doi: 10.54208/1000/0009/010

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF CULT TRAUMA: THE IMPACT ON CHILD-REARING OF CULT-CREATED DISSOCIATION AND A CULT-CREATED HARSH CONSCIENCE

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Abstract: *As a result of trauma and ongoing cult control practices, parents raising children in cults are usually living in a cult-induced dissociative state, which interferes with their ability to self-reflect and establish an empathic connection with their children. Many parents are conditioned to anxiously follow their leader's self-serving demands rather than their natural inclinations. Typically, cult control practices leave children vulnerable to emotional and physical neglect or abuse. To illustrate this process, this paper examines the child-rearing relationship between a second-generation mother and her third-generation son. The author defines dissociation and explores theories of early childhood development to illustrate how the cult mother–child relationship affects a child's developing brain and nervous system, impacts early life experiences, and has consequences for adulthood. Finally, the paper addresses the recovery process for mother and son.*

Keywords: *cult, intergenerational trauma, dissociation, cult recovery*

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2 The author wishes to thank 'Anika' and 'David' for their insights. She also thanks William Goldberg and two additional former long-term members of this cult for their generosity and wisdom in editing.

Introduction

This paper explores the child-rearing relationship of a second-generation cult mother, "Anika," and her third-generation son, "David." It examines an Eastern meditation cult's impact across three generations (1970–2024): Anika's parents, Anika, and her son. During this time, there were two leaders: first, a man, and then, following his death, a woman. This paper describes how Anika and David came to understand how cult dynamics interfered with their relationship, thus hindering their ability to empathize with one another. It follows their journey toward recognizing these patterns and taking steps toward healing.

The author describes how cult practices, including long hours of chanting and meditation to achieve enlightenment, driven by a strict moral code and pressure to advance in the cult's hierarchy, led to anxious perfectionism and eroded individuality, leaving little room for parents to meet their children's needs. Anika's experiences—parental absence, sexual abuse, and the relentless pressure to achieve enlightenment—undermined her sense of self and her ability to connect with David. Her focus on satisfying the cult's demands often overshadowed her ability to comfort and protect him.

Anika experienced the cult traumas of parental absence, prolonged periods of dissociative practices, and the cult's demand to strive for the unreachable goal of enlightenment. These traumas, as well as sexual abuse, led to dissociation, accepting the cult's principles blindly, and losing her agency. Anika's ability to soothe and protect David from cult harm was undermined because she was anxiously ensuring that they both complied with the cult's strict code rather than focusing on his needs. Cult control mechanisms interfered with her abilities to self-soothe and to soothe her son, despite her conscious desire to be a devoted mother.

Drawing on years of conducting therapy with former cult member parents, the author learned that most cult parents exist in a dissociative state from cult trauma and cult practices. This state hinders self-reflection and the establishment of an empathic connection with their children (Goldberg, 2003; Goldberg, 2017). Parents are likely to follow the self-serving demands of their leader instead of their own inclinations (Lifton, 1961). This

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undermining of the parental role leaves their children susceptible to emotional and physical neglect or abuse.

The cult's control processes, including long hours of chanting and meditation aimed at achieving enlightenment, induced dissociation, undermined members' critical thinking, and isolated them from one another. Dissociation also rendered members amenable to incorporating the leader's harsh moral code, enforced on everyone except the two punitive leaders. Furthermore, the pressure to adapt to this moral code created a conscience in members that was severely judgmental of themselves and others, including children, compelling them to behave in ways to avoid feelings of badness or shame. The cult induced a need to be "perfect" and "special" to advance in the strict cult hierarchy. This demand reinforced members' desperately anxious nervous systems.

The cult eradicated members' sense of individuality and personal agency by asserting that enlightenment is life's singular and urgent goal. The belief that each member had to nurture their awakened *kundalini* (a dormant spiritual energy at the base of the spine) created pressure to strive for this unattainable ideal. These control mechanisms reshaped members' personalities by providing them with a model of ideal behavior to emulate. This preoccupation precluded them from focusing on the cult's troubling aspects.[1] Members invariably failed to achieve the cult's ideal, and they mitigated the resulting feelings of unworthiness or self-disgust by defensively acting superior to others, thus undermining cult members' relationships with everyone except the cult leader.

In the following, the author describes how Anika and David came to understand the cult dynamics that influenced their relationship and hindered their ability to empathize with one another. By examining the impact of cultic trauma on this mother–son relationship, this paper will demonstrate how individuals born and raised in such environments are traumatized by cult dynamics and how cult trauma is transmitted across generations. Finally, the paper will examine the experiences of Anika, her husband, and David as they left the cult and took steps toward recovery. While other families may follow different developmental paths, the author believes that the intergenerational dynamics experienced by this family are relevant to many cult families.

1 According to Lifton, there is a "demand for purity" in cults, and people are pressured to change their beliefs to conform to the group norm (1961).

A Family Therapy Session

Anika and her husband were members of a support group co-facilitated by the author and William Goldberg. She contacted the author requesting a family therapy session for herself, her husband, David, and his sister. Anika had become concerned upon discovering that David viewed her as "cold." She wished to better understand David's perspective. For the first time, Anika explored with her son the factors that led to her dissociation and incorporation of the cult belief system, and David discussed how his mother's child-rearing had impacted him. The session concentrated on the cult dynamics that influenced and interfered with her parenting and how this had affected David in particular. During the session, it became clear that Anika had been a dissociated mother, not a cold one, and thus, each gained some empathy for the other.

Following the session, the author reflected on how the phenomenon of parental dissociation negatively affects children born and raised in cults. She approached Anika and David about participating in a series of discussions aimed at developing a paper. Both agreed. A series of weekly Zoom meetings was held to explore how the cult influenced their mother–son relationship. The insights developed in those meetings led to this paper.

Premises

- Cult-born individuals often suffer trauma from cult practices that push many parents into dissociation.
- Dissociated parents become compliant with leaders' demands, losing pre-cult inclinations.
- Dissociation hinders self-reflection and a somatically attuned empathic connection with their children.
- These factors leave children vulnerable to neglect and abuse.

Dissociation Defined

"Dissociation refers to the separation of mental and experiential contents that would normally be

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connected" (Howell, 2005, p. 18). Thus, dissociation fails to integrate ideas, information, and affects with experience (Putnam, 1997). Dissociation can be viewed as "the isolation of elements of experience from each other that decreases coherence, increases a sense of fragmentation, and precludes the possibility of making accurate sense out of perception of self and world" (Chefetz, 2017, p. 87). Dissociation can also become psychologically defensive, protecting against painful affects and memories (Howell, 2005). Additionally, dissociation renders parts of the self inaccessible to others in the individual's relational world. Dissociated memories and affects connected with trauma influence and disrupt the conscious life of the person who has been traumatized. These dissociative states enter that person's relationships with others (Bromberg, 2003).

Anika entered a dissociative state because of:

- Cult Trauma from Parental Loss: After her mother's affiliation, seven-year-old Anika felt abandoned and anxious when her mother traveled to India for several months each time. Anika now recognizes her dissociative response as protection from extreme sadness and anxiety.
- Long periods of chanting to achieve enlightenment, a state in which members would become one with God by destroying the self-limiting ego, bad karma, and any sense of separation from God (see page 8); (Sroufe et al., 1997, in Ogawa et al., p. 875).

Anika's Life

Anika has warm and carefree memories of her childhood before the cult. Both of her parents were artists who worked from home. Although her mother was always busy with various activities outside the home, she still took care of the children, taking her younger brother and her to the park in the afternoons and preparing family meals. Anika's father, a warmer and more loving presence, enjoyed taking the children to museums. For three months each summer, the family would spend time at the seashore, renting a cottage near her uncle, aunt, and cousins. Anika loved that time with her family. There were also happy memories of time spent with her grandparents, who lived nearby.

In the 1970s, many were attracted to the Indian gurus and their Eastern Meditation groups proliferating in the U.S. Anika's mother was searching for life's meaning. She explored various Eastern meditation groups, finally joining the group of an Indian guru. Anika's parents joined the cult in 1970 when Anika was seven. Anika's mother devoted herself to working full-time for the cult and the cult leader.

Anika experienced that her mother's priority became working for and spending time in the cult facility. Taking care of her children was secondary. Anika's mother believed that by giving her time and energy to the cult, Anika would be taken care of by the cult leader's grace and thereby be blessed. She believed everything that happened to her daughter was meant to be. This led her to abdicate personal responsibility, reinforcing her dissociation, denial, and alienation from Anika. Anika's mother thus became more concerned with her spiritual journey and position in the cult than with taking care of her family. Anika's father, initially a warm and caring presence in her life, grew emotionally distant as he aged, hiding behind a wall of jokes and sarcasm.

Although Anika still saw her relatives occasionally, the time they spent together was considerably reduced. Long summers at the seashore with extended family came to an end, and the family spent summers traveling and living in India (her mother traveled there for weeks at a time), or at an upstate location with the cult leaders. Anika's parents remained devoted cult members for the rest of their lives, hosting weekly cult meetings in their apartment in a large American city. Many nights, Anika had to share her room with other cult members.

Anika's Fear of Abandonment

Anika experienced fear of abandonment when her mother became increasingly focused on proselytizing the cult message and managing cult affairs, becoming a senior figure, and when her mother travelled to India for months at a time. Anika's fear of abandonment was displaced and, thus, became a repeated fear of abandonment by others throughout her life.

Anika grew up in the cult, married a cult member, and had two children while living in the cult facility. In her mid-forties, with the birth of her second child, Anika, her husband, and her children left the upstate cult location, although they continued to be members. Her parents remained. She believes that it has taken her another twenty years to fully comprehend the impact

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of the cult on herself, her marriage, and her children, and to heal from the multiple harms done to her and her family. Only in the past two years, she, now 61, and David, 32, began to understand the impact the cult has had on his life and their relationship.

At fifteen, Anika left home to live with the leader in India and to join him on a world tour. This left her vulnerable to the leader's sexual abuse. Anika was a teenager in India, with no previous sexual experience, far from home and her family, when the leader raped her.[2] Trying to nullify and justify her distress over the abuse created dissonance in Anika and increased her dissociation. She could not flee or fight. She was trapped in the cult without her family, and so she froze.Anika had incorporated the cult message that the cult leader was "perfect," as all those around her told her he was, and, therefore, his sexual abuse was reframed positively. The cult leader was a sanyasi, a sworn celibate monk. However, he allegedly raped or sexually assaulted numerous young girls and women. Cult members reinterpreted physical touch from the leader as a blessing because it transmitted spiritual energy. They believed that the leader could awaken the *kundalini* in a disciple through his thought, gaze, word, or touch. Disciples hungered for any attention from the leader, believing this attention would further their movement toward enlightenment, but the leader's touch held particular importance. Some of the victims of the alleged sexual abuse reported that he told them that they were receiving a "special touch" or a "special initiation," which was "top secret." The leader was seen as infallible, so although many girls, women, and other cult members were reportedly aware of the abuse, they excused it as a special tantric practice that benefited the victim; they did not perceive it as harmful. One of the stories perpetrated in the cult to excuse the leader's rapes was that adolescent girls were needed to provide him with energy after he suffered a heart attack. This narrative asserted that the victims were doing him and everyone else a service; they were serving the greater good, which was their privilege. However, each victim was instructed to treat the information as confidential and never disclose or discuss it.

Anika's mother knew the girls were being abused. She rationalized and found a way to justify the cult's hypocrisy: the leader could do no wrong.[3] Anika never told her mother that she was one of the victims. While she was unaware of Anika's abuse, her mother (and others in the cult) knew that girls were being abused. She rationalized it and found a way to justify the cult hypocrisy. Her mother had accepted the notion that anything the leader needed, wanted, or commanded was to be given to him.

Anika secretly wondered why cult members accepted that the leader defined sex as a distraction not to be indulged in, yet indulged himself. This caused profound confusion and cognitive dissonance. She displaced these feelings onto others, a defense mechanism, by becoming hypersensitive to anyone who said one thing but did another. She also became deeply ambivalent about her sexuality. Having been taught that sex was negative, Anika struggled in her marriage with her sexuality. She transmitted that ambivalence to her children, who came to wonder what constituted a healthy sexual relationship.

Enlightenment

The cult's objective was to attain enlightenment or self-realization. Enlightenment was defined as a state in which the individual becomes one with God by destroying the self-limiting ego, bad karma, and any sense of separation from God. The cult taught that enlightenment would be achieved by receiving spiritual initiation from the leader and then following a rigorous schedule of daily chanting, meditation, and selfless service (unpaid work).

The leader was purported to be one with God. Cult members were urged to surrender all aspects of individuality to the leader. A central feature of cult life was a mandatory chant, sung every day in the early morning. This chant exhorted followers to

- think only of the leader and abandon any wish for personal well-being or reputation.
- purify their mind by following the leader's path; consider the leader to be father, mother, brother, and God.
- dedicate to the leader their body, senses, spouse, and all else.

2 It is typical in cult life that children are separated from parents (Goldberg, 2003; Whitsett & Kent, 2003; Markowitz & Halperin, 1984).

3 In *Terror, Love, and Brainwashing*, Stein (2016) describes how the cult leader undermines the possibility of a protective attachment bond between parents and their children, leaving children in these groups vulnerable to neglect and abuse.

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- honor the leader, who would protect them from the troubles of the world, end all hardships, save them from misfortune, and grant them the highest truth.
- know that chanting this hymn would make their good dreams come true and end their bad dreams. It would remove all difficulties and fulfill every desire, including success, wealth, pleasure, and true freedom. It would wash away sins and worldly cares, cure major illnesses, and take away their fear of death. It would also grant superhuman powers and the ability to control other people. It would allow an infertile woman to bear a child.

Any emotion deemed to be negative was frowned upon, its existence condemned. The members were viewed as the source of any problem. A critical thought or emotion indicated that the member was failing on their path to enlightenment.[4]

Enlightenment was used as a mechanism to control Anika and her parents, who dedicated their lives to attaining enlightenment through ongoing practices. They followed all the prescribed actions. Anika's father once told her half-sister (not a cult member), when she recommended a fiction book to him, "Oh, well, now I only read books written by enlightened beings. I am not going to read that book."

Dissociation Resulting from the Drive to Attain Enlightenment

Anika and David describe the cult as being structured around a mandated, unchanging, seven-day-a-week daily schedule that was prescribed for all resident cult members. Chanting in Sanskrit for up to seven hours a day dissociated members from thoughts and feelings. Followers were encouraged to "lose themselves in the chant." Sitting on the floor for prolonged chanting and meditation, forcing a dissociation from physical discomfort. Conducting chants and worship ceremonies to various Hindu gods and goddesses enhanced dissociation. These practices encouraged people to focus on the divine, not themselves. Meditating to rise above individual consciousness and attain complete absorption in God, whereby the sense of individuality dissolves, reinforced dissociative states.

Performing many hours each day of seva, or selfless service (i.e., working without pay) and complying with instructions on what to do and how to do it caused dissociation from personal interests and preferences. If anyone in this group was not productive, they were castigated. They had little free time to play, explore, contemplate, or recoup. Anika and the other core members were often in a state of physical and emotional exhaustion or sleep deprivation.

Pujas were installed throughout the cult's facilities: in every office, in every meeting room, in the dining areas, in every public area, in each follower's room, and even on their car dashboards. A bookstore in each facility sold the latest photos of the leader, books by the leader, and assorted paraphernalia. The pervasive images of the leader and the inculcated sense of worship further subjugated the individual and induced dissociation in community members. Additionally, the leader monitored followers through closed-circuit cameras mounted throughout the facility.

Members attended regular, long lectures, which the leader gave from his throne on a dais. Followers sat cross-legged quietly on the floor and listened closely, often taking notes. The teachings were reinforced through courses, retreats, study groups, and costly weekend programs. The leader and senior cult teachers shared stories from other spiritual traditions about surrendering to a master with total devotion or performing countless years of selfless service without question. These stories presented total surrender as an elevated goal for one's life. The ideal was to become an "empty vessel," a "pure container," and have a stilled mind, further emphasizing the goal of a dissociative state.

Members were coached and praised for sharing in public programs an account of having a profound meditation experience, surrendering to the cult leader, experiencing the leader's omnipotence or perfection, or achieving a thoughtless state. Examples of meditation experiences included having visions, seeing lights, experiencing involuntary physical movements, or experiencing a sense of oneness with the divine. This reinforced the goal of separating and dissociating the individual from the wider world.

Cult members were encouraged to remain silent as

4 Cults can undermine and control members' emotional lives by labeling negative emotions as "bad" and, thus, deterring them from moving towards a state of equanimity (Whitsett, 2014).

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they followed a long path through the woods to the dining area. They walked alongside each other but did not converse. Similarly, silent areas in the communal dining room further limited the interaction among some followers, reinforcing dissociative states.

Seeking enlightenment through these practices reinforced Anika's dissociative state, which became her usual demeanor. Members were on guard to act and appear in a cult-approved manner, so anxiety was ubiquitous. There was little room to relax due to the pressure to appear as if one were acting in an approved manner and the constant need to be "productive."

Anika became part of the cult's center of a core group of highly committed members; if anyone in this group was not productive, they were castigated. They had little free time to play, explore, contemplate, or recoup. In addition, the daily schedule precluded adequate time to sleep. As a result, Anika and the other core members were often in a state of physical and emotional exhaustion or sleep deprivation.[5]

Primary Teachings of Cult-Induced Dissociation

The cult's teachings were transmitted through books, periodicals, lectures by the leader or senior teachers, and signs posted throughout the cult's worldwide facilities. Anika committed fully to following these teachings:

- *Become free from all attachments.* Anika was taught to cultivate dispassion. She strove to detach herself emotionally from all the things she was attached to, including her children, husband, possessions, agency, desires, worldly goals, etc.
- *Rise above pain, pleasure, joy, and sorrow.* The world is an illusion, and cult followers must rise above the human condition. Reality was seen as the "ocean of worldliness." Anika believed that if she could transcend her experience of the world, she would attain enlightenment.
- *Still your thoughts.* This taught Anika to dissociate from thoughts and feelings.
- *Overcome desire, pride, envy, greed, and anger.* Anika learned to dissociate from these "negative" emotions to comply with the cult's teachings.
- *Embrace* Tapasya*, or the burning of the ego.* Ego-based feelings such as shame, embarrassment, jealousy, anger, sadness, yearning, loneliness, disappointment, depression, pride, accomplishment, success, etc., should be "burned" or destroyed through chanting, meditation, and selfless service. Anika understood that her human emotions were unworthy. She castigated herself for feeling such things and dissociated from them. Dissociation led her to feel shame and destroyed her sense of true self-esteem and self-worth.
- *Eradicate the ego.* Dissolve all sense of limited self-experience into communion with the cult leader or God—both were considered divine since the leader was one with God. Anika learned to separate herself from her experiences and feelings, seeking to merge her individuality with "the divine."

Incorporation of the Cult's Harsh Moral Voice

To attain enlightenment, Anika believed she needed to incorporate the leader's harsh moral code, which was enforced on everyone except the highly punitive leaders. The cult maintained a strict moral voice that dictated every aspect of members' lives. The leader enforced this moral voice through his teachings and authoritative demands. Within the cult, individuals were judged as good or bad based on their adherence to the leader's rules. There was no room for ambivalence, complex feelings, or personal divergence. Anika and other members were admonished to follow strict commands:

- Shower daily.
- Adhere to a strict dress code.
- Work hard and always be productive.
- Speak the truth.
- Refrain from stealing or harming.
- Abstain from sex.
- Offer all you are and all you have to the leader.
- Overcome anger, jealousy, covetousness, and so on.
- Follow the leader's dictates without question.
- Follow the prescribed teachings.
- Work towards enlightenment.

When they inevitably failed to attain the cult ideal, Anika and David experienced a cycle of harsh self-judgment followed by the shame of failure and unworthiness, a pattern likely mirrored in other cult

5 According to West (1990), lack of sleep is a pivotal element in cult manipulation, further undermining the thinking process and increasing members' willingness to follow the leaders' directives.

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members. This harsh moral voice, combined with cult beliefs, harmed members in several ways. They developed a hyperactive, monitoring, strict, black-and-white conscience fueled by judgment of self and others. Members became anxiously focused on avoiding trouble and creating bad karma. Striving for the impossible goal of enlightenment, they shifted their focus outward, away from self-awareness, critical thinking, and self-acceptance. Parents felt pressure to teach their children to conform to cult rules. According to David, this attitude also caused children to judge themselves harshly and project this judgmental thinking onto others.

The Cult's Harsh Mandates Undermined Followers' Agency

According to Anika and David, members anxiously self-monitored to adhere to the strict rules, suppress emotions, and maintain the prescribed modest appearance; this exacerbated the loss of agency. Cult members became outer-directed; they learned to disconnect from their inner voice, impulses, desires, and morals. In addition to the suppression of emotions, cults particularly do not tolerate the expression of anger or grief. This results in children having little experience in self-regulating emotions and affect (Goldberg, 2006).

Anika grew up immersed in her parents' loss of agency, and she followed their example. The abandonment of their goals and desires to the leader led to a zeal to devote themselves to the leader to justify this sacrifice. Anika's mother was taught that the cult leader was infallible and perfect. She believed her relationship with the leader was the most important one and that she must follow all his directives. Anika's father initially resented the cult leader. Much of this resentment may have stemmed from his wife's primary focus on the leader and her compliance with so-called spiritual practices, including renouncing sex to attain spiritual goals. However, over time, he became increasingly invested in cult practices and teachings, focusing his energy and resources on them.

Anika's mother built her life around the cult's rules and invested herself in devotion to the cult and advancing in its hierarchy. She relinquished her successful career as an artist and gave many of her family heirlooms to the leader. Anika's mother, father, and brother each chose to start using a "spiritual" name given by the cult leader and stopped using their birth name; this was another step in negating their previous identity. Anika eventually followed and gave up her birth name and identity to take on a name and identity chosen by the cult leader. Anika observed that her parents could not make their own decisions. They would seek an answer to any difficult question by asking the leader, dowsing with a pendulum, or throwing the I-Ching. Anika saw her parents' lack of autonomy and modeled those behaviors and thought patterns.

Anika's mother sent Anika to live away from her family at 15, placing her in the care of the cult and the leader in the hope that it would provide both herself and Anika divine blessings and status within the cult. Anika's mother thought everything that happened was meant to be, which led her to abdicate personal responsibility, reinforcing her dissociation, denial, and alienation from Anika.

Anika, like her parents, gave up agency and surrendered to cult control processes.[6] Throughout her life in the cult, Anika was told what to eat, drink, wear, do, like, dislike, whom to relate to, and whom to shun. The cult prescribed each aspect of her life. As a result, when she left the cult, Anika struggled to recognize her predilections and preferences. She struggled to make her own decisions. She was so accustomed to taking direction that she had to start learning to act on her own behalf.

The Cult's Moral Voice Promoted Harsh Judgment of Self and Others

Members needed to be "perfect," "special," and "unimpeachable." Thus, they anxiously attempted to display this behavior to avoid feelings of badness or shame. This created an anxious nervous system that interferes with self-soothing and soothing their children. Members, including children, needed to conform, which fostered a harsh internalized conscience, severely judgmental of themselves and others, including children. They developed a hyperactive, monitoring, strict, black-and-white conscience fueled by judgmental thinking.

6 Witnessing such parental behaviors, children typically struggle to develop their unique identity and, instead, feel pressure to conform to inappropriate and harmful external expectations (Goldberg, 2006).

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Members were anxious about avoiding trouble and creating bad karma to avoid judgment from others. This kept members centered on attaining the impossible goal of enlightenment, shifting their focus outward away from self-awareness, critical thinking, and self-acceptance. The cult's black-and-white thinking was delivered in a judgmental manner, and parents felt pressured to teach their children to conform to cult rules. This attitude led children to harsh self-judgment and to externalize judgmental thinking towards others.

The Cult's Harsh Moral Code Induced Anika's and David's Hyperactive Monitoring of Voice and Anxiety

The need to conform to the strict rules of the cult created intense anxiety for both Anika and David, becoming the default setting of their nervous systems. The need for adherence to the cult's strict code caused them to self-monitor each thought and action. This monitoring was pragmatic because members were constantly under observation and evaluation, and there was always a concern about being reported to the leader. Even during the inward-facing practices of meditation and chanting, Anika's hypervigilance caused her to remain aware of how she appeared outwardly, knowing that the leader might be watching via a closed-circuit camera to see how still she sat and how attentively she performed the practice.

Members also worried about creating bad karma by not adhering to the rules. They feared being reincarnated with a less fortunate human birth or even as a lower, non-human life form. Anika and David were, therefore, outwardly focused and would be ashamed to be seen as deficient. Anika worried about so many things: Was she in trouble? Who were her friends? Did she please the leader? Was she adequately demonstrating her yearning for the cult's goals? Was she showing self-discipline in her practices? Did she do her service well? As a result, she became chronically stressed. Similarly, as a child, David was concerned about reincarnation and worried he would be reincarnated as a worm if he did not follow the rules. He was flooded with guilt and emotional pain if he was not being "productive." When anxiety became intense, Anika and David might chant or meditate to dissociate. By doing so, they tricked themselves into thinking they were "above" emotions, or they would rationalize that there were no problematic emotions to deal with in the first place.

Cult Control: A Hierarchical System

Cult followers believed the leader was a perfect human being who could awaken the *kundalini*. They felt special and superior compared to those outside the cult because they served a "perfect master" and had an awakened *kundalini*. They believed they were uniquely blessed, mystically endowed, and stood apart from the rest of humanity. They believed the leader had bestowed upon them "divine grace," which would make their lives easier, happier, and wealthier than those of those "out in the world" who lacked this grace.

The cult had a potent hierarchy within which followers strove to advance by attempting to present themselves as devoted followers. Proximity to the leader led to a higher status and was energetically pursued by many. Achieving a higher status led to prized rewards and the perception of advancing towards "Enlightenment." These rewards included

- More attention from and time with the leader
- Gifts from the leader, including expensive jewelry and other luxury items
- Invitations to private meetings with the leader
- Receiving "blessed" leftover food from the leader's meal
- Receiving an item of the leader's unwanted clothing
- Being hosted by those close to the leader
- Assignment to a nicer room, closer to the leader's suite of rooms
- Invitations to eat in a private dining area
- Access to a nicer car from the carpool shared by members

Although never explicitly acknowledged, status was granted to long-term resident members based on complete submission to the leader, skill in an area needed by the cult or that could make the cult money, tireless work without complaint, decades of selfless service, conforming completely to cult rules, significant monetary donations to the cult, female gender, or physical attractiveness. For visitors, a higher status was granted based on wealth, fame, or social status. Hollywood types were particularly honored.

According to Anika, members anxiously concentrated on enhancing their status within the hierarchy to avoid feelings of failure and self-loathing. They prioritized

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status in the hierarchy over genuine relationships. Members' natural inclination to build good relationships was redirected to the cult. This shift resulted in changes in the members' principles and attitudes.

- Reinforced members' dissociation and made them more amenable to harsh cult attitudes
- Undermined parental authority
- Created confusion and insecurity in children about parental roles
- Corrupted intra-family dynamics and eroded trust within the family
- Undermined marital and member intimacy, confused members about their relationships' loyalty, and metaphorically brought a third party into the marriage bed
- Created a constant striving to reach the top by pulling others down
- Engendered the need to make oneself appear perfect
- Reinforced black-and-white thinking
- Replaced true intimacy (or a relationship of equals who gain pleasure through collaboration) with gaining the cult leader's favor

As a result, children learned to manipulate and compete rather than connect with others. Children in the cult learned to see themselves and others as "higher" or "lower" based on the leader's favor. This fostered harsh self-judgment and judgment of others, hindering healthy social interactions.

The Drive to Rise in the Cult Hierarchy Distorted Family Relationships

Over the years, Anika's mother achieved a high status by spending time with people close to the leader and advancing in the organization's management. In 1976, she facilitated the purchase of the first two facilities in the northeastern United States. She played a key role in the cult's American expansion. She was one of the early Westerners who travelled to India to study with the leader. Over the next 44 years, she became a respected "old timer." She wanted to be the best possible devotee; she avidly worshipped the male leader and later, his female successor.

The male leader refused Anika's mother's request to take formal vows of celibacy because she was married and had children. However, he gave her permission to wear yellow to physically indicate her alignment with that way of life while still respecting the needs of her husband and family. Anika was unsure whether her mother wanted her to pursue spiritual growth or to advance in the organizational hierarchy, perhaps both.

Anika's mother also physically placed her children at the center of things, and they enjoyed their status. When she managed the city-based cult facility, her children had access to the inner offices and other privileged areas. Feeling special was a huge draw and a mechanism for retaining core cult members. Anika's mother believed that whatever was required to move herself and her family higher in the cult's hierarchy was justified. Anika believes her mother wanted acclaim. Everyone in the cult knew their family. The whole family felt special because they had a place of belonging and importance.

Observing her mother's status made Anika want to be special by also being at the center. Anika now recognizes that her behavior was an attempt to receive her mother's approval by following her mother's lead. Driven by the cult dynamic of seeking status for recognition, personal benefit, and spiritual advancement, Anika strove to exceed her mother in the hierarchy.[7]

As a teenager, Anika was sent to India, where she learned yoga and other skills, including Indian cooking, public speaking, music, and reading Sanskrit. While a resident of the cult in the USA, she also received private tutoring in these areas. Anika became close to the leader and served as the leader's private cook in her teens. The leader gave Anika gifts of gold jewelry, silk saris, and other luxury items. She also received special consideration and nice accommodations near the leader's rooms. Anika was given secret work assignments. All of this played into her confusion about and dissociation from the sexual abuse. Anika changed from being known as her mother's daughter to her mother being known as Anika's mother. As Anika rose in the hierarchy, she felt more important than her mother. Because of her cult-induced superior attitude and elevated place, she began to look down on her mother and further distance herself.

According to David, children in the cult also learned

7 Anika considers that this might have been, at least in part, an unconscious way to retaliate against her mother for abandoning her.

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that relationships were hierarchical. They observed nonverbal cues and markers of cult power and authority, noting who received more attention or gifts from the leader, who sat closer to the leader in programs and audiences, who was invited into the leader's private apartments, and so on.

Anika's keen awareness of status was, in turn, adopted by her son. David reports that, to defend against feelings of "smallness" or powerlessness, children in cults anxiously strive to rise in the hierarchy by being closer to the leader and the cult's ideals than their peers. Children whom the leader currently favored became a desirable clique to belong to. Being closer to these children or these children's parents was viewed as favorable and might lead to further favor from the cult leader, which led to transactional relations between children and adults.

David was determined never to find himself in a "lower" position, accompanied by feelings of shame and worthlessness. Attempting to boost his self-esteem, he reminded himself that his grandparents were long-time respected members with elevated positions in the cult. As a result of his early indoctrination, David felt he had no close friends because he was constantly jockeying with his peers for an elevated position. He attended school outside the cult after his family left the residential facility, though the family continued as cult members. David sought out friends who were passive or insecure, among whom he could be dominant by appearing confident and sure of himself. This behavior was his attempt to preemptively retain a "higher" position in his relationships, which lacked empathy.

Sexuality as Hindrance to Enlightenment

In contrast to the leader's sexual behavior, he undermined intimacy between members. Sex was considered a distraction from the goal of enlightenment, which was one way the cult undermined intimacy between members. Following the cult's dictates, Anika's parents began to abstain from sex and to sleep in separate beds in their city apartment. Anika's mother started to wear only yellow clothing, which signified a commitment to refrain from sex.

As a child, Anika was confused about why her parents began to sleep separately and wondered if there was something wrong with their marriage. As they navigated life in the city, Anika was embarrassed by her mother's yellow clothing and long skirts and her habit of wearing her hair in a bun and placing a bindi between her eyebrows to represent the inner-seeing third eye. To a young girl and then a teenager, these behaviors modeled a confusing relationship to sexual normalcy.

Harsh Moral Voice Reinforced by Identification with Aggressor

Cult processes induce adult members to regress, feeling like children, and seeing their cult leader as a parental figure. In addition to cult control mechanisms, Ferenczi's concept of "identification with the aggressor" further explains how cult members respond to their abuser.

> [T]he aggressor disappears as part of external reality and becomes intra—as opposed to extra—psychic; the intra-psychic is then subjected, in a dream-like state, as is the traumatic trance, to the primary process.... In any case, the attack as a rigid external reality ceases to exist and in the traumatic trance the child succeeds in maintaining the previous situation of tenderness .(Ferenczi, 1933, p. 162)

That is, cult members give up their sense of self and completely submit. In doing so, they become hypervigilant to the feelings (and demands) of the cult leader, lose touch with their emotions, and, instead, identify with the emotions of the cult leader, taking the blame for being abused.

Impact of Cult Dissociation on Parenting and Children

Shortly after her family's cult affiliation, eight-year-old Anika felt abandoned when her mother chose to travel to India twice for several months. To cope with her devastating sadness and the anxiety brought on by the recurring loss of her mother, Anika now recognizes how she protected herself by dissociating from her overwhelming emotions. This early experience of periodic abandonment resulted in a fear throughout her life of abandonment by others. The experience of being abandoned by her mother was re-experienced

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when Anika's mother became increasingly focused on proselytizing the cult message, managing cult affairs, and establishing herself as a senior figure within the cult. This lack of attention increased Anika's sense of distance from her mother. It reinforced feelings of abandonment as her mother's focus turned to nurturing the cult and cult members rather than Anika.

Anika existed in an almost constant dissociative state because of cult trauma, intensive chanting and meditation, and her focus on anxiously striving to meet the cult's goals. Therefore, when she became a mother, Anika's primary focus on pleasing her leader interfered with her ability to center on her son, David. This dynamic blocked her from the possibility of emotionally connecting to her baby through soothing responses. Anika was unable to show the right-brain-to-right-brain response of empathy and soothing (Shore, 2001; Shore, 2011) despite her *conscious* desire to be a present mother to her son. Instead, she became anxious, hypervigilant, and constantly diligent in adhering to the cult's harsh rules set by the cult leader (i.e., left-brain behavior).

When she became a mother, Anika vowed not to abandon her child as her mother had abandoned her. Since she remembered her sadness about her abandonment, she remained physically close to David. She believed that by being *physically* present, she was protecting him from the experience of maternal loss. However, due to her dissociated state and anxious need to center her attention on the leader, she *emotionally* abandoned David instead of providing him with nonverbal empathic responses when comfort was needed. Thus, David experienced her as cold, receiving the same abandonment messages Anika had received in childhood. Moreover, as with his mother, David dissociated from overwhelming feelings of distress in an attempt to reach a state of calm.

Beebe (2014), researching mother-child interactions, hypothesized that early dissociative experiences of not being "sensed, met, known, and recognized, particularly in times of distress, can lead to dissociative experiences during distress in later life" (p. 62-63).

Schore (2011) emphasizes the centrality of the right brain structures, which are the implicit, unconscious, and emotion-processing modes of communication that dominate human experience. In moving contemporary theory from its traditional emphasis on "left-brain" verbal and cognitive processes to "right-brain" emotional and relational processes, he recognizes the importance of embodied and somatic states. Implicit, nonverbal, psychobiological communication processes occur in the earliest interactions between the mother and child. These right-brain-to-right-brain processes include facial, auditory, tactile, and "emotionally charged attachment communications" (p. 79). Schore (2011) explains that in forming an attachment bond through somatically expressed emotional communication, the mother needs to synchronize and resonate with the infant's arousal levels of negative and positive states. Implicit communication from the mother enables the baby to feel acknowledged and understood. Schore (2011) discusses the potential for intergenerational transmission of attachment trauma-related difficulties with self-regulation when this implicit positive communication fails to occur.

Bowlby (1965) describes the primary need for a child to have a secure base that establishes secure attachment, which is related to later social development. These early relational patterns become internalized and set the stage for later patterns of relating to others.

According to Ainsworth (1967), attachment is built into the nervous system through interactions with the mother. Healthy attachment develops from dyadic (interactive) regulation (Sroufe, 1996). Regulated interactions create a sense of safety and curiosity in the baby. Healthy attachment influences not only outward behavior but also internal states.

Trauma is linked to compromised attachment. In exploring this observation, Salberg (2015) points out,

> Attachment is the oxygen of our emotional lives, serving to create a feeling of safety and security, allowing us to learn how to be socially human and operationally teaching us how to self-regulate our affective lives. It is because of attachment's primal aspect in our psyches that trauma and its impact constitute massive disruption and disorganization of the parent-child bonding system. When trauma revisits us transgenerationally through disrupted attachment patterns, it is within the child's

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> empathic attunement and bond that the mode of transmission can be found. (p. 37)

When Anika was pregnant with her daughter and David was four, the family moved from the cult facility. Anika's focus then began to shift to her children. Although she remained a cult member, with time away from the cult facility, her dissociative state began to lessen as she felt less "watched," and so her daughter grew up experiencing Anika as a more empathic parent.

Anika has a warm memory of the first time she had the freedom to take her four-year-old son to the park, where they could play. Her description of the pleasure in spending time playing with her son is indicative of the responsive mother that she could have been if not for the cult. At that time, she recalls feeling relieved to no longer be on constant alert about the cult leader's whereabouts and how she might gain the leader's benevolent attention or have her child gain that attention.

Sroufe et al. (1997) conclude that early trauma has a more significant impact on the development of dissociation. They write, "The vulnerable self will be more likely to adopt dissociation as a coping mechanism because it does not have either the belief in worthiness gained from a loving and responsive early relationship or the normal level of defenses and integration that such a belief affords" (in Ogawa et al., p. 875).

Intergenerational Trauma Resulting from Dissociation in Child-Rearing

Anika learned that her grandmother had been distant towards her mother in her mother's upbringing. She wonders if her mother was repeating this pattern with her, and this was intensified in the cult. As a child, to Anika, her mother did not appear to be conflicted about separating from her to spend long periods working for the cult and traveling to India.

Trauma can be passed down from generation to generation, affecting unconscious behavior and beliefs like a "ghost" (Fraiberg et al., 1975). In "Ghosts in the Nursery," Fraiberg, Adelson, and Shapiro (1975) observe how the "ghosts" of parents' unremembered, conflicted histories can lead to repetitive enactments in parenting children. According to Fraiberg et al. (1975), the trauma of the first generation unconsciously influences the behavior of the second generation. Fraiberg et al. (1975) presented cases that included multigenerational trauma histories with dysregulated affect and problematic mother-infant attachments. In Fraiberg's paper, the authors describe how empathic witnessing by the therapist allows these mothers to gain access to early trauma and, as a result, become more resilient (Fraiberg et al., 1975).

Children are attuned to their parents' unconscious lives, and trauma can affect their parents' capacity to provide the necessary "containment" to enable healthy thinking and symbolizing in their infants. Cavalli (2012) extends Fraiberg's (1975) work by describing how even the fetal environment may be impacted. She states, "If the mother's mind is already inhabited by trauma during gestation, her incapacity to differentiate will work as a shadow under which the fetus will be developing" (2012, p. 609).

Rachel Yehuda (2016) discovered that the genes of parents who were Holocaust survivors could be passed to their children through epigenetic inheritance. Her study indicates that the markers on ancestors' genes affect how the present generation's genes will be expressed—that ancestors' traumas influence the expression of the present generation's genes.

Porges' (2009) polyvagal theory emphasizes the neurophysiological foundations of attachment, emotions, communication, and self-regulation. His theory demonstrates the effect of safety and stress on the nervous system by focusing on the impact on the vagus nerve, which unconsciously and automatically provides embodied, environmental, and relational cues. Porges explains how an autonomic state is optimized during safe social interactions and disrupted during defensive states of stress. Porges considers that if a threat is perceived in one's environment (e.g., the fear and chronic stress of failing to live up to the highest standards of perfection of the cult or the fear of "bad karma" or being reported and verbally attacked by others), the sympathetic nervous system prepares for the threat, and body processes are disrupted. The emphasis on avoiding trouble and bad karma shifts the focus outward, away from healthy self-awareness. Calm and a sense of safety are impossible while experiencing this higher-level threat. This constant stressful state

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affects the parents' ability to calm their children. The flight-or-freeze (dissociation) response to a stressful state is antithetical to a natural state of calm in which the mother communicates with her child through a soothing connection and, in this manner, creates a feeling of safety (Porges, 2009).

Therefore, due to dissociative and anxious child-rearing, children raised in cults may struggle with accessing their emotions and emotional regulation. Consequently, they may, in turn, struggle with dissociation, a high degree of anxiety, and difficulty with emotional regulation as adults. According to Whitsett (2014), cult parents

> are continuously thrown off balance, unintegrated. Their suppressed feelings often are displaced onto their children. Their normal stress response becomes hyperactive, resulting in an inability to regulate their affect. Additionally, it may be that the part of the brain that modulates emotions has been weakened through cultic practices that punish critical thinking. (p. 4)

In a cult, once children and parents have incorporated the cult leader's attitude of contempt and disgust for followers, they feel shame when they fail to achieve perfection. Shaw (2014) describes how cult leaders, often traumatizing narcissists, use these shame dynamics to induce a

> feeling self-loathing, and the helplessness of unrequited dependency needs, the traumatizing narcissist arranges to keep dependency and its accompanying shame external, assigned and belonging only to others, to protect himself from self-loathing and ultimately decomposition, literally mortification or psychic death from shame. (p. 6)

As a result, the cult has no room for humility or compassion for human flaws. Therefore, to avoid these negative feelings, cult parents stay hypervigilant and strive for unattainable standards of perfection.

In Anika's cult, children were taught to practice the cult's dissociation-inducing chanting and meditation, which led to further suppression of their emotions. As with other cult members, David felt shame when experiencing negative emotions. To counter his shame, he adopted mental models that allowed him to dissociate and make himself feel better. David now believes these models define truth as absolute and universal, and that he dehumanized others in an attempt to feel superior, for example, believing everyone is worthless and a waste of time. David defended against his shameful feelings by playing a mind game, attempting to convince himself that he was not in a "lower state" of being. David believes he grew up without experiencing genuine empathy and, as a result, developed a cold way of responding to others. Both Anika and David used dissociation to deal with the wounds they experienced while growing up in the cult. David also struggled with chronic anxiety and, therefore, emotional dysregulation.

Until the cult dynamics' influence on child-rearing was explored, Anika and David remained emotionally distant from one another, and David continued to see his mother as cold. However, during a series of Zoom meetings, David and Anika had the opportunity to reflect on and deconstruct their early communications and experiences. They examined closely how the dynamics of cult-influenced child-rearing behavior impacted them and their relationship. As a result, and through open self-examination, Anika and David began to feel and express emotions with one another, such as regret, sadness, humor, and joy. Simultaneously, their ongoing understanding and conversations increased their compassion for themselves and one another. Genuine warmth and empathy began to emerge and then flourish in their relationship. Presently, Anika and David feel emotionally connected and can freely express love for one another. David now recognizes that his mother was dissociated rather than cold.

In "Ghosts in the Nursery," Fraiberg, Adelson, and Shapiro (1975) describe how visiting therapists became empathic, curious witnesses to their clients who were dissociated because of trauma. Over time, these clients slowly became more resilient and empathic. They were able to let go of dissociation and experience a range of feelings, including grief, anger, happiness, and fear. The authors' findings align with those of Amy Siskind (2001), who examines child-rearing practices in several different cults. Siskind views the risk to children from

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cult groups as stemming from the cult's influence that led parents to subsume their cultural backgrounds to the edicts of their leaders. Siskind theorizes that the patriarchal and hierarchical way in which all the groups she studied were structured put children at further risk. Siskind (2001) states,

> It was the parents' willingness to subsume their children's interests to the 'greater good' that led them to follow the directives of their leadership even when these directives ran counter to their natural perceptions and beliefs regarding their children's well-being. (p. 446)

Whitsett and Kent add,

> A common observation about cults is that leaders usually go to great lengths to destroy dyadic bonds among members... Viewing many high-demand cult leaders as narcissistic, clinicians are likely to state that leaders have insatiable needs for attention and admiration. ... Coming to similar conclusions, sociologists emphasize the threat to group cohesion generated by family attachments (see Kanter, 1972, pp. 89–91, in Siskind, p. 494).

The Loosening of Cult Control

When David was four years old, and Anika was pregnant with her second child, the family moved from the cult facility but remained members. They immediately experienced a sense of freedom. No one was watching them to report on them, and they felt no longer bound to the daily schedule and the cult's pervasive, harsh moral voice. They were free to decide how to live, how they might spend their time, when and what they would eat, and so on. Thus began a decades-long process of leaving the cult. Over time, with the help of therapy, Anika and her husband started to distance themselves emotionally from the cult. Eventually, they ended their financial support of the cult and refrained from visiting the facility and cult community. Although they experienced relief, they mourned the loss of their belief system and community.

David's behavior became aggressive, and he had difficulty adjusting to his public-school kindergarten environment, so his parents enrolled him in a private school. David remembers the public-school culture with "meaner" children. In contrast, he recalls a calmer and more nurturing environment at the private school with clear-cut rules, including no media, television, or aggressive play. Today, David believes that growing boys can be naturally aggressive, but in the cult, aggression in children was unacceptable. At the private school, David found comfort in a community aligned with the cult's moral voice, which defined right and wrong ways to be. However, stemming from the place they had held in the cult hierarchy, the family felt morally superior to the school community. This belief alienated Anika, her husband, and David from their new community, making it harder for them to make friends, ask for help, or express typical human vulnerabilities that permit interpersonal connection.

During this time, Anika and her husband were having marital issues and sought help from a therapist. When Anika shared her account of being sexually molested with the therapist, he challenged the leader's interpretation and reframed her experience as rape. As a result, Anika understood for the first time that the cult leader had sexually abused her. This was deeply distressing to Anika and her husband. They felt rage, sadness, and despair over the sexual abuse she endured as a fifteen-year-old girl. As a result, Anika wrote a letter to the current female cult leader stating that her predecessor, the male cult leader, had sexually abused her and that she was severing her relationship with the cult. Despite a thirty-year personal relationship between Anika and the current leader, the leader did not respond to this letter or the letters her brother wrote in her defense. Other victims also reported sending letters about their sexual abuse to the current leader and not getting a reply.

Anika experienced tremendous emotional pain and turmoil as she struggled to understand this new perspective on her sexual abuse; she began to reevaluate her life. To see her leader as a pedophile instead of a perfect being required a complete paradigm shift. Everything she had believed, put her faith in, and trusted from age seven to her early forties was turned on its head. Anika reminisces:

> If the leader was not the perfect being I had thought, but rather a toxic narcissist; if this person who I had loved more than any other

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was using and exploiting me; if the sexual touch I had received was not a special initiation but rather sexual abuse experienced by many others; if the purpose of my life, which I believed was to become enlightened like the cult leader, was no longer something I believed in; if the philosophical teachings I had built my life around were simply leading me to dissociate; if many of my friendships were not true, but rather a means to rise in the hierarchy of the cult; if, basically, every single belief I had built my life around was a lie and a cultic manipulation used to control me, what do I have left? What is true? In what can I put my faith? What do I believe? Who can I trust? Can I trust myself when I cannot even identify my own emotions because I am so deeply dissociated?

Anika and David Maintain Harsh Conscience

The harsh, perfectionist conscience that Anika internalized from the cult remained a part of her personality after she left. Her conscience revealed itself by demanding that she always be productive, eat right, and not "waste time" having fun.

After leaving the cult, Anika worked as a hatha yoga teacher. Early on, she was insensitive to the rigid demands she placed on her students—suburban women who had never been in the cult. She felt judgmental towards them if they attended classes for exercise rather than a spiritual awakening, appeared superficial, wore excessive makeup and jewelry, or did not take their yoga studies seriously. While training in India to become a yoga teacher, Anika devoted herself to memorizing each yoga pose's Sanskrit name. Students she was now training to be yoga teachers were not similarly dedicated to learning these Sanskrit terms; their lack of studentship surprised and disappointed her. The harsh judgment that she experienced in the cult had become a learned pattern that was repeated in her post-cult relationships, making it difficult for her to find friendships and intimacy. Over time, Anika began to see how she was transferring her cult's attitude of perfection and purity to others. Anika also realized she should not make assumptions about others based on their appearance.

Anika carried this cult-learned, judgmental attitude into her marriage and judged her husband harshly. Her husband had entered the cult as a young man and had not been in a dissociated state before joining the cult, so he was able to access his emotions long before she was in touch with hers. He struggled with a variety of feelings after the cult, and Anika initially judged that he was less spiritual than she was and, therefore, looked down on him. After leaving the cult, he felt lost, anxious, frustrated, and angry. He dealt with these feelings by consuming too much alcohol and exhibiting poor self-care—going to bed late and eating poorly. Her husband's response can be seen as a continuation of the harsh cult conscience that attacks the self for having become involved in a cult. As an individual who was raised in a cult, Anika did not attack herself for joining in the way that her husband did. As a young man, he traveled to India in search of a place where people lived an elevated way of life, a place where they realized the 60s' ideal of the Age of Aquarius. He continues to grapple with a profound sense of betrayal because the cult promised love, light, and a direct experience of God, but harbored a dark underbelly.

Like his mother, David initially judged people through the lens of harsh cult views. After his parents gradually began to leave the cult, he remained in a dissociative state and tended to either surrender to others or attempt to control them. However, after graduating from college, David reports wanting to take ownership of the direction of his life. To understand different perspectives, he began reading and listening to podcasts to explore how he wanted to live; he felt free to agree or disagree with each message. He was inspired to take charge of his life after reading *Extreme Ownership* by a former Navy SEAL, Jocko Willink (2015), and *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu (n.d.). Although David continued to set high standards for himself, he believed he could pick and choose what inspiration to take from each of these individuals' philosophies. He was determined to incorporate their principles rather than taking the ideas as rules he must live by without question. David knew from his cult experience that feelings of certainty could be comforting, but he now wanted to try tolerating a degree of uncertainty. He was experiencing the freedom to use his own judgment to accept or reject other people's opinions. David was determined to live his best possible life, defined by himself rather than some external teacher.

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David notes the lingering harsh moral conscience he learned from the cult and his parents. He states,

> We lose humanity in trying to be perfect and attain impossible standards. We are always 'on' and engaged if we try to meet high standards in everything. There is no sense of shared humanity—the focus is only on perfection. There is no compassion, only contempt and disgust.

Anika's Shift in Perspective Impacts David's Perspective

When David's mother disclosed to him that the prior cult leader had sexually abused her, David severed his ties to the cult. However, Anika made the choice not to tell her parents she had been raped because she reasoned that they were elderly and had dedicated their lives to the cult. She worried that revealing her experience would cause them to have intense guilt about her abuse, and managing their guilt would place an added burden on her rather than healing. Furthermore, her parents seemed comfortable, as the cult provided them with a house, food, and practical help at its facility.

In contrast, David wished Anika had told his grandparents the truth. He believes that his relationship with his grandparents deteriorated because of the secret he was asked to keep from them. By his late teens, David had spent many years attending a second cult with his grandmother, whom he now views as a "serial cultist." He believes his grandmother was seeking another charismatic leader. This second cult taught a healing modality like Reiki. David now believes he continued looking for certainty and status in this other cult. However, upon visiting the cult's headquarters in Japan, he saw a giant gold statue of the leader, similar to the statues worshipped in the first cult, which caused him to break with this second cult immediately. This break further undermined David's relationship with his grandmother.

Over time, David began to realize that his thought processes were built upon cultic thinking; he began to consider the damage that this way of thinking had done to him and his development. He had felt disgusted with himself his entire life. He had harbored hatred for himself because of the cult teaching that he had to be "perfect," and he had failed to attain this goal. He now realizes that because of cult indoctrination, he had viewed his imperfections as disgusting and nonhuman and had also dehumanized others for not being perfect.

Anika and David Begin to Recover from the Cult

After fully leaving the cult, Anika spent her next twenty years reassessing, redefining, and re-aligning her beliefs. She has struggled in unimaginable ways to come to terms with what happened to her. She examined every experience, belief, and perception from her time in the cult, reassessing and reconstructing them in a radically different way.

In recent years, Anika and her husband joined two support groups: a smaller one with former members of her cult and a larger one with former members from various cults. In the smaller group, participants explicitly agreed to state that they had been members of a cult. This was the first time Anika acknowledged to herself that the organization to which she had devoted her life was a cult. In this group, Anika discovered that others were struggling similarly. In the larger support group with former members from a wide range of cults, Anika learned that each cult used a particular form of control and jargon to exploit people in ways similar to her former cult. As she listened to participants in each group describe their experiences, Anika became increasingly aware of the numerous negative aspects of her years in the cult. She found it life-affirming, healing, and supportive to hear about the commonality of experience across cults and the similarities in residual effects on post-cult daily life. Herman (1997) explains,

> Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim. The group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity (p. 214).

However, Anika initially continued to hold herself to an unrealistically high standard—she was determined to recover from the cult in the "right" way. She suppressed any feelings that would humanize her, refusing to acknowledge her own fallibility. She took a while to see that part of recovery was to allow herself to be fallibly human. She began to feel more connected with herself

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and others as her harsh attitude softened. She could allow herself the freedom to experience a full range of emotions instead of protecting herself by dissociating from anxiety, shame, or anger.

Through this combination of therapy and support groups, Anika's harsh conscience has softened, and she can now connect with and feel empathy for others and herself. Anika discovered how other former members also struggle with a hypervigilant nervous system. She is aware that she still overcompensates to avoid anxiety.

Anika now finally recognizes the full impact of what it meant for her to grow up in a cult as a second-generation cult member and to raise her children in the cult. She believes she is finally getting to know herself and, thus, developing her unique identity. This happened only after leaving the cult, as she reclaimed her agency, chose what she believed, understood her likes and dislikes, reclaimed her ability to feel, and decided how she wanted to live the remainder of her life. She is grateful that this reconsideration also helped heal her relationship with her son. Anika states,

> Some former cult members can pinpoint their date of departure. For my family and me, leaving has taken many years. At first, I just wanted to distance myself from certain parts of the cult, even though I still held the cult leader and their teachings in high regard. As time went by, I came to understand the many layers of belief I had acquired from growing up and becoming an adult in the cult. Each belief and cult-derived thought pattern needed to be recognized and addressed. The hardest was recognizing the harm done to me by the two leaders whom I revered and loved deeply.

David also has been on a journey of healing. He initially went to several therapists who did not focus on understanding the impact of the cult on his personality. More recently, he found a cult-informed therapist who encourages self-reflection to help him reframe and deepen his understanding of his experience. He believes he's developing a healthier sense of self and is better at assessing and regulating his emotions. However, he still struggles with a hypervigilant nervous system. This attracts him to highly stressful situations, repeating the stressful environment of the past, just as many former cult members find themselves repeating their early traumatic experiences (Freud, 1914; van der Kolk, 1989).

As with many individuals who have been born and raised in cults, David has felt most comfortable relying on himself (rather than an all-knowing authority) to drive his recovery process. He reports that in the last few years, he has found Buddhist meditation helpful because it allows him to access his body's emotions at his own pace rather than defend against them as he had done in the cult. David also felt aided in the past by medication and psychedelic-assisted therapy. He states that he consciously attempts to replace the cult's harsh attitude with kindness towards himself and others; he seeks emotional acceptance of his and others ' fallibility. As a result of this change in attitude, his relationships with others, particularly his fiancée, have flourished.

Therapy for Cult Parents and Their Children

Therapy focuses on helping the client understand and heal from cult-induced dissociation and a harsh conscience; it examines the cult's harms that prevented cult parents from becoming the best possible parents (Goldberg, 2017).

To heal, the therapist primarily addresses these destructive cult dynamics. In contrast to a cult life without empathy, therapy centers on the therapist's empathy as a model for the client to relate to others and themselves. In doing so, the therapist addresses the harsh conscience that former cult members, such as Anika and David, have incorporated.

The following sections describe therapeutic strategies centering on the needs of former cult members, especially those who were parented or raised in a cult. These strategies emphasize and create a relationship that fosters self-reflection, particularly emotional and body awareness, and trauma processing while cultivating a safe, trusting relationship with the therapist.

Psychoeducational Approaches

The therapist explains the larger context of how cults manipulate members through psychological and emotional control, providing a framework to understand the cult experiences. Child-rearing is one

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aspect of an extensive control process. Additionally, suggesting books, articles, or conferences helps former cult members understand and objectify these experiences (Goldberg, 1995).

Psychoeducation demystifies the cult and aids former cult members in reflecting on how the cult has influenced post-cult patterns of behavior. To achieve this, therapy brings the unconscious repetition of learned cult behaviors into consciousness. For example, Anika became aware of feeling uncomfortable when she was not "productive." Exploring how this emotion originated in cult control allowed her to engage in various pleasurable activities. Thus, this process strengthened Anika's self-reflection capacities and allowed her to consider her individual beliefs and desires, leading to a more balanced life (Goldberg, 1995).

Safe Base and Empathy

The therapist provides a safe base that increases feelings of trust and encourages the free expression of memories and spontaneous reactions (Bowlby, 1988). They become an emotionally empathic witness, allowing previously dissociated parts of their client's personality to come alive in therapy. For instance, while collaborating on this paper with the author, after Anika and David began to share their emotional reactions to cult memories, they deepened their empathy for one another. According to Whitsett (2014), after a life centered on ignoring the right brain, therapists need to enhance right-brain communication by helping clients identify and resonate with their affective states.

This therapeutic environment sharply contrasts with the control and judgment that former cult members likely faced while in the cult (Goldberg, 2022). To change such critical attitudes, therapy also explores the cult personality impacted by identification with the aggressor (Fenichel, 1949).

Child-Rearing and Intergenerational Trauma

Examining how cult control impacts parenting, as Anika experienced, helps reduce shame, lessen post-cult moral injury, enhance agency, and promote healing. This approach also assists those raised in a cult, like David, in gaining perspective on their childhood and developing empathy for parents who might have been more devoted had they not been cult members (Goldberg, 2017).

Sometimes, joint sessions with cult parents and their adult children can be beneficial for the therapist to conduct. These sessions should occur when parents are receptive to hearing their adult children describe the harm received from cult parenting. Joint sessions allow adult children to listen to the conditions under which the parents became cult members and how the cult influenced them. Hearing if their parents were conflicted about certain child-rearing attitudes and practices is helpful for adult children (Goldberg 2017).

Addressing a Harsh Internalized Conscience

This style of therapy acknowledges both Freud's (1914) concept of unconscious repetition compulsion and somatic repetition in trauma (Levine, 1997). It addresses and ultimately softens the harsh conscience by linking past experiences of attack to the re-experiencing of present self-attack or fear of attack.

Therapists promote self-compassion and self-acceptance. For example, when either the former cult member or the therapist makes a mistake, the therapist can serve as a model of compassion and self-compassion (Goldberg, 2002; Goldberg, 2024).

As former cult members become more self-accepting, they become more open to expressing themselves and, consequently, to becoming their authentic selves. Their unique identities can emerge, including genuine preferences and favored aspects of their personalities.

Understanding Transference and Countertransference

Former cult members may project feelings and expectations that originated in the cult onto their therapist. Therapy, which incorporates an understanding of transference, focuses on the former cult members' present experience of the therapeutic relationship and identifies unconscious repetitions of past relationships played out with the therapist and others (Freud & Breuer, 1895). For example, a cult member might expect her therapist to have a critical reaction to hearing that she joins her friends in the

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evening for fun.

Having undergone their own therapy enables therapists to access and utilize countertransference reactions to better understand clients during treatment. Countertransference "entail[s] a jointly created reaction in the clinician that stems in part from contributions of the clinician's past and in part from feeling induced by the patient's behavior" (Gabbard, 1995, p. 21). For example, therapists might begin to feel intimidated by a former cult member who speaks contemptuously. Exploring contemptuous behavior could reveal the former cult member's identification with the leader.

Body-Based Trauma Interventions to Somatic Difficulties

Therapists using this modality appreciate how physiological states impact mental processes. They understand that mental processes affect visceral organs and that the brain's autonomic nervous system communicates bidirectionally with bodily organs (Porges, 2009). After a childhood impacted by dissociation, David was troubled by his inability to access his emotions and deepen his insights into his behavior. He discovered the Johns Hopkins psilocybin study for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Consequently, he started a combination of psychedelics and psychotherapy, which he believes allowed him to access and deepen his emotions and become more open, allowing him insight into his defenses. In such circumstances, the therapist can later serve as a moderating force to help the client work through these insights.

Therapists understand that they need to think about trauma as indicating vertical splits and subtle Me and Not-Me (dissociated) states (Chefetz & Bromberg, 2004) and look underneath our clients' words for their feeling state expressed, which might be connected to earlier life experiences. Therapists using somatic-informed approaches perceive the body as another container of unconscious experiences and beliefs from the past. They strengthen self-regulation through dyadic co-regulation. They are attuned to their own and clients' bodily reactions, helping clients notice their hypervigilance and hypovigilance responses (Lamagna & Gleise, 2007). For example, a therapist might observe a client's shoulders getting tight and then become attuned to the client's anxiety expressed in the tapping of a foot. The therapist next moves from body awareness to using words to reflect on feelings associated with somatic behavior (Ogden, 2012).

Grounding strategies support former cult members during moments of dissociation or when they become emotionally overwhelmed. This allows them to remain present in their bodies and regain a sense of agency (Chefetz, 2019). Physical activities such as swimming, singing, dancing, and yoga can help calm the body from the bottom up. For example, Anika, a yoga teacher, began changing her yoga practice. Instead of the dissociation-inducing yoga she experienced in the cult, she focused on increasing her somatic awareness and added deep breathing to regulate her anxiety. David started playing the piano at six years old. In the cult, he used his musical ability to impress others. After the cult, David began feeling less self-protective, enabling him to focus on others' needs and build trusting relationships. He then developed a music mentoring program, teaching students from seventh to twelfth grade.

Safe, supportive relationships and therapeutic interventions can foster neuroplasticity by helping clients develop healthier emotional responses and thought patterns (Siegel, 1999). After the cult, supportive relationships, support groups, and therapy can positively change beliefs and behavior and even rewire the brain (Doidge, 2007).

Conclusion

As they collaborated on this paper and came to understand how the cult interfered with child-rearing, Anika and David gained an empathic connection, occasionally filled with shared humor. They resonated emotionally as they uncovered cult dynamics that interfered with their early relationship. The therapist/author was tremendously pleased to participate and observe how Anika and David each began to cognitively understand and somatically feel the other with a new sense of clarity. She anticipates a future filled with understanding and love for each other and those in their lives.

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