

Excerpts from *The Beyerstein Report on Straight*

Chapter Eight

Treatment, Thought Reform and the Road to Hell

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

Barry L. Beyerstein

Use of the word "treatment" is a subtle form of deception.

Several years ago I was pleased to be asked by Anne's Therapist to review the manuscript of a book, *The Great Drug War*. As I read his account of Fred Collins' ordeal at the hands of the drug "recovery" agency Straight, I began to experience a strange sense of déjà vu. As I read on, it finally occurred to me that the appealing treatment the drug "recovery"

In the fall of 1990 Professor Barry L. Beyerstein, at the invitation of Straight, Inc., visited the Straight treatment camp in Springfield, Virginia and reported his findings in *Strategies for Change, New Directions in Drug Policy (1992)*, by the Drug Policy Foundation, Chapter 8, pp. 245-251, *Thought Reform Tactics: The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions*.

Professor Beyerstein is a leading Canadian researcher on opiates and brain functioning and operates a laboratory at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. Here are excerpts from his findings on Straight.

... 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.⁵ 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.

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 physical coercion to prevent them from leaving.¹⁶ 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. [p. 247-248]

. . . 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.¹⁸ Quick adoption of the prisoner role was facilitated in Straights induction ritual by a humiliating search of all body orifices, dramatically signaling 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 captives previous network of people, organizations and standards of behavior. Thus, Straight prevented communication with parents, siblings or friends. . .

Straight also adopted the old interrogators ploy of alternating periods of intensive indoctrination with periods of social isolation during this early stage of vulnerability. [p. 248]

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 reeducation, the remaking of [the individual] in the [reformers] image."²¹ 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. . . .

Straights use of informants throughout the program is also right out of the thought reformers 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. . .

In Straights group sessions, we observed counselors 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 . . . 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. . . [pp. 248 - 249]

In "Rules Raps," the group was required to memorize Straights 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 hold-outs in the program.²²

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.²³ 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." We observed none of this, but the vacant "prisoner's shuffle" was evident as clients were led around the facility. [p. 249]

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.

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 . . .;
- 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; . . .;
- 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."

Andersens 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 groups leader and/or dogma; and

4)ruthless control of all information from without and within the group.²⁸

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. [pp. 250 - 251]

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