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DENNIS ERLICH, WHO writes about religious cults, has some expertise on the subject. Erlich, 37, born in New York City, says he spent 15 years in a cult in California, rising to leadership positions.

He left it two years ago, and says it has taken most of that time to "de-condition" himself. He now lives in Omaha, where he describes himself as "an analyst, consultant and troubleshooter."

He's writing a book about his cult experiences, and on Page 15 we carry an excerpt.

The Cult: A Search for Answers



Dave Croy/World-Herald

By Dennis Erlich

The author, a native of Los Angeles, lives in Omaha. He says he was a cult member for 15 years, until two years ago.

MOST PEOPLE, sometime during the process of passing from infancy to adulthood, ask some very basic questions about life: "Why am I here?" "Why aren't things better on Earth?" and "What, if anything, can I do about it?"

These questions may never actually be put into words but they are examined nonetheless.

For some people, the normal, everyday social experiences may not be enough to provide satisfactory answers to these questions.

Some will seek answers in study, some in travel, alternative lifestyles or drugs. And many will turn to religion for the satisfaction of these questions.

But for a few of those who turned to religion, there will be no answers in the organized religions, so they turn instead to practices they are not familiar with in hopes that different ideas might satisfy their needs.

Traditionally the family, through instruction and example, has provided acceptable answers to questions about the purpose and meaning of life.

Now, with the breakdown of the family in some segments of modern society, the duties and responsibilities of such instruction are increasingly left to the media, the state, or to chance.

We have a great many people looking for answers to their confusion and pain. These are the ones that religious cults attempt to attract.

Cults recruit members in a very interesting and effective way. Their newer members, eager to pass on their new-found truths, are sent out to contact new prospects, interest

them in the cult and direct them into the organization.

The cult member, to be faithful to the cult, must show the "outsider" the error of his ideas about life. This is not a particularly difficult task when dealing with a young person who is already confused and has a feeling of hopelessness. The promise of relief from his suffering is usually enough to create interest.

IF THE MEMBER is unsuccessful in channeling the outsider into the organization or at least getting him interested, he simply looks for another person to contact.

Almost every cult has some form of instruction and rehearsal of its particular method of getting outsiders interested enough to explore the cult.

Once the person enters the environment of the cult and its membership, the entire procedure is choreographed to ensure the proper result.

The outsider is treated with kindness, interest, care and respect by his new-found friends to such a degree that — no matter how lost he has felt before — he finally feels at home.

These people show him what appears to be genuine concern for the things that trouble him, and tell him they, and they alone, can truly help him.

Thus the newcomer is convinced that he is dealing with a group of people with a higher level of integrity and purpose than he has known outside the cult. He is made to feel that he could fit into the group and someday be like these wonderful and caring people. At the very least, he is told, they can help him overcome his weaknesses.

From that point on, mild social pressures within the closed environment of the cult is enough to enforce behavior and opinion, or

change both toward what the group wants.

The newcomer has found "his" answer to the questions about life that so troubled him earlier, and he feels relieved of the feelings of confusion and hopelessness. He is eager to guide others, in their ignorance, toward "the Truth."

His family and friends are the first people he attempts to enlighten. Their responses are usually less than enthusiastic, and at times openly hostile.

THIS, UNFORTUNATELY, drives the person farther away from society and into the safety of the cult.

Members consider themselves and their fellow cult members to be very different from the rest of society. Their group is the one which holds the Truth — and therefore salvation — for the rest of mankind, they believe. Outsiders are unenlightened and not suitable as close friends unless delivered from ignorance.

There is no real communication between cult members and outsiders. There is only pre-rehearsed rhetoric, designed to "enlighten" the outsider.

This situation becomes frustrating and often painful for the family and close friends of cult members.

Communication into the cult to its members is difficult at best and usually impossible. It is nearly hopeless, using legal means, to attempt to reason with a cult member about his participation in the cult.

Some families, in their desperate concern for the loved one, resort to the illegal and what I consider barbaric practice of forcible deprogramming. This procedure is, in fact, a more vicious version of exactly what was being done to the person while in the cult.

A new set of ideas is installed into the person's mind, which he or she must accept in

order to be "free." That was the cult's premise, too. Now, the person will be allowed to be free of the deprogrammer's control once he or she has discarded the cult's ideas and accepted the deprogrammer's.

Both are coercion and brainwashing. The former cult member once again loses his right and ability to think, and this is a factor of deprogramming that often leads to lawsuits by children against their parents.

THE CULT'S REACTION to these practices is to become more protective of its members and its ideas. Cult leaders justify further separating their members from society by citing acts of deprogramming as brainwashing and as serious violations of the right of religious freedom. (And I agree with them.)

The situation for the person still in the cult worsens because he is shown how outsiders are actually dangerous to him. He is now totally in the cult and has no real contact with society.

However, as time goes on, the new cult member inevitably sees flaws in the policies and actions of the cult and its leaders. As he becomes more cynical he usually moves up in the organization of the cult because he is willing to ignore the visible contradictions between the cult's practices and its stated aims.

He decides that for the good of the greater purpose, such contradictions would best be ignored or tolerated without comment.

Having been so sure of the rightness of his decision to dedicate himself to the cult in the first place, the person is hesitant to grant importance to anything that might indicate he had made a mistake.

All of the hard work he has put into the cult, and all of the anguish he has caused others with his new-found "Truth" combine to make him less inclined to re-examine his decision to join the cult.

But ultimately the pressure of reality finally becomes too great, and the cultist reaches out to those things which have been stable and true to him all his life: The love and care of his family and friends, and the protection that this great country provides for the right to think as one wishes.

If those who love and care for the former cult member are smart, they will allow him to sort out the truth of his involvement in the cult on his own, with his dignity intact.

IF, ON THE OTHER hand, his family now shows him just how wrong he was (which he already suspects), he will simply defend how right he was and this will further impair his ability to think clearly.

If the person's contact with the cult has been anything more than casual interest, after he returns to society it may take him a long time to sort out the truth about the cult and his participation in it.

It generally takes longer still for him to adjust to living in society and figure out what his role in it will be.

This period, after leaving a cult, can take years and is often painful and upsetting because the person feels purposeless, confused (again) and unsure about his ability to cope with real life outside the cult.

Very little effort has gone into finding a way to alleviate the suffering of cult victims or their families. Society's main concern is not for the victims of cults, but for the nebulous threat cults may pose to the social structure.

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