

## Domestic Violence in a Fabricated Family: Reflecting on a Cult Next Door

By Elizabeth R. Burchard

Stereotypes of domestic violence (DV) or intimate-partner violence (IPV) and cults differ significantly. The popular concept of DV or IPV is physical abuse perpetrated by a man on his intimate partner, while most people hearing the word *cult* envisage a socially deviant lifestyle, zealous devotion to a guru figure, and mass suicide. Although neither stereotype is accurate or inclusive of all the nuances of the phenomena they reference, in both DV and IPV, and in cultic relationships generally, a dynamic of dominance and subjugation is at the core.

The cult leader or domestic abuser hones in on his<sup>1</sup> target's vulnerabilities, positions himself as a parent figure, and mounts a campaign of disempowerment to create childlike dependency. Inspiring both love and fear, he uses coercive control to maintain an addictive trauma bond (Dutton & Painter, 1993) while artfully blocking any routes of escape. The cultic abuser often presents with symptoms of three psychiatric disorders, which work synergistically: narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders, and delusional disorder, grandiose type (i.e., messiah complex or megalomania). Character traits of these diseases (e.g., lack of empathy, entitlement, disregard for others' safety) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) permit him to abuse such human rights as safety, adequate food, shelter, rest, fair compensation for labor, and respect for human dignity. With coercive tactics, he causes his victim to relinquish her own best interests, exploiting her to gain perquisites such as labor, material assets, sex, childbearing, adoration, and power, among others. The two systems have much in common, such as a distorted sense of commitment and obligation, authoritarian rules with severe punishments, egregious personal boundary violations, and a façade developed for outsiders. Therefore, I suggest that (a) cults may be characterized as DV in a fabricated family, and (b) DV or IPV may be characterized as a one-on-one cult.

During my two decades with the guru of a small, New Age cult in New York City, I experienced both interpersonal violence and cultic abuse. In the following, I refer to the domestic abuser and the cultic abuser interchangeably, and I illustrate both from my personal experience as portrayed in my published account of these years, *The Cult Next Door: A Manhattan Memoir* (2017). My journey progressed through four stages: (1) deceptive recruitment, (2) totalistic indoctrination, (3) coercive maintenance, and (4) emancipative emigration.<sup>2</sup>

### Stage 1: Deceptive Recruitment

During the first stage, a relationship is initiated between the abuser and the victim. Highly attuned to vulnerability and naiveté, the cultic leader/domestic abuser presents an authoritative and benevolent front. Addressing her needs, wants, and hopes, he grooms her through deft manipulation of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

#### Manipulation of Thought

The relationship begins with a sales pitch. Spinning propaganda and false promises, the abuser speaks to the heart's desires of the victim—perhaps love, community, wealth, solutions to her problems, answers to life's big questions, or even unending bliss.

I met the guru, George, in 1977 during my Thanksgiving vacation from Swarthmore College, where I was a pre-med student. A parentified only child deprived of love, I was the perfect target—swiss cheese and desperate to fill the holes. George was a biofeedback technician on staff in the office of a Manhattan psychiatrist where my mother had scheduled me to receive stress reduction treatments. George seemed

gentle, thoughtful, and wise. He painted himself as a spiritual seeker bushwhacking a path to freedom from current and inevitable future disasters. The problem lay in the "Program," as he dubbed it. "We are trained like robots, blocking us from reaching our true potential. Scientists have proven we only use 3% of the brain; I'm going to wake up the other 97%." To me, his novel perspective was brimming with potential. I had to know more. Later, I discovered that his "unique" philosophies were a concoction of New Age principles garnered from popular self-help books and a weekend spent at an EST seminar. (Burchard, 2020)

### **Manipulation of Emotion**

The abuser exudes confidence, charm, and charisma. During an initial honeymoon period, he represents himself as a safe haven in which the target feels accepted, significant, and loved. Chameleon-like, he transforms into whomever she needs him to be (e.g., father, priest, advisor, lover), love-bombing her with ingratiation and imposing activities that compromise critical thinking, increase suggestibility, and intensify emotions (e.g., sex, alcohol, drugs, chanting, dancing, praying, vigorous exercise).

One day, George kissed me on the cheek. Instantly, I was in love, and I *knew* he loved me too. He quickly became father, mentor, and best friend. During sessions, he taught me how to "focus." We would stare at each other, our eyes locked. Eventually, the room filled with light, and I saw auras around everything. He identified this as "universal life energy," to which "the dead robots in the Crazy World are too stupid to pay attention." Soon, he developed his signature "head-spinning" where he shook his head back and forth rapidly to release the "Energy," a unique, intelligent force that would clear out the Program and lead us to freedom. Soon after my 18th birthday, he seduced me. Those encounters were scary and intoxicating. George swore me to secrecy. He had a wife and two preteen children. (Burchard, 2020)

### **Manipulation of Behavior**

The abuser infiltrates the target's life, consumes her schedule, and redirects her plans. He convinces her to participate in activities generated by the cultic system and to socialize with him/other members. With increased involvement come requests for concessions on her part. Convincing her to change her plans for him or extracting a financial contribution are common.

Within a year, George was fired. Taking five of the psychiatrist's patients with him, he opened up shop in my mother's Upper West Side apartment where we all attended a weekly group meeting. After a lonely childhood, this new family felt like exactly what I had been missing. George encouraged us to spend time with each other to reinforce his teachings. "Those dumbos in the Crazy World will hold you back. You should only visit with them to break your connections and to learn how *not* to live." Obediently, my mother and I abandoned the few friends and family that we had. George had cast his spell, successfully installing himself at the center of our universe. (Burchard, 2020)

### **Stage 2: Totalistic Indoctrination**

The second stage involves reprogramming ("unfreezing and changing"; Hassan, 1990, p. 67) and commitment ("refreezing"; Hassan, 1990, p. 67). It is marked by contrived scenarios and strategically applied tools of influence, prompting increasing levels of compliance on the victim's part. The abuser erases the past of the victim and frames her present, forging a cultic pseudopersonality compatible with his self-serving autocracy wherein roles and power dynamics are defined to suit his agenda. Employing coercive tactics cloaked beneath half-truths and distractions, the abuser works diligently to assimilate the victim into his distorted, alternate reality. Eventually, as she moves toward

full submission to his will, the perpetrator's mask slips and his abusive practices progressively emerge.

### **Unfreezing and Changing**

The hallmarks of the unfreezing and changing (Hassan, 1990, p. 67) phase are the stripping of the victim's authentic identity and the construction of a pseudoidentity through isolation and engulfment. To establish a foundation for change, the perpetrator launches a campaign of identity disassembly. He may change the victim's appellation, clothing, or hairstyle. Through suggestion, condemnation, or outright demand, he provokes severance from her social ties—particularly those that are supportive and loving—inserting himself (or cult group members) in lieu of them. She may be coerced into discontinuing her education, resigning from her place of employment, or disaffiliating from other groups and institutions. To create disempowerment and dependency, he controls how her basic needs such as food, clothing, bathing, and toileting are met. He may deny her privacy, subject her to degrading conditions, interrupt sleep, or overschedule her to the point of exhaustion. While she adjusts to and practices abuser-defined lifestyle changes, he introduces stress, fear, and ultimately, terror, in stark contrast to the honeymoon. This process completes the trauma bond—the superglue that tethers victim to abuser—an addictive state of instability marked by unpredictable rewards and punishments. Thus, the cultic abuser fabricates his omnipotence; he is the ultimate authority over all.

After completing my bachelor's degree in biochemistry, I gave up my plans to attend medical school, focusing instead on George. There were about 15 devotees, and we called ourselves the "Group." While holding jobs in the real world and sharing homes with unenlightened family, we steadily separated ourselves, both mentally and emotionally. George claimed that without the Energy, there was no truth. Thus, all outsiders lacked credibility. According to him, spending time in his presence was the only path to spiritual freedom and safety. Competition surged as we all attended numerous, costly sessions, seeking to top one another. Exhausting our finances to feed the addiction, many of us had trouble paying basic expenses.

George's personality began to change. Unpredictably, his sweet, fatherly disposition gave way to violent rage. Murderously ranting, he called us cowards, ungrateful failures, and destructive to the quest. We trembled in fear as he reminded us that he had three black belts and knew how to kill someone. Randomly, he would choose a target for the hot seat and demand them to "stop resisting the Energy." To avoid similar treatment, the rest of us contributed to the attack, proving we knew better. Escalating, he would eject the terrified devotee from his house under threat of permanent banishment. Expulsion meant certain destruction. How could we survive outside where no one knew what George had discovered? Thus inevitably, after much apologizing and pleading, he would relent, magnanimously offering one more final chance. His control over present and future was absolute. (Burchard, 2020)

### **Refreezing**

Separated from her former life and stripped of any sense of agency, the victim's cultic identity takes hold and solidifies (refreezing; Hassan, 1990, p. 67). The past fades, along with her authentic self and her precult values, plans, and priorities. As she submits to bondage, alternative lifestyles are eliminated from consideration and the outside world loses all credibility. Finally, an initiation ritual may seal the deal, such as a wedding or other ceremony.

George began to preach an apocalyptic message, characterizing himself as Messiah—the only hope for humanity. Our identities changed in tandem. We were now spiritual Navy SEALs. Our mission was two-fold: ingest George's energy to save ourselves and recruit others. We all sensed the impending spiritual cataclysm that

would “turn any who weren’t prepared to burnt toast.” There was no time to waste. Resigned to permanent separation from society, we knew that every thought in our heads was a lie and part of the Program, and we worked frantically, 24/7, to rewire ourselves. (Burchard, 2020)

### **Stage 3: Coercive Maintenance**

As the second stage progresses toward the third, the guru continues to employ his indoctrination tactics, now in full force. Although the devotee has assimilated into the totalitarian system, the possibility that her oppressed soul will seek freedom is an ever-present threat. To squash potential rebellion and protect his kingdom, the abuser exercises his mastery of coercive control in four overlapping domains: behavior, information, emotion, and thought (BITE; Hassan, 2016, p. 33).

#### **Behavior Control**

Cultic systems are of necessity impregnated with stringent rules to maintain order in a narrow range. Nonconforming behaviors are a threat to equilibrium, particularly if they lead to self-determination, empowerment, or nurturing. To discourage these, the perpetrator, as parent and lawmaker, regulates the victim’s physical reality, including relationships, sex, finances, employment, and medical treatment, among others.

After a few years, I was assigned a male mate [Mike], so the Group could study a relationship. Mike was chronically unemployed, and for eight years as George’s lab rat, against my will, I paid for his [Mike’s] food, shelter, and sessions with George, who would not allow me to end the relationship. He said, “You’re paying for your education to work out your weaknesses with men.” During that time, the relationship between me and my mother devolved into sibling rivalry as we competed for elevated roles such as A+ student, best recruiter, or George’s mistress. Craving his approval, we consulted George about everything: employment, finances, and holiday invitations from non-believing family members. Much of the Crazy World was forbidden, especially doctors. (Burchard, 2020)

#### **Information Control**

Input from any source (e.g., public media, outsiders) that contradicts the doctrine is particularly troublesome to the abuser. His double standards and injustices *must* be guarded against exposure. To maintain saturation with his personal branding, he may block contradictory information by limiting or forbidding computer, telephone, and television use, along with reading material. Intrafamilial communication is controlled, including blacklisted topics related to his exploitation and abuse. Finally, to gain social support, he presents an inoffensive and benevolent front to outsiders. Only familiar with Dr. Jekyll, who would believe claims levied against Mr. Hyde? The victim is on her own.

#### **Thought Control**

The perpetrator contrives and reinforces rationalizations to justify the status quo. These justifications are ingested by the abused and serve as thought and emotion-stopping techniques to thwart thoughts and feelings of discontent and rebellion. Doubts and questions challenging the abuser’s authority are handily quashed, and with violence as necessary. Finally, he maintains instability by changing the rules at whim; the abused walks on eggshells in a state of relentless anticipatory anxiety.

#### **Emotion Control**

Within the totalistic system, the victim languishes in an emotional straitjacket. She is specially chosen, so happiness is the only logical and acceptable feeling to have and to express. Normal human responses to injustice and mistreatment (e.g., anger, drive to retaliate, sense of violation, horror) must be suppressed. The victim is further crippled by

chronic tension in a fear-laden environment: fear of punishment, fear of failure, and fear of expulsion. Cult devotees and victims of intimate partners alike commonly suffer from Battered Woman Syndrome: They are in a constant state of fear, including for their safety; they hide, deny, or justify the abuse; they believe in the abuser's omnipotence (Walker, 1979).

Before our eyes, George quickly became a millionaire while we descended into poverty. His "law of reciprocity" justified the "investment" in our future salvation. The money would come back to us ten-fold. Topics related to George's double standard were blacklisted. (His family had health insurance, furnished an ample suburban home, and pursued higher education.) George claimed that the Energy immersed him in bliss. Therefore, any other state was evidence of failure, inspiring feelings of guilt and shame. Doubts and challenges equaled ingratitude and risked expulsion. (Burchard, 2020)

### Self-Preservation

Lacking opportunities for interpersonal dialogue driven by independent and creative thinking, the victim's capacity for rational and analytical cognition atrophies, weakening her inborn, biological, survival responses to stress and threat, maintaining her disempowerment, and further advantaging the abuser. Cult-induced mental-health issues such as anxiety, depression, and psychosis take center stage, monopolizing her inner world. Stress hormones released from fight/flight survival reactions exhaust the body and compromise the immune system, resulting in somatic symptoms and illness. Dissociation from severe abuse interferes with proper memory storage, keeping her in a fog. Chronically numb, seeking to change her circumstances isn't even a concept. *Struggling to cope takes up all of her resources*. Fear also keeps her from exiting: fear of losing everything for which she has worked and hoped, fear of retaliation, and existential fear of annihilation should she challenge her infantile attachment to the abuser.

I was in for seventeen years when George went over the edge. One day, while strolling on a Long Island beach, he "discovered" the soul of his recently deceased, black Labrador retriever in a white palm-sized rock. Thus, the "Black Dog Religion" and a new mission were born—the resurrection of the family pet who would lead us to the next spiritual level. George's evidence? *Dog is god* spelled backward. "Not in French," I challenged, and paid dearly for that remark. Nauseated by the stench of rotting flesh and horrified as I watched the other devotees follow, sheep-like, it was the first time that I disagreed—privately. Years of chronic stress had taken their toll. Wracked with severe asthma, relentless anxiety, overwhelming depression, and chronic dissociation, my coping skills were fading fast. Also, I was out of money; and at age 35, I cashed in my IRA. George blamed my financial ruin on my lack of devotion. Beaten down, I was ready to consider a new perspective, but I did not know it yet. (Burchard, 2020)

### Stage 4: Emancipative Emigration

Eventually, with opportune timing and mobilized resources, the victim may leave. Perhaps, having been pushed too far, she bolts from intolerable circumstances. Conversely, if her commitment has weakened, the leader may view her as no longer useful and eject her. Or outsiders may help to break the spell by offering knowledge, friendship, and other support. If the victim does manage to leave, rejoining the world brings new challenges as she copes with culture shock while seeking healing from trauma and reconstructing a new life.

## Getting Out

An outsider reaching in and forming an “escape hatch attachment” (Stein, 2017) is one way that a victim may exit a cultic relationship. She may also be expelled if she is no longer productive or her assets have been depleted.

In 1992, the Group joined United We Stand America supporting Ross Perot. I met there a new friend who would open the door to my escape. Judy was one of the local members who observed our strange, robotic behavior, and our glassy-eyed stares. Sensing that I was in trouble, she befriended me. To confirm her suspicions, that this was indeed a “cult next door,” she went undercover, attending a few of George’s weekly group meetings. Over three years and numerous Dunkin’ Donuts cups of coffee, Judy opened my eyes to George’s hypocrisy and self-serving agenda. Yet, leaving was not a thought, and I continued to pay (on credit cards) to attend daily resurrection sessions. One pivotal day, while George stared in awe at his dog’s ghost floating above the coffee table, I finally recognized insanity in his eyes. *How could I have not seen it before?* At that moment, George lost all credibility. Beyond broke, I pulled back on my attendance. With that, George threw me out for insubordination. Frozen in shock, I knew he had done me a favor, and I never looked back. Judy congratulated me on my graduation. God bless her, she never once told me to leave, but she had always known where I was headed. (Burchard, 2020)

## Restoration

Exit costs can be massive. These include multiple and profound losses: identity, purpose, shelter, property, financial resources, and social ties, among many others. Pandora’s Box of emotion opens, overflowing with confusion, grief, anger, and loneliness. If the victim has been in a severely isolating relationship for an extensive period, she lacks social skills and knowledge of popular culture, which can induce senses of disorientation and disconnection. Her boundaries have been violated to the point of extinction, making it difficult to form new, safe, social connections. Rebuilding her life involves moving from dependency to self-determination, engaging in critical thinking and decision-making, shedding her pseudoidentity and reconnecting with her precult personality, gathering material resources and social capital, and much more. Finally, as she evolves from victim to survivor, she will benefit from working through her trauma with a well-trained therapist, and perhaps a support group.

A new season began filled with overwhelming challenges. The Group abandoned me. In one decisive moment, I lost my entire family, and Judy was appalled at the cruelty. No longer defined by my position on George’s chessboard, my identity was shattered. I was chronically exhausted, anxious, and grief-stricken. Socially, I had no idea how to function, and people found me strange. Slowly, the loss of irreplaceable years to a con man and a lie began to sink in, triggering shame, outrage, and fantasies of revenge. Constructing a new life from scratch would be a monumental task. However, for the first time in forever, I tasted precious freedom and safety, and for those, I was immeasurably grateful. (Burchard, 2020)

Cultic relationships are a rampant, cancerous social problem. In contrast to healthy mutuality marked by respect for human dignity, they are a one-way street—a system of dominance and submission in which, through violation of human rights, malevolently intelligent abusers gain at the expense of those they subjugate. My hope in writing this paper is to help elucidate the nature of the abuse common to cultic groups and interpersonal violence, so that we may be more effective protecting potential victims and holding perpetrators to account.

## Notes

[1] For simplicity in this article, I use *he* and associated gender pronouns to indicate the abuser, and *she* and associated gender pronouns to indicate the victim, although the abuser may be either man or woman, and the victim may be either, as well.

[2] The vignettes in this paper were adapted from my book *The Cult Next Door: A Manhattan Memoir* (Burchard & Carlone, 2017) for the ICSA Conversation, *Domestic Violence in a Fabricated Family: Reflecting on a Cult Next Door* (January 2020, New York, NY).

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