

# Healing from Experiences with Unhealthy Spiritual Groups and Cults: Treatment Using Myths and Folk Tales

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## Abstract

Over the years much has been written describing experiences of individuals in abusive and exploitive spiritual groups and approaches to treatment of the issues they bring. Building upon the foundation of previous work, an approach to group treatment of this population is presented herein. Treatment of this population has the particular challenge of working constructively with individuals who have previously surrendered a disproportionate share of control to authority. The group treatment approach presented balances the delivery of information with respectful use of authority. Folk tales and religious stories are used to catalyze reflection and discussion of the meaning of the client's experiences for each individual. Cognitive information about the practices of unhealthy spiritual groups is offered as supportive written material in a non-didactic manner. In this way, structure is provided to initiate the group therapy process, while allowing the group members maximum autonomy in the group.

Unhealthy spiritual communities exist on a continuum from somewhat dysfunctional congregations of mainstream religions to what some may define as "cults." (Further consideration of what may be included on this continuum is included below.) The terminology "unhealthy spiritual community" (USC) will be used in this paper instead of the more common word, "cult," in order to represent that clients may seek assistance in healing from a broad range of spiritual or religious communities. The level of trauma experienced by an individual will also vary considerably based on the age, gender, developmental level, nature of the participation of the member, and the degree of dysfunction of the community. Treatment approaches must accommodate the level of trauma in a commensurate fashion. The approach presented below has been designed to address those having suffered moderate trauma due to their involvement in USCs. Clients involved in USCs as children who experienced neglect, physical and sexual abuse would be at higher risk for severe traumatization, and less likely to be appropriate for the group treatment described below without modifications to the methodology.

It has been suggested that exit counselors and therapists working with ex-members of cults be familiar with the specific communities of their clients (Hassan, 1990; Langone, 1993). While helpful for therapists, familiarity with the communities may be essential for exit counselors in providing material for critical reflection of the group in which the client was involved. Even when the client has already decided to leave the USC, counselor-provided information can still be helpful in assisting the healing of trauma. For example, many ex-members share feelings of guilt and shame due to their involvement in the groups (Singer, 1996). These feelings are often exacerbated by the accusatory questions and reactions of those around them curious to know how someone like "them" may have become involved in such an USC (Shaw, 1996). For these clients, basic information about sophisticated recruitment techniques used by some USCs may normalize their position and assist them in regaining their self-esteem. Factual information on this topic and others commonly relevant to many or all ex-members of USCs is helpful to clients as part of treatment.

When factual information is provided in a didactic format, however, the therapist would be taking the role of "teacher" and the client is once again relegated to being the "student." While the effects of this dynamic can certainly be mitigated, they are potentially even more powerful in a group therapy setting. To circumvent this pitfall, the present method avoids any use of a lecture format. Instead, it is suggested that factual material be distributed as handouts at the end of group sessions. Topics for handout may include, 1) what defines a spiritual group as a "cult," 2) who joins a cult? 3) techniques used by spiritual groups to recruit members, 4) what attracts people to USCs, what needs of an individual are fulfilled by participation in USCs? 5) techniques used by groups to control thought or limit critical thinking, 6) teachers, gurus and

spiritual leaders, 7) surrender of self in spiritual practice, 8) projection and the student-teacher relationship and 9) common psychological difficulties of ex-members of USCs.

Since the basis of the group therapy is nominally to explore and heal experiences in USCs, groups may benefit from some structure to establish the forum, particularly as they begin. Imposition of structure will again run the risk of establishing a hierarchical relationship that will be counterproductive to the group. As in the dissemination of factual information, structure can be provided as a suggestion, leaving the group itself room to choose the nature of its response. Folk tales and myths are by nature subjective and pregnant with potential for varied associations and perspectives. By offering stories to the group, topics relevant to issues central to the process of healing may be softly introduced.

Group treatment, utilizing both cognitive and mythic elements, is an extrapolation of means used by the authors in working with groups and individuals from various backgrounds, including those from USCs. The use of stories and myths is also an extrapolation of techniques pioneered by Jungian and Archetypal psychologists (Jung, Hull & Kerenyi, 1972; Estes, 1992; Hillman, 1983). Clinical tests of the techniques described herein are proceeding. The concepts are presented for clinicians to consider for adaptation to their own styles and client populations.

### **Defining Unhealthy Spiritual Groups and Cults**

One definition of a cult is provided by Langone:

...a group or movement that, to a significant degree, (a) exhibits a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, (b) uses a thought reform program to persuade, control, and socialize members (i.e., integrate them into the group's unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values and practices), (c) systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members, (d) exploits members to advance the leadership's goals, and (e) causes psychological harm to members, their families, and the community. (1993, p. 5)

Alternatively, Singer (1996, p. 58) suggests a model of influence and persuasion that exists along a continuum starting with education on one end of the scale, and moving through advertising, propaganda, and indoctrination to Thought Reform on the other end of the scale. In this model, Thought Reform is defined as a system used by cults to destabilize an individual's sense of self, get the individual to radically alter his or her world view to be that of the organization, and induce the individual to develop a dependency on the organization (Singer, 1996). This process is accomplished by the use of deception, controlling the individual's environment and time, creating a sense of powerlessness, suppressing the individual's old behaviors, instilling new behaviors, and presenting a new closed system with no tolerance for criticism or input (Singer, 1996). Any specific spiritual group may include methods of persuasion at various points along the continuum suggested above, and the types of persuasion used may vary with time and between congregations that are a part of the organization. Similarly, different spiritual groups may use selected techniques from the methods of Thought Reform listed above, and use them to various degrees. An argument could be made that mainstream religions and Cognitive Behavioral psychologists use methods of thought control to a degree. Mainstream religions may also include some of the features defined as characteristics of cults as well. The presence of selected characteristics or less coercive indoctrination alone does not necessarily define a community as a cult. This leaves a subjective quality to the identification of unhealthy spiritual communities and cults.

As treatment practitioners (as opposed to policy developers), it is unnecessary for us to develop a rigid definition of USCs to impose upon organizations. Rather, information about cults' characteristics, models of persuasion and Thought Reform better serve us as stimuli with which to explore with our clients the nature and intensity of their perceptions of their communities. By providing information about experiences common to many ex-members of USCs, clients have an opportunity to reflect upon those characteristics meaningful to them.

## **Factual Information And Healing From USC Involvement**

There is no doubt that the two thousand or more groups regarded as cults (Schwartz & Kaslow, 2001) with two to three million members (Bloch & Shor, 1989) and the possibly greater number of USCs encompass a breadth of styles and unique rituals. Clearly no pre-prepared handouts could capture the range of issues of importance to all groups. Still, many of the ex-members present questions and concerns around common issues (Hassan, 1990; Singer, 1996; Langone, 1993). By increasing their cognitive understanding of these issues, some ex-members are able to find perspectives with which they can better understand their involvement in USCs and often reduce their feelings of guilt and shame. The topics described below for inclusion as prepared handouts encompass some issues identified by others (Hassan, 1990; Singer, 1996; Langone, 1993) and some issues associated with the stories to be included in the group treatment approach. The intent of the handouts is to provide information, not answers, so that the clients may come to their own conclusions. Presentation of multiple viewpoints requiring their judgment will likely be at variance with their experience within USCs.

### **What Defines a Spiritual Group as a “Cult?”**

Depending on their own stage in the healing process, many ex-members of USCs may wish to explore the ways in which their community provided an environment in which they were able to grow, and other ways in which it contributed to trauma and was a barrier to their personal development. Not all clients will be ready to consider both positive and negative aspects of their experiences at any given time, though their emotions may be complex and include ambiguity. Exposure to descriptions of common features of cults may assist clients in reflecting on the negative aspects of their groups, help them to normalize their reactions, and affirm critical thoughts about the group that may have been long discouraged and suppressed during their group membership.

In addition to the definition of cults provided above (Langone, 1993), use of more than one characterization may provide clients alternate perspectives and vocabularies for comparison. Carol Giambalvo has the following list of characteristics included on her website.

### **What Are Some Characteristics of a Cult?**

- Authoritarian in their power structure
- Totalitarian in their control of the behavior of their members
- Pyramidal structure
- Uses thought reform techniques
- Isolation of members (physical and/or psychological isolation) from society
- Uses deception in recruiting and/or fund raising
- Promotes dependence of the members on the group
- Totalitarian in their world view
- Uses mind altering techniques (chanting, meditation, hypnosis and various forms of repetitive actions) to stop normal critical thinking
- Appear exclusive and innovative
- Charismatic or messianic leader who is self-appointed and has a special mission in life
- Controls the flow of information
- Instills a fear of leaving the group. (Giambalvo, 2000)

It would also be important to stress that no list of characteristics provides an absolute definition. An individual may feel betrayed or traumatized by participation in a community that has a subset of these characteristics or invokes these characteristics in greater or lesser degree. After surviving the extremes of a concentration camp, Viktor Frankl said, "...suffering completely fills the human soul and consciousness, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the 'size' of human suffering is absolutely relative" (1963, p. 70). Our clients need not discount the severity of their USC involvement due to comparison with any external factors.

## **Who Joins a Cult?**

At one time, it was believed that cult members tended to be middle class young adults, rejecting materialism or feeling otherwise dissatisfied or unfulfilled by the mainstream options around them (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1979). It has also been said that individuals are more vulnerable to cults when they are in periods of life transitions due to changes in relationships, jobs, or moving (Whitsett, 1992). More recently, there have been indications that cults have extended their recruiting to additional groups including the elderly and business executives (Schwartz & Kaslow, 2001). A credible perspective in the literature indicates that, while there are factors that increase vulnerability, anyone can be at risk due to the sophisticated techniques employed by cults (Singer, 1996). Singer reported that two-thirds of cult members are from normal functioning families demonstrating age appropriate behavior when they joined the cult; only five to six percent had major psychological difficulties (1996, p. 17).

In presenting information to clients about those who join cults, positive factors may also be included. For clients who perceive only self-critical reasons for their USC participation, affirmation that their motivations for self improvement, perceptions of a spiritual calling, and goals of improving society may be healthy and admirable qualities. Assisting clients in finding nourishing and constructive expressions of these positive qualities enables the same qualities to be drawn upon in the healing process.

## **Techniques Used by Spiritual Groups to Recruit Members**

There are abundant resources to confirm that cults use sophisticated and deceptive techniques to recruit members (Singer, 1996; Shaw, 1996; Hassan, 1990; Langone, 1996; reFOCUS, 1998; Giambalvo, 2000; Schwartz & Kaslow, 2001). Many of these same sources state that anyone can be recruited in a cult (Singer, 1996; Shaw, 1996; Langone, 1993). For USCs that may be less intentionally coercive in their approach, the inducements and deceptions may be present but subtle; the sense of betrayal can still be traumatic (Cope, 1999). One possible approach to a handout on this topic would be to summarize one of the autobiographical accounts of a healthy individual's recruitment into a cult (Hassan, 1990; Cope, 1999). Another would be to list the techniques used by USCs in recruitment (Singer, 1996; Shaw, 1996; Hassan, 1990; Langone, 1996; reFOCUS, 1998; Giambalvo, 2000; Schwartz & Kaslow, 2001).

## **What Attracts People to USCs? How Can the Underlying Needs be Satisfied in Healthy Ways?**

This handout must be carefully prepared so that it does not appear to accuse the client of weakness that led to his or her involvement. Instead, the intent is to assist the client in identifying his or her own needs that motivated their original participation or delayed their departure. By bringing awareness to these needs, the client may be able to find alternate means of addressing the needs that still exist, and by doing so, he or she will increase enjoyment of life. These needs and motivations may include:

- Need for community
  - Need for structure or comfort
  - Belief in something pure
  - Participation cleanses personal impurity
  - Escape from a factor or factors in worldly life
  - Coercion and fear
  - Powerlessness, feeling dissociated, lack or suspension of critical thought
- Children may have little choice or understanding of having a choice

Other, more ephemeral, motivations may also be included. Many who join USCs have some degree of spiritual seeking. For those in groups with idealized leaders, the object of spiritual seeking is made concrete in the embodiment of the teacher. The desire for this intimate relationship with spirituality, God, or a representative of God is not new or necessarily pathological. In Psalms (42:2) David said, "As the heart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: When shall I come and appear before God?" Another passionate example of the desire for the experience of God can be found in the writings of Rumi from the Islamic tradition, "Either you see the

Beloved or you lose your head!" (Rumi, p. 11). Many see the desire to see the face of God as a blessing and path to health.

The presence of faith and community in one's life has even been shown to have many and varied concrete health benefits (Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2000). Examples can be included in a handout to balance self-blame clients may hold due to their attraction to spirituality and religion.

### **Techniques Used by Groups to Control Thought or Limit Critical Thinking**

Singer's (1996) formulation of Thought Control has been described above. Shaw (1996) paraphrases Lifton (1987) in another formulation that includes the following techniques: 1) control of communication within the environment, 2) intentional deception to make it appear that the leader has mystical power, 3) demand for purity, 4) required public confessions, 5) dogmatic principles which are presented as unquestionable truth, 6) use of simplistic clichés to distort complex concepts and limit critical thinking, 7) inducing members to believe that doubts of the doctrine are evidence of personal defects or sins and 8) the leaders are the undisputed judges of deviance and deviance is not tolerated.

Additionally, there is a thorough description by Langone included on the reFOCUS website (1998) under the title "Deception, Dependency & Dread." While lengthy and possibly more relevant to communities that would be considered cults, it includes points that are likely to be common (at least by degree) even for groups that are less extreme.

Again, the information presented in a handout could be balanced with discussion of methods that may be similar to thought control, but can be used in beneficial ways. For example, hypnosis, meditation, chanting and ritual are potentially harmful for some individuals and in some USC's. Simultaneously, these techniques are increasingly incorporated in effective health care (Emerson & Trexler, 1999; Kabat-Zin, 1990; Bourne, 1995).

A movie that can be recommended that relates to this topic is "Star Trek: The Search for Spock," in which a charismatic leader persuades a number of normally self-actualizing people to follow him in breaking laws and commandeering a star ship to pursue his spiritual quest.

### **Teachers, gurus and spiritual leaders**

Although the role of the teacher or authority is included in some of the other topics, the influence of the authority is so profound that it warrants individual attention as well. Many possible subjects abound for inclusion in this topic. It may be handled exclusively through stories, such as that of Job or Hyakujo and the Fox (below), or some cognitive description may be included in a handout to support the stories. Stendl-Rast (1996) argues that the original story of Jesus depicts him as a radical who preaches for the rejection of any intermediaries between individuals and their worship and understanding of God. Similar experiential traditions exist in the world's major religions as Sufism for Islam, Kabbalistic practices in Judaism, and Zen among other traditions in Buddhism. Stendl-Rast also makes the interesting distinction between the use of the word "authority" to mean either "power to command," or having a "firm basis for knowing and acting" (Stendl-Rast, 1996). The distinction may be utilized within a handout to provoke consideration of the clients' experiences of authority within their groups.

It is also important to understand the subtle role that authority can take in our culture. In a document such as this one, the author commonly includes citations to substantiate each theory or fact with published sources. Clearly there are good reasons for doing so. But how would this material be perceived on its own merits? Leaving the factual citations aside, many of the ideas presented could have been evaluated by the reader without reliance upon other authorities to bolster them. In writing and reading professional papers it is, in some ways, simpler and easier to rely upon previously-proven concepts than to go through our own verification process. This is not fundamentally different from the way authority may be used in healthy and unhealthy spiritual communities. The famous and disturbing Milgram (1963) experiments on obedience and authority may also be used to demonstrate the great degree to which we all rely on authority, whether members of USC's or not.

Another perspective on the teacher as authority can be drawn from Moore (1990), who postulates that a healthy male will incorporate aspects of the King, the Warrior, the Magician and the Lover. One might suggest that women would include the same aspects with the Queen replacing the King. In USCs, one or more authority figures may take on various of these four roles. Moore identifies healthy expression of the King/Queen as providing order. The tyrant or the weakling are unhealthy or immature expressions of the King/Queen. The Magician in his or her fullness provides insight. When unhealthy or immature, the Magician is manipulative or naïve. This model may provide clients a means of appreciating both the positive and negative traits of the teacher(s) in their communities, as they may have been more mature in some roles or at some times. By doing so, we can also respect ourselves even if we have both positive and negative qualities. Distinct from the black and white expectations about purity in many USCs, an acceptance of ambiguity may promote an understanding of the ambivalent feelings clients may still hold with respect to their communities or teachers; thus, the client and his or her view of the teacher (and therapist) can be humanized.

There are two movies that have aspects related to the student-teacher relationship. In "Finding Forester," a quirky but mutually beneficial student-teacher relationship is portrayed. In "Star Wars: Return of the Jedi," Luke Skywalker disregards the advice of both of his teachers (Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi), follows his own counsel, and is successful in returning his father from the dark side.

### **Surrender of Self in Spiritual Practice**

Surrender of the self for spiritual growth and the needs of the community are emphasized in many cults, USCs and even healthy spiritual groups. Again this topic can be included exclusively through the use of stories such as Abraham and his son (below) or with cognitive descriptions in a handout. Topics that could be included in a handout may consider cultural variations in the appropriate exercise of personal choice and communal focus. Means of determining balance between surrender and the maintenance of critical thinking can be discussed. One provocative point of view that may be included is that of Kramer and Alstad (Blacker, 1996), who assert that the utter failure of spiritual groups is due at least in part to spiritual goals of selflessness. Kramer and Alstad said, "One of the longest experiments in history, the approximately 3,000 year-old Eastern ideology of Oneness, was first developed in the Upanishads...The failure of its renunciate morality to diminish self-centeredness is a powerful statement that something is amiss" (1993, p. 32). Kramer also believes that teaching of selflessness causes people to doubt themselves, leaving them susceptible to authoritarian manipulation (Blacker, 1996).

Messages regarding the benefits of commitment and surrender to God, or spiritual practice drawn from mainstream sources, can also be included in the handout. There is little doubt that millions of people find fulfillment in the progressive reduction in self-concerns and renunciation of pursuits that have little meaning. At the same time, the story of Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde (Stevenson, 1886) relates the tragic consequences of an individual that tries to purify himself by extinguishing his negative traits. As Dr. Jeckyl emphasized the respectable and valued traits, the more dangerous, unconscious and out-of-control his alternate personality of Mr. Hyde became (Stevenson, 1886). Mr. Hyde holds the aspects of us that are socially unacceptable, repulsive and avoided. This simple story illustrates the old Japanese saying, "the bigger the front, the bigger the back." The children's movie, "The Dark Crystal," has a lovely depiction of the need to integrate what we would call positive and negative aspects of ourselves.

### **Projection and the Student-Teacher Relationship**

This topic is related to the previous two topics (teachers and surrender) and it could be incorporated with them or stand alone, depending on the sophistication of the group. While the concept of "projection" is familiar to psychotherapists, it may be abstract for clients. It would be more appropriate to raise it later in the group process, when the group can take the topic without being distracted by the potentially discursive issues. The topic will only be effective if it includes visceral reactions as part of processing the ideas.

Just as Stendl-Rast (1996) interpreted Jesus' message as suggesting we look inside to find God without intermediaries, Buddha and Rumi made the same suggestions in other parts of the world. Yet humankind continues its tendency to look outward for authority. It is no different within psychology, when students take the concepts of innovators and attempt to find the formula with which to apply it in a mechanical fashion. In each case, when we act on these tendencies, we are doubting our own gifts and projecting our strength and authority onto another. Marion Woodman was able to clearly communicate her observation of this tendency in the Kripalu community and conclude that the job of the community was to take back its projections (Cope, 1999, p. 273-4, 288)

The tale of Narcissus and Echo shows an interesting perspective on the issue. In the story, Narcissus fell in love with his own image reflected in the water. The nymph Echo fell in love with Narcissus, but having been previously cursed by Juno, could only repeat what was said by others. Narcissus, mistaking his reflection in the water for a water sprite, would say "I love you," or "you're beautiful." Echo would repeat his words in her voice so that Narcissus believed that it was indeed a water sprite that he admired. Both pined away, unable to give up or find satisfaction in the relationship. By whatever degree the teacher in an USC accepts the projections of his- or her students, he or she is making Narcissus's error; he or she is appreciating the image of his or herself reflected back in the attitudes of the students. While projecting on to the teacher, members of the community lose their own voice and must repeat what is said by the teacher as did Echo. Ex-members of USCs and the rest of us must accept the challenge of finding and using our own voices.

### **Common Psychological Difficulties of Ex-members of USCs**

The intent in this topic is not to "pathologize" the clients, but to provide perspective. Common issues that arise for ex-members of USCs are low self esteem, difficulty with trust, isolation, dependency, grief, depression, anxiety, guilt, confusion regarding ethics, morals and social norms (Singer, 1996, p. 295-299). Singer also includes a chart of possible emotional, cognitive, social, philosophical and practical ways in which cult involvement may affect one's life. Clients may find it helpful to identify for themselves those areas in which they have been affected.

Practitioners may access additional resources to address other issues that arise with specific individuals and groups. In addition to print sources, the Internet has abundant sites with community-specific information and autobiographical accounts. Clients may find it beneficial to receive a selective list of resources which they can explore on their own to learn more about ideas important to them, but are not included in the pre-prepared handouts. With the plethora of online information currently available about cults, it is recommended to include at least a couple of websites to start clients on their way (reFOCUS, 1998; American Family Foundation, 2001).

### **Folk Stories Relevant to USC Experience**

Just as the number of potential topics for handouts is endless, so the available stories and themes that may be appropriate for a particular group or individual are infinite. A sample is included below to illustrate how stories may be used to address common themes. A brief summary is provided for each story, along with suggestions as to how the events of the story may be relevant to the healing of ex-members of USCs. Clients may also be reminded that characters in the story often can be viewed from both positive and negative perspectives, depending upon the emphasis and circumstances of the question being asked. This ambiguity serves as a healthy balance to the narrow assessment of the sacred and profane present in many USCs and natural within our culture. By being open to the ambiguity, it is hoped that all in the group will experience the full richness of the stories.

The stories included have been selected presuming a group of predominantly western clients. Similar stories would work for other cultures as well, with variation in emphasis. At the end of a therapy group session, one story may be distributed for review by the clients prior to the next session. A full recounting of the story or quoted rendition should be used to give clients the comprehensive picture of the events. By using complete stories, individual members will have the greatest opportunity to discover unique perspectives and establish personal meaning and connection to the tale. In the group format, all will have

an opportunity to learn about the meaning of seemingly insignificant images that turned out to be important to others.

Along with each story distributed to the group, a brief discussion may be attached to initiate reflection on the association of the story to the themes of interest. For the first stories, the written discussion may also remind the clients to look for ways the story is alive and holds meaning for them now. If the ideas in the discussion do not strike a client, are there other meanings or emphases evoked? Clients may also be informed that some religious stories are used. The discussion of these stories is not intended to delve theologically but psychologically, exploring the meaning for each reader. Interpretations that are different from the theologically common ones are not necessarily in conflict with the theology, but considered in a different context.

### **The Garden of Eden**

The Biblical story of the Garden of Eden is likely to be familiar to most clients. It is also likely that we all have had exposure to the story over many years and have many associations that arise from that history. In the story of the Garden of Eden, God has created the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, who live in peace and harmony with animals and all of creation. The word "Eden" is from a Hebrew word meaning, "delight" (Campbell, 1972, p. 25). Then it is written, as we all know, that the serpent beguiled Eve into eating fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge of Good and Evil. At Eve's offering, Adam joined in eating of the forbidden fruit. When God discovered the transgression, He (gender taken from common translation) punished the snake, Eve and Adam, in that order. Eve was given pain in childbirth and relegated to being ruled by Adam. Adam was destined to toil for his food until death took him back to the dust from which he came. After these pronouncements, God said, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:22).

Some ex-members of USCs may have experiences they associate with leaving Eden. While in the community, there may have been at least a verbalized ideal of total acceptance akin to no duality of good and evil. There may be a perceived abandonment by the teacher and previous close friends similar to God's expulsion of Adam and Eve. Clients may also perceive the world in which they find themselves to be stark, mundane, lacking the perfection touted in the community they left and requiring overwhelming work for survival. All this can paint a world that is seemingly dirty with no hope of redemption after the disillusionment of their USC experience.

However, God does pronounce that Adam and Eve, knowing good and evil, are one of "us." This suggests an alternate interpretation. In their innocence previous to eating the fruit, was Eden perfect or were Adam and Eve, lacking the ability to discriminate, unable to understand the nature of the world in which they lived? In a similar fashion, clients leaving USCs have gained an ability to understand the dark aspects of the community they have left and the rest of the world, and may feel bereft in the way of Adam and Eve. But far from dismissive, God's last words suggested that Adam and Eve were now closer to God and other unnamed celestial beings. We may ask our clients how they think Adam and Eve felt on the other side of the garden wall, and what they may have said to each other about the choices they had made. What would have become of the world had Adam and Eve never eaten the forbidden fruit? The Bible is ambiguous as to whether there would have been childbirth at all prior to that act. Was the loss of innocence necessary for creation to continue? Was the loss of innocence and willingness to bear the pain of creation necessary for clients to continue to mature in leaving the USCs? What does a client believe about the existence of Eden in the present? Where is the client now in terms of the sequence of the events in the story (childlike - inside the garden, aware of good and evil, bereft and in transition – newly outside the wall, wandering in the world, transformed)?

### **Abraham and Isaac**

In Genesis after Noah, Abraham and Sarah are the parents to whom God made the promise that he would bless their offspring and make them as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis, 22:17). As such, Abraham became the father of the Hebrew people, and the forefather of Christianity as well. As Abraham and Sarah aged, Abraham despaired and questioned God about the promise of the progeny he



was to receive. Finally when Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah was past menopause, Sarah bore Isaac. We can easily surmise that Isaac was deeply important to Abraham after years of longing for a child.

Yet, when God asked Abraham to take his only and beloved son into the wilderness to offer him in sacrifice to God, Abraham's surrender to God was such that he complied. Isaac was old enough to question his father as to the nature of the sacrifice since they carried no lamb. Abraham avoided the question, saying only that God would provide one. Once in the appointed spot for the sacrifice, Abraham bound his son and prepared to kill him with a knife and set fire to him as an offering. As Abraham raised the knife, the word came from Heaven that it would not be necessary to sacrifice his son. God made a ram available to use in his place. The angel of God called again to Abraham to affirm the blessings Abraham would receive because of his willingness to offer his son (Genesis, 22:15).

In this story, the father of Judeo-Christian religion is blessed for his faith and absolute surrender to the will of God. With this value deep in our cultural imagery, it is no wonder that members of USCs may consider suspension of critical thinking and absolute faith in a teacher, path or doctrine to be a lofty accomplishment. Yet we may also wonder at the trauma to Isaac, as he was bound and prepared to die at his father's hand. I can't imagine any Department of Social Services being quite as impressed with Abraham's accomplishment if he had been referred to them. Clients may use the story to explore positive and negative aspects of surrender of self and the way surrender of self was used within their USCs. Is surrender of self part of their lives now? How do they choose someone or something to surrender to now?

The story holds potential for the positive and negative of surrender to a greater will or commitment to a spiritual path. In the negative, there is the danger of being unaware of the damage done to another by our actions. In the positive, such commitment can be essential for deep transformation, in spirituality as well as psychology. Clients may find positive and negative ways they have acted in the role of Isaac, and other ways they have acted in the role of Abraham.

In the context of USCs, it is also interesting to note that Abraham felt the need for deception in carrying out his plan. He didn't tell his son what he had in mind. In this sense, Abraham is in the role of leader in an USC, and Isaac is the student, trusting in the authority figure. Also interesting is the lack of the presence of Sarah in this part of the story. As Marion Woodman has said (Cope, 1999), the feminine (as opposed to the female) aspects of our selves often carry the paradoxical, the imperfect, the human, and the wisdom of our bodies. One aspect of the story of Abraham and Isaac that can be discussed (felt) is whether the lack of Sarah's role was essential for the actions to occur as written.

Clients may wish to consider ways in which they have played various characters in the story, and whether they hold any feelings from the roles they have played in the past.

### **Shiva and Ganesh**

Shiva is one aspect of the Hindu trinity of God. In many versions of this story, it begins when Shiva would not take seriously the request of his wife, Parvati, to give her privacy when she bathed. Parvati had also been unable to find anyone who would stand by her door and resist Shiva's entry, since all her assistants considered Shiva to be their master. In order to have an ally that would be responsive to her, Parvati created a son by molding his body from the earth and investing him with her own breath. After a time away, Shiva returned to Parvati. When he attempted to enter her chamber he was restrained by a handsome young man. In a jealous rage, Shiva cut off the young man's head. Parvati was horrified and told Shiva the young man was her son, Ganesh. Parvati threatened to act through her aspect as Kali to destroy the world if Shiva did not restore Ganesh to life and grant him other blessings as well. Shiva restored Ganesh's head by replacing it with the head of the first creature he came upon, an elephant. Shiva then used his own breath to restore Ganesh to life. In doing so, Ganesh also became Shiva's son as well. Images of Ganesh with the head and trunk of an elephant can be found throughout India to this day.

In striking contrast to Western depiction of God as perfect, Shiva exhibits human traits and imperfections, including jealousy, unreasoned and violent action and succumbing to coercion by his wife. Forever more, the images of his son demonstrate Shiva's humanity. This is a fundamentally different basis for religion. For those clients of Western background who have been involved in USCs from eastern traditions, members may have had very different assumptions about the perfection of the teachers and even about the characters in myths and stories. For clients from any USCs, the stories still suggest that it is appropriate to question the actions of any teacher all the way up to God, since all are fallible. Unlike the conclusion of the Book of Job, the client may find this story opens the door to questioning and critical thinking.

Also in the story, it is clear that Parvati is surrounded by people who were dominated by the presence of the divine aspect of the teacher. While her request was simple and personal, none would take her needs seriously. When she created Ganesh for protection, Shiva was infuriated by the resistance to his authority and immediately destroyed Ganesh. As a member in an USC, an individual may find familiarity in the role of the disciples who would not support Parvati, in Parvati's role in having had an authority figure forcibly destroy any aspects of their own creativity, or in Ganesh, having been destroyed. Some may also have occasionally played Shiva's role of dominating others. In the myth, the autonomy and personal health of Parvati was maintained by her power to respond, not directly against Shiva, but in having the power and in threatening to destroy the world Shiva held dear. After she expresses her anger but before she acts, Shiva complies and Ganesh become reborn with aspects of both Shiva and Parvati. Parvati's power was generated from her love for her son, a worldly attachment. Through this power she was able also to affirm a place for her own individuality and creativity. Although many USCs may devalue human attachment and anger, in this story a feminine aspect of God maintains herself through the acceptance and expression of those feelings. By doing so, the subject of her creativity (Ganesh) was joined with God (Shiva). Similarly, if clients were involved in groups that left no room for their humanity or creativity, the authority was the only one empowered, and the result could not lead to the maturation of the client.

Were the roles played by clients in USCs similar to the disciples, Parvati or Shiva from this story? Each client may have played more than one role. Do they have any residual feelings about the roles they played? Have the clients' roles change with respect to their support for others in the face of authority or other aspects of the story?

## **Job**

In another classical Biblical tale, Job is described as an upright, God-fearing man (Job, 1:1). Satan tells God that Job is righteous because he hasn't been challenged. Why not be righteous when you are rich, healthy and have a lovely family? Satan asks God's permission to ruin Job's life in order to demonstrate that Job will reveal the limits to his righteousness. In consecutive attempts, Satan dismantles Job's life piece by piece (destroying his assets, killing his family and covering him with sores) and yet Job never curses God. Instead, Job questions God, asking why he has been so challenged when he has done no wrong. Job's friends try to persuade him to confess his sins, convinced that he must have sinned since God was so clearly punishing him. In the end, God answers Job by asking his own questions, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou has the understanding." (Job, 38:4). In so doing, God suggests that Job cannot question or understand the acts or will of God.

The story of Job is compelling for anyone, perhaps particularly so for ex-members of authoritarian USCs. The story may be taken at face value in expressing the limited capacity for any of us to understand why anything happens or does not happen in this world. It can also be taken to confirm that bad things can happen to good people; our misfortune and lack of success is not an indication of our lack of worth. But the story of Job can also be taken as a foundational cultural image that supports our inability to question superior spiritual authorities. It is from this aspect that clients may gain insight from reflection on their hesitations to use critical thinking while in an USC. They may also reflect upon the validity of ascribing authority to teachers and leaders in their group.

The role of Satan in the story is also worthy of reflection. Rather than being scorned, he is influential and has the ear of God. Although the questioning of Job did not induce God to any reconsideration or change

in action, Satan was apparently able to serve as the spark plug for all the story's events. This seems odd, in that God introduced Job for his integrity, features for which Satan is not generally known in our culture. In Biblical sources, the term, "Satan" refers to a messenger or angel and describes an adversarial role, not a particular character (Pagels, 1995). The root of the word means, "one who opposes, obstructs or acts as adversary" (Pagels, 1995). Perhaps God is demonstrating the necessity of true criticism, from one close enough of an equal to have real doubts and little fear. Perhaps God fails to answer Job in the same way specifically because Job is God-fearing, because Job is a "yes-man." Satan appears to be accepted and influential in the story for doing exactly those things which Job, being God-fearing, is praised for not doing. Similarly, there may have been individuals in the USCs who were close enough to the center to question and influence the authority with impunity. Or, there may be clients who played that role, toying with the lives of other community members without true compassion for the effects of their decisions. The role of Satan includes a measure of personal power and willingness to exercise one's own voice, which are possibly healthy qualities in this world. The role in the story also implies a coldness and lack of heart connection to those actions.

It may be illuminating to encourage clients to consider how they themselves behaved like various characters in the story. For example, they may consider whether there were times when they acted as Job's friends and questioned fellow community members' integrity because the authority in their group disparaged the individual. Or perhaps they doubted themselves because of disparagement they received from friends. Alternatively, clients may find it helpful in personalizing the story to identify individuals or institutions in their USCs who played roles similar to those in the story. Was their teacher seemingly arbitrary in his treatment of community members and intolerant of questioning? Do clients now or in the past react to the critical words of those outside the community, as they do to the words of Satan to God? Do clients hold anger towards God for his behavior in the story or in their own lives, or are they able to bow and defer completely as Job did? Would they choose to bow if they could? Through such questions, clients may find alternate perspectives from which to view the USCs and their own reactions.

### **Hyakujo and the Fox**

In this Zen story, teacher Hyakujo (Pai-Chang in Chinese) observes an unknown old man present for his periodic talks. After one talk, the old man stayed and approached Hyakujo. The man told Hyakujo that he had been a teacher on the mountain long ago. According to the old man, "...a monk asked me, 'Does an enlightened person fall under the law of cause and effect or not?' I replied, 'Such a person does not fall under the law of cause and effect.' 'With this I was reborn five hundred times as a fox. Please say a turning word for me and release me from the body of a fox.'..." (Aitken, 1990, p. 19). Hyakujo told the man, 'Such a person does not evade the law of cause and effect'..." (Aitken, 1990, p. 19). With this, the old man was enlightened and released from his fox body.

This mythic story awakens questions of the fallibility of teaching, the seriousness of wrong teaching, and limitations of enlightenment. It is used as a koan in Zen tradition, calling for the student to express his or her experience of the issue, as opposed to supplying the correct intellectual answer. In working with ex-members of USCs, the story is intended to open questions of how teaching and teachers were considered in their USCs. The seriousness of the consequence (to the old man) of the wrong answer implies the profound influence of the role of teacher. Hyakujo's response to the old man implies limitations – humanization- of the enlightened person. Clients may be asked what their perceptions of teacher(s) were in their groups. They may be also asked for their hopes for what their expectations were for themselves as they matured in their practice within their group. How do clients feel now about their current goals about growing personally? Have their experiences with USCs reduced their hope in their potential? Where would that put them in the process of the events of Hyakujo and the fox?

It is also interesting that the story does not depict the old man as evil or malicious, but rather as just wrong. Yet, he was reborn as a fox for generations. Like western culture, the fox in Asian folklore is seen as tricky and dishonest and more – like the black cat associated with witches (Aitken, 1990). What might this say about the retrospective opinions clients have about the leaders in their USCs?

## The Seal Maiden

The story of the Seal Maiden was beautifully described by Estes (1992) under the name "Sealskin, Soulskin." Many of Estes insights with respect to application of the story to women can be extrapolated for their application to ex-members of USCs. In Estes rendition of the story, it begins with a lonely man hunting from his kayak in the waters of the far north. He observed a group of naked women dancing on a rock in the sea, as if made of "...moon milk, their skin shimmered with little silver dots like those on the salmon in springtime..." (Estes, 1992, p. 258). He watched fascinated and, almost without being aware, paddled adjacent to the rock. In listening to their singing and laughter, the burden of loneliness was lifted from his chest. As he climbed on the rock he found a number of sealskins lying there. Without thinking he grabbed one and hid. Soon, at a signal from one, all the women ran for the sealskins, slipped them on, became seals and dove into the water. The tallest remained, searching for her skin. The man stood before her and asked her to be his wife. At first she refused, but he agreed that if she chose to leave after seven summers he would return her seal skin at that time.

Soon they had a child. While others taught children about land animals, she carried the child and taught him of all the creatures of the sea that she knew so well. As time went on, her skin began to dry and peel. She became more and more pale, gaunt and even lame. Although the seven summers had passed, the man refused to return the seal skin. He berated her for her selfishness at wanting to leave him and her son. One night, the young boy awoke, fascinated by a call of an old seal in the quiet of the night. When he went out to listen, the boy stumbled upon the sealskin hidden under a stone. Upon seeing the skin, his mother immediately slid into it and began moving toward the sea. She grasped her son, crying for his mother, and jumped with him into the sea. Her son met his grandfather in the sea before returning to live on land. The mother was revived and vital when again in her true home.

The chronologically first part of the story describes how the seal maiden was playing happily on the rock with her friends. The man is described as taking a significant amount of time to reach them, but the seal maidens all remained oblivious. The experience of ex-members of USCs is similar, in that their intuitive radar was not functioning in a manner to detect the present danger. The presence of the group of seal maidens is an appropriate image for ex-members of USCs, in that they also were not alone in joining/being recruited/seduced into joining the community (clients may select the level of influence they find appropriate to their community). The fact that all in a group were oblivious could be taken two ways: 1) The approach of danger was so subtle or skillful that they were all unable to detect it, or 2) the intuitive blindness was not personal but collective. Due to tendencies in the culture, they were all vulnerable to the same danger coming in below their radar. A retrospective reflection of the condition of their intuition, signs of danger that were evident, and how they were missed is one possible topic of discussion related to this story.

Next, the seal maiden has her skin stolen. In this case, by losing her skin, she loses her elemental self, herself as a creature of the sea. Without it, she is forced to exist in a world that is not her own, and in a body that is not natural to her. She is forced to do so by the lonely man, but she agrees only after he makes a promise to her to allow her to eventually regain her true self. With respect to USCs, these images may represent the loss of self that members of the community experience by trying to mold their beings into the idealized forms suggested or demanded by their communities. The lonely man may then represent either an individual authority (or the community itself) that needs the adoration of the client to justify the authority's inflated role. Alternatively, the images could all be reversed. The community members, suffering from their own loss of connection (loneliness) place demands (projections) on the authority that slowly sway him or her from his or her own humanity and sense of rooted self. Both these perspectives can simultaneously be true.

Returning to the story, the seal maiden apparently learns to love the man and clearly loves her son. But she becomes progressively more ill and cannot survive giving her love away without feeding her own soul. She has enough of a sense of her self to know what she needs. She struggles with the lonely man to achieve her release. For a member of an USC, the sickness can be both that of the community members with their humanity suffocating from overemphasized ideals and the authority suffocating by accepting more and more of the idealized image others have of him or her. The mutual love between the

man and seal maiden is not enough; she would still perish if she remains outside her own world. The lonely man does not have the strength to release her on his own. Instead he can only think of himself and his need for her. As there is love in the story, for those in USCs there may be healthy and positive aspects of that community life. There may even be true growth, as in the image of the son; yet, it is not enough. The seal maiden must return fully to herself to survive. So must we all be strong enough to understand when we are in a place that stifles our true selves, and to leave.

For the seal maiden, it was through the healthy fruit of the relationship (her son) that she gained the tools to leave. The other key factor in her leaving was that of her true father in the sea. So we see her saved by a combination of the fruits of her own efforts and a benevolent outside strength. The lonely man was not of assistance in this. In leaving the community, ex-members of USCs may also find that the benefits of their practices were of assistance along with the help of an old voice, maybe that of the type of call that first drew them to spiritual practice initially.

The story doesn't speak clearly to the transition back to our selves when we choose to move where our souls demand. But we do see the seal maiden return to health in spite of the difficulty she has in leaving objects of her love in the unhealthy place. It is no surprise that ex-members of USCs would also have great loss in leaving communities to which they were committed. Where are the clients now in the process of the events in the story? Do they (or we) have our skins back? Are there ways they (or we) feel drawn back (by love) to remain where don't belong? What is the state of our intuition now?

"The Secret of Roan Inish" is a version of this story made into a movie that may also be recommended to clients.

### **Dracula, the Vampire Myth**

The story of the vampire, Count Dracula, is old and familiar to most in our culture. In fact, it has recently had a revival of sorts with books (Rice, 1977), movies ("Interview with the Vampire: The Vampire Chronicles," 1994), and TV shows ("Buffy the Vampire Slayer," 2001) Rather than describing the plot of one of these varied tales, a description of some of the traits of a vampire will be included. In the novel by Stoker (1897), Dracula is much stronger than ordinary men, can live forever, turn into a bat or wolf, drinks blood of humans by biting the neck, can make others into vampires, casts no shadow and has no reflection in a mirror. He also cannot enter a building without being invited, loses his supernatural powers in daylight, can be repelled by holy objects or garlic and can be killed by a stake through the heart or being decapitated.

The vampire can only enter a building to suck your blood – your life force- at your invitation. This requires the vampire to use charm and deception so that you will choose to become vulnerable. To achieve entry, the vampire preys on our own desires. For a community member who lost his or her dynamism and vitality, the authority figure of an USC, or the community itself, may fit the image of a vampire that sucked their lifeblood. If the image fits, the questions this leaves are of how the vampire induced the client to invite the vampire into his or her life, and what was it that the client desired that the vampire appeared to offer to gain entry? If it was need for community, where is the need now and what options are available for fulfilling it? If the door was opened so that the client might be taken care of, how is he or she being cared for now, and what options are now available for receiving care? The needs themselves aren't positive or negative, but the choices in fulfilling them may be constructive or self-defeating.

Once bitten by the USC, the member becomes one of the "undead," lacking vitality, lacking personal creative force and becoming a hollow image of his or her self. This hollow image may strive for immortality by reaching for spiritual heights or conforming to a preconceived and idealized notion of the pure and sacred. The vitality of character and personality is squeezed out by the idealized conceptualization of a "good" person; vitality and creativity are squeezed out by the lack of tolerance of the messiness of real people. In an USC, individuals and communities may have genuine and affirmative ideals, but when the ideals are valued more highly than the individuals, it is a turn towards death. In the myth of Buddha's life, it is said that he went through a period of "mortification" before he found the "middle way." During this period of asceticism, Buddha decried food and starved his body to reject desire, and

achieve spiritual gain. When weak and dying, he rejected this approach as ineffective and missing the point; he concluded that his spiritual self was not different from his humanity. Although rejected by his compatriots, Buddha continued to practice sincerely, but without the ascetic rejection of aspects of his humanity. It could be said that Buddha had a Dracula period that was mitigated by his choice of moderation in belief and action.

Clients may wish to consider what goals brought them into the USC initially and whether there were ways that the goals became idealized and rigid. Are there ways that positive aspects of the original goals may be maintained without inhumane demands? Are there ways or times they now hold feelings of idealization and moderation? Do feelings of vitality (full of life-blood) or desolation (emptiness) associate with either idealization or moderation? What would moderation mean in their (or our) lives now?

Dracula may be an odd image in which to seek associations with USCs. While USCs include components of high spiritual aspirations, Dracula recoils when confronted with holy objects. And in various versions of the story, Dracula loses his power or his existence when exposed to light, while spiritual groups may be actively seeking for light. The image of Dracula may be a useful lens with which to seek the shadow, the hidden ugly and draining qualities within USCs and perhaps any community.

### **An Integrated Group Therapy for Ex-members of USCs**

The application of group therapy for ex-members of USCs hold particular benefits and risks. Group therapy would be a natural transitional step in mediating the loss of community for one leaving an USC. The normalization that occurs through mutual disclosure of similar experiences may serve to moderate ex-members experiences of loss of self-esteem, guilt and shame because of their involvement. A group format also ideally provides a safe and open environment for processing ex-members residual concerns or feelings about their participation in groups and the role of authority. These same issues also suggest a need for caution in working with at least a subset of ex-members of USCs. The group facilitator must not allow the group to replay unhealthy patterns of the original communities. There may be clients who tend to surrender their own authority to the group facilitator, the goals of the group, or the group itself. Clients may tend to become dependent upon the therapy group, and similarly surrender their own authority. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to avoid these pitfalls in the design and execution of the group. The use of steps outlined by Yalom (1995) for establishing therapy groups may be used as a basic tool for initiating the group. A brief discussion of aspects of the process unique to this population and approach will be presented below.

#### **Screening**

The approach as designed would be appropriate for groups of ex-members of USCs who have a level of function similar to others in the group. It has also been developed for a population with moderate trauma, not for those who became involved as children, or those in crisis. To confirm a workable group composition, pre-screening of prospective members in person or by phone would be important. Screening should include questions about age at first involvement with one or more USCs, the number of USCs in which the client was a member, the duration of involvement in each, the intensity of involvement (residential situation, number of meetings per week, amount of time separate from the community, work and money integrated with the community, friends separate from the community), and the amount of time that has passed since the end of involvement. Other general questions may include family, work history and psychological histories. The psychological history may include information about previous counseling, any diagnoses received, medications prescribed, hospitalization and suicidality. A disclosure statement about the group and written questionnaire may also be given to prospective clients for review prior to the first meeting.

The information received may then be used to select individuals for the group and to make recommendations to appropriate referrals for others.

## **Initiating the Group**

All group members will have received information prior to the first meeting that describes what they may expect at the meetings. The information may also include any basic ground rules for group operation, such as the maintenance of confidentiality of anything discussed within the group.

During the first meeting, clients will be given a chance to tell their story as to why they have come, and about the USCs with which they have been associated. As group members are comfortable they can share what issues they have dealt with since leaving the USCs. It would be beneficial if the facilitator also discloses background information as to his or her involvement in USCs and the nature of his or her interest in the topic. It would not be suitable for the facilitator to use the group's time to process personal material; as always, the facilitator should seek outside consultation for personal material. But the group may be less inclined to over-invest in the authority of the facilitator if he or she contributes appropriately in an open manner from the beginning.

The facilitator may also explain the expected process of the group, including a verbal introduction to the use of handouts and stories, that a limited number of those documents are available, and that the use of the handouts and stories will be tapered off as the group proceeds. After the handouts and stories are spent, the group will either continue without the use of external structure to inspire the discussion, or the facilitator will occasionally provide new exercises for the group.

The facilitator, after listening to the discussion the first session, may select a prepared handout with information about one of the major topics that arose in the session. The facilitator will also distribute a story such as those included above. Stories will have attached introductions that will suggest ways in which the story may be relevant to issues common to ex-members of USCs. The introduction will suggest that, at the next session, clients may bring back residual thoughts, feelings, and associations from their reading of either the story or the handout. There may also be a couple of general questions to spark reflection such as, "How does this relate to your experience? What in the reading has meaning for you personally? Are your observations or reactions to the story relevant to your life now?"

Second and subsequent session will begin with responses to stories and handouts. Again, a story and handout may be distributed at the end of the ensuing meetings as appropriate. The facilitator may ask the group if they want to receive a new story or continue with the last one. At some point, all documents will have been used and an announcement to the fact should be made to the group.

## **Role of Group Facilitator**

As in any group, it is the facilitator's responsibility to create the environment for a beneficial group culture. When beginning the group, this involves encouraging and modeling means of interaction that build cohesion and set the ambience for change. This is done by promoting individuality, responsibility, honesty, encouraging clients to work in the here-and-now, and focusing on process. The facilitator supports the group process by providing structure that may assist the group. An example of a pre-planned activity to provide structure is that of the distribution of stories and handouts. A number of handouts are prepared prior to the initiation of the group and kept available for each session. As topics naturally arise during a session, a prepared handout can be selected and distributed to clients to take home with them. They are then free to read the material or not, reflect upon it individually or return the following week and bring something up for further discussion.

Frankl described his work as, "neither teaching nor preaching," but "more like an eye specialist than a painter." (Frank, 1963, p. 174) By this he meant he served his clients best by improving their own vision rather than giving them his picture of the world. This sensitivity is entirely in keeping with the need to foster independence in group work with ex-members of USCs.

If problems or conflicts arise, the facilitator is also responsible for maintaining processes by which conflict can be addressed, and if necessary, members may be asked to leave the group. To maximize group

empowerment and responsibility, the group as a whole, and the individual(s) raising the issues (as opposed to the therapist) should be expected to clarify issues.

It is also important to note that the approach described herein is not presented as a formula to be applied, but as a concept to be molded. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the facilitator to remain sensitive to how the group is reacting to the material, make best-effort attempts at foreseeing the reactions of individual group members to handouts, and check-in with clients as to their actual reactions. Handouts are designed to be suggestive and not coercive; it is likely that clients functioning in the world would naturally encounter compelling stimuli in their daily lives as well. Still, individuals may have profound reactions to material presented. If a group, or even an individual within a group, may be overwhelmingly triggered by distributed material, adjustments to the approach are possible. One modification would be to introduce and distribute handout material at the end of a session while allowing some time to process immediate responses. If yet more time is regularly needed to process written material, then the approach can again be modified to provide for distribution at the start of sessions. It may be necessary to evaluate whether the accommodations are in the interest of the group as a whole, or whether instead, one or more clients would be better served by an alternate treatment approach. In that case, the group as a whole may continue as planned while one or more clients are given referrals to something more suited to them.

The facilitator should also be available for consultation between sessions as appropriate for the individual clients, the nature of the intervening issues, and the group process. For clarity, all clients should be informed of the guidelines for such consultations at the initiation of the group, including any expectations of what, if anything, will be shared with the group subsequent to individual sessions.

### **Termination of the Group**

If the group members were subjected to significant trauma, it is likely that the group will be ongoing for some time. Still, it may be important to discourage the group from continuing beyond its need. One possibility is to say up front that, at some point, the facilitator may initiate a discussion regarding whether the group continues to need his or her help. The group may then, at its discretion, continue as a self-directed group. Alternatively, the group leader could just maintain an awareness of bringing up the topic when issues appear to be resolved.

### **Conclusions**

Group therapy is a natural treatment modality for the community-related trauma of ex-members of USCs. Group therapy can be a place where individuals from various USCs can share experiences that were common or unique among communities, explore the ways in which their tenure in the community was difficult, strategies for continuing with their lives and the personal meaning(s) they find for their involvements in USCs. When effective, therapy groups also offer an environment in which the unhealthy group dynamics from the USC may be explored and alternate responses and behaviors practiced.

The approach presented herein describes a respectful and non-didactic process that includes distribution of information shown to be helpful to ex-members of USCs. Myths, religious stories, and folk tales are also used to inspire reflection and assist participants in finding personal meaning in their experiences that is relevant to their lives in the present.

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