

Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow



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After eight years at Headquarters, I am "moving on" to other work. My duties as Director of Public Affairs will be handled by Taj Hamad and Linda Shapiro although I will try to continue to work with many of the contacts I have made over the years. For me, they are much more than professional contacts—they are my friends. Thus, my change in mission does not mean I will forget my friends. Those relationships will continue and hopefully flourish for many years to come.

As I write this, I am still in the process of transferring my responsibilities. The most obvious indication that I am moving is that my postcards are coming down off my office wall! For those who have visited me in my office, you will understand that this is a significant event! There are literally hundreds of cards from all over the world which always gave my office a rather "novel" appearance.

Brainwashing Lawsuit

Now that I reflect on the work I have done (and things I have failed to do) I am especially pleased by one recent victory. It relates to some of the main issues of controversy which I tried to address in my early columns. As some of my readers may remember, I began my career as a columnist for the Unification News by writing a column called "Debunking Deprogramming." I always thought that title had a

certain ring to it but after a few months, the "persecution" became too much to handle so I changed the title to "Debunking the Faithbreakers." That lasted for another few months until I gave up on "debunking" anything! Nevertheless, to this day, some people still associate my columns with my original articles where I tried to expose the evils of deprogramming and debunk the brainwashing myth.

The victory I am referring to involves the continuing saga of Margaret Singer and her efforts to spread her "thought reform" or "coercive persuasion" or "brainwashing" gospel to the world. Dr. Singer has become a perennial witness in courts of law—attacking any organization from Unification Church to men's clothing stores and TM (Transcendental Meditation) to Snap-On Tools. The "one thing" they apparently have in common (according to Singer) is that they all control and manipulate the minds of people associated with them.

For me, Dr. Singer is kind of like the dandelions that keep popping up in your lawn every spring. No matter what kind of weed killer you use, they're always back each year laying claim to part of your beautiful backyard.

I don't mean to mock Dr. Singer but the analogy is unfortunately all too fitting. Dr. Singer has been so severely and consistently discredited by her peers that one wonders how she could ever survive with her credibility (not to mention her self-esteem) intact. Yet, like the dandelion, every time one hears of a lawsuit with any remote notions of "thought reform," Dr. Singer shows up in all her glory.

Criminal Prosecution

One such case was a recent criminal prosecution by the United States Attorney in San Francisco against a former member of the Church of Scientology, Stephen Fishman. Mr. Fishman has been indicted on eleven counts of fraudulently obtaining settlement monies from various federal courts in connection with shareholders'

class action suits. In his defense, Fishman seeks to rely on the insanity defense and, as a backup, he claims that the "brainwashing" techniques of Scientology affected his state of mind so much that he should not be responsible for the acts he committed.

Enter Margaret Singer for the defense. She seeks to "testify that upon joining the Church of Scientology, defendant was subjected to intense suggestion procedures as well as other social and behavioral influence processes. In the opinion of Dr. Singer, the conjuring of the Church's influence techniques and Mr. Fishman's previous psychological condition permitted his mental state to evolve to a point of extremely clouded reasoning and judgment." (U.S. v Fishman, Memorandum Opinion, April 12, 1990, 3)

In response to this defense, the United States Attorney filed a motion before the U.S. District Court in San Francisco to exclude Dr. Singer's testimony from the forthcoming trial. The government argued that the theories espoused by Dr. Singer "are not generally accepted within the applicable scientific community. . . . The government also contends that evidence regarding thought reform and Scientology is irrelevant to this case because the factual record establishes that defendant did not join the Church until 1986, at which time he had already committed most of the charged offenses." (Ibid., 4-5)

This motion was vigorously resisted by defense attorneys, along with Dr. Singer herself, but to no avail. The U.S. District Court rejected Singer's protests and ruled that her views were not accepted within the scientific community. The Court said that her proffered testimony "has been challenged by the scientific community on grounds of both scientific merit and methodological rigor." (Ibid., 12)

Summary Of Court Ruling

The District Court went into some detail to explain the essence of the controversy surrounding Singer's theories about "coercive persuasion"—a controversy which has been central to a number of lawsuits against the Unification Church including the Molko case which was settled out of court just last autumn. For those of you who want to better understand all this, the following is a lengthy and somewhat complex excerpt from the court's opinion which summarizes the key arguments:

"To the extent understood by the Court, the controversy surrounding the proffered testimony stems from the fact that psychologists and sociologists are limited to investigating the range of observable responses to environmental stimuli. Coercion is a feature of the external environment; its effect or degree must be inferred from the constricted range of behavior most people exhibit in that environment.

"Similarly, free will is ineffable and not susceptible to direct observation or measurement. To borrow an example from one of the amici briefs discussed above, when a seemingly fit but harmless beggar asks for money, some people are inclined to give money and others are not. But when a mugger holds a knife at a victim's throat and asks for money, most people give it. Mugging accompanied with the threat of physical force is quite coercive, while begging ordinarily is not. The Court finds general acceptance within the scientific community (and elsewhere) that armed mugging is sufficiently coercive to overcome an average

person's free will. But the proffered testimony in this case relates to coercive persuasion without the use or threat of physical force. The subject of the testimony is thus similar to a harmless beggar's attempt to coerce money from a stranger. There is no consensus within the scientific community regarding whether the deprivation of free will occurs in these circumstances, nor is there a consensus on how to measure this deprivation. . . .

"Accordingly, the Court finds that defendant [Mr. Fishman] has not met its burden of showing that Dr. Singer's theories of thought reform are generally accepted within their fields. Not only has Dr. [Robert] Lifton expressed reservations regarding these theories, but more importantly, the Singer-Ofshe thesis lacks the imprimatur of the APA [American Psychological Association] and ASA [American Sociological Association]. Thought reform is a complex and controversial subject within the scientific community, and defendant bears the burden of establishing the scientific basis, reliability, and general acceptance of his proffered expert testimony. At best, the evidence establishes that psychiatrists, psychologists, and sociologists disagree as to whether or not there is agreement regarding the Singer-Ofshe thesis. The Court therefore excludes defendant's proffered testimony." (Ibid., 13-15)

Satisfying Victory

This is an extremely significant legal decision which debunks and virtually destroys the central thesis of the anti-cult movement. Dr. Singer's credibility as a witness in a court of law in future cases of this type is now virtually nil.

The obvious conclusion is that the persuasion that takes place in the context of religious indoctrination is something that is fully legitimate and acceptable within our society. It certainly does not amount to "coercion," as much as Dr. Singer and her cohorts have so cleverly tried to "persuade" paranoid parents and members of the media along the way. Fortunately though, they have not persuaded their professional peers and now it is quite evident that they have not persuaded the courts.

For someone like myself who has fought this battle through my writings and otherwise for so many years, this victory is a very satisfying one. It is also a very satisfying victory for the many scholars, mental health practitioners, attorneys and civil rights leaders who have fought to vindicate the rights of the persecuted minorities that have suffered so much at the hands of bigots like Dr. Singer. And I think it is a very positive note upon which to leave this mission and move on to tackle greater challenges in other arenas.

WE ARE INVITED TO FLY

We are invited to fly
Beyond the realm of function
But we, history's refuse,
Refuse, happy wallow
In the man made pit.

Real man and pure woman,
Step into our quagmire.
They are not muddled
But call the filthy to them.
A fearful, trembling few touch.

The desperate hands are cleaned
(Strange days indeed
When the good apples
In the rotten crop
Make healthy a harvest.)

They lift as we hang on
But we scream for the easy,
Hopeless chaos of
The writhing humanity
We claw at and cling to.

Our eyes meet in pain
And we cry in mitigation
But the absence of accusation
Pre-empt's our screaming look
And we feel loved.

Upwards they pull
And we see matter
Invisibly building - As it must,
So we go on.

Skywards we fly,
Past the food for life,
The earth's fruits
As they have to be,
So we pass beyond.

Starwards we soar
Past the beasts reaction,
Past the creatures
Who function for us
For their fulfilment.

Homewards - we are flying!
A downwards glimpse
Shows the chain of humanity,
Uncolling upwards
Out of the pit.

We look to them
And they to each other

Their heart in their eyes
That meet, enjoin,
And cannot be broken.

by Andy Barrett

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