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<center>Does a Family Know Better than a Victim?:</center>

<center>*The Ethics and Morality Behind Cult Deprogramming and Its Effectiveness*</center>

In 1978, Jim Jones decided the members of the People's Temple had to die in a way akin to the 73 CE mass suicide in Masada by Jews against the Roman Empire. The deaths of 908 people, deemed the "largest mass suicide in modern history," were recorded on-site and the footage was preserved (Cutler 128). Armed guards stood around the compound, distributing a concoction of juice and cyanide to everyone and making sure no one was able to run away. The footage shows adults first feeding the drink to children - and squirting it into their mouths via syringe if the children were too young - before then administering it to themselves. The children went quickly but it was an incredibly arduous and painful death for the adults as they experienced convulsions, foaming at the mouth, and vomiting the contents of their stomach and blood, among other things for twenty minutes or more. Over the sounds of pain and agony and death, one can hear followers screaming thank you to Jones, who also died in the same way.

How does one find themselves at a place in which they are thanking the man directly contributing to their demise? More easily than the average person would think. Some researchers have "found no evidence of mental illness in their study of cult members" while others have found "higher neuroticism and depression scores" and those who are "severely [mentally] disturbed, [such as those] suffering from

schizophrenia, mania [and/or] psychosis-like symptoms" have been reported in cult member numbers (Feldmann & Johnson 240). Some common reasons for joining a cult are "a general state of dysphoria," "chronic unhappiness and unsatisfactory parental relations," and "a depressive episode secondary to the loss of a significant figure," all of which a human can go through at any point in their life (Feldmann & Johnson 240). Regardless of race, socioeconomic status, station in life, etc., anyone could be influenced into joining a cult. Furthermore, cult leaders do not start with the harshest rules and deadliest punishments; they gradually build up to them, similarly to how abusers do in intimate partner violence situations. Jim Jones started as an activist for Black rights, huge at a time in which "nearly a third of all white men in Indiana [Jones' home state] belonged to the [Ku Klux] Klan" (Culter 136). This led to many Black people trusting him and lateral joining the People's Temple. The Jonestown deaths could not have happened a few days or even weeks into the creation of the cult. In fact, the place of their deaths, Guyana in South America, highlights the fact that this was years in the making. Starting in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1955, the group did not found Jonestown, Guyana until 1977.

A better question would be *how can we, as a community, work to encourage those in these situations to get out?* Deprogramming is one potential solution to this problem. According to Dictionary.com, there are two appropriate definitions: "free[ing] (a convert) from the influence of a religious cult, political indoctrination, etc., by intensive persuasion or reeducation" and "retrain[ing], as for the purpose of eliminating or replacing a learned or acquired behavior pattern or habit that is undesirable or unsuitable." The practice of deprogramming has many facets and levels and there has

been a push to find better solutions. However, its beginnings and legacy are difficult to ignore. Traditional deprogramming tactics have the potential to be extremely harmful and ineffective in encouraging people to leave cults.

There are three primary aspects of cults that make them so effective in targeting people: "1. The origin of the group and role of the leader[.] 2. The power structure, or relationship between the leader (or leaders) and the followers[.] 3. The use of a coordinated program of persuasion (which is called thought reform, or more commonly, brainwashing" (Singer and Lalich). Each of these deprogrammers must tackle to successfully return a person to a 'normal life.' All of them work in conjunction with and lead to each other but, arguably, the most potent of these is thought reform. The ability to control how another person thinks is imperative for any cult leader. Without it, it would be nearly impossible to convince people to leave their families, give up all of their worldly possessions, and go through with acts as serious as murder and torture. Many leaders have been described as charismatic prior to their leadership.
Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh is one such leader. After facing legal troubles in India, he and his band of followers moved right next to Antelope, Oregon to found Rajneeshpuram. The locals of Antelope, however, were not happy about their small, Christian town turning into a religious compound. Rajneesh's followers, Rajneeshees, numbered in the thousands and they managed to buy out many of the shops in Antelope. Rajneesh took a vow of silence during his time in Rajneeshpuram, further proving his charismatic nature; he had ascended to a level in which his followers did not even need to hear him speak to hang on to his every word. Through the use of his right-hand woman, Sheela Patel, he instructed his followers to commit biological warfare by "lacing the salad bars

in Oregon restaurants with salmonella, in order to rig a local election and take over the nearby town" (Cutler 91). This attack was not the extent of their control, however. They also bussed homeless people into the town to vote in the election by promising them food and housing. Once they grew to be too violent and numerous, Sheela put Haldol, a sedative, in all of the beer on the compound without telling anyone, knowing that many of the homeless people drank it.

Sheela Patel started as one of Rajneesh's followers. They met when she was 22 and he was 41. The cult began to fall apart due to Rajneesh's drug use and Sheela ordering an assassination of his doctor and supplier as she was upset they were taking him from her, in a way. Though she was the perpetrator of many violent encounters and actions, she was a victim of the leader as well, which can be said about many followers in all cults. Even if they are not actively participating, complicity is just as important. The Ant Hill Kids are considered by many to be one of the more sadistic cults in modern history. As said by Max Cutler in *Cults*, "[i]t is hard to determine which is more unbelievable: the cruelty of its cult leader Roch Thériault or the passivity of his victims, who tolerated his barbarity and heartlessness for years." Known as being incredibly charismatic, Thériault completely isolated his followers from the outside world. This isolation was heightened when he moved the French-Canadian group, all of whom only spoke French, to an English-speaking province in Toronto, Ontario. Thériault was the only person able to speak English fluently.

Many of his acts are incredibly graphic, so this is a shortened version of some of his more tame actions. He would beat people with the side of an ax. He hosted multi-hour "gladiatorial combats" (Cutler 222). He ordered his followers to give an adult, male

member a circumcision. He would nail children's clothes to trees with them in it. He would threaten to drop infants into an open fire by holding them above it and had his followers beg him not to let them go. He would force the children of the cult to watch as the adults participated in orgies. He decided he would operate on one of his follower's livers, ripped open her stomach, took out her organs, and put "digestive acids" in the now empty space (Cutler 226). He, then, told one of his other followers to sew her up. She died the next morning. In an act of great sacrifice, rather than allowing her child to ever face Thériault's abuse, one mother left her infant alone in the snow to die.

As aforementioned, abusers do not show their abusive side until the victims feel it is too late for them to leave. Thériault's victims, for instance, often apologized to him for their abuses because he was upset and angry. The cycle of abuse is incredibly difficult to get out of. Coupled with the group and power dynamics, fear, and escalation of various forms of violence previously discussed, it may feel nearly impossible. This is why families turn to deprogrammers; they are unsure of whether or not the victim will be able to get out themselves.

Deprogramming as a practice has roots in early Christianity, but the term was coined by Ted Patrick, the father of a cult member (New World Encyclopedia). His son joined The Family International created by David Berg, which many consider to be a "sex cult" with rampant child abuse (Gross, Tewa). Patrick, naturally, did not want his son to be a part of this and after helping his son, made a job of deprogramming the children of other families from The Family International and other cults. Some of the tactics used to 'help' these cult members include kidnapping, confinement, and physical intimidation. Patrick published a book on the subject in 1976 entitled *Let Our Children*

Go!, in which he claims that in order to put someone in his car, he grabbed a man between the legs so he bent over, then "shov[ed the man] headfirst into the back seat of the car and pil[ed] in on top of him" (New World Encyclopedia). These actions can be considered to be punishments similar to those found in some cults and are not convincing in encouraging someone to leave a cult. In the cult, they know the leader and their abuses, which could be seen as better than having to start over with another person. The saying "better the devil I know than the one I don't" applies very well. During the 1980s, people attempted to find less aggressive ways to deprogram people that were "more effective, less harmful, and less likely to lead to legal action," the latter was important as deprogrammers were facing a considerable number of legal repercussions (New World Encyclopedia). In some instances, cult members would go back to the cult and the cult would wind up suing the deprogrammer - and winning. From this, came the terms 'exit counseling' and 'thought control reform.' Exit counseling targeted those who wanted to leave a cult but did not know how or have the means to do so. Thought control reform is used on both sides of the issue and is essentially convincing someone to believe 'the other side,' whether that be convincing them to leave or join a cult. These terms are still heavily criticized by people in- and outside of cults but are much more widely accepted than traditional deprogramming is. Ultimately, deprogramming, in its natural state, is not sustainable for a victim and removes more of the power they may feel as though they have lost. It is natural for families and people, in general, to want the best for others. However, good intentions do not always lead to the best actions. Fear being used as a driving force to convince a person to do something good for them is still manipulative, no matter how it is being

spun. The victim has been brainwashed by their leader and abuser and made to believe they love them, regardless of the pain they inflict; they should not be made to feel as if they are going through the same thing with their family. So much of their agency has already been taken away that they deserve to know that the choice to leave is theirs and no one else's. In that same regard, they also deserve to know that they have people they can come back to away from the cult should they choose to leave.

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