of various physical weaknesses and his extremely poor vision. He later failed to qualify for medical school, and went bankrupt when he was arrested for selling fraudulent Chinese medications. He eventually transformed himself into a guru who could persuade his followers that releasing nerve gas in the Tokyo subway would be a way to begin purifying the world, so that he and his followers could then take control and start over. Asahara’s actual, not fictionalized, biography is similar to that of many other cult leaders. Pull aside the curtain of the cult leader’s grandiose omnipotence, take away his control over others, and there is often a very disturbed human being who goes insane or even kills himself rather than face the feelings of disgrace and humiliation he has spent a lifetime defending against. The most extreme cult leaders would rather destroy the whole world than not be able to believe that they are at the center of the universe. If that delusion of self-sufficient magnificence is ripped away from them, in a worst-case scenario they can destroy all their followers and, finally, themselves – and many have done one or the other, or both.

The words that essentially brought down the paranoid Senator Joe McCarthy, whose witch hunt for Communists harmed so many innocent peoples’ careers in the 1950s, are worth revisiting. Joseph Welch, the attorney for the US. Army, which was accused by McCarthy of harboring Communists, was shocked when in the course of his interrogations, McCarthy attacked a young lawyer in Welch’s firm who had briefly flirted with a Communist oriented professional organization early in his career. Speaking without concealing his disgust, Welch addressed McCarthy as follows, here condensed: “Until this moment, Senator, I think I have never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness… Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?” Until that moment, McCarthy had proceeded with his destructive agenda *shamelessly*. Joseph Welch publicly humiliated McCarthy, and it marked the beginning of the end of McCarthy’s tyranny. He died of alcoholism less than three years after that confrontation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Demagogues, gurus and cult leaders construct their worlds around the delusion of their own omnipotence – a hallmark of the traumatizing narcissist. In the original Greek myth as told by Ovid, Narcissus died staring at his own reflection, having shamelessly adored himself and having had only contempt for Echo, and any others who desired him. The self-inflation of the narcissist, his delusion of omnipotence, allows him to disavow any need of others as he relentlessly contrives to have control of others. His delusion eventually leads him to outright madness and self-destruction. His followers, like Echo, enter the narcissist’s delusion and lose their subjectivity, their dignity, their freedom.

Psychoanalysts starting with Freud, and in the latter part of the 20th century, Kohut and Kernberg, among many others, elaborated detailed explanations of narcissism and descriptions of narcissistic people. But it was mostly Erich Fromm who influenced my way of thinking about the traumatizing narcissist’s relational system, in which the narcissist maintains his delusion of superior perfection by subjugating others, drawing them into his delusion about himself and holding them there, while he extracts from them the adoration he needs to keep himself continually hyper-inflated (see Fromm, 1941, 1964). My research on cult leaders, and both Fromm and Robert J. Lifton allude to this, leads me to theorize that these are people who were subjected to traumatic humiliation developmentally – bullied, teased, unwanted, despised. Chronic humiliation from parents, the primary attachment figures, is one of the possible developmental traumas. Being traumatized by peers, along with an absence of responsiveness from parents and adult authority figures, also leaves the scars of shame. Some people in these circumstances grow up to overcome these obstacles, others find themselves struggling with depression. But for some, the solution is narcissism. For this group, the goal in life becomes to overcome humiliation, to triumph over their feelings of humiliation by becoming delusionally free of all shame and dependency, all weakness of any kind. The use of omnipotence as a defense allows the cult leader to recognize no limits to his entitlement, no boundary he is not entitled to violate. Without any of the positive aspects of the sense of shame, that would form the basis for one’s moral compass, the cult leader creates his own moral code, which is organized around his boundaryless sense of ultimate entitlement, and the need to control his environment by controlling his relationships.

When the narcissist feels the need of something from someone, he experiences that need as a humiliation, and seeks to turn the tables and humiliate the one who evoked his need. By subjugating those the cult leader needs, he hides from himself how truly dependent he is. I have not yet heard of a cult leader that didn’t arrange to have people constantly, urgently obsessing about what does the cult leader want now, and what next, and then what. The cult leader creates a life for himself in which he completely depends on people doing every possible thing for him – feed him, buy everything for him, supply him with sex slaves, pay for everything. Instead of feeling like a helpless, dependent, needy person, which describes a deeply dissociated core part of who he is – he seduces, intimidates, belittles and humiliates others into submission – and they take on the role of the needy, dependent, helpless ones.

The cult leader’s certainty of his perfection, his conviction about his exalted status as a superior human whom others should idolize and serve, is compelling. It is the source of his charisma. Being able to enthrall and control others is what keeps the delusion alive. A cult leader’s only purpose in life, no matter what claims he makes about a purported mission, is to get people to believe in his delusion of omnipotence, so that he may take from them whatever he wants. Many kinds of groups and institutions are led by narcissistic people, and often, the aims of these groups, sometimes very legitimate aims, are fulfilled. Cults are distinguished by the fact that the only real accomplishment of the group, the only real aim of all the labors of the followers, is to reinforce the leader’s delusion of omnipotence.

Zombie stories, and the story of Dracula, have much in common – a dead person stays “alive” by making actually alive people become dead like himself. The life of the traumatizing narcissist is eerily similar. Because the traumatic experience of shame is so pervasive for the narcissist, he mentally evacuates the shame. To fill the emptiness and keep shame at bay, he must seduce others, from whom he will then take all the life he can extract, while simultaneously filling them with his disavowed shame. As I will elaborate in the next section, the follower, now filled with shame, tries to purify himself by seeking absolution through subjugation to the leader, and the symbiosis is complete.

Shame as the Means of Control in Cults.

Shame performs a central role in keeping cult followers subjugated, and keeping them deployable to be used and exploited in whatever way the leader determines. Let me illustrate this with some vignettes about people I knew when I was in Shakti Yoga (a pseudonym). Public programs in my group always included an “experience talk.” These were basically talks about how the guru miraculously changed our lives, presented in public programs to help keep current members indoctrinated, and sell the guru to new recruits. One of the more senior Shakti Yoga teachers was an attractive man in his late 30s, who had gone to Harvard, which was always mentioned when he spoke publicly. (That he never graduated was never mentioned). He did a lot of writing and teaching and public speaking at the ashram. In the experience talk I am remembering, he spoke of how before he met the guru, his life was so aimless. He said he didn’t know what food to eat, when to sleep, when to work, what to wear. His point, made in earnest, almost tearful tones, was that Shakti Yoga gave him everything, showed him the way; and that he was nothing, worthless, a wreck, until he submitted himself completely to the guru. It is painful now to recall the self-abasement that he and so many followers like myself felt it necessary to display to the cult leader as we worked so hard to persuade others to become followers.

Cult leaders urgently need people in whom they can induce profound shame and complete submission. That’s why this fellow was a featured speaker in public programs – he made abject submission look smart and cool. The guru needs you to think you are nothing without him, so that you will submit to him in whatever way he wants, while at the same time he needs to be able to pretend to himself that he doesn’t need you, and that it’s only you who need him. In other words, the cult leader arranges the relationship so that the follower will look, act and feel like the shamefully dependent one – thus bolstering the leader’s delusion of omnipotence.

I’ll mention another person I knew when I was part of the Shakti Yoga community. Katie was one of the funniest people I’ve ever known. A struggling actress and a very competent helping professional, she had curly red hair, a quick wit and the ability to leave a room full of people laughing helplessly. I was away from the ashram for a long period of time at one point, travelling internationally as what you might call a missionary – the mission, as I only later fully understood, being the aggrandizement and enrichment of the guru. When I got back to the main headquarters, I ran into Katie in one of the hallways of the compound. She had ended her professional activities outside the ashram and was now there full-time. The guru had not taken Katie with her on tour, but had left her behind in the remote, lonely winter ashram – which followers always took to mean that they had failed to please the guru sufficiently to be included on her tour. Katie’s red hair gone, she was now nearly bald, with a hint of white hair coming in. She looked small, deflated. She told me that the guru had told her she was hiding behind her hair and should shave it all off. I asked how she was doing, and in a frail, melancholy tone she said, “I’m just missing Guruji.” Even in my dissociated state, I was saddened, and perhaps without fully realizing it, I identified with her, and was just glad I hadn’t been put in her position – not that time, anyway. Katie, like so many in cults, was willing to believe that the guru’s denigrating characterization of her talents and strengths as “ego” justified having the guru strip her of her dignity.

What does the guru get out of it? The guru gets to prove to herself and others how powerful she is, how super-human, how fully she can control others. She gets to prove she is not impotent, not weak, not vulnerable to shame or fear. What is supposed to be understood as purification (cut off your beautiful hair, you are hiding behind it) is really just cruel humiliation, spurred by the leader’s disavowed shame and envy. Followers are indoctrinated to embrace total subjugation, viewing themselves as having no value without the guru’s recognition and control. While followers devalue their pre-cult selves, their cult self value entirely depends on their status with the leader and the group. This gives the leader exactly the leverage she needs to take whatever she wants from others, and sustain her delusion of omnipotence, by a show of power that keeps dependency controllable in the followers, bolstering the leader’s delusion of shamelessness.

What cults advertise is that your participation means that you are opening yourself to something bigger than yourself, letting down your defenses and inhibitions so that you can leave the prison of your small self for a wider, deeper experience. But what you are really buying is submission, masochistic self-negation at the hands of a sadistic leader. It takes a good deal of dissociation to believe that you are loving the experience. When I was a spokesperson in my cult, at public programs meant to rally the followers, I displayed my entertaining self, my devotional self, my warm and loving self. Privately during that time, I was often lonely, scared about my status in the group, feeling trapped, resentful and depressed. I was able to dissociate these different mental states and keep them separate. It was necessary to do so, to show my happy grateful self, no matter how exhausted and depressed I actually was, if I wanted to maintain my status in the group. Leaving ceases to feel possible, because it could only mean total failure.

Dissociation has been referred to as the escape when there is no escape (Putnam, 1992). A classic example is of a child who is being abused, who experiences herself watching what is happening to her as though she is on the ceiling of the room and not in her own body. The deeper one goes into the inner circles of a cult, the more dissociative you must become to be able to continually lose your own sense of self, your moral compass, your value system, and adopt full compliance with and submission to the cult leader’s culture. Exploiting the dissociation that has made a cult recruit lose contact with the pre-cult self, cults master the techniques of seductive desensitization to boundary violations, and can successfully make you believe that you need and want to be violated; and that others need to be violated for the fulfillment of the leader’s mission.

Here is an especially vivid example. Recently (as of this writing), New York prosecutors charged Keith Raniere, the leader of a group known as NXIVM, with sex trafficking, among a host of other crimes, and at trial he was found guilty, on all counts. According to over a dozen women followers of Raniere with whom I spoke first-hand, and according to police allegations, he demanded of his top female devotees that they declare themselves his slaves, and he their master. There is general consensus culturally that to be a slave is to be objectified and dehumanized; to be rendered powerless and bent to the will of one who dominates and controls. It is a state of profound humiliation. The women of NXIVM, on the other hand, had been indoctrinated to believe that their agreement to enslave themselves was going to lead them to an extraordinary, transformative experience of self-empowerment, readying them for playing a major role in purifying the world. Raniere demanded that the slaves procure other women to be their slaves, with himself at the top of the pyramid as the ultimate master of them all. According to the women who spoke with me, in order to qualify as a slave, they had to start out being slim and pretty, and then go on starvation diets to get even skinnier. They had to ask their master for permission to eat, and if they argued or disobeyed in any way, they would be punished by ridicule, or spanked with paddles, and in some cases kept for long periods of time in isolation. They had to seduce Raniere by showing ravenous desire for him. They had to be at the beck and call, night and day, of their masters. And they had to be willing to offer collateral, consisting of naked pictures of themselves, and specifically of their genitals; notarized confessions of shameful things they had done in the past; and notarized confessions of things that weren’t true but if revealed would be damaging to themselves and to members of their family – such as a notarized but untrue statement that a relative had sexually abused his children. The extraction of collateral of this nature would seem to assure that under no circumstances would they ever break the vow of secrecy. Using blackmail and entrapment, the women were persuaded that they had willingly chosen to enslave themselves as a path toward self-empowerment. What Raniere has done here is create a situation in which the women would submit more and more deeply to him; they would submit so deeply that they would be willing to abuse other women. Not to submit further and further would threaten a breach in the walls of dissociation that had been induced in them.

What is underneath that dissociation, that would be too unbearable to know, is the state of utter shame that would flood them. They would have to face that the choices they thought they were making willingly were bounded choices, in Janja Lalich’s apt phrase (Lalich, 2004); “choices,” made under psychological coercion, that are self-erasing submissions, not really choices at all. They would have to face that they had given a cruel, sadistic abuser complete control over themselves because they believed he was an idol worthy of worship. They would have to face the extent to which they had allowed themselves to be violated and degraded and the extent to which they had been betrayed and exploited. Leaving a cult means facing the shame of having been catastrophically wrong about something in which you invested everything you had. That a number of the NXIVM women testified of their abuse before a judge and jury in an open courtroom, that they were believed, and that they were able to see their abuser convicted, is an extraordinary, and all too rare, instance in cases like this of overcoming shame in the service of justice.

Post-Cult Shame.

This brings us to the question of what to do with our shame, once we have left the cult. When one emerges out of dissociation, and usually for cult members that happens slowly over time, one can feel a lot of things: joyful liberation; righteous anger; confusion; fear; numbness; panic. But eventually, leaving a cult means facing the shame of having betrayed yourself, having let yourself be betrayed. If you choose not to hide but rather to be open with others about having been in a cult, you are exposed to being perceived as pathologically “other” by everyone who asks you, “Why didn’t you just leave?” And you ask yourself, what, in the end, was it all about? A maniacal, traumatizing narcissist needed to prove to himself that he is the most powerful, important person in the universe; he needed you to agree with him, so he could keep his psychosis more or less under control. You thought you were doing something noble and urgent, like “clearing the planet,” or “ending world hunger;” or creating a “meditation revolution” for peace; or ending capitalist tyranny, as in some political cults. And then you realize that all you were really doing was letting someone sucker you into worshipping a false idol, at your own expense. Some people try to leave a cult and deny any kind of trauma or any kind of shame. But in the survivor’s darkest moments after leaving a cult, she may submit to the fear and shame that was being induced by the cult leader, and believe that she is worthless and contemptible, failed and shameful.

Most of the people I speak with who have left cults report that they experience panic attacks, for a time, after leaving. I believe the panic is triggered by these feelings of shamefulness and self-loathing as they start to break into consciousness. But there is also something else that seems to be part of these very typical panic attacks, and I think that is rage. Most humans exposed to traumatic helplessness instinctively react to the unbearable loss of control by trying to regain control. This effort often takes the form of fragmentation, in which a part of the self splits off and becomes an enraged condemner, attacking with blame and hate the victim part of the self. The enraged condemner part is taking control of the situation, assigning blame to the victimized self. This internal battle is a terrible, desperate attempt at finding an antidote to traumatic helplessness, by re-establishing control through self-condemnation, so harsh in some cases that it can go as far as self annihilation. The angry attacking part isn’t directing outrage toward the cult leader, which would be appropriate; it’s attacking the submitting part of the self. The submitting part of the self cannot bear the anger directed toward the self and the shame that arises. The effort not to know and not to feel what is happening inside leads to panic.

I suspect that this internalized enactment, punishing one’s own badness, happens because it is the nature of all human beings to protect their attachment figures, to idealize them, to be loyal to them – even when they are abusive. So even though one leaves the cult, and rejects the cult leader, shame continues to haunt the former cultist in this dissociated, unconscious way. The bond to the abuser, a trauma bond, remains, long after the abuser is nowhere in the victim’s life. So much of what must happen for healing and recovering from cult trauma is about breaking up that internal conversation, in which the former cultist is punishing and shaming himself, submitting as he was trained to do, but now to his own internalized shaming voice.

Conclusion.

To conclude, I want to discuss what I have come to think of as a corrective to shame: dignity (Chefetz, 2017). Dr. Donna Hicks is an associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. She has facilitated dialogue between communities in conflict all over the world and has developed what she calls the “dignity model.” Here are some of Hicks’ essential elements of dignity from her book, entitled “Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict” (Hicks, 2013):

**Acceptance of identity.** Approach people as being neither inferior nor superior to you. Give others the freedom to express their authentic selves without fear of being negatively judged.

**Safety.** Put people at ease so they feel safe from bodily harm, and psychologically, so they feel safe from being humiliated. Help them to feel free to speak without fear of retribution.

**Fairness**. Treat people justly, with equality, and in an even-handed way according to agreed-on laws and rules. People feel that you have honored their dignity when you treat them without discrimination or injustice.

**Independence.** Encourage people to act on their own behalf so that they feel in control of their lives and experience a sense of hope and possibility.

**Accountability**. Take responsibility for your actions. If you have violated the dignity of another person, apologize. Make a commitment to change your hurtful behavior.

If you were once in a cultic group, or cultic relationship, you may very well have been treated to all the considerations listed above, at first. But by the time you left, every one of these principles had been turned inside out. For many in cults, every bit of dignity they can hold on to ends up being taken from them. Recovering from traumatic abuse in cults is to a great extent a quest for liberation from shame and fear, and the restoration of dignity. Cult survivors must find a way to restore their faith in their own worth, their own worthiness of respect and compassion. One way they can recover and turn toward life is when they are able to spend time with others, peers, who understand what they have been through, who treat them with respect and compassion. This is also how an effective therapist will treat cult survivors.

Like the Knight moving forward, fully aware of being followed by Death and the Devil, cult survivors are also on a journey, back to dignity, to trust and faith in one’s self and in the larger world. Shame and fear won’t ever go away completely, but they don’t have to be the parts of the self in control. Leaving a cult, and freeing ourselves from subjugation in the cult, was a triumph! We tend to forget that we were strong, we had courage, and we left. We need to tell that to our self-shaming voice. We can give ourselves credit for leaving, and help the shaming voice to see that we are stronger now, and able to move forward.

The leaving process continues as we keep moving forward toward dignity, and as we leave the devil of shame and fear further and further behind. The truth is, that is not just the cult survivor’s journey. It is the human journey, an especially meaningful and worthwhile journey.

1. For more on coercive persuasion, see Schein, (1961). See also the work of Dr. Robert Cialdini, at <https://www.influenceatwork.com/principles-of-persuasion/>. On undue influence, see this paper from the Journal of the International Cultic Studies Association at <https://www.icsahome.com/articles/prosecuting-an-ex-members-undue-influence-suit-levy>. Also see on predatory alienation, the work being done at Rutgers University, at https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/centers/center-violence-against-women-and-children/research-and-evaluation/predatory-alienation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For many who attend to American politics, the study of cult phenomena has become particularly poignant in the era of Donald Trump. In *The Cult of Trump* (Hassan, 2019), cult expert Steven Hassan has thoroughly examined the ways in which Trump’s behavior is consistent with that of the malignant, traumatizing narcissist, and how the behavior of his most fervent adherents resembles the behavior of cult followers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. McCarthy’s legacy was extended by his lawyer, Roy Cohn, who went on to greater fame as the lawyer for and mentor of Donald Trump, the United States President at the time of this writing. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)