

Diana, Leaving the Cult: Play Therapy in Childhood and Talk Therapy in Adolescence

Lorna Goldberg

Dean of Faculty, Institute for Psychoanalytic Studies

Abstract

This paper presents clinical material from the psychoanalytically¹ oriented therapy of an 8-year-old girl, who was born and raised in a cult. The author considers how this child's response to the traumatic events of her cult experience influenced her developing personality. Therapy sessions, beginning about thirty years ago, occurred during two time frames: Play therapy lasted for 2 years. Therapy was resumed for 1 year in adolescence. Play therapy focused on helping this client deal with some of her painful cult experiences and aided in the transition to a new world outside. Later, talk therapy during adolescence enhanced her ability to deal with adolescent difficulties that appeared to be impacted by cult experiences.

Introduction

In the cult, Diana had been separated from both parents at the age of 5, and, subsequently, she experienced abusive childrearing by the teachers in her cult-run boarding school.² Diana's emotional response to these traumatic events was re-

enacted through fantasy play³ in our therapy sessions. Our sessions also addressed her characteristic tendency to be the good, perfect child; her tendency to use isolation⁴ of affects and compartmentalization of her life to defend against painful emotions; and, as a result, her tendency to cut off feelings of loss from the past. Additionally, therapy addressed separation issues and conflicts in her parental relationships, as well as the development of some narcissistic⁵ character traits.

I used play therapy initially as the primary vehicle for the analysis of Diana's defenses, the labeling of affects, and the use of the therapist as a new kind of relationship. Talk therapy increased over time. In reviewing this case as a more experienced clinician today, I also might have explored more fully Diana's transference⁶ reactions to me as they played out in therapy sessions. At the time, I primarily focused on enabling Diana to play out her fantasy life in sessions in order for me to gain access to her early experiences and the unconscious meanings that she gave various experiences; to

¹ Psychoanalysis can be defined as "a specific form of individual psychotherapy that aims to bring unconscious mental elements and processes into awareness in order to expand an individual's self understanding, enhance adaptation in multiple spheres of functioning, alleviate symptoms of mental disorder, and facilitate character change and emotional growth. (Accreditation Council for Psychoanalytic Education, Inc. 2011).

² Cult leaders typically use a variety of techniques to usurp the authority of parents and to establish themselves in the place of parents to cult children. For example, the cult practice of separating children from their parents physically (in addition to emotionally) serves to place children at risk for abuse and neglect (Goldberg, 2003; Markowitz and Halperin, 1984; Whitsett and Kent, 2003).

³ Refer to the "Play Therapy" section.

⁴ Isolation is a defense mechanism that "separates a painful idea or event from feelings associated with it, thereby altering its emotional impact" (Moore and Fine, 1990, p. 48).

⁵ Diana changed from a child with the risk of developing pathological narcissistic character traits to an adolescent who demonstrated normal narcissism. Kernberg distinguishes pathological narcissism from normal narcissism in the following way: Pathological narcissism focuses on the dependence on the acclaim of others and poor relationships, while normal narcissism leads to realistic self-regard, mature aspirations, and good relationships (Kernberg, O. F., 1975). *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*. New York, NY: Aronson.

⁶ Freud theorized that transference is the displacement of feelings, originating with important figures from early life, onto the analyst (S. Freud, 1940). *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. London, England: The Hogarth Press. Transference also occurs in present life with friends, family members, and work colleagues.

promote the expression of her feelings about these events; and to gain an understanding of how these events impacted her present character and symptoms.

Now I also more clearly would see the play as revealing the *meaning* that Diana has made of her early life experiences, rather than necessarily viewing therapy as revealing a totally accurate recollection of her early life history. This perspective is no different from my assessment of early memories that are verbalized in therapy: I see them as screen memories that might or might not accurately reveal all aspects of the past. I believe that past memories are influenced by fantasy life, and I view my role as aiding the patient in the process of understanding why she has come to see her past in this particular way. However, at that time, I not only was an inexperienced clinician, but also was strongly influenced by my own countertransference⁷ reactions of anger, sadness, and distress about the cult abuse.⁸ Nevertheless, the more recent uncovering of child abuse in these cult-run schools has made it clear that Diana's story, revealed through play, generally was accurate, if not in every detail. Additionally, play therapy contributed to the modification of some of Diana's defenses and allowed Diana to more fully develop her capacity for self-reflection; deal with her affects more directly; and, as a result, to advance in her development.

⁷ Countertransference is defined as "a situation in which an analyst's feelings and attitudes toward a patient are derived from earlier situations in the analyst's life that have been displaced onto the patient. Countertransference therefore reflects the analyst's own unconscious reactions to the patient, though some aspects may be conscious" (Moore and Fine, 1990).

⁸ However, at times, clients can induce the same countertransference feelings in a broad range of therapists. The clinician who works with second-generation former cult members should be prepared to experience powerful emotions, particularly anger at cult-related abuse and neglect. It is helpful to consult with others, if possible, in order to tolerate hearing about cult harm and not interfere with the progression of therapy. It also takes time to begin to understand the client and to appreciate the possibility of defenses being used as positive coping mechanisms.

Play Therapy

The child therapist enters into the child's fantasy life by participating in fantasies as they are played out in the treatment room. In general, the therapist encourages the child's fantasies in play by participating in the child's make-believe world. She joins the child in play, which can become "...a mode of coping with conflicts, developmental demands, deprivation, loss, and yearnings..." (Solnit, 1987, p. 214). Play can enable the child to explore how to become active in shaping his or her life and counter feelings of helplessness or dependency.

Melanie Klein wrote,

Play analysis has shown that symbolism enabled the child to transfer not only interests, but also phantasies, anxieties and guilt to objects other than people. Thus a great deal of relief is experienced in play and this is one of the factors which make it so essential for the child. (Mitchell, 1986, p. 52)

Anna Freud theorized that play in the psychoanalytic situation is a vehicle for regression in the service of the ego, and that the child's symbolic play in the therapy situation not only communicates his or her internal fantasies, but also reveals the child's manner of communicating the current family situation (A. Freud, 1965, p. 50).

Winnicott viewed play as the transitional space in which the child can transfer something from his or her inner world and make it a part of a shared world with others. Play turns private thought into action. According to Winnicott, the therapist becomes a transitional object rather than someone who is a permanent part of the child's life (Winnicott, 1971). In the transitional space of the relationship with the therapist in the privacy of the therapy room, the child ideally feels permission to play out internal struggles.

Throughout therapy with a child, we can view play as a primary means of communication. It is experienced as “make believe,” and pathological adaptations that may have brought the child into treatment can be addressed by the therapist’s being in the play state with the child—a state that makes possible unconscious communication and intuitive leaps (Lang, p. 938).

In focusing on traumatic play, Solnit notes that play becomes constrained by one disproportionately focusing on how the past experience has affected the thinking and the behavior of the individual (Solnit, p. 218). We will see an example of this in how Diana repeated the same trauma themes until she more fully had discharged her anxiety and pain around these events. As therapist, I saw my role as demonstrating to Diana that I could tolerate her feelings and put them into words for her as they emerged.

For Diana, therapy provided a safe place to approach problems she had previously experienced that she had not consciously dealt with. Playing gave her a sense of control over these experiences in an effort to master them. Frankel points out that play allows the child get in touch with a disavowed part of the self with a greater sense of safety (Frankel, 1998). Sugarman suggests that children are capable of knowing and processing at the level of fantasy and fantasy-based play, even when they are not able to process or understand on a verbal, symbolic plane (Lang, 942). The world of “just pretending” allowed Diana to try out new relationships and solutions. When I as therapist felt that a direct intervention would raise too much anxiety, interpreting within the play (such as focusing on how the play characters felt) was less anxiety provoking and threatening than talking about these feelings directly with Diana.

Background

Diana came to see me after her father rescued her from a cult-run boarding school. Her father and mother, young adults from middle-class families, became part of the New York counterculture of the late 1960s. They met a charismatic guru who was lecturing at a city bookstore, and they had become involved with an Eastern religious cult. Diana’s father had left the cult when Diana was 3 years old, but he continued to see Diana regularly until she left New York for Colorado with her mother within a year of her parents’ separation.

I routinely take a history from the parents prior to my meeting with the child. Unfortunately, in Diana’s situation, I was able to meet only with her father, and he had not lived with Diana for the past 4 years; so her historical information was limited. Historical information allows me to better understand the narrative information the child discloses in sessions, often through play. In speaking with me prior to my first session with Diana, her father disclosed that he believed that his former wife and their daughter were purposely sent by the cult leaders to Colorado in an effort to interfere with his relationship with his daughter since he was no longer a cult member. At that point in his life, once Diana had moved to Colorado, it was difficult for her father to afford to see her. He visited her only once prior to Diana’s entrance, at age 5, into a cult-run boarding school in a state many miles from both of her parents’ homes. After Diana was sent to the boarding school, Diana’s mother refused to tell her ex-husband of Diana’s whereabouts.⁹

Diana’s father began searching for his daughter and, eventually, found her at the

⁹ This cult typically separated children from parents at age 5, which not only served to sever the parent-child emotional bond and enhance the predominant tie with the cult leader’s view, but also increased parental availability to proselytize and do fundraising.

school when she was 8 years old. One day, when she was walking outside the school facility, Diana's father rescued her and returned her with him to Connecticut. Subsequently, he won custody of Diana in a court case. He reported that his wife had been present in court, but she appeared to be in a dissociative state and ill equipped to present a strong case for custody (she had a childlike and disorganized quality).

Therapy Sessions with Diana

Diana, a pretty child with long red hair and a serious demeanor, appeared to be somewhat anxious when I first met with her and her father. She sat in the waiting room with perfect posture and was dressed in a casual, but tidy manner. After inviting Diana and her father into my office, I asked her father to tell me why he had brought Diana to see me. I wanted Diana to have a clear understanding of the reason for therapy. Her father began to report how Diana had lived with him until she was 3 years of age, at which time he had left Diana's mother's group. He was able to continue to visit Diana until her mother suddenly moved with her to Colorado. When Diana was 5, the cult demanded that she leave mother to enter the cult-run boarding school. Because Diana's father was aware of the strict and highly disciplined nature of the group, he was concerned about the severity of his daughter's care at the school. He began hearing negative reports about the treatment of children in the schools from other members who had left the group. Therefore, he decided to rescue Diana and bring her to Connecticut. There was a custody battle with Diana's mother, but since he was able to show that her mother was under the control of the group, he was given full custody. Now Diana's father believed that it was important for Diana have a place to sort out all that had happened to her. She had been living in one kind of world, and, suddenly, she was living in a very different

world. I watched as Diana solemnly listened to this with little affect.

Next, I asked Diana if she would mind if her Dad left us briefly to go into the waiting room adjacent to my office for a few minutes. In responding to her anxious facial expression, I reassured her that I would leave the door open, so that, at any time, she could check on her father. I added that, if this made her uncomfortable, her father could remain with her in my office. Diana, who was shyly eying my toys, agreed that he could leave.

After her Dad left, I indicated to Diana that we would be talking and playing together as a way of trying to help her deal with all that she had experienced. I told her that I knew she had been through some scary experiences and she had lived in many different places in her life. When such scary and upsetting experiences happen, children have strong feelings inside. When children are able to use their imaginations in play, it can help them feel better. I explained that we would be playing and talking in a way that would help her feel not so frightened. I added that she could select any of the toys in the room during our time together.

Diana immediately spotted a Barbie doll. She looked at me tentatively. I told her that she could play with the doll, if she wished. After Diana carefully picked up the doll, I asked her to tell me the doll's name. She softly responded, "Princess Leia." I asked her to tell me about Princess Leia, knowing that she probably recently had seen the movie *Star Wars*. She explained that Princess Leia was a beautiful princess who lived on a far-away planet. I picked up the Ken figure and softly said to Diana, "Can I play with you?" She nodded seriously. I asked her if she would name the male doll. She responded, "He's Hans Solo." I asked if they were friends. She told me that they were: Hans Solo had come to a far-away

planet to rescue Princess Leia. The details of this rescue became more and more elaborate during our subsequent sessions together. Playing the role of Hans Solo, I often would say something like “I know you don’t know me and you are scared, but I’ve been sent here to take you to a better place.” Initially, I was careful to address Diana’s feelings through the characters in our play.

This theme became more and more elaborated during our time together. I eventually discovered about life on the faraway planet, and this information helped me gain an understanding of the impact on Diana of the trauma of her previous life, and how this contrasted with her present life with her Dad. On this far-away planet, Princess Leia got up at sunrise every day for chanting and morning prayers. She had a tight schedule of lessons and kitchen and laundry work. I would comment, “It was difficult on that planet for Princess Leia, but she also might miss some things of her life there.”

It seemed to me that Diana’s life was so discontinuous. I felt that it was important to help Diana carry over one experience to the next, rather than to cut off her feelings of loss. I sensed that, transferentially, she had a strong need to please me as well as her father as she began to reveal her old life as “bad” and her new life as “good.” She was so compliant. I felt that Diana had figured out how to be the perfect client, and she seemed to do her best to please me.

I told her that I did not want her to feel that she had to please her father and me by cutting off other feelings, such as bad feelings about her present life and good feelings about her old life. I emphasized how children have both good and bad feelings about their experiences. Over time, I also indicated to Diana that children often believed that, in order to survive in a new place, they would have to cut off feelings,

especially good ones from the past, as well as bad feelings about their present lives. (I was thinking of how painful it must have been for Diana to leave her mother to go to the boarding school.)

Diana seemed to look forward to our weekly sessions, in which she quickly entered into play. The constrained and fearful Diana became more relaxed in play. In an early session, Diana told me that Princess Leia was awakened in the middle of the night if she wet her bed. Since she wet her bed almost every night, she rarely had much sleep. Princess Leia had to launder the sheets and make her bed before returning to sleep. Then she had to get up again at dawn for chanting and morning prayers. If Princess Leia was bad, she was locked in a closet, which was a very scary place. Princess Leia chanted in order not to feel so scared and alone. Learning this was how I began to consider the possibility of Diana’s abusive treatment in the cult. Diana would tell me this without emotion. I would respond with emotion, talking about how scary it was for a child to be locked in a closet, or how tired Princess Leia must be from so little sleep. I also commented that chanting must have made Princess Leia feel comforted when she felt so scared. It seemed that chanting might have been a dissociative response Diana used to protect herself from being overwhelmed by her traumatic experiences.

As I mentioned previously, thirty years later, I have a deeper understanding of the need to consider that play (similar to early memory) might not accurately depict every detail of the past. However, play indicates the meaning that the child makes of his or her experiences. Today I also am more informed by recent understandings about dissociation; and with that knowledge, I might have explored more fully this area of Diana’s cultic life. Also, in reviewing this case, I now wonder whether the chanting

was Diana's way of comforting herself by performing a role that her mother might have played for her. This might have been an opportunity to help Diana connect to feelings related to the loss of her mother. However, at that time, my initial countertransference reaction was more focused on my distress about the discovery of so much cult abuse, so that it was difficult for me to fully appreciate Diana's efforts toward survival within that abuse and her continued attachment to her mother. Her efforts certainly were an indicator of Diana's resilience. At the time, I was mainly concerned about Diana's adjustment to her world with her father.

Nevertheless, I also was aware of feeling the sadness about her separation from her mother. Leaving her mother at the age of 5 and entering the harsh boarding school had been traumatic for Diana, who reacted to this trauma by becoming highly defended against sad and anxious feelings through some of the strategies and defense mechanisms I have described in this paper. She also regressed and developed the symptom of bed-wetting. Although there was pressure on her to handle all of this, she was after all just a little girl. Fortunately, it seemed that Diana experienced her first 3 years of life with two caring parents. She spent 2 more years with her gentle mother, who, unfortunately, had become subservient to the demands of her cult leaders and acceded to giving her child to the cult-run boarding school. During the play sessions, I told Diana that it is not unusual for children like Princess Leia to wet their beds when they are sad, scared, and angry about being in a scary new place without their mothers or fathers. Diana solemnly nodded her head.

I also learned about Princess Leia's resilience in coping with this situation. Princess Leia had a lovely singing voice, and she was a graceful dancer. Because of these abilities and the value placed on

singing (chanting) and dancing in this group, she often performed at different ceremonies. In our sessions together, when I asked her to show me how Princess Leia sang and danced, Diana seemed to enjoy this demonstration.

I suspect that Diana's ability to sing and dance allowed her to tap into and develop a glimmer of her creative self and some small sense of pride and worth in the traumatic situation of the cult-run boarding school. Over time, Diana began to sing songs she was picking up from the latest pop groups and to show me new dance steps as she moved from her cultic-style performing to become more immersed in her present world. Diana's ability to perform clearly was valued in the cult; and, while some aspects of her personality were restricted, this aspect was rewarded.

Diana's cult influence also appeared in her pictures, which revealed an Asian Indian influence. However, over time, her pictures also began to reflect the wider culture of her New York world. [See attached pictures.]

In time, I asked about Princess Leia's parents. Diana explained that Princess Leia's mother was told that she had to send her away. I commented that it must have been sad and frightening for Princess Leia to leave her mother, who sounded like a kind woman. Diana responded that she loved her mother, but that the kingdom believed that she must be educated at school in order to gain a true understanding of her guru's teachings.

She was so unhappy at her school. Some of the teachers were so mean. However, Hans Solo rescued Princess Leia and brought her to a new planet. The new planet was better than the old one, but it was a confusing place. The people spoke a different language, and Princess Leia had to learn it from Hans Solo. They had different ways of

doing things, and there was lots of ice cream and candy.

Diana's father initially had placed her in private school to help her deal with the transition to the outside world. Her education in the cult was limited, and she needed time to catch up to the other children. Fortunately, Diana was an intelligent girl who was a quick learner. She was able to achieve grade level after a year. Diana was extremely cooperative with the teachers—anxious to please. However, she ran into difficulties with the other children. Her father reported that teachers told him that Diana was quite judgmental, and that she could be a little tattletale. Diana also displayed an elitist or superior demeanor, which became evident in therapy sessions as she became more comfortable with me.

One day, with contempt in her voice, Diana was telling me about the misbehavior of one of the boys in her class. She informed me that *she* never would act that way. I listened to her, and my countertransference reaction was to feel put off by her. It was clear to me that this cult-appropriate behavior could be irritating in her present school environment.¹⁰ Instead of agreeing with her as she expected and siding with the defensive nature of this behavior, I responded by empathizing with the boy by saying, "Sometimes children don't feel like following the rules." She looked at me with suspicion and surprise. I imagined that in her cult there was little empathy for

disruptive children, and I suspected that she was rewarded for displaying this tattletale behavior. And, in this way, she also was identifying with the aggressors (the punishing leaders) who punished children for acting too playfully and mischievously. In the cult, children had masochistically submitted to the leaders, and disruptive or "childish" behavior was not tolerated. Children were not recognized as separate individuals with their own desires and impulses. Although she did not respond to me on that day, I believed that this statement might begin to allow Diana to test out her negative feelings. [Previously, I have explored the cultic influence on certain aspects of character in adolescence (Goldberg, 2006).]

I also knew that Diana was continuing to wet her bed at night. I had recommended that her father get her a nightlight and some stuffed animals to keep her company. I also suggested that he not make a big deal about the bed wetting, but instead simply change her bed in the morning. Therefore, Diana's father was not responding to her symptom in the expected sadistic, shame-inducing manner of the cult. He was tolerating and respecting her struggle.

I suspected that the bedwetting was a symptom of the continued anxiety (and also anger) that Diana probably was experiencing in her present situation. Although I found her to be precocious in her ability to care for herself, I viewed the bedwetting as an expression of her need to be a child, and as an indirect expression of her need for care. In a subsequent session, I decided to help Diana address these painful feelings as a way to master them more effectively: I told Diana that, at her previous school, children seemed to be punished harshly when rules weren't followed. When children needed to be perfect, they worried about making mistakes and getting into trouble. Sometimes when they worried, they

¹⁰ Cults typically encourage children to "snitch" on other members. I suspect that these children are defending against anxious feelings through use of identification with the aggressor, a defense originally theorized by Ferenczi and utilized by Anna Freud. Frankel discusses how Ferenczi theorized that aggression shown by the authority figure elicits the automatic response of becoming like the threatening person in order to protect oneself against overwhelming anxiety. In contrast, Anna Freud later used this term to describe how, by becoming like the aggressor and taking on his traits, the child changes himself from the one who is threatened (powerless) to the one who is making the threat (powerful). Frankel described Ferenczi's view as a "pervasive change in someone's perceptual world rather than the more limited event that Anna Freud discussed" (Frankel, 2002, p. 103).

developed behaviors that showed their worry. Some children might get tummy aches; while others might push their feelings deep down and act like they had no feelings. Some children would have trouble eating; others, like Diana, would wet their beds. Wetting her bed was Diana's way of showing that she was scared, sad, and angry, at having to live there. The school acted as if she should be able to care for herself and she needed to protect herself from these normal feelings. However, maybe bed-wetting was Diana's way of saying she was only a child. Now, although she acted like a very good girl, wetting the bed also might be her way of telling us how scared she sometimes feels in her new life with her Daddy. Although Diana did not respond at that moment, soon after this, her nighttime bed-wetting stopped.¹¹

At my encouragement, while I was seeing Diana during this period, her father had contacted her maternal grandmother, who was living nearby, and Diana had begun visiting her. After about six months, Diana's mother came for a visit and stayed with her mother. A visit between Diana and her mother was arranged. Diana expressed her fear that her mother would return her to the cult-run boarding school. Although both Diana and her father were apprehensive about this visit, we were able to determine a way that he and Diana would feel safe and reassured that she would not be returned to the group. Diana's visit with her mother had a positive effect. She was reassured that her mother still loved her, even though she found her mother to be rather childlike and remote. These behaviors appeared to be a reflection and result of the regression and dissociation induced by the cult. Diana and

I talked about the demands of cult life and how this had changed her mother. (It seemed that adults often acted like children, but children were expected to act like adults.) I encouraged Diana's father to describe her mother's personality prior to the cult. At the same time, Diana was hearing childhood stories about her mother during her visits with her maternal grandmother.

To lose her child to the outside world must have been painful for Diana's mother. In my work with former cult members, I have seen too many parents in cults who were discouraged from developing a potentially loving relationship with their children. Even if children remain in the home, parents are induced to follow the directives of the cult (Goldberg, 2003).

Diana continued in therapy until she had successfully made the transition to public school and had begun to relate to her father and me in a manner that was more typical of a child of 11. Over time, she appeared less precocious and more relaxed. There seemed to be a softening of her harsh conscience (superego) and her need to be so self-reliant. She left therapy with the understanding that she was able to return in the future if there were issues that she wished to discuss.¹² Diana's therapy gave her a relationship with a caring adult who attempted to help her understand her past and her defenses against the painful emotions experienced. This gave Diana the freedom to begin to respond to others in a more genuine manner.

Return to Therapy in Adolescence

When Diana was 14, her father contacted me again.¹³ He had remarried, and Diana was miserable with her stepmother. Diana and

¹¹ As a psychoanalytically oriented therapist, I consider the possible multiple meanings and feelings underlying a symptom or characteristic behavior. Whether working with children or adults, I take the approach of exploring the client's protection against unwelcome emotions when this is presented in therapy.

¹² I believe that therapy with children should be focused upon and limited to getting them back on track developmentally. Children always can have the option to return to therapy at a later date.

¹³ It is not unusual to see a child client again in adolescence, nor is it unusual for me to see a former cult member client periodically. Therapeutic growth can occur from a departure accepted by a therapist who is not guilt- or fear-inducing.

he had agreed that it would be helpful for me to become involved to help them deal with this situation. When I first met with Diana again, she had changed dramatically. At 14, she was a typical pretty adolescent, wearing jeans and makeup. In contrast to her overly compliant behavior in latency, Diana had developed into a rather oppositional adolescent at home, although she continued to work hard in school and make friends. It became clear that, although she might have some realistic complaints (e.g., her stepmother was less permissive and somewhat more rigid than her father), the intensity of Diana's anger indicated that she might be additionally transferring some of her anger from her father, mother, and cult onto her stepmother, a convenient target. I also suspected that, during the first period of therapy, there had been more of a focus on Diana's predominant affects of anxiety and sadness rather than on angry and sexual feelings, which were more apparent with the onset of adolescence.

Diana saw her stepmother as "ruining her life." Furthermore, by remarrying, Diana's "Hans Solo" had dashed her Oedipal¹⁴ fantasies of having her father to herself. (In reviewing this case, I also suspect that the superior attitude Diana showed in latency might not have been connected only with cult behavior. Her sense of superiority also might have been connected with her powerful fantasy that she was a princess who was rescued by Hans Solo. Thirty years later, I have a deeper appreciation of

how character often is a reflection of inner fantasy life.)

In meeting with Diana in adolescence, it became clear to me that Diana felt replaced by a mother figure. Her parents had parted when she was 3 years old, so we had not touched on these issues in our previous therapy. Additionally, the safety she had established with her father had been threatened. I suspected that, ultimately, coming to terms with this stimulating (reflected in anger and sexuality), as well as painful and anxiety-producing situation would help Diana move toward a relationship of her own in the future.

I examined all of this in therapy with Diana. It was difficult for her to give up her central role with her father. She continued to see the worst in her stepmother. Although Diana's grandmother had served as a mother substitute, her grandmother had not taken a central role with her father. With Diana's permission, I held sessions with her father and stepmother to help them gain a better understanding of some of Diana's feelings, and to help them with parenting issues.

Over time, Diana was able to consider the array of feelings that might play into her intense dislike of her stepmother. In time, Diana revealed some memories and early maternal, nurturing feelings experienced with her mother. Diana was able to share with me her concern about losing her father as she had lost her mother. I helped her focus on how so many early losses had made her painfully aware of the potential for abandonment. Naturally, she was sensitive to the emotional loss of her father when he brought her stepmother into his life. Furthermore, I felt that it would be important for her to consider that she was not being disloyal to her mother if she allowed a relationship with her stepmother. However, Diana continued her litany of complaints. I saw how the either-or quality

¹⁴ Freud theorized that, typically, in approximately the fourth year of life, the child fantasizes taking the place of the same-sex parent to gain the love of the parent of the opposite sex. (Children also can experience the negative Oedipal stage with a desire for an exclusive relationship with the parent of the same sex.) In time, in healthy development, the child fears retaliation and, also, faces the reality that he/she cannot compete with one parent for an exclusive relationship with the other parent. Freud theorized that Oedipal feelings never are fully resolved and can be experienced at all later stages of development, particularly in adolescence when sexual feelings are reawakened (S. Freud, 1924).

of adolescence became joined with the punishing attitude of the cult, and I addressed this with her. Later in therapy, I also attempted to help Diana empathize with her stepmother, who had, no doubt, made some mistakes, but who seemed sincere in her attempt to make things better with Diana. Defending against pain through a harsh attitude toward others and a tendency toward lack of empathy seemed to be the defensive legacies from her cult involvement. However, I was aware that her lack of empathy also had to do with her being 14 and the narcissism inherent in that age group.

As we explored all of these emotions, Diana to some degree was able to grieve the loss of her own mother's ability to mother her. Having a new mother in the house made Diana painfully aware of all her own mother had been unable to give her, and Diana also was fighting her dependency needs. She was able to feel anger, but also, in time, face her mother's limitations that were in large measure a result of her mother's cult involvement. The cult had robbed her mother of the ability to parent by sending Diana away and undermining her mother's sense of parental authority. When she visited with her mother, Diana described to me her feeling that they were more like sisters than mother and daughter. She and I again focused on how cults foster regression in the members, treating them like children and giving all parental authority to the cult leader. Furthermore, we focused on how her mother was "brainwashed" to see the world in a completely different way from how Diana had come to see it. As Diana and I worked together, she seemed able to develop more empathy for her mother, as well as for her stepmother.

It also seemed that the entrance of her stepmother into the home had stimulated Diana's sexual feelings. Diana was replaced as Hans Solo's Princess Leia. This situation

was painful to Diana. However, in letting go of her father, she was better able to move into the world of boys. She soon began to focus on her social life and the boys at her school, and sessions often became filled with boy talk.

I was pleased to see that Diana, in general, was getting along well with peers, was doing well academically, and had gotten into a high school for the performing arts. She was continuing to utilize natural abilities that had been enhanced while she was at the cult-run boarding school. For the most part, these abilities were a positive link to her cultic environment. However, I also became aware of how these abilities might feed into a narcissistic aspect of her character. That is, Diana could be an actress and, at times, seemed as if she was giving a performance. I was amazed at how far her character had come from being that soft-spoken, controlled, but superior-acting child. Now I found her to be rather dramatic and spirited. This part of her character seemed to be an integration of her cultic performing self, her own natural temperament, and her stage of development—adolescence. However, it seemed that Diana's performing aspect had been overvalued in the cult, while other aspects had been undervalued. In the first stage of treatment, she had been performing as the perfect child. In adolescence, she came across in an overly dramatic way.

My work with adolescents had informed me that many young adolescent girls tend to be rather dramatic as they react to the vicissitudes of the emotions stirred up after puberty. However, without a loss of appreciation for her dramatic abilities and stage of development, it also was important an important task of therapy to help Diana deal with others in a more authentic manner. As in the earlier period of therapy, I continued to show empathy for others in Diana's life as well as for Diana. In time,

this approach promoted her ability to empathize with others.

Conclusion

Diana's therapy allowed her to better deal with both the difficulties she experienced with the past and with her everyday life. She was able to work through some of her traumatic experiences through play. Along with re-experiencing early trauma, Diana was able to acknowledge her emotions instead of defend against her pain through regressive behavior, emotional numbing, identification with the aggressor, and narcissistic defenses. A fuller range of authentic emotion ultimately allowed Diana to become more compassionate toward others.

It appeared that she experienced the impact of the abuse again when Diana reached adolescence. Returning to therapy allowed her to revisit feelings that had not been fully addressed previously. The adolescent's increased cognitive abilities and decreased need for the defenses of latency allows her to re-examine old experiences in new ways.

Diana's prognosis was hopeful. There were several factors in her favor. She had spent her early years with two caring parents. She was biologically endowed with intelligence, and she was an appealing child who, despite the loss of her mother and the harsh disciplinary practices at the school, was able to succeed in her studies, and gracefully dance and chant. These abilities led to better treatment in the cult and a better self-image. Her father rescued her from the cult. Diana initially experienced this rescue as another scary event, but it gave her the opportunity to escape from a potentially increasingly abusive environment and,

ultimately, to gain access to a freer way of life.

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Appendix: Diana's Artwork - Reflection of a Diminishing Cult Identity and Development of New Identity that Integrates the Outside World

Illustration 1: Princess Leia Travels to a New Home



Illustration 2: Princess Leia Dances

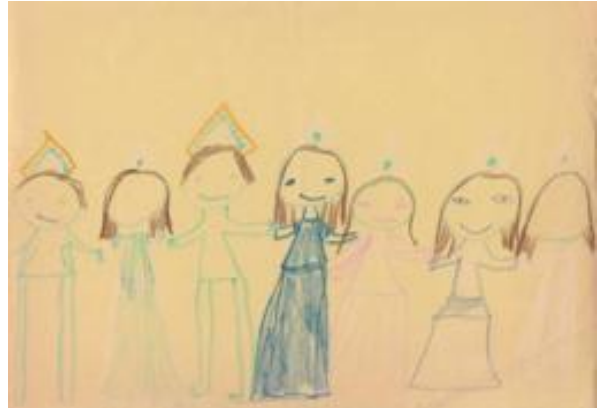


Illustration 3: Diana at the Playground

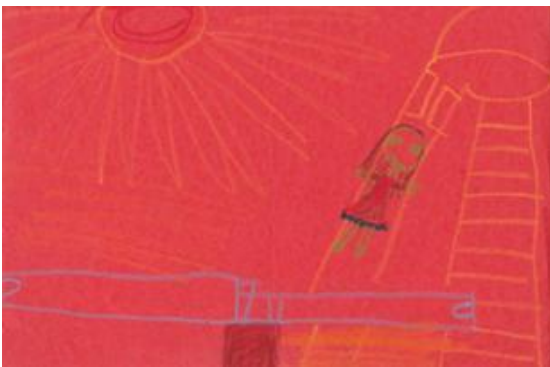


Illustration 4: Diana Hanging an Ornament on the Christmas Tree

