

A LINE ON LIFE

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You, I and Cults *

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In recent years, we have heard about various cults whose members died, including Marshall Applewhite's Heaven's Gate, David Koresh's Branch Davidians, and Jim Jones' People's Temple. In finding cause for this deviant behavior, most of us blame the **dispositional** factors – personal qualities of the individuals involved. We attach negative labels to the members like "*kooks, weirdos, gullible, stupid, evil.*" This allows us to feel less vulnerable to such groups.

Philip Zimbardo, an eminent social psychologist at Stanford University and a former president of the American Psychological Association, has worked closely with survivors of People's Temple and other cults. Rather than "*blaming the victims,*" he offers a **situational** explanation. Zimbardo views cults as a social occurrence that could happen to any one of us. Rather than making moralistic judgments "*after the fact,*" we need to ask about the beginning. What was so appealing about this group to get people to voluntarily join? "*What needs was this group fulfilling that were not being met by 'traditional society'?*"

From his investigations, Zimbardo offers several basic ground rules for his interpretation.

- "***No one ever joins a 'cult.'***" They join groups that will satisfy their important – but unmet – needs. These groups only become cults when they are seen as "*deceptive, defective, or opposing basic values of their society.*"
- **Cults represent basic societal values that are missing for its members.** For the members, their society has failed in meeting these values. This is a major recruiting point for any cult.
- "***If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything.***" In times of rapid cultural change such as now, some people do not have a strong value system that guides them. Lost and seeking a moral anchor, they are likely to grasp at promises of any group. They fail to examine the group's ability to actually fulfill these promises.
- **You or I can be recruited into doing the bidding of a cult.** Under certain situations, any of us is vulnerable. Even us "*normal, average, intelligent*" people can be influenced. We may be persuaded to do immoral, irrational and destructive acts that are against our values. None of us are immune.

- **Cults do not have any "special" power.** Their methods of recruiting and indoctrinating are the basic tactics of social influence used by professionals and organizations in our society. However, they are more intensely applied by cults.

With a new millennium close at hand, some people view this a sign of impending change in the world order. At the same time, our changing society poses many contradictions. We have made remarkable advances in science and technology, yet anti-scientific values flourish. Beliefs in the occult and paranormal are common. (What's your astrological sign?) Government and religious organizations promote "*family values*," yet reports of divorce and spouse/child abuse are increasing. We fear crime on our streets and drugs in our schools. The economic gap – between the few who are rich and powerful and the masses who are poor and powerless – grows. (Sounds hopeless, doesn't it?)

*"Follow me,
I know the path
to sanity, security
and salvation."
Marshall Applewhite*

Now, imagine finding a group in which you are loved, respected and needed. It gives you an identity, security, and a sense of purpose. The group seems to have an ideology that will improve human life. It offers simple solutions to very complex social and moral problems that we deal with every day. The group may even promise immortality. (Sounds terrific, doesn't it?) It would be even more seductive, if the appeals were made by a trusted person in familiar surroundings. (Once people become members, they are pushed to recruit family members, friends, acquaintances and co-workers.)

If important personal needs have not been met, we would be even more vulnerable. This is especially true with people whose lives are in transition. Such changes include moving, dropping out of school, parental divorce, broken romances, or giving up a traditional religion that seems irrelevant.

Cult recruiting is relatively common. In a 1980 study, Zimbardo interviewed 1000 randomly selected high school students from the San Francisco Bay area. Over half (54%) had received one recruiting attempt from a cult member. Almost as many (40%) had faced 3-5 attempts. Besides recruiting from people in your churches, schools, home and work, the Internet has become another source of pressure to join.

Most groups soliciting members are not a threat, but there are some conditions that indicate danger. We need to be wary, if the group –

- demands unquestioning obedience and loyalty.

- wants you to cut ties with family, friends and the outside community.
- wants you to sign over all or most of your worldly goods.
- claims to have special knowledge that can only be revealed to insiders.

As threatening as it is, the situation is far from hopeless. There is a way to increase immunity against the deceptions and distortions of cult recruiting. We can prevent our children and neighbors from joining these destructive groups. To do this, we need to create our own "*perfect cult*." In other words, we can provide our children with the love, care, acceptance and values that they need. At a broader level, we can band together with others to help our society live up to its values. We can share our common humanity with others. The more we do that, the less cults will attract potential recruits. We can avoid the tragedies suffered by the members of Heaven's Gate and other cults.

* Adapted from Philip Zimbardo's "What messages are behind today's cults?" [*The APA Monitor*](#), May, 1997, page 14.