

# Cracking the Riddle of the Cults:

## Frontiers of Freedom in an Information Age\*

by

Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman

*The following address was presented in Pittsburgh on October 30, 1987 to the Cult Awareness Network National Conference. Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman are co-authors of Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change (Delta Books, 1979), which brought information and analysis of contemporary cultism to a wide public; and Holy Terror: The Fundamentalist War on America's Freedoms in Religion, Politics and Our Private Lives (Delta Books, 1984), an investigation of the mass communication strategies of televangelists and related religious-political groups.*

### Opening Remarks — Flo Conway

Good evening and thank you for such a wonderful reception. Jim and I would like to thank our hosts, Irv Heller, program chairman, Cynthia Kissler, Executive Director of CAN National, Kay and Don Sauter, and everyone in the Akron and Pittsburgh affiliates for inviting us to be with you this evening. We are delighted and pleased to share this important occasion. For us, it is like coming home, a time to remember, to evaluate and see anew, in the light of more than a decade, the singular experience of the cult phenomenon that binds us, and the nature of the frontier on which all of us are traveling.

For the next forty-five minutes or so, Jim and I want to give you as full a picture as possible of what we have been doing and what we are beginning to see as the larger meaning of the cult experience and the direction in which it unfolds. Few phenomena in human affairs today have continually raised more national controversy, delivered more personal traumas or created more divisions across entire societies. The cult phenomenon, from its first sightings in the seventies, has been a riddle of extremes, filled with conflict and extraordinary complexities. This journey for individuals, parents, families and professionals alike has been one that, for Jim and me,

brings into a new focus the nature of the difficult, historic change people everywhere are experiencing. It is an unprecedented shift that has literally changed the rules and the whole ball game, a shift from yesterday's world of industrial resources, of physical matter and energy, to today's new world of information and communication resources born of the most precious natural resource of all — the human mind.

On this frontier, Jim and I have seen in countless places the inroads made by many of you here tonight, and by many who are not here, in your personal efforts and persistent struggles for new precedents in law and new mental health methods for diagnosing and treating the effects of the cult experience. But of equal importance has been the cumulative effort made by so many individuals in this organization to educate the public toward an awareness of freedom of thought and a new understanding of the real-world threats to our basic powers of mind. In this cumulative effort Jim and I see the riddle of the cults as a Rosetta Stone, a key to profoundly important human questions in this time of so much revolutionary ferment that points the way, not only to new directions for research, but to new terms for understanding the value of the mind and the changing imperatives of human freedom in an information society.

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When so many characteristics of cult control — from the information and communication strategies used in recruitment and conversion to cult-like mind- and emotion-stilling tech-niques — have become an integral part of the information and communication practices employed in nearly every arena of our national life, cracking the riddle of the cults becomes a challenge of a much larger magnitude, a journey from the inner frontier of freedom of thought outward to the frontier of freedom as the meaning and base of democracy, coming full circle to the survival of the mind itself and the fundamental right of each individual to be free to think and feel and choose.

Freedom in an information society rests on this bottom line, on the bottom line of freedom of thought set by this organization from its beginnings. From this starting point where we all begin, I want to turn things over to Jim, who will tell you about our efforts to crack the riddle of the cults, and the frontiers the two of us have explored along the way.

### Part I — Jim Siegelman

It's wonderful to be here with all of you. It's been a long time since we've seen so many of our good friends in this remarkable organization. Some of you may already be familiar with the work Flo and I have been doing for more than a decade now — *Snapping*, *Holy Terror*, our *Information Disease* study. But we haven't talked much about our work over the past three or four years — we've been writing and researching across the country on a number of projects. So, without bombarding you with too many theories and numbers here tonight, I'd like to update you and lay out, as briefly as I can, a picture of the research the two of us have been embarked on, what we've found, what we think it might mean for your efforts — and for issues that reach beyond the cult controversy as it is usually portrayed.

Our odyssey in this new world began quite differently from most of yours. In 1975, Flo and I left our jobs at *Harper's Weekly* in New York and headed west to investigate a flood of reports of bizarre, sudden personality changes we had been receiving from around the country. By the time we reached California, we had heard an odd phrase a hundred times: "I don't know what happened, I just snapped. "Something snapped inside me" — people said, and they were never the same again.

We tracked down Bill Rambur in San Diego and Henrietta Crampton in Redondo Beach and learned about this Citizen's Freedom Foundation with its nationwide network of activist parents who had put everything on the line — their jobs, their life savings, everything — to rescue their children from new cults, sects and self-help therapies that were changing them beyond recognition.

We met with dozens of former cult members and their families. We caught up with Sondra Sacks and Ted Patrick — who was in the Orange County Jail at the time — and learned about this controversial cult remedy Ted called "deprogramming." We interviewed leading mental health professionals and pioneering brain researchers and asked them what they made of the extraordinary changes people were describing. Then we went and hid out on the Oregon Coast to piece together the picture in our own understanding.

The result was *Snapping*, a new perspective on this phenomenon people were beginning to refer to as cult "mind control." We soon came to see that term literally. In *Snapping*, we began to crack the riddle, the code of the cults, as we laid out the sophisticated communication techniques used by cults, sects and mass therapies across the board to engineer sweeping changes in the basic capacities of mind that make each of us human: our fundamental abilities to think, to feel and to make reasoned, independent choices. Our model of cult mind control as we presented it in the book and have expanded it in our followup writing goes beyond mind control alone to describe a broader process we've come to refer to as a comprehensive program of "covert induction."

Let me tell you what we mean by covert induction and why we use this term to talk about what goes on in the cults. Covert induction is a far cry from "brainwashing" as that word is still used so loosely today. As we pointed out in *Snapping*, Chinese and Korean methods of "thought reform" or "coercive persuasion," as it is often called, lean heavily on the brute force of physical coercion. The process we've observed is a more subtle one custom-made for the open, democratic societies of the West. Here manipulation and control are accomplished, not by coercion, but *covertly* through everyday uses of human communication. In the cults, as many of you know first-hand, participation almost always begins voluntarily — or, at least, appears to — but it may lead quickly to manipulations that go far beyond brainwashing or

anything that has been seen in this country.

The process takes place in distinct stages or steps. Covert induction begins with recruitment, at the moment of first contact, as cult leaders use the invisible stuff of information and communication, not to persuade a person to join a group by reason or argument or even claims of faith, but to induce covertly intense experiences that lead people to relinquish control over their own thoughts, feelings and decision-making powers. The recruiter's words sound like any others, a picture or gesture barely registers, someone comes up to you who seems incredibly happy and fulfilled, like he's found some special meaning or purpose in his life — and you want to know and feel that too.

The next step is conversion. Once a person has been drawn to some sect temple or counseling center, by whatever means, most groups we studied deliver an extraordinary experience we heard described time after time as a "snapping" moment, some sect ritual or therapeutic technique that was systematically engineered to create an impression of a great psychic or spiritual breakthrough. The Krishnas' *arotika* ceremony remains the classic cult example. The Moonies' weekend retreats are more subtle but may bring about equally profound changes. Rajneesh and other New Age groups have strung together techniques from Hinduism, Yoga and the "consciousness explosion" of the sixties — encounter groups, psychodrama, rebirthing, guided fantasy — to push people to the peak and over the precipice of snapping.

We called the book *Snapping*, but the snapping moment is only the jumping-off point. The long fall into covert induction comes in the aftermath of the moment, when nearly every cult and therapy we studied makes its simple suggestions or commands: to "surrender," to "let go," to "relinquish hold upon the will," "stop thinking and questioning," "turn off your satanic mind," "just let things float" — we've catalogued dozens of phrases of this type; every group has its own distinct call.

These simple, seemingly harmless suggestions, commands and codewords are the covert triggers of step three, the central process of mind control. In our work, Flo and I have sought to pinpoint these ritual techniques used by hundreds of cults, sects and therapies because, to us, they represent the first clearly identifiable, objective indicators that

a group is using practices that can truly be called "mind control" in the most literal sense of the term. Krishna, DLM, Rajneesh, TM and other eastern sects use covert triggers in chanting and meditation rituals that physically still people's thought processes for hours on end. The Way uses a nonstop method of speaking in tongues. Scientology uses multiple covert cues in its auditing and training regimens.

The process across the board bears striking resemblance to a form of hypnosis known as "indirect induction," a method pioneered by the late hypnotherapist Dr. Milton H. Erickson. I know many of you are familiar with Erickson's groundbreaking work by now. I just want to tell you the gist of the man's discovery as it fits into the riddle of the cults. Erickson did away with dangling watchfobs, whirling spirals and other hypnotic props, turning instead to the individual's own inner thinking and feeling processes. By focusing his subjects' attention inward, on immediate bodily sensations, mental images, memories, personal beliefs, even abstract ideas, Erickson showed how much easier it was to let people hypnotize themselves indirectly, often without ever knowing they were under hypnosis. In the cults, in contrast to the clinical setting, where patients are led into then expressly out of a short-term therapeutic trance, millions are being led, not indirectly but covertly, without their knowledge or consent, into trance states that are not short-lived and specific but generalized, ongoing and self-sustaining.

It's this program of inner, covert control — mind control — where the cult phenomenon departs from all the prevailing mental health criteria and legal precedents. This is the problem with covert induction and mind control in particular, the dilemma at the heart of the riddle: specific techniques can be identified within each group, but not their effects. As with hypnosis itself, there's no way clinically to tell a so-called "normal" person from someone who is under mind control. The fact is, as most of you know first-hand, the riddle of the cults cannot be cracked from inside. Only in the aftermath of the experience, at the breakpoint of emergence and re-entry, can the cult member even begin to realize he has been under mind control. Only then does he come face to face with his own participation in the control and, for the first time, with the lasting effects of the powerful techniques that were used to bring it about.

It is here, at the crucial juncture of emergence and

re-entry, that life can suddenly become so very clear and wonderful, or so very cloudy and more painful and confusing than ever. For us, this is the real bottom line of the experience, the key to the riddle. Beyond the details of mind control and covert induction, beyond the cults' all-encompassing illusion of freedom of belief and religion, lie the deeper, lasting effects we first heard about from many of you and have continued to explore as symptoms of the new disorder we call "information disease."

Now, "information disease" is not some hype phrase or scare word. It is a term we introduced in *Snapping* almost ten years ago to describe the extraordinary alterations of mind and body people told us they experienced both during and after their cult involvements. In our initial research, we counted more than a dozen clinically recognized signs of disorder: physical illness, exhaustion, fear, guilt, hostility, withdrawal, depression, violent outbursts, self-destructive tendencies. But the most startling effects fell into a new and different category: lasting disturbances of awareness, perception, memory, imagination and other everyday human information-processing capacities. Symptoms included ongoing problems of disorientation and dissociation, recurring nightmares, daytime images, hallucinations and delusions, uncontrollable "floating" in and out of altered states and a frustrating inability to break mental rhythms, images, voices and other repetitive thought patterns.

The minute we discerned this larger pattern of effects, Flo and I sensed we had uncovered something important from a mental health standpoint and, potentially, of even greater significance for science's basic understanding of the everyday workings of the mind. To learn more, in the fall of 1980, we met with senior editors of *Science Digest* magazine and, with their support, we began a followup study to *Snapping*, a nationwide survey of the cult experience and its long-term effects. With help from a number of CAN affiliates and more than a dozen other sources, we distributed 1,600 confidential questionnaires throughout the U.S. and Canada and got back more than 400 replies from former members of 48 different cults, sects and mass therapies. A summary of our initial findings, published in *Science Digest* in 1982, received a National Mental Health Association Media Award that year.

When those first findings appeared, Flo and I received many requests for more information, but

because of the controversy that inevitably surrounds this subject, we were reluctant to release the full study until the entire body of data could be thoroughly analyzed, critiqued and prepared for more formal presentation. In 1984, the University of Oregon invited us to come out as associate researchers and visiting faculty in their Center for Communication Research, where our raw data became the subject of a year-long data analysis conducted jointly by the two of us and researchers with the Center's Project on Information and Social Change. Finally, in May, 1985 our full findings were presented to the annual meeting of the International Communication Association in Honolulu. A summary of our presentation appeared last year in *Update*, a journal of new religious movements published by the Dialog Center in Aarhus, Denmark.

Now I promised not to load you down with numbers tonight. We'll go into our findings in detail tomorrow morning — we've brought the complete statistical breakdown and a series of graphs from our ICA presentation. But I would like to report here for the first time some findings that came out of the University of Oregon's computers that support things Flo and I have been saying about cult groups for a long time.

The profile of the cult experience itself was revealing. Inside the group, our 400 subjects lived day-to-day under constant stresses and pressures. Exhaustion was widespread but, in fact, basic physical deprivations turned out to be minimal. In contrast to the usual reports of cult life, which cite poor diet and lack of sleep as primary factors in mind control, the majority of people we surveyed reported eating normal, balanced meals or vegetarian but not unhealthy diets, and the amount of sleep averaged almost 6 hours per night — a low but by no means inadequate amount.

As we suspected, the primary control factor turned out to be the intense ritual practices people engaged in as part of their daily devotions or required therapy programs. Most people spent from 3 to 7 hours *per day* practicing one or more mind-stilling rituals and covert communication techniques and another 20 to 30 hours per week in individual and group indoctrination. That's a 40 to 80 hour week members spent in mind-stilling and indoctrination procedures alone!

The impact was imperceptible to most people while they were in the group, but it surfaced with a

vengeance afterwards. Nearly everyone reported one or more of the 20 symptoms we catalogued. Twenty percent of former members — 1 in 5 — experienced some lasting health problem. Three-quarters experienced lasting emotional problems. But it was in disruptions of basic thinking processes that our study turned up its most telling insights.

Almost everyone reported one or more information disease symptoms. Two-thirds reported periods of disorientation or "floating." Half reported recurring nightmares. More than a third were unable to break mental rhythms of chanting, meditation or speaking in tongues. One in four experienced some memory loss. One in seven reported hallucinations or delusions for periods of up to 8 years after leaving their groups!

As important as the numbers were the written comments people sent in with their questionnaires. Many claimed they had become *unable* to think, incapable of making even the simplest choices about what to eat, what clothes to wear, how to get through the easiest day. People couldn't focus or concentrate for months, couldn't read a newspaper, couldn't write basic sentences. Some wrote of experiencing physical pain while attempting to make reasoned, independent decisions for the first time in years. "I went through intense pain, like my insides were exploding," one woman wrote. "It hurts to think, physically aches," said a young man. "I phase in and out. I have memory lapses and find it hard to remember details." Another said, "Still suffering from amnesia and sexual dysfunction, among other things... totally different person... the world looks flat... Can't feel or find myself."

Now I want to tell you just a little of what we learned about deprogramming. This area was of enormous interest to our team at the University of Oregon for both its mental health and legal implications. Nearly three quarters of the people we surveyed were deprogrammed or went through some form of exit counseling — about half voluntary, half involuntary. As a group, they reported a third less, and in many instances only *half* as many after effects and, on the whole, took roughly a third less time to full recovery than those who weren't deprogrammed. Average rehab time was 20 months — more than a year and a half — for those who weren't deprogrammed, compared to about 14 months — just over a year — for those who were. Overall, deprogrammees reported a

third fewer months of depression, 40% less disorientation, half as many sleepless nights — clearly, something in the deprogramming process works!

Of course, as we said in *Science Digest*, we found no evidence to support charges that deprogramming is physically violent or brutal, but there were widespread complaints about the process that we want to bring to people's attention here tonight, problems of inexperienced deprogrammers and people who went out on cases with little knowledge about the beliefs and methods of the groups they were dealing with. The real injury we heard about many, many times was not to people's mind or bodies but to their dignity as individuals, damage done by deprogrammers who were insensitive, ignorant of cult methods or, more often, just in too big a hurry.

Without question, our most significant findings concerned the relationship between cult techniques and their long-term effects. The University of Oregon analysis found a direct relationship between the amount of time cult members spent in ritual mind-control practices and the extent of their reported aftereffects. We also found a direct relationship between ritual time and rehabilitation — the more time people spent stilling their minds in the cult, the longer it took for rehab. Our final analysis turned up 63 statistically significant correlations across more than a dozen separate symptoms in the effects reported by all former members and in separate breakdowns for the four largest cults in our sample — the Moonies, Scientology, DLM and The Way.

**Snapping and Information Disease.** In the seventies, the cults were the first sighting, the special case, a world apart. In the eighties, as we all know, the riddle has moved close in to the mainstream of American life. When Flo and I started work on our second book, *Holy Terror*, we stepped into a world that was more subtle, more controversial and, in many ways, more frightening than that of the cults, precisely because this new world was all around us. When the book was first published in 1982, we got calls and letters from people across the country, including some inside the cult awareness network: "Don't take on the born-again," they said. "We get a lot of money from evangelical Christians. Whatever you do, don't criticize the government or the Republican Party. We need them!"

Of course, *Holy Terror* was not an attack on any religion or party. It was the next step Flo and I knew we had to take — and I must say, with some grave concerns on our part — in our exploration of the widening use of new communication techniques and technologies to gain power and control over millions in the name of religion. Both of us had been confronted at every turn in our work by disturbing parallels between the cults and America's massive born-again movement. Two-thirds of the sects named in our study were outgrowths of fundamentalist-based Christian churches. As a group, ex-members of these Bible sects reported more severe aftereffects than any other group we surveyed. In the eighties, CAN chapters across the country have confirmed this dramatic shift in the breakdown of calls coming into their offices. Before, it was almost exclusively "the cults" as we used to know them. Now, by almost two to one, the problem groups are extreme fundamentalist, pentecostal and charismatic sects, many aligned with the Shepherding movement and its interlocking Discipling, Covenant and Headship offshoots.

This is the forefront of cult activity in the eighties for a number of obvious reasons: the desire by cult leaders everywhere to appear more respectable and edge into the mainstream, the national swing to conservatism and return to traditional religions, and — last but not least — the enormous political, economic and technological clout of right-wing fundamentalism as it has exploded into a full-fledged religious-political ideology in America and worldwide. Our research in *Holy Terror* revealed for the first time the spread of the same covert communication techniques we identified in the cults into larger religious-political arenas, into the electronic church and throughout the fundamentalist right's coordinated satellite TV, direct mail and grassroots organizing networks.

The numbers were staggering: the followers, the money, the bloc votes, the worldwide missionary crusades. The movement's impact on officials in Congress, federal agencies and the nation's courts has been chilling. In Washington, politicians in both parties continue to tell us, they've been astonished and personally intimidated by the explosion of Bible studies, prayer groups, witnessing and evangelizing taking place in government offices on a regular basis — including weekly prayer groups in the White House. The linkups between Oliver North's renegade Iran-contra supply operations, the fundamentalist right network and the Moonies' global enterprises, CAUSA and the *Washington*

*Times*, have been well-documented. Ollie North's own personal connections to charismatic groups in the military and around suburban Washington appear to have multiple ties to the Shepherding movement.

And beyond Washington, people in every walk of life are being manipulated by fundamentalist right groups for all kinds of religious, political and economic ends. In *Holy Terror* we distinguished the fundamentalist right method as one, not of mind control, but of a separate strategy we call "emotional control." In contrast to cult rituals that target basic powers of thinking and decision-making, the techniques of emotional control target bedrock feelings of fear, guilt, love, hate, anger and other universal human responses. Fundamentalist right leaders use the vivid words and images of the Bible to command unwavering belief and obedience in their followers, to stir primal fears and induce overwhelming born-again moments and other emotional experiences. Emotional control is the engine of the fundamentalist right machine and the core of control in most fundamentalist sects. One of the most devastating things about it is how perfectly the strategy meshes with high-technology and mass media. In contrast to mind control, which usually requires some personal contact and one-on-one instruction, emotional control works equally well sight unseen, by remote control — over the electronic church, through mass-produced proselytizing materials and computerized mailings — or woven into the subtle religious appeals of a televised presidential address.

Some fundamentalist sects use the strategy to suppress their followers' feelings altogether — just as the cults strive to suppress people's thoughts. The Navigators' Scripture Memory and Meditation program plants the suggestion in subtle ways: "Alas, it is this that deceives you, for your heart is the worst part." Campus Crusade doesn't beat around the bush. Its Four Spiritual Laws proselytizing pamphlet closes with the explicit command: "DO NOT DEPEND ON FEELINGS!..." For those who waver, as in the cults, the sect's non-stop "spiritual breathing" technique effectively stills any remaining doubts or fears.

Mind control. Emotional control. The distinctions begin to blur. In practice, of course, most cults, fundamentalist sects and mass therapies alike use mixed methods of mind control and emotional control in their daily rituals and regimens. Tongues is a mantra. Scientology's auditing technique is more emotional control than mind control. The late

Center for Feeling Therapy used emotional confrontations, confessions and — like Rajneesh — random, impersonal sex to push people's feelings over a threshold of both physical and emotional burnout.

Where on earth is this free-for-all going? For more than a decade, Flo and I have held that the case against the cults and so many groups that now warrant that label can be made unambiguously on mental health grounds. The bottom line we have been striving for in all our work is to document the verifiable effects of cult techniques on the mind. The facts of covert induction, its proven threat to freedom of thought, and the cumulative effects of cult rituals on basic powers of thought, feeling and free choice, come home to roost ultimately, we contend, at the neurophysiological level, in lasting organic effects on the everyday workings of the brain and nervous system. This is the final piece of the puzzle, the last step in cracking the riddle, and Flo and I know all of us are on the brink of an era in which great progress can be made. In the past few years, powerful new tools for verifying specific alterations of brain function by ethical, nonintrusive means have come into wide use in medical and scientific circles. We believe the time has come to begin applying those tools to cult-related questions. The research would be fascinating and, more importantly, could prove genuinely helpful to struggling ex-members who might wish to participate.

In the meantime, all of us have urgent business to attend to on the social and political front. The way things are shaping up, it looks like 1988 is going to be one wild and crazy and perhaps frightening election year. Don't underestimate Pat Robertson. Win or lose, he's playing a pivotal role as stalking-horse for the fundamentalist right. While he's drawing fire out front, State Republican parties across the country are being targeted for a holy war from within — and it appears that major segments of the Shepherding movement are being geared up for covert action at state and local levels.

The situation may turn critical next year. Flo and I believe people in the Cult Awareness Network have an invaluable role to play as vital resources for the local and national media, for moderate incumbents, mainstream candidates and responsible officials of both parties. CAN and its affiliates know more than anyone nationwide about the two groups that promise to be major players in '88 — the Moonies and the Shepherding movement, their entwined roots and branches, their tactics and

operations — and people are going to need that information next year. Above all, as you did in the chaotic days after Jonestown when the public was confronted with the worst-case scenarios we had all been warning about, you alone can provide first-hand testimony and access to trustworthy former members whose voices give real-life meaning to the larger threat of cult methods and goals.

Now, whether you agree or disagree with my assessment of the political situation, one fact is undeniable: none of us is dealing any longer just with "the cults" as we were in the seventies. For you as parents, ex-members and professionals, as for the two of us as authors, the special case of the cults has grown into a much larger social and now pervasive political problem as well. In every arena, the fight is the same: free minds. Freedom of thought for the individual is identical with our first priority as citizens, to see that same freedom preserved, protected and formally recognized as the inviolable human foundation of a democratic society.

Now I'll turn things over to Flo, who will take us up out of the trenches to look at other priorities in this extraordinary experience we've all been through — and to turn our sights to the horizon and the future.

## Part II — Flo Conway

Jim has given you an overview of our research and writing and the widening dimensions of cult-like control we have found moving into government and other vital information and communication channels throughout the culture. As Jim has made clear, the picture we've found as we push forward encompasses an explosion of cult-like groups and organizations that have become a combined social, political, economic and technological force in the ongoing religious-political assault on American society.

Here the growth and complexity of the cult phenomenon has emerged in the eighties as one with even larger and more urgent implications. For us, the new picture has two important priorities. The first priority is action and a new level of activism. A renewed commitment and dedication is needed now to speak and educate the public about the new face of the cult phenomenon and its far-reaching roles in the political arena. Jim and I have found consistently that the information being assembled and constantly updated by individuals in this organi-

zation has been some of the most detailed and reliable information that exists about the winding psychological and ideological labyrinths of groups across the religious-political spectrum. For us, the distinguishing characteristic that makes the resource of this organization so distinct and so valuable is the wealth of first-hand experience and hard-won understanding about cult control and how it operates. In the new picture, this first-hand knowledge and understanding is something new — and this brings me to our second priority.

The second priority is for a new kind of bold, creative leadership in the professional arena that recognizes the changing dimensions of the cult experience in its escalating personal, social and political dimensions. Here, once again, standing on the forefront, are the ex-members, the parents and the families. In the eighties, the cults have changed, some disappearing altogether, some surfacing in new political garb. The scramble for survival taking place across the whole of American society has triggered a crisis and shakeout among many of the original cults, sects, mass-therapies and their leaders. So many of the children, not children anymore, have simply been let go, turned out, sent home, often after a decade or more of total involvement, through crucial, formative years of adult development and, for most of this time, with virtually no contact with parents, siblings and larger family relationships.

Today there are thousands — if not millions — worldwide who were teenagers or college students a decade ago and are only now entering adult society as they approach midlife. Many are bringing with them growing children of their own who have spent their entire lives in the sects' closed worlds. Many are making their way back into an everyday reality that has grown more complex and more threatening than the one they left. Most are confronting this new era with no college degrees, no resumes, no work or credit history, often finding themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to bend the facts of their whereabouts for the past decade to win favor from university admissions boards, potential employers and people they meet socially and romantically.

As the riddle of the cults enters these advanced stages, we have begun to see the emergence of yet another puzzling frame of mind, one that cannot be described as either everyday awareness nor as the pronounced altered state of mind control that characterized the seventies' cults. The prevailing state of mind among these middle-aged children appears as

something of a warp between two worlds, a state of mind in limbo, suspended between sect and society, often floating in frightened awareness of some indefinable alteration — only now, that inner warp has begun to reach outward to distort and affect the lives of those around them.

I am speaking now specifically about the plight of the parents. For years, Jim and I have seen the parents as the unsung heroes on this unprecedented frontier. In the seventies, they went into battle for the children, to rescue them, to help them, to try to understand for themselves what had happened and what their role was to be in this strange and forbidden realm. Since then, so many have missed out on the consummation of their child-rearing labors and the joys of seeing their offspring become self-supporting, contributing members to the legacy of their families and the larger society. Instead, many parents spent those years desperate with worry and consumed by loss.

Now many of those same parents are finding themselves face to face with children in their thirties and forties who have landed suddenly on their doorsteps — uneducated, unable to earn a living, in ill health and, often, barely recognizable. Out of nowhere, after enduring so much, these parents have been thrust into the eye of a new storm. They have come face to face with their worst fears and the alarming questions skirted constantly by professionals and clinicians, questions about the long-term effects of cult control and the very real prospect that something so fundamental has been altered in these middle-aged children that they may never grow to be anything more.

In the last few years, Jim and I have confronted this scenario as it is being played out in the solitary lives of individuals, parents and families across the country. What do people do now? Where do they turn for help? Who can they talk to and what kinds of alternatives can they seek out? What, in fact, are we really dealing with in this strange warp between two worlds that appears to be communicable in its effects, reaching out now to enfold individuals and families alike?

This new forefront of the cult phenomenon in the eighties sounds very familiar. The questions being asked by these parents and family members are strikingly similar to those they were asking over ten years ago. Then, they were asking about what had happened to their children inside the cults. Today they are asking those same questions and more — now they are also asking about what is



beginning to happen to them. The symptoms sound all too familiar: guilt, anger, withdrawal, ongoing and deepening depression, denial and eventual burnout.

The rippling impact of the cult experience as it is beginning to affect the larger social fabric of the family brings forward with renewed urgency the significance and unprecedented nature of the cult phenomenon. It also raises anew old questions about the long-term personal and social effects of cult control. These questions remain at the center of the growing controversy and, over the years, they have become easier to sidestep or bury in outmoded defenses and rationales because they challenge the very core of established clinical and scientific assumptions about how human beings grow and develop. These persistent questions also challenge the very heart and spirit of what we mean when we talk about freedom in every aspect of American life.

It seems obvious to Jim and me that, in the escalating ideological climate of the last few years, the old debates and rhetoric about freedom of religion have themselves escalated into an unspoken atmosphere and everyday air of intimidation. What can we say today about the most intimate aspects of people's experience in this country? What are we allowed to question? What subjects are looked upon as areas for valid and worthwhile research? What tacit pressures dictate the agendas of researchers and clinicians in their need to obtain grants from government agencies, charitable foundations and other tax-exempt institutions? What are all of us free to discover and report?

Jim and I have confronted in our own professional arenas — in the media and academic worlds — the realities of this new climate and air of intimidation that has sought time and again to determine what we think and do and say. We have experienced first-hand the assumption in America today that there can be no real questioning and no real dissent, that nothing serious could ever happen in American society and, thus, there is no real need for critique or discussion on basic issues affecting people in this culture.

How in this kind of climate do we confront the persistent, urgent questions brought to all of us by the cult phenomenon? What has happened, for example, with deprogramming? In the eighties, the door on this subject seems to have been closed. Why? If this subject has now become taboo — even here, whether for legal reasons, political

reasons, for whatever reasons — where is the social scientific framework and supporting research that shows conclusively that deprogramming is no longer a helpful, if not imperative, step in the overall process of cult intervention and rehabilitation? What about the different forms of separation and exit counseling being practiced today? Are any of them viable alternatives for dealing with the problems of this new warp and its effects on parents and families? Where else are people turning for help, especially those dealing with the long-term incapacities of middle-aged cult members? Is the only professionally recognized solution psychoactive drugs — an answer that has been shown too often to hurt rather than help people caught in these new states of mind? What, in fact, is the nature of cult control that has been described for more than a decade by the individuals who have been through it?

After so much tireless effort by people in this organization and nationwide to reach people about the reality of cult control, its unprecedented absence of physical coercion and broad range of debilitating physical, mental and emotional effects — why today does it appear that so much of the knowledge on this frontier has been sidetracked, or worse, fallen victim to the national air of silence and intimidation?

I remember so clearly my sense of all of you at the moment of Jonestown, when Jim and I were called to speak as researchers and scholars, as well as authors. I cannot forget the poignancy of the truth I confronted each time we faced the TV cameras and the questions about the underlying meaning of the cult phenomenon for people everywhere. That truth sat side by side with us on many stages then, but it is the same truth today, the same one sitting before me tonight. The experiences of the ex-members and the parents — your voices — told a story to the American people that could not be understood any other way. Now, I must ask, where are those experiences reflected today? Where is all the learning and the breakthroughs, the brilliance of your voices that rang so clearly for Jim and me, for people in this country and worldwide after Jonestown? I am speaking about the unity of that irrefutable base and truth of your experience and the supporting knowledge of the professionals and clinicians like Dr. John Clark and others who themselves gave voice and formal recognition to this unprecedented phenomenon.

In the time since then, there has been one consistent problem Jim and I have observed each time we

speaking about the covert communication techniques we have found at the core of cult control and its enduring effects. Whether we are speaking to the media, to mental health professionals or to scholars in varying disciplines, we run headlong into a wall of assumption that says, if the control has no outward visible components of physical coercion, as in brainwashing or its psychological derivative "coercive persuasion" and other pseudo-persuasive models, then it doesn't exist. There is no acknowledgement of even the possibility that these older notions and models have been surpassed by a new human technology of sophisticated communication techniques, strategies, formulas and programs that have the power to control and alter every aspect of mind, behavior, performance and personality — from within.

This new human technology changes all prior notions of control, as we see so vividly in the cults, where control is turned inward, induced covertly through intense experiences and maintained systematically through ritualized individual and group communication practices. Here a threshold has been crossed into new forms of covert communication control — mind control, emotional control — yet in today's high technology world, the assumption persists that control is strictly an outside job. Such outmoded assumptions place intolerable physical limitations on our most basic definitions of human freedom and miss the single most important place where, in fact, that freedom resides.

They also make it all but impossible to reach the unity of personal experience and professional explanation that is so urgently needed on the cult forefront today. Too often, the professional explanations collide head-on with people's first-hand descriptions of the cult experience and its aftermath. The established medical and psychological models, their tools of analysis and methods of research, simply fail to account for the phenomenon and its expanding effects that are at once individual, organic and social in nature.

The sheer complexities and contradictions inherent in the cult phenomenon are the primary reasons why, from the beginning, Jim and I chose to approach the experience and its effects from a new perspective in communication science. The moment I first heard about the cult experience at *Harper's Weekly*, I knew that the nature of the changes people were writing to us about would require alternative methods of research and insights from the new sciences that had been the focus of my

graduate work in communication.

My field of communication is broad based and interdisciplinary. The original synthesis I began in my graduate work, that Jim has contributed to and both of us have taken forward together, provides the range and flexibility to see and hear the individual, on the one hand, his inner experiences and their intensely personal effects, and at the same time, to see and follow patterns of change in the larger social system. Our perspective is different. It's like being in an enormous house — Jim and I call it our "big house" — with many different floors and rooms. You enter on the ground floor — always the individual — and you can move up or down to any level — up here to the social, cultural, political and spiritual, down here to the physiological and neurophysiological, over here to the family and other social institutions.

From time to time, I'm sure, many of you have stubbed your toes wandering among the rooms filled with terms and concepts we use, like "human information processing capacities," "information disease," "the technology of experience," and the holograms and catastrophe curves we used in *Snapping* to show how personality change can take place suddenly, in a moment, or gradually in slow motion. To us, the whole house is a piece, continuous. That's why our work on cult mind control techniques in *Snapping* led naturally to the techniques of emotional control used by fundamentalist sects and the larger religious-political strategies we explored in *Holy Terror*. Since then the challenge for us has been to expand our big house from below — in our understanding of information disease and its potential effects on the brain and nervous system, and, from above, in our understanding of the larger social, political and spiritual dimensions of information and communication control.

Here our communication perspective has something important to say about the state of mind we call the warp and the flood of reports of deepening stress and trauma affecting not only those who have come out of cults after many years, but so many parents and family members, who are beginning to realize how profoundly they, too, have been affected by their own personal ordeals. In the past few years, there have been some valuable comparisons made between the long-term effects of the cult experience and the plight of America's Vietnam veterans suffering from delayed stress and other post-traumatic stress disorders. As we have seen in our own research, including a

number of in-depth sessions with Vietnam-era vets, the effects of delayed stress are widespread and very real. Yet, the reigning models of post-traumatic stress still make the same outmoded assumptions about the nature of human experience and the physical limits of individual growth and change.

The delayed stress model assumes what psychologists call "gradual assimilation." It assumes that the vet's post-traumatic symptoms — nightmares, flashbacks, hallucinations, delusions, emotional numbing and uncontrollable floating in and out of dissociated states — inevitably subside with time, automatically. In this picture, the human mind and the brain itself is just another machine doing its job faster or slower, depending on the task at hand. Now, however, clinicians across the country who have been dealing with Vietnam vets, in many cases for a decade or more, are beginning to acknowledge that their symptoms of delayed stress are not going away with time — they are becoming ongoing, generalized personality disorders and, in some cases, people are getting worse, not better, particularly where psychoactive drugs have been the dominant mode of therapy.

In our expanding view of the cult phenomenon as it has moved from mind control to emotional control and a long list of symptoms and effects, we see important parallels between the ongoing stress responses of many Vietnam veterans and that of so many ex-cult members and families in the eighties. There are valid, common elements in both groups, and crucial differences between the two experiences that I won't go into now. But I would like to address the overriding problem and urgent necessity for developing new modes of therapy and treatment that may be the only possible remedies for these new disorders of experience and information.

The cure is communication. For all its controversy, deprogramming and its expanding offshoots and refinements remains a powerful prototype proven thousands of times over for just such a valuable new mode of communication therapy. The same base of communication has been shown to work *collectively*, in the "rap groups" that emerged as vital support systems that, consistently, have provided the best help available and sometimes all that was necessary for thousands of struggling Vietnam vets. The same process can be seen at work in the support groups that have been established among ex-cult members and ex-fundamentalists as well.

The foundations for this new direction in communication-based therapy were laid in the early years of humanistic psychology when Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May, Milton Erickson, Gregory Bateson, Virginia Satir and other pioneering figures discovered that communication — talk — among people individually and in groups is a powerful human tool that can help a person heal and grow from the stresses and shocks of even the most traumatic experiences — and I can't begin to tell you how I feel when I see so much of this important knowledge in humanistic psychology and my own field of communication misused and distorted by New Age groups and, at times, even by mental health professionals who haven't engaged the base of science and scholarship that underlies these valuable new disciplines.

Communication, in all its complexity and simplicity, is the foundation of our Big House, and the heart of Jim's and my message tonight. Communication between parents and children, whether in or out of cults, between and among each of you as you deal with your own personal and family ordeals. Communication among ex-members, families and the professionals, who need to hear your voices more than ever right now. Communication with mainline denominations, clergy, lawyers and elected officials who have yet to act on so many cult-related issues.

To me, as a communication scholar, the riddle of the cults means this: there is no denying any longer that the human mind and its reflection in society make up an open, living communication system, and that this living whole is vulnerable at its deepest levels to modern communication techniques that undermine critical human capacities of thought, feeling and decision-making, of reason, judgment, intuition, imagination and every canon of ethical communication in an open society. Such techniques may produce unwavering beliefs, positive feelings, predictable outcomes, profits, power, personal aggrandizement and other questionable material ends. But such methods and their underlying assumptions deny the fundamental truth that the information that passes between and among people every moment of their lives is a living force and substance with organic consequences that strike at the core of our humanity.

In the new information age equation, the cult experience as it surfaced in the seventies and in its expanding social dimensions in the eighties stands as one of those rare phenomena that come along at great moments of human change, when individuals

and cultures are forced to grow or die, to go forward or decline.

On this frontier, Jim and I have felt from the beginning, the riddle of the cults is the Rosetta Stone, a microcosm of the larger human crisis rising with the information age and its dazzling array of new techniques and technologies. The truth rising on that frontier for people everywhere is the same truth you gave to Jim and me and the one this organization alone has been dedicated to: the combined will and effort of every person to rescue our humanity by winning recognition in fact, in science and in law for the fundamental human right that comes before any other, the right to freedom of thought, and the commitment to preserve the mind and wholeness of each individual.

Tonight, it is my personal and professional hope that all of us will rise to meet these challenges to human freedom — the challenge before us and the new ones rising on the frontier of the information age. We'd like to close with a few shared comments.

### Conclusion — Jim Siegelman

We want to close on a personal note. Many of you have helped us enormously over the years, as first-person interviews, confidential sources, local contact people. You've arranged all kinds of meetings for us, done advance publicity when we came into town, provided security when we needed it — sometimes when we didn't even know you were doing it. You've taken our calls at all hours, express-mailed precious documents to us that have saved our necks with our lawyers and publishers — and left our media colleagues speechless more times than you can imagine. You've hosted us from one end of the country to the other, put us up for the night, served some great home-cooked meals to two weary travelers. And for that Flo and I are grateful to this organization and to all of you — to our many West Coast contacts, to the wonderful people in Minneapolis where we've been so often, to everyone in Philadelphia, our beloved "Philly phamily," who really have become as dear to us as our own families. To those of you who are with us tonight and those who aren't, we remember and say thank you...

If we can leave you with anything tonight, we'd

like it to be our sense of the important place in which you stand in this historic phenomenon. Over these years, Flo and I have come to see all of you — each in your own way — as pioneers on a new frontier of the mind, first travelers to and from an uncharted realm of awareness coming back loaded with precious insights and hard-won lessons to share. Some of you may have all kinds of chants and cries and voices going around in your heads. Well, we have your voices going around in ours. From the beginning, your thoughts, your feelings and your words have informed and guided and inspired so many of ours. The moment that drove it home for both of us was when the responses to our questionnaire began pouring in. Finally, after so many days and nights sitting on our floor in New York, folding paper and licking stamps and envelopes into the wee hours, the replies started coming back in great stacks. The numbers were incredible — I've given you enough numbers tonight — but the words, they were the most moving part for both of us.

There's one response we've carried around the country and shared with all kinds of audiences, a poem, we don't know for sure who wrote it — just the initials P.M.K. Tonight, we bring it home — P.M.K., if you're out there anywhere, we'd love to meet you. We leave you, not with any more of our words, but with some of yours, some by P.M.K., reporting direct from the frontier of freedom:

### Untitled Poem by "P.M.K."

(Read by Flo Conway)

*So you struggle with the sorrow  
of the time which they have borrowed  
and you wonder how they ever took your mind.  
But it's my heart that had been taken  
and all the dreams that I'd been making  
were the luring and prophetic hopes sublime.  
Now I wonder through uncertainty,  
an emptiness called liberty,  
not knowing what to grasp or what to shun.  
Good and right within myself  
throw countless pages back upon the shelf.  
No easy answers, but it seems a new life has begun.  
So many choices,  
like a million inner voices,  
once again, a new life has begun.*