



**“The Everyday Cult: Control as a Social Disease”
By Sarah Walter**

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Cults in the Everyday: Control as a Social Disease

“With heavy hearts we sailed along and reached
 The country of high-minded Cyclopes,
 The mavericks. They put their trust in gods,
 And do not plant their food from seed, nor plow,
 And yet the barley, grain, and clustering wine-grapes
 All flourish there, increased by rain from Zeus.
 They hold no councils, have no common laws,
 But live in caves on lofty mountaintops,
 And each makes laws for his own wife and children,
 Without concern for what the others think.”

--The Odyssey, Book 9, lines 106-115

Trans. Stanley Lombardo (1997)

Life begins with the family. The family operates as the primary reference group and main source of learned social behavior. In childhood, one is socialized by their caretakers to learn how best to fit and function within the society at large. “It is through the family,” psychologist Robert E. Haskell explains, “that the infant first learns how to feel, think, believe, and act in accordance with the norms, the values, and reality of the society in which he or she is to reside. This learning is largely accomplished by the child observing how the parents feel, think, believe, and act. The parents become models of society” (99). This process is largely unspoken and unconscious. Through socialization, the child is subject to the social attitudes of their parents. In terms of psychosocial adjustment, the development of autonomy and emotional attachments, researcher Marc Noom found that among adolescents “the quality of the relationship with parents is more important than that with peers” (780). Autonomy, Noom explains, is defined as “the ability to regulate one’s own behavior,” while attachment as “the quality of the relationship with significant others” (771). In healthy functional environments “supportive relationships facilitate rather than inhibit autonomy” (Noom 771). It follows that in abusive households, autonomy is inhibited. Healthy attachment to parents are experienced as a “general feeling of trust, an

adequate level of communication and the absence of feelings of alienation” (Noom 772).

Relationships fostered on uneven ground, then, lead to unhealthy attachments.

When models of behavior are corrupted, the parental role of caregiver can morph into that of the abuser. Emotional child abuse occurs when instead of meeting a child’s emotional needs, the parent “rejects, terrorizes, verbally assaults, and attempts to destroy a child’s self-esteem” (Lyden 1). Abuse is centered in the family and is characterized by “poor parental or caregiver coping skills that affect the entire family” (Lyden 3). Dysfunctional families “tend to be organized around their specific pathology, that is, drinking, drugs, mental disorders” (Haskell 25). Dysfunction within the family unit inhibits the normal process of socialization and cognitive development of the self; children are not adequately exposed to the variety of normal social situations consistent with their culture. As they approach adulthood the children are often unable to function outside of that family unit.

This research will argue that when parents abuse their positions as natural figures of authority and impose both their wills and perceptions of reality on their children, they engage in cult-like behaviors and authoritarian principles. The four basic behaviors of cults are: “compliance with the group, dependence on a leader, devaluing the outsider, and avoiding dissent” (Deikman 48). Principles of authoritarianism in the household therefore overlap with characteristics of cult behavior. Researchers Rebekah J. Breyer and David MacPhee define authoritarian child rearing as “parents’ attempt to control children’s behavior in a way that often adheres to theologically motivated [and/or] absolute standards” (126). Households in which a parent controls the information children have access to operate in patterns that mirror cults. Children are unable to critically evaluate their parents and their behaviors, motivations, and demands, and will trust and believe what they are told. This research therefore also seeks to

define the point at which ideology becomes inherently abusive—when it becomes indistinguishable from pathology.

This paper aims to demonstrate a parallel between how cults and dysfunctional family environments operate under the domain of a controlling parent-leader to impair and cripple the cognitive, social, and emotional abilities of the child-follower, regardless of the particular ideology or pathology at work in the household. In order to establish this parallel, I will draw on the theories of psychologists Arthur J. Deikman, Robert E. Haskell, and Alexandra Stein to explore the mirrored structures of cults, dysfunctional families—in particular those centered around addiction—and totalitarian groups. The childhood experiences of Haskell, the son of an alcoholic, Tara Westover, the disowned daughter of a fundamentalist Mormon family, who was denied access to any sort of formal education, and the teenagers of Poplar Grove, an affluent community suffering from an adolescent suicide epidemic, will serve as far reaching and illustrative cases that demonstrate the severity of the mental scars left from highly monitored and controlled futures.

Child Abuse and Psychological Damage: The Lost Youth

Child abuse is borne out of disorganization at the most basic social unit—the home. The more uncontrolled and erratic the environment, the higher the chance of child mistreatment (Breyer 134). An established sense of community plays an important “part of child abuse prevention” (Breyer 134). Broadly defined, child abuse is the “physical or emotional injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child...by a person responsible for the child’s welfare” (Lyden 1). It is typical of abusers to think of themselves as “victims rather than villains, misunderstood by others, not appreciated, treated unfairly, not deserving the hardships encounters” (Deikman 152). Reeling within this mindset, the parent lashes out to gain a

semblance of control within their reality. The clinical research states that “abuse is a family-centered problem that reveals poor parental or caregiver coping skills that affect the entire family” (Lyden 3). The abuse is a symptom of the parent’s fragile psychological state, which is characterized by an inability to function as a caregiver, a source of emotional support and model of proper social behavior. Emotional abuse, the resulting wounds of which are largely invisible and often go undetected, can “be tied to the parent’s poor knowledge of normal child growth and development—the parents expects the child to do or understand things beyond his or her years” (Lyden 1).

The child, meanwhile, at a natural state of subordination, wishes to keep their parents in power. Any child wants to believe that their parent is good and wise, that what they do is right. Reifen Tagar explains that children possess a certain “willingness to internalize their caregivers’ moral agendas” (890). This is evidenced by the fact that children, when faced with external help, are more likely to “underreport rather than overreport abuse” (Lyden 4). Abused children, in a twist of logic, become the guardians of the parents, who are the very source of their pain. Just as in cults, in which dissent is automatically avoided, “the suppression of deviant points of view is often done by subordinates to protect [the leader] from discordant opinions that might damage their confidence. The underlying wish to preserve for all the fantasy of the leader” (Deikman 144). Put in such terms, the child takes on a very adult position of maintaining a semblance of order and decorum, no easy task. Children seemingly let the parent control the situation; parents can only lead insofar as children are willing to prop them up. This will is enhanced by constant the constant fear of facing the wrath of a parent who feels not in control. Children would rather edit themselves, hide away desires or experiences that may clash with their parent’s values, in an

attempt to manage the parent's emotional state. Energy is best first spent towards keeping the parent happy than dealing with the fallout of their anger.

Reality becomes increasingly out of touch as denial operates and invalidates the child's perceptions. Denial is the consequence of this simultaneous push and pull, of "injunctions to not talk, feel, express, or admit to certain feelings" (Haskell 70). Denial perpetuates the family secret and feelings of isolation. Paradoxically, this denial, or lack of feeling, occurs within a setting swimming with constant high-strung emotion. In a dysfunctional family:

Intense feelings are generated by conflict over rules and discipline, the consistency of which may fluctuate from minute to minute. The child is frequently in a state of hypervigilance, waiting, watching, and anticipating what might happen next. The hypervigilance is both acute and chronic. It is acute during crises and chronic on a daily basis. The [dysfunctional] family's "gag rule" or "don't talk rule" leaves the child without sufficient information, so s/he must be constantly vigilant and learn to read the 'signs' of when tempers are about to flare or when all hell is about to break loose (Haskell 183-184).

The state of arousal only serves, however, to bring the family closer together, in chains if not in love. The child, or "the follower," constantly seeks "proximity to the [family] in a failed attempt to attain comfort" (Stein 19). What little comfort is found becomes the accepted standard of care; children will equate this state of terror of love. Stein compares the loss of autonomy and reciprocated emotional attachments as "suicides of the self...: the rejection of one's inner self, of one's family, friends, beliefs, morals" (3). The child severs communications with their own self. Basic emotions are at first unacknowledged and eventually unrecognizable. The abused child is a lost child.

Dealing in Absolutes: Authoritarianism and Total Ideologies

Authoritarian social groups are structured around a leader's total control of their followers. Psychologist Michal Reifen Tagar proposes that "authoritarianism may be

conceptualized as a generalized motive for social conformity” (886). In environments lacking cohesion or direction the appointment of a single leader brings and clarity and focus to the group. This control, however, must be carefully maintained. Authoritarians “emphasize obedience, loyalty, and the suppression of criticism. In the groups they lead, hierarchies of rank are emphasized and autonomy discouraged” (Deikman 71). Changes in social structure therefore threaten any sense of constructed organization. The looming threat of chaos is weaponized by the leader to maintain their position of power and keep followers in line. The followers dwell in constant terror. They fear both their very leader and the possibility of a life without them and the safety of their direction.

In terms of family, employing authoritarian ideology places the parents in a position of total power over their children. The goal of socialization in such households is to “impose submission to parental authority” (Breyer 126). Children—who are already at a natural state of subordination to and dependence on their parents—are taught to obey without question, to follow the leader no matter how capricious or irrational the order. Reifen Tagar writes that “a long line of research shows that adults who are high in authoritarianism...show greater ethnocentrism, xenophobia, political intolerance and prejudice” (883). His research continues to conclude that well before adulthood, children raised in authoritarian households have internalized cues of status to such an extent that when “determining whom to learn from,” they automatically measure the outsider against the ideals of their learned ideology (883). If a stranger deviates from the accepted rules of norms of the child’s parents, then they are automatically not treated as figures whom the child can trust or develop healthy attachment to.

Dissenting views, which threaten the supremacy of the leader, are filtered out. Attempts to affirm the reality of a situation—to seek validation of fears and feelings of unease—either fail

to get off the ground or are met by punishment for threatening the internal social order. Clara Robinson, a former member of the Life Force Psychology cult, explained that “sometimes after a meeting, members would walk home together and say, ‘God, that was weird wasn’t it?’” (Deikman 20). Through careful self-policing, due to fear of being denounced by other followers, and the pressure from such informants, echoes of any shared dissenting opinions are suppressed. Silence reigns. Psychologist Alexandra Stein, who herself was part of a radical leftwing political cult for much of the 1980s, explains that due to the insular social structure of such organizations the only people members can reflect on the experience with are those in the same situation. They are “in effect, forbidden from sharing and reflecting upon their experience with persons outside the system” (Stein 53). This is exacerbated in abusive homes or cults where children-followers vie for favor. Hugh Robinson, Clara’s husband, described how “it was never a very secure favoritism, you could lose it at any point” (Deikman 21). A follower’s sense of personal autonomy is trumped by the will and whim of the leader.

Such a world view, restricted from the beginning, impacts the child’s ability to trust outsiders. Those who come from outside their defined and accepted culture are viewed by wary eyes. Potential safe havens, supportive role models who encourage the development of individual values and a sense of self apart from that defined by the parent, are steered clear of. To trust another adult is to betray the parent, an unthinkable and punishable act. Children sink into isolation in settings outside of the family home. Not only are they isolated from basic knowledge of how society-at-large operates, but they also become “isolated from an authentic relationship to others within the group—allowed only to communicate within the narrow confines of the group-speak and rigid rules of behavior; and, due to the dissociation that is created, the follower is also isolated from his or her self, from his or her own ability to think clearly about the situation”

(Stein 21-22). The child-follower is perpetually lonely, seeking comfort from the false charms of the parent-leader and finding only terror.

Authoritarian ideologies also distort reality as they rely on constant efforts to control children's thought processes and perceptions. While the belief systems of external social groups, such as school or non-familial contacts, may be grounded in empirical knowledge or trial-and-error, the authoritarian parent-leader offers a single unifying truth and demands that the children-followers adhere to a highly prescribed set of behaviors. The children-followers are stranded within an unbreakable social mold. Philosopher Hannah Arendt describes such ideologies as "isms that pretend to have found the key explanation for all the mysteries of life and world" (Stein 12). Just as the leader controls the followers, the ideology controls the external reality by offering constant justifications, all of which originate from the leader's own pathological mind.

An abused child's reality is shrouded also by a general lack of experience. Abused children are not indoctrinated into an abusive situation as autonomous adults, but are most often trapped from birth or a very young age. They are therefore unable to understand their circumstances without any developed points of reference and continue to keep the parent in the pleased position of power, maintaining the witnessed family structure. Deikman phrases the abused child's predicament as such:

A young child's critical evaluation of his or her parent is very difficult because the child's understanding is limited by an egocentric view that relates all events to himself or herself as cause. A child cannot comprehend the network of forces affecting parents and their society; furthermore, critical evaluation may be hazardous and frightening. When a child accurately perceives hypocrisy, selfishness or irrationality in the parent—and says so—he or she risks punishment and the parent's withdrawal (Deikman 156).

A child, for whom escape or external help is not a possibility, remains trapped in the demented social reality of their family. The parent is both a source of love and fear—strong emotions

which are impossible to marry. Stein explains that for such children, “their caregiver is at once the safe haven and also the source of threat or alarm” (33). The child makes excuses for the bad parent—the Mr. Hyde—and props up the good parent—the Dr. Jekyll. Deikman points out that “we are not accustomed to recognizing the effect on us of the threats and rewards of the childhood’s world: the parental frown or the parental smile, the invitation to play or the exclusion from a game, the blissful comfort of being cared for” (49). Children moderate their behavior in order to meet their ultimate goal of winning lasting favor from their parent. Any other ambitions or larger sense of self-preservation falls to the wayside.

It is crucial to point out that the defining characteristic of authoritarian groups is not predicated on the ideology itself—that is to say, whether is it right-wing, left-wing, religious, or radically secular. Rather, the pathology resides in the structure of the social order. Stein argues that groups led by a totalitarian ideology differ from other belief systems in the “nature of the relationship between leader and follower” (Stein 15). The leader steers and the followers bow their heads and row the boat, following and upholding the leader’s absolute control. The ideology is not necessarily a constant or grounded set of beliefs. Instead, it “reflects the personality, the preferences, and the whims of the leader” (Stein 15). At any moment the leader could choose another direction—maintaining control all the while by employing their practiced charisma and fear generated by the ideology. In abusive families this is often manifested by capricious demands by a parent, sudden changes in plans, refusal to fulfill long-standing commitments, or the withholding of basic needs. Essentials of life are transformed into privileges that must be earned by total compliance. Food is restricted, sleep interrupted, privacy denied.

Diseased Socialization: The Hijacked Social Animal

Examining the corrupted process of socialization as it occurs in cults provides a lens of the extreme through which one can see the magnified effect of cognitive impairment, that also manifests in the abusive and dysfunctional household. The aforementioned Clara Robinson described that the price of joining a cult was a “diminished realism” (Deikman 2). Her husband Hugh attributed the “highest point of tension” as trying to figure out and decide which “reality system” he wanted to commit to (Deikman 45). Eventually the Robinsons found their way out, but not before suffering the consequences of their playing into their follower roles for so long and with such ardor. Upon trying to leave for the first time, Hugh was bombarded for an entire uninterrupted day by the leader himself and other subordinates expressing both their deep love and grave disappointment in him over the phone. Hugh, who had begun to construct a wider sense of reality for himself, nearly lost his fragile hold on the external world after this lengthy attack. He found himself unable to hang up and suffered hysterical symptoms. He reports:

I woke up the next morning and it was like I couldn't find my head. Everything that I had put together had been shattered. I had been really beat up...I had been under severe attack from people who thought they were saving me from the devil. Looking back it feels like a snake whispering in my ears for eight hours. This ear is still slightly deaf...the hearing has never totally come back on this side (Deikman 45).

If not for physical notes he took on what he could trust from his sense perceptions, he would have been completely sucked back into the current and eagerly resumed his role without question or further complaint. Facing the external world brought chaos to the Robinsons. Their bodies would shake and minds seize up. This only made the insular world of the cult more appealing. Hugh continues, however, maintaining a clear line of vision regarding the cult:

I could feel a maelstrom, a vortex an I was going to lose my will and be sucked into the center of this thing... I could see in the center... this nice, cozy place, where all your needs were taken care of and it was loving. I remember writing down in big letters, "I've got to get out of here!" (Deikman 46).

Both Hugh and Clara had been raised in loving, functional households, yet found themselves, as adults, trapped in the role of the child. They nearly lost the ability to think critically for themselves, a skill that they had to exercise and purposefully strengthen. Years of forced compliance with the group and the stifling of any murmurs of dissent resulted in the suppression and near extinction of personal morals and principles. They compromised their very beings in order to belong.

Using the Deikman parameters of cult behavior, the family environments of Robert E. Haskell, a child of a severe alcoholic, and Tara Westover, who was raised in a fundamentalist, end-of-times Mormon family, fit the characteristics, namely: "compliance with the group, dependence on a leader, devaluing the outsider and avoiding dissent" (48). Overall, the effect of living out these behaviors is an impaired social ability. Both Haskell and Westover struggled to make themselves meet the demands of functional adulthood.

Haskell spent his childhood caring for his mother. He would clean up her messes of vomit and broken glass and blood and then put himself to bed. His mother, battling a severe case of alcoholism, felt she had no control over her life. She had become pregnant with Haskell accidentally and turned to drink shortly after the birth of her son, unable to control her impulses. Haskell, in turn, inherited these control issues. He describes: "I learned early that if I could control, I could predict. If I could distract my mother, keep her busy dealing with me or something else, the less likelihood there was that she would get drunk—at least as quickly as she would have otherwise" (135). He learned that to approach life and social situations, one should try to control them, an unfortunate impossibility. The responsibilities he faced as a child, fit for

not even most adults, eroded his ability to feel pleasure. He writes, “I found it difficult to feel enjoyment; I found it difficult to play” (151). Children learn much of what constitutes acceptable social behavior from playing. Haskell was denied this chance.

The extent of Haskell’s interrupted socialization is evidenced by his reactions, or non-reactions, to two major life events. At 18, standing at the threshold of adulthood, his mother died. She was 48 and passed away in the hospital, her body spent from abuse. He did not feel the pang of grief or regret or sorrow. Instead, he was relieved, glad that she was finally gone (149). Later, after the birth of his daughter, he was unsure of how to act. He did not feel any sort of shared joy with the other new fathers in the maternity ward. He writes: “Why should I be proud? Rats do it, cats do it; in fact all manner of animals do it. What I felt was great relief that she was normal, physically and mentally” (101). Haskell met both birth and death with relief. His emotional obligations had been fulfilled, in his eyes. He had successfully jumped another hurdle and could now prepare for the next one, rather than remain in the moment and contemplate any sort of deep emotional reaction.

Overall, Haskell faced much of his life with all of his dials turned up to 11. He placed himself on high alert at all times, needlessly:

I was hypervigilant in face-to-face relationships, searching for any cue that may inform me of the mood of the person. Their cues may be verbal, nonverbal, in body positions, an incidental tone of voice, the raising of an eyebrow, or a quiver in their lip. As a consequence, interacting with others has always worn me out (186).

His oversensitive approach came naturally to him. It was his nature. The other people in these interactions were not potential friends or allies, but potential threats, people he might have to appease. His existence was marred by constant self-constructed chaos. He describes: “Living in an almost constant excited state conditioned me to feel that for life to be meaningful it had to be

intense. In its absence there was only depression and boredom. When there were no causes to feed on, I would create crises, both small and large” (187). Normal, healthy situations made him uncomfortable. Peace did not allow him a chance to catch his breath but overwhelmed him. He was most comfortable in disorder. He lived his life “in the society, but not of it” (104).

Westover, the youngest of seven children, was conditioned from birth to comply to the whims of her father. She was taught, instead of washing her hands after using the restroom, to not “piss on her hands” (53). On one instance, when visiting her grandmother, who did not ascribe to the same fervid ideology as Westover’s parents and siblings, she was forced to wash her hands with soap and water. Westover writes: “Grandma led me into the bathroom and watched as I washed my hands, then directed me to dry them on the rose-colored towel. My ears burned, my throat felt hot” (53). This simple act felt like a betrayal. She failed to comply to the established rules and felt punished accordingly by her shame. The expectations demanded by her father so permeated her life that going to the restroom became a battle. She could not use the toilet without feeling an obligation to triumph her father’s beliefs. When her father took to a passage in the Bible pitting honey against milk, he promptly banned all dairy products from the household. Each meal afterwards became a “test of loyalty” (5). On occasion, having grown sick of the seven grain cereal mixed with nothing but water for breakfast, she would escape to her grandmother’s house for a bowl of cornflakes and milk, a breach of trust that she would attempt to atone for throughout the day.

Instead of in school, Westover spent the days of her youth in her father’s junkyard, scrapping and sorting metal. When she hesitated one day to operate a dangerous piece of machinery in her father’s junkyard after watching the metal gears tear a deep gash in her older brother’s arm just moments before, her father said: “I told her to do it, and she will do it.... Or

she won't live under my roof" (140). Her brother stepped up to him, a first for the family, something that stood out in her memory for its rarity, but was bullied into submission. She describes: "Dad could not lose this argument and save face. If I didn't run the [machine], Dad would no longer be Dad" (140). In fear of her life, Westover operated the machine. She let her father win. She had too.

Both victims of cult-like settings and abused children internalize a complete avoidance of anything that could be remotely perceived as dissent. It becomes so unconscious, utterly ingrained, that it is a socialized behavior. The repression goes beyond a turning of the cheek. The children bear the brunt of emotional distress without any output or acknowledgement from themselves or the parents. Emotional manifestations are improperly recognized and cared for, in favor of glossing unrest over to appease the leader, not only a willing action but an unaware automatic response. Westover began to pine for an education as she got older, to spend her childhood energies on matters other than scrapping metal and avoiding injury. She was told by her mother that all she had to do was ask to be sent to school. But she couldn't bring herself to ask. To do so would be to threaten the established hierarchy of the household. Westover describes: "There was something in the hard line of my father's face, in the quiet sigh of supplication he made every morning before he began family prayer, that made me think my curiosity was an obscenity, an affront to all he'd sacrificed to raise me" (61). She graded her natural desires against the rubric of her father's values and marked it as sinful. She pushed it aside and allowed her father to maintain his rule as leader and herself as a favored child.

After moving out of her father's house, Westover found that she was more comfortable in situations where she knew her place as the outsider. She struggled to fit in at her new church. Eventually, she gave up, rejecting the beckons of welcome from potential friends and literally

shut herself away in the corner. She writes: “I was pleased by the familiarity of the arrangement: me, pressed into the corner, away from the other children, a precise reproduction of every Sunday school lesson from my childhood. It was the only sensation of familiarity I’d felt since coming to this place, and I relished it” (159).

Having learned to automatically suppress dissent, abused children lose the very vocabulary to navigate social relationships. Westover was physically abused throughout her childhood by an older brother, but was able to survive those moments by effectively hollowing herself out:

I was able to tell myself, without lying, that it didn’t affect me, that he didn’t affect me, because nothing affected me. I didn’t understand how morbidly right I was. How I had hollowed myself out. For all my obsessing over the consequences of that night, I had misunderstood the vital truth: that its not affecting me, that was its effect (111).

Her non-reaction to moments of horror demonstrate the depths of her atrophied emotional life. When that same brother was involved in an accident and was near death, like Haskell, she did not feel the pain of grief but the acute sensation of relief (127). Both Haskell and Westover began their adulthoods conditioned to the specific social realities of their childhood. The wider reality, outside their homes, was experienced in jerky and stunted efforts to integrate.

Waiting for Miss Honey: Growing Up

Stein defines resiliency as “ ‘the ability to use internal and external resources successfully to resolve stage-salient developmental issues’ and features the capacity to adapt and function well despite stressful circumstances or following traumatic events” (Stein 162). The knowledge on was denied while young or under the influence of a charismatic and terrifying leader-parent is not necessarily denied forever. In Roald Dahl’s book *Matilda*, an ignored and abused schoolgirl is rescued by her loving teaching, Miss Honey, who adopts her way from a life of pain and

limitations. Haskell, who forged himself into something of a success, was not entirely unassisted. After making his way into college in his mid-twenties, he found a mentor in a professor, J.J. Kockelman, a man he considered as a sort of pseudo-father. “When I graduated,” he writes, “he took me out to lunch at a local café and told me of his graduation ceremony in the Netherlands. I still hold this lunch in reverence. This ‘little’ act of kindness and civility loomed like a great banquet in my life” (129). Westover, too, found a mentor in her history professor, to whom she admitted that she had never even heard of the Holocaust or Martin Luther King, Jr. before taking his class. These teachers tethered these lost children to a larger community. They remained on the periphery, but were introduced to the new social expectations and norms of conduct.

Both Westover and Haskell, whose social abilities were hijacked from birth, still had to fight with their instincts in social settings but began to find their own ways to deal. Knowledge became a way out, a foundation on which to build a reality all their own. “Ideas,” Haskell explains, “were quickly becoming my umbilical cord to a life-sustaining force; they were all that stood between me and my being sucked into the gravitational field of an existential black hole” (121). Language became his beacon: “Analogy and metaphor were fundamental cognitive and logical processes. I saw these two particular concepts as universal mental operations...to reduce a multiplicity of realities by equivalence transformations...to universalize as a means to reduce chaos and flux” (Haskell 165). On the other hand, math and its unyielding logic became a safe haven for Westover. She writes:

I began to study trigonometry. There was a solace in its strange formulas and equations. I was drawn to the Pythagorean theorem and its promise of a universal—the ability to predict the nature of any three points containing a right angle, anywhere, always. What I knew of physics I had learned in the junkyard, where the physical world often seemed unstable, capricious. But here was a principle through which the dimensions of life could be defined, captured. Perhaps reality was not wholly volatile. Perhaps it could be explained, predicted. Perhaps it could be made to make sense (125).

The effects of experiences of childhood abuse extend far beyond impaired social functioning. They can include “disruption to sexual functioning, disruption to sense of self, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and other mental health concerns” (Doyle 12). Haskell, as previously stated, found that he had no idea how to even approach the concept of play. Playing, like the anchors of metaphor and mathematics, abstracts reality into bite sized micro-interactions. Embracing the lost aspects of one’s childhood, creating social roots in a different setting, is a way of recovering the buried child within. Corrupted behaviors, like the constant denial of one’s inner emotional state or daydreaming night and day, which once served an important part in the survival of the child but are no longer useful, can be laid to rest. For this reason, therapies such as Sandplay has been used as means of helping adult-children grow up, grow past the wounds of their childhood. This form of therapy, which involves the patient playing with a sandbox while talking to a therapist, allows clients to “externalize the experience of their internal worlds, providing physical manifestations of their internal processes in the sand” (13).

Social Control and Child Abuse in Stable Communities

Cults are so named for their immediately noticeable segregation from society at large. Pathological traits, however, found in these isolated pockets persist in outwardly secure communities. The town of Poplar Grove, a pseudonym given to an upper-class suburb with one of the best school districts in the state, provides an example for how cult behavior can permeate seemingly functional environments and destroy lives. Researchers Anna Mueller and Seth Abrutyn attempt to provide an explanation for the phenomenon of teen suicide within affluent communities through a socio-psychological lens, also by employing the theories of noted sociologist Emile Durkheim. Suicide, from a strictly psychological lens is viewed as the result of

a combination of high levels of psychological pain and an ability to harm oneself (878).

Durkheim was among the first to examine suicide as a social defect, the result of a structural problem, rather than an individual failing, and theorized that people kill themselves due to feeling disconnected or too connected to others. Group connection is heightened by increased integration, defined as the “extent of social relations binding a person or group to others,” and regulation, the “cultural directives and cultural coherence of social groups” (880). Highly integrated and regulated groups impose and amplify social demands on the individual. When regulation turns into overregulation, the resources of the individual are continually taxed and exact an emotional toll, which amounts to psychological abuse.

Cohesive social groups are also composed of defined social norms and expectations of behavior, which limit the acceptable beliefs and identities available to the individual. Durkheim’s theory of mechanical solidarity, a group cohesion produced from the imposition of the collective will over the individual, is based in controlling the individual and group behavior, and shows the lack of naturally occurring social connections. Those who stray from norms receive sanctions and are made to feel as deviant or ‘other’ until their behavior is corrected. From the years 2000 to 2015, 16 students of the Poplar Grove school system killed themselves. One father described the town as being a very tight-knit community with an ever present safety net, which in this case suffocated rather than protected. Social credits were earned through the sharing of children’s achievements and, like in other small towns, everyone knew each other’s business. Poplar Grove, a community with high levels of integration and regulation, was described as a “pressure cooker and a fishbowl” (892). Success was defined in rigid terms and to die was in multiple cases seen as a better alternative to failure.

It is important to remember that “no adult is a mere product of childhood. There is always a forward momentum to the self that does not follow simple cause and effect. Each self becomes a constellation of a collage that is ever in motion, a ‘self-system’ or ‘self-process’” (Lifton 12). Parts can be discarded at will, with practice, with help, the time. Who one is now is not necessarily who they will be, nor who they were. The self can be reclaimed, remembered, or constructed entirely anew from scratch. Healing is possible. Reality, belief systems, values can likewise be built, ones that steer clear from absolutes and paranoia and fear and openly embrace all that the future may hold.

Ultimately, however, the pathology of control can be sustained through generations. Child abusers are often “abused themselves or observed abuse in their families” (Lyden 2). There is a built-in failsafe in thinking of such family interactions as acceptable. Breyer explains “when individuals experienced harsh punishments in childhood, which may be more likely in authoritarian families, they are less likely to consider such behaviors to be abusive. In conservative communities, deviates from these social norms may be viewed as an unacceptable challenge to authority, consistent with authoritarian ideology” (128). Anyone can say, “I turned out fine,” a nod to the denial of feelings first learned in childhood. As Haskell reports:

The offspring of such dysfunctional families often exhibit narcissistic, self-centered, acting-out behaviors; they tend to be less emotionally attached to other people and to society. As a consequence, they tend to be less involved in social activity. In turn, these offspring are often less able to appropriately socialize their children psychosocially, leading to a second generation-effect on their children (26).

Matildas don’t always end up with their own Miss Honeys.

Cult behaviors are not found exclusively in isolated social environments. Any family or social group can be grounded in a system of terror and control behind closed doors. Totalitarian ideologies, which offer absolute truths and shift all power to a single leader impair the cognitive

abilities of those who love within the bounds of its reality. Parents who wish to write their child's future, to direct rather than influence, to control rather than lead, are not raising their offspring but deliberately constructing barriers. These children do not own themselves. They are their parent's child.

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