

Post- Leverage Effects in More Detail

I cannot understate how radically my experience of life changed after leaving Leverage in 2019 from how it was prior.

The names of members of leadership or even those who were once friends of mine, jargon terms we used, or references to places in Oakland would cause my nervous system to go into fight-or-flight and my thoughts would freeze. I was always shocked when people who were there or adjacent spoke casually about those people, places, or times; to me, it felt like an alternate reality I was busy pretending didn't exist, and the mention of it shocked and paralyzed me. I struggled to sleep; my partner in the year after leaving had to sleep elsewhere because I'd wake up with tears streaming down my face, or my throat closed in panic, or else I'd spend hours tossing and turning, my legs unable to settle, my thoughts blurry and full of shame. My dreams were full of people I'd known at Leverage taking over my new life, criticizing me and being believed by everyone I loved, or convincing childhood friends of mine to join their group and then spurn me. Themes of invasion and ostracization emerged again and again, violations of a world in which I'd thought was safe.

I struggled enormously with shame. My thoughts spiraled for months at a time. *Why am I the only person affected by this* (I'm not, but I thought so)? *Why did I let these people do this to me? What is wrong with me? Am I weak? Am I too open, too innocent, too naïve, too stupid, too female? Am I what they said; ungrateful, manipulative, attention-seeking, unagentic, unambitious, floopy, too artsy? Is my great artistic love, acting, what they said? Is it stupid, wasteful, self-indulgent, egotistical, not real, not important? Does it say something shameful and embarrassing and permanent about me that I love it?*

I couldn't stop trying to "debug" or fix myself. Every thought I had, I attacked. Every problem I had, I blamed myself. *I should know how to introspect. I was trained by the best in the world.* If it isn't working, it's because I'm not trying hard enough. If I'm suffering, it's embarrassing-- I was trained with tools that should fix all of this, if I only apply them. What should I do about this emotional pattern? That thought spiral? That introspective block? I should sit down and hammer it out. I should let it go. I should address the avoidance. I should just fix it now, and quick. I should be different, change faster, diagnose myself more effectively, release that muscle sooner, etc.

I tried to seek help, but I didn't trust therapists; it took about a year before I could have a session without dissociating intensely. I initially believed that anyone working without Leverage's tools was indubitably a hack, a credentialed automaton. In addition, working with therapists was a trigger from my time at Leverage; I'd be flooded with memories, distrust, shame, judgment, elitism, self-hatred and confusion whenever I entered a session. Going meta on this response with a therapist also matched patterns from Leverage, so the dissociation and panic would get even worse. The first thing a therapist did that started to de-escalate this was to basically own their subjectivity and ask me to trust my own perceptions; they told me that if I picked up on something going on with them that didn't match what they were saying, maybe I

was attuned to something they weren't, and I was welcome to tell them, if I felt comfortable. I didn't even know I needed to hear this, and it was the first baby step toward trusting someone again.

My relationship with my family suffered. My mom was terrified for me. My extended relatives wondered if I had a mental illness, based on my mom's descriptions of me on the phone, although my mom knew better; it was too sudden, and I was telling her again and again, it had something to do with this Leverage place. I thought I'd been in—"a cult, or something, I don't know, I know it sounds crazy-- please believe me." I came home for three months to recover, and she said I didn't smile or laugh for the first two. The first time I did, she started crying with relief.

I suddenly had little access to my bodily sensations. I used to love soccer, yoga, dancing, working out, biking, and had long performed onstage in NYC, expressing character with my body. I had a long history of breath and voice work from my acting classes. I tried to take a somatic-focused acting class to study Feldenkreis and voice work-- I had to quit because I kept having panic attacks, then becoming dazed and emotional for days afterward. I sent them an embarrassed email explaining that I seemed to have some trauma, or something...I don't know, I'd been in this kind of toxic group, I didn't know how to explain it, maybe it was a cult, I was sorry.

Where once I'd been unusually excellent at articulating my inner state to others, I now felt like a mutant, a freak, defiled, outside. What do you say to someone when they ask, "how are you?" Your entire world is crumbling, you hate and doubt yourself, you're convinced your mind is full of "demons" and no longer trust your internal experience is "you," people you love have attacked and shamed you, and all of it in such an embarrassing, creepy, societally illegible way? It would've almost been easier if I'd had an abusive boyfriend; people know how to respond to that. They don't say, "Oh cool! I love that TV show *Maid*." But when it's a "cult," it's exotic, and oddly kind of harmless. "Oh, cool, I love that documentary '*Wild Wild Country*.'" I had no idea how to match my inner world to my outer; they were completely, utterly separate. I was stunned and disturbed by my alienation, the likes of which I'd never experienced before.

Especially the first few months after leaving, I experienced these strange, trance-like hours where I couldn't really think straight, choose what to do, or even notice this was happening until it was over (I learned later this is a common after-effect of a certain kind of trauma caused by environments that enforce intense, specific mental practices). I was exhausted for at least six months after leaving, and to this day I get overstimulated far faster than I used to—loud environments upset and disorient me, where I used to be the kind of person who could deeply read Anne Carson with the TV is blasting.

My relationships suffered. I was reactive, frightened, desperate for validation. I was enraged at inappropriate times, or else absolutely animal-level terrified of specific people in ways people around me couldn't understand. I'd lash out, then trip over myself to apologize, full of shame and surprise. On top of it, some cognitive part of me was watching this frightened for myself—"okay, this isn't good. What the fuck is all this. This isn't you."

I was afraid to talk about my experiences. I thought it would make them more real. I didn't know how to talk about "magic", and thought I might accidentally call demons to me if I thought the wrong thoughts. I was obsessed, I mean obsessed with ridding myself of "objects" or "demons," and spent literal months in this frame, terrified of what might be hiding in my mind that wasn't 'me' but was manipulating or affecting me. I 'debugged' these things for hours in the middle of the night, typing away at my laptop, having conversations with myself, engaged in endless private exorcisms, with no frame in which to even explain these experiences to myself, let alone others.

I hurt my partner, bringing into our relationship a framework of "fixing" and "debugging." As hard as I tried not to carry all that toxicity forward, there was no way I wasn't going to until it was more deeply processed. Our relationship was full of the expectation of deep psychological change from the other. That is incredibly dysfunctional, damaging, and hurtful, and I regret my contributions to that deeply; I honestly think I didn't know how to have intimate relationships anymore than weren't premised on both people already being bad and needing to change, and imminently.

One of the biggest effects has been a kind of continuity fragmentation (I suspect this is a common response to any kind of severe trauma, because there are memories that need to be pocketed away and not integrated). I had memory loss, and still actually do, somewhat—when I was writing this, a trusted friend noted, "you need to provide specific examples." When I started to try to do that, I was derailed from writing for three days while I processed all the memories that came up. I had carefully forgotten certain aspects of how it felt to be there, to be spoken to in those ways, to be so deeply immersed in that culture, to have taken its goals into my own being so deeply. I struggle to feel one part of my history has anything to do with the other. The worlds before, during and after *Leverage* have often felt like three different TV shows that play on different channels.

Honestly, the fallout from this is still happening. It's not all bad, and maybe at some point I'll write about everything I've learned, because it's a hell of a lot. This should suffice for now.