

“Merchant of Chaos” Takes Scientology Course

by Dennis Wheeler

Part 3 in a series

“You can start tonight,” said Diana as I handed her \$45 in cash. She gave me some change and quickly filled out two receipts — one for the course itself and the other for a book, *Scientology: A New Slant on Life* by L. Ron Hubbard, founder of the Church of Scientology. “Thank you for contributing to the expansion of Scientology,” read the receipts. And on the back, in red, was printed “The True Story of Scientology” by L. Ron Hubbard. The story ran as follows:

“1. A philosopher develops a philosophy about life and death;

“2. People find it interesting;

“3. People find it works;

“4. People pass it along to others;

“5. It grows.”

“When we examine this extremely accurate and very brief account, we see that there must be in our civilization some very disturbing elements for anything else to be believed about Scientology. These disturbing elements are the Merchants of Chaos. They deal in confusion and upset. Their daily bread is made by creating chaos. If chaos were to lessen, so would their incomes.”

I'd just added \$44.54 to the coffers of Scientology, and I immediately flinched. After all, as a newspaper reporter I automatically qualified as one of those “Merchants of Chaos.”

But the local Scientologists apparently knew me only as a young man who'd responded to a newspaper ad offering free tests. I'd already taken an I.Q. test, followed by a personality test which suggested I was unstable, nervous, irresponsible, critical, withdrawn, and inactive. Then I'd been urged to sign up for Scientology's Communications Course, or “Comm Course,” which I'd been told could help me with these problems.

And, I was reminded, urgent attention was needed.

A mission, in Scientologese, is one of the smaller outposts of Hubbard's vast organization. The Santa Rosa mission, founded in 1975, is housed in a remodeled home at 721 Mendocino Avenue, between the Belvedere building and a gas station. A sign out front proclaims “CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY SANTA ROSA”; another advertises “Free Personality Tests.”

The Comm Course is held in a room set aside specifically for that purpose. Desks and shelves line the walls. In one corner eight or ten chairs face each other in two rows.

My supervisor was Christy — an attractive woman whose eyes had a steely glint. She smiled often (at least in the first few days of the course) but in a quick, tight, *controlled* way. She was young and well-dressed, and around her wrist she wore a bracelet with the Scientology logo — an “S” twisted like a snake through two triangles.

Christy asked me to sign a statement agreeing that during the course I wouldn't use any drugs (legal or otherwise), or drink alcoholic beverages within 24 hours of attending any of the sessions.

She also asked if there was “anyone in your life who might object to your taking the course.” Nope, I said. “Are you *sure*?” she persisted, staring intently at me.

“Yeah, I'm sure.”

“Any *upsets* in your life right now?”

“None.”

“Good!” was the reply, and the course started immediately. Christy told me to read from a “course pack,” and explained that I'd be participating in various “drills.” Two other young men, Mark and Rich, would be repeating the course at the same time. I was surprised to learn that although they'd apparently been involved in Scientology at least several months, they'd still be doing the very same exercises which I'd be doing.

These drills were labeled mysteriously OTTRO, TR1, TR2, and so on. “What do the letters stand for?” I asked, indicating OTTRO.

“Well,” said Christy brightly, “the second zero is just the number of the drill, and TR stands for Training Regimen.”

“What about the OT?” I persisted. I knew quite well this stood for “Operating Thetan,” the Scientology concept of a space-traveling entity who's trillions of years old.

Christy, however, looked away. “Oh, those are just some Greek words you wouldn't understand. They wouldn't mean anything to you if I told you them right now.”

So I doggedly started reading the first page. It was dry stuff, full of what I felt were overly obvious platitudes. When finished, I raised my hand as required, and Christy came over to give me my “checkout.” This consisted of her going over the material with me, asking me to define certain words — picked at random — and to use each in a sentence.

I think I did pretty well with the definitions — Christy at

Continued on next page

Scientology Course...

Continued from last page

least seemed a little surprised, and I suspected she was more accustomed to people with lesser vocabularies. Occasionally, however, I didn't define a word to her satisfaction, and I had to look it up in one or more different dictionaries, among them a Scientology glossary of Hubbardisms.

The process was doubly grueling, however, because the materials warped certain words into unexpected usages — lots of words can become nouns, for instance. "Win," "confronts," and "because" are all nouns, according to the materials. Other Scientology literature is sprinkled with words such as "is-ness," "alter-isness," "not-isness," "beingness," "obnosion" (which means "observing the obvious"), "misemotion," "outness," and "why finding."

Using the words in sentences was easier. In fact, I soon discovered my sentences actually didn't even have to indicate the meaning of the words. If told to use "encouraging," "communicative," and "exact" in sentences, I could get away with saying, "He was very encouraging. He was very communicative. He was very exact." The utter blandness and lack of imagination in the whole thing started to irk me.

And the traffic sounds roaring through the open windows were distracting, as were the other people in the room noisily doing their own drills. Behind me, Rich and Mark were engaged in "TRO Bullbaiting." They sat face to face, one of them taunting the other with disgusting, embarrassing words and actions. According to Scientology instructions, "The coach may say anything or do anything except leave the chair." If the other person reacts in any way at all, he or she is instantly given a "flunk" — which simply means the coach says "Flunk!" and the student has to start the drill over again.

It sure wasn't the typical classroom atmosphere. As I industriously read from the course pack and recited Hubbard's definitions of words, I heard one of the guys telling the other that a huge herpes sore on his lip was oozing pus. Later, the topic turned to tampons. In the small "Comm Course Room" it's impossible to block out the others around you, and I listened with a strange mixture of dread, fascination and amusement at the absurdity of it all.

"Define the word *and!*" Christy snapped at me, and she seemed startled when I snapped back an adequate answer. I sensed, in fact, that I was moving through the material much more quickly, on a hidden agenda, than I was supposed to. In response to this, Christy began giving me what I regarded as busy-work — making me do such things as drawing little pictures with stick-figures representing two people "communicating." For each picture I'd get 10 points; at the end of the session all the other points I'd received for reading, participating in drills, and looking up words would be tallied on my "statistical graph."

In OTTRO (Operating Thetan Training Regimen Zero), I sat in a chair facing another "preclear," or student. Our eyes were closed, our knees almost touching. We were in-

structed to "just be there." If one of us twitched an eyelid, moved a finger, or swayed our bodies, Christy, who watched both of us as intently as a hawk, called out "Flunk!" and we had to start over.

I tried my hardest to just *be* there — to be *aware*, as I was told, and not to think, to move, to hear, to feel. I was simply *there*.

Time dragged on. My thoughts rambled and paradoxically tried to eliminate themselves. I felt like my mind was a great empty blackboard, and the very instant a thought appeared on its surface I had to erase it.

Suddenly, I was *there* and *not* there. I seemed to be outside my body — but my body itself was acting bizarrely to say the least. I watched, transfixed, as my body became pliable, elastic. It gradually bent in the middle, far to the left, like a tube of dough. I "watched" myself become the Amazing Elastic Man with a little fear, lots of astonishment, and a calmly detached interest. Then I suddenly got worried that I might actually topple off the chair, and with that thought the hallucination ended.

"Flunk!" said Christy.

What to make of all this? I don't know. Maybe I "exteriorized," as the Scientologists call it, and had a "major stable win." Or was it what psychologists call "dissociation" produced by intense emotional stress?

As I said, I don't know. But my confusion was increasing bit by bit.

The course continued all during the week. It began each weeknight at 7 p.m. (with a 15-minute break starting precisely at 8:30) and ended at 10 p.m. Students progressed "at their own rate" and only moved on to the next TR when they claimed they'd achieved a "win." I'd been told the course *might* take several months, although some people manage to finish it in just a few weeks.

The written material had indicated there'd be four or five lectures; actually there were none, except the introductory lecture I'd heard before the Comm Course itself. Christy walked around the room, maintaining strict control over all the proceedings. Mark and Rich kowtowed to her as if she were an army sergeant; a few words could send them scurrying to do her bidding. Her *invariable* term of approval was to say "Good!" — always in the same tone of voice and with a robotic manner that actually only invalidated, for me, any sense of personal approval she might have felt.

"TRO Confronting" was similar to OTTRO, but this time we kept our eyes open. I received a few "flunks" for smiling, laughing, or twitching the corner of my lips. But finally I could stare at someone, "just being there and confronting the other student" for 20 minutes at a stretch. My eyes ached a lot afterwards, but during the drill itself I wasn't allowed to think about that. I told Christy, only half-seriously, that it might be because I wear contact

Continued on next page

-June 23 - June 29, 1982



The Dianetics/Scientology mission at 721 Mendocino Avenue, Santa Rosa.

Continued from last page

lenses; she said softly that later "that might be taken care of."

Wednesday, 6 p.m. I began feeling nervous and jumpy. Suddenly an attack of pure terror hit me. It sounds dumb, perhaps, but all at once I felt an intense loathing to attend that evening's session. Maybe it was some unusual psychological phenomenon, or maybe I was just lazy — all I knew was that I *didn't* want to attend the Comm Course that evening.

Abruptly I called the number Christy had given me. (The Scientology mission itself has had its phone disconnected.) "Hi, this is Dennis," I gabbled. "From the course, remember? I'm sorry, but an emergency has come up and I'm not going to be able to be there tonight."

"What's the emergency?" Christy demanded icily.

My thoughts raced, and I lied, saying I had to unexpectedly drive someone to the airport. "I'll be at the class tomorrow night," I promised, feeling like a little boy afraid of his mother but trying to please her.

"We'll talk about this tomorrow night," Christy said ominously. "All right? Good!"

But the next evening Christy never said a word to me about not showing up the night before. Maybe she still was afraid of scaring me away; it seemed, after all, that the local Scientology mission might be having a hard time getting people to take its Comm Course. I suspected she might get a little more harsh later on; when one of the students was five minutes late one evening, I overheard her threaten to send him to Ethics. "Ethics" has a number of definitions

in Scientologese, but in this case Christy probably was referring to whomever enforces the "rules and regulations which must be adhered to in order for results and gains to be gotten from training."

"TRO Bullbaiting" wasn't as bad as I'd expected, even though it's named for the technique in bullfighting in which the bull is stabbed and goaded to make it fight back. As with the "confronts," I faced another person and wasn't allowed to move or react in any way, no matter what happened.

Mark, Rich and Christy each took a turn at bullbaiting me. But they were a little easy on me, I think. They criticized my clothing — from my shoes and socks to my shirt and pants, and said that red lace underwear was hanging out of my zipper. They laughed at me and swatted me on the knee to make me react. Mark described the sleazy pornographic material he said was hidden in my car. When it was Christy's turn to take a shot at me, she took a different tack — she wriggled her ears, crossed her eyes, and stuck out her tongue.

Flunk. Flunk. Flunk. Over and over I couldn't help bursting into laughter, or beginning to smile, or simply passing an eyelid a little too much. My reactions supposedly revealed "buttons," and the drill had to continue until all my buttons had been "flattened." I pointed out that I was laughing at the drill itself more than at what was being said, but this wasn't accepted very well by the others, and didn't count as a "win."

The bullbaiting continued. Christy wagged her tongue and told me my hair looked ridiculous. I stared at her impassionately, my hair looked ridiculous. I stared at her impassionately, my eyes aching, my mind a blank. But then, slowly, I realized the other students had moved on to other drills, higher-numbered

Continued on next page

The News-Herald

June 23 - June 29, 1982

Continued from last page

TRs which I wouldn't reach myself for days.

Next to me, Rich was talking to an ashtray.

It was a clean, ordinary ashtray. Rich sat on a chair, and held the ashtray on a chair facing him. "Stand up," he said calmly, and he made the ashtray stand up on the chair as if it were a Barbie doll. "Sit down," he said, and he made the ashtray resume its seat. "Thank you," he said politely.

The ashtray made no response.

Again and again, Rich repeated the same three phrases to the ashtray, occasionally pausing and staring at it with an almost loving expression. That guy's talkin' to an ashtray, I thought to myself in amazement. "Flunk for not being here!" Christy said; she'd been twitching her eyebrows spasmodically.

Before long, Mark began bullbaiting Rich. He sat across from him and said, "Rich, do you know you're talking to an ashtray? That's really weird, man. You're talking to an ashtray." Rich merely continued conversing with his ceramic friend, and showed no response at all to the bullbaiting. His buttons were as flat as they could be, apparently.

My own bullbaiting continued as button after button was flattened. Finally Christy told me to sit in the corner and "reread the material." I did so, but the other students advanced to yet another TR. This time one of them took the other by the shoulders and walked him back and forth across the room. "Look at that wall," he said. "Walk over to that wall. Touch that wall. Turn around." The other person refused to do so, or made some totally irrelevant remark, and the first person was supposed to show no reaction to being rebuffed.

Shaking my head in astonishment and wondering if I'd ever get to such advanced levels, I thumbed through the material. At the end of the checksheet was a statement I was supposed to sign after I'd finished the course and had become a "Hubbard Apprentice Scientologist." "I attest that I have completed the materials of this course and know and can apply them," it said. "I further attest that I have increased my awareness and can handle life better and can change my life through improved knowledge of communication."

I turned back to the section headed "How to Coach," in which Hubbard says, "You very definitely 'flunk' the student for anything that amounts to 'self-coaching.' The reason for this is that the student will tend to introvert and will look too much at how he is doing and what he is doing rather than just doing it."

Behind me, Mark was ordering Christy to touch the wall and she was refusing to do so. And Rich? He was chatting with the ashtray again.

And the drills continued.

Next week: More advanced levels of the Comm Course.

Copyright 1982
News-Herald News Service

**"Rich was
talking to an
ashtray."**