

Candice Schutter: [00:00:00] Thank you for joining me for another episode of The Deeper Pulse. I'm back from a short break and I am so thrilled to be bringing you a very special episode of the culture series.

Hello out there. It is so good to be back with you on the podcast. And as you may already know, I took a little travel break and these past three weeks have really flown by. It's probably because I spent most of my time road tripping through Colorado, eating meals out of a Yeti cooler and visiting some of my old haunts. And I used the word haunt quite deliberately here.

Chris and I spent five nights in an Airbnb in Boulder. And we booked our stay there months and months ago, around the first of the year, when [00:01:00] we landed tickets to see Brandi Carlile and The Indigo Girls at Red Rocks Amphitheater. If you've never been to Red Rocks, do yourself a favor and get there. It is arguably one of the best music venues in the country.

Anyhow, the trip was planned months and months ago, and it was so crazy, somewhat synchronistic to just happen to be in Colorado on the heels of releasing this very series.

It just so happens that we were staying less than two miles from Alchemy of Movement, the dance studio where, in the fall of 2000, I was first introduced to a mind body wellness practice that would turn the trajectory of my life on a dime. Soon after attending my first class, I began dancing at the studio six days a week and less than a year later, I traveled to Santa Barbara, California to attend a week long teacher training. I became totally enamored with the practice and the company, which I refer to as the Org.

I had already been somewhat exposed to the bittersweet lure of new age wellness culture, but the ways in which this [00:02:00] practice transformed my body and my way of walking in the world was undeniable. Let's just say I was all in.

So While in Boulder, I decided to pay a quick visit to the studio where it had all began 20 years earlier. It was so surreal. I was flooded with memories as soon as I stepped through the doors.

What's more just down the street, less than a mile away was the shopping center where The Dahn Center had once stood. Dahnhak was another practice I became involved in around the same time.

The space was now a used kids clothing store, but it had once been a brightly painted dojo where I'd been issued my first martial arts uniform, and I'd spent many hundreds of dollars I didn't have on weekend workshops and private energy work sessions that promised to prepare me for an enlightenment revolution. Now I'm not gonna go into all that here. You can circle back to episode 33, and the many others that follow, if you wanna hear that story.

In a nutshell, I kicked Dahnhak to the curb, and I became an all in [00:03:00] devotee of the Org, eventually working in the inner circle, overlooking red flags in favor of personal development, social status, and most importantly, a wholehearted belief that I had finally found a sense of purpose in life.

Eventually things got so uncomfortable that I left the Org. The culture felt toxic to me, but it would be many years before I'd come to understand that this was a common cultic experience.

I couldn't see any of that at the time. So like most survivors, I walked away from one group only find myself in another iteration down the road. I cycled through one culty culture after another. And the irony was that each new experience seemed to be offering me something that at the time felt like the antidote to whatever spell I'd most previously been under.

You can think of it sort of as the smoke and mirrors of new age wellness culture. In these environments, control is very often confused with connection, and lavish praise is traded for compliance and [00:04:00] obedience.

I didn't understand any of this at the time. And so I'd get frustrated and exit yet another environment because something just felt off. Eventually, I felt unable to trust my instincts. So I broke away from group dynamics altogether. Wary to join the ranks of another idealistic organization, I decided instead to build a private coaching practice. In the process I sought online business training, and in a true plot twist, that is a total mind fuckery, I'd later realize, way after the fact, that I myself had been trained in a variation of tried and true cultic systems of influence. Essentially, I learned to replicate coaching models that were designed to build a cult following through the use of laundered systems of influence and online sales funnels.

Cha-ching. Click bait salvation.

I never had much measurable capitalistic success using these models because once again, I could feel that something wasn't quite [00:05:00] right.

In the spring of 2019, I finally just gave up. I let go of my teaching slash coaching practice, and I decided to devote myself to a question: What keeps happening? How is it that I keep seeing the same dynamics over and over again?

I've since learned that despite my deep and unrelenting desire for autonomy, I will never actually be free from cultic influences until I am able to clearly understand and identify how exactly they operate.

Knowing something isn't good for me, just isn't enough. Saying no to one thing, doesn't keep me from repeating the same cycle somewhere else.

How did I get here? Is really the impetus for this series, which has rather gloriously led me to this week's episode and an insightful conversation with a very special guest.

Janja Lalich is a sociologist and a world renowned cult expert, who some of you may even recognize. She's [00:06:00] been featured in documentaries like Heaven's Gate, Cults & Extreme Belief, & Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult. Dr. Lalich is a Professor Emerita of Sociology at California State University and has been studying the social psychology of controversial groups and exploitative and abusive relationships for 30 plus years. She is an international authority on cults and coercion, has written and lectured extensively, advised the

international intelligence community on extremism and indoctrination, and has served as consultant and expert witness in civil and criminal cases. Now, semi-retired, Janja still works as a researcher, author, and educator specializing in recruitment, indoctrination, and coercive methods of influence and control. She's the author and or co-author of six books, including the now classic *Take Back Your Life: Recovering From Cults and Abusive Relationships*. In addition to working with survivors and their families, Janja leads [00:07:00] workshops and educational sessions for government agencies, private companies, educational institutions, and nonprofit organizations.

Janja's work has been profound, giving language to my own journey of recovery. Early on in this series, I very innocently tagged her in an Instagram post. She reached out to me in support and with an offer to be a guest on this podcast.

We've had a few false starts, but we finally had the chance to sit down together via Zoom, just a little over a week ago. I kind of think it's fitting that this episode just happened to be recorded while I was in Boulder, trying to make sense of how and why it's taken me two decades to extricate myself from the unhealthy dynamics of culty culture.

And a quick spoiler. It turns out that Janja is not only a world renowned expert on all things cultic. She's very generous with her own story and also just a pure delight. I have a feeling you will enjoy our conversation just as much as I did. [00:08:00]

Janja Lalich, PhD: Hello.

Candice Schutter: Hi, Janja. It's so good to finally see you and meet in person. This is great.

Janja Lalich, PhD: It only took what a couple of months.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Life just keeps happening, doesn't it?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. Now, you know, we've had this heat wave and ant invasions and I

Candice Schutter: Uhhuh. Yeah. It's it's nonstop these days, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. It's yeah, it is.

Candice Schutter: I'm coming to you from an Airbnb in Boulder and there's

Janja Lalich, PhD: Oh, you're in Boulder, okay.

Candice Schutter: In Boulder, Colorado. Yeah. We're on a road trip and there's roosters crowing outside and dog barking and traffic. And I'm like, we're just doing this.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. I same here. I've got these guys outside, sanding and drilling and we just have to try it.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. We'll just roll with it. It'll be great. Well, I'm so grateful for you. Well, all the shuffling to make this happen and just that you agreed to do it at [00:09:00] all just means a lot. So I'm really grateful to be here with you.

I have so many questions for you of course, and your work, I want you to know on a personal note has been really profound for me, particularly your book *Take Back Your Life* has just, I mean, I've gone through it three or four times and each time another little nugget rises up and just gives language to experience that I had. And, and just really helps me to, to heal, really. To take back my life and to make sense of so many experiences that I have where I felt, I knew something was off. I just couldn't articulate and put into words what it was and I can't recommend your book enough in terms of the language that it gives to so many of these dynamics.

So I just want to say how grateful I am for the work that you do.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Well, thank you. Maybe I could hire you to do an ad.

Candice Schutter: It would be very easy thing for me to do so, anytime.

So just to share, I'm trying to think of exactly how I first [00:10:00] was exposed to you. I think it was probably through Sarah Edmondson and Nippy Ames their work, *A Little Bit Culty*.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Um, I'm not sure if I listened to the interview with you on that podcast first, or if I read something from her, but I grabbed the book and I've just fallen down the Janja Lalich rabbit hole, watching all the things.

And then circling back to documentaries I had seen and realizing that I had already seen you, you know, offering your expertise. And, are you involved in the second season of *The Vow* that's coming out?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Well, apparently I'm in for one second.

Candice Schutter: One second?

Janja Lalich, PhD: I know. I spent weeks with them. I mean, they filmed me cuz I stayed in an Airbnb with five or six of the women, and it was incredible and they filmed me like every min -- they filmed me sleeping and snoring on the couch and I mean, they just filmed me constantly.

Candice Schutter: Wow.

Janja Lalich, PhD: We were all going to the trial during the day and I mean, it was so intense and then [00:11:00] the conviction happened.

Candice Schutter: Uhhuh.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And yeah, so I apparently the only bit they're using is there's a scene where we're all kind of running out of the courtroom after the conviction.

Candice Schutter: Uhhuh.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, and I think that same video was in might have been in Seduced. Um.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: But anyway, yeah, I was kind of disappointed. I was like, oh my God, I spent with you guys, but I, I guess they had so much to cover. You know, it's always a crapshoot when you do those things.

Candice Schutter: Totally.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. So,

Candice Schutter: yeah.

Well, you are featured quite a bit in Seduced though, if I remember correctly.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. So that's a really great place for people to, particularly around the dynamics there with NXIVM, a great resource for people to go to.

I think that as far as a lot of the cult experts that I've tapped into, I think the way that you approach and explain things is just so relatable and perhaps it's because which maybe kind of leads me into my first question for listeners who maybe aren't as familiar with your work, like how you got [00:12:00] into doing what you do. If you don't mind. I'm sure you've told the story a million times, but just a little bit about your background and, and I think one of the reasons why you're so potent at what you do is that you've walked the path before, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Um, do you mind sharing a little bit about your personal history?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, not at all. So we probably have a few hours, I guess?

Candice Schutter: We might need it just for this part, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: So, when I was 30 years old, I moved to San Francisco. I had been living on an island off the coast of Spain for four years. I was a hippie before that and you know, I'd been to university and all of that, but anyway, it was time for me to leave the island and I moved to San Francisco because one of my best friends from college was there.

And there was a room in their house and she was living with a group of women who had all gone to law school. It was kind of like this first wave of women who went to law school. So it was, you know, the, this was like late [00:13:00] 74. 1974. So the feminist thing was booming. We actually were living in the Castro.

I was coming out as a lesbian, you know, all kinds of stuff was happening. And the Vietnam war had just ended, and so people on the left were kind of looking for what do we do now? And so I met a woman who was a friend of a roommate, you know, one of these stories and we would have, we would stop and have coffee and we'd have these great political discussions. And, and eventually at one point she invited me to join a study group. And there were a lot of study groups going on in the urban areas at that time among the left. So that seemed normal. So, and she said we were gonna study women in the state, which sounded really interesting to me. And I thought, well, I'll meet new people. I'm new in town, blah, blah, blah.

I didn't know, of course that the study group was a front for a cult, an organization. They kept that secret.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And of course in the study group, we all took turns like leading the discussion of the reading [00:14:00] that week. And so we were reading a lot of revolutionary stuff, you know, Lenin and Mao and things like that.

And when it was my turn, of course, they praised me to high heaven, like I was such a genius.

Candice Schutter: Uhhuh.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And then they met with me again. They asked to meet with me again and long story short, they told me there was this organization and didn't I wanna join. And of course I was very excited, and they said to keep it a secret, cuz they didn't want everyone to know.

And this was around the time of the Patty Hearst and the SLA incidents, if people know about that. And so there was, there were a lot of "red squads" in all the police departments in the urban areas. And the FBI was looking for Patty Hearst and knocking on door. And they actually even knocked on my door because I opened up a new gas and electric account. So they were going to all the kind of new apartments.

Candice Schutter: Uh huh.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Anyway, I joined. I really didn't know what I was joining. It didn't have a name at that time. I wasn't really told there was a leader. I was just, I was told it was an all women's [00:15:00] organization that was gonna fight for social change. And so it sounded good to me. It sounded serious. And, you know, I thought the fact that they were keeping it secret was a smart thing to do. And so that didn't really surprise me. And, well, you know, before I knew it, I was, I was pretty quickly brought up the ranks. My first assignment was secretary to the central committee.

So I would sit in on these meetings of the top leadership, like six women and have to take the minutes and then type them all up and deliver them to each of their houses before six in the morning. So sleep deprivation started very early on. Anyway, it went from there. I mean, we grew, we had a lot of different front groups which cults often do.

I was always, I guess you would say internal to the organization. I was always in leadership and leading classes and creating curriculum and on the discipline and control board and was pretty [00:16:00] much groomed by the second in command, the woman who had recruited me.

And so I was quite a bitch. I mean, we, it was a very harsh world. We worked 20 hour days, seven days a week, year after year. We spent a great deal of our time sitting around in circles and criticizing each other, which, you know, self criticism, we kind of adopted it from Chairman Mao and China, and it you know, basically breaking everyone down.

And so I did that for 10 and a half years. The last five years, I was absolutely miserable and wanted to get out and couldn't figure out how to get out.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, I had no money. I had no family. I had nobody on the outside. I knew they'd come after me. I was terrified. And some little part of my brain was saying, well, maybe they're right. You know, I should stay. You know, something wrong with me that I wanna leave, you know, all that.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm. I do.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And then, kind of miraculously, the leader happened to be out of the country [00:17:00] and we all, the leadership called together all the members. And we told them what was going on behind the scenes and that the leader was an alcoholic and arbitrary and all the corruption. And, it took a couple of weeks to convince people that we were telling the truth. And then everybody just started like pouring their stories out. It was just so emotional and very cathartic, but very emotional.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And, the night before she was coming back, we took a vote and we voted unanimously to expel her and dissolve the organization.

So we all got out.

Candice Schutter: Wow.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Very unusual.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And at that point there were probably 120 of us who were like the full time padre members. So then we all had to, you know, go our merry way and get ourselves together and we helped each other with resumes. And like, I ran the publishing house, which was one of my jobs. And so everybody, when they applied for a job, they said they worked at the publishing house and I, you know, I would be a [00:18:00] reference for them.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, and I went to New York to get away from San Francisco and I figured I could get a job in publishing. And so I was both elated and miserable. I felt like I'd been let out of prison. And yet I just felt like the most complete weirdo.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, you know, I was in New York City. I'd seen maybe two movies in 10 years. I just felt completely alienated from everybody. I'd have to go on these business lunches and I didn't know what to talk about. And, it was really tough. And sort of a combination of factors happened that led me to realize I needed to be in therapy. And another miraculous thing at the time, there was a cult clinic in New York where the therapist. Yeah. Worked with cult survivors and families. And I ended up getting the most incredible therapist who more than once saved my life.

I had so much guilt and shame because I had been in leadership and I had done such [00:19:00] shitty things to people. Um.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And so I was pretty suicidal a lot.

Um, anyway, once I felt better, I moved back to San Francisco. New York was really tough in those years, drugs on the street and stuff. So I went back to San Francisco and after 10 years out of the group, I finally went to grad school. It took me 10 years to make that decision.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And I kept thinking I can't do it.

So I went to grad school and got my PhD and got the job teaching sociology at one of the California state universities. But all of that time, I was going to conferences and speaking about cults, especially political cults, because when I got out, which was 86, 87, all anybody talked about was religious cults.

So I started going to conferences and meeting people and writing articles. And then I wrote the first version of Take Back Your Life, which was called Captive Hearts, Captive Minds. I think that came out in [00:20:00] 94. And then I ended up being really good friends with and working with Dr. Margaret Singer, who was,

Candice Schutter: oh, wow, great.

Janja Lalich, PhD: The clinical psychologist who was kind of the preeminent cult expert for decades.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: She lived in Berkeley and so we wrote two books together and she was a mentor and a friend. And, so here I am today. I mean, in 2019, I retired from the university and I moved back to the bay area. And I thought I was retiring. And then the pandemic happened and QAnon and anti-vaxxers, and suddenly my phone and my email was just bursting, and I haven't stopped since. So, I've been swept up by the cultiverse.

Candice Schutter: I was wondering.

Yeah. I was wondering about that. Cuz I kept reading that you were retired and I was like, she doesn't seem very retired.

Janja Lalich, PhD: No, I'm not very retired. In fact I'm exhausted. I'm tired, but not retired, right.

Candice Schutter: Right. There you go. If retired means tired again, then yes.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Exactly.[00:21:00]

Yes. So.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Well thank you for sharing that story. It's so great to hear it direct from you, and of course there's always new details that emerge. And one of the things that's intriguing to me about your story is that the organization that you were involved in had, did have a leader and it was a female leader, which isn't as common.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right.

Candice Schutter: And the organization that I'm no longer involved in. I was involved in more than one culty organization over the years. But the one that I worked in the inner circle

of is still led by a woman who when you've described certain aspects of your experience with your leader, they just seemed to have an awful lot in common.

And I think it's just worth noting because when we hear and see these like, especially sensationalized stories about cults, it's usually some charismatic man who's got, you know, a harem and there's sort of this particular trope, which obviously you and I know there's a lot of variations that don't necessarily get covered, [00:22:00] but we don't see a lot about female led cults and how that can show up.

And so that's really an intriguing piece for me. Like, do you see that? Is it true? Is it just what I'm seeing in terms of what's depicted? Is it less common that there's a woman sort of at the helm? Or

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, probably at least two thirds or more of cult leaders are male.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And I think, in part it's the way men are raised. Men tend to be more assertive, more aggressive.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: um, have narcissistic tendencies, whatever. You know, are in most of our societies still today, men are considered superior. And so I think that kind of just lends to them becoming cult leaders.

There certainly are, and there always have been women cult leaders and they haven't gotten as much attention, I think in part, because you know, in the early years, those groups weren't as [00:23:00] sensational as the groups led by men. But that, I think that has certainly changed.

So, even most recently we've seen, I don't know if most people have probably heard the podcast or seen the video, the documentary about Teal Swan.

Candice Schutter: Yes.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And also Love Has Won and LulaRich, you know.

Candice Schutter: LulaRich, yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. So I think people are getting used to the ideas like, oh yeah, women can do this too, you know?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: I mean, narcissism holds no bounds, you know, it's,

Candice Schutter: for sure.

Janja Lalich, PhD: an equal opportunity personality disorder. So yeah.

Candice Schutter: So true.

So in my experience it took me and I imagine this is fairly common as well. It took me so many years to really even recognize that what I had experienced was sort of a cultic dynamic and that I had [00:24:00] been.

I imagine, I mean, it's like when we're in a cult, we think, oh, it's not a cult, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right. Of course.

Candice Schutter: But even coming out of it and because so much of what I had seen until recent years in terms of depictions of cult were these extreme sensationalized stories, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm , mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: And it's not until recent years that I'm seeing these more nuanced portrayals and seeing like, you know, I know NXIVM got pretty, you know, Keith Raniere was diabolical and it got pretty gnarly.

And the doorway in was very much like what I experienced a personal development company. Very much the indoctrination around being at cause and looking at your own stuff and everything circling back to personal ownership and never holding the, the leaders accountable, all of that. It was more subtle, perhaps cuz I was in it, but also because there wasn't this crazy plot twist at the end, it was just this slow erosion of personal power over time. And when I got out, I didn't even realize the impact that it had had until I began working with a therapist again, years [00:25:00] later. And she actually asked me the question have you ever examined your spiritual wounds?

And when she said that phrase, it just cut deep because I felt like I had lost my ability to even trust myself, right? That, that moral injury that gets spoken about. And I feel like I'm kind of going way ahead of where I wanted to go, but I wanna say this right out of the gate, because I think what I'm so curious to talk with you about is just the ways that these dynamics are present all around us, all the time and in these self-help and personal growth containers, I've worked as a coach for 16 years. And I feel like I'm walking on eggshells around this stuff all the time. Like did I inadvertently slip into a certain kind of behavior that's maybe, you know, reinforcing these dynamics and pulling myself back and it's such a subtle thing.

And I just am so curious to talk with you because I feel like I've seen you interviewed about these [00:26:00] extreme situations so much. I'm so curious. What are your thoughts especially in the culture being what it is right now and like you said, suddenly your phone's

ringing off the hook because there's a pandemic. Like, why is that? And what makes this emergence of cult dynamics so present right now. And how is it showing up in these subtle ways that maybe we don't have our eyes open to cause we're just looking for these extreme examples.

What are your thoughts on all that?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Well, a couple of things, um, cuz you've touched on a lot.

First of all, it started back in the sixties and seventies with the human potential movement, which now has evolved into this kind of personal development stuff. But the human potential movement and the therapies that were being experimented with and the stuff that was going on at Esalen out in California and the beginnings of what was known as attack therapy.

There would be these groups of people who would get together, supposedly under the guise of we're going to be more aware of other cultures and other [00:27:00] ethnicities, but they really kind of turned into these kind of attack everybody situations. That then evolved into what started with what we call the large group awareness trainings, right?

So EST and Landmark and PSI World and Avatar, there's just a jillion of them at this point. So all of that stuff along with all of the new age stuff that I consider things like talking to ascended masters and seance and crystals and all that stuff. I mean, we had TV shows where, you know, there were ghosts and it was, it all became completely normalized, right.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: It just was all of it seeped into mainstream society and seemed to be acceptable. Then it all got into the business world with all these training programs, right? So you have entities as high as the government sending their people to these courses where they had to like, hang on ropes and do whatever and be tied to each other, you know, some really extreme [00:28:00] situations.

Candice Schutter: Wow.

Janja Lalich, PhD: But it was all like, oh, well this is, you know, this is what we were sent to do this by our company. We have to do it. We can't say no, right. And if you talked against it, you were ostracized at work. And so there was that pressure.

So we have this society that's completely enmeshed in this sort of quick fix, magical thinking. Right.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And the acceptance of the idea of gurus or people who know better than we do, right. And that started because in the sixties we changed the immigration laws. And up until then, it was very difficult for Asians to get into our country because of the war. So in

the sixties, when we had a more liberal government, that law changed and in came the Indian gurus, right?

So all these bloody gurus who left India because they weren't accepted there, and they were known as charlatans for the most part, come here and people, because of all this new age influence about how we're supposed to hate [00:29:00] Western medicine and you know, all of that, the age of Aquarius. So suddenly everybody's latching onto these Indian gurus when they don't understand a shred about the Indian tradition of guruism or tantra or whatever it is, right. So they're just being taken advantage of wholesale.

So all that together brings us to where we are today, right. We've got it in so many, oh and then of course, the multilevel marketing people who use the same techniques as the LGATs did the large group awareness trainings, you know, you're in this ballroom and they use these high arousal techniques and they get everybody pumped up and then, you know what I'm talking about and I'm sure most of your listeners do, right.

So this is where we are. It's like,

Candice Schutter: yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: It's in our blood right now, so to speak. And so it is everywhere. And then with the pandemic, you know, became the heightened presence of conspiracy theories. And so that's now a whole nother wing of this. You know, I see conspiracy theories as this [00:30:00] era's version of magical thinking.

Which is what the seventies and eighties were about. Right?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So people are desperate. They're locked in. They're on their computer. They aren't seeing anybody, you know, we all know what happened and they get down these other rabbit holes, where they're feel they find a like-minded community and boom.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And then of course, we had that man who was our president for a while.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: He reinforced all of the us versus them thinking, which is a hallmark of a cult. Right. So we find, we find now that people feel they have the license to act out, so there's so much violence, so many shootings, people being assaulted cuz they're wearing a mask, you know, whatever it is.

So this kind of culty closed mindedness is, is just around us all the time. Um,

Candice Schutter: yeah. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And it's, it's frightening in a way and it's obviously harmful. I mean, some of it, I suppose, is more benign, [00:31:00] but it's tough.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And I mean, I could work 24 hours a day if I had the stamina, um, just the amount of calls and queries that I get.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Of every sort, of every sort.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And from every type of person and from countries around the world.

Candice Schutter: yeah. It's it's yeah. It's like an aspect of the human condition, especially right now in this time of vulnerability. Is that vulnerability a susceptibility in a way? Like when we're more vulnerable, we're more available to these influences. Yeah?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, exactly.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: So one of the questions that I have is I think just a common question that was asked to me, and I was like, Janja's gonna be able to answer this much better than I can. Like, what determines the difference between a community of people and a society of people living together and a cult?

What is it that pushes it over the edge that makes it, what is it that makes it a cult? How would you define it?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Well, you know, what makes something [00:32:00] a cult is an authoritarian leader, a lack of transparency, a lack of democracy. Um, no independent thinking at least about anything substantial. No way to raise criticism, especially of the leader or the leadership.

You know, having a belief system that is basically an all or nothing belief system. It is the only way. And not even wanting to recognize that there could possibly even be other belief systems.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: um, and expecting you to then devote your entire life to whatever quote, salvation or promise that this great leader is offering you.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So you know, a community, some kind of intentional community, or just a bunch of people living together that doesn't have to turn cultic and it probably in most cases, it doesn't. It's only if you get somebody like Larry Ray in [00:33:00] there. If people are familiar with the Sarah Lawrence cult.

These were just college kids living together until daddy moved in and boom. Right. It became really one of the most evil situations of the last few years.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: I didn't think anyone could be worse than Keith Raniere, but Larry Ray beat him to it.

Candice Schutter: Wow.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, so I think it's important when people are thinking about joining something or signing up for something that they, you know, consider these things. Ask a lot of questions and if your questions get turned back on you, well, that's not a good sign.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You know, ask how the leader was chosen. Ask how decisions are made. Ask where the money goes. And if they tell you, well, you don't know enough yet to ask that question, then leave. If they're not answering your questions, that's a red flag, right?

Candice Schutter: Right. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, I was talking to a woman the other day who said she went to some retreat and when the, the head, you know, the guy, they went to see walked in, everybody had to get [00:34:00] down on the ground and bow down to him like he was God. And she said right then and there, she was like, no, I'm not, I'm doing this. Right.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So, try to keep your wits about you as much as you can, especially in the beginning before you get too swept up. And slow down, people need to slow down, you know?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And if they make you sign a waiver that says they're not responsible. Well, that right there tells you something. Because why would they make you sign a waiver unless something bad's gonna happen, right?

Candice Schutter: Right. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And a lot of your training programs now make you do that because they've been sued so often cuz people have been hurt or damaged or died or whatever. So, signing a non-disclosure or some kind of waiver of responsibility. Don't do it.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Yeah. Well, that's part of doing research about the organization you're getting involved with as well, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: If they're discouraging that that's another red flag.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Exactly.

Candice Schutter: Or, they're saying, you know, oh, they're just, those are the sort of nonbelievers.

Janja Lalich, PhD: They're just bad mouthing us. Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. [00:35:00] They're just not as enlightened as we are sort of the, the vein of where the communities that I was involved in would come from. And I think what makes it so tricky in new age wellness circles, like where I was involved is this sort of rhetoric around abandoning your ego, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Oh yeah.

Candice Schutter: It's like your ego is sort of the enemy, which is basically like disidentify with who you really are and defer to our authority. And that was something I was hugely vulnerable to in my late twenties and early thirties when I was really involved in all of this.

And, and even to this day, to a certain extent, you know. There's so many different ways they spin that like get out of your head.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Right. Don't overthink things.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Don't overthink it. I was just gonna say, that's right.

Candice Schutter: It's so common. And I get that a lot, cuz I have a lot of wheels spinning up here and it's taken me years to actually celebrate that about myself.

I have an intellect that's firing on all cylinders and I've been told to like deaden that.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. It's really big red flag now for me.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. [00:36:00]

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. There's so much of that. And it's such, I mean, and it's actually such hypocritical bullshit this whole abandon your ego because essentially a lot of those programs or groups or whatever are all about ego and self.

Candice Schutter: Yes.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And self-indulgence, right. And not doing a bloody thing about society, you know, where you're supposed to feel really good about yourself cuz you're meditating as though that's gonna do something good for the world. Not that I'm against meditation, but putting that spin on it is, you know, is just ridiculous.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

I'm interested too. You mentioned in one of the interviews I heard you, I think you might have mentioned it to Sarah Edmondson in the conversation because as she was coming out of NXIVM she was sort of fighting and involved in all this activity that she maybe wouldn't have chosen if [00:37:00] she had, could have authored it herself. And she became an activist like right outta the gate. And you said something to her about her savior complex.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: And just being mindful of that. And I was just like, ding, ding, ding. That's something that I have definitely over the course of my life, not even just in this project, but over and over again, in some ways it was the hook for me that brought me into a lot of these containers, cuz oh, like this is the next best thing that's gonna save the world and change lives. And, this savior complex thing really spoke to me. So can you say a little bit more about that?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Sure, sure. So first of all, I think it in part stems from the fact that despite all the myths about who joins cults, like stupid, weird, crazy, lazy people. In my 35 years of doing this, I think I can firmly say that if there's a common denominator among the people who join cults, it's idealism. Right?

It's people who want to better the world, better themselves, [00:38:00] better their family, find perfect enlightenment, if you will.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Financial success, but it's some form of idealism. And nine times out of 10, it's about the world and not just about yourself, right?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So people get into things because of their good intentions. And then they spend whatever amount of time in this organization thinking that whatever they're being told to do is because they're saving the world. Right.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Ultimately. So when they get out, two things happen. They're still left with that feeling of, I wanna change the world, save the world, but now it, sort of focuses back on all those people who are still left in the group and I wanna help get them all out. I want them to see what I'm seeing. Right.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Or I wanna expose the group and tell the authorities or whatever. And so it's kind of this leftover [00:39:00] feeling and also the need to have a purpose, right? While we're in these groups, we think we have a purpose and there's nothing wrong with that. We all want purpose in our life and meaning. So then we get out and there's this huge void.

Candice Schutter: Yeah, for sure. Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So this is gonna give you purpose again, right? If you're either gonna go back and save everybody or whatever, or you're gonna start a podcast and tell the world, or you're gonna whatever.

Candice Schutter: Guilty.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Whatever way you're gonna do it. Exactly.

And, and my caution to people is that if you become, and I see this as activism, um, but if you become an activist too soon after leaving a cultic situation, it's gonna come back to bite you.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You're either gonna crash at some point and be overwhelmed and triggered, or you're going to do things that aren't helpful because you yourself aren't recovered enough yet.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, so you might end up even damaging further certain [00:40:00] relationships or whatever it might be, right?

People wanna be in documentaries. Let's get a documentary about our group. And then they, they have to spend all this time on camera talking about it with a room full of audio guys and camera guys, and you know, all these strangers and they get triggered like crazy.

Candice Schutter: Sure.

Janja Lalich, PhD: It's a huge setback. So it's really important. Not that I have anything against activism. I mean, obviously that's what I've done.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, but I think people have to really initially focus on themselves. And that's really hard to do because typically we've been in groups where we're told not to focus on ourselves. Right.

Candice Schutter: Exactly.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Like, that's the ego, right? It's not about you. Right. So you think now, if you do "self care" that you're being selfish. Right. Or I know, I remember the first few months, like sitting down and making a bowl of popcorn and watching a football game. And one part of me was like, oh, I'm just doing [00:41:00] this incredibly normal thing.

And the other part of me was like, I should be doing something I should be working. I should be doing.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right. Always in the back of my head, I'm being lazy. I'm be, you know, and, and I'm sure you, and many others experienced that. So it's important to really do your recovery in whatever way that is for you and every person's path is different, but otherwise it's gonna harm you, potentially harm you and potentially harm the people you're trying to save.

And I know that I know it's difficult. I know it's hard to find therapists who understand this. I know there aren't that many resources available. I, you know, I went through the same thing. And so I know it's hard, I hear it day and night from Canada, Europe, wherever, there aren't therapists who get it. They can't find people to talk to to understand. And then their friends are telling them, oh, just get over it already, you know, just get, right?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: It's like, no, you don't just get over it. These are incredibly [00:42:00] traumatic experiences. So that's my bit on the savior complex.

Candice Schutter: Yeah, that's great. That's really great. And, and I think it relates to an overarching theme of my life, cause I think, you know, my first cult was my nuclear family.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm.

Candice Schutter: You know, there was, there was a patriarchal leader that called all the shots and we were all just walking on eggshells. So I feel like my indoctrination started when I was like four years old when my mom remarried. So I see that for many, many years, my desire to heal was just completely projected onto people all around me. Like I was the wounded healer running around trying to do all the things for everyone else. And yeah, it took me a long time to, to really be in recovery. Right. And still I'm still in it.

And, and I just wanna say for listeners out there who are hearing what you're saying about, you know, the challenges, I, again, I'm gonna plug your book like crazy, cuz it's such a great resource in terms of the process of healing and having that language, and then you even have a place. I can't remember which chapter it's in, but a list of questions for a therapist. [00:43:00] If you're, if you're gonna see a therapist like the right questions to ask, to make sure that they're informed in the right ways and that they don't retrigger and retraumatize you, which can happen a lot.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yes.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. For sure. Especially right now I'm living 20 minutes outside of Sedona.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Oh God.

Candice Schutter: Which just circumstantially. Yeah. Circumstantially that's. Yeah. Where my mother-in-law is. And it's like, I mean, thankfully I'm where I am so that I'm not triggered just walking around town.

Janja Lalich, PhD: I remember when I went to Sedona, it was actually, I was working on like Gabriel stuff then. You know, Gabriel of Sedona who's I don't know what his name is now, but I was working with several families who had adult children in Gabriel and a couple of them were fighting for custody of their grandchildren cause they didn't want them raised there. Um, and so my partner and I went to Sedona for like a long weekend and I was just like, oh my God, this is like.

Candice Schutter: It's like over the top.

Janja Lalich, PhD: New age culty heaven, you know.

Candice Schutter: It really is, you know, it really is. [00:44:00] Yeah. It so is.

Yeah, it's interesting, just side note on that. I was hiking just a few weeks ago and I realized that I was on a trail that I had read about.

So are you familiar with Dahnhak? It's D a H N H a K. It's a cult that I was involved in. They had centers all over the states and it was basically, they called it brain yoga. But it was like a lot of tai Chi, meridian exercises, some really beneficial body practices. And when I went into the center, I started taking the classes and they immediately start love bombing, like crazy. And I was I and my partner at the time, we were both sort of chosen to be invited to their healer school, which was this \$10,000 investment.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Whoa.

Candice Schutter: And there was a lot of pressure to "manifest" this money, which neither of us had access to any kind of cash like that. And so we would do these 4:00 AM bowing exercises and just all these practices to manifest [00:45:00] this money. And it was really high pressure sales and something that I've come to call soft power coercion. What I've experienced in the new age wellness spheres, and even working as a coach and being trained to create online sales funnels and be like a celebrity coach and all that stuff, which I could never get behind. This different way of coercing people. Like just loving them so much that they can't possibly say no to you.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Oh yeah. Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: It's so common.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: And I just, when I hear the word coercion, I don't hear as much conversation about how, especially how much this is being used in the self-help commercialized arenas. How we're literally trained. I've gone through so many online business trainings as a coach and working in personal development. You're literally trained to do this.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: They don't call it love bombing.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right.

Candice Schutter: But it's essentially what you're doing. You find the pain point and then you, you know, you activate it, you put a timeline around how quickly they need to sign up. And then you're just loving at them the whole time until they, they finally say yes. It's, it's [00:46:00] so icky. It's always felt just so gross to me. And it's why I backed away from the whole arena of self-help. And I went back to school and got my master's in social impact. I was like, there's gotta be a better way to help people than this.

This does not feel good. I'm not even sure what my question is, but it'd be interesting to hear your take on how recruitment happens and this sort of what I call soft power coercion, like how that gets manipulated too. Like you, have you seen that in your work a lot?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. I mean that, that's what it is, right? I mean, the problem is, like you said, I think people think of coercion as somebody holding a gun to your head, but that's not what coercion is. I mean, coercion is way more settled than that.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And that's what we need to get the courts and, and law enforcement to understand. As they've been doing in some countries now, like in the UK and in I think New Zealand and Australia and Scotland, um, you know, it's now in the books.

Mostly it's being applied to [00:47:00] domestic situations and not quite yet cults or other high controlled groups, but I get these situations all the time whereas, you know, I'm working with some husband whose wife is just given a half a million dollars to some bogus energy worker up in Idaho. And he calls the police and they say, well, you know, she's in her forties. If she wants to give him all her money, that's her decision.

Candice Schutter: Right. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And he he's like, first of all, it's my money, but.

Candice Schutter: There's that.

Janja Lalich, PhD: But they don't get that people can be swayed, um,

Candice Schutter: yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: In these sometimes obvious, but often way more subtle ways.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And the more you're invested in something, you know, and the more you've bought into it, then the harder and harder it is and the easier it is for them to push you onto the next thing and the next thing. And yeah, that, I mean, I see that all the time. So it's sometimes more obvious, like at a gathering where they, I mean, we did this in my cult.

We'd, we'd have [00:48:00] these dinners for workers, right. Cuz we were supposed to be recruiting the workers. And we'd have like Thanksgiving open house and we'd have 50 turkeys, right. And we,

Candice Schutter: wow.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And of course, none of us were supposed to say we were part of this political organization. And then, you know, maybe five workers would come, you know, so each one could have Turkey. You know, but then if somebody arrived, it's just like that person, you just, you just swarm around that person and say whatever you can to make them feel so wonderful and so loved so that when you say, oh, come on back, they just feel OB, you know, it's they feel obligated to say yes.

I don't know if you've read Robert Cialdini, but his book is genius. It's just called Influence. And he's the social psychologist actually. He's probably retired now, but he was at University of Arizona. And he talks about these principles. I think there's nine principles of influence, you know, and one of them is reciprocation, right? Like they do something for you, and so you feel like you have to do something for them?

Candice Schutter: [00:49:00] Oh gosh. Yeah. That really resonates.

Janja Lalich, PhD: He tells this story in the book. The book is great. It's and it was, it was one of the first books I got way back in the nineties. But anyway, he tells this story about one time he, one of his experiments was that he just went through the phone book and he randomly sent Christmas cards to various families, various homes.

And I forget what percentage, but a remarkable percentage sent him back a Christmas card thinking they must know who the sky is, so they should send a Christmas card back. It's just like a perfect example of that.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Reciprocation, right?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So yeah, this is, you know, basic human behavior.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: That's just being very smartly manipulated by these con artists and that, and you know, if you take it down to the bare bones, that's what it is.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You know, they're all charlatans. And it's all about money, sex, or power. You know, it's whatever it's at.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. [00:50:00] Yeah.

Do you think that, has it been your experience that people who have, I mean, I would say like most of us on some level have a small T trauma in our background, but people who have more of a trauma history are more likely to be exploited in terms of these dynamics?

Have you seen that to be, have you found that to be the case?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Well, yeah. I mean, I think there is a lot of that. You know, on the one hand I truly believe, and I say all the time that anybody can get recruited into something or some kind of cultic situation, because all it takes is just running into someone at that vulnerable moment. And we're all vulnerable thousands of times in our lives. That, that's not an illness. That's not a weakness. That's,

Candice Schutter: mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: It's raining today. So I'm vulnerable, right. Or I have an ant invasion, so I'm vulnerable. Right? I mean, it can be anything. I just moved to a new town. I just got divorced. I, my dog just died, but whatever.

And so in, if in that [00:51:00] moment, no matter what your background, I think you can be susceptible to that lure. Now, of course. The pitch has to resonate with you. It can't be something way outta left field that you would never relate to. Right. So I, like, I always say I would never join a meditation cult cuz I can't sit still that long. Right. But a political cult I'm gonna change the world. Oh yeah, I can do.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right?

So that sounded good to me. Right.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So there has to be that. But I do think just from, I mean, just from all the people I've met over the years. There's a, you know, hundreds and hundreds of survivors at this point, if not more.

And plus the courses I've been doing. There are a lot of people with narcissistic families in their backgrounds, or a pattern of getting into narcissistic relationships, romantic relationships, or maybe even with bosses, one boss after another. And people who do what we call cult hopping, you know, go from cult to cult because they don't get the right [00:52:00] psychoeducation or recovery work in between. So they don't assess what happened to me and why, and how can I not let this happen again?

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, so yeah, I think trauma childhood trauma, for sure. But you know, to tell you the truth, I've hardly met anyone who doesn't have some kind of trauma background.

Candice Schutter: Just started, as soon as I started asking the question, I was like, well.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. Who, I mean, who is that? You know? I mean.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, and I think, you know, right now, like narcissism is really trendy. And I think a lot of that came because of that guy who was our president for a while. And people finally knew what that term meant and started talking about it.

And so then there started being more awareness of it and people being in relationships with narcissists or their family or whatever. When it wasn't really talked about before. And so people started reading the books and maybe it's used a little too much today.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Cause people tend to jump on bandwagons, you know?

Candice Schutter: Yeah, for sure.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, [00:53:00] but I think it's good that there's attention coming to that because there's a lot to know about narcissists and how they operate and the different types of narcissists and, and the reality that they don't change. They're not gonna change. So you're beating your head against the wall, if you think you're gonna change that guy or that woman or that sister, whoever.

Um, and so I think it's important. People get educated about that. And certainly the cult leaders, most of them are what we call malignant narcissists, which means there's a bit of psychopathy or sociopathy, you know? And that's when things get really ugly, like with Keith Raniere.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Or Larry Ray, or, you know, some of the really more vile cult leaders.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

It's interesting as I, I put out this project and I did my best to tell my story in terms of all these different [00:54:00] ways that I experience cult dynamics in my life. And I focused primarily on this organization that I call the Org that I was involved in, in the inner circle and got the most I suppose, wounded by. And then I interviewed another woman who came out and we've had conversations and it's since been circulating among this community.

Cause the organization still exists and there's lots of people who are still in it. And it's circulating pretty widely. And the people who need to know who we're talking about absolutely do. And I've also heard from more than one person that, of course, there's people in the inner circle now who have every intention of addressing this stuff. Even hearing from the people who say I'm learning from what you're sharing and we're gonna change this. And.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, right.

Candice Schutter: Right.

And have you ever seen that happen? like, um.

Janja Lalich, PhD: No, um, no, because, well, because of one thing of what I said, which is narcissists don't change. You can't change them. There's something wrong with their brain. They're not like us. [00:55:00] They don't think like us.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And that's what's hard for people to accept.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You know, like people can really be that way. You know, especially the really evil ones. But, you know, in a sense that happened in my group. So in my group, the cult leader split with her second in command, which was a big mistake because the second in command is really who ran everything and who knew everybody inside out and who was very effective in her way of working with you and talking to you or criticizing you. And she trained me.

The leader was brutish, drunk, vindictive, hard to be around, threw tantrums. And so, you know, we often did our best to just keep her away from most of the members. And most members had no clue what she was like, and some had never even seen her once we got big enough, right.

So she broke with her second in command, which was really stupid. And she basically [00:56:00] banished her to her house and no one was supposed to see her and all of that. While rose, her name was Rosa, while she was in confinement, you know, she started reading books. And she started reading about adult children of alcoholics, which she was one. And she started putting some shit together.

And then she secretly started talking to some of us and saying, Hey, I think we've got a problem here, blah, blah, blah. And so it kind of opened up this can of worms that suddenly we were talking about stuff, which we'd never, ever, ever had been allowed to talk about.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: At the same time, the leader started to go to therapy. Because, because we were working her so hard, right? And of course, none of us could ever go to therapy. I mean, that was like, no, no, no, but she started going to therapy so she could complain about us all the time. And she came back and at one of the inner circle meetings, one day, she said, I think we have to have quality of life [00:57:00] circles or, you know, some bullshit name like that. And we need to get all the branches, that's what we called our meeting groups, get all our branches together and people should talk about their quality of life.

And those of us in leadership were like, oh my God, this is, she doesn't have a clue what she's doing. This is gonna blow the whole thing wide open, right?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And basically it did. It didn't happen exactly like that, but that's the point at which she left the country. And enough of us had been talking and enough of us who were like the people who had been in almost the whole time. Like one of my colleagues and I, we were about to go to Frankfurt to the book fair, cuz we ran the publishing house. And we got on the plane at five in the morning. And as soon as the door shut, we looked at each other and said, we're in a cult. And we spent the whole time in Frankfurt crying and eating frankfurters and drinking big things of beer and looking for jobs. And meanwhile, the same thing [00:58:00] happened back home. Everybody just blew. It was just spontaneous.

Candice Schutter: Interesting.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So this idea that these people in leadership are saying, oh, we hear what people are saying and we're gonna talk about it. It could lead to an internal volcano. Um, it may not. You know, this is what happened in the Hari Krishnas where all the child abuse started coming out, that the children were sent to these baruculas, the schools in India, and there was horrific sexual and physical abuse. Years later, they filed a class action lawsuit against the Hari Krishnas. And it was a huge to do. And at that time, this Prabhupada was already dead. So they were like these 10 guys who were left in charge 10 or 12, and some of them said, we should expose this, and half of them said, no, we shouldn't. But it started a whole curfuffle. And I don't know where this word curfuffle comes from, but everybody's using it lately.

Candice Schutter: I like it.

I haven't used it, but I'm going to start.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, I know. [00:59:00] It's like, and so anyway, this huge curfuffle happened, and it exposed a lot and they did change some things. There were some dynamics were changed within the Hari Krishnas. It's still not the healthiest of organizations, but.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So some of these things do have kind of a ripple effect. But in most cases I'd say the cult leader's gonna clamp down and a couple people probably get expelled and things will carry on.

I, I would certainly never put all my hopes in that basket, you know?

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Yeah.

I I've made the decision not to become involved in that conversation.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: I've been invited into it, and I don't feel like that would serve me.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: I've and one of the things...

Janja Lalich, PhD: That's good self-care. Yay, yay.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Well, and, and I feel like that the centering of the leader and the organization is the problem.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: For me. And I'm done with that. I'm gonna pay attention to myself and connect with the people who, you know, wanna connect around our experience. Like you said, sharing, whether [01:00:00] it's with a frankfurter and a beer or whatever it is. Let's, you know, let's unpack this together and connect with people like you who are doing this work.

And, and I feel like that in some way the need to save the organization is really just another symptom of the indoctrination. Cuz I look at it now 16 years later and I'm like, it's just another mind body fitness practice, like whatever. It's not the end all be all. It's not this thing that we need to save because it's gonna save the world and oh my gosh, we have to make it work, right? I think that being invited to have those conversations, I just feel like, no, that's just not useful.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: For me. And I'm done with the self-sacrificing storyline.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: That I need to, you know, save everyone.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right.

Candice Schutter: From this internal monster that nobody's willing to really deal with.

Janja Lalich, PhD: I mean that, you know, we did the same, when we broke up, like I said, all of us were out and then these debates started. And we kind of scattered around the country and this was pre-internet. So we'd write these documents and make [01:01:00] copies and mail them all around it, and, this whole debate started about, well, was it worth it? Was any of it worth it?

And I, and I I've just been rereading my journals because I'm writing a memoir. And I written.

Candice Schutter: Oh, cool!

Janja Lalich, PhD: Journal. And I'm saying, no, it wasn't worth it goddamnit. And I don't wanna be part of these discussions. I don't have time for, I'm not gonna talk about was it worth it. It was, it hurt people. It hurt a lot of people very badly. And that's all that really matters, you know?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So that that's such a natural tendency to clinging to it, you know, to, to not let it go in a way. Yeah.

I wanted to make sure you know Laura Tucker.

Candice Schutter: The name is familiar. Remind me who she is.

Janja Lalich, PhD: She has a podcast called Free Your Inner Guru.

Candice Schutter: Yes. I watched her interview with you. Yeah. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Because she's, you know, she was a coach as well.

Candice Schutter: Yes.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And so I think you'd have a lot to connect.

Candice Schutter: I've been thinking of reaching out to her. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. I think you should. Let her know you talk to me and you know, we still follow each other on Instagram and stuff. She's terr-, I love her. She's one of my [01:02:00] favorite people.

Candice Schutter: Yeah, great. Yeah. I'll definitely reach out to her.

Janja Lalich, PhD: That's, I mean, I always remember her podcast because that was my famous line of, there are no gurus, you know?

Yes.

That's become my mantra.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. It's honestly, that's been so key for me. And even in the years since I've been out of the Org, you know, getting close to the like sort of, it's like a moth to a flame. I catch myself and then I'm like, what are you doing? Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: And, and really that's, my thing has been, nobody has spiritual authority.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right.

Candice Schutter: That lives inside of me. Like I've had to find that.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: And stay connected to that. And it's sometimes I have to reel myself back. There I go again. Right.

Mm-hmm.

Um, but one of the things I wanted to ask you was a question that I actually had from this small support group that myself and Tracy, who was featured on my podcast, we started for people who have left the Org that has been mind blowing, the stories that people are sharing in some ways, and maybe this is also common, not even realizing how [01:03:00] bad it was until you start hearing other people's stories. And I left 16 years ago and did a lot of work and yet remained silent the whole time.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Because of all the good that the organization does.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: On the fringe, right?

I know you've spoken a lot about you call them LGATs, the large group awareness trainings.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Our organization was, there were like belt levels, right? They'd be anywhere between 10 to 50 people, depending on the level. And it was a very specific kind of atmosphere. They were called intensives and they were most certainly intense.

And one of the women said that she had a lot of peak experiences in these environments and that even now, as she's woken up to these dynamics and wants nothing to do with the organization, she finds herself missing that high, you know, that altered state. And she's wondering along with many of us, like what to do with that misguided longing when you're steeped in new age wellness, and that becomes the norm. [01:04:00] Even the meditative practices, all the different things. And if maybe if you could explain a little bit what's happening there in terms of those high arousal, arousal experiences, and maybe if we understand a little bit more what's going on there can be a letting go of nostalgia around that.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Does that make sense? Yeah. What are your thoughts?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Have you ever dropped acid?

Candice Schutter: I haven't dropped acid. But I did get slipped something at a concert, and I was hallucinating and I went to the hospital and, yeah. So I've been in a very, very altered state before. Yes.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Okay.

So basically what happens in those intensives or in the, uh, darshans that Rajneesh used to do, and in the LGATs in these generally mass situations with a lot of input, a lot, maybe loud music, maybe drumming, maybe whatever, somebody talking endlessly, whatever the intensity is, people go into a kind of an altered state, a form of [01:05:00] trance and the high arousal part of it triggers brain reactions.

And it's basically your brain reactions that are setting off these, what you interpret as a peak experience. So for me, it would've been an LSD high, right? I saw The Beatles marching through my living room. I swore they were there. Right. I mean, nobody was gonna tell me The Beatles, Sergeant Pepper's band didn't walk through my living room. Right.

So it's the same thing it's that you attribute whatever happens to you in that state to whoever got you there. And so in these cases, it's the coaches who got you there, or it's Rajneesh who got you there. But they didn't get you there. It's your own bloody brain that got you there.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So those are actually your personal experiences that your brain set off and reacted to the intensity of all of the [01:06:00] things that were happening around you. Right.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And so they will be different for each person because every person's brain is different and what's packed in there with everything else and what traumas and whatever. So whatever these experiences feel like, whether it's, sometimes it's frightening. Sometimes it's a past life experience. Sometimes it's like a spiritual awakening. Sometimes somebody thinks they're Jesus and that's then they become a cult leader. Right.

But it's all of your own doing in a, in that sense. Yeah. It's, it's mechanistically, or physically your brain doing that. And it was set off by everything that was turned on around you.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right. So anybody can make that happen to you. Some people are better at putting together the logistics of that than others and creating a, an atmosphere of wonder and awe and being like super [01:07:00] cosmic, like Rajneesh with his funny little voice and, you know, sucking on his laughing gas and touching their foreheads and having people screaming and shaking.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And so, you know, or people are lying on the floor. In a lot of large group awareness trainings, people are like rolling on the floor or there's rebirthing there's, you know, whatever they wanna call it and whatever program it's essentially that same thing. It's getting you into an altered state. And it's really not anything special that they've done or that they can do. Um, it's just that they learn the technique and they're taking advantage of it and they're making fame and fortune off of it.

Candice Schutter: Right. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So, and that's why people go back. I mean, that's why they go back because they feel that. They feel high. And then in a few days it wears off. So they wanna go back and feel that again.

Candice Schutter: Exactly. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: That's all it is.

Candice Schutter: It's so addictive. In our, in our instance, it was euphoric dance. Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Okay. There you go.

Candice Schutter: Euphoric [01:08:00] dance practice. And, and in some ways, some of it was just physiological, like enough endorphins flowing through your body, you're gonna get loopy, right? And you just happen to be around a bunch of other people who are, which just heightens the experience.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. I mean, that's what Rajneeshi had them doing that, who meditation, where they would jump and go, who, who, who, for hours. People would go into seizures and stuff because it.

Candice Schutter: Wow.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Your body can't really take that, but.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You've got 500 people in a room doing that. You don't notice the one guy who's falling on the floor in an epileptic seizure.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Well, and there's a lot of talk in our group about just dissociative experiences, and how often we were dissociating. And that just became actually confused with a positive meditative altered state.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Exactly, exactly.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And all this false sense, you know, this false sense of power and ability. Like one of the LGATs got sued because their thing was to make you do your worst [01:09:00] fear, right? Like go and do your worst fear. And so there was a guy who couldn't swim and he decided he was gonna jump in the lake and swim.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And he drowned and he died. And his parents sued because he was manipulated into doing that. There's no way under any other circumstances, he would've jumped in the lake.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Uh, but they set out these false ideals, you know, and push people towards them. And that's where it can get really dangerous.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Yeah. Definitely in, in Dahnhak when I was involved in that we would do this practice called yeon dahn and we would stand in a room and they would put us in like a kind of intense yoga posture, like a really deep stance with our arms up high.

And they would play like this intense drumming music. And we were to hold the posture for 30 to 40 minutes. And the body would shake and sweat and, and they would walk through and say over and over again: my body is not me, but mine; my mind is not me, but mine. And it was this sort of breaking down.

Janja Lalich, PhD: [01:10:00] Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Like listening to those signals. And I didn't know of course where it was headed and I wasn't able to "manifest" the \$10,000 for the healer training. And I did eventually I transferred thankfully to a different center where their high pressure sales was a little more overt and transparent. And I just, I just finally said, no, I'm turning my back on this.

So I was so proud of myself. And then I turned right into another cult.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You and, you and millions of others.

Candice Schutter: Right? Yeah.

So, but when I left, years later I learned about a woman by the name of Julia Siverls who was involved with Dahnhak and did go through the program that I was thinking of going through. And she actually died on a hike on a trail in Sedona. A hike that they put, they had everyone go on this hike in July, in Sedona at nine in the morning with a backpack full of rocks.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Oh my God.

Candice Schutter: And very minimal water. And she, of course, this mind over matter thing.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: That, I mean, [01:11:00] that could have been me. I mean, I was on the track of overriding. I would hold the posture for 35 minutes, Janja. Like, my body would be screaming at me, and I would do it.

And I thought it was connecting me to my true self.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right, right.

Candice Schutter: Right.

And I'm interested you speak about in the, in the book. I can't remember if it's Take Back Your Life or Escaping Utopia, which I also love. You talk about what is the word you say? Doubling.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Oh, doubling. Yeah. That's a, that's a term that I don't know if that came from Lifton. I don't remember. Um, basically it's this idea that you kind of have your real self and your cult self. Not in the sense of, you know, what we used to think of as split personalities, but.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: There is the persona who is trained in the ways of the cult. Who can and will do things that the other you never would've done or wouldn't even try to do or couldn't do. Right.

And that's kind of the [01:12:00] clash. That's, I think that's part of the cognitive dissonance that goes on with people. Because I mean, you've probably heard me say this. My, my feeling is that everybody has doubts. Even, I mean, I was way up there.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And I had doubts.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Same.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And, and everybody has doubts. But you can't express them. And once you're indoctrinated enough, you berate yourself for having those doubts, right.

Candice Schutter: A hundred percent. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: But the doubts don't go completely away. They go and they sit on a shelf in the back of your head, right. This is my shelf metaphor.

Candice Schutter: I love this. Keep going.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

And then when enough things happen that get loaded on that shelf, right. At some point that shelf breaks. And that's the cognitive dissonance. It's that the reality your living in doesn't match the reality of the real world or the reality that you know is different.

And so it creates this very uncomfortable mental [01:13:00] conflict really. It's an uncomfortable space. And some people will consistently choose for their belief system. They can't let go of their belief system. Right. And, and that's what Festinger talked about. He's the guy who kind of conceptualized cognitive dissonance with this UFO cult that he studied.

But you know, the, the little shelf breaking kind of lets you know, there's something not right here.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And you may not think it's a cult. You may not escape at that moment, but it gets the wheels turning. It just opens up something a crack that you start to entertain the idea that maybe this isn't healthy for me.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Maybe you need to check out other things. Maybe I need to. And then that, that dilemma has to work itself out, which can happen in different ways. And can take a long time or a short time depending on the person's experience and the situation they're in and all of that.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: But, so I think we do, [01:14:00] we do have these different aspects of our personality. I mean, I know when I got out of my cult, I was like, how in the hell did I become that person?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So it's not that I didn't know who I was in a sense bef I mean, I certainly knew that I had been changed, but I was like, how did I get changed to that degree? And where did that come from? And was that in me? Or did they create, you know, was that like a recipe they put together and.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You know, that was all the stuff I had to figure out. And in part I did that by calling old friends and relatives and was like, who was I before? And what was I like as a kid? You know, what was I like as your college roommate? You know, just to like do these different reality checks.

Candice Schutter: That's great. Yeah. That's a great tool. I love that.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So, this stuff is so complex.

Candice Schutter: It is. And I, you know, I feel like I've been kicking against this spiritual persona for two decades now, I'm like, who [01:15:00] am I if I'm not all the things I was taught to be that that make me the ideal superhuman.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Oh dear.

Candice Schutter: No. Now granted, I didn't think of it that way at all. It was my insecurity that I, in some ways I feel like the circles I got pulled into really preyed on the fact that I already felt that I was deficient and that I wasn't enough.

And so if they can give me the formula to fix that and I can continually be fighting against myself, who's not enough, to be all those things. And, and it is, it is. I mean, that, that doubling thing really spoke to me. And I feel like only in recent years, am I even landing back into myself and, and even catching myself when that kicks in.

It's almost like a, well, it's like a socialized thing. It's like this reflex to be, and it's beyond the cult experience, right? It's the good girl. It's the patriarchy, it's all the things, right. It's like, I mean, we're just [01:16:00] kicking against the current in a lot of ways, but I definitely resonated with that sense of doubling and feeling that, that division and, and finding integration again, has been, been such a process.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And the, and the integration isn't gonna be who you were back then.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You know, I wasn't gonna go back to be the person I was when I was 30. Right.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: I was now 41. And I was probably 45 or six by the time I actually felt I knew who I was.

Candice Schutter: Right. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And so who I was was a combination of all of that. But it's not, recovery isn't going back to who you were before, because you've experienced too much and you've learned too much.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And that's part of the, if we wanna think there's a positive of these experiences, it's that we, most of us are now so aware of how these things work.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And we're able to spot them quicker. We're able to help educate [01:17:00] others and help others from prevent them from getting involved in situations like that. You know? So the, the quote, the blessing, although I hate using words like that, but the blessing I guess is, you know, having this now human experience of one of the worst things and being able to survive it and do something with it.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

I mean, in many ways I would say that my sense of self is stronger than it would've been otherwise. I mean, this is impossible to know, but having to really return and reclaim my inner authority has been so profound, it's almost like, and again, I, I'm not saying everything happens for a reason. I hate that shit. But like, this whole idea of, of sometimes we it's like that pendulum, right. It's like sometimes we have to swing on that pendulum to find the center. And I feel like that's what this has been for me in a lot of ways. Yeah, for sure.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Not that I would do it again.

Candice Schutter: [01:18:00] Yeah. Me neither. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Definitely not. Right. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: I did take many years and now I'm self expressing about these experiences. And really for me, it was more of a creative than educational project. It was more just, I need to bring what I now know from the inside out. And it just happens to be that I have a podcast and I get to share it with other people.

And one of the questions that's come to me as we're in this circle of, of sharing our experiences, obviously there's a great benefit in expressing and telling our stories. Right. That's pretty key.

Is there like a point at which that's no longer helpful? In terms of, of our healing journey, like we're taking back our life, but are we spinning the story so much that we actually need to learn to separate from it? Is that like kind of where therapy comes in or like, what are your thoughts around [01:19:00] that?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, I think it's different for each person. I think, people find it helpful, especially at the beginning of their awakening moment or whatever we wanna call it. Right. That they, I think they find it helpful to talk about it, to find people who understand what they're talking about.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You know, maybe support groups or whatever we wanna call them, or reading stuff, reading other people's stories.

And I mean, I see recovery as sort of a roller coaster where you're gonna go through periods where that's all you wanna do and think about it. And then there are gonna be times it's like, I don't wanna even hear the word cult anymore. And I just wanna like, you know, go to Water World or whatever people do.

I just wanna be life, you know?

Candice Schutter: Right. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, so I think that there's kind of that up and down and I think, you know, it's gonna, it's different for every person. I think for some people they're gonna speak out for a while and then that was enough and they'll go off and [01:20:00] do their life and maybe never talk about it again, at least publicly.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, you know, whereas other people might end up doing it for a few years or. I mean, I, I don't know that I intentionally did it this way, but obviously this is what I did, you know, it's like.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: I mean, I certainly had years when I did less of this, but it was always some part of what I was doing.

Either writing a book or giving talks or whatever, teaching it in my classes. When I was teaching, I couldn't do as much cuz we had such a high teaching load, but I still that's when I wrote Escaping Utopia, that was my, one of my research projects. So, you know, I, I think it's different for everybody and I think some people don't ever wanna speak out and that's okay.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: There's no obligation. You know, that's something that comes up all the time in our classes is like people, you know, they go to work and people wanna know, well, what did you do for the last 10 years? And it's like, how do you talk [01:21:00] about that? Do you start talking about it? And then you start flooding and it's like, well, you tell the whole story and everybody looks at you like, they're [inaudible] or you just shut up and then you act like a weirdo and, you know.

Candice Schutter: Uhhuh.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So like everybody has to sort through that, and you know, we always suggest do a lot of practice runs. If you know, you're gonna be a social situation practice what you're gonna say when you get asked that question.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Especially in the beginning, it can be so awkward and triggering, right? So it's almost better to not say anything. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, yeah. But then if you don't say anything, anything, then it's like, you're like this silent person, you know?

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: I just, now, when people ask about like a certain band or something, I just say, you know, that was my blackout period. I don't know about anything between, you know, 75 and 85, you know?

Candice Schutter: Yeah, yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So, yeah. Um, yeah.

Candice Schutter: So I'll just have two more questions.

The first is really around your bounded choice framework.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm.

Candice Schutter: Which I think is so beautiful. [01:22:00] And before I even dove into the book, just those two words, bounded choice. Because in the environments I was in, and I wanna ask you this question, because I know there's potentially for sure gonna be some people listening to this who are still involved in the organization that I speak of and are maybe in some ways mentally out, but physically in, you know, sort of on that fringe.

And it just was so helpful to me to understand, because I was in an environment, there was so much talk about personal power and choice. It was like literally the focus of one of the whole levels of training.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right.

Candice Schutter: We were continually told how to express our personal power and that we had choice and that it was our job to sort of stand up and speak our truth when, when necessary. But the framework itself didn't support that. And this idea of bounded choice is really interesting to me. And I'm wondering if you could speak to it a little bit, like.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Okay.

Candice Schutter: I know it's a big, it's a big framework. I know there's four aspects to it.

So there's the charismatic authority, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: The transcendent belief system.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Systems of [01:23:00] control.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: And systems of influence, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right.

Candice Schutter: So we'll let people read all about all that in your book. I don't expect you to, to break all that down. And the idea that we have choice, but we don't have choice. That's kind of what I would love for you to just speak to for a moment.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So, so for me, what bounded choice is it's a state of mind that you get to when you have more or less internalized all of the indoctrination, right? So that you, you, in a sense are like a little microcosm of the cult. So at that point, in your mind, you cannot imagine life outside of the context of that group, because life outside the group means death either literal or figurative. Right?

So for some cults, it really, you know, people are threatened with death or their family's gonna be killed or whatever, right? There's like horrible [01:24:00] paranoia implanted into people. But it could also be figurative, you know, in, in the sense that you're gonna lose your chance on that self path to salvation or whatever it is. Right. So you cannot imagine life outside the group. You're so deep into it and it is so much a part of you.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Once you get to that place, you have choices, but the choices you make are determined by the will of the leader and the will of the group. So that you have choices like, inconsequential things. Now, depending on the cult, it might be where you live or the car you buy or the food you eat or the, you know, whatever, you can certainly decide that. But big decisions, like, am I gonna talk back to the leader or am I gonna challenge this issue? Or am I gonna speak up about that? Or am I gonna think about leaving? You cannot entertain those ideas. Those are choices you don't get [01:25:00] to make. Right.

So at that point, your will is completely altered by the will of the group. And so yes, you have free will of a sort about certain things, but about other things you really don't.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, cause you are so indoctrinated into it at that point. And so, so much of a believer and a devotee of whoever that leader is. So that that's kind of what bounded choice is in a nutshell.

And I, and I wrote that book, it was my dissertation in grad school. And my question was, why do people in cults do things that those of us on the outside find incomprehensible?

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So it was to kind of explain that question. Why did the people in Heaven's Gate take their own lives, right? Why do mothers give away their children? Why do whatever, whatever, whatever.

Candice Schutter: Right, right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Why do we do the [01:26:00] things we're asked to do when never in our lives, we would've done those things. Right?

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So to try to answer that question. And it's because we're, we're psychologically trapped.

Candice Schutter: Mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And emotionally, of course.

Yeah. Hundred percent. Yeah.

Candice Schutter: It's, it's so helpful to hear you explain the framework and when I first heard it, I think I heard, I'd heard somebody reference you and say those words. I actually thought of it in terms initially as, oh, like if I leave, I lose everything.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Mm-hmm.

Candice Schutter: Like, I'm bounded in that sense. If I leave, I no longer, and this is how it was like, I no longer have a community. I no longer have a job. I no longer have a spiritual practice. I no longer have like all of those things, but that framework is what's created that reality, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Right.

Candice Schutter: So it's, it's just another way of looking at it.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. And that's exactly what it is. Yeah. Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Okay. So I did understand it. Good.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You're living, yeah. You're living in a bounded reality.

Candice Schutter: Yes. Yes. One-hundred percent that.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So that's [01:27:00] the, what I call the self-sealing system. Everything's closed in, on itself.

Candice Schutter: Uhhuh.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And then you are closed in on yourself.

Candice Schutter: And that, I can't remember maybe you know, triple isolation. Somebody spoke about triple isolation. I was reading and they said, you're isolated from, you're isolated from the outside world. You're isolated from people within the group, cuz you can't complain or talk about anything, and you're isolated from yourself.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: And that just ding, ding, ding. Ran all three for sure. And, and seeing that even now, like there's a couple of people in this group that I worked with 16 years ago and they're sharing things that I had no idea occurred in their reality. And they probably heard my story and felt the same way. And we were close friends.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Wow.

Candice Schutter: And I had no idea. And they had no idea. Right. We were taught not to communicate.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Exactly. Well, exactly.

Candice Schutter: With each other. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: It's the same thing. I mean, in our group, spouses, whoever, I mean, you didn't know where somebody else worked. You didn't know what they did. You didn't. [01:28:00]

Candice Schutter: Oh, wow.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So relationships were just bullshit, you know, they were based on nothing real.

Candice Schutter: Right. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: And that's why I think that happens a lot when people leave a cult, a lot of couples, especially if they met in the cult, end up getting divorced when they leave, because those really weren't real relationships.

Candice Schutter: Right.

Janja Lalich, PhD: In many ways.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. I could see that. Yeah.

So what can we do to make this type of education more mainstream? Like what.

Janja Lalich, PhD: That's the million dollar question.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, well, I'm starting a nonprofit and hopefully that can be one of our programs.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Well, if there's anything I can do to support and help I would be more than happy to because it just feels so important.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: I'm actually revising and updating Take Back Your Life.

Yeah. It'll have a lot of new stories in it, personal accounts and [01:29:00] updating the stuff on complex PTSD cuz when the book was written, no one was even talking about complex PTSD.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: So, um, that's pretty exciting and yeah, just a lot going on.

Candice Schutter: And you're writing a memoir.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah. That's in the back, in the back burner. I'm trying to write a memoir in the middle of all this before I die.

Candice Schutter: mm-hmm.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Um, but anyway, if people, you know, my website, janjalalich.com we, it will always have announcements about the new nonprofit, which will eventually have its own website, but.

Candice Schutter: Uhhuh. And cultresearch.org is another way to get to you.

Janja Lalich, PhD: It's the same thing. Yeah. That's same, same website. Yeah.

Candice Schutter: It's easier so people don't misspell your name, right?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah, exactly.

Candice Schutter: I know how that goes. I have the same thing.

Janja Lalich, PhD: It's not an easy name, I know.

Candice Schutter: That's so great. Well, Take Back Your Life and Escaping Utopia, the two books that, that I've read and highly recommend, and I'll stand up from my couch cushion and applaud for those few seconds you're in The Vow. I was like, [01:30:00] hoping you were gonna be, you know, they were gonna feature a lot of your expertise in it, but I'll still watch, although not as excitedly.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Tell them that.

Candice Schutter: I would love to. Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: I'll be in plenty of other documentaries. Believe me. I'm actually have a crew coming here tomorrow to do one. So.

Candice Schutter: Oh really? You are just,

Janja Lalich, PhD: There, there'll be one coming out about Larry Ray and the, uh, Sarah Lawrence cult. I'll be in that one, but that, you know, it usually takes a year.

Candice Schutter: So who knows how long?

Janja Lalich, PhD: Yeah.

Candice Schutter: Yeah.

Janja Lalich, PhD: They just come out whenever they come out. So.

Candice Schutter: Yeah. Yeah. Great.

Well, it's been just such a pleasure to talk to you. And if there's anything, any way you need people to be involved, to spread the word about something, just let me know. I'd love to stay in touch with you and.

Thank you so much.

Janja Lalich, PhD: This was wonderful. Yeah. Thanks, Candice. Glad we finally made it work.

Candice Schutter: I know we did it.

Janja Lalich, PhD: Okay.

Candice Schutter: Take Care.

Janja Lalich, PhD: You, too. Caio.

Candice Schutter: [01:31:00] Uh, what a rare treat, to have the opportunity to sit down with someone whose work has been a key to a door you didn't even know was there. Huge, massive thanks to Janja for spending so much time with me and with us. And for her willingness to be so brave with her work and her own personal story.

Now I happen to agree with Janja, that sharing our honest stories is a form of activism. Especially when telling the whole truth means challenging cultural norms that condition us toward conformity, siloing us from one another and tethering us to lofty promises that deny the complexity of our human experience.

The reality is we all get lost in groupthink from time to time. Whether it happens in a spiritual or self-help community, in the race to the top of a workplace hierarchy, or in the thrall of an all-consuming love affair. These dynamics can be a bit blind siding.

And when we come to on the other side of an experience, we often wonder what [01:32:00] on earth came over us. It is in this moment when our real work begins. Sometimes it's not enough to know what happened to us. We must also understand the why and the how of it. We must take time to learn from our experiences. To go deeper than the drama, to understand mechanisms of influence.

Which is why I encourage you to pick up one or more of Dr. Janja's books. I have earmarked and highlighted the hell out of my own copy of *Take Back Your Life*. And I also really enjoy the audio version, which is read by NXIVM survivor and brave as fuck whistleblower, Sarah Edmondson.

If you aren't familiar with Sarah, she's featured in the HBO docu-series *The Vow*, which Janja and I referenced in our chat. The second season of *The Vow* is set to release on October 17th.

I cannot express the debt of gratitude I feel toward people who are doing work in this arena. Dr. Janja Lalich, Sarah Edmondson, Nippy Ames, my hopefully new friend, Laura Tucker, and so many others who are bravely working to [01:33:00] raise awareness and provide psychoeducation to those of us who need it most. Which side note I happen to believe is all of us.

I'm gonna keep saying it, culty culture is every damn where. So we're gonna keep unpacking how easy it is to lose ourselves in the social pressures all around us.

And on that note, in an act of extreme self care, I've decided to trust my own honest rhythms and take a longer break before I continue on with the series.

So I'll see you in the late fall and as always, thank you so much for tuning in. Keep on trusting your gut and moving toward what moves you.

Caio.