The Hidden Cults Among Us

Cult-Like Business Practices by: Dana Mitchell  Are you or anyone you know involved in a cult? Don't answer too quickly. It's not as outlandish a question as you might think.

It is widely recognized that there are many cult-like organizations all around us, largely operating under the radar. And contrary to what many believe, a group doesn't have to be religious to use cult-like methods. This article was written in the interest of public awareness; to draw attention to a problem of which not many people are aware. The cult-like methods some groups employ are very powerful and are even used by some secular businesses in the interest of increasing their bottom line and controlling their associates. "An estimated 5,000 economic, political, and religious groups operate in the United States alone at any given time, with 2.5 million members. Over the last ten years, cults have used tactics of coercive mind control to negatively impact an estimated 20 million victims in the last ten years. Worldwide figures are even greater." -Dr. Margaret Singer, "Cults in Our Midst"

Indoctrination Cult experts often refer to the analogy of a 'frog in boiling water'. It is said that if you try to boil a frog by placing it in boiling water, it will just hop out. But if you place it in lukewarm water and slowly increase the heat, it will not try to escape. The frog will stay still until the water is boiling around it and it is cooked. Similarly, cult-like manipulation takes place incrementally and over time. New entrants to the cult are shown only the most acceptable and positive aspects of the business or practice when they first join. After the initial emotional or spiritual 'bonding' that takes place within the group, the intimidation, coercion, and control can begin. 

Businesses as Cults As Dr. Margaret Singer points out in her book, "Cults In Our Midst", many cults operate as businesses, with their tactics focused around financial success instead of religion or spirituality. Charges of cult-like methods have been aimed at Amway and many other multi-level marketing organizations for years. ("Amway: The Cult of Free Enterprise" is a great book by a former top seller of Amway, and I highly recommend it. Also, Dr. Singer's book offers some great examples.) It is also possible to combine spiritual and business elements together. This combination can make for an extremely effective indoctrination, as the leader of the cult can appeal to both the need for financial success and the need for spirituality of their targets. 

Cult-Like Methods There are many 'weapons' that cult leaders use when targeting their audience. I've listed 5 major ones below, but there are many more that psychological manipulators have at their command. Targeting the Vulnerable Jennifer Burrows was a 24-year-old 3rd year dental student in 2002, enrolled in a school in North Carolina. At this point in her life, she was deeply in debt from 6 years of student loans, and worried about her career prospects once she graduated. At a school function, she met Bryan Landers, a
35-year-old author and dentist, and leader of a group called Enriched Dentistry. Landers seemed very successful, and ran social and networking groups that Jennifer thought would be very helpful to her career. Some of these social groups met at long, weekend retreats in the rural part of the state, and they were very social, fun events. Looking back, Jennifer recognizes that it was her financial vulnerability and fear of instability that led her to stay with Landers and Enriched Dentistry even once things started taking a more ominous turn. "No one plans to join a cult," says Lorna Goldberg, a New Jersey therapist who helps clients with cult-like experiences. "Cults target people in transition - college students away from home for the first time, people who have moved to new cities for jobs, those who have just been divorced or widowed."

**Claims of 'Special Knowledge'** Jennifer was a Christian, as were Landers and his 'students', and this made for a good fit. Jennifer discovered that Enriched Dentistry acted as a kind of business network for dentists and dental students on the East Coast, and it made sense to Jennifer that people in the same profession, with the same beliefs, would want to help each other. Jennifer quickly bonded with the group, and over the course of the next few months she found herself spending much more time with them, being invited to more and more religious retreats and late-night get-togethers. Landers had self-published books on the role of Christianity in medicine and health, and he would hold sessions at his house that would stretch long into the night. Dialogue was discouraged; it was Landers who held sway at the meetings, speaking about his 'knowledge of God's will' and the 'correct way to live'. He also appealed to the financial concerns of his students. "He told us that by being involved with him, we were part of something very special, that we would be successful if we stayed close to him," Jennifer says. "He was doing very well for himself, and he was very clear about his beliefs. It made sense that we all wanted to be like him in one way or another." Jennifer described that first year as "the most exciting period of my life. I respected and loved everyone in the group." **Distancing From Family and Friends** As time went on and Jennifer neared her graduation and her entry into the wider world, her personal life was being narrowed. In her last year of school, she was much more involved with Landers and the group, and she spent large amounts of time volunteering at Enriched Dentistry events. She recalls one of her early friends in dentistry school expressing concern that Jennifer might be being taken advantage of. She also heard similar concerns from her family. She was not in a position to appreciate what they were saying at that time. "It just made me angry," said Jennifer. "I thought that no one could understand the great things Landers was doing. No one knew the bond our group had. No one bashing him knew the great things he was doing in the world." When people brought up the comments of outsiders in their group meetings, Landers laughed about the "judgments of nonbelievers". Jennifer was encouraged by Landers and the group to cut ties with the negative influences in her life; these were the people holding her back from true success. **Financial Manipulation** Jennifer learned that Landers was offering a sort-of franchise operation to his 'friends' and 'associates'. These businesses were set up in a six-state area in the Southeast. The dentists or soon-to-be dentists of Landers' group would incorporate their businesses with Landers being a main partner. The range of services provided by Landers included 'business consulting', 'website design', 'brand sharing' (with Enriched Dentistry), and 'client referral'. Virtually everyone in Enriched Dentistry was signing up for this partnership; it seemed a no-brainer to Jennifer and to many others. Landers and his associates were obviously successful; sometimes Landers' partners would speak to the group about their practices and their current success. Before graduating, Jennifer signed a contract with Landers making Landers a quarter partner in Jennifer's first practice. The fine print, which, admittedly, Jennifer should have read more carefully, ensured that Landers would receive, at the very least,
$20,000 from each of Jennifer’s first four years in business. It was the bond she felt with Landers and her trust that he was a spiritual man that made Jennifer not as cautious as she should have been. "Members may be asked to make phenomenal contributions of money to the group," says Frank Schneider of the non-profit group Cult Watch. "Besides making the leader and the group rich, this money ties the member ever more deeply to the group." 

**Intimidation** In addition to his psychological manipulation skills, Landers was a very physically imposing man. He spent many hours every day in his personal gym, and told his group that physical fitness was very important in doing God’s work. "Many cult leaders are insecure and are making up for early feelings of inferiority," says Mary Miller, a California psychotherapist. "This can be manifested as intellectual or physical overcompensation. Sometimes a leader will stress their extreme intellectual capabilities; other times they will stress their physical capabilities; other times they will stress their spiritual capabilities. Sometimes you will see someone overcompensating so strongly that they rely on all three." Later, Landers would use his physicality when negotiating with Jennifer and other Enriched Dentistry members. He would stand close to his 'students’ and go from his soft style of speaking to a hard, demeaning approach. Landers would emphasize how difficult a time his group members would have in the real world without his help, and how they would most likely fail miserably if they were to go it alone. He also used guilt, which is one of the strongest weapons for cults. He would reference the past bonds and good feelings that they shared, and use those feelings against his 'friends', manipulating them into seeking his favor again. "It was like a complete change of face for him," said Jennifer. "Before the contracts were signed, he was like a father figure. It was all about trust and doing the right thing. After he got what he wanted, he really treated us like we were very far below him."

**Epilogue** Over the next 4 years, as Jennifer established her own practice, she incurred a debt to Enriched Dentistry of over $100,000. As of this writing, Jennifer has been free of the group's influence for 3 years and is currently in litigation with the group. She realizes now how naïve she was in trusting someone like Landers implicitly. "I should have known to ask questions," Jennifer says now. "It was my fault in the end. I was too trusting. I'd like to help others not make this same mistake... I had the highest opinion of him. In the end it was all an illusion." These kinds of manipulations are common in today's new-age business cults. Leaders like Landers initially use trust, good will, and their own self-proclaimed spirituality to create strong personal bonds. Later comes intimidation and fear, but by then it is too late for the many who have already signed elaborate and deceptive legal contracts, or given away large amounts of their money. 

**Warning Signs** You shouldn't have to be afraid of falling into a situation as horrible as Jennifer's. The large majority of organizations are benevolent groups that have their members’ best interests at heart. All that is required to be safe is to ask questions and keep an eye out for some key warning signs. 

**Hostile Relationships** Find people who have been associated with the group for some time. See how they are doing financially as well as psychologically. If the group is turning on past members and there is evidence of major ill will and aggression, that is a warning sign that things are not what they seem to be. 

**Pressure to Donate Time and Money** Many groups will try to recruit you to donate your time or money to their cause. Many will do it under the guise of helping society or serving God. Many groups are truly non-profit, but a red flag should go up for you once it is requested of you. Study any document very, very closely before you sign it. Ask specific questions of the group or individual about any contract you are considering. 

**Pressure to Not Ask Questions** This is by far the most important warning sign. If you feel pressured not to ask questions, and if you are made to feel unwelcome just for being curious about how the group operates, that is a sure sign you are
in a bad situation. If any of the above scenario sounds remotely similar to your situation, or to the situation of a friend or family member, I would recommend doing more research on the group in question. Asking questions about the groups and the people around you will serve to keep you safe from any possible psychological and financial manipulation.