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Nothing Need Go to Waste

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I would like to thank AFF (American Family Foundation, now ICSA and initially CAN) and Denver Seminary for asking me to share with you what I've been through, including some of the more significant factors that have contributed to my healing from a very cultic group. My hope is that at least some of what I share will be encouraging and helpful to many of you.

Looking back, I realize the roots of my cultic experience can be found within the family in which I was raised. I didn't enter into and remain in an abusive religious system for 13 years out of some sort of existential vacuum. Patterns of false beliefs and habituated dysfunctional behaviors within my family contributed significantly to my eventual involvement in a *Bible-based cult.

Despite the overuse and frequent abuse of the term dysfunctional, I can now see that much of my understanding of recovery lies within the context of this term, as long as it is properly defined. For clarity, I define a dysfunctional family as one that exhibits significant, highly consistent patterns of false beliefs and corresponding behaviors that interfere with healthy, biblical, interpersonal relationships and with one's relationship to the discovery of Truth.

As a child, I was much accustomed to my highly dysfunctional family of origin. My dad was an alcoholic; my mother was a classic enabler; my younger brother was the family scapegoat. During the turbulent late 60's, my brother went off into alcohol and drugs. I was the family hero-very popular, a high school tennis star, and the first in the family to attend college.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I had been raised in an environment of very nominal Christianity. I hadn't accepted Christ as my Savior and Lord until immediately after high school. Unfortunately, I was not sufficiently disciplined, and had only a minimal and overly idealistic perspective of what comprised the Christian life.

My entrance into college at CU (University of Colorado) here in Denver was non-eventful, consisting mostly of high, and unfulfilled, expectations. In my need to find real personal growth in my Christian walk, I transferred to a Christian college. I became profoundly disillusioned with what I saw there-it seemed cheap, easy, and not much different behaviorally from what I had found at CU. Again, I found myself floating, without meaningful roots or a clear sense of direction.

Joining the Group

My entry into what quickly would become a Bible-based cult came by way of an invitation from a college friend. At first, the group seemed very solid; the members appeared passionate about their beliefs and their walk with the Jesus of the Bible. The leader, had been a Southern Baptist minister, a teacher at Wheaton College, and also had been associated with India's leading Christian evangelist. He had come from India, with a background in Zoroastrianism. He professed to be a convert to Christianity.

For the first two years I was in this house church, things seemed to go very well. The group grew rapidly, and I found a lot of encouragement and support from the many young people who comprised the congregation. As I recall, the oldest person in the group (with the exception of the leader and his wife) was perhaps 30 years old; nearly all other members were of college age.

But then the "bump in the road" came. The leader felt that God had revealed to him that he had never truly been married to the woman he was married to, because they were not married "in the spirit." He claimed that God had revealed that he was, in fact, "already married" to another woman in the group who was legally married to someone else. This woman was

nearly 30 years his junior. Needless to say, this issue caused a split in the group. I decided to continue with the leader, and I insisted that my new spouse follow my lead.

Damaging Doctrines

Looking back, I see there were two significant issues. One issue was the group's beliefs. At the theological core of these beliefs were two non-negotiable, highly damaging doctrines. There was a false belief concerning the nature of spiritual authority. There was also a very unorthodox view of spirituality. As with Dave's [David Clark] experience, the use of Watchmen Nee material was extensive and influential. The group used a particular book by Watchman Nee, "Spiritual Authority." This book proposed an extremely hierarchical, oppressive, and controlling form of leadership. The group's view of spirituality was highly anti-intellectual and esoteric, allowing for nearly unlimited "direction by the Holy Spirit," contingent only upon the will of the leader. This view is characterized clearly in a book that was promoted heavily in the group, "Rees Howells: Intercessor," by Norman Grubb. An allegorical hermeneutic was standard fare, and frequently resulted in convoluted interpretations of the Bible.

The second significant issue revolved around the very dysfunctional behavior that was encouraged. Looking back, I realize that we were frequently encouraged to follow what is sometimes known as the five rules of a dysfunctional family: *don't think, don't talk, don't feel, don't trust, and don't do anything but pretend* that those in authority are always correct. Within the group, pretending became an art form.

In terms of my own behavior, my hero role in my family of origin helped to draw me in to the group, because at this time I perceived the leader to be very much the underdog. I wanted to come in as the knight in shining armor to help in the turbulent times and to contribute my perceived great wisdom to this now ailing group. The leader served as the strong father figure I didn't have growing up, and he and I went for many long walks. We spent sometimes two or three hours just walking around the neighborhood, talking about relationships and the many questions I had about life in general. These times I spent with the leader met some very real needs for me. Looking back though, despite the help I received, I had essentially traded my dysfunctional family system (from my family of origin) for another dysfunctional system that had religious verbiage.

Increasing Aberrance

During the next 11 years following its internal split, the group became much more aberrant. We had many heavy, all-night "counseling" sessions. We viewed people outside the group with a lot of we/they isolationism. We were forbidden to have any contact with our parents, other relatives, or previous close friends who were not a part of the group. Our family lived here locally, but we were encouraged to hang up on them when they called, to return the letters they sent unopened, and to return presents they sent for the kids. While a few in the group were allowed some limited contact with parents, mostly for financial reasons, we were allowed none.

Over time, expectations for compliance from group members and financial contributions to the abusive and controlling leader increased. The leader encouraged us to remain as dependent little children, waiting upon him. He often used a wheel analogy: He was the hub and we, as the spokes, were rightfully dependent upon him. He repeatedly told us that without him we would fall apart, spiritually and emotionally; and, according to him, that was God's design. He said he didn't particularly like this role, but that was simply the way God had structured it.

This group exhibited many other indications of aberrant or cultic beliefs and practices. When I returned from Germany (I was in the military for part of the time my wife and I were in the group), the leader had decided what kind of job I would have. Keep in mind, I had managed to get through an undergraduate degree program at a Christian college, and I had been employed as a counselor while in the military. But the leader had decided that God's desire for me was to be a truck driver. The story about that is illustrative of some of the thinking in the group. But it is a rather long story, so I won't tell it. [Doug Groothuis encourages Patrick to tell the story.] ...OK, I will tell it in abbreviated form.

Illuminating Anecdote

Immediately following my return from Germany-in fact the following day-a truck-driving job had been set up for me at EFD Express, which was a much smaller version of UPS. Despite how unsuited I was for the work, I managed to do the job for two years, although I had great difficulty. Anyone who has spent much time with me knows I have both a very poor sense of direction and an extreme tendency to become tunnel-visioned when I'm performing a task. Because I was required to perform this work at a fast pace, it had become a rather hazardous venture. I kept running into things. At first,

they were small, relatively insignificant things; but on my last day of work, the situation abruptly changed.

I was wheeling around in the back-parking area of a new car lot on South Colorado Boulevard here in Denver in my step van. I was performing hard for God and for the group. As I wheeled around a corner, suddenly I looked up and saw a gas pump floating off in the distance. Flames began rushing around the sides of my truck. I had run over a gas pump and I was sitting there disbelieving, stunned. “This can’t be happening, Lord!” I finally got my senses about me and pulled away from the spewing gas.

The particularly interesting and significant part to all this was in the response of the group. You see, it wasn’t, “Oh! What a horrible ordeal for you!” Instead, it was, “Well, it just goes to show that you had never truly accepted God’s plan for you, and the leader’s vision for you to be a truck driver, and that’s why this took place.” I was told, “Those flames were like the flames of Hell coming up around you because you have not sufficiently submitted to God’s ordained head over you.” Looking back, it felt like one victimization on top of another. I wasn’t allowed any expression of my real feelings. It was one of those times to just knuckle under, submit to the leader and bury my real feelings.

Many other examples could serve to illustrate where the group was coming from. There was the repressed and controlled manipulation of relationships. All relationships had to be funneled in one form or fashion through the group and ultimately through the leader. There was the firm control of any information that could threaten the leader. For example, while I was in the military, I had started a graduate program in counseling through UNC (University of Northern Colorado). Looking back, however, I realize that because this held the potential for information that would prove damaging to the leader, he forbade my continuing education in this field. I dropped out of school.

Leaving the Group

We had the “Truth,” and that Truth would surely die without us. When we expressed thoughts of leaving the group, we were repeatedly told we could expect some sort of impending doom because of our spiritual rebellion. It seemed almost as if an emotional/spiritual time bomb had been planted on the members; if anyone left, it seemed inevitable that it would discharge. We were conditioned to believe this, and in most cases, our expectations appeared to come true. Members who left seemed inevitably to have extreme difficulties with their attempts to hold on to their marriages, find new churches to associate with, and keep their employment.

Finally, in early January of 1984, my wife and I received information about some of the so-called counseling the leader had been doing that we knew could not be justified biblically. This knowledge became the proverbial straw for us.

About 90 percent certain that the information given to us was accurate, I confronted the leader about what we had learned. I recall verbatim his response to me: “I knew when I entered this ministry I’d be accused of such things. If I tell you that what you’ve been told is false, you’ll call me a liar. If I tell you it’s true, you’ll call me a heretic, so believe what you will.” In effect, he pleaded the Fifth Amendment. Looking back, I realize it was obvious that he had been caught previously in this sin and had rehearsed this response many times before. I knew without a doubt that what we had been told was true, and that same day, my wife and I parted company with the group.

Recovering

The recovery process seemed overwhelming. We had a great number of immediate needs. We had four children by this time. We had gigantic financial concerns and social issues to address, such as getting back in touch with friends and relatives outside of the group. And I had many unanswered questions: Who was I now? Where did I fit into life? Questions about the sovereignty of God were looming, threatening to undo me. My emotions were running rampant. I was very angry. Furthermore, I didn’t know how to deal with the intensity of my resentment. I seriously needed direction and support.

Fortunately, even though we found ourselves floating, we sought help. We were living near a Baptist church, and we knew that one of the group’s ex-members was attending there. It was extremely hard, but we started regularly attending the church. While we were out of our old group, the group’s influence was far from out of us. We spent much of our time during the first few years unjustly criticizing the sermons and the lack of staff and member availability, and anything that was a perceived threat to our autonomy.

It was here we met Alan Myatt, the director of Shield of Faith (a counter cult lay organization of the Baptist church), and his wife Kathy, who herself came out of a very abusive, controlling, Bible-based cult. I soon found I needed to rethink

both my behavior patterns and my beliefs. I needed to relearn how to trust religious authority figures. I needed a tighter, healthier set of personal boundaries. I had become accustomed to stuffing most of my feelings, allowing only acceptable ones to surface, and I needed to grow up emotionally. I needed to learn how to use good, biblically oriented patterns of critical-thinking skills. Most of all, I had become accustomed to pretending I was living a wonderful, satisfying, victorious life—a pretense far from reality. Over time all of these would need to change.

God chose four spheres (a fifth sphere will be soon added in an updated version of this paper) of influence within a particular time frame to meet those needs and the timing proved itself a key element. For me to seek professional counseling was unthinkable at that time, though it was highly recommended. Counseling? I still had in my mind a false vision of what counseling was. It meant exposing myself to verbal coercion; it meant having things imposed on me that simply hurt and didn't help. It was a couple of years after I got out of the group before I was ready for any formal counseling.

Sphere 1 - Meanwhile, I did work with some of the cognitive issues. Alan had suggested several outstanding books on the subject of spiritual authority and spirituality, and these books had a great deal of influence and impact on me. Books such as *Being Human: The Nature of Spiritual Experience*, by R. Macaulay and Jerome Barrs, and *Sheep and Shepherds*, by Jerome Barrs, together with articles by Ron Enroth, helped immensely. I started to attend school again (not immediately here at Denver Seminary). This helped me to start rethinking my experience. I started to write down what I had been through, which helped me verbalize and identify both what had actually happened to me and my part in it. Writing was very helpful, because it allowed me a safe emotional distance from which to work on the issues of false beliefs. I also listened to many tapes about various cults and received considerable academic tutorial assistance while attending this seminary.

Sphere 2 - As I mentioned, counseling (or life-coaching) eventually entered the picture. Much of my counseling centered on my extremely dysfunctional behavior, which I was later to find stemmed ultimately from “family of origin” issues. In the course of my recovery, I sought professional individual counseling, and I joined an ex-member support group for two years. I was involved with this support group with Sharon Hilderbrandt, Psy.D. I found it extremely helpful to hear other people tell their stories. After two years as a member, I moved on to being a co-facilitator and facilitator of support and recovery groups, where I worked with people out of the Boston Church of Christ and other similar aberrant and cultic groups.

Looking back, I've realized that the greatest need people initially have coming out of a cultic group is to be listened to. No matter how long it takes, no matter how often they tell their story, being carefully, empathetically listened to, is absolutely essential!

I also went through marital counseling, where I learned how to fight constructively with my spouse, and in general, how to communicate effectively. Such things simply were not necessary in my previous cult group because everything was siphoned through the leader. Marital counseling really helped me learn the true nature of biblically defined growth and how to identify unhealthy forms of dependency.

Sphere 3 - The third sphere of influence in my recovery, in addition to the cognitive work and counseling, concerned the development of safe and healthy interpersonal relationships. There were those who not only modeled what genuine Christian spirituality looks like, but in many ways were mentors—people such as Alan Myatt, Gordon Lewis, Sharon Hilderbrandt, Robert K. McGregor Wright, and most recently, Doug Groothuis. Each has contributed much to my recovery, and I greatly appreciate them all. There were also peers and other ex-members who could understand and who did much to help identify both what happened to me and my part in it.

Sphere 4 - The fourth sphere of influence pertained to the process of giving back what has been so richly given to me. This giving back occurred in my personal involvement in counter-cult work that helped to cement the mixed pieces I had previously gathered. I spent four years with Alan, as an understudy of sorts in Shield of Faith. I tagged along with Alan, listening, questioning, learning more about cult dynamics and beliefs, and contributing wherever I could.

During the four years following that informal internship, 1988 to 1992, I directed the Shield of Faith organization and worked along with 30 other volunteers. The organization worked extensively in educational, evangelistic, networking and counseling activities. We were able to help many find various levels of information and healing. I have much to be grateful for!

Summary

To summarize, what have I learned? I've learned some important lessons about truck driving and my respective limitations-I'm not suited to be a truck driver! [Laughter] On the serious side, during the past 12 years of healing, I've found a kaleidoscope of issues and a tremendous diversity of ways and means of addressing recovery needs. I've learned a great deal about myself. At times I was, indeed, a victim. At other times, I was a sinful contributor to a very sick system. Both the system and I were interacting, and both were very real. I had found a codependent, systematic, dysfunctional fit.

While I certainly was morally culpable for my contributions to the unhealthy and unbiblical systems in which I was involved, I also now believe that within God's providence and design, nothing goes to waste. This perspective, however, was not something I came to early on in my recovery. At first, I could feel only anger and feel deeply victimized; I couldn't see that God was involved in any way, shape, or form. Only after years of considerable reflection, after God's ways and means had been redefined, after I personally repented for my contribution to this sinful system could I see many of these experiences from a truly biblical frame of reference and begin to accept any value from this religiously abusive experience.

Finally, I've become convinced, over the course of many years, that God's desire and control over all the past and future events of my life combined to produce a particular outcome to bring Him glory and to give me some much-needed preparation for following Him with passion, both now and for eternity. I see no chance events in God's universe. My involvement in this cultic group was not some sort of bad dream come true or mere blunder on my part, but rather His preparation. This doesn't mean that people who contributed to my abuse are not culpable; they certainly were and are. This also does not mean that to a lesser degree I was not culpable; I certainly was. What it does mean is that God is sovereign and fully capable of using all things to bring about His desired ends.

Notes

- By "Bible-based," I mean that the Bible was erroneously drawn from, for the purpose of control and manipulation, not that the Bible promotes or encourages such behaviors and beliefs as those outlined in the group in which I was involved. These groups are frequently referred to as "totalist aberrant Christian organizations" (T.A.C.O.s).

Updated biography -----

Patrick J. Knapp, PhD, ChB. Pat's initial interest in cult recovery stems from his own involvement in a bible-based group (1970-1984). His recovery came as a result of individual and marital counseling, in addition to several years of work in and facilitating support groups for former-members. His M.A. thesis (Fall 2000) was titled: "The Place of Mind-Control in the Cult Recovery Process." For over 25 years he formally mentored *Denver Seminary* students for spiritual formation. He has completed 98 semester hours of doctoral work in Marriage and Family Counseling (Professional Track), at *Gordon-Conwell* in Charlotte, NC, and completed his doctoral (PhD) studies at *Graduate Theological Foundation* (GTF). His doctoral thesis was titled: "A Survey of Religious Abuse and Recovery."

He completed counseling internships at: *Southwest Counseling Associates* in Littleton, Co., *Denver Veterans Medical Center* in their intensive outpatient substance abuse program and the *Center for Dependency, Addiction and Rehabilitation* (CeDAR), an inpatient substance abuse program in Aurora, Co. He contributed a book chapter on developing support groups from a faith-based perspective for those affected by religiously abusive environments, that is now published and available under the title: *Cult Recovery: A Clinician's Guide to working with former members and families* (2017). He is currently a professional life-recovery coach working with those effected by religious or spiritual abuse and has a book in publication which examines various models of cult recovery and defends a Family Systems and Attachment perspective, informed by a Christian world-view. Pat's email is: becomingfree.org@gmail.com and cell phone number is; 720-227-8695.

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