

CHAPTER 11

HELPING FIRST-GENERATION PARENTS AND SECOND-GENERATION CHILDREN HEAL THE IMPACT OF CULT HARM

Lorna Goldberg

Thirty years ago, the focus of my cult-related therapeutic work was with first-generation former cult members, who typically left their groups in less than 10 years' time. However, for the past 15 years or so, I also have been working with both second-generation former cult members (SGAs) and their first-generation parents, who might have spent 20 years or more in a group¹. In this chapter, I focus primarily on the first-generation parents, who have unique difficulties adjusting to the world outside the cult. They often are dealing with the postcult difficulties with which all long-term, first-generation former members struggle, including a mixture of sadness, shame, and anger after a life that was (in large measure) based upon deception and exploitation by a cult leader; a feeling of isolation and alienation from family, friends, and the outside world; confusion; and a sense of vulnerability about their postcult identity and the need to acclimate to a different worldview (Giambalvo, 1993; Goldberg, 1993). However, these former-member parents also struggle with unique difficulties. For example, it is common for them to deal with guilty feelings about having harmed their children through their cult membership; there often are potential conflicts between the marital pair; and finally, these parents often are dealing with a breach in their relationships with their children, particularly their adult children (Goldberg, 2003). In this chapter, I also speculate about the causes for this breach and describe my therapeutic role with this population of first-generation and second-generation former members.

¹ Beginning in the late 1960s, large numbers of individuals began entering cultic groups. Over the past 20 years, many of the children of these first-generation cult members have begun to leave the highly authoritarian environment in which they were born. Sometimes their parents have followed them—or led the way—out of the group.

LIFE IN THE CULT

While former-member parents were in the cult, the cult leader's evolving ideology usually dictated family life—from marriage, to conception, to childbirth, to childrearing and schooling². This interference undermined the parents' ability to respond empathically to their growing children. The need to accept the requirements of the cult often induced parents to defend against their own natural parenting tendencies and their desire to express loving feelings, or to protect or empathize with their children. Attempting to stifle these natural tendencies left many cult parents feeling depressed or anxious.

Historically, in most cults, the needs of the cult leader superseded the needs of the children³. Cult leaders characteristically demanded that children be sacrificed to the cult leader's control to prove the parents' commitment to the group. Parents often were separated both physically and emotionally from their children. The parents were expected to spend long periods of time involved in cult activities, which sometimes involved some form of missionary work in other localities to prove their loyalty to the cult. Also, because cult doctrine often emphasized the benefits of communal care or care by alternative caretakers, children might have been placed in dormitories or sent away to cult-related boarding schools. The members in charge of those dormitories and schools—those who taught the children cult doctrine, often had little or no background in child development or education, and no understanding of the emotional needs of children. Over the years, evidence of the abuse of children in these schools has been accumulating⁴.

Even in those cults in which parents were allowed to raise their children in their homes, there usually was cult interference. The parents, who were anxiously trying to remain out of trouble and meet the demands of the leader, often had little emotional reserve to parent. Simultaneously, cult leaders undermined parental feelings of love toward their own children, often making them feel selfish if they acknowledged loving feelings. Cult ideology sometimes taught that children belonged to the whole commu-

2 Most of my clients have reported that their cult leaders became more controlling and restrictive over time, and many leaders became more paranoid or antisocial.

3 Although I am writing about the past, the following conditions I describe generally continue to exist today.

4 In one example, I worked with a child whose father rescued her from a cult when she was 8 years old. Her mother, who remained in the cult, had been pressured to send this child to a cult-run boarding school in another state when the child turned 5. In response to this child's bed-wetting at the school, which began upon separation from her mother, the small child was pulled from her bed and required to wash and dry her sheets each night. Sleep was minimal because she also was required to rise early for morning prayers. At other times, when her behavior was seen as disobedient, she was put into a closet for punishment. To survive the time in the closet, she would sing the songs her loving mother sang to her when she was very young. I became aware of these experiences as the child acted them out in play therapy with me after she had left the cult at age 8.

nity rather than solely to their parents. In a large number of cults, children were instructed to address their parents by first names (often newly acquired cult names) and address the cult leader as *Mother* or *Father*. In one cult, parents would buy Christmas gifts for their children, but the cult leader would present the gifts. In another, members were told that it was best to reduce their time with their children because parents played out their unconscious murderous feelings toward children. (Cult leaders also separated parents from their own original families by interpreting how the parents' own parents had played out these negative feelings with them.) In one cult, members were told that parents pollute their young, so all parenting decisions must be left to the cult. In some groups, parents were taught that every adult had the right to discipline the children; as a result, children often were disciplined harshly, sometimes with belts, switches, or sticks. Some second-generation members have reported that their cult attracted pedophiles who would capitalize on their access to children; consequently, children were sexually abused. When children reported this egregious behavior to the cult hierarchy, the leaders typically would either whitewash these occurrences or blame the children for the events. Finally, in one cult, parents were encouraged to teach their children sexual practices within their own home environment, and incestuous behavior was common.

Therefore, cult ideology, driven by the cult leader, incorporated various child-rearing practices that left children more vulnerable to harmful treatment, including physical and sexual abuse, poor diet, impoverished living conditions, inadequate schooling, bizarre ideology, and inappropriate or harmful medical care. Ideology often resulted in children feeling guilt-ridden, sometimes overly responsible for their poor circumstances, and vulnerable to the acceptance of strange notions; they also felt unprotected, overstimulated, or abandoned by their own parents. Additionally, because of the reduction of the parental role to that of a sibling (Markowitz and Halperin, 1984), children did not look up to, or often did not respect their own parents. (In some groups children were rewarded for tattling not only on other children but also on their parents.)⁵ Children were not reassured that their parents would protect them, and in some cases, children were sacrificed so that parents would be seen in a positive light. In one example, parents sent an American boy of 13 to school in South America to protect him from the harmful effects of school because he displayed an interest in a female classmate. Therefore, in a variety of ways, the cult environment usually generated lack of trust between parents and children.

CULT DEPARTURE

Once these parents leave the group, some find their way into therapy or support groups. In an article focused on marriage after the cult, I previously described how the gradual unfreezing of the former member's cult personality and the simultaneous recovery of suppressed aspects of the precult

⁵ I've worked with children who felt compelled to tattle on others after they left the cult.

personality can lead to new conflicts within the marital pair. Such conflicts happen because, although married former cultists might be sharing the same postcult difficulties, each partner might handle these difficulties in a unique way that depends on, among other factors, individual precult personality structures, the degree of support the partner receives from others, and the influence of the couple's individual cult experiences (Goldberg, 2003). Therefore, as the pair's precult personalities emerge, the complementarity of a marriage based on cult values can erode as both partners begin to reestablish their unique ways of viewing the world. Needless to say, this dynamic places a strain on postcult marriages. For example, women who previously were subservient to their husbands might reveal more assertive behavior. Men who had important positions in the cult might feel less confident as they encounter the stresses of providing for a family in the world outside the cult. Additionally, parents might become aware that they have little in common with their spouses, a realization that can have a negative impact on children as the parents react to their children and their spouses in contradictory ways. For example, parents might begin to establish different parenting styles and rules after they leave the cult. Those individuals who continue to play out the controlling and narcissistic aspects of their former cult leader might need to undermine the authority of the other parent, and they might attempt to alienate the children from the other spouse. In one example, a father was able to alienate his three children from their mother. This father, whose personality reflected many of the narcissistic and antisocial aspects of the cult leader, was able to gain custody of the children by giving the children and the court the impression that the mother was emotionally disturbed. In contrast to his wife, this man was able to approach the courts with charm and many financial resources. His wife was a kind and loving (if naive) person, who clearly was struggling with the tasks of recovering from a cult. But in the court proceedings, her normal reaction to leaving the cult was interpreted as pathology.

In contrast, the unfreezing of their cult personalities also might allow parents who are not narcissistic or antisocial to better empathize with and respond to their children. After they leave the cult, these parents typically are cognitively freer to become aware of the neglect and abuse of their children, and of their lack of protection. Former cult-member parents such as these who have sought therapy with me have expressed tremendous guilt about the treatment their children received while they were in the cult. Along with guilt, these cult parents often find themselves struggling with feelings of sadness about their missed opportunity to parent their children during the cult years. Additionally, these parents often are dealing with second-generation children who are angry with them for abandoning them or failing to protect them from harm.

With younger children, parents might have difficulty taking a parental role after they leave the cult. This difficulty is related to the fact previously mentioned that the parents were induced into a regressed state by their cult leader and as a result acted like siblings rather than parents to their

children while they were in the cult. Like siblings, parents and children might have been induced to vie for the cult leader's attention. Additionally, many parents may have trouble assuming authority as a result of their guilt about having neglected or abused their children during their time in the cult. This guilt can lead to tendencies to be too indulgent or to have difficulty setting needed limits with children. Other parents continue to hold onto the punitive or sexually stimulating practices of the cult, rationalizing their behavior as being "for their child's own good." And some parents, immersed in struggling with their own postcult issues, continue to neglect their children.

When the therapist is working with parents, an assessment of their child-rearing issues becomes an important aspect of therapy. The therapist not only explores all that occurred in the cult, but also the parents' experiences prior to the cult. The therapist can help former cult-member parents begin to understand the cult dynamics that interfered with their ability to respond to and protect their children. Once this is clarified, the therapist also can assist them in the exploration of new ways of relating to their children now that they have left.

It is of primary importance for the therapist to provide the context for the cult members' behavior. That is, I might explain to the parents that they probably parented in a particular manner as a reaction to being told that was the best way to care for their children. For example, if the parents were told they should not rear their own children because of unconscious murderous feelings, their attempt to stay away from their children was a response to the cult belief that they were protecting children from potential harm. Similarly, if the parents were told that it was selfish to have a special relationship with their children, they might have attempted to hold back natural loving feelings of comfort or pride in their children's achievements. Achievements were for the betterment of the cult, not of an individual child. And children often were discouraged in the development of their special abilities if those abilities were not aligned with the cult's values. For example, a child who loved to draw pictures was demonized for her "scribbling." In the cult, she was told that her artwork was Satan's presence within her, and therefore she would not be saved when Armageddon came if she continued in those endeavors. Despite this, as an adult, this resilient second-generation former member eventually chose to enter an artistically creative career after she had spent more than 10 years hiding her work and fearing retribution. After she analyzed in therapy how her so-called scribbling had been demonized in the cult, this young woman was able to begin to show her work and move ahead in her field. Nevertheless, although she now is somewhat freer to create, she continues to struggle with feeling pleasure and pride, in part still believing that these emotions are sinful.

At times, the therapist will work with both the parent and the children to repair the distortions they learned from the cult. For example, when I was working with a mother and her younger children after they had left the

cult, the children began to draw frightening pictures of Hell and the end of the world. Their leader had frightened these children into believing they needed to display good, soldier-like behavior. After leaving the cult, they continued to fear terrible consequences (going to Hell or severe punishment) for what they perceived as bad behavior. I encouraged this mother to focus on telling her children about her sadness that they had been frightened by the cult leader, and to explain that they no longer were a part of a group who believed that children who acted in “naughty” ways would suffer scary or terrible consequences. Instead, it was normal for children sometimes to act naughty. This therapy was just the beginning of this mother’s connection to her children through empathy, and the beginning of an ongoing discussion with them about the harmfulness of the group. These interactions opened the door for the children to share additional harmful experiences with their mother. They now were able to view their mother as someone who could provide comfort and empathy.

The therapist also can point out that the parents’ belief that they have totally failed their children might be an extension of the black-and-white thinking of the cult. She can encourage parents to review times that they either contradicted or secretly went against the cult doctrine to respond to the needs of their children. I encourage parents to review and reflect upon (a) how separations from the children affected them while they were in the cult; (b) how the cult child-rearing practices changed and usually worsened over time; (c) occasions when they undermined or secretly went against cult child-rearing practices; (d) how they felt when they saw or heard other children being abused, and (e) what they feared would happen to them if they went against the leader’s demands. Considering and developing an understanding of these examples expands parents’ awareness of all the ways in which the cult influenced their behavior and consequently is helpful in relieving self-blame and shame. However, at the same time, this process can increase the parents’ sense of sadness and sense of lost opportunity.

In therapy, former cult-member parents typically internalize, and also externalize, the blame they have experienced with their cult leader. Therefore, they have the expectation that the therapist will blame them as they are blaming themselves. In fact, they often expect that everyone in their current life will blame them. Instead, the therapist helps cult parents move toward empathy for themselves and self-forgiveness—to see the life conditions and manipulations that set the stage for their receptivity to the cult’s messages.

In my work, I attempt to help former members understand that therapy is a place of exploration rather than of judgment. In keeping with this idea, I help them put their cultic behavior within the context of a high-demand environment. I give them an understanding of the manipulation and mind-control processes of their group. I help them to see that, with the information they had at the time, they probably did their best. Most cult parents with whom I have worked were recruited by their cults in their early twenties. They were idealistic and found a group that seemed to comprise

like-minded individuals. If the group hadn't recruited them, they probably would have involved themselves in something less harmful and even more worthy. Since parents with whom I have worked were basically naïve and honest people, they imbued the cult leader with qualities of guilelessness that matched theirs. When they entered the cult, they never thought that their children would be prey to abuse or neglect. They believed they were entering a better place—a utopian community for their children and themselves.

Nevertheless, at the same time, cult-member parents need to appreciate the impact of their cult-related behavior on their children. If they can, I encourage them to now listen to their children's feelings related to their own cult experiences. This process might increase parental pain, but listening to their children with as much empathy as they can foster is the best bridge to a better relationship with their children in the future. Listening allows children to feel that their parents are attempting to hear their story and better understand their feelings about their childhood in the cult.

CASE ILLUSTRATIONS

Let me now give you a sense of the background of some former cult parents of adult children with whom I've worked, and some of the issues on which such therapy focuses:

Case Example: Kathleen*

After Kathleen's birth, her mother went into postpartum psychosis and was hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital, where she spent the rest of her life in a psychotic state. Kathleen's overburdened father, who barely was able to care for his four older children, placed the new baby in a foundling home. At 2 years of age, Kathleen was placed in foster care with an abusive foster mother. She aged out of the foster care system at 18 and left her foster home.

Soon thereafter, Kathleen and her high school boyfriend became pregnant. Kathleen attempted to care for her newborn baby on her own as best she could, but she was overwhelmed by the need to independently support her baby and herself without any resources. Her boyfriend's mother offered to care for the child, but with the proviso that Kathleen would give up her parental rights. After finding it untenable to manage on her own for the baby's first 2 years (she rode subways with her child at night because she could no longer afford housing), Kathleen reluctantly agreed to this offer. However, she planned to see the child for regular visits.

(continued on next page)

Case Example: Kathleen*

(continued from previous page)

Kathleen became deeply depressed; soon thereafter, she was recruited into a New Age cult. As she currently reflects upon this experience, Kathleen believes that she connected with this high-demand group as a way to deal with the overwhelming feelings of sadness and shame that resulted from having given up her child. The group initially appeared to be loving and accepting. It also provided this young woman with an instant family of her own. However, Kathleen's immersion in the cult further alienated her from her growing child because she was required to spend long hours fund-raising and being involved in cult rituals. Furthermore, the leaders told her that she was selfish to meet her own needs by providing for regular contact with her daughter because this would take time away from cult activities. Although she continued periodic contact, both her cult and her baby's paternal grandmother thwarted many of her efforts.

Kathleen left the cult when her daughter was in her twenties. By this time, her daughter had a new family of her own. In the 10 years since Kathleen left the group, her daughter has relocated to another state and has kept Kathleen at arms' length. Her daughter presently is intensely involved with her husband's family. Kathleen has attempted to improve her relationship with her daughter by telling her of her great sorrow for not having been more involved when her daughter was a child, and she has been accepting of her daughter's angry feelings toward her. But her daughter has continued to keep her distance.

Nonetheless, Kathleen attempts to be caring and helpful. Now that her daughter has two boys, Kathleen sends Christmas and birthday presents, but she rarely gets a response. She has offered to visit and has invited the family to her home in New York. I've encouraged Kathleen to keep this tenuous connection in order to have the opportunity for a better relationship with her daughter or her grandchildren in the future. I've also encouraged her to keep journals written for her grandchildren, and to write about her own cult experience. In this way, Kathleen can keep a connection to her grandchildren and hope that, at some point in the future, they will know she was thinking of them as they were growing up.

(continued on next page)

Case Example: Kathleen*

(continued from previous page)

Although Kathleen is a kind, intelligent, and caring woman, her daughter's continuing anger because of Kathleen's limited contact during her cult involvement seems to prevent her daughter from seeing how Kathleen could be a rich addition to her new family's life. Therapy has helped Kathleen to see how abandoned and sad her daughter might have felt, and how her daughter might believe that it is risky to trust her mother now. Therapy also has helped her realistically review how difficult it must have been for the young woman she was to adequately care for her child without any support or resources.

The cult initially served as an escape from the intense loss and shame Kathleen was experiencing in giving up her child. For many years, her feelings of shame about her past prevented her from developing intimate relationships after she left the cult. Now she feels reluctant to share her history with others, expecting them to reject her as a "terrible mother" (a projection of her own feelings about herself); this pattern tends to isolate her from her coworkers and potential friends.

Therapy has allowed Kathleen to have more empathy for the lost, overwhelmed girl of 18 and to better understand her daughter's need for self-protection by rejecting her. This understanding has helped Kathleen to gain some strength to hang in there, keeping contact with her daughter and the family by sending cards and gifts. An additional source of comfort has been the friends Kathleen has made through her work, ICSA groups, volunteer work, and a support group for former cult-member parents. Particularly, the group for former cult-member parents has allowed Kathleen and the other participants to tell their story in a nonjudgmental and empathic environment. For Kathleen, trusting the group enough to tell her story was a healing and transforming experience in which, instead of harsh judgment, she was greeted with kindness and understanding.

**Pseudonyms have been used for family members and clients in the case studies to maintain their anonymity and protect their privacy.*

Case Example: Barbara and Jed

In their early twenties, Barbara and Jed were recruited by an Eastern meditation cult that professed a universal message of love and world peace. While in the group, they gave birth to a boy. However, they were expected to work long hours in recruiting for their spiritual leader, translating books and promoting the guru in his quest to gain the Nobel Prize. Their son left the cult in late adolescence and joined a group for former cult members.

After some time outside the cult, their son developed a website that was critical of the cult. On the site, he posted extensive negative interviews with former members about the guru's misdeeds and sexual abuse. This information allowed Barbara and Jed to become aware of the cult leader's hypocrisy. The leader attempted to cover up these accusations and threatened to harm their son. Barbara and Jed found this situation terribly distressing and attempted to secretly undermine the guru's wishes. Eventually, they followed their son's path and left the cult. Since that time, 8 years ago, Barbara and Jed have continued to try to connect with their son. He has married, and at family gatherings he originally was resentful and distant in their presence. However, Barbara and Jed have begun to forge a good relationship with their small grandchildren, and this relationship appears to be serving as a bridge to a better relationship with their son and daughter-in-law. In fact, their son initially expressed his belief that the only opportunity to heal their relationship with him was through their relationship with his children; and this, indeed, slowly appears to be working. Recently, Barbara and Jed spent some time with their son and another former member of their cult. The four of them were able to reflect upon cult experiences. During this discussion, the fourth participant was able to empathize with the points of view of both parents and son, which had a curative effect on all.

Barbara and Jed are left with tremendous guilt and sorrow, both from having experienced 24 years in the cult and the resulting impact on their relationship with their son. However, acknowledging some of the positive and enriching experiences that the family had during those years has comforted them. They also are coming to understand all the ways in which they were undermined in being the parents that they might have been. Additionally, they are discovering that their efforts to be the most loving grandparents that they can be can have a healing effect on both them and their son, and they are gaining the rewards of grandchildren who love them. Recently, their son told them that he often felt loved by his parents in childhood, but that his later teenage years were not happy. In his early twenties, after he had left the cult, he felt abandoned by his parents. However, during the 2-month period that Barbara and Jed were forbidden to see him, they became even more aware of the depth of their love for their son, and these feelings generated a desire in them to leave.

Reflecting on these vignettes, I can see how all of these individuals had the potential to be loving parents, but they were unable to freely love their children while they remained in the cult. Many parents don't reach the ideal of becoming a loving parent, and many former-cult parents would not have been more loving parents even without the cult. However, for the most part, the parents who have consulted me would have been, in Winnicott's (2003) definition, "good enough," and they would have been able to better prepare their children for mainstream culture. Many former-cult parents were drawn to the cult because of their idealism, the desire to seek a better world for themselves and their children, or they were at a time of their lives when they were experiencing some sense of alienation or difficulty. It becomes a painful reality that can be hard to accept that, in their attempt to find a better world, they placed their children in a totalitarian environment.

RECONCILIATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

How do former-member parents begin the process of reconciling with their children? I recommend, as a first step, that these parents apologize to their children for their inability to better protect them from the harm the adult children experienced in their childhood as a result of the family's cult membership. At the time of the apology, it is important for parents *not* to focus upon their own story about how they were controlled by the cult. Initially, their adult children may view a long explanation as an excuse—a rationalization for their lack of parenting. Instead, a good beginning is a simple apology and receptivity to hearing their children's experiences. Of course, this interaction will open the door to a great deal of pain.

However, I've found that parents who have come to me are already experiencing tremendous guilt. Guilty feelings might cause some parents to feel that they don't want to open some version of a hornet's nest, so they might prefer to avoid having this discussion. However, for adult children to thrive, it helps if they believe their parents can handle the truth of the adult children's cult experiences. In some cases, avoidance of the truth might keep the adult children in a parentified position, believing that they must be there to parent their vulnerable parents who are burdened by their own cult disillusionment. (Unfortunately, I have seen cases of role reversal in which parents have induced their adult children to parent them. This dynamic, which sometimes stems from the continuation of the parent's childlike personality, is destructive to both the parents and the children.)

Listening to the truth of these experiences also allows the parents to begin to comfort their adult children—a role that was undermined in the past. In response to their children's experiences, the parents' expression of authentic sadness and remorse for the suffering of their children can be a major step toward healing the rift between them and their adult children. I have found that many children ultimately want to love and make a connection with their parents, even if they have needed to defend against these feelings with anger and withdrawal. Not to be able to make a connection with

their parents takes its toll on second-generation children. Although many of these children have created lives for themselves without this connection, that lack of connection can be a source of continual pain. First-generation parents who have the courage to face the harm done to their children are providing their children with the gift of empathy; and they are making a significant step toward giving their children the gift of parental comfort, which all children, ultimately desire, no matter their age.

Perhaps at another, later time, former-cult parents can suggest that, if their adult children wish to know how they got involved in the cult and fell under the leader's spell, the parents will be ready to tell them. At some point, it will be healing for these second-generation former members to hear their parents' stories and to learn about their parents' identities before the cult.

Second-generation adults might continue to feel and express anger toward their parents. It is important for parents to remember that their children also were raised in the black-and-white teaching of the cult, and living with ambivalence is not something that comes easily to those who spent years in an authoritarian environment. Some second-generation adults wonder whether letting go of anger and showing positive feelings means that they are condoning their parents' past abuse or past abandonment of them. If not openly angry, many might keep an emotional distance, keeping their feelings hidden. These protective character traits originally might have been established in the cult for self-protection. It is important for parents to understand that their children might always have a tendency to be angry with them or might always prefer to keep a distance. For these second-generation adult children, openness might result in their vulnerability to becoming hurt and abandoned by their parents once more. Parents can help if they verbalize that they understand their children always might be angry with them or prefer to keep a distance; but, in the future, they will continue to be open to seeing what can be done to improve the relationship. At the same time, parents can demonstrate their love by their positive, helpful, and generous actions whenever possible.

RECONCILIATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND EXTENDED FAMILY

After the cult, reconnecting with extended family members and sharing past memories with them can be helpful to everyone involved. Occasionally, some extended family members can remain angry, aloof, or both. It is crucial for former cult members to understand that their family members have needed to continue their lives without them. For those who were in cults for long periods of time, their siblings who did not join the cult might be dealing with a reservoir of anger and resentment about the cult members' absence from the family and, as a result, their own individual feelings of abandonment, as well. Important life events have occurred, and the nonmembers have taken responsibilities without their siblings' involvement. They may feel anger for what they perceive as callous or indifferent behavior by their siblings while they were in the cult.

Again, after showing empathy for the pain family and old friends have experienced, former cult members might explain the context for their own behavior. For some of these siblings, this explanation will not lead to an improved relationship. Instead, some siblings will feel the newly emerged former cult member is an intruder, and they will resent their attempt to forge a better tie with the family, particularly their own parents. In one case, an older brother of a long-time former cult member attempted to undermine the renewal of a bond between his sister, the former member, and their elderly mother. He was suspicious that his sister only wanted some of their mother's inheritance. So it became important for them to meet to clarify and sort out this issue.

SUPPORT GROUPS FOR FORMER MEMBER CULT PARENTS

Many former cult-member parents find it difficult to persevere with therapy and cult-related programs. They see themselves as different from both second-generation former members and those who did not raise children in the cult; they find second-generation stories painful to hear; and, as mentioned previously, they expect to be blamed by everyone. As mentioned previously, it seems that most former members have incorporated the punishing attitude of their cult leader, and this makes them even more ready to indict themselves. A support group for this population can have a curative effect.

At several ICSA conferences, I have facilitated a group for former cult-member parents. It was therapeutic for members to come together and discuss common problems and provide one another support and the benefit of their practical knowledge. Additionally, in the spring of 2013, William Goldberg and I initiated a local support group for this population.

Some of the issues that our support group addresses are the following:

- How did cult involvement affect you while in the group?
- How did cult involvement affect your children while in the group?
- How did cult involvement affect your extended family? How did cult involvement affect your parent-child relationship?
- For those who entered groups with your families, how did your family life change?
- For those who had children but entered groups before the birth of your children, how was your family life affected?
- How do you now view the way you raised your children in the group?
- What kinds of problems did you confront after you left the cult, and how did you/your family deal with these difficulties?
- How can families begin to reestablish and improve relationships that might have been adversely affected by family members' group involvement?

As trust and a sense of safety grew for participants in the support group, they found the courage to tell their stories, often perceived as shameful, to others—and some did so for the first time. The ability to share their stories with others who responded to them with empathy and without harsh judgment served to soften their own harsh judgments of themselves. Some participants began to have empathy for the innocent individuals who had joined a group with an intention to provide the best for their children.

FAMILY THERAPY

At times, family therapy can be helpful for former-cult parents and their second-generation adult children. Disclosing their difficult feelings in the protected environment of a therapist's office can be more comfortable than in other settings. Sometimes, it might be necessary for parents and adult children to hold separate sessions with the therapist before they are ready for a family meeting. Separate initial meetings allow each participant to feel more comfortable with the therapist and feel better prepared for the family meeting. In that prefamily meeting, participants have the ability to set up ground rules and items for discussion for the family meeting. They also have the option of including items they wish not to discuss in that first meeting. Topics not acceptable in the first meeting might be approached in later ones.

These meetings with a therapist can serve as a beginning to an improved relationship if parents and children can put themselves into the others' place, which might be quite hard to do. As mentioned previously, former cult-member parents have to face a lot of pain, anger, and sadness to do this. Likewise, to appreciate their parents' experiences, the second-generation former members need to take a step away from totally encasing themselves in their rightly felt anger or distant behavior. As mentioned previously, anger and distant behavior serve to protect them from becoming vulnerable: Will their parents be able to hear their pain and, in response, give them comfort and understanding?

It helps if parents and their adult children can explore the concept of intention—and separate the intentionality of the cult leader from that of their parents. It's important for parents to explain to their children how their cult-indoctrinated point of view influenced their cult behaviors, and also for them to describe any struggles that they had with cult doctrine as it related to their children. For example, a mother who sent her daughter to boarding school at the cult leader's request told her daughter there was not a day that she had not missed her. This revelation had a profound impact on her daughter.

This is not to say that second-generation former members should completely move past their anger or their need for distance. However, if chronic anger or isolation is interfering with the possibility of them living a satisfying life, I become concerned. Sometimes, I counsel second-generation former cult members that they might consider moving past these chronic emotions for *themselves* if not for their parents. In this way, they are taking care of themselves. I attempt to help SGAs see that they initially might have

found it necessary to hold onto these defenses as a way of protecting themselves against getting close and becoming controlled by others. However, these behaviors or character traits might make it hard for them to get close to anyone. As discussed earlier, there is absoluteness of thinking in cults: Everything is either right or wrong, black or white. And it might be difficult for those who have spent years thinking in this fundamentalist style to consider a more complex and compassionate view of the world—a world in which humans try their best, but still make all kinds of mistakes. If the parental harm hasn't been intentional (that is, the parents were responding to the influence of the cult leader) or too severe, and if parents apologize, the ability of adult children to put themselves into another's feeling state, a kind of basic empathy for their parent's suffering, can be beneficial not only to themselves, but also to family relationships. It has been my experience that, for former members, moving from the harsh, unforgiving conscience they incorporated as a result of the cult experience to a conscience that is more loving and compassionate is one of their most difficult tasks. However, the move toward a more compassionate conscience will enrich their postcult life (Fromm, 1947/1990).

Can You Ever Forgive Me?

As a final example that reflects the benefit of therapeutic work with parents and their adult children, I include the following case material:

Case Example: Theresa

In the early 1970s, Theresa joined a communal group that espoused peace and love. Although the American guru, who incorporated a mixture of New Age beliefs and his own version of Freudian principles into his doctrine, purported an idealistic communal experience, he became more and more controlling over time. He demanded that members spend numerous hours working in his health-food stores, and he viewed children as interfering with his ability to accumulate control and wealth. Therefore, he instituted the practice of sending children to boarding schools. He bolstered this approach with theories about how parents unconsciously were driven to destroy their children, and he pointed out how each cult member's parents had been harmful. Following the guru's directive, Theresa sent her daughter, April, to a boarding school when she was 6 years old, and she had limited time with April during the remainder of her childhood years.

Theresa left the group after it fell apart subsequent to the leader's death. She became aware of how she had been influenced to abandon April to others. By the time Theresa left the group, April was in her twenties and had previously left the cult. She spent small periods of time with her mother, but there always was tension between them.

(continued on next page)continued

Case Example: Theresa

(continued from previous page)

Theresa and April came to see me for a series of family sessions. Initially, Theresa described how she believed that her daughter always was ready to be angry with her, and this made Theresa tense about all their family visits. Theresa described the experience of being on “pins and needles,” constantly expecting to be blasted by April. Her daughter said that sometimes her mother’s tense behavior bothered her, but she didn’t have a particular need to blast her.

I wondered whether Theresa was transferring to April feelings that she herself had experienced in the cult. Theresa agreed that this was true. In the cult, she always was waiting to be blasted by either her leader or by other members. I also wondered if she felt that April should blast her. Theresa replied that she did, because April had experienced such a painful childhood as the result of Theresa’s cult membership.

I asked April to talk about her childhood. As she began to talk, it became clear that her belief that her mother didn’t love her or want to be with her developed over time because she was sent to boarding school at such a young age. Theresa began to cry. And after hearing about her daughter’s experience, she described how painful those separations were for her: how sending her daughter to boarding school had saddened her, and how difficult it was for her to hide these feelings in the cult. Once Theresa had been chastised for her selfishness about feeling attached to her daughter.

I asked April to talk about how it was for her at the school. She said that, fortunately, her mother had found a warm school environment for her. Theresa acknowledged that she had been careful in looking for a place. She had found

the warmth of the school she chose to be comforting, and she was aware of feeling partly relieved that her daughter would be far from the group. She did have a sense that it might be difficult for April to remain in an environment away from all she had known. April seemed to consider these words and how her mother was able to put some care into this choice.

Next April focused on how she was fortunate to have become close to her house parents, so that experience was not just negative. Nevertheless, she had found weekends difficult when the other parents would visit or some children returned home. April often was left behind and felt particularly unloved by her mother at those times.

(continued on next page)

Case Example: Theresa

Theresa reached out to embrace her daughter and plaintively asked, "Can you ever forgive me?" April responded, "I think that the important question here is can you ever forgive yourself?" Theresa said she didn't know whether she could do that.

This family session opened the door to a better understanding between mother and daughter. The tension between them has dramatically lessened since. All is not solved, but this was a beginning.

CONCLUSION

Cults interfere with all family relationships. Years ago, the focus of my family therapeutic work was with former cult members and their parents who had never entered the cult. Today, my focus is upon former cult members and their children who often were born and raised in the cult. Unfortunately, many members leave the group with feelings of guilt and shame; as a result, they tend to avoid their painful pasts. They continue to suffer from depression and a variety of undermining symptoms. Consequently, they never receive help for problems that were generated or exacerbated by their cult experience. Those who seek therapy, or at least begin to risk sharing their story, can dramatically improve their inner sense of themselves and possibly have an opportunity to improve their outer lives with family members, as well.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fromm, E. (1947/1990). *Man for himself: An inquiry into the psychology of ethics*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
- Giambalvo, C. (1993). Post-cult problems: An exit counselor's perspective. In M. Langone (Ed.), *Recovery from cults* (pp. 148–154). New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Goldberg, L. (1993). Guidelines for therapists. In M. Langone (Ed.), *Recovery from cults* (pp. 232–250). New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Goldberg, L. (2003). Reflections on marriage and children after the cult. *Cultic Studies Review*, 2(1), 9–29.
- Markowitz, A., & Halperin, D. A. (1984). Cults and children. *Cultic Studies Journal*, 1, 143–155.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1953). Transitional objects and transitional phenomena—a study of the first not-me possession. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 34(2), 89–97.

Lorna Goldberg, LCSW, PsyA, board member and past president of ICSA, is a psychoanalyst in private practice and Director, Institute for Psychoanalytic Studies. In 1976, she and her husband, William Goldberg, began facilitating a support group for former cult members that continues to meet monthly in their home in Englewood, New Jersey. Lorna and Bill received the Hall of Fame Award from the authentic Cult Awareness Network in 1989 and the Leo J. Ryan Award from the Leo J. Ryan Foundation in 1999. In 2009, Lorna received the Margaret T. Singer Award from ICSA. Along with Rosanne Henry, she cochaired ICSA's Mental Health Committee from 2003 to 2008. Lorna has published numerous articles about her therapeutic work with former cult members in professional journals, including, most recently, Goldberg, L., (2012), "Influence of a Charismatic Antisocial Cult Leader: Psychotherapy With an Ex-Cultist Prosecuted for Criminal Behavior," *International Journal of Cultic Studies*, Vol. 2, 15–24; and Goldberg, L., (2011), "Diana, Leaving the Cult: Play Therapy in Childhood and Talk Therapy in Adolescence," *International Journal of Cultic Studies*, Vol. 2, 33–43. She also wrote the chapter "Guidelines for Therapists" in the book *Recovery from Cults* (1993), edited by Michael Langone. She cowrote with Bill Goldberg the chapter "Psychotherapy With Targeted Parents" in the book *Working With Alienated Children and Families* (2013), edited by Amy J. L. Baker and S. Richard Sauber.