



**Highlights from the October 2009 ICSA Cult Conference
and Personal Opinions by
Counter-Cult Educator and Author
Brenda Lee**

www.outofthecocoon.net

I recently attended the ICSA (International Cultic Studies Association) conference held in Lakewood, Colorado, October 2-3, 2009. As always, the sessions were informative and well-organized. My only regret is that some of the sessions overlapped and I couldn't be in two places at once. Next time, I may just have to clone myself!

How Can I Help Someone Involved in a Cult?

The first session I attended addressed the question: "How can I help someone involved in a cult?" Most of those attending were parents who were being shunned by a son or daughter involved in a cult. Understandably, attempts to reconnect intellectually and emotionally with their child had failed. (Milieu control, censorship of communication both internal and external, is one of the initial eight points of mind control that cults utilize to gain subtle control over new members.)

While a parent's natural instinct might be to lecture and point out all the group's flaws to save the child from something they know will be detrimental to *the entire family's* well-being, shouting from the rooftops, "Don't YOU realize this is a cult!?" isn't necessarily the best approach.

We must remember: unsolicited advice comes across as criticism and the intangible cost of perceived criticism can drive a person deeper into a cult, resulting in the "handlers" [i.e., the cult leader(s)] attempt to harness even more control over the person. This point was driven home by a former Jehovah's Witness who shared the following with me, "I think my father's opposition to the family's fanaticism caused us to draw even closer to the organization, thinking that he was a tool of Satan. That sounds crazy but that's the way I looked at it."

What Strategy Should I Use to Communicate?

An important component to communicating is to be patient because as trust builds, the cult member is able to share more with you. You should hold back your ace until you feel the person's belief system is teetering. Going in with both barrels firing isn't going to make the person consider what you have to say; it will only elicit defensive retreat.

I truly believe that simply asking questions about your loved one's mindset, the group's expectations and their history in a non-threatening manner is your best strategy. Unfortunately, few people have been educated about how cults work and their first strategy is to charge straight ahead from the front lines, hoping to mow down the enemy (cult leader) in the process.



Do I Have to Do This Alone?

Remember, you do not have to break through the cult barrier alone. Oftentimes you can elicit the inklings of independent thought by offering up an extended social network. How many times have you spoken to someone you barely knew or watched a movie and in the process learned more about yourself? If your son shows an interest in pottery, encourage a class in pottery through local college or recreation center. If she is interested in sports, offer up series tickets to a baseball or football game. In doing so, you may help get the cult member out of his/her "rut"—the rut of speaking only with other like-minded cult members and processing information a particular way.

In addition, influences outside the immediate family can and often do contribute to helping someone exit a high-control group. One woman shared how her physician's comment about her poor health and high stress level dramatically changed her perception of her cult family. She internalized, "She's right—I am really tired and under a lot of stress!" As a result, she began to question the all-consuming nature of the group as compared to her own needs, which she had suppressed for quite some time. The more exposure the cult member has to people outside their immediate cult social circle, the better the odds are that the cult's concrete foundation will crumble into sandstone.

One thing you can say that may get your loved one thinking is, "You know, I sometimes get depressed and wish I could have a closer relationship with all my relatives (or fill in the blank with whatever you feel your loved one might be missing). I'm sure you aren't 100% happy either because *no one* is ever 100% happy all of the time. What would *you* want to be doing differently right now if you weren't a member of _____?" (fill in the name of the group)

If he counters angrily: "I **am** 100% happy and there is nothing I would change!"--don't despair. A cult member is programmed to have that response. The point is, you planted a seed that may germinate in time and your loved one knows deep inside that what he is saying simply isn't true. Perhaps all the BS that the cult has been feeding your loved one will someday act as fertilizer and make the seed that you've just planted sprout.

Remember that the goal when speaking to anyone under mind control is to get them to think outside the box, not to have them concede overnight that they have been involved in something destructive.

Seek First to Understand

It's important to understand why a loved one won't have contact with you. Understand the group's dynamics and how the group thinks as one mind. This means that you *must* research the group thoroughly and try to understand why your friend/relative wants to believe in this group's mission/utopia/idealistic endeavor. What are the payoffs/downsides? What vulnerabilities does the group manifest? What doubt is your loved one secretly fostering—is he/she tired of the endless and non-climactic routine, the eternal carrot, the hypocrisy, the financial outlay, the disassociation from loved ones?

There is a common component in all relationships which Dr. Stephen R. Covey, cites as a good habit #5 in his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. It is: **Seek First to Understand**, Then to be Understood. <http://vip.6to23.com/shanshu/7hhabits/7heng8.htm> Seeking first to understand can pay huge dividends in all relationships.



A caution, however, based upon my own personal observations: While you are researching your loved one's high-control group, be careful that they do not indoctrinate you! Keep yourself grounded by reading books about thought/mind control and having your own support network. Remember that most people fall prey to cults because of some emotional need that isn't being fulfilled. Think about it—what stronger emotional need do you have right now than to have your loved one back in your arms? Are you vulnerable at this time? You bet you are!

What If My Loved One Returns My Mail, Shuns Me Completely, or Will Only Speak to Me if I Join the Cult?

If you find communication difficult or letters/packages end up being returned unopened, try sending post cards instead, not letters. Or send an email and type something *only in the subject line*. That way they *will* read it before they toss it into the trash.

What do you do if your loved one won't speak to you at all? Of course, the path you take depends upon your family's dynamics. You know your loved one best. Will your incredulous presence drive him deeper into the group or will your total absence allow the group to take hold of him faster? The most impactful strategy might be to do nothing and wait. Then again, consistently sending periodic reminders from home may be the best approach—as long as you don't bombard him with the message **YOUR GROUP IS A CULT! NOW QUICKLY RUN AWAY!**

Ideas for subtly reaching out: send photographs, a short "I love you" or "I saw this and thought of you today," or send news about a non-threatening family member: "Did you hear grandma broke her leg? She said she'd love to hear from you." The key here is to keep the information short, sweet and engaging. If your loved one feels she is being inundated with information to which she isn't subscribing, she will be quick to cancel the subscription. Again, this goes back to developing rapport and trust by seeking first to understand.

What if a loved one says she can only continue to speak to you if you join her group? Although it is tempting to say, "I will NEVER become a puppet to your delusional, narcissistic cult leader!" don't eliminate the power of hope. You don't want to lie but you don't want to entirely close the door either. Let her believe that she may still be able to reach you someday. A good response might be: "You know how much I want to have a relationship with you and I would do virtually anything to have that with you, but I can't join XYZ *at this time* because I need to understand why I can't choose to be friends with people outside the group or read whatever I want to read. Will you help me understand why these restrictions exist in your group?" You are not lying. You are not saying you *will* join them. Keeping some hope alive may be the only way to keep your loved one from shunning you completely.

Tic Toc, Tic Toc

For me, the last session of the day was the most enjoyable. I attended author Steve Hassan's session on "Hypnosis, Altered States of Consciousness and Cults." As most of you probably already know, Steve is the author of multiple books about mind control and has been an exit counselor for years after his own experience as a member of the Moonies.

Steve pointed out that hypnosis is not simply a watch swinging back and forth. Total consciousness is not a constant force in our life that suddenly gets disrupted. All of us go through different trance states throughout the day. Some examples: driving a car and not remembering how we got to our destination or the suspension of awareness of our surroundings when we read a book or watch a movie.

Steve discussed Theodore Barber's suggestibility model and the different types of people who are susceptible to hypnosis. These people include:

- 1) The fantasy prone. These types enjoyed a childhood strongly rooted in make believe and report experiencing paranormal activity as an adult.
- 2) The amnesia prone. These types are forgetful. (Oh, no. I'm beginning to see myself fall into this category!)
- 3) Positively oriented people. These types are trusting, less skeptical and controlling and like to go with the flow. The largest percentage of those who can be hypnotized come from this group.



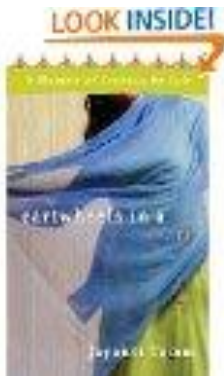
Brenda Lee, "Out of the Cocoon" and Steve Hassan, "Combatting Cult Mind Control"

Summary

I experienced many memorable events at this conference. One was when ICSA president and cult expert Lorna Goldberg and I met up with fellow cult survivor, Amy Shipley, also featured on “The Secret Lives of Women” (WEtv). Amy recently exited Dahn Yoga and attended Wellspring.



2009: *The Secret Lives Women*: Amy Shipley, Lorna Goldberg and Brenda Lee



I also enjoyed meeting Jayanti Tamm, author of “Cartwheels in a Sari: A Memoir of Growing Up Cult.” Jayanti, which means “Absolute victory of the highest supreme,” was pronounced at birth by her guru, Sri Chinmoy, to have descended from the highest heavens and was destined to become a devoted sacrificial being, his eternal devotee...that is, until she was kicked out of the group by him at age 25. My favorite quote from Tamm was: “I just wanted to be normal and not go to a party and end up introducing myself as someone raised in a cult.”

Isn't that what we all want, even today?

Visit Brenda's website at www.outofthecocoon.net to learn more about her struggles growing up as a Jehovah's Witness and to read some of her other informative articles.

©Brenda Lee, 2009, author “Out of the Cocoon: A Young Woman's Courageous Flight from the Grip of a Religious Cult,” www.outofthecocoon.net