

Candice Schutter: [00:00:00] Hi, I'm Candice Schutter. Welcome back to The Deeper Pulse and the 'cult'ure series reboot. I'm back after a longer than ever break. And to kick things off, I'm coming to you solo.

Okay, so first things first, I wanna thank all of you who've continued to listen and share the podcast, particularly over this past two, almost three months while I've been on break. The 'cult'ure series has received a record number of downloads, and it's kind of blowing my mind in the best possible way. I'm genuinely grateful for the privilege of your attention, and I have been particularly moved by those of you who have taken the time to write to me, to reach out via [00:01:00] email and dms. Your support means more than you can know.

Truth be told, I was a little bit nervous taking off so much time while the interest in the podcast was at an all time high.

But having said that, stepping into this culty crucible of truth has been a lot. And after the past few weeks of much needed integration, which has included some downtime, extra money spent on therapy sessions, and of course more research, I'm finally feeling ready to poke a bit at the embers that I left smoldering back in September.

But before I do, I have a quick announcement.

Given the recent growth in listenership, a growing need to cover overhead costs, and the fact that I have way more content ideas than I can squeeze into these weekly podcast episodes, I've decided to do a whole other thing over on Patreon.

Patreon is a platform built for makers like me, and it will allow me to roll out some extra content [00:02:00] in addition to regular episodes, which will of course keep on dropping right here. I've already created some eBooks, videos, and Patreon exclusive conversations that I'm pretty excited to share with you.

Now, typically, patreon is a tiered membership portal where the more you pay, the more you get. But as you may know, I'm not really all that into capitalist cult norms these days. So I'm attempting to do things differently. Over on The Deeper Pulse Patreon page, there will be no hierarchies when it comes to access.

Now, it's true the bonus content is behind a paywall, but that's actually a good thing because it enables me to better monitor engagement and keep the community safe from trolls, voyeurs, and the like. So membership, if you even wanna call it that, starts at \$1 a month, because that's as low as they'll let me go, and then it goes up from there. But only if you want it to.

As a patron of the podcast, you contribute what feels best to you, and then all the extras are yours to stream. There's no hidden [00:03:00] agenda. No bait and switch down the road. And there are no culty strings attached. Come and go as you please. Easy peasy.

Now, you may already know that this podcast is independently produced, which is really just a fancy way of saying that I do all the production myself. I'm incredibly privileged to be able

to do it this way, and I wanna keep doing it. Patreon subscription fees will help me to keep the podcast authentic and ad free.

So if you're interested in extras and in supporting the podcast, head on over there and check it out. If you sign up, you'll get a behind the scenes peak at my home studio, and keep in mind, the word studio is very much in air quotes, an ebook download (Intro to the Seven Keys) and the first of many bonus episodes in a new Patreon exclusive series that we're calling *Deconstructing Dogma*. My brave and articulate friend, Tracy Stamper, has agreed to join me again, and she and I are sorting through our new age wellness indoctrination, separating what's helpful from the royally effed up bits and pieces that were so [00:04:00] commonly misused against us.

It's all over there for you if you want it. And if you'd rather just continue listening here from week to week, I'm good with that too. You can feel it out over at patreon.com/thedeeperpulse.

Or not. Whatever.

Have I mentioned how much I love marketing?

Ugh, I'm glad we got through that bit of awkwardness.

Okay, now onward.

It's a bit hard to believe that it's been nearly three months since I last released an episode of the podcast. When I started up this series, I wasn't really sure what to expect, and it was and is uncharted territory for me. I'm really learning as I go here.

The 'cult'ure series has required me to go a number of places, emotionally speaking, that I have been avoiding for quite a while now, and it's led to some pretty radical shifts in my public and private life. It's been a wild ride, and I wouldn't change a thing.

Blowing the whistle on 'the Org', as I call it, the mind-body fitness company, where I [00:05:00] worked in the inner circle for a number of years, this was, as they say, a BFD, big fucking deal. Circle back to episode 33, if you missed that story.

And yet it's been such a profound relief to be free of the secrecy of that story and a rather pleasant surprise that there hasn't been any nasty backlash. Nada, zilch, not so much as a snide comment on Facebook.

It could be because people are steering clear of the drama or because they're unable to make a viable case in favor of those who are leading the company after so many years of dysfunction. But I suspect that it's also, at least in part, because of our choice to use aliases. Had the flying monkeys come swinging through the branches to defend the honor of Seth, Marissa, or Raul, all fictitious names if you'll remember, they would've immediately outed the company. And no one wants to be the one to do that, myself included, at least for now.

Now, I'm also quite aware that having said [00:06:00] that, the Earth could shift beneath my feet at any moment, that the leaders of the Org could decide to attack me, Tracy, or any one of us who would dare to speak openly. But as of this recording, feedback on the series has been pretty much only positive. And I share this with you, not as a humble brag, but to explain my recent absence.

When the podcast really started taking off, so did my nervous system. I started to feel a familiar buzz, a mixture of fear and excitement, an anxious swell that I know from past experience can get me into a little bit of trouble. It's pretty easy for me to get lost in the whole need-to-prove-my-worth song and dance and by get lost, I mean lose touch with myself.

Both criticism and praise can pull me right on up and outta my body, ungrounding me emotionally. I can easily be altered by too much attention, of any sort, and then I end up operating in this sort of socially induced trance where I'm doing all the things, all the damn time, all to keep up appearances.

I used to [00:07:00] reframe this positively calling it my Type A personality, but now it sort of feels more like a neurotic and not altogether healthy sort of ambition, where my to-do list tackling overachieving, performative self steps in and kicks me to the curb. And when that happens, more often than not, the thing I started doing for the love of it becomes a dogged obsession. A hey-look-at-me capitalist enterprise, where my inner critic is the CEO, and I'm continually looking around to see if anyone notices just how goddamn much I am crushing it.

Now, I wish that I wasn't so prone to this obsessive workaholism and that I didn't care so much about keeping up appearances. But hey, I'm just laying out the cold hard truth of it for you. I easily get lost in the fog of productivity. I become a sort of automated version of the best parts of me. The ideal self takes over and in that way, I'm a solitary member of my own cult of one, so to speak, with an internalized autocrat that is pushing me to work overtime, [00:08:00] even though I'm feeling exhausted and insecure and more than a little bit delusional. I've done this to myself more times than I can count. And this time I am proud to say that when I felt the impulse threaten to kick in, I put the brakes on. All the way on.

I stopped work on the podcast entirely because I made a promise to myself three years ago that when I catch myself getting lost in that hustle, when I start to feel anxious and frantic about the thing that I'm doing, making or sharing, I will no longer power forward. I'm gonna give myself permission to take a break for a while and come back to what I'm doing once I've landed back in a place where I've got nothing to prove. And in my world, honoring that commitment is another BFD.

Now that I can finally say it out loud, I am in cult recovery, I finally understand that I'm not just in recovery from this group or that group, but from the normalized mechanisms of self denial and self-control that I have been imitating since childhood.

So that's where I've been cooling my jets, unraveling [00:09:00] neuroticism, and getting back in touch with why I started this project in the first place.

And while I was on break, I was introduced to the work of Tricia Hersey, who writes:

"The truth that we may be afraid or unsure of how and when we will rest is valid. It can be overwhelming to go against the dominant culture's desires and plans. We've been taught to hustle, fake it till we make, ignore our body's cues for rest, all because our systems have been created to ignore and push the laborers and the workers as hard as possible to increase profit. Grind culture thrives on us remaining in our heads, unable to allow the technology of our divine bodies to soar and develop. There is massive knowledge and wisdom lying dormant in our exhausted and weary bodies and hearts. I believe the dreaming part of our unraveling will be the most challenging because it goes against all we have been socialized to maintain, the pace and disconnection of grind culture."

Grind culture. Boy does that [00:10:00] resonate. And this dreaming part that Tricia points to, the space of the imagination, where we are able to deconstruct and even reconstruct a healthier alternative.

Hersey's book is called, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto*, and it is remarkably insightful and timely. She is one of many Black female activists who have long been shouting at us from the margins, giving language to the way in which we are all entranced by capitalism, white supremacy, and grind culture. The way we are all, for lack of a better word, cult survivors.

Haven't we all been indoctrinated into ways of thinking and behaving that are reflexive and zombie-like, marching us forward in service to profits and power over paradigms that continually separate us from ourselves, each other, and the planet?

Tricia Hersey is often referred to as the Nap Minister. What a glorious job title. And I discovered her work just as I was struggling with the question of whether or not it was okay to take this [00:11:00] most recent break.

It was pretty much a done deal when I heard her speak, particularly when she mentioned her refusal to donate her body to capitalism. She writes: "Rest in its simplest form becomes an act of resistance and a reclaiming of power because it disrupts and pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy."

Now, if that isn't some cult defiant truth telling, I'm not sure what is.

Taking time to listen and learn from social justice activists has really opened my eyes to what we're actually up against when we really start digging down toward the roots of culty culture.

A couple of months ago, right when the podcast really started taking off, I sat down for a phone call with a couple of cult survivor celebrities. The phone call was lightning fast. I was mid-sentence when it ended abruptly due to an urgent and unforeseeable interruption. I had to hang up from [00:12:00] the call before I had even been able to rest down. I recall how nervous I was and the way that my voice had sounded foreign even to my own ears. I was just gearing up to sell them on potentially being guests on the podcast and then just like that, the call was over. And I hung up the phone feeling pretty certain that I had missed out on my one and only opportunity to impress them.

But a few minutes later, I received a text. "So sorry, count us in for your pod," It said.

I stared down at the words on the screen and waited for the excitement to kick in, but it was already too late. My nervous system was flooded. I wanted to celebrate the yes, but I was too preoccupied by the fact that such a short interaction had led to so much self-doubt and insecurity. I mean, here I was a 47 year old woman reminding others of the dangers of surrendering agency to influence. And yet all I'd been thinking about for the past two hours was, "oh, dear God, I hope these people like me."

It's kind of funny when you think about it, a [00:13:00] cult survivor tripping out on whether or not some other more socially recognizable cult survivors were gonna let me into their club.

I mean, I can't make this stuff up, y'all. The truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

And I wanna be clear about something. There was nothing even remotely threatening or intimidating about these two humans. They'd been super generous with their time, had agreed to talk to me based on a heartfelt Insta message I'd sent to one of them, a message I'd only sent in the first place because I sensed their authenticity and groundedness.

But you see, none of that mattered because in the social order of things, they had influence, and that was enough to send my nervous system into a frenzy.

In an earlier episode, I spoke a bit about fawning, counterpart to fight, flight, and freeze. Fawning is like all of the above, a reflexive response to stress and or the perception of a real or imagined threat. And it's particularly common in folks like me who were raised in homes that were physically or emotionally unsafe in some [00:14:00] way.

Fawning is a developmental survival strategy, a need to feel safe, or a need to be liked flooding of the nervous system that leads to compliance, people pleasing, and a disconnection from self.

Now, personally speaking, I don't need to feel immediately threatened in order to fawn. Admiration is enough to trigger this people pleasing mechanism in me. A deeper part of me sort of goes offline. It's as if a younger self who is desperate to be liked, loved or chosen, takes full possession. And in an instant, chameleonlike, I become a socially altered version of myself.

Oftentimes, I'll wake up from this trance, minutes, hours, sometimes even days later, wondering what in the hell came over me.

Guru. Intellectual influencer. A sexy new crush. Any sort of attraction, social proof, or even certain styles of relating can trigger me to fawn, and I just sort of fall asleep at the wheel, quite literally [00:15:00] losing access to my own beliefs, feelings, and perceptions.

Now, of course, in this most recent instance, it was very short lived and it had all worked out okay. I somehow managed to land the interview despite my awkwardness and the cotton mouth I felt during that phone call.

But despite the positive outcome, I didn't, I couldn't celebrate. I hung up from the call knowing that I had work to do. I needed to examine my susceptibility to influence more critically than ever.

You might be nothing like me. Maybe you've never worked in the inner circle of a mind body wellness cult, and maybe you don't feel seen the way that I do when watching The Vow.

Even so, if I do my job well here, the 'cult'ure series might still speak to you. As I've said before, this project isn't solely about this cult and that cult, narcissist versus empath survivors and their healing stories... it's about all of us and the invisible influences, both internal and [00:16:00] external, that continually shape our everyday social interactions. As well as the ways we are collectively under the influence, and how this contributes to denial and a sense of powerlessness when it comes to the big stuff.

As I said earlier, we are all, every damn one of us, cult survivors. The capital C cults of the patriarchy, white supremacy, and toxic capitalism. It's the trifecta of social control and whether we like it or not, whether we wanna admit to it or not, we are all in some ways under the influence of these internalized systems of oppression.

Culty culture looks like gender policing and the legislation of bodies, widespread addiction, workaholicism and material over indulge. It shows up in far right extremism through QAnon, the cult of gun ownership, and hate crimes against marginalized individuals. And it's just as evident on the far left via cancel culture, magical thinking, [00:17:00] anti-vax conspiracy theories, and purity obsessed wellness culture.

All of these are fruits borne of the same root rotting tree.

But when we think only in terms of culty extremism, far this and far that, we kind of sort of miss the point, because distancing ourselves from a systemic mindset only makes us more blindly allegiant to it.

When it comes to collective cult recovery, we've gotta start with the first step. Admitting that there is a problem. Not just for those guys over there, but for all of us right here, right under our upturn noses. Tribalism is very often normalized in our families, communities, and in terms of how, when and if we actively give a shit about how people outside of our chosen in group are seeing and experiencing the world.

Cult recovery requires we humble ourselves and admit that oppressive ideologies are likely operating in almost every group we're a part [00:18:00] of. It is when we fail to cop to this and notice this fact that our denial can and will be exploited, by savvy marketers and political opportunists, and by people just like us who are genuine in their desire to do the right thing.

Now, I wanna be super clear here. I don't have one damn bit of this all figured out. I'm still flying blindly most days.

Case in point, back in August, just a couple weeks after baring my soul to the ethers, I was walking on a trail near my house, listening to another pre-recorded convo, doing some final edits.

Side note, I do some of my best editorial work while meandering through the desert.

Anywho, listening back to the recording, I heard myself say something that made me stop dead in my tracks. I honestly don't even remember what it was. All I know is that it was so kind of sorta obvious that it landed like a face palm to my forehead. I remember laughing and saying out loud, "Dear God, you've gotta be fucking kidding me. Have I gone and done it again?"

[00:19:00] Now, before I tell you what it is, I wanna give you a little backstory.

In 2019, after a decade long hiatus from such things, I decided to join an online spiritual community.

Now, of course, I had some reservations around it all, but I just chalked that up to being gun shy given past experiences, and I entered in feeling mostly hopeful and only a little bit hesitant.

For the most part, it was a very positive experience so when about a year into it, I was invited to join the group's inner circle, it kind of felt like a no-brainer. Which by the way, that phrase in and of itself might be a little bit of a red flag.

But all kidding aside, I said yes because I'd met so many great women in the community and we all seem to be benefiting from the work.

Now, one thing that I conveniently overlooked from the get go was that all of this was happening during a really vulnerable time in my life, when I was without a job and a home and a clear vision, and during the onset of a global pandemic when my primary relationship was on the rocks and I was [00:20:00] aching for the promise of a sure thing.

Joining the group's inner circle required a buy-in investment. But this didn't really discourage me given what I imagined would be the eventual payoff. And I genuinely loved and admired all the women involved. It didn't really seem to resemble any other group I'd been a part of. It felt clean, collaborative, inclusive, mission oriented. Everything was on the up and up.

And you know what? All of that is still true. If you're waiting for some uber-culty plot twist here, you're gonna be disappointed, because in this instance, the culture shift away from the group and toward myself was much more subtle.

If it sounds like I'm being a little vague, I am, purposefully. The separation is very fresh and I'm not feeling quite ready, or even at liberty, to share the details. Let's just say that the larger vision began to evolve in ways that I personally didn't vibe with. The point is that right or wrong, my life started to move in a direction that was not [00:21:00] only different from, but in many ways, contrary to the mission I'd signed on for.

Now, the trouble was, and this is what makes the story a little cultish, I had gone all in. I had made a lifetime commitment Yeah. Lifetime. Kind of makes me cringe even saying it.

And to be honest, it seems a little crazy to me now that I would even say yes to such a thing, given how little I knew going in, and in light of my seemingly hardware tendency to reinvent myself every few years.

But at the time when I was invited, I was super into the work and I was just so flattered that I had been chosen. Yep, there it is again, chosen. And I desperately wanted to be part of a lasting legacy, even if it meant making ideal promises to a vision, that looking back was never really mine in the first place.

So yeah, when I was walking on the trail and I heard [00:22:00] myself saying things that I most of all needed to hear myself, I had to laugh somewhat maniacally. This again, really? I have to extricate myself from another community in the middle of *this* series.

Oh. What can I say? We teach what we need to learn.

In that moment, it was clear as day I needed to step away.

This was a very painful realization, not only because it was humble pie, but because I fucking hate breakups.

And I knew that leaving with my integrity intact meant challenging the larger narrative, disappointing people I cared about and damn it to hell, speaking some difficult truths that I'd been afraid to admit out loud.

Later that week, I exited the group. Fortunately in this instance, my choice to leave was immediately honored. My message was received with kindness and grace, and every single dime of my financial investment was immediately returned to me. I cannot stress enough how deeply healing this [00:23:00] was.

And it doesn't discount from that in any way to admit that there were some things about the inner workings that concerned me. I'm not gonna speak to those particulars because, well it's nobody's business, and also because there was really nothing, all that unusual going on there. Like most groups in service to a larger mission, its cultic influences were subtle, well intentioned, and a bit subversive.

And as it so often goes in communities where there's an agreed upon spiritual framework, there wasn't a lot of room to step outside of that. And when I did, I was discouraged. It felt to me as if I was being asked to override my authentic impulses, which are to examine and think critically about things.

At any rate, I learned a lot about the power of belief and the ways that spiritual, psychological, or political ideology results in a sort of cult mindset, where despite good intentions, we are unconsciously imposing our way of life on [00:24:00] others.

And please understand when I say imposing, I'm not talking about strong arm persuasion or coercion with malicious intent. Not at all. I'm speaking about something else. Something much, much more subtle.

When I was a little girl, I really hated cow's milk. But my mom, she loved the stuff. The creamier the better. And she'd been brought up learning about the food pyramid, had been persuaded by the dairy industry's clever Milk It Does A Body Good marketing shtick that drinking milk was absolutely essential to healthy development.

And so, she devised a clever strategy to get me to drink more of it.

Savvy at ceramics, she made me my own special cup. It was dark blue, and she'd painted my name and all caps along one side. Inside the cup at the very bottom sat a [00:25:00] tiny green ceramic frog. She'd carefully colored in its features with painstaking detail before baking it right into the bottom and adding a glazed finish.

My Frog Cup, as we called it, was reserved primarily for my daily dose of milk. She'd fill it up and pass it to me, reminding me to hold on with both hands, she'd say, "Ok now drink until you see the froggy!"

And with eyes crossed, staring down into the cup, I'd chug-a-lug to the bottom just to get a peek at him. It worked like a charm.

Now I'm not really one for sentimentality or nostalgia, but after countless moves and a never-ending obsession with decluttering, I still have my very special Frog Cup. It's never once crossed my mind to get rid of it.

There's something about that particular time in life and my mother's industrious and loving desire to nourish me, that makes the Frog Cup one of my most treasured possessions from childhood. I'm so touched by the care and thoughtfulness she put into making it for me, fueled by a genuine [00:26:00] desire to positively influence my health, my habits, and my choices.

It's a beautiful story. And the Frog Cup is also a pretty excellent example of undue influence.

Now, when we think about what defines a cult, we often have our eyes peeled for coercion. The toxically masculine version of social control, where threat of harm and use of force is used to deter or compel action, to obtain or reinforce compliance. Action. Movies and crime dramas offer endless examples of coercion.

But when it comes to understanding the nuances of cult dynamics, it's helpful to shift our focus toward coercion more soft spoken cousin, undue influence.

When I first started digging around and doing research on how to define undue influence, the results were pretty varied.

I discovered some psychological researchers who study it, and they described it plainly as "inappropriate enticement with something seen as [00:27:00] good."

The dictionary defines undue influence a bit more broadly, and I quote, "influence by which a person is induced to act otherwise than by their own free will or without adequate attention to the consequences."

But legal scholars offer an even more nuanced explanation.

"Undue influence is when the free will and judgment of an individual is tampered with through persuasion, using devices such as trickery, insinuations, deception, and flattery."

Certain characteristics known as *predisposing factors* make an individual susceptible to manipulation, and if these vulnerabilities are enhanced, nurtured, or even exploited, there is an increased likelihood that influence will stick and that a desired outcome will be achieved.

Now if your head is threatening to explode, given all the definitions I just threw at you, let's just circle back to the Frog Cup, as an example of how undue influence might function.

First of [00:28:00] all, we need someone who is in some way vulnerable to influence. I was a small and helpless child, so yeah, that tracks.

And then we need an influencer. Enter my mother with her good intentions and the strongly held belief that more milk equals healthy bones. She had a desired outcome, which was to get her kid to drink more milk, which she creatively encouraged through the use of an enticement. Cue the little froggy at the bottom of the cup.

She got what she wanted, what she believed was best for me, with a bit of one might say creative persuasion.

Now of course, you could argue that this can't possibly be a meaningful example because my mother had such good intentions. She wholeheartedly believed that what she was doing was for my own good. How can that be seen as a negative?

Well, the sad truth of the matter is that something doesn't have to be overtly malicious in order to be harmful. Later in life, it became pretty clear that I was borderline lactose intolerant, which also in part [00:29:00] explains all the constipation I experienced as a child, as well as the doctor ordered enemas that my mother regularly gave me through her own teary eyes.

Perhaps as a child, I refused to drink milk for good reason. Because my body had something to say about it.

But my mother, who was a product of a culture that actively conditioned her to believe that good motherhood meant making sure her kid is dosing on dairy, daily. She did what she did to influence me out of love.

And this my friends, is what I want us to keep in mind as we continue to explore this series, particularly as it relates to the worlds of spirituality and wellness.

Now, if you finished season two of *The Vow*, you might be tempted to think that every cult is led by a narcissistic, sociopathic sex addict, but you would be mistaken.

Certainly, Keith Raniere was and is all of the above, as well as a master manipulator who used his own [00:30:00] diabolical skillset to condition an entire army of followers, many of whom in the inner circle, were willing to pay it forward, actively normalizing harm toward themselves and one another.

It is often said that hurt people hurt people. Indeed. I would also argue that altered people alter people. Alter in terms of contact high contagion, groupthink is a very real thing, but also altar in the sense of sacrifice. We often place our better judgment at the altar of a belief system that we've slowly and steadily been taught to never question.

NXIVM's diehard followers, most notably, those who were members of DOS were under a particularly toxic and all consuming spell of undue influence. Many had been socially isolated and groomed by Keith Raniere for years.

But culty culture doesn't always start out with a conscious intention to exploit or manipulate. [00:31:00] I think a lot of leaders out there who are doing sort of culty things, I think a lot of people are simply marketing their own version of the Frog Cup, inadvertently doing harm because they are convinced that they know what's best for us.

They encourage us to drink up and to imbibe what they themselves genuinely believe to be the next best rapid growth elixir.

Or I could be wrong. Maybe I just need to believe in their innocence in order to reckon with the mistakes of my past.

It had been a dream come true, seeing my face advertised on the seasonal event flyer for new Renaissance Bookstore, a metaphysical mecca in Northwest Portland.

It was the summer of 2007, and I was teaching to an audience of roughly 30 people or so at the bookstore's event center. It was a workshop on the law of [00:32:00] attraction. For a few years prior, I had been doggedly stalking my thoughts and cleaning up my negative vibes, all with a singularly focused obsession on "manifesting" my dreams. I saw this teaching gig as evidence that all of my hard work and vision boarding was finally paying off.

The book, *The Secret*, had just recently come out and the new language emerging around Law of Attraction was still evolving and all a bit new to me. But I was a seasoned facilitator at this point. I knew how to shift the air in a room and deliver on a feel good promise. So I made it through the workshop, no problem. And the group seemed pretty receptive.

Toward the end of my presentation, I opened the floor for questions, responded to a couple of them, and then a woman at the back of the room raised her hand up high.

When I invited her to stand and speak, she spoke warmly and directly.

" So I'm wondering. What about a young child who's been abused? Are you saying that she somehow manifested this [00:33:00] experience?"

The room grew quiet and she held my gaze from across the room.

It was clear to me that her question wasn't offered as a challenge. It was an earnest inquiry. Her heart longing to make sense of faulty logic.

Now, I can't actually recall what I said in response. Only that I validated her question and admitted my ignorance, but only somewhat. I feared that if I really went there, the scaffolding I'd spent the last two hours building would come crashing to the ground.

When the event ended, the room emptied. But her question stayed with me. Her courage had watered a seed of doubt that was already there.

It's not as if this question had never occurred to me. As an abuse survivor myself, I'd often wondered the same thing. And about a year later, I'd travel to Abraham Hicks workshops and hear their word salad responses to these sorts of inquiries. None of the so-called answers they offered [00:34:00] would feel rationally sufficient.

But what I now understand is that I didn't buy into the law of attraction in spite of the glaring ways it seemed to negate me and my lived experience. I believed in it because of that.

Not only did I need to believe that there was some sort of higher purpose to my suffering, you have to understand that underneath all the spiritual pretense raged an ocean of shame and self-loathing. And so this undercurrent of victim blaming, it sort of checked out to me.

Of course it was my fault bad things happened. That tracks. It was a sort of twisted relief to know that all the abuse that I'd suffered that had led me to believe that I was bad and never good enough, the law of attraction underscored this.

The key to my salvation was to become better than I was. Brighter, kinder, more positive, and energetically compliant. I'd been trying to be good and clean and pure for as long as I could remember.

So when I was [00:35:00] asked to teach people how to fake it, no problem. Hold my kombucha. I got this.

Okay? So this may already be painfully obvious, but as a general rule, I'm pretty tormented by insecurity and self doubt. Which may be why when I was teaching and coaching full time, I struggled quite a lot with imposter syndrome.

It was always strange and surprisingly unsettling to me when I captured the attention of an audience. Not just because of my own private insecurities, but because, well, I really don't trust authority all that much. So having it has always been a mixed bag experience for me.

I don't put a lot of weight on astrology. But I have to say that as a Leo, I do find being in the spotlight highly intoxicating. But I also find it deeply disturbing. Both are true all at once and at the same time. And to be honest with you, I kind of hope it stays that way.

I'd rather not become comfortable wielding influence, [00:36:00] having that sort of power over others, because the dark side.

Which is why a world filled with influencers doesn't really strike me as something that a healthy culture should aspire to.

I mean just look at all the celebrities who suffer from addiction. Not only to substances, but to bigger than ever houses, Botox, and the endless hustle to stay relevant.

Influence is a drug and like any other, it's highly addictive.

And despite appearances, being a spiritual teacher or a wellness influencer, it does not in fact require mindfulness or self mastery.

In her book, *American Detox: the Myth of Wellness and How We Can Truly Heal*, Kerri Kelly writes: "Wellness is just one more system that has been colonized by ideologies of individualism, white supremacy, ableism, and capitalism. And until we wake up to it, until we begin to interrogate the systems that thrive [00:37:00] off convincing us that we are not good enough, that shame the aging process and deny the certainty of dying, that sell enlightenment and peace of mind under the cloak of capitalism, that preach of oneness while dividing, excluding, and exploiting, and that idolize the self at the expense of the whole, we will remain imprisoned by its hand."

Well said.

If we wanna understand cult dynamics better, we have to look not only at leaders and the structure of the group, we have to examine to what end is this group in service to, really? Not only to what end, in terms of bottom up cash flow, but what is the difference between what we are buying and what's actually being sold.

In the world of wellness, there are a number of near enemies at work. Savvy marketers do their best to carve a very, very thin and fine line between self-improvement and self perfection, between a [00:38:00] one-off expenditure around self-care and the ongoing rejection of self, as is.

Whether we're the leader or the follower, the hierarchy itself is just a distraction. It's the shiny pretty thing that we keep gazing up and down at, rarely looking around to notice the cultural spells we're all operating under.

In the next episode, I'm gonna go a bit deeper into spirituality and group wellness culture. It's trappings and how early childhood might shape our experience of it.

But for now, I wanna share a few questions that I've started asking myself when it comes to stepping in and out of a community. Questions that help me to identify red flags and how and if undue influence maybe at work.

How much time do I spend following? Studying, admiring, or sitting at the feet of the group leader? And is this time self-affirming? Is it leading me back to [00:39:00] myself?

Do I catch myself imitating versus authenticating, copying the leader or the group's perspective, the general vibe, diet, or manner of speaking? And does it feel homogenous on the inside and strange from the outside?

At what point do I graduate from the work that we're doing? Is there a clear end point in sight or am I being subtly encouraged to stick around and or pay into the group indefinitely?

Does there always seem to be a next thing or another level to aspire to? Am I being love bombed to stay or endlessly baited with a never-ending series of enticements?

What happens when someone in the group is non-conforming in some way? When they speak up, challenge leadership, or even leave the group altogether? Are they made wrong? Are we allowed to talk about it? Or does everyone simply carry on acting as if the [00:40:00] defector never even existed?

These are just a few of the many red flag questions to keep in mind as you reexamine the groups you were and are a part of. I'm of the opinion that far too much emphasis is given to the single question of, is this or isn't this a cult? While the more nuanced presentation of cult dynamics continue to go unnoticed.

Abuse of power is more often than not in the subtleties. Which brings me to a very important update that I'd really like to share before I go.

Back in August when I dropped the first few episodes of the 'cult'ure series, I spoke very carefully, treaded lightly. Because I was afraid. Because it was important to me that the series not be about a single organization. And because I was reflexively protecting myself and others from [00:41:00] potential fallout.

As such, my special guest, Tracy Stamper and I both made the choice to use aliases all while knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that the stories we shared would be relatable and entirely recognizable to the people who were or still are affiliated with the company.

And damn, were we right. Org survivors continue to share stories with us through dms and emails, stories that regularly knock the wind out of me.

Undue influence. Yeah, you betcha.

And also, allegedly malignant narcissistic power plays, exploitive labor practices, body shaming like you wouldn't believe, and dysfunction that has spread like a virus throughout communities far from the Org's epicenter.

It's all been a bit of a mind fuck, trying to figure out what to do with, all the information that keeps rolling in. I was recently grappling with how and what to share when, when a recent development was brought to my attention. [00:42:00] One that I feel a responsibility to speak to.

Whether it's due to this podcast series or for other reasons that I don't know about, I won't pretend to know, the company has added some very troubling language to the teachers license contract. I've seen it with my own eyes, and I just wanna say to those of you who are still with the Org, please read the fine print and think twice before signing.

Personally, I would never sign a document that muzzles me and my ability to speak honestly and openly about my experiences.

And to Org representatives who have reached out to us in recent months, if you wanna continue making a case that you're actively addressing culty dysfunction at the core, that you're taking actions to create systemic change within the company, well, I'm sorry to say that this is stark evidence that things are actually moving exactly in the opposite direction.

Outlawing free and open speech among your people, that is as culty as it [00:43:00] gets. And if you need an expert's opinion on this circle back to Steven Hassan's BITE Model, I referenced it in episode 33. Or just type it into the Google. When control is exerted over members in regards to behavior, information, thought, emotion, and speech. These are cult-defining behaviors. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Hey, so I'm popping in here with a quick editorial note. I've done a bit more research since recording this episode, and it turns out that "non-disparagement clauses" are a thing, not just at the Org, but in businesses operating all over the country.

A New York Times article from 2017 talks at length about the use of non-disparagement agreements in the tech industry. And it turns out they're pretty common. And it should come as no surprise that they have allegedly been used to silence critics of particular companies and specifically employees who speak out against [00:44:00] abuse.

So I wanted to make note of the fact that apparently this isn't all that unusual in the corporate world. And I also wanna clarify that this clause was brought to my attention recently as it pertains to the Org licensing agreement. It's possible it's been there for a while, hard to say, but once again, it's neither here nor there. Just because something is normalized, that doesn't mean it isn't culty.

So my PSA for Org licensees still stands.

Okay, back to it.

Now, of course, it's worth noting that way back in 2001, when I signed my first teaching license contract, there was already an unspoken rule never to speak negatively of the group or its members. But apparently now this is something that folks are expected to sign onto explicitly. And frankly, I find it appalling.

Now remember, this is the fine print we're talking about, folks. This is not something you're gonna find [00:45:00] advertised on the training sales. So, I'll say it again, as many times as it takes in the world of self-help and wellness, what's being said is far less important than what's actually being sold.

Sometimes we can only learn the hard way with lies beneath the glossy sales page, especially these days. Lots and lots of air time is given to images and messages around body positivity, racial inclusion, open door policies, and political wokeness. But in many cases, such as with the Org, the actual practices within the business aren't reflecting the lip service.

And all of this despite the good intentions of those who believe in the mission who are working in and around the inner circle. I have compassion for these folks because I used to be one of them. I know what it is to be in lockstep with the vision, the purpose. To do whatever it takes to get people to drink the damn milk.

Which circles us all the way [00:46:00] back to the Frog Cup and my dear mother who wanted only the best for me. May the Frog Cup remind you, me, all of us, that two seemingly contrary things can in fact be true at once.

What we do out of love doesn't always end up being for the best. And that's okay.

When we stop clinging to our beliefs. When we stop trying to be perfect and do the right thing, only then can we wake up from the cultural spells we're under. Only then can we self correct.

In my college days when I'd come home for the holidays, my mother would have her fridge stocked with milk and dairy alternatives, because she was willing to question her assumptions. And because I was old enough to choose for myself.

We restore personal agency when we stop indulging in things that make us nauseous because other people tell us to, or because there's a prize at the bottom of the cup.

And yes, I'm well aware that I am really milking this [00:47:00] metaphor. See what I did there? Okay, I'll stop now.

No, actually I'm gonna stick with it to the end because I happen to believe that most of the culty damage being done to us, and through us, is as well intentioned as a mother's love.

Good intentions aren't enough to keep us safe from harm or from doing harm. The only way for us to stop being part of the problem is to wake up to the insidiousness of these dynamics and how we ourselves are perpetuating them.

So let's continue unraveling all of this together. In the next episode, we're gonna take an unflinchingly honest look at the spiritual ego, what it is, where it comes from, and how it is perhaps one of the most clever hiding places when it comes to wellness culture abuses.

Until then, I hope you'll explore the work of some of the activists that I've referenced in this episode. I've dropped the details into the show notes, and also consider checking out The Deeper Pulse all access Patreon community.

That's it for [00:48:00] now. Keep on speaking bold truths and asking difficult questions, and I'll see you next week.

Caio.