

Mothers in Cults: The Influence of Cults on the Relationship of Mothers to Their Children

Alexandra Stein
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Abstract

The author discusses the experience of mothers in cults and the impact of such an experience on the mother-child bond. The methods used in cults to control and limit this bond, and the responses of mothers to these controls are explored here. Some areas of focus are proposed for the education and support of mothers exiting cults.

I became a mother during the 10 years I spent in a left-wing political cult. In fact, becoming a mother was one of many "recommendations" made to me by the cult leader. Like other things in the beginning, it was something I wasn't fully ready for; yet I didn't object. Having a child was a strategic step in my ideological development, I was told. It would ground me in the real experience of working women, whom, supposedly, we saw as leadership.

Years later, when I was just 2 years out of the cult, I watched the siege of Waco unfold. I followed the news obsessively and when the Branch Davidian compound went up in flames, I sobbed for hours and hours. The horror of that moment has never left me. The thought that stuck in my head was this: *there but for the grace of god go I...* And my children, my living, laughing, life-loving children, they too could have been sacrificed to one man's madness. I could not separate myself from the mothers and children who stayed with David Koresh and his apocalyptic fire. Whatever happened exactly at the end of the siege—and perhaps we'll never know—I felt I could understand, deep inside myself, how a woman could get trapped so surely that dying with her children seemed like the right thing to do.



There are important questions to address in trying to understand the experience of mothers in cults: How does a mother's love for her children become so distorted? What methods are used in cults to

accomplish this? What goes on inside a mother's head and heart when the bond with her child is threatened? Why are mothers able to resist this threat in some situations and not in others? And, can such damage be healed?

This article is offered as a contribution to the discussion of these questions, focusing on how mothers are controlled in cults, what the effect of this control is on the mother-child relationship, when and how the limits of the cult's control are reached, and the mother's process of recovery. To this end, I interviewed six women who were mothers while in cults, reflected on my own experience, and also read several written accounts of mothers and children in cults. Names and details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

To begin, I will introduce my six interview subjects, whose comments appear throughout:

Anne: Anne spent 17 years in a left-wing political cult based in the Midwest. Due to illness, Anne had a hysterectomy as a young woman. When members in the cult were generally being encouraged, or allowed, to have children, Anne was told she should adopt a child. The cult leader mediated the adoption process, at one point taking several thousand dollars from Anne, claiming it was for an adoption that later "fell through." Anne was financially exploited in the cult to the tune of more than \$50,000. She did finally adopt a child, and she and her teenage daughter have been out of the cult for 5 years.

Laurel: Laurel spent 16 years in the same cult as Anne. As a self-described "free-spirit," and having some fear of the childbirth process, Laurel had not planned on having children. However, when a committee in the cult directed her and her cult-arranged partner to do so, she agreed. The child had a traumatic delivery and was born with developmental problems. When the child was 2, the cult leader informed Laurel and her partner that they would have to either leave the cult or abandon the child. Laurel's partner left with the child, while Laurel made the decision to stay. Later, Laurel entered into another arranged relationship within the group and adopted a child. Laurel left the cult

along with some other members, but immediately joined an intensive personal-growth training group.

Janie: Janie spent 4 years in a Christian group that grew out of the "hippie Jesus movement." She was married in the cult, (atypically) without the cult's approval, and had her first child. She had always wanted to have children and looked forward to being a good mother. For much of the time she was a peripheral member, known in the group as a "backslider." She left the cult when her first child was a year old, and with her own self-esteem as a mother badly damaged. She had three more children after leaving. Years later, Janie's husband became involved with Amway, and Janie recognized many of the same patterns of behavior as they had encountered in the earlier cult experience. Janie then sought out an ex-cult-member support group, and she and her husband are only now, 7 years later, beginning to understand the impact of their cult experiences.

Jill: During high school Jill became involved with a religious cult that blended Reorganized Latter Day Saints doctrine with Native American rituals. The cult finally went "back to the land to escape the Russians," living in tents and rudimentary houses without modern conveniences such as electricity or running water. Jill met her husband in the group and had two children. At one point the cult leader persuaded Jill to give up her baby daughter for 6 months. He also separated Jill and her husband twice. During one of those separations Jill's husband left the group. A few months later Jill followed him with the children. They have been out for 6 years.

Helen: While in high school Helen got involved in a bible-based group led by a man from India. When Helen was 19 the leader arranged her marriage to a man in the group. At age 20, Helen had her first child. The group did not believe in birth control, and by the time Helen left the group 10 years later, she had seven children. Prior to joining the group Helen had had plans to go to college and had not yet started thinking about having children. Even though she left the group and her husband stayed, they continued to live together until his death in an auto accident a few months later. Helen believes that her husband's death was related to his cult involvement—either as a suicide or as a result of sleep-

deprivation and overwork. She is now raising her seven children on her own. She has been out for 9 years.

Mary: Mary spent 5 years in a semi-militaristic, left-wing political cult on the West Coast. Her children were 11 and 13 years old when she joined the cult, and both were living with their father. Her relationship with her children was very difficult at that point due, among other things, to her coming out as a lesbian. She did not see her children for the 5 years she was in the group. She finally left after becoming disillusioned with the organization and because she wanted to reconnect with her children. She has been out for 13 years; over time and with some difficulty, Mary has rebuilt a positive relationship with her children.

Methods of Control

The bond between mothers and children is controlled in multiple ways in a cult. This can be done through the following means: control of conception and pregnancy; discouraging the mother-child bond; control of time spent with the child; actual or threatened removal of the child from the mother; monitoring and judging the relationship between the mother and the child; and generally directing the mother's child-rearing practices. The control often starts well before pregnancy, for example, by manipulating the parents' relationship through an arranged marriage. Once the child arrives, "cult parents in essence turn over the custody of their children to a third party, so that the leader or the group becomes the actual custodian of the children." (Singer with Lalich, 1995, p. 261). The methods of control are more fully described below.

The decision for a woman to conceive a child is frequently made by the cult leader, or at least requires the leader's approval. One woman waited years before receiving permission to have a child. She said, "I really want children, but I know I'm not ideologically developed enough yet."

The cult may influence both the physical and psychological aspects of pregnancy. In many cults being pregnant is an esteemed position. As Laurel said, "It was clear to me that this child was going to be a guaranteed recruit—it was by inheritance." The mother may be encouraged to feel proud of her role. Unfortunately, this esteem does not translate into actual privileges such as adequate rest, nutrition, and

prenatal care, all of which are notoriously absent within most cults. Helen described herself as "being pregnant and looking like walking death—I was emaciated." She both fasted and nursed during pregnancy (in her group, members ate proper meals only 2 or 3 times a week, living on bread the rest of the time). Helen had prenatal care during only her first pregnancy, and for 10 years after that neither she nor any other cult member went to a hospital or clinic. Conversely, when a miscarriage occurs, the woman may be blamed for "ideological murder," or, as in Janie's case, for not being "faithful."

Mothers are often discouraged from having a special bond with the child. In the cult I was in, we were told: "Children are not your private property" or "You have too much value in your children." In *The Wrong Way Home*, Deikman (1990) describes several cult members saying to Clara, a fellow member, "Your family is the whole world...[your son] David is just one of the many children you are responsible for" (p. 22). In groups such as the Sullivanians or the Branch Davidians (see, among others, Singer with Lalich, 1995) or the earlier Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (Connor, 1979), children barely know who or what parents are.

Mothers may spend very little or no time with their children because of the demands of the cult. In the early years of my cult involvement, parents saw their children only an hour or less a day. The rest of the time children were in the group's child care center. About her experience, Mary said: "It was like being a workaholic with meetings and fund-raising and political work day and night. It consumed our lives. I knew the children would never understand—nor did I want them to. It was assumed that we would give 100%." In a similar vein Janie said: "I decided I should wean [my son] early because that would leave me freer to be involved in the group. There was pressure to be right and faithful and to give 100%."

In many cases the child is physically taken from the parents. Nancy, a child raised in my cult, spent 4 of her early teen years away from her parents, living with other "cadre" members. Supposedly to "help her" while she recovered from a breakdown induced by the stress of cultic life, Jill was persuaded to give her 6-month-old baby to a childless couple

in the group (the leader's brother and sister-in-law). The leader secretly promised the couple that the baby would be theirs forever and assured them that Jill would never get well. Six months later Jill was living in the cult's primitive encampment when the couple wheeled the baby back to Jill in a wheelbarrow. The surrogate mother told Jill that she realized Jill and the baby were bonded and the child could never really be hers.

Mothers' behavior toward their children is carefully monitored. This monitoring may be in the name of science, devotion to God, or personal development. The purpose, however, is to control the relationship between the mother and child. In my group, for example, every child's behavior was to be recorded on Observation Forms, the less-than-scientific results of which were later entered into a Lotus spreadsheet. Helen reports, "We had to be careful not to be too kind to a child if that child had been in trouble—or we'd get criticized. You had to keep track of which children were in disfavor." Parents can be "turned in" for their behavior toward their child. For example, I was reported to leadership for letting my 4-year-old play with Ninja Turtles and engage in "unproductive free-play."

While there is, on the one hand, an abundance of "supervision" over one's parenting; on the other hand, there is no real support. Many of the mothers reported isolation or condemnation, rather than any help in dealing with parenting problems. Jill and Janie both had difficult babies (one colicky, the other a "Barracuda baby," needing to nurse constantly), and each woman struggled alone in her mothering with no support either inside or outside the group. Further, mothers may live with the heavy fear that should they make too serious a mistake, their children may be taken from them. "Becky once said she was afraid of having a second child because she saw Libby's kid taken away," recounted Laurel.

The mother's position in the cult may be judged by the behavior of her children, or by the processes of pregnancy and birth. Laurel reports that "the only time I was ever praised was when I sent a memo saying I'd figured out that J. was born with a birth defect because of my anxiety and tension during the pregnancy—in other words, it was my ideological problem." Here is Janie's experience: "I went to a 'backsliders' meeting and had this fear of being there with my baby—I was worried I'd be

accused of 'being into attention,' which was what they said about the mothers. That if you showed any interest or affection to your child, you were really trying to draw [the leader's] attention to you. I was exhausted with breast-feeding all the time and I felt I was a bad Christian and a bad example." Jill said: "My second baby had colic.... The implication was she cried because I was doing or feeling something wrong. The leader said, 'I felt what your baby is feeling when she cries: she feels like she has no mother.' I was devastated...a deep sense of failure and condemnation sunk in."

The mother must often participate in "child-rearing" or reproductive practices which may range from abuse and neglect to ridiculous pseudoscience. These practices are well documented in the literature (see, for example, Atack, 1990, 245-252; Langone, 1993, pp. 329-336; Singer with Lalich, 1995, pp. 247-269). Helen adds her own story: "My kids have been physically hurt by every adult in the cult: slapping, kicking, pulling hair. But only Brother was allowed to use the cattle prod.... I laughed because everyone laughed, but on the inside I was feeling absolutely sick. We were taught that 'Desperate Discipline' was needed to save their souls."

Effects on and Responses of the Mother

How do mothers respond to this situation where the cult leader has control of their children?

According to Singer and Lalich:

There is an interplay between the ideology of the group and the authoritarian role of the leader that has a particular impact on parents' thinking and behavior. The authoritarian ideology, through his control of the social system and social environment, is able to gain compliance and obedience from the parents. The shared ideology of the group is a set of emotionally charged convictions about mankind and its relationship to the world.... Cult parents assume pseudo-personalities, brought on by the cult's training and thought-reform processes. (1995, p. 261)

This represents one of the key double binds in which the mother finds herself trapped. Through the processes of thought reform (as described variously by Lifton, Singer, and others), the cult leader becomes the mediator between the mother and her most deeply held beliefs. Doing "the right thing" (for God, the Revolution, one's personal growth, whatever) becomes synonymous with obeying the leader. To go against the leader's directive is to go against God himself. The mother becomes psychologically trapped: she wants to be a good person, but the definition of goodness resides entirely in the cult's domain. And any attempt to define goodness for herself ensures swift condemnation and an attack on her "faith." This double bind often results in an almost unbearable tension.

An internal struggle takes place within the mother when asked to do something that her noncult persona identifies as wrong. Anne discussed the incident where the cult leader took her money for a phony adoption: "I was very uncomfortable when I gave him the money—I felt that he was insincere. But then, I also thought that he was a true proletarian and anything he did was good for my development. He just wouldn't do anything unprincipled. He was this great political leader—and everything around me was reinforcing that belief." Or Jill talking about her reaction when her leader took her baby away: "I thought, 'I don't want to do this, but I will if that's what's best, if that's God's will.' The leader took the place of God, so I thought he'd only do what was best. To me, I needed Chrissie, but he said otherwise."

The mother may also go against her noncult self out of fear of the leader's or the group's response. Helen describes an incident: "Once when my twins were less than a year old and they were holding onto the hem of my skirt—it was in front of a whole group of people—Brother told me over and over to kick them away, and first I just wiggled, but he insisted that I kick them away and so, finally, I did. Even though it violated my sense of Mother, of Human Being, of the notion of loving the Lord."

Again, Clara describes the pressure:

If I had paid attention to all those occasions when everything inside of me said, "No, this isn't right," I couldn't have stayed there. If I had...said, "I will not go along with this," first of all, it would have taken a kind of strength I don't know I had at the time because everyone in the room [would be saying] "Clara, you want to have dinner with your son? You're so selfish..." I would have had to be willing to stand there and have everyone in the room say "No." (Deikman, 1990, p. 20)

Even though the mother may resist, eventually she must give in or leave the group. In some cases, giving in results in a feeling of relief. Clara recounts:

I remember at one point saying, "I'll do it," and everything got quiet around me and the noise in my head stopped and I thought, "God, maybe that is right..." And inside me I thought the quiet or sense of rightness means I'm doing the right thing. (Deikman, 1990, pp. 22-23)

The conflict of struggling against the cult can be so intense that giving in feels like a resolution. This feeling is analogous to that of a battered woman: "In these relationships the painful feelings of confusion, anxiety, and guilt that the victimized woman is led to feel are all relieved when she simply 'gives in' and does what she is told. If she agrees...she is, at least briefly, 'loved' by him. If not, she continues to be degraded, devalued, and maligned" (Boulette & Anderson, 1986, p. 27).

What is particularly damaging in this process of giving in is the sense of positive feedback *from within yourself*. It's as though you come to believe in the "rightness" of the decision because of the relief that comes from resolving the conflict and removing the intense pressure. At this point you can truly no longer trust your own feelings because those feelings have, in a sense, been captured and turned against you. You have walked through the looking-glass and can no longer trust your own innate sensations.

The mothers described those times when they made critical decisions involving their children:

Mary told how she thought "it was for the best" that she not see her children for 5 years, saying, "I thought they'd be harassed by the FBI—the FBI had already visited other members of my family."

When Laurel agreed to give up her disabled child she said, "J. needed the best chance in life...and so I could let her go."

Janie told me, "I wanted my son to have a happier life. But this was The Truth. It must have been something wrong with *me* if I wanted to leave. It was God's will for us to be there. It *should* have been the best thing for him, but all there was around us was hopelessness."

Or Helen, whose children suffered considerable physical abuse: "Brother said it was the Holy Way. He took so many liberties with my children and told me to consider it an honor."

Rosanne Henry, who gave up her child to her cult leader, shared her story in *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds* (Tobias & Lalich, 1994): "After two months of hell I finally agreed to the plan. I remember the very moment when I flipped the switch. 'There is nothing greater that I could do for my child than give her to the divine mother,' I thought" (p. 235).

What comes across in these stories is how the mothers felt that *they were doing the best thing* for their children. Perhaps in this way mothers strive to reconcile the internal conflict that is at work. They do, clearly, still love their children deeply. In that sense the bond between mother and child remains intact.

For some mothers, however, their children represented a barrier to their complete dedication to the cult. Jill (who, before joining the cult, imagined that she would be a "fun and empathetic" mother) was often resentful of her young children when they made noise during endless meetings with no child care. She felt that they were preventing her from "knowing God," as well as casting a bad light on her as a poor mother and, therefore, a sinner. For Jill, the conflict was the double bind of having to be a perfect mother (in the cult's view), yet having to give the cult 100% and so not having time or resources to properly parent her

children. She now feels that this strain had a severe impact on her bond with her oldest child.

Sometimes a mother's acceptance of the cult's influence may reflect her own ambivalent feelings about certain issues. In these cases, perhaps the cult involvement helps "resolve" a difficulty for the mother.

For Mary, joining the cult and not seeing her children for 5 years resolved the intense conflicts she felt toward her children, who had chosen to live with their father because of Mary's lesbianism. She had felt alienated from her children and unable to participate positively in rearing them. In joining the cult, she both regained an inner sense of meaning lost to her when her children moved away, and removed herself from her painful role as noncustodial parent.

In Laurel's case, the "recommendation" to give up her disabled child spoke to two issues for her. First, she didn't love the child's father: "I could have made a commitment to go with them if I had loved him." Second, "If I were to leave [with the baby and father], I thought I would have to stay home with J. and make her therapy my full-time career, while "Dave" would be an accountant and earn our living. I saw that as self-sacrifice and I didn't see myself as that type of person."

It would be important to further pursue the question of how mothers respond to this fundamental internal conflict: between their own sense of what is right and the cult's control. My observations lead me to see three different ways this conflict plays out:

The mother may continue to consciously disagree with the cult practices, but will give in externally to resolve the pressure being applied on her. She carries within her, however, a continuing, nagging sense that what she is being asked to do is wrong, even while she may rationalize her behavior to herself. As in my own case (and perhaps in Janie's), the mother may live in a constant state of resentment and be characterized as a bad group member.

Some mothers may repress their sense of right, fully embracing the group's ideology, yet maintain an unconscious feeling about what is

right. As these mothers begin to question the group, this feeling is slowly articulated. These may often be the "good" cult members.

Some mothers may resolve the conflict by a total submission to the group and its deceptions, perhaps in exchange for a degree of power (see Singer with Lalich, 1995, p. 278). And perhaps these are the mothers who get permanently trapped. Is it the case that some may totally lose contact with their own sense of right, thus taking on the cult leader's psychopathology? Perhaps this is how the mantle of inheritance is bestowed in long-lasting cults?

Reaching Limits

For most of the mothers, leaving the cult was a complex process involving the following factors:

Beginning to connect a "generalized feeling of being unhappy" with an often protracted intellectual process of evaluating the group's actions. Helen said, "I started seeing inconsistencies—I wasn't judging, but I was aware. When the thought processes kicked in they were acute, keen. I started journaling." Mary stayed in an extra year to see if people were ever allowed to ask questions. Instead she "saw people's questions rebuffed and ridiculed, over and over," and that finally helped her get out.

Reaching some kind of limit in how their children were being treated. Helen described the following: "I wept over Jonah when he was born because...I knew what was in store for him. One of the brethren had held a gun to one of my twin's face, and pulled the trigger—my child didn't know it was unloaded. But this is why I wept for Jonah.... The last straw was when a woman kicked him when he was a year and a half old—because he was wiggling around. It was over and I knew it. I had no fear of what anyone thought for the first time. We were all in the church and I got all my kids. I said, 'Get your blankets,' and they got their stuff and we left."

Anne said, "One of the reasons I left was because I didn't want to get back to working every day and night and weekends and leave Beth. I wasn't going to do that again."

Many of the mothers echoed Helen's statement: "I thought, 'You can hurt me, but...not my kids, not anymore.'"

The limits on what the mothers could tolerate vis-à-vis the group's treatment of their children varied drastically. The incidents triggering the mothers' limits were also not necessarily either the "worst" thing that had happened to the children or the first time such a thing had been done. For instance, Helen's children had been subjected to a great deal of physical abuse; the kick that was the last straw was just one of many. When questioned about why that particular incident triggered her to leave, Helen replied: "The members were watching movies about the Holocaust, and I saw my kid's face in that movie. I could have endured the greatest humiliation (and I did), but I couldn't keep on letting the children get hurt.... It got so old—daily, for all those years. The children were what made the intellectual stuff [thinking again] necessary."

In a few cases, the limit the mother reached centered around her own treatment. Janie finally walked out of a meeting after being told, yet again, that she was a bad person and a bad wife. "I called my husband and he came and got me and I said, 'I'm never going back.' I realized I didn't need to be treated that way."

Several of the mothers had at least a small break in their isolation. This break in isolation ranged from my own case, where another cult member began talking with me; to Helen, whose husband confided suicidal thoughts and doubts about the leader; to Anne, who had fellow cult members actively trying to help her get out. In Mary's case, her estranged children represented a point of connection to the outside world. "At the end, although I was sure I was going to leave, the cult voice inside me was saying, 'I might as well die if I can't make it in here.' But then a voice of reason came in over the cult voice and said, 'But there are other realities. I could have been just a mother—there's nothing wrong with that.'"

In many cases, then, concern for her children's welfare broke through the grip of the cult, giving the mother a kind of strength. Helen said, "It wasn't even about God, or good or evil or faith or sin. It's about a bond that I think is primary to everything else: the very basis of everything

that is. If Brother could have broken my love for my kids, he could have broken me forever." She goes on, "In the end, my leaving was about being the right kind of mother and losing my soul, or saving my soul and being the wrong kind of mother. I truly felt there would be dire consequences if I left. But I had to stop the abuse of my children. I knew that I couldn't change the dynamics of the cult by staying. I had to leave."

It is important to remember, however, that many mothers are unable to leave cults. The most well-known example, perhaps, is Jonestown. In that case, though, it is clear that by the time of the mass deaths, a great deal of physical coercion was also in place. For months prior to the mass poisonings, the mothers at Jonestown had been trapped in the jungle with their children and without money, transport, or passports. At the very end, an armed guard surrounded the cult members as they administered poison to their children and themselves, or had it forced upon them (Feinsod, 1981). Can this be called suicide? These mothers had no way to escape.

The mothers interviewed here did retain a strong bond with their children through the cult experience. (Laurel's example is more complex as she now is unable to have contact with her child; however, she clearly continues to have an emotional bond toward her). Eventually the mothers were able to act on the mother-child bond and move to protect their children given a combination of (1) a continued threat to their child's, or their own, well-being; (2) some outside support or connection to the non-cult world; and (3) a gradual return of critical thought, allowing them to evaluate the group's inconsistencies. It would be valuable to conduct further research to study those mothers who are not ever able to leave a cult, despite ongoing maltreatment of their children.

Recovery

Coming out of a cult with children is a Herculean task. Not only does one have to rebuild one's own life, belief systems, one's very *self*, but also one has to care for the children, perhaps navigate a divorce and custody battle, deal with a spouse still in the cult, or rebuild a marriage from the ground up. The mother and children's community is gone, and the children lose friends and adults in the cult who were close to them.

Often the mother faces serious financial problems and frequently has to find housing. No matter how you look at it, the task of survival is huge.

All the mothers interviewed for this article suffered fairly severe depressions after leaving (with the possible exception of Laurel who moved straight into an intensive personal-growth group). One woman broke down, attempted suicide, and was hospitalized for an extended period. For myself, I felt that I wanted to break down but that I couldn't, I had to hold on for the children. This feeling was shared by some of the other mothers: we had to find reserves of strength we didn't know we had. Clara said, "I sometimes thought [that what enabled me to leave] was the mother lion energy in me" (Deikman, 1990, p. 38). Anne and Jill, on the other hand, felt they had neglected their children during the initial recovery period: they simply did not have the resources to care sufficiently for their children during that traumatic time.

A serious burden to recovery is the leader's parting curse—a frequent phenomenon in cults. These curses ranged from "Your children will be cursed to the seventh generation" to "You're not fit to be a mother; you have an unnatural relationship and you'll have trouble with your daughter when she's a teenager" (as if *that* were a profound insight!). These women had to continually work through the weight of the leader's curse, or negative prophecy, so that when their children misbehaved they could see it as children either processing their experience or simply being children. In general, mothers nearly always carried negative views of their parenting directly inherited from the group. This is a critical area to explore in either support groups or in a therapeutic situation.

A crucial issue is the lack of available support resources. Jill, Helen, and Janie still feel isolated. They regret the lack of experienced counselors. Only Jill, who went to a rehabilitation center, had contact with a counselor experienced in cult-related issues. Additionally, mothers and families often need (but seldom get) the same types of material support (housing, financial, etc.) as are typically provided by women's shelters.

Follow-up

At the time I interviewed these women, they all felt that they were now developing close and honest relationships with their children. Helen, in

particular, said, "My children are tremendously gifted and talented and unique. For all the trouble we had, my children love me and I love them. We have a close relationship that many families don't have."

Mary, who had not seen her children in 5 years, said: "I was determined to rebond with my children. And I have. It took a long time and a lot of work, but now we have a good relationship."

Both Jill and Janie feel that they still face a lot of difficulties in their parenting, sometimes feeling spaced out or overwhelmed. But Janie sees that she is doing the best she can. "You just have to love them—I'm not condemning myself." Both she and Jill struggle with whether they are raising their children "rightly," but are now able to rely on their own judgments of what that means and to separate that from the cult's doctrine. "I've learned that you can serve God by loving your children," said Jill, "God doesn't make you choose."

I asked these mothers to offer advice to other mothers coming out of cults. Their words were both moving and insightful:

Jill: "Remember, this is a chapter of your life, it's not your whole life. Recognize that this is a very, very hard thing to do—to keep doing your parenting *and* get well. It's not darn hard, it's *damn* hard. It's so hard to get a picture of what you're going through. There are no guidelines, no maps. You must get your own support: you can't give from an empty cup—and you have to give so much as a parent. Get counseling—although it's hard to find a counselor who understands."

Anne: "Honesty is real critical. You need to be as honest as possible about what happened at a level the child can understand. One thing I would tell mothers: your gut feeling is right. It's the intellectual aspect where you get boxed in by the cult."

Janie: "Seek out help. Don't do it alone. Seek out other people who've been in cults [because] others may not be able to understand the pressures. If you have a supportive family, let them be involved. Spend some time for yourself. In the long run, that'll make you a better parent."

Helen: "The more I tell my own story, that diminishes the shame, although the regret is intact. But I have to negotiate with my kids, with what they want kept private. All mothers should teach their children to *think*—at the risk of them disagreeing with the parent. My children and I talk about everything. There's a power in having no more secrets."

All of the women I interviewed were glad of the opportunity to revisit this experience, despite its painful nature, and they felt that there was a benefit to them in doing so.

Conclusion

Being in a cult per se does not have to permanently damage the mother-child bond; although, clearly, the experience has a severe impact on the bond. As Anne remarked, "There's a dual allegiance. It's a power relationship. Your child is powerless, and you have less power than the cult leader. Your child has no one but you to protect them.... A mother should primarily be taking care of her child. But in a cult, it's always a conflict."

If demonstrated by the women I interviewed, the prognosis for recovery of that bond is good, so long as the cult experience is dealt with honestly and openly. Though it is a devastating way to learn, many of these mothers felt that they had gained a deep and lasting understanding of issues of power abuse and that, in most cases, they were able to pass this on to their children. They shared a strong desire to encourage critical and independent thinking in their children.

It is my hope that these mothers' stories will not be wasted: that those of us who are concerned about cults will continue to study the experiences of cult survivors in order to effectively educate and inform the public to prevent future tragedies.

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Alexandra Stein spent 10 years in a leftist political cult based in Minnesota. She is currently writing a book about this experience. She volunteers as a cult awareness activist and educator.