

## Chapter Eight

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# Treatment, Thought Reform and the Road to Hell

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### Thought Reform Tactics: The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions

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*If we believe absurdities, we shall commit  
atrocities.*

—Sarvepalli Radha Krishnan

Several years ago I was pleased to be asked by Arnold Trebach to review the manuscript of his book, *The Great Drug War*. As I read his account of Fred Collins' ordeal at the hands of the drug "treatment" agency, Straight Inc. I began to experience a strange sense of *deja vu*. As I read on, it finally occurred to me that the appalling treatment the then 19-year-old

Fred had endured bore a striking resemblance to certain behavior control techniques described in a course in social psychology I had taken many years earlier.

A section of that course had dealt with the "thought reform" tactics used by the Chinese communists to secure collaboration from American POWs during the Korean War<sup>2</sup> and in their "re-education" programs for political prisoners at home.<sup>3</sup> Similar psychological manipulations, designed to reduce personal autonomy and inculcate beliefs, values and self-identities more agreeable to those in power, have since been found among many religious cults.<sup>4</sup>

All such practices begin with a concerted assault upon the individual's personal identity, i.e., an attempt to destroy his or her sense of self and its relation to the pre-existing social matrix.<sup>5</sup> By systematically undermining their sense of individual autonomy, target persons can be driven to a state of child-like vulnerability to outside influences, dramatic alterations in beliefs, and in extreme cases, psychotic-like behavior and suicidal tendencies.

When I mentioned these troubling parallels to Arnold Trebach, he added a short discussion of them to the final draft of his chapter on Straight Inc. In this paper, I should like to expand upon the similarities between Straight's methods and totalitarian thought reform and cult indoctrination. Though strictly speaking my remarks apply only to Straight Inc., they have broader relevance because Straight's methods have been widely recommended by the White House, influential members of the U.S. Congress, and former government drug policy advisors such as Robert DuPont and Carleton Turner. Nancy Reagan even guided the visiting Princess of Wales on an official tour of a Straight facility to promote its methods.

When I discussed the foregoing with my colleague, Bruce Alexander, he subsequently mentioned it in an article that came to the attention of Straight's directors. Apparently shocked and hurt that they should be mentioned in the same breath as the so-called "brainwashing" techniques of godless communists and religious cults, officials of Straight Inc. invited us to visit their facility in Fairfax, Virginia, in order to learn firsthand how we had slandered them. In the fall of 1990, Bruce Alexander, Linda Wong, a student of ours, and I accepted the invitation.

At Straight's sprawling, warehouse-like complex, we spoke with administrators, counsellors and clients. We toured the facility unimpeded and observed several group "therapy" sessions in progress. Our hosts were always cordial and showed no evasiveness when we asked tough questions about their tactics and critics' allegations. On the contrary, they seemed proud of what they were doing and eager to disabuse us of what they saw as our misconstrual of their program. Ironically, the more we observed and were briefed by supervisors, the more obvious it became that we did not differ with our hosts about the modus operandi at Straight Inc., only in our value judgements about its propriety in a democratic society.

Of course, we did not witness on our guided tour any of the kidnappings, deceitful recruiting, unlawful confinements, or brutal violence documented by Trebach, but these are part of sworn evidence in the court cases he discusses and numerous survivors' accounts.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the personal degradation, invasion of privacy, and use of cult-like attacks on the personal autonomy of these youngsters in attempts to turn them into anti-drug zealots was, for us, quite alarming enough. I am most troubled by the involuntary exposure of unsuspecting adolescents to these techniques in isolated, totally regimented environments. In a trauma-induced state of diminished mental capacity, which largely untrained "counsellors"<sup>7</sup> assert is essential to their "treatment," these youths are incessantly bombarded with biased, emotionally-charged information.

In effect, our hosts at Straight Inc. argued not that their means were so very different from what critics had alleged, but that their noble ends (saving the nation's children!) justified such harsh and underhanded manipulations. They excused their tactics on the grounds that the dangers of drugs, especially for youth, are so overwhelming that practices normally forbidden in democracies must be permitted in the all-out battle for survival. Their sincere concern was never in doubt, but as we spoke, I was constantly reminded of Justice Holmes' wise caution that citizens should be most on guard when motives are of the highest sort.

For a more detailed description of Straight Inc.'s program, the reader should consult Trebach's 1987 volume. Briefly, Straight's "treatment" is an amalgam

of Dr. Miller Newton's book, *Gone Way Down*, and the controversial "Toughlove" approach to re-asserting parental control over "wayward" youth. Straight begins with the dubious assumption that "any drug use by adolescents is evidence of a disease that impels insane behavior, and that parents must intervene forcefully or risk the possible death of their children from drugs."<sup>8</sup> While serious brutality was found by the courts to have been part of Straight Inc.'s repertoire, it is their seemingly more benign environmental and psychological manipulations that I wish to concentrate on in this paper for, in many ways, these assaults on the ability to engage in independent, critical thought are more insidious than physical abuse.

### The Tactics of Thought Reform

Practically as far back as one wishes to trace it, proselytizers have ardently sought ways to effect rapid and lasting conversions to their political or religious dogmas. As William Sargant points out, the indoctrination procedures to which extremists have gravitated exhibit a remarkable degree of overlap despite their widely differing aims and the diversity of their teachings across time, place and culture.<sup>9</sup> By trial and error, and with little understanding of why it works, they have stumbled, independently, upon an effective set of procedures for transforming others. Modern research has helped explain why this limited repertoire of conversion techniques works.<sup>10</sup> It involves strict control over information and manipulation of deep-seated psychological needs and anxieties, combined with disorientation produced by physical and mental exhaustion. With concerted application, cathartic alterations in consciousness are possible, often resulting in dramatic changes in world view.<sup>11</sup>

The popular term "brainwashing" often surfaces in this context. Unfortunately, these days, its mention is more likely to confuse and emotionalize than to clarify because much of its original meaning has been lost through trivial overuse. The term entered English in the 1950s through the work of the journalist, Edward Hunter, who introduced it as a translation for the Chinese *hsi nao* (literally, "wash brain") in his interviews with refugees who told of undergoing "ideological remolding" at the hands of Maoist revolutionaries. Westerners' fears were further aggravated by sensational media reports of an allegedly new and mysterious oriental device used to control American prisoners

of war during the Korean War. This fostered the erroneous notion that the Chinese had discovered something unique and overpowering. As Lifton lamented, "brainwashing" came (incorrectly) to denote "an all-powerful, irresistible, unfathomable and magical method of achieving total control over the human mind."<sup>12</sup> In fact, its effectiveness is much less, and all that was really new in the Chinese programs was the vehement and systematic way in which they applied a combination of old persuasion techniques in a highly regimented environment.<sup>13</sup>

While public hysteria about the potency of Chinese indoctrination methods was growing, most of the underlying principles were already well understood by western psychologists and were being experimented with in overt and covert research funded by the CIA.<sup>14</sup> The techniques are essentially those of applied social psychology and, while potentially powerful in the right setting, they are not irresistible. They are extensions of interpersonal ploys, rewards and punishments we all use in various legitimate attempts to persuade others. They become objectionable only in situations where communicator and recipient are on a grossly unequal footing or the recipient's ability to evaluate information is impeded. In other words, where the normal flow of conflicting opinion is curtailed, control of rewards and punishments is one-sided, or deception and coercion are used to induce a captive audience to change its beliefs or intentions.

While the threats posed by brainwashing in everyday settings may have been exaggerated, the fact remains that these procedures can be psychologically harmful in closed environments. Attempts to apply them surreptitiously or on especially vulnerable populations have sparked a prolonged debate concerning their permissibility in democratic societies.<sup>15</sup> What, then, are the essential features of totalitarian thought reform and how are they manifested in treatment schemes that follow the Straight Inc. model?

### Deceit, Coercion and Disorientation During Early Captivity.

Straight, like many religious cults, has maintained its right to conceal its aims from potential inductees. Abetted by usually well-meaning parents, it has routinely deceived adolescents as to the purpose of their initial visit and used psychological and physi-

cal coercion to prevent them from leaving.<sup>16</sup> Straight's rationalization for this is: "they lie to us about their drug use, so it's OK to lie to them about treatment, it's for their own good." Of course, the loss of trust this engenders eliminates one of the central requisites of a legitimate therapeutic relationship.

According to Straight's philosophy, drug use of any kind is pathological by definition, so it is virtually impossible for the youth to maintain that treatment is unnecessary once the slightest admission is made. Such admissions were extracted under false pretences in the initial interview and, by Straight's perverted logic, refusal to admit the need for therapy is evidence of "being in denial" and therefore all the more proof of the "abuser's" need for the program.

In 1978, Raymond Toliver published a biography of the Luftwaffe interrogator, Hanns-Joachim Scharff, who became famous for his ability to secure information and cooperation from captured Allied aircrews by subtle psychological means rather than physical abuse.<sup>17</sup> Scharff emphasized the advantages of working on the interviewee immediately after arrest to capitalize on the shock of the transition from free person to captive. Suddenly confused, apprehensive and powerless, the target understandably tends to feel dependent on the captor. Exploitation of this state was also apparent in the elaborate rituals many American prisoners of war experienced at the moment of capture by Chinese troops.<sup>18</sup> Quick adoption of the prisoner role was facilitated in Straight's induction ritual by a humiliating search of all body orifices, dramatically signalling the end of privacy and self-direction. From that point on, even urinating and defecating was closely observed and inmates would be led from place to place by their belts, like a dog on a leash.

Thought reform seeks to blur self-identity by shattering ties with the captive's previous network of people, organizations and standards of behavior. Thus, Straight prevented communication with parents, siblings or friends. Loneliness enhances anxiety, making identification with the captors an attractive source of relief. In this demoralized state, any minor, unexpected show of human compassion assumes major reward value, useful for shaping compliance and reminding the inmate of the promised land available to those who submit.<sup>19</sup>

Straight also adopted the old interrogator's ploy of alternating periods of intensive indoctrination with

periods of social isolation during this early stage of vulnerability. Isolation heightens the inmate's hunger for information of any kind, thereby enhancing the impact of the carefully selected messages to follow.<sup>20</sup>

### Rapping, Relating, Motivating and Marathoning

According to Robert J. Lifton, the essential elements of thought reform are: "confession, the exposure and renunciation of past and present 'evil'; and re-education, the remaking of [the individual] in the [reformer's] image."<sup>21</sup> The mere threat of physical violence hovering in the background maximizes its effectiveness. Elaborate sessions where groups of prisoners were cajoled by Chinese re-educators to confess real or imagined crimes of thought and deed, and to profess their guilt and unworthiness, are described by Edgar H. Schein and Lifton. Group members were also encouraged to denounce one another for alleged transgressions. We observed highly similar processes, called "relating" and "moral inventories" in Straight jargon. Straight demanded that youths repeatedly confess their "bad habits," their worthlessness, and their inability to reform by themselves. Like Alcoholics Anonymous and Synanon, Straight emphasizes the need to confess failures before the group, to admit denial and powerlessness, and the need to give oneself over to a "higher power."

Straight's use of informants throughout the program is also right out of the thought reformer's handbook. The intent is to destroy any trust and solidarity among resisters and to undermine all attempts to question the messages being hammered home by relentless repetition. One of the strongest psychological needs served by normal affiliation with others is that of consensual validation, i.e., by interacting in groups, we check the validity of our knowledge and values through comparison with those of others. In thought reform programs, such reaffirmation is thwarted while the old attitudes are constantly attacked by one-sided, emotional exhortations. At the heart of all such systems are the twin aims of total information control and making satisfaction of the basic human need for group acceptance contingent on conformity.

In Straight's group sessions, we observed counsellors and higher level inmates encouraging hysterical chanting of program jargon, accompanied by ritualistic movements in unison. Those who failed to exhibit enough enthusiasm were goaded on, verbally

and physically. These so-called "group raps" occurred daily, often lasting 12 hours per day on weekdays and six on weekends. In the process known as "motivating," public confessions called "renouncements" were demanded — the more lurid, the greater the group approval (and the easier it would be to demonstrate subsequent improvement). Watching these youths vie noisily for the privilege of being next to engage in this public self-effacement, I could not help thinking of the old documentaries I had seen of Hitler Youth rallies, complete with the fanatical raised-arm salute (which Straight told us was merely their enthusiastic way of being recognized as the next to recite, confess and denounce). A technique found most effective in the Korean POW camps, and in evidence in the Straight "raps," was heavy use of testimonials from converts who vigorously denounced their past evilness and extolled their present redemption.

In "Rules Raps," the group was required to memorize Straight's dogma in mindless rote drills. Social pressure to conform was ratcheted up by making everyone repeat the exercise if one member faltered. Those who continued to lag were subject to "marathoning" where they would be singled out and humiliated and bullied by the group until they conformed. There is documentation of up to 80 hours of continuous "marathoning" being applied to some holdouts in the program.<sup>22</sup>

To enhance the emotional and physical exhaustion and the passivity it induces, Straight adopted another triad of time-honored "thought police" techniques: sleep deprivation, dietary restriction and restriction of bathroom privileges.<sup>23</sup> Disorienting in themselves, these restraints make sleep, food, and access to the toilet powerful rewards that can be meted out to conformers. According to sworn testimony, Straight often left restrained group members sitting in their own urine, feces or vomit until suitable concessions were extracted.<sup>24</sup> We observed none of this, but the vacant "prisoner's shuffle" was evident as clients were led around the facility.

To effect submission, thought reform causes despondency then builds the hope of secular or religious salvation. The metaphor of death and rebirth reappears frequently. Sargant notes the similarity of totalitarian conversion techniques to the writings of the early American revivalist preacher, Jonathan Edwards. Edwards described how to increase tension

systematically by inducing guilt and acute apprehensiveness (in his case, fear of eternal damnation), leading up to fervent exhortations to repent. The intent is to drive the proselyte to a state of emotional collapse where the offer of salvation can soothe his anguish.

Another common thread in both secular and religious conversions is the distinction between the unenlightened "them" of the target's evil past and the virtuous "us" who are in the desired state of grace. Recognition and acceptance by the righteous is withheld from the potential convert until surrender is obtained. The motivations for this leap are powerful social and psychological rewards: intimacy and belonging, the release from tension by surrendering to an all-powerful higher force, and a new sense of righteousness conferred by membership in a great moral crusade.<sup>25</sup> At this point, neophytes can also expect improvement in physical circumstances and some freedom of movement.

People who have never experienced such treatment frequently ask why the victims don't simply "go along" overtly while secretly maintaining their prior beliefs. The answer is that, while this does occasionally happen (Fred Collins is one case), it is much easier said than done. One of the best supported findings of social psychology is that if people can be induced by rewards, threats or a sense of obligation to act contrary to their beliefs, it is the beliefs that are more likely to shift in the direction of the behavior, rather than the other way around. Schein, Lifton and Sargant all noted that thought reformers everywhere seem to have discovered this, as well as the effectiveness of gradually shaping compliance in small steps. Straight is no exception here, either. Making seemingly trivial concessions, which can be rationalized as harmless and only done to achieve a reward (e.g., a letter from home or even just a moment's peace), seems like a reasonable bargain under the circumstances. The hidden cost is that this makes it more likely that a bigger concession will be granted next time. It also offers an example of collaboration that can be shown to holdouts or used to blackmail the perpetrator at a later date. More benign versions of this strategy are taught in most sales manuals and the supporting research is covered in any social psychology text under the heading of the "foot-in-door" technique.<sup>26</sup>

### Why is Thought Reform Morally Objectionable?

In addition to the obvious callousness, privations and physical maltreatment, there are other reasons why such programs do not belong in a democratic society. These are discussed by Perry London under the headings of "arguments from the ethical tradition" and "existential-humanist arguments."<sup>27</sup> The former are essentially the philosophical underpinnings of liberal democracy, rooted in the ancient religious and political philosophies of the Mediterranean basin and refined by European dialogues and political movements down to the present. They find their clearest modern expression in documents such as the Magna Carta, the English Bill of Rights, the American Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, the writers of the French Revolution, the Helsinki Accords, and most recently, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The "existential-humanist" objections to extreme forms of manipulation assert that deliberate control of others is wrong because it dehumanizes them. Humanists see freedom as an extension of the concept of choice. Its exercise is fundamental to morality and control is a negation of choice. They argue that people are obligated to exercise their uniquely human attributes and to fulfill their inner potential. Therefore, they say, we must oppose any activity that aims to subvert an individual's ability to choose.

London distills the foregoing into three tests for anti-democratic procedure or undue influence over others. The Rule of Non-Coercion says people should be free under the widest possible circumstances to refuse the dictates of others. The Rule of Explication says they should not be seduced into compliance but should be told what is wanted of them. And the Rule of Self-direction states that, within reasonable limits, people should be free to decide how they wish to conduct their lives. Of course, none of these rules is absolute, for society could hardly function under such conditions. In a democracy, however, any restrictions should be subject to "due process," and so the question becomes one of where limitations can reasonably be placed.

Control of others is, after all, a daily and often benign occurrence. Questions arise when the motives of the controller are suspect, control is exerted against the will or interest of the person controlled, the controlee

is of diminished capacity, or the control is so subtle as to be beneath the awareness of its target. Susan Andersen attempted to assess the real extent of cult abuses of this sort. She tried to steer a middle course between the needs to safeguard the rights of unsuspecting potential recruits and the desire not to infringe upon constitutional protections that even cult devotees enjoy. In identifying those aspects of cults that should worry civil libertarians, Andersen settled on two essential factors: presence of significant physical or psychological coercion and use of deception. Realizing that families, friends, schools, employers, advertisers, and mainstream churches and political parties all engage in persuasion and manipulation to some degree, she sought to demarcate permissible limits. Those boundaries have been overstepped when any group:

- 1) isolates its members from past and external sources of social support (i.e., curtails the individual's means of "checking reality");
- 2) demands all ties with family, friends, defectors, and non-group members be broken;
- 3) offers initial unconditional love and support, but later threatens its withdrawal for deviancy; i.e., makes acceptance conditional on expression of the group ideology;
- 4) institutionalizes disrespect for personal privacy and forces constant contact with the group;
- 5) exerts extreme pressure to maintain unanimity and severely discourages questioning or diversity of opinion;
- 6) threatens physical harm for thought deviation or departure from group norms;
- 7) threatens spiritual, mystical or psychological punishments for deviation from "the one true path";
- 8) demands protracted confessions of unworthiness, sinfulness;
- 9) systematically induces guilt, anxiety and confusion about self-identity, previous attitudes;
- 10) holds out the group as the only relief for this disquieting and confused state;
- 11) rigidly divides the world into the good, enlightened "us" versus the evil, ignorant

“them” who must be shunned;

12) continually barrages inductees with “pro-group” information while rigidly isolating them from any contrary opinion; and

13) seeks to produce disorientation and an inability to engage in critical thought through physical exhaustion, sleep and food deprivation, and by emotional exhortation and ritualized behaviors in protracted, mandatory “rallies.”

Andersen’s criteria for inferring cult-like deceptive practices include:

1) lying to prospective members about the purposes of the organization;

2) providing misleading information to families, the community, the police, government, or the media;

3) attempting to convince inductees that the only source of authority for beliefs and actions resides in the group’s leader and/or dogma; and

4) ruthless control of all information from without and within the group.<sup>28</sup>

By any objective standard, the activities of Straight Inc. and its imitators run afoul of these criteria. While Straight may be among the worst offenders, it is far from alone. There is a disturbing trend in drug abuse treatment toward dogmas, that denigrate autonomy. According to 12-Step ideology, drug use is an overpowering disease that can only be held in check by a process of wallowing in past failures, confessing one’s inadequacy, and surrendering to a “higher power.”

I am happy to report, however, that there are some theorists and helping agencies who reject this pessimistic outlook and strive instead to help youths with drug problems by teaching them actual skills that lead to enhanced self-images and confidence in their ability to meet life’s challenges. There could hardly be a more stark contrast than between the scenes I observed on our visit to Straight Inc. and on more recent tours of the Vancouver-based Odyssey program which embodies this more enlightened philosophy. Others have reported success with this sort of empowering, as opposed to dis-empowering, approach.<sup>29</sup>

In this paper, I have decried the destructive, anti-democratic practices of Straight Inc. Free citizens

should oppose them not only because of the tangible harm they do to individuals such as Fred Collins, but because to tolerate them as an exigency demanded by an allegedly overwhelming drug threat inures the population to the steady erosion of our hard-won liberties. President James Madison was already aware of such dangers:

I believe there are more instances of the abridgement of the freedom of the people by gradual and silent encroachment of those in power than by violent and sudden usurpation.<sup>30</sup>

Many such stories were related by survivors of Straight, including Fred Collins himself, in a special session at the 1991 Drug Policy Foundation conference in Washington, D.C.

There is a disturbing trend to staff drug treatment facilities largely with non-professional “counselors” whose sole qualification is graduation from the programs in which they serve. In addition to their limited qualifications, this also provides as role models only people who have had trouble with drugs, rather than those who were able to use them responsibly.

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### Endnotes

Endnotes furnished by author upon request.