



“CULT”: A FOUR-LETTER WORD?

By *Brenda Lee*

Out of the Cocoon: A Young Woman’s Courageous Flight from the Grip of a Religious Cult www.outofthecocoon.net

Through the years cult experts have held lively debates about what defines a particular group as a cult and the terminology that should be used in counter-cult education. Some people don’t even like to use the word “cult” because they feel it impedes open dialog concerning a particular group. Meanwhile, the average parent is left wondering why Joe, an otherwise loving and independent son, has lost all freewill to a particular group and will no longer speak to his devoted parents. The answer, which is hard for a grief-stricken family to grasp: Subtle and insidious thought reform.

What is thought reform? Margaret Thaler Singer, Ph.D., Professor at the University of California at Berkeley, acknowledged leading authority in the world on cults says: “Thought reform...is the systematic application of psychological [i.e., through indoctrination and emotional manipulation] and social influence [control of your environment and social circle] in an organized programmatic way...The goal is to produce specific attitudinal and behavioral changes...Contrary to popular misconceptions, a thought reform program does not require physical confinement...[However} thought reform is environment-dependent.” In other words, a cult applies psychological and emotional manipulation along with control of your environment in order to produce changes in your attitude and behavior. [bracketed material mine]

In counter-cult circles, “thought reform” has become the phrase of choice for many rather than the word “brainwashing” because when one hears “brainwashing,” the image conjures up individuals held captive against their will and physically beaten into submission. One might argue: Since millions of self-professed “Christian,” nontraditional religious groups do *not* live in restrictive communes; is it appropriate for them to receive the “cult” label? Don’t all cults indoctrinate people through communal living? (If that were the case, I guess I wouldn’t be sending my son off to college to live in a dorm!)

I’ve encountered this question many times after my seminars entitled, “Cults: What You Need to Know to Protect Your Family.” Whenever I hold up my book, *Out of the Cocoon: A Young Woman’s Courageous Flight from the Grip of a Religious Cult* and recount my childhood as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses, inevitably someone asks: “Why do you think your Jehovah Witness family is in a cult? They aren’t living in isolation like those folks who died in Jonestown. They are free to leave at any time.” I then get to explain that to manipulate and control someone, you don’t need to confine them. You just need to use thought reform techniques coupled with coercive persuasion.

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Robert J. Lifton, a noted cult expert and author who studied the effects of thought reform and mind control on prisoners of war talked about eight psychological techniques used to control another. Milieu control is one of methods employed by the cult leader to create a leader/follower or parent/child dynamic. Milieu control is simply control of your environment—both internal and external. Controlling to whom you speak, or how you speak to yourself, is but one example.

What is coercive persuasion and how might one use it on another? An example I like to use in my cult seminars is the parent/child relationship because everyone finds the illustration easy to grasp. A parent can say to his or her child: “Don’t you eat that cookie or I will be really *angry* with you and you won’t be allowed to watch TV tonight!” The child doesn’t need to be restrained in order to comply with the parent. The child knows there will be psychological consequences if he or she disobeys. And let’s face it, more important than that cookie, at least for many children, is their parents’ approval. Cult leaders are the parent to the cult members’ child.

Similarly, in 1981 a cult leader warned my family--don’t talk to Brenda because if you do, we will disfellowship (excommunicate) you and none of “the friends” (other cult members) will associate with you. That was 27 years ago and without fail, my mother, sister, brother, five nephews and niece have all been very obedient to their guru. I remember that while I was in the Watchtower organization, we referred to other members—good or bad—as “The Friends.” Looking back now, I realize what a misnomer that was for it was these very “friends” who shunned me when I left the group.

Cookies, family members, Christmas trees, long hair, too much toilet paper. Anything can be the forbidden fruit in a cult. Unfortunately, it is quite common for a new member to be unaware that he or she has surrendered his or her independent thought to another, until it is too late to leave the group without reprisal.

We as a society put a lot of credence on labels. It’s how we define our world. But I always caution: *You can take a label off a can of beans and slap on a peach label, but you still have beans inside. What’s more important than the label is recognizing the contents.*

Whether we use the word “cult” or “brainwashing” or “thought reform,” what exactly are we trying to accomplish through our counter-cult education? Aren’t we simply attempting to scrape out the contents and lay them bare so that one more family doesn’t have to lose a loved one to a destructive group someday? I know that’s my goal.

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