

Thomas White's Deprogramming Story:

Causes and Effects on a Family Level

To discuss the causes of my parent's decision to "deprogram" me, I have to describe my family background a little. My parents were old school Catholics - very conservative. My family was kind of close in some ways - though not in any deep communicative way. Racham, I remember when you were teaching before Michael and Mirah's wedding. I don't remember specifically what you were communicating but it caused me to remember how my parents had never communicated anything to me from their hearts when I was growing up. I never communicated with them either - I can only remember talking to one of my sisters growing up what I really thought about life.

The day my father dropped me off at Syracuse University, I began realizing more that I didn't want to go to college. I was just fulfilling my parent's expectations of me. I had six older brothers and sisters, most of whom had finished college and so I was merely following their footsteps.

The last time I saw my two older sisters before I came to the community things were pretty light - we were drinking wine with friends. This was late September, 1979. Over the next two months my life and circumstances changed radically and swiftly. I had never even smoked pot until my senior year in high school. Now I was using cocaine to help overcome my increasing depression and lack of motivation. All through school I had usually done well without much effort - now I was greatly overwhelmed - failing three of the five courses I was taking. I was certainly headed for a serious nervous breakdown to say the least in fact I was becoming suicidal - fearfully paranoid - my brother came to visit me once - and I left town because I was convinced he was upset with me because of my drug problems and academic failure. At the same time my conscience was screaming at me for the tremendous guilt of my life - violence, harshness, sexual problems, etc.

I was looking for an escape of any kind, from all my problems. Sometimes I thought I was dead and in hell. I looked to Buddhism, the Bible. Bob Dylan was my idol - somewhere he spoke of hope being found in some other place. I knew then that I needed to leave Syracuse. So I took off hitchhiking without telling anyone. When my roommate realized I was gone he contacted my parents and told them I was suicidal. Students from the university were combing the area looking for me or my dead body - so you can imagine the emotional effect on my parents - especially the sharp contrast to a supposedly "normal" childhood in their minds.

Meanwhile I was traveling down south - I ended up in Florida. There I met a man who told me about the community. I went there quickly. After being there for a month I wrote my parents who hadn't know where I'd been for almost two months - my dad and two older brothers flew to Chattanooga to "rescue" me. After some intense emotional pressure from them I went back with them to Brooklyn - supposedly for a few days. When I got there, of course, the pressure increased on me to stay. After a few days I told them I was leaving and took a bus to Chattanooga.. So they thought I had gone crazy - this was certainly a major factor in their decision to deprogram me about six months later.

During the deprogramming my dad told me a little of why they had decided to do this. It was my mother's decision, she was a pretty strong person. My dad was concerned about me, and particularly concerned about my mother and holding the family together. He was the most involved family member the first few weeks of the deprogramming - but never around for the ugly side of things - the deprogrammer's bizarre tactics. A couple of weeks into it he and I talked. He said, "I don't care what you do with your life - you don't have to go back to college, you don't have to be a Catholic, etc. But you need to get out of that cult and come home and tell your mother you are sorry for what you have put her through the past year."

I said, "There is a lot I could tell her I'm sorry about, but what I have done this past year is one of the few things I'm not sorry about." I continued, "Actually I'm having a problem with you - what you are putting me through here." I described

to him some of the abusive techniques they were using - which he was unaware of. He told me he didn't want them mistreating me and that he was going to talk to the deprogrammers about that. He did talk to them - the deprogrammers told me about it the next day - but they were not going to listen to him. That is why I sometimes felt that he (my father) had a little bit of integrity.

Effects on my family: Financial and our relationship

As far as the effects on my relationship with members of my family I had no communication with anyone for about two years. Finally I came to the point where I was able to write my parents a letter. At about the same time one of my sisters began looking for me again. She told me about ten years ago that she was not personally involved in the decision to deprogram me but had regrets because not only was I still in the community (which she at best is just resigned to) but that it caused an almost -total shutdown of communication on both sides.

In terms of the financial effect on my dad - he was middle class, hard working - making ends meet on a \$25,000 per year salary, trying to raise 12 children in Brooklyn in the seventies. The deprogramming cost him \$20,000 which forced him to remortgage the house, which I think he had been close to paying off. On top of this he had been hit with a lawsuit for a fight I had been involved in high school. After the deprogramming he had been holding me in NY. because this was supposed to go to court. As he had totally destroyed any trust I had in him, I left Brooklyn to come back to the community, and it turned out the case went to court two weeks later. Since I was not present at the court the judge ruled against my dad and his insurance company refused to pay the \$30,000 for the same reason. He then spent the rest of his life - 12 years trying to financially recover from this. When he finally accomplished this, he retired and died within a few months.

The Deprogramming

At the beginning of the deprogramming there were three "bodyguards" and two deprogrammers. Two of the guards were just tough guys - didn't talk - just doing their job. The third one was occasionally friendly. As far as the deprogrammers - one was a man named Chuck, the other a woman named Carol. Chuck had been in the Children of God for about five years (this is his story) when some of his relatives decided to rescue him. He said they hired Ted Patrick to deprogram him and he had obviously received Ted's spirit - he lived to take revenge on "cults." Carol said she had been in some offbeat Christian cult down south with several others who were following some men around. After her family helped her get away from that she would occasionally work as a deprogrammer. They were both Christians - Chuck was harsh, irritated - always looking for ways to provoke his victims. Carol on the other hand was usually sweet talking, southern, religious. I think they matched their opposite temperaments to see which would be successful.

Chuck would talk at me for several hours at a time - accusations, chanting "cult," trying to incite emotional guilt in me for what this was doing to my family, etc.. he definitely had a tremendous lack of humanity - undoubtedly the most undesirable human being I have ever been around in my life. He would keep me up long hours - 36 hours at a stretch on one occasion - most of that time being subjected to verbal, physical, and emotional abuse. He would sit next to me talking, slapping my leg for long periods of time, hoping I would yell at him or perhaps even hit him back. He would switch off with Carol who would try to sweet talk me - motherly - I think there were several times during my six weeks with her that I was taken in by her "sweetness" - trusted her - a little to my regret. I think most if not all of this was just her religious front. Chuck's motivation was entirely bitterness toward cults, and certainly it was an easy way for him to make a living. He was the embodiment or everything he accused cults of being - unreasonable, manipulative, restricting others' freedom, kidnapper, etc. Most of the time I chose not to even answer his questions, as he would invariably take whatever I said and twist it. Once - trying to

coerce me to speak - he started yelling, "You're messed up - you can't even talk to us." I said (we were locked in a hotel room), "Take me down to the hotel clerk let's see who does the talking."

I think it was Chuck who said they would deprogram anybody for religious or political reasons. I don't remember the specifics of this, but obviously it was a boast about their ability. I think typically their deprogramming lasts a few hours to a few days in length. At first they just used vague generalizations about cults - autocratic leaders, brainwashings - but they demonstrated no knowledge about the community. As time went on they started doing some homework to come up with specifics about the community. I don't know of any attempt by them to follow up on their work afterwards.

One of the most damning things they said about themselves was that they were there to "snap my mind." They said that once they had accomplished this they would fill up my mind with what they wanted and that afterward my mind would be like a swinging door - going one way - believing what I had been told in the community, then swinging the other way, believing the deprogrammers - back and forth until it eventually settled in one place. These statements clearly expose their satanic origins - their violations of a person's free will - their true hatred of humans - treating them as robots. This same confrontation also exposed my own sin - to the extent that I was taken in by their lies. I remember soon after I came back to the community Yoneq read a proverb (Proverbs 17:4) that says that someone who is deceitful is open to receive lies from and about others. When I was first in the community there were seemingly small things I wasn't open about, and that deceit, lack of honesty, weakened my resistance to their lies.

Many things cleared up for me through my communication with Aquilla, Zadok and others. I think I generally felt cleared up after I was back for a few weeks - but there was something nagging at my conscience for several years before I was able to clearly confess the root of my problems - my lack of honesty - to Nahaliel and others and put it behind me.