

Just Between Us

How to spot a dangerous cult



By
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Religious cults are much in the news. Suspicion runs higher than usual about mind manipulation, thought control and behavior modification by far-out groups. The picture has become violent. Suicide, homicide, beatings and kidnappings are commonly reported.

Accusations and counter-accusations fly back and forth. Parental and social concern have some basis in fact. Cults often are dangerous and do pose a threat to individuals and families.

The picture is complex. Cults sometimes do good. They may rescue persons from heavy drug involvement. They give a sense of purpose and meaningfulness.

Cults generally appeal to something larger than the individual. They offer opportunity to express idealism. Ours has been called an age of narcissism or self-centeredness. Cults paradoxically appeal both to self-concern and idealism, to narcissism and altruism.

CULTS CANNOT be dismissed merely as a haven for the emotionally disturbed.

Some individuals who join cults are having psychological problems. The majority probably do not join because they are emotionally disturbed.

Individuals do appear to be most vulnerable to

the appeal of cults when they are feeling isolated and their lives meaningless. Cults do offer a home to the alienated.

Part of the appeal to needy persons is that the cult appears to be a "good family." Not only does it provide a sense of purpose, but also it gives one a place in a tight group.

The charismatic leader may be called "daddy" or some other form of "father." Fulfilling the demands made on you gives you a place in the cult "family" among the other siblings.

The stronger the demands and the greater the alienation from the outside world, the greater the sense of belonging to the cult family.

WHAT PRICE is one willing to pay for such security? The time to answer that question is before one finds himself or herself in a sense of meaninglessness and isolation. Some important questions to be examined by any person regarding such groups include the following:

•What do you have to do in order to join? What kinds of commitments do you have to make in order to be accepted by the cult and its leader? Do you have to give up your money, property, salary, ties with parents, family, friends? Are there sex-

ual requirements, either that one abstains entirely, engage in orgies, or submits to the advances of the leadership?

Once you have paid the initiation price, it may be emotionally difficult to turn back, admit your mistakes, cut your losses, and leave the cult.

•What do you have to be against in order to be a member. Do you have to be against injustice, Satan, family, capitalist society? Who or what is made to blame for the existing evils of life?

The cult offers a target for one's aggression. Are cult members fanatical and single-minded? Are the mistakes of bad and good seen as clear-cut? Are the solutions offered by the cult simple?

•What is the leader like? In a time of anti-heroism and disillusionment in much of our society, a charismatic, herolike leader has considerable appeal.

To those hungry for heroes and father-like figures, the appeal may overshadow the flaws of the leader. Does the leader demand unquestioning personal loyalty and allegiance from cult members? Is the leader indispensable to the group?

THE MORE "YES" responses one makes in answering such questions, the more likely it is that

the group should be avoided.

Healthy religion may make demands of its members. It is not likely to require total surrender of assets, giving up one's personality and social ties, or unusual sexual behavior.

It is not likely to offer simple solutions to complex problems. It is not likely to be built around an indispensable, charismatic leader who demands total personal allegiance from blindly-obedient followers.

It is to be hoped that being aware of the nature and appeal of cults will help persons to beware of the mixed blessings that they offer. Healthy groups can be found that do not require the payment of the kind of price extracted by totalitarian cults.

Cults also serve notice to organized religion and social life. The need to belong and the need for being cared for by others run deep in human beings.

If they are not met in non-exploitative ways by legitimate groups, they may leave the door open for exploitation of the needy by others.

(The writer is a consulting psychologist and marriage counselor in the suburban area.)

Ask the Educator

Bureaucrat insensitive to handicapped rider



JOSEPH HADDAD

QUESTION: I live in Detroit and my 11-year-old son was diagnosed as learning disabled.

Before he was identified as handicapped, he used to ride the yellow school bus to school with his neighborhood friends. After he was found to be learning disabled and was placed in a special class, we were told he was now "eligible" for public transportation (two free bus tickets each day) and could no longer ride the yellow school

bus because he was handicapped. What can I do about this? I am worried sick about my son taking public transportation daily.

Mrs. S.R.

ANSWER: Your situation is a perfect example of bureaucratic insensitivity.

You see, state school law says that transportation must be provided for special education students who need it

in order to get to special classes which may be in locations other than the neighborhood school.

Likewise, some very young handicapped children are not mature or sufficiently responsible to be expected to find their way to school safely each day. Such children need transportation for their protection.

Your son was already being transported nicely. Why some staff person or administrator would choose to

apply the rule in this situation is beyond me. Following rules slavishly is not good practice.

You should complain.

Call your school principal and ask for the name and number of the person who makes these decisions, and tell that person that you wish your son to resume riding the regular school bus.

If you don't get satisfaction, ask for the name and number of this person's supervisor. Go up the chain of command until you find someone with common sense.

Clinics help smokers, the overweight

A smoking withdrawal and weight control clinic has been put together by Larry Gettelman, who zeros in on self-management to help persons bring about change without strain.

The first of his course in two parts is set for 7:30 p.m., Friday, Jan. 12, in the YMCA, 28100 Farmington Road. Gettelman is a Certified Public Accountant with Ford Motor Company and a certified physical fitness instructor for the Y.

He is also a reformed two-and-a-half-pack-a-day smoker who lost 50

pounds after putting into practice some techniques he devised.

"It's absolutely amazing," he said, "to find what we can achieve when we overcome fear of failure and the unknown. A few simple techniques and some usable knowledge can change our entire lives, from hard work to play."

His introductory lecture is without charge or obligation.

He believes his devices are fun ways to neutralize the forces that compel one to do what one does. He teaches

autosuggestion techniques that overcome the hypnotic-like forces that compel one away from what the person really wants. He teaches knowledge systems that explain how the personality is constructed, that one can test for without relaxation or meditation techniques.

He says, "armed with usable knowledge, you can start to enjoy more of life now. You have every right to enjoy all of your life without being compelled by self-destructive behavior."

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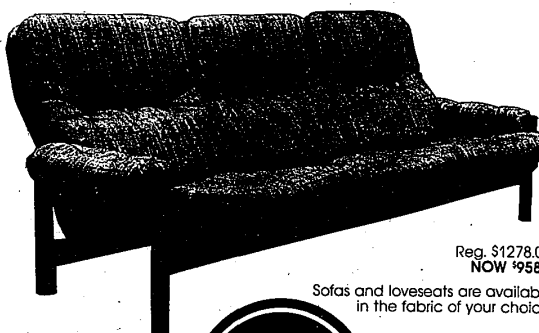
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