

Candice Schutter: [00:00:00] Thank you for joining me for another episode of The Deeper Pulse. Last week I introduced our brand new summer series, and today we're gonna keep things moving with some personal stories. But before I go there a quick word.

In the first episode of the culture series, I spoke about spiritual wounds, and the rewards and risks of being under the influence of spiritual teachers, thought leaders, and other purveyors of self-help.

Today, I'll be sharing more intimately, about the first 10 years I spent working in the world of new age wellness. Last week, I sort of hinted at the trepidation that I feel sharing these stories so publicly. Trepidation, not because of what the stories reveal. Relatively speaking these are pretty benign tales.

No, It is the [00:01:00] wariness itself that makes the sharing of these stories so essential. I'm showing up here transparently in front of you to deconstruct the quaking apprehension that I feel. This series is an attempt to unravel social conditioning. Conditioning that suggests it is blasphemous for me to speak candidly about those who've at one time or another sought to control me.

Even though I will take great pains to be generous and fair, there are people who will take issue with my choice to speak openly, and I have great compassion for their perspective. I used to be one of them.

As much as it pains me to admit this, for the longest time I thought that taking the spiritual high road meant being so above it all as to be emotionally untouchable. Superhuman, if you. Immune to psychosocial harm and abuses of power. Either that or so altruistic and forgiving so as to never request or require accountability.

It has long been my habit to protect those [00:02:00] who have antagonized me; and in doing so, I've enabled their actions and inadvertently neglected those who carry burdens similar to my own. Folks like me, who keep the superficial peace because love and light, and don't be a victim, and they know not what they do, and so many other well meaning small-t truths that both liberate and cage us. Spiritual high mindedness is all well and good, until it's repurposed to serve those in power.

Now having said that, let me be clear. I am neither the victim, nor the hero of these stories that I share. And this isn't about pointing fingers and vilifying anything or anyone. There'll be none of that. I happen to believe that when we spend our energy attacking and/or defending, we miss the point and overlook an opportunity to examine the deeper pulse at work in our relationships and in our lives.

The truth is sometimes it is the people who are doing their best to love us that cause the most significant harm. [00:03:00] And while it is important to feel compassionate toward them, it is not our job to protect them from the impact of their choices.

Jen Hatmaker expresses it well when she says, "co-dependence is not about being weak and needy. It is about not allowing anyone to sit in the consequences of their actions."

Love means telling the whole truth and making room for more than one vantage point. And this time, around I'm including my own.

I'll be sharing about my involvement with more than one personal growth, AKA self-help organizations. Most of the time, I'll name these organizations explicitly. However, in one instance, I do not. The bulk of the stories I'm about to share with you span three years I spent working in the inner circle of an international mind body fitness company.

When I speak about this time, I will use fictitious names and the organization itself will be referred to [00:04:00] simply as the Org. I've decided not to use names and identify the players involved for the following reasons.

First, it's to honor the countless ways that this practice inspired me to change my life for the better. Despite the many issues I had with the business and its leaders, I benefited in profound ways from the content of the work itself. In fact, in some ways it was the embodiment of the practice as it was described that empowered me to step away. I use many of the tools that I learned to this day, and I am grateful to have encountered them.

Secondly, I have a number of colleagues and friends who are still involved with this practice. I do not wish for stories about my own personal experiences to negatively impact their bottom line. Nor do I want to discourage the many thousands of students worldwide who benefit daily from ongoing classes taught in this modality. As it often is with such things, those on the fringe of the movement are the ones benefiting the [00:05:00] most from this work.

And lastly, because this is not meant to be an antagonistic takedown or an attempt to cancel any person or group of persons. The intention of this podcast series is to share personal stories in hopes that it will help shine a light on what can and often does go wrong in self-help circles. When good intentions are codified into a homogenous culture and language. And when those with power and influence are not held to the same standards they've set for their followers.

The stories that I'm about to share are true to the best of my recollection. That said, memory is subjective. And how I remember the past may be different than how others recall those very same events. I will share my experiences and my perceptions openly. However, they are not meant to be generalized, nor are they intended to malign any individual, group, or organization.

In between stories, from time to time I will zoom out with commentary to briefly describe the undercurrents that I [00:06:00] now know were at work beneath the drama. I am hoping that these editorial additions along with chapter markers will break up the 10 year saga, making it a bit more digestible.

I thank you in advance for your patience as I make an attempt to wrap words around triggering events that I experienced in real time. Allowance for my humanity is most appreciated.

"If your nerve deny you go above your nerve." Emily Dickinson.

I fumbled around in the dark to silence my alarm. 3:30 AM wasn't negotiable. If I gave in all into my body's reluctance, I'd never make it out the door in time. My partner was already up and stretching on the living room floor. So I pulled on my clothes and she and I headed out the door.

The [00:07:00] Irvine Dahn Center was a 20 minute drive from our apartment. We'd been attending classes at the dojo for a couple of months, ever since we'd moved to the area from Boulder, Colorado.

The 4:00 AM practice was by invite only. It started out with some stretching and breathing exercises that led into 103 prostrations, or what was known as bowing exercise. Similar to yogic sun salutations, each pass through the series would land us on our knees, where we would touch our foreheads to the earth in an act of reverence and devotion.

I'd committed to showing up at the dojo every morning for this 21 day practice as a sort of means to an end. It had all started back in Boulder where I took regular Dahnhak classes then progressed through a series of weekend long trainings known as Shim Sung. A few weeks in the masters, as we called them, had invited both my partner and I to earn our place in their most coveted training known as Healer School. Neither of us had any clear sense of what Healer [00:08:00] School actually entailed, but we'd both benefited greatly from the regular weekly classes, which consisted of a series of qigong-inspired meridian exercises, guided meditations, and restorative yoga postures.

We'd been told that Dahnhak's grand vision was to inspire 100 million people to join Illchi Lee in the creation of an enlightenment revolution. Sure, it sounded over the top and more than a little suspect, but I loved the way my body felt after each practice and the weekend workshops had inspired a renewed sense of hopefulness. Access to more advanced training was appealing and the mystery of the content only added to its allure.

Besides the masters insisted it was a no strings attached investment in our own personal development. Nevertheless, each center had three to four masters working full time, and it was hard to imagine that any of them had a life outside the dojo. They were all warm, soft-spoken, and effervescent, typically smiling from ear to ear in their all-white uniforms. I didn't [00:09:00] envy their daily existence, but they projected a deep and abiding peacefulness that I was yearning for.

After our move to the Irvine Center, there was a growing pressure to manifest the \$10,000 that was required to attend Healer School. The master's insistence had become incessant and a bit off putting. Particularly given that they might as well have been asking me to turn water into wine. I had never in my life had easy access to that kind of cash.

But by then, my diehard devotion to new age prosperity gospel was in full bloom. I was doing Wayne Dyer's abundance meditations religiously desperate to believe that if I was 'on purpose,' if I believed and affirmed and practiced hard enough spirit would provide me with a windfall.

But when week after week, I failed to manifest the funds, I began to second guess my plans to progress in the program. Whenever I spoke of my doubts, I was repeatedly reminded "Candice Dowoonim, that is your ego keeping you from hearing your [00:10:00] heart. You are conflicted and suffering because of your ego's refusal to submit to the true self."

So I kept chanting, bowing, and brainstorming. I applied for a line of credit. I asked relatives for loans. And when nothing panned out, I felt sick with longing and shame.

Eventually the hard sales approach, continual harassment, and near constant gaslighting became too blatant to justify. The final straw was when one of the masters placed my \$3,000 preregistration fee on his own credit card without my consent insisting I could pay him back once I manifested the money.

Needless to say, I didn't pay him a dime. My partner and I had finally had enough and we both walked away from the practice for good. In the weeks that followed, the female masters were recruited to leave encouraging voicemails, cooing into my inbox, urging us to come back to class. We both stopped responding and eventually they gave.

Now before you [00:11:00] applaud my resolve, you should know that had I been able to come up with the money, I would very likely be sharing a different version of this story.

In July of 2003, roughly one year after I walked out of the Irvine Dahn Center for the very last time, a woman by the name of Julia Siverls lost her life while hiking Casner Mountain in Arizona. She died from heat exhaustion while participating in a day long trek up a mountain in extreme heat.

She was allegedly required to carry a backpack filled with rocks and was given limited access to water. Lawyers claim that Julia collapsed several times, but was forced to continue onward. There was even an allegation that the tea she drank just prior to the hike may have been drugged.

Julia was studying to become a Dahn master.

The New York Supreme Court dismissed the charges in 2005, determining that the statute of limitations on the wrongful death charge had passed.

Julia was a 41 year old woman, [00:12:00] an NYC college professor with two master's degrees and a doctorate. According to family members, she had decided to invest in Dahn training because of a deep desire to be of service.

Julia's story touches me deeply. I can personally relate to her longing to make a measurable difference in the world; to her willingness to sacrifice her own personal comfort in order to get in touch with a deeper sense of self. And if I had stuck around, it's conceivable that I might have been hiking that mountain next to her.

Moral injury is what results when our higher values are weaponized against us. In Julia's case, the trust she placed in the spiritual hierarchy cost her her life.

TDP #33 - Behaving Gladly: The Cult of New Age Wellness | Solo Episode

I recently read the following words, and please forgive me for not recalling their source: "teaching someone that you are the intermediary between them and their higher voice is one of the most damaging things you can do to a person."

I can say from firsthand experience, this rings true. [00:13:00] It is profoundly confusing when your insides are crying out and those you trust to lead you gaslight you into questioning your deepest knowing. Being taught to mistrust the deeper self is a crime against the soul.

The Dahn masters taught me that my wholehearted resistance was the very thing that was keeping me stuck when it was actually my inner knowing trying to break me free.

In the last episode, I referenced the work of Amanda Montel who reminds us how important it is to see cultishness on a spectrum. Dahnhak is a crystal clear example of how spiritual abuse of power and psychosocial indoctrination can result in a loss of agency and lead to devastating outcomes.

But there are also times when cultiness just isn't as obvious, and the cultural costs of conformity erode agency slowly and steadily over time.

[00:14:00] I'd started taking Dahnhak classes in 2001 as a supplement to my new career path, teaching a fusion fitness dance practice. It was a movement modality that blended non-impact fitness, dance and martial arts, with other mind-body disciplines.

The Org trained and licensed teachers worldwide, and the practice had become my new center of gravity. When I first discovered the Org, I was twenty-five years old, and three years out of college, hungry for a sense of meaning and purpose. And the community at the dance studio had made me feel immediately at home in a new city. Moving my body daily had lifted me out of a deep depression and had helped me to lose almost 20 pounds.

Nevermind the fact that my personal life had also received a makeover. My singular focus on taking classes, and on spending time with a new crush I developed at the studio, swiftly put an end to a [00:15:00] stable three-year relationship.

Now I gotta tell you, I have a lot of regrets looking back at how all of that played out. But at the time I just considered it collateral damage. The small but necessary price that one must pay on the road to self-actualization.

Back on the plus side, I had stopped drinking alcohol and stress smoking cigarettes, and I was no longer having irregular panic attacks.

I'd never felt so light, uninhibited, and free in my body. Every day I would dance and swing my hips freely, grimacing less and less at my own reflection in the mirror. I felt power in my limbs in my core for the very first time and discovered the depths of my voice while kicking and belly shouting my angst into the mirror.

I'd lie on the floor at the end of each class, sweat and tears pooling all around me. The physical and emotional numbness that I had normalized all of my life began to slowly fade. Pain and pleasure collided. And I started seeing a therapist for the first time.

Anxious to go deeper, I maxed out my credit card and traveled to [00:16:00] Santa Barbara to attend the Org's level-one teacher training. It was a week long intensive, and I'd left the training space feeling like I had been given a one way ticket to the rest of my life. For the first time I was doing something simply because I wanted to.

At the end of the level-one training, I chose to license as a teacher, and when I returned home, my new partner and I began co-teaching classes together. After about a year or so, we decided to move to Orange County. Boulder already had a handful of successful teachers in our discipline, and we wanted to seed the practice in a new area where we were a professional novelty and ocean breezes were the norm.

The idea had sounded great on paper, but in reality, teaching in Orange County required a whole hell of a lot of driving. We spent far more time on the 405 than we did teaching classes, but I kept telling myself that our early career sacrifices would lead to a big payoff. So on and on it went.

A few months in, my partner decided she had had enough and headed back to Colorado. I [00:17:00] was sad and relieved. Our relationship had been rocky since the beginning, and I was more than ready to make a go of it on my own. I secured a roommate and kept up with the demanding teaching schedule best I could, scheduling private sessions and editorial work around my regular classes.

But no matter how much I worked, there was simply no way to make ends meet doing what I was doing. At one point I was teaching 13 classes a week, but at 20 to \$30 a pop that didn't math out to a living wage. And my sporadic teaching schedule left little to no room for side gigs.

So I'd spend an hour before bed each night, scribbling affirmations into the pages of my abundance journal, envisioning the life I was certain was just right around the corner. I was consumed by a feverish faith in my calling and an overdrawn bank account didn't discourage me.

One day, I got a call from the Org's headquarters. It was Seth inviting me to attend the upcoming IDEA Fitness Convention in LA, where the company's [00:18:00] founders would be presenting. Seth was the Org's CEO. He and I had forged a distant bond the year before, when he'd helped to sponsor our relocation to California.

Seth was married to Marissa. She and her ex-husband Raul had founded the practice back in the late eighties. They were still business and training partners, and the three of them co-lead the company, which at the time served roughly 1500 teachers in about a dozen countries worldwide.

Raul had been the trainer at my first training in Santa Barbara. And I had been immediately captivated by him. Short in stature, but large in life, his shamonic demeanor was both intimidating and mesmerizing. I studied him carefully over the course of the training week, marveling at how he seemed to watch and listen beneath the surface of things. I was fascinated by his ferocity of presence and truth be told, he was in enigma of sorts. He had this whimsical playful persona when teaching classes to the public, but in the training [00:19:00] space his demeanor was serious and somewhat prickly. He'd stand in front of a large whiteboard, his face expressionless. Hands folded at his waist, he'd ask pointed questions of the group, careful to never show his cards as to the answer he was looking for. It was totally disarming for someone like me who was overly prone to pleasing.

At one point, when a terrified trainee insisted that she was too afraid to participate in the final teaching practicum of the training, he'd shown no sympathy. So she'd done it anyway. When she broke down midway through and was barely able to make it through the exercise, we all saw her tears as evidence of a breakthrough.

I recall being devastated that Marissa hadn't joined Raul for that first level training, and I'd left feeling somewhat unfinished. The teachers at my home studio quoted both of the founders quite often. I'd seen them in videos and I had come to admire Marissa's teaching style the most. She always appeared perfectly poised and put together, dressed in [00:20:00] bold colors that accentuated her curves. Her skills as a presenter were, in my opinion, unparalleled. She possessed camera-ready charisma and spoke with a hypnotic cadence, offering verbal cues with remarkable clarity and confidence. When it came time to learn the Org's preapproved routines, hers were often the most complex and I always strived to master them first.

I RSVP'd yes for the LA meetup, and made the hour and 15 minute drive to the convention center. I don't recall attending the presentation, only the group breakfast that followed. Seth had invited me and the LA county community of teachers to come together with both he and the founders. Over the course of the meal, he spoke emphatically about a variety of lucrative and promising opportunities that would soon be available within the company.

I was all in. Exhausted by my hand to mouth lifestyle, I was ready for more. The agreement had been for us to seed the practice in OC, and there were now a handful of [00:21:00] students interested in attending teacher trainings. I was hoping I'd soon be free to explore other opportunities within the company.

A few days after the meetup, I received a package in the mail. It contained a pair of black dance pants, a top with the Org's logo emblazoned across its front, and a note from Seth with a nebulous invitation to become part of the Org's training team in Portland. I had no clue what that meant, as far as I knew nothing of the sort existed at the time. But it didn't matter. I felt chosen.

It was a woman named Marilyn who had really made our move to the OC possible. It was due to her connections with local dance and fitness facilities that we'd secured the classes that I was still teaching. And at one point, when I considered selling my car to cover expenses, which was a very unrealistic impulse given the demands of my work schedule, she and her

husband handed me a check for \$2,000 insisting it was a gift to help me keep my head above water. I will never forget their kindness.

[00:22:00] Yet even with this gift, editorial projects, and a handful of weekend catering gigs in LA, I was still struggling. I started taking EFT and Psych-K classes. Self-help interventions designed to clear emotional barriers and perceptions that get in the way of abundant living.

Every so often I would reach out to one or both my parents to bail me out financially. Eventually all of my people grew tired of investing their hard-earned money in my high-minded dreams. So I decided it was time to leave Orange County.

I'd just fallen in love with my stepbrother, Tony. See episode 29 if you really need me to unpack that, and he generously agreed to loan me enough cash to relocate. He lived in Atlanta, so I made plans to head that way. I'd live with my stepsister and her family while I figured out my next move.

I drove east my Mitsubishi hatchback filled to the brim with most of my belongings. I'd be stopping in Boulder for a week to attend the Org's level-two training that was being hosted at my home [00:23:00] studio. I had traded for tuition per an arrangement with Seth I'd made a few months prior. In exchange for the level-two experience, I'd write a series of articles for the teacher newsletter touting the glories of teaching the practice full time.

Oh, the irony.

In early September, just 12 days before I left the OC, I'd received another unexpected call from Seth. There was no idle chit chat. He cut straight to the point.

" Hey, Candice. Something's come up. Do you think you could come to Portland and start working for us on October 1st?"

He explained that the company had decided to take over ownership of the movement studio where the founders had been teaching and training for years. The previous owner, the founder and teacher of another modality had decided to step away suddenly. And the company was presented the opportunity to take over the lease. They had decided to say yes, which meant hiring someone to manage the studio's daily operations. And Seth told me he believed that I was the right person for the job.

I struggled to regroup. I was all [00:24:00] set to re build my life in Atlanta, and his immediate faith in my abilities had caught me a bit off guard. I told him that I would think about it.

Four days later, I received a call from Kim, the Org's Director of Operations. She explained that Seth's job offer had been premature and then asked if I'd still like to be considered for the position. I said yes. And it was decided that I would interview with the founders at the upcoming training that I was already slated to attend.

While in Boulder, I divided my time between the 10 hour training days, Org interviews, and conversations via phone with loved ones who helped me to weigh my options. By the end of the training week, I was still in limbo. So I extended my stay, charging a couple more nights to my credit card and waiting by the phone for the call that would determine my fate. I was offered the job. And I said, yes. After a quick back and forth to Atlanta, I drove my car to Portland arriving on October 8th, 2003.

My new workplace was [00:25:00] on the fourth floor of a historic building in downtown Portland, in a massive studio space that hosted a variety of movement formats. On the first evening I arrived to town, a meeting had been planned. Staff and teachers had gathered together to discuss what to expect now that the Org had officially taken over ownership of the studio.

I arrived to a room full of strangers. We sat on cushions in a circle on the floor. The atmosphere was one that I'd already come to normalize. Similar to the training environment, it was an unnerving blend of heightened self consciousness, bittersweet tension, and immediate familial belonging.

I was still struggling to land so my memory is a bit fuzzy. But I do recall being introduced as the studio manager. Questions were asked, and everyone was assured that although we were immediately stepping into assume operations, most everything would stay the same indefinitely, so as not to overwhelm the existing community of students with too much sudden change.

I felt giddy and honored to be at the epicenter. [00:26:00] So close to the founders or 'the source' as we called them. I told myself that this job was just a jumping off point, that it would pave the way for me to become a high rank trainer. I was convinced that living and working so close to the founders would help me to embody the Org's principles as a way of life.

Now here I should remind you that the majority of folks who were familiar with the Org were only peripherally involved. Quite literally dancing on the fringe of all this teacher and lifestyle training hubbalub. Many thousands of students were attending classes taught by licensed teachers in community centers, dance studios, and health clubs all across the globe.

Marissa and Raul taught the majority of the open to the public Org classes that we offered at the Portland studio, and I had been told early on that I would sometimes be asked to step in and sub for them when they were traveling out of town to conduct trainings for example.

Now I'd been the general manager of a small business before. So despite the learning curve, the studio's daily operations felt well within my [00:27:00] wheelhouse. Subbing for the founders on the other hand, now that was daunting.

The week following my arrival, there was an onsite training, and I loved being backstage for the action. Especially given that it was a level four, the highest level of advancement in the practice. The level-four content was shrouded in secrecy. I was instructed to cover the window to the large studio door and to keep it closed at all times during training sessions.

Midway through the training week, and just five days into my employment, I was informed that I would be subbing for Marissa later that evening. This was hugely unexpected. Not only because I was a relative newbie, there were other more established subs to choose from, but because training day classes were considered extra special. Regulars of the studio were accustomed to these high octane events and they drew huge numbers, especially given that all visiting trainees were typically required to attend.

But the founders had decided of the last minute to [00:28:00] change things up. They were gonna take the trainees on a secret outing instead.

And so it was that I spent the afternoon before class losing my shit. Quite literally, racing to the ladies room every 10 or so minutes to purge my terror and self doubt. Now I'm not trying to gross you out. I've told this story before. But it's really important to understand that in my mind, the founders were the gods of this practice. I wasn't just teaching one of their dance routines. I was preparing to channel their wisdom.

Even before I arrived at the Org's headquarters, I was under the influence, punch drunk on the mystique of the practice. I have no recollection of teaching that class. Only the visceral memory of my nerves going into it. And in time, I'd come to expect these last minute calls. After receiving two paychecks, I realized that I wasn't being paid for the classes I subbed. When I asked about it, I was told that Seth had already factored this into my salary, that when I'd signed on I'd understood that subbing was a condition of my [00:29:00] employment.

Evening classes extended beyond my working hours. And I regularly cut checks to the other subs at \$30 a pop. Even so, I let it go without much aggravation. I told myself that I should just be grateful because teaching for the founders was an honor.

Candice Schutter: Undue influence isn't always dramatic and overwhelming. Sometimes it's a slow burn, a psychological dynamic whereby a person's free will is incrementally superseded and replaced by a person, persons, or group ideology. This can occur through social indoctrination, excessive persuasion, and or the rewarding of loyalty and obedience. And it is not at all uncommon in spiritual hierarchies where those at the top are revered.

Now I wanna be crystal clear from the get go. I am not suggesting [00:30:00] that the Org was, or is, a full-blown cult, but instead I'm inviting us to consider how the inner circle itself might have been, and likely still is a little cultish.

To understand this better let's take a look at the BITE Model. Developed by cult expert Steven Hassen, the BITE Model describes the primary methods that high-demand groups use to recruit and maintain membership.

BITE stands for behavior, information, thought, and emotional control.

Things get a little questionable in group dynamics when we agree to *behaviors* that place us outside of our value zone or give in to conditions we might not normally agree to. When we

are operating in an insular environment where people rarely if ever question the legitimacy of the *information* that they're imbibing. When we second guess ourselves and use *thought* terminating cliches to shut down critical thinking when things feel a little bit off. When we [00:31:00] internally outlaw certain *emotional* responses, deeming them unenlightened, wrong or selfish, not in service to the mission.

Now of course, each one of these can be minuscule psychological shifts and a normal part of the social experience. However, when they show up in combination and in service to a power structure, it's pretty easy to become disconnected from your own center of gravity.

Psychiatrist, Robert Jay Lifton called it milieu control, which refers in part to how social pressures and a shared language can slowly erode a sense of personal agency. Inner authority is replaced by the group's identity, which naturally leads to cognitive and behavioral changes in the individual.

Now I knew full well that there were hundreds of people around the globe who would've given anything to stand in my shoes. So I saw each tiny sacrifice as a small price to pay an exchange for an ongoing spiritual apprenticeship.

But in reality, there wasn't really much of that. [00:32:00] The goings on at the studio were secondary to the daily operations of the company's headquarters located across town where a staff of roughly a half dozen sat at small works stations in the basement of Seth and Marissa's home.

The Org's administrative headquarters were tasked with the creation and shipment of educational materials. The staff also booked trainings and fielded communication from students and teachers worldwide. I was largely isolated downtown, but I did meet many of my fellow staff members early on when they would make the drive to attend evening classes with the founders. I would often dance alongside them. That is until more and more conflicts at the studio began arising.

The previous studio owner had been the center of gravity in his own little cultiverse. And he'd left behind a booming practice and a community that felt in some ways abandoned. The students and teachers were struggling. And this was complicated by the fact that Org leadership was eager to rebrand the space according to our company's philosophy and aesthetic. Despite many promises to take [00:33:00] things slowly, they had gotten right to work and the changes were slowly compounding.

Soon enough, my afternoons and evenings were spent putting out fires, mediating psychosocial dramas, and fielding a flurry of space-related complaints.

Six weeks after my arrival in Portland, I was feeling pretty certain that I'd made the wrong move. Upending my life to be closer to the work I loved really wasn't panning out the way that I expected. It felt like moving closer to the source was moving me further and further away from the work itself.

Not only was I teaching rarely and dancing less and less often, I was disheartened by the way my bosses appeared to perpetually be in over their heads. Raul was the exception. He seemed to be at peace with his lack of interest in business acumen. Aside from his engagement with all things related to Org classes and trainings, his was a mostly hands off approach. Seth and Marissa on the other hand were incessant with their input.

Now in the Org teacher [00:34:00] trainings self-awareness was an overarching theme. We were taught to pause, self-reflect, and respond to relational dynamics with empathy, mindfulness, and a collaborative approach. But it became immediately apparent that leadership didn't really walk the talk.

Marissa seemed, to me at least, indifferent to the needs of others. And Seth was chronically manic and somewhat dysregulated. And of course I was willing to make room for their humanity, but what I found most disturbing was that both of them seemed entirely blind to their own limitations. I didn't vibe at all with their top-down management style. It felt old school codependent and autocratic.

They didn't make much room for others in conversation and fielding their requests was a little like drinking from a fire hose. Everything was urgent and their expectations often ignored the complex and incremental steps required to reach an objective. When reality checks were offered, they'd often be ignored or dismissed, and their frustrations would be offloaded onto the [00:35:00] staff.

Many nights after failing to deliver on their expectations, I'd lie in bed ruminating, mentally replaying this moment and that, trying to figure out what I might have said or done to make it right.

And to be honest, I was also up in the night because I was once again without money. I'd long since burned through the cash that Tony had loaned me using most of it to reestablish myself in a new city. I was living in a studio apartment, limiting my expenses best I could providing only for myself and Tati Sue my two year old fur baby kiddo that I'd flown out to meet me shortly after the move.

During negotiations, Seth had declined what I had considered to be a very modest salary request, adamantly insisting that his less generous offer would be "more than enough" to support a comfortable lifestyle in Portland. Blinded by the glory of the job offer, I had taken him in his word.

But when a couple months in, I finally sat down to do the math. I realized that at the roughly 50 hours a week I was working, I was making under \$12 an [00:36:00] hour. And this wasn't accounting for the classes I was teaching for free. With living expenses, student loan payments, and continually compounding debt I was perpetually in the red. So I went back to writing bad checks for cash back at the supermarket, trying to buy time until the next payday. Once again, filling the pages of my journal with obsessive devotion to the metaphysical slot machine in the sky.

In December, there was a massive snowstorm that shut down the entire city. Two days of paid time off were godsend. I needed a minute. Tony and I were going through an amicable

yet painful long distance breakup. I knew it was the right thing to do, but I was devastated. I had told myself that he was 'the one' and I blamed our failed relationship on the fact that I'd chosen my career over a potential future together.

I'd been moving my body only intermittently, and I felt myself sinking into the familiar dark hole of depression that had preceded my early days in the practice.

Just before the studio [00:37:00] closed for the holidays, the company hosted what I considered to be a lavish party at a popular restaurant in Northwest Portland. Seth stood at the head of the table, singing our individual praises while I devoured every morsel of a decadent four course meal. Marissa then distributed each of us a small stack of gorgeously wrapped gifts. One of which was a long and lush white robe with the Org's logo embroidered in red on its back. My heart swelled with pride as they spoke about the company's vision and the worthwhile sacrifices we were making in service to so many. The dinner vanquished all the doubts I'd been having, and I left for holiday break feeling certain that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

But by early January, I was struggling again. Every now and then I'd fantasize about quitting and then I'd be blindsided by something beautiful and unexpected. Gifts were quite common. And every gesture of the Org's beneficence threw me for a loop. Just a few days after a particularly heated work meeting, Marissa walked up to my desk and [00:38:00] announced out of nowhere that my office would be top to bottom remodeled using "funds from her own pocket."

I was stunned. Abundance had long been a buzzword in my mind, and also an experience that was entirely foreign to me. Scarcity had defined my childhood, and my hunger for relief was shameless and insatiable. I was awkward at receiving and metaphysically dazzled by any and all acts of material grace, seeing it as evidence of my hard work and good vibes. Nevermind the fact that I'd use my car title to secure a payday loan at 15% interest.

Now, while we're on the subject of cars, I'll never forget the day that Marissa and Raul's executive assistant was offered a company lease on a BMW. Now I personally loved her and in my mind she deserved it. Even so, it was an odd gift that appeared to come out of nowhere. My best guess is she was feeling underpaid and underappreciated, and this was an effort to bring her back into the fold. I can't really recall how it all played [00:39:00] out, but I'm pretty sure she declined because she was unwilling to trade a luxury car for her dignity. Years later, I'd learned that she wasn't the only one who'd been offered a BMW when she'd grown tired of earning well beneath her pay grade.

Eight months in, when I approached the topic again, Seth finally agreed to pay me the going rate for subbing classes. A few days later, he treated me to a private dinner at The Brasserie and asked, off the record, if I'd be interested in working as his personal assistant. Over the months, I'd grown to love and care for him in a fatherly way. So I'd nodded warmly, even though I was unsettled by his offer. I'd been in regular attendance at executive team meetings, and even when Kim or myself would offer up a carefully outlined agenda, things would almost always go sideways. Meetings would run over, sometimes lasting two or three hours, as the trio verbally sparred back and forth around this or that. Marissa and Raul would disagree on, well, most things. And then Seth would rant about the staff's in [00:40:00] ability

to follow through on the moving target that was his ever expanding vision. Whenever one of us attempted to offer feedback, it was reflexively ignored. I'd leave the room feeling emotionally fatigued and confused as to what exactly my role was in the drama.

And what made it all so maddening was all the lip service. Marissa would continually say things to me like, "We want you to be in your joy. If you're not, speak up!" Raul would insist, "We love you. And we will do all that we can to support you and your success." And Seth reminded me more than once that I needed to let go of the idea that I could ever disappoint him.

I heard their words, but didn't feel that I could place my trust in the love and support they cited because their words so rarely lined up with their actions.

I spoke with a client a few weeks ago who was having an understandably hard time recovering from a love affair that had started [00:41:00] out picture perfect, but had ended tragically in physical and sexual abuse.

Before she told me anything about the trauma she'd suffered, she described to me the first few weeks of the relationship. She spoke about his singular attention, how he'd repeatedly blown her mind through gifts, romantic gestures, and professions of love. I recall the hair on the back of my neck standing up as she spoke, because in some way I sensed what was coming.

Love bombing is defined as intense validation that is later traded for control. Love bombing is fairly common in situations involving domestic violence or emotional abuse. In these environments, the emotional landscape is continually shifting. Expressions of love and care turn on a dime, swinging in the direction of indifference or even abuse. Love bombing throws us emotionally off balance. We struggle with cognitive dissonance and make [00:42:00] endless excuses for poor behavior because of the expressions of love that surround it.

But love bombing is also common in group dynamics, particularly in spiritual hierarchies where so-called goodness can become performative and where people are eager for guidance and belonging. When we are folded into a family of sorts, positive attention can feel amazing. But when that affection is inconsistent or used as a substitute for something as simple as a pay raise, things can get messy fast. Love bombing is a way that leaders can silently center themselves using extraneous and unpredictable rewards to leverage loyalty, encourage attachment and obedience.

Think of it this way. When we are offered a pay raise, we know exactly how we earned it. But when it's a gift, it's destabilizing and it may make you feel indebted to the giver. Or at least I should say, that's how it always felt to me.

In recent years, I've learned [00:43:00] from more than one credible source that there are still a handful of individuals who are doing work for the Org for free. Mentoring new recruits and waving their earned production fees and commissions all in exchange for the honor of being celebrated.

Now I'm not speaking critically of my colleagues. Trust me, I get it. I know how intoxicating and alluring it feels to feel loved, to be chosen. And I also know how conflicting and painful it can be when the only alternative to self-sacrifice is being attacked or walking away from the community and the work that you love.

The first time I quit was in July 2004, shortly after a visit to see family. A few weeks before the trip, work had been a total shit show and the pain and heaviness in my body had become unbearable. While I was in Atlanta, I asked my sister if it was still okay for me to live with her, and she was as gracious as ever. I spent the four hour plane ride home drafting my first letter of [00:44:00] resignation.

Now I'm gonna spare you the details, but after a four hour meeting with Raul, which turned out to be an impromptu one-on-one intensive in my office, I was back on board and feeling more committed than ever. Raul offered me a delicate blend of sympathy and tough love, along with a masterclass in personal power. By the end of it I'd shed many tears and he had invited me to draft myself a new job description. A few days later, the executive team agreed to hire an assistant manager to assist me with daily operations at the studio.

I felt seen and held for the first time since I'd arrived, and it was a great relief. Marissa had always appeared somewhat ambivalent toward me. I wasn't entirely sure if I was imagining it, or if it was real, the undercurrent of resentment that I felt from her. So it had meant everything to me that Raul had shown up as my ally. He'd earned my deep love and respect, and I was committed to staying, if only to learn more from him.

I [00:45:00] told myself that as long as I was staying grounded and impeccable in my expression, that was all that mattered. That everything else was none of my business. I'd been hearing stories alleging that the trainers, an elite group of roughly a dozen teachers who had been selected to teach the first level of training, were not being paid commissions that they'd been promised and that they hadn't been for years. I shelved my concerns and told myself there must be a reasonable explanation, and the rumors in no way discouraged me from the hope that one day in the near future, I would be counted among them.

After our private meeting, I began developing an even closer working relationship with Raul. On occasion, he would invite me to teach alongside him. And at the official grand reopening event, he'd introduced me to the crowd as "his good friend, Candice." It warmed my heart. The title felt both fragile and kismet.

October marked one year with the company. Raul would be facilitating the upcoming level-three training in Chicago solo. [00:46:00] Even though my workload had decreased, I was experiencing anxious, dizzy spells, similar to the ones I'd had back in college when I'd struggled mightily with a panic disorder. I was certain that the level three curriculum, which focused on mastery over the energy body, was exactly what I needed. My former roommate from the OC was now living in Chicago in a high rise not far from where the training was hosted. She invited me to stay with her, and I scraped together the funds for a plane ticket.

The Org trainings always began with a group meditation that spilled into a day chocked full of verbal lessons and somatic exercises. Over the years, I'd become fluent in the language of

the practice, and I felt safe under Raul's leadership. I left the training feeling full. Once again, inspired and more alive, feeling equipped to change my life for the better.

Shortly after I returned from Chicago, Seth came into my office, agitated and in a rage. "Candice, you're the reason the studio isn't making a profit. Now figure it out."

I pushed back, but he didn't let up until I took full [00:47:00] responsibility.

I'd recently hired a new Tai Chi teacher at the studio. He was knowledgeable and charismatic, and within a few short weeks, he had created his own cult following. He approached me to discuss a new financial arrangement. Rather than getting paid by the hour as the other teachers did, Kim and I came up with an attendance-based commission, and I pitched it to the trio.

It was more than fair, but they immediately rejected his request. When I told him, he didn't flinch. He just resigned. They called a meeting and I sat awestruck as he spoke calmly to the founders about what he called the dis-ease within the business and the lack of integrity he witnessed in their leadership style. Unable to counter his messaging, they invited him to stay. He declined and walked outta the studio, never to return again.

I spent the next couple of days visibly shaken by the sovereignty of his example, and I sat helpless as my emotions rose to the surface in a remote meeting with Seth and [00:48:00] Marissa via phone. I admitted aloud for the first time that I had similar concerns. Now this wasn't the first time I'd seen Marissa come unhinged, but it was the first time that she had unleashed her fury toward me. The shock of it was overwhelming. She shouted accusations into the phone and berated me as if I were a child speaking out of turn. I tried to defend myself, but my tears got the best of me. I hung up from the call outraged and ashamed.

That night, I carved my frustrations into the pages of my journal, insisting to myself that this was it, the final straw. Enough is enough, I wrote in all caps. Certainly it is possible to grow without taking a beating.

I was more desperate than ever to leave, but the shame that'd offloaded onto me had stuck. Another part of me was even more desperate to prove my worth. I spent the entire weekend drafting resignation letter number two, along with a visual presentation of what it would take for the studio to turn a profit. My [00:49:00] plan was to leave and to make them wish I hadn't.

Midday on Monday, I delivered my profit model presentation and then handed them my resignation letter as I walked out the door.

Not long after, Raul once again landed in my office letter in hand. "We don't want you to go, he pleaded. "Please give us an opportunity to give you a new experience."

Raul was my kryptonite, and everyone knew it. When I cocked my head to the side and looked at him warily, he admitted aloud for the first time that his business partners were not making it easy for any of us. I felt myself relax as he spoke openly about Seth and Marissa's

limitations. He then told me that he believed that together we could change things. I wanted to put my faith in his influence. Maybe he was right, maybe together we could restore the Org's mission to its integrity. I agreed to stay on if and only if they could find another role for me in the company.

Seth had us all convinced that in the new year, the Org's offerings were gonna be off the [00:50:00] charts. The Org was just wrapping up a book deal with Broadway Books, and the founders had been involved in negotiations with the direct marketing company Guthy-Renker. He'd set up a backdrop in the small studio, and some of us were invited to be featured in the book's photo spread. When the book was released, a TV crew visited the studio to film the founders. I was invited to lead a group of students in a class to serve as a backdrop to the interview.

I was a rising star, and I felt my light was slowly dimming. The night of the TV spot, I wrote the following words in my journal: "I desperately want out. Why does it feel like someone else is living inside of my body making my choices for me?"

In early February, I went out with friends on a Saturday night. I turned my phone off after dinner, and passed out at about 3:00 AM. When I woke late the next morning, I had 14 missed calls.

An unattended candle in a ballroom above our studio had started a small fire. It had been contained [00:51:00] quickly, but the sprinkler system had activated on our floor. Both dance studios, the lobby, offices, and the dressing rooms had all suffered severe water damage.

By the time I made it downtown, Seth was in triage mode. He and a small work crew were fighting to save what could be salvaged. I apologized for my absence over the roar of industrial fans and started making calls to the insurance company.

The studio was closed immediately. And for the next two months, I worked from a coffee shop near my apartment. The reopening was pushed out even further when the trio learned that the entire floor beneath us was now available for lease. It was decided that the company's offices would move out of Seth and Marissa's home and into the open floor plan come May.

In the meantime, everything would receive a massive facelift and we'd reopen as the Org's international training headquarters.

Since I had the bandwidth, I began working with Bill, a somatic therapist who'd come highly recommended by many in the Org. In our [00:52:00] early sessions, I spoke openly about my challenges at work, and the discomfort I often felt around leadership.

Bill would invite me to do things like tell him where I was feeling emotions in my body. He'd have me walk through the space with my chest open and my arms wide, or he'd invite me to push the pillow he held in front of his chest. I was stunned that in almost every instance, I became slightly paralyzed. When faced with certain kinds of stimuli, it was as if my voice and body would become suddenly unavailable to me. Bill diagnosed me with complex PTSD after only a couple of sessions.

Seth had offered to pay for my therapy sessions, and I'd agreed to it, because strings or not, it was an act of love. And also because I was angry, broke and desperate.

Now, of course I can't be sure, but I always suspected that the reason he'd sponsored and encouraged the work was because he believed that if I could just get a handle on my [00:53:00] reactivity, he and I would be able to work together long term and without any further problems.

At one point, he even volunteered to attend a session with me as my trigger. He sat to my right and I spoke about the many ways he reminded me of my stepdad. Neither of us bothering to acknowledge out loud that Seth's own erratic behavior was in and of itself problematic. It was as if we had silently agreed that the problem was in my past and a problem solely mine to solve.

One afternoon, I arrived therapy feeling fried. I had just come from another executive team meeting and we'd spent a number of hours processing. Bill listened as I debriefed. And then he gave language to something I was sensing, but had been unable to put my finger on.

He said to me, "intensity is very often confused with intimacy." Then he elaborated defining intensity is an addictive drama spiral that spends all of our energy and results in a sort of [00:54:00] trauma bond closeness. Then he explained how intimacy feels different. How it isn't necessarily dramatic. It's more spacious. It makes room for vulnerability to be shared in a space of openhearted reciprocity. He didn't need to tell me which one I just come from experiencing. I left his office feeling like a hunger that I had buried deep down inside had been validated.

My stepdad Gary was a kind and loving man, and I absolutely adored him. He could make me laugh harder than anyone on the planet. And then within the blink of an eye, he could send me into a pillow punching fit of rage. For 14 years, he verbally assaulted my mother and I. I loved him, and there were many times when I hated him. And I struggled with the shame I felt alone in my bedroom in those moments when I would wish for him to die. He is no longer here, and it is a pain I still carry with me.

[00:55:00] Disorganized attachment is what psychologists call it when a child develops attachment to a caregiver in an environment that elicits fear and a lack of reliability. When our safe Haven is also the source of our pain, it is not uncommon to develop an insecure bond with the person who causes us harm.

Another more extreme variation of this is the coping mechanism known as Stockholm Syndrome, which is common in extreme cases of abuse. In the docu-series *Surviving, R Kelly*, victims speak bravely about how and why they felt emotionally bonded to their captor. In almost every instance, the door to R Kelly's home was unlocked, and yet the vast majority of these women remained under the thumb of his abuse.

Now, of course my experiences working at the Org pale in comparison, but there is a core similarity that's important to pay attention to, which is the loss of personal power and agency. Perhaps my childhood shaped my tolerance for emotional [00:56:00] discomfort or perhaps it

was something else. Either way, I couldn't seem to walk away no matter how much I desperately wanted to.

In late May, the business offices moved downtown and the studio reopened its doors remodeled and rebranded. We finally hired a new studio manager and Kim sat me down to create my next best job description. She smiled, handed me a printed list of tasks, and then asked, "Okay. So when you read through this list of duties, where do you say to yourself. Oh, I get to do that?!"

I stared down at the sheet of paper in front of me, read through the list of options, and continued to feel dead inside. Charmed by her generosity and grace, I underlined the best bits. And a few days later, I was given a new job title: Senior Editor of Educational Materials. It was part-time [00:57:00] and there would be no insurance benefits. So I canceled my further sessions with bill and hoped for the best. A week later, I was battling migraines.

I'd recently started teaching again outside of the studio, and I was also volunteering as a youth minister at a new thought church in Northeast Portland. I'd begun dissecting passages in the Science of Mind and A Course in Miracles. I did spiritual mind treatments and carefully stalked my thoughts and emotions, feeling discouraged and ashamed by my growing depression. It seemed like everything I was learning was reinforcing the idea that my suffering was an illusion.

After three years of sobriety, I started drinking again, just in time for a company trip to Las Vegas. A small team of us were invited to accompany the trio for the annual IDEA convention. Our long work days manning the booth were bookended by elaborate meals and tickets to Cirque de Soleil shows. My guilt compounding with each gift I received.

One Saturday, late morning I was back home and driving across the Fremont bridge when [00:58:00] my face, feet, and hands began to go numb. By the time I found a safe place to pull over my vision had blurred and I struggled to think clearly. I climbed outta the car, dug my hands into the dirt, and sat on the ground in tears.

A few days later, I had a second panic attack, this time during a staff meeting . I felt a little off as soon as the meeting began, but it really kicked into high gear when Seth launched into an impassioned diatribe. I watched him gesture emphatically from outside of my body, struggling to appear in nonchalant.

After the meeting, Raul approached me, and he expressed his concern that I was no longer attending his classes.

I wish I'd been able to tell him the truth. That I felt like I was slowly dying inside. That the beauty that had summoned me here was no longer available to me. That the lack of integrity within the Org was so dizzying that I could no longer find a way to anchor myself into the practice.

But at the time, I didn't have any of those words. So instead I rallied for [00:59:00] his evening class. Before it began, I listened as a diehard student of over a decade welcome to

newbie. She became animated, and as she spoke about the founders like they were the second coming, I felt myself grow irate and somewhat nauseous.

Three more panic attacks in less than two weeks, and I'd had enough.

"Is there anything you wanna say?" Seth asked me pointedly.

"Yes. I quit." This time I didn't bother to elaborate. He stormed away in anger. Marissa crossed her arms at her chest. She popped one hip to the side and narrowed her eyes before speaking. "Do you know what your problem is, Candice? You are never satisfied. You always want more."

I blinked back shameful tears as her eyes bore into me, and then for the first time I fired back. "You're right. I do want more and I'm gonna stop apologizing for it."

My hands trembled with rage. I felt the warm wash of guilt immediately, [01:00:00] but I let it stand.

A little over a month later, in honor of what was supposed to be my last day, Seth invited me to join him for a one-on-one farewell dinner at City Grill, an upscale restaurant with a 30th floor skyline view. We spoke candidly over drinks and sushi, and I confessed to him the depth of my recent mental health struggles. He wept and told me that he loved me. My heart cracked wide open.

"How about you go freelance?" He made the offer and I agreed.

Two months later, I was screaming, kicking, and punching the walls of my apartment. My rent was late. My phone was disconnected. My nervous system was in shambles. Marissa was quick to remind me that I had failed. I was relieved that no one tried to convince me to stay.

After two years and seven months, I had finally walked away. But I also kept the original promise that I had made to myself, to complete the level-four training. And ironically, it was that final training, the coveted one [01:01:00] that had been shrouded in so much mystery, that had felt flat. I was largely unmoved by the content. Even so, in the closing circle I wept bittersweet tears, proud to have finally reached a goal I had long ago set for myself. And grieving the loss. Knowing in that moment that my relationship to the practice and its people would soon be behind me.

I left on good terms, occasionally renting space from the studio and staying in close contact with Raul and his partner at the time, who would go on to be one of my longest dearest friends. Raul and his partner broke up and he left the org a couple of years after I did. He married, cut all ties, and moved to Texas. After he left Marissa decided it was finally time to amass a team of trainers to help grow the work. I was invited, but declined her invitation.

Perhaps the greatest irony in my leaving the Org was just how many of its foundational principles I used to get out and maintain a healthy [01:02:00] distance. The founders were consistently reminding us to speak to our emotional experience and stand in our power, even

when they were unable to make room for it. The practice focused primarily on body awareness and tuning into physical sensation as a personal guide. My body had been talking to me from the moment I arrived at the studio. And in the end, it was my physical discomfort that finally pushed me out the door.

I wish I could say I felt better as soon as I left, but in reality, it was a painful separation. The Org was not only a source of financial livelihood. It was my spiritual touchstone, a path in life that had given me a sense of identity and purpose. The loss was incalculable, both emotionally and practically speaking.

I was grieving the loss of a community, an atmosphere and a language that had become my way of moving through the world. Everything that had become reflexive in me was just a reminder of all that I had lost.

And what was [01:03:00] even more of a mindfuck was that I had been conditioned to believe that none of it even really belonged to me. The choreography, the principles, the language that I had embodied, it was all part of the brand. And unless I pledged allegiance to the Org, it felt as though none of it was mine to own.

During the pandemic, I attended graduate school and earned a master's degree. Upon my graduation, the knowledge that I gained immediately belonged to me. While I certainly give occasional credit to those who inspired me on the path, I am not required to pay monthly royalties nor do I need to remain affiliated with the university. I'm at liberty to apply my knowledge freely without explanation or oversight.

But in the world of cult fitness things work a little differently. Program creators pull together a little bit of this and a little bit of that, codify it into a language, and package it to be sold. Hello capitalism.

But how do we account for the fact that the [01:04:00] tenants of many practices are just a conglomeration of things that already exist? And what about when the practice becomes an embodiment? How exactly does one step away from that?

When I left the Org, I was convinced that the wisdom that I'd embodied through literally hundreds of hours of education and thousands of classes taught, most of it, I couldn't take with me. I struggled to imagine a future where I could use what I'd embodied without betraying the brand. And I think this is why so many people stick around, even when they're underpaid and underappreciated. It's the sunk cost fallacy. The more time and money you invest, the more buy-in you have. And the harder it is to step away.

I feel strongly that the financial exploitation of physical movement, mental health treatments, or spiritual teachings is a failure of capitalism. Especially when we desperately need our psychological frameworks, somatic education, and trans rational understandings to be shared far and wide.

When we give a person, a religion, or a brand ownership over [01:05:00] the results experience, when everything good in our lives is attributed to the work, we're standing on

culty ground. When leaving a community behind means also separating from embodied wisdom, the emotional impact can be devastating.

I didn't have a plan B, so I dropped all my classes and went back to waiting tables. My anxiety got better at first, and then it got worse. Soon after a panic attack landed me in the ER, I threw myself head first into a new relationship. We weren't an ideal match and there were many red flags that I willfully ignored. But he was a caretaker type that made me feel safe and loved, and at that time, nothing mattered more.

Around the time that I stopped teaching, a handful of former students began requesting one-on-one work. These holistic personal training sessions would evolve into the work that I do to this day. I eventually found other fitness modalities to explore and began co-authoring a series of training manuals [01:06:00] for a mind body fitness company out of San Francisco. I'd eventually work as a trainer in this new format, traveling abroad to perform and co-facilitate teacher trainings. It laid a firm foundation for my future work, empowering agency, not just through movement, but in every aspect of life.

I still visited the new age bookstore weekly, constantly adding books to my self-help collection and zeroing in on those that centered around the law of attraction. I watched and re-watched movies like *The Secret*, *The Moses Code*, and *What The Bleep Do We Know*, attending and eventually teaching workshops at the bookstores event center.

I was very into Abraham, a so-called group entity channeled by Esther Hicks. Esther's husband Jerry had apparently at one time been a successful Amway distributor, which may explain why Abraham-Hicks became a worldwide brand. The organization's net worth is estimated to be at around \$10 million.

Despite the fact that Jerry died of cancer in 2011, Abraham-Hicks made a compelling case for good vibes and the [01:07:00] promise that we can access all of our heart's desires by getting into the vortex, the ideal space of vibrational self-alignment.

From 2007 to 2009, I attended roughly a half dozen live workshops in various locations, including an Abraham-Hicks cruise to Mexico.

Eventually I faded out, disenchanted by this idea that I was in fact the center of my own private universe and unable to parse out their teachings with all the suffering I saw around the world. And practically speaking, no matter how much I committed to the work, I couldn't seem to stop having human experiences that forced me to feel things and pay bills I didn't see coming.

In retrospect, I think that's what gets me so damn heated about these sort of cult-following teachings, the way they gaslight us into thinking that we are the reason that things don't necessarily work out, and that if we buy into more of what they have to offer, we will finally transcend the messiness of our humanity.

If you can convince people that you have the one thing they [01:08:00] need to transcend their suffering for good. You have a customer for life.

In January of 2009, much to the consternation of my former colleagues, I started teaching Zumba. They all saw it as an unenlightened step backwards, by then I knew better. It was medicinal for me, being able to dance and teach again only without all the dogma. I was no longer interested in delivering body sermons. Zumba required only that I play music, offer up a smile, and trust people to move and exist in their bodies without the need of high-talk interventions.

And by now, I'm sure you're catching onto the fact that I had grown a little cynical. Talk of spiritual pseudoscience had started to make me cringe, and charismatic individuals with influence were at the top of my list of people to be avoided. [01:09:00] I'd become overprotective of myself and the inner authority I'd fought so hard to recover. My early buy-in into the woo had cost me some self respect, and I wasn't willing to make the same mistake twice.

That said, I was in a bit of a conundrum. Because I was now working as a holistic coach in the domain of spirituality and self-help, and it was essential to my brand that it at least looked like I had my shit together. It was then I started living a double life.

During the day, I taught classes and sat with clients. And at night I'd work as a cocktail waitress, then stick around after hours to drink and share laughs with the guys. Pete, Brent and Sam were the Monday night crew and they offered me irreverent salvation. They treated me like a whole human, appreciating my strengths and playfully pointing out my blind spots. Pete in particular saw right through my carefully curated representative. His Bostonian directness and brotherly tough love helped me to crack through the [01:10:00] spiritual pretense, reminding me what it felt like to unconditionally love and accept myself again.

I spent time with this new trio drinking vodka tonics, eating popcorn, and shooting pool at the local dive bar. It was just the anti-church I needed.

Sociologist Janja Lalich uses the metaphor of the shelf to describe the place in the back of our mind where we place our doubts when evidence arises that challenges what we've been taught to believe. I'd been shelving my doubts since the early two thousands, when I'd first started self helping myself to the influence of others. I'd stacked up quite a collection of misgivings.

On March 23rd, 2010, the shelf finally broke. That was the day Tony, one of the great loves of my life, died in a sudden and tragic accident. Tony and I had successfully transitioned our relationship years before. It had been the one time in my life when I did love with maturity and [01:11:00] grace. Although the frameworks had always been vastly different, we shared a devotion to the spiritual path. But the fact that he was so good and had been so violently removed from this life was something I simply couldn't fathom. His death rippled seismically through my life. There was no person, spiritual framework, or other worldly perspective that was strong enough or true enough to carry me through the loss. I was on my own. For the first time in my life, I had to learn how to carry myself.

Now, of course, I had no idea how to do that. So instead I developed a crush on the saucy new sous chef at the restaurant, an emotionally-unstable manchild with jade green eyes and a not so secret cocaine addiction. He was, in fact, the polar opposite of Tony. And the time I

spent with him was my way of giving God the finger. Over the course of that year, I rejected the idea that anything, least of all my body, was sacred.

It was an all consuming [01:12:00] mess, but that toxic relationship helped me to survive my grief. I suffered a lot during those months, and it taught me how to feel again. How to be a messy human who has no choice but to make sense of her pain. I yet again struggled to extricate myself, this time from a cult of one. But I eventually managed to grab a hold of myself enough to let go of him.

And that's the bittersweet truth of life. The worst moments giving way to the best wisdom. Thanks to Dahnhak, the Org, and unfathomable loss, I know now that it is the best things that are hardest to let go of. Sometimes the culture we occupy is life giving and painful all at the same time. Sometimes we are deeply attached to someone who is hurting us, and it's difficult to say goodbye, in part due to the potential we see, and also because we are choosing pain either way. We are willing to endure [01:13:00] many tiny injuries to avoid the hollow and devastating pain of loss, especially when it feels like letting go is somehow a betrayal of all that is good and right, however fleeting or precarious it may have been.

But this is why we must learn to trust ourselves, our bodies, and our emotional intelligence. Pros and cons lists aside, we know in our depths when something isn't serving us. Whether it's within an intimate relationship, a family, or a spiritual community.

Influence is a drug. It can be both medicinal and all consuming. Anyone and everyone is susceptible to high demand influence and abuse of power. No one is exempt.

But this does not make us weak. It makes us human. We are wired to come together. And this only becomes a negative when power-over dynamics are discouraging us from expressing our dignity and uniqueness.

The solution to the problem of culty culture is not [01:14:00] that we silo ourselves off from one another. We need to come together now more than ever, but not in service to sameness or powerful overlords.

I have a deep love for every teacher who crossed my path because each of them added genuine value to my life, both through their healthy redirections and their misguided moments. Some of it was helpful and some of it harmful. We can hold both truths at the same time. And we can remember that the good doesn't necessarily justify the bad. Understanding doesn't have to mean enabling.

I stayed silent about my cultish experiences because there was no way for me to share my story without breaking the unspoken bonds of my social conditioning. It's a cultural norm, bias in favor of those who reside at the top of the hierarchy. We shame and blame anyone who suffers at the hands of oppressive ideologies and make excuses for those who seek to influence or control them.

But enough [01:15:00] already.

TDP #33 - Behaving Gladly: The Cult of New Age Wellness | Solo Episode

Next week, I'm gonna introduce you to a former colleague at the Org. She and I met as teachers way back in 2004, and she stayed on with the company for more than a decade after I left. I've invited her to share her story with us because courageous expression is liberation. And because her memories are more recent and potently demonstrate the psychosocial costs of leaving a high-demand culture. Walking alongside her and others who have left the Org has reminded me that sharing the weight of our honest stories can lighten our load. And it is the way that we dismantle our social conditioning. Conditioning that so often turns our attention toward those at the top of the hierarchy and away from one another.

Thank you for listening. My guest and I will be back next week with her story and a conversation that will lead us into an episodic exploration of cult dynamics, specifically how they play out in the industries of spirituality and self-help.

Until we meet again, move away from [01:16:00] anything that does not make your soul sing and keep moving toward what moves you.

Caio.