

Candice Schutter: [00:00:00] Hi, and welcome back to The Deeper Pulse and the continuation of the 'cult'ure series.

I have an amazing lineup of guests coming up over the next few weeks, but first one more solo episode. Today we're gonna take a piercing look at early in life, cult conditioning, spiritual bypassing, and some of the many smoke screens of supremacy in so-called wellness culture.

Yep. This one's a doozy, so let's get to it.

Now, before we dig into this week's content, I wanna say a very special thank you to The Deeper Pulse Patreon donors. I just launched the community last week and your contributions are already making it easier for me to keep on doing this work. And I'm really hoping you're enjoying the bonus content over on the Patreon page. Two days ago, I dropped another [00:01:00] bonus episode in the new series entitled Deconstructing Dogma, and later this month, the next chapter of The 7 Keys ebook will become available, which is exclusive to Patreon subscribers.

And yes, I used the culty word exclusive, but really everyone is welcome and the average monthly donation is \$5, but you can join for as little as a dollar a month. You can learn more at patreon.com/thedeeperpulse.

Alrighty then, no time to waste. We've got a lot to cover. Let's get into it.

In her book, *Big Magic: Creative Living Without Fear*, Liz Gilbert writes: "Follow your own fascinations, obsessions, and compulsions. Trust them. Create whatever causes a revolution in your heart."

I love this quote so much because it perfectly describes why I started this podcast and how and why I created this series, to better understand all the many things that I can't stop thinking, feeling, and wondering about. My guests and I are attempting to make meaning [00:02:00] out of the mess, in a culture where silence enables dysfunction, and being brave and curious with our stories is a revolution all its own.

The word revolution is from the Latin *revolvere*, which means to roll back or unwind.

Recently a friend expressed her sincere concern about the time I'm spending, looking back over my shoulder, unearthing the past and the pain associated with certain events.

You see a new age wellness circles, trauma work of this sort is sort of considered low vibe. Hanging out in your wounds is a great big no-no.

"I get that you wanna help people," she said, "but how will you know when it's time to just move on?"

I've been reflecting a bit on this question, and what I can say with certainty is that there is nothing spiritually regressive about diving deeper into the darkness. And that this *is* me moving on. Sometimes pressing the rewind button is the only way to move forward.

In college, I worked [00:03:00] part-time in the linguistics department. I'd spend hours sitting in front of a computer transcribing play therapy sessions, coding interactions between researchers and young children who'd been diagnosed with developmental language delays.

Each kiddo would be given a set of action figures to play with while a grad level researcher asked them questions, hoping to elicit specific linguistic markers.

"What's happening there, Jenny?"

"She's running. She's running, and now she falled down."

I'd push pause on the tape and tap away at my keyboard, transcribing every word using bracketed codes to capture each grammatical error. It was tedious work, and after a while I was eager to be on the other side of the action, so I started volunteering at Headstart, a federal program that provides preschool services to low-income families. I'd spend two to three hours a week offering smiles, distributing snacks, and helping to clean up around group art projects.

I vividly remember one boy in particular. I'll call him Trevor. [00:04:00]

Trevor was four years old and the youngest of five children, and let's just say that his home life was a bit challenging. He'd been diagnosed with a variety of behavioral issues and was prone to sudden outbursts and acts of physical aggression.

One day during a morning art project, he struck another child. When he was verbally corrected, he pushed a bin of art supplies onto the floor and then began screaming uncontrollably. Ms. Patty swept in to intervene, and he kicked and punched at her face as she escorted him to the corner of the room.

He refused to sit in a chair instead knocking it into her aggressively. Ms. Patty kept her cool. She didn't harden toward him one bit, nor did she loom larger to assert her authority. Instead, she sat on the floor right alongside him, wrapping his body in a warm embrace.

Trevor tantrumed on kicking and slamming his tiny fists against her arms, like hail pelting against the face of a rock, desperate to make a dent.

Miss Patty didn't flinch. She just [00:05:00] rocked him... back and forth, back and forth, protecting both of their bodies best she could while allowing him his rage.

Then she began to softly whisper in his ear. His face softened bit by bit, shaping itself back towards something that resembled innocence.

Trevor's body melted into her embrace. His head fell against her bosom reflexively. She continued to hold and rock him, to soothe in his ear as he wept and wept and wept. He slowly and surely found himself again, the child underneath it all, who'd finally been relieved of some of his unspent sorrow.

Ms. Patty had gradually released her hold on him. After a few minutes with snot dripping down over his lips and onto his chin, he wiped at his face with the backs of his hands, and then he looked up into Ms. Patty's warm and wet eyes.

"Would you like to return to your art project now, Trevor?"

He nodded and headed back to [00:06:00] his finger painting.

Trauma expert and speaker Dr. Gabor Mate explains, "Children don't get traumatized because they're hurt. Children get traumatized because they're alone with their hurt."

I love this reminder because it allows for the stuff of life. It reminds us that there is no such thing as a perfect childhood. And that resilience comes from the way we teach children to feel about their feelings. This is what makes such a difference in the long run.

Ms. Patty knew that Trevor didn't need redirection and scolding. He needed a safe space to express his emotions and purge the pain he'd been carrying. Some of the pain was his, and some of it he'd absorbed from his family system.

Family system's theory was developed by psychiatrist Dr. Murray Bowen, and it describes a family unit as a complex social system in which roles are interdependent. In which each family member applies a [00:07:00] unique set of strategies to meet one another's needs for attention, approval, and support.

Now, there's a lot to it, and I'm not trained in the nuances at all, so please Google if you wanna learn more. But one point I wanna highlight here is that within a family system, the family member who does the most accommodating and pleasing does so in an unconscious effort to relieve overall tension. And also he, she or they are the ones who typically absorb the anxiety of the system.

Mm-hmm. Yeah. I'm feeling that. Absorbing anxiety is one of the things I learned to do very early in life.

My mother loved me like a part of her own body, and also she was simultaneously burdened by my existence. Single motherhood at 22 was difficult and lonely. A fact that was somehow known to me early on. I was determined to be an easy child. And even more so when my [00:08:00] stepdad stepped in to support us. I became fluent in the unspoken language of his mood swings, and many times I felt it was my job to hold the space of levity in place.

I'd quite literally dance around the living room, cracking jokes, flashing merit badges, flaunting my report card, distracting all of us from the raging undercurrents that would, despite my best efforts, always eventually erupt.

But it would be extremely shortsighted to say that my neurotic need to please is a function of "bad parenting." Not only is this overly simplistic and in many ways inaccurate, it misses the point entirely.

A family system is a part of a larger culture, and both the family and that larger culture are byproducts of generational trauma and the ways in which our sorted history often goes ignored.

Wounds that haven't been tended to eventually fester and erupt [00:09:00] into chaos. And part of the chaos that results is cultic social conditioning. Conditioning that reinforces compulsive compliance over individuation. Said another way, when we are ill-equipped and unable to tolerate our own personal discomfort, we very often merge with the group.

My mother grew up in the Midwest Bible Belt where being a good girl was honorable and speaking out of turn was disrespectful. She was taught never to question her allegiance to God, the American flag, or her paternal authority figures. Her mother, my grandmother Margaret, was a homemaker, an avid baker, and a stern disciplinarian. A stiff upper lip was a sign of strength. Vulnerability, a totally off limits liability.

But at age 19, my mother decided to rebel against common conventions. And she followed her heart to California, to the land of my father, who was a bit softer around the edges. A [00:10:00] year younger than her, he was a music aficionado who wrote love letters and loved furry animals and things of that sort.

But after three years together, and shortly after she bore him a child, he left us. And I think some part of my mother's tender and trusting heart went with him.

She wouldn't make the same mistake twice. Her second husband, my stepdad Gary, was 12 years her senior. An irreverent man who served his country proudly and who never, ever backed away from a challenge. His cowboy charisma was a balm. His sense of entitlement made her feel safe. She leaned into his callous embrace with relief, understandably, and even though it would come at a cost to both of us.

But even in their failings, all of my parents loved me the best they could. It's true. They each denied me the right to certain experiences that are owed to childhood, but even so I know it's only because they'd never been shown how to do any different. They were under the spell of their own family [00:11:00] systems and they passed it down to me like the wave in my hair.

This is why I say that the original cult is the family, because it's where the self is first fragmented, split in pieces by the fractured hearts of others. It's where we first learn about cultural expectations, coercive control, and what we must and mustn't do in order to keep the system of shared influence humming along.

There were of course days when financial hardship and fatigue got the best of my mother. I remember one such morning while she was brushing my hair. She was trying to tame my long curls with the same tightly bristled hairbrush she used on her super fine straight hanging locks, and it wasn't working out so well.

I squirmed and squealed with each pull of the brush and she began pleading with me in a sharp tone. "Dammit, just sit still."

I did not.

And eventually her resolve snapped. Out of nowhere, she batted me on the ass with the hairbrush, two maybe three times. [00:12:00] It hurt. And I was stunned silent by the shock and the pain.

But before I could process the moment and even consider crying out, she began to sob. I could feel her shoulders heaving behind me, and just like that my pain no longer mattered.

For most of my life, I'm not sure I could really distinguish between my mother's comfort and my own. They were really one and the same. I often looked to her in order to know how I should feel.

She'd regularly brag to her friends what an easy and well-behaved child I was. And so that became the backbone of my identity. Who was I? I was a straight A student whose mother sung her praises during the day and tucked her into bed each night, so, so proud of her good little girl who was wise beyond her years and needing of almost nothing.

Well, there were of course, many moments when I was unable to suppress my needs, desires, and emotions. [00:13:00] I'd lose control and act out, and then she'd do just as her mother had done to her. All it took was a sharp look from across the room and the drag of an index finger across her throat. I'd stop all that needing right quick.

So by the time I reached adolescence, I was the kind of kid who didn't dare talk back and pretty much never got into trouble. All of this, because I was masterful at controlling my emotions.

Much later in life in my late thirties, I had a therapist once tell me that my superpower, for better or for worse, was my ability to metabolize anger, to break it down until it, and I, were both virtually non-existent.

My best friend Sylvia was visiting from Oregon recently and a few days into her time here, I received an unexpected text. One that resulted in all the feels. My solar plexus tightened into a fist upon reading it, and I shared aloud about the [00:14:00] sensations in my body, adding with frustration, "ugh! Why am I so *triggered* by this?"

It wasn't so much a question as it was self-judgment. I sighed and dropped my phone onto the kitchen counter, feeling defeated by the evidence that lay before me. The tone of the text had been warm, so what the fuck? My guts were swimming with something that closely resembled anger.

Sylvia stood across from me, calm and relaxed after three days of vacationing away from her to-do list. She didn't ask to see the text, she just took a beat, as she always does, and then she asked a question.

"What if it's not a trigger? What if it's just information?"

I gazed up at her as if she'd just solved a lifelong riddle before my very eyes.

I realized in that moment that "triggered" is a word that I very often used to gaslight myself, to discourage and deaden strong and honest feelings that are letting me [00:15:00] know when I'm not being honored, or more accurately, when I'm not honoring myself in some crucial way.

Now to be clear, I'm well aware that triggers are a real deal thing, and I'd kind of like to think that I'm relatively savvy when it comes to owning my actual triggers. Now I'm by no means fully cooked, but I've therapized the shit out of my reactivity. I've examined it from many different angles. I wouldn't be in a loving and peaceful ten-year relationship had I not identified my attachment wounds and learned how to self-regulate and reality check my triggers. Taking responsibility for reactivity is something I'm very well versed in.

So much so, in fact, I think I might have overcorrected. I've made it a bit of a habit, over assuming that whatever I feel is solely because of me and that it's on me to make things feel good again.

But I'm learning that unpleasant emotions aren't always triggers that we need to work on disabling. Sometimes they are necessary signposts signaling us to pay closer attention, to make different choices, to choose what [00:16:00] we want, simply because we want it without shame or explanation.

To be clear, this is not the same thing as giving no fucks, which is, in my opinion, another form of overcorrection and one that is defensive, but sometimes necessary.

I mean saying, fuck that. These two words can be quite useful. They can help us to kick against culty, codependent conditioning that teaches us to perpetually seek personal validation through social proof rather than honoring ourselves.

I get that that can be helpful.

And also, we humans are social creatures designed for connection. We're built to care what other people think. If we didn't care, then we wouldn't be able to feel empathy and repair intimate connection when it goes awry.

Caring too much isn't the problem

Caring too little [00:17:00] is.

I was recently listening to an episode of Unlocking Us where Brene Brown was interviewing clinical psychologist and mindfulness expert Chris Germer. They spoke at length about the Buddhist concept of near enemies, the close-but-not-quite emotions that are commonly mistaken for positive virtues, but are really just their opposite in disguise.

Germer noted that most people are familiar with the far enemy of mindfulness, which is of course, reactivity. While it's near enemy is very often overlooked.

According to Germer, the thing that we very often confuse with mindfulness is complacency.

By definition, complacency is "self-satisfaction, especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies."

Yep. I'm raising my hand here. I've seen it. I've been there. And I've done that. For years, I thought for sure that my ability to shift out of reactivity and into a sort of dissociated form of self-righteousness, [00:18:00] that this was sort of how mindfulness functioned.

Now, of course, I didn't actually think it was being self-righteous in any way. My spiritually masked, yet smug, indifference wasn't malicious. It resulted from a deep ignorance around my own blind spots. Complacency seemed like the opposite of reactivity because I felt pretty untouchable.

But my capacity to rise above it all wasn't necessarily a function of an ability to self-regulate. It operated more like dissociation. It lacked authenticity and a true embodiment of self.

Mindfulness, and a truly embodied sense of self-awareness, isn't narcissistic. It's just the opposite. It means being aware of how the self exists and operates within and in relationship to the much larger context of life.

But complacency is culturally reinforced, through all the ways we're taught to willfully numb ourselves, be it through a bottle of wine or chanting [00:19:00] mantras. It's built right into our systems of influence, especially when we sign away our voice and appease others in order to override honest human emotions that are natural, authentic, and purposeful. Emotions that are when honored, designed to guide us as to when to speak up and when to listen, when to move closer to and when to step away.

A practice of mindfulness should never deaden our emotions. It should strengthen our relationship to them.

And so when the opposite of reactivity looks and feels like self-satisfaction, Pollyanna optimism, or willful ignorance toward issues of injustice, we might wanna check in with ourselves and ask, is this mindfulness that I'm practicing or is it something else?

Now I admit that I default to complacency way more than I would like. It's definitely one of my go-to hiding places when I can't stomach the largeness of life. But I'm [00:20:00] slowly finding ways to snap myself out of it. And to become truly mindful, to learn how to accept that, be they good, bad, or ugly... my feelings, they aren't the problem. Pretending that I don't have them is.

When I look at who's done the most damage to me personally and to the world at large, it's the narcissist who stand out most. Narcissism can appear on a vast spectrum, ranging from ignorant and clueless to malignant and sociopathic. However, it's almost always defined in

part by an indifference towards others. Narcissists seem to speak and act as if they are without shame, when in fact it's more accurate to say that they are shame bound. Entirely unable to feel their pain, they offload their emotions onto others.

John Bradshaw's book, *Healing The Shame that Binds You*, isn't really about narcissism specifically, but he does write at length about the differences between healthy and toxic shame.

He [00:21:00] describes how when we are taught to negate certain parts of ourselves, we can become what he calls shame bound, which means that our every emotional expression sort of brings about feelings of shame. Being shame bound can lead to self-loathing, and it can also lead to expressions of intense grandiosity.

Ironically, we act shamelessly or pretend to be better than others in order to remain at a tolerable distance from shame itself. And it's super common, this compulsive need to offload our human fallibility. Whether we're pretending we don't have any fucks to give, or we're striving and hustling to be better or to lead others to prove that we are in fact, above it all.

But because we're dealing with shame here, we have to be so very gentle with ourselves around all of this. If we've never had our own vulnerability constructively mirrored to us, it's no wonder we don't lean into it. The [00:22:00] resulting feelings of helplessness can seem unbearable if we're not sure how to hold ourselves when shame arises.

Even so, we're desperate for a way out, so we look to our leaders and we end up repeating the same compulsive culty patterns of self denial and deferential treatment toward people who are themselves shame bound.

Now, if this is all sounding hopeless, let us not forget that even though shame gets a bad rap, it does have a purpose. Healthy shame teaches us about our limits. Like a moral compass, it guides our choices and guards us from over-exposure.

But when we repeatedly self abandon, toxic shame shows up. And how do we know we're dealing with toxic shame? Because we're ashamed so much of the time, perhaps even every time we have a feeling need or drive apart from who others expect us to.

The courage to say, no, not this, not now, possibly not ever is actually born of a value-driven sense of purpose. [00:23:00] And we need a moral compass to help guide us. But the only way to follow that guidance is to know ourselves apart from the group, to grieve our losses, and to continually ask ourselves the question. Is this my agency at work or is it conditioning?

Bradshaw proposes that human emotions serve two essential purposes in life. To help us monitor our basic needs and to give us fuel and energy to act. When we are stifled or continually silenced, particularly as children, but at any point in life, we become emotionally fragmented and separated from this deeper self.

And most of us deal with this internal conflict by riding a pendulum between two extremes, acting more or less than human.

When we are more than human we are constantly striving, on a mission to prove our worth and secure outside validation. It's the impossible Goldilocks race toward the land of just right [00:24:00] enoughness... Of having or being just the right amount, but never too much. It's an overcompensation for our insecurities at every turn.

When we are less than human, we are self punishing. Having lost our sense of hope and agency, we collapse into despair and depression. We feel perpetually flawed and unworthy, and so we act out or we act in.

Like most of us, I'm pretty intimate with both of these adaptations. Acting more than human is pretty much my go-to way of being. I plow through my to-do list daily, replying to every text, email, and comment thread. I keep the house clean and tidy, the fridge stocked, and my mother-in-law fed. I read the news headlines, doing my best to respond with level-headed empathy and action when possible.

The more than human roles that I play are mood altering and addictive, mostly because it feels as if I'm in control. Which is the point, really. Because if I can manage my world, then in theory [00:25:00] I can always find a way out of my feelings. At least for a while, because no matter how more than human I become, I'm never able to outpace my humanity for long. Something always happens, and I'm reminded that I am in fact, not in control, not in the least. And it's sort of devastating every time.

In her book, the Drama of the Gifted Child, Alice Miller speaks about this internal reckoning when so much of your identity is tied to more than human grandiose expressions of self.

She writes, "At first, it will be mortifying to see that she is not always good, understanding, tolerant, controlled, and above all, without needs for these have been the basis of her self respect.

Bingo.

For most of my life I was taught that I am what I do, and so when I fail to do... well, I am nothing.

It sounds [00:26:00] dramatic, right? Well, it is. Because this is the other extreme we swing to. The lesser than, less than human. Those moments when we become steeped in our shame, wondering if there was ever in the history of the world, someone as pathetic as us. Okay. Me. True story.

I recently told my therapist about a day a couple of months ago when I was having trouble with a writing project and in my frustration I finally gave up and decided instead to binge on cookies and Netflix in the middle of the day and well into the night.

I was feeling a lot of shame around having done this, and so she asked me. "Candice, what if it's okay to crave something sweet and lie leisurely on the couch for an entire afternoon?"

I patiently explained to her that it *is* okay, but only under the right carefully controlled circumstances. I do easy breezy relaxation. When I feel that I've rightfully earned it. It's as if I need to prove my worth before I can rest down into it.

I wanna read you another [00:27:00] longer passage from the same book by Alice Miller. She writes.

"There are needs that can and should be satisfied in the present. Among these is every human being's central need to express herself, to show herself to the world as she really is, in word, in gesture, in behavior, in art; in every genuine expression beginning with the baby's cry. For the person who as a child had to hide her true feelings from herself and others, this first step into the open produces much anxiety. Yet she feels a great need to throw over her former restraints. The first experiences do not always lead to freedom, but quite often lead instead to a repetition of the person's childhood situation in which she will experience feelings of agonizing shame and painful nakedness as an accompaniment to genuine expressions of her true self. With the infallibility of a sleepwalker, she will seek out those who, like her parents (though for different reasons) [00:28:00] certainly cannot understand her. Because of the blindness caused by repression, she will try to make herself understandable to precisely these people, trying to make possible what cannot be."

Whew. Mic drop, Alice. This is the story of my damn life. The incessant longing for self-expression. The searing ache of self exposure that so often follows it. The obsessive hustle to win over the one who's doling out favor. Check. Check. Double check.

And one line in particular really stands out to me. "She will experience feelings of agonizing shame and painful nakedness as an accompaniment to genuine expressions of her true self."

Agonizing shame and painful nakedness.

Um, yeah. This should actually be the subtitle of this podcast.

Oh, but why am I once again sharing my childhood backstory? [00:29:00] Because I believe that what we experience in childhood is evidence for, and the foundation of culty culture.

For most of my life, my entire sense of self was tethered to others. And when we're unable to see ourselves outside of the way others see us, we can't even see culty conditioning, let alone challenge it.

Until we each do our own inner work, compulsive repetition will continue to rule our social interactions, and it will feed into addictive patterns of self denial and a culture of conformity.

Authenticity is the new buzzword and for good reason, but it is way easier said than done, particularly when we were never taught how to feel and know for ourselves.

What is real and authentic in me? Who am I when I'm beholden to no one? When there is no script to read or no map to follow? These are really painful questions to ask, and influence offers us a pretty easy out. I'll just do what they're doing. [00:30:00] This community, leader,

practice, lover, belief system... Perhaps it will solve the riddle of my existence once and for all.

Chris and I attended a live performance on Friday night at a small music venue in Sedona. It was all very well, to be honest, it was all very Sedona.

We were asked to remove our shoes at the door, and then we joined as everyone gathered around the stage, sitting in a half moon shape in front of an altar.

Porangui is a Brazilian born artist who is beloved in Sedona. He plays a variety of instruments from around the world, live looping sounds together into an electronic tapestry of music. He's pretty talented, and needless to say, the place was packed.

Now, as much as I'd love to, I'm not sure that I can adequately describe [00:31:00] the culture that is the Sedona music scene. Nor have I been able to reconcile the personal feelings I have around it all. And there's no denying that my relationship with Sedona is rather complicated by all this exploration into cult dynamics and recovery.

We're actually not in Sedona. We're 20 minutes outside in a small town called Cornville. Yeah, I know Cornville. If you think it's an odd name for a town in the middle of the high desert, you are correct. It got its name due to a post office typo. For real. You can Google it.

Anyhow, I'm very much pleased to be living on the outskirts of Sedona because let's just say it's not really my scene.

Scenery wise, it's certainly a stunner. No complaints there. Sedona is nestled with the glory of Red Rocks, and it still takes my breath away every time I drive into town. Just yesterday, there was a dusting of snow and wow, let me tell you, sometimes it's like living inside of a postcard.

For decades now, Sedona has been a modern [00:32:00] day, new age mecca and home to some of the most diehard spiritualists in the country.

Spiritual egos are pretty plentiful around these parts, and I say this as someone in the know, because over the years, mine became pretty well developed.

If you are a seeker who practices yoga, participates in deep dive therapy, or prescribes to any belief system for long enough, the spiritual ego is bound to show up at some point. And it's not necessarily all about the God stuff. It can be tied to any cultish belief system that relies on a hierarchical understanding of who is in the know and who isn't.

I recently saw a meme on Facebook. It's a cartoon drawing of a woman with long blonde hair wearing a crown of flowers. She's dressed in all white and she smiles peacefully, her hands in prayer position at her heart. She stands between two other people, and the caption reads. " Since I've had my spiritual awakening, I can finally put my ego [00:33:00] aside. And now, I'm so much better than all of you."

The image made me wanna laugh and cry all in the same breath because while I've never spoken words like this aloud, I have most certainly carried this energy.

Ah, speaking of energy, that word is supercharged around these parts. And no, not just because of the vortexes, we'll get to that in a minute, but because it's often difficult to determine the deeper motivations at work when people start throwing language like this around.

Energy is sometimes used in reference to heightened states of conscious awareness. But it's also used as a clever manipulation, as a way of spiritually bypassing difficult emotions.

I've made a few friends in the area, but sadly, I don't feel as though I actually know very many of them. It's hard to penetrate the spiritual persona, to get behind and underneath it. And if I'm being honest, I've had a lot of interactions that feel inauthentic and [00:34:00] performative. All the vacant smiles. Empty eye gazing. Hand to heart head nodding.

And so, it's Friday night and I'm sitting there among a sea of warm and approachable shined up faces. Some of them familiar, most of them not. And I'm feeling what I can only describe as supreme ambivalence.

The show started over an hour late, and then once we got through all the ceremonial opening rituals, which is pretty standard around these parts, it was then that the music finally started going, and that was the moment I started to feel a little less alien.

Actually. Wait, no, that's a poor choice of words because they really love aliens around here.

Let's just say that when the music started, it all felt a little less culty. I was just another person there with a body swimming through a sea of movement and sound. It was all very sweet, and yet still sort of unsettling.

It reminded me a little bit of not long ago when I was in Mexico, attending a sweat [00:35:00] lodge for the very first time. I was dressed like everyone else, wearing all white, moving through a series of rites that had been borrowed from indigenous traditions. There were so many small moments that felt good, but so little of the overall vibe felt right.

And here I was again, I continued to push my body against the sounds, looking around and actively appreciating how everyone in the room seemed so uninhibited, free and open-hearted. I loved the feeling of sobriety, or at the very least, the way that folks were altered in a more subdued and friendly sort of way. There were no space invaders or drunk opportunists breathing down my neck. And that's one of the things I love about spending time in high-minded community.

There's this deeply seductive illusion of safety. It's a sort of superficial stupor that results when everyone in the room has agreed upon love and light, no matter what and at all times.

But this often comes at a cost to self, and [00:36:00] to something larger.

By the end of it all, I had enjoyed myself, but I couldn't help but wonder. What is this high vibe city in service to, really? Let's take a quick peek behind the curtain.

Boynton Canyon is a gorgeous area in Sedona that is considered sacred to the Yavapai Apache, who consider it the place where Great Spirit Mother gave birth to the human race.

And you might not be surprised to learn that, nestled right in the canyons core, is a critically acclaimed 70 acre resort. In fact, my partner works there part-time as a massage therapist giving luxury spa treatments to guests who spend upwards of \$500 a night.

Right outside the window from where these well-to-do visitors take their yoga classes stands the Kachina Woman Formation, a Red Rock spire that was once a Native American holy marker and has since become a popular tourist destination. And yes, some of you might be wondering, it is considered by [00:37:00] many in the area to be an energetic vortex.

First mention of these so-called vortexes, and please don't get the nerdy grammar gal me started around why it isn't vortices... anyway, it allegedly traces back to the late 1930s or forties, and a man of Ojibwe descent named Sun Bear. Research revealed that he was the first to lead high dollar retreats to some of the areas most sacred indigenous sites.

Sun Bear was a self-proclaimed medicine man whose tours were solo led and very controversial. His business venture was actively protested by the National Indian Youth Council, on more than one occasion.

Nevertheless, Sun Bear continued his work and then he went on to build a following, recruiting members into a pay-to-play 'tribe' of his own. It was made up of mostly white folks, including a woman by the name of Page Bryant. Bryant has been described online as Sun Bear's 'First Apprentice,' [00:38:00] and she was also a self-proclaimed psychic channeler.

Page Bryant is the individual most often credited with the discovery of the vortexes. Through her supposed ability to 'read energy,' she determined that a handful of sacred indigenous sites, the ones that Sun Bear had allegedly introduced her, to were energetic vortex or places where the supercharged energy of the earth is said to interact with the subtle energy body of its visitors.

Okay, so there's a lot to unpack there. And you and I at some point have to get on with the day. So I'm not gonna go into the cultural appropriating history of all that, which is a pretty fucking huge thing to set aside. So I'm gonna invite you to just continue pondering that on your own.

I wanna continue to speak more personally. People often ask me, what do you feel when you visit the vortexes? What do I feel? Well, I always get a bit of a natural high while hiking through the Red [00:39:00] Rocks, but I've had pretty similar and sometimes significantly more notable experiences exploring other natural wonders in the world.

Now I get that that's a pretty privileged perspective, to be sure. But my point is, I don't experience these specific spots in the Red Rocks as anything other than natural works of art and new age tourist bait.

Now, quick side note. One of the most convenient things about magical thinking is that we always have an out when it comes to non-believers. So the fact that I don't get high while sitting on Bell Rock would most likely be explained away with an argument that my skepticism is obviously just getting in the way of my energetic sensitivity. Poor girl, she's so blocked energetically.

Now, I know I'm being a smart ass, but I actually do have a point. You know you're dealing with indoctrination when there's only one side to the argument.

That being said, I'm not here to rob anyone of life's magic. Which is why when I get stopped on a hiking trail in Sedona by an out of [00:40:00] townner who inevitably asks me, "Hey, is the vortex around here somewhere?"

I always smile, nod, and resist the urge to roll my eyes as I point them in the general direction. Are you impressed by myself restraint? Well, maybe you should be.

It's not that I don't want people to enjoy themselves. What troubles me is the way that we, humans seem so damn susceptible to cult-like fascination, particularly when it comes to something that has been stolen and monetize.

It's become impossible for me to overlook the way that the original indigenous inhabitants of this area have been pushed out, silenced, and forgotten.

Oh, okay, maybe not forgotten. But to have statues of their ancestors erected in a town center where their sacred sites and practices are commodified. I'm not so sure that this is the best way to honor them.

Crystal shops on every corner. High dollar vision quests. Sweat lodges. And all sorts of so-called shamanic [00:41:00] healings. A lot of folks I meet here have some sort of 'shamanic training' under their belt. And all judgment aside, and I will admit there is judgment, I really get the sense that for many, but not all of these folks, their self-image relies heavily on the social credibility that it gives them.

That might sound a bit strange to outsiders, but Sedona's new age culture flatly rejects the normy way of life. The conventional is very often considered taboo.

And while there's a ton of lip service around sovereignty, agency, and personal choice; few people seem to notice how oftentimes it is those who are most skeptical of science and conventional influences, who most frequently offer their faith to people who claim to know things according to some God-given psychic authority.

Frankly, I find the whole thing rather puzzling.

And if I sound like a disgruntled cynic, well, you should know that that is in part true because I've been burned by more than one shamanic truth teller, and because despite my [00:42:00] efforts to keep an open mind, some of what I've heard around here takes magical thinking to a whole new level.

Such as the time, a few months back when a woman voiced to me her concern about vaccines, not with a grounded and reasonable argument about bodily autonomy, but because, as she said, incredulously, "what if they're right?!"

When I pressed for more information, she explained that she'd heard that people who are vaccinated are a danger to the unvaccinated because the covid vaccine carries energetic entities that can and will jump from their hosts into people like her.

I stared at her dumbfounded and unsure of what to say, wondering if I should ask who 'they' are. The people who had convinced her that she now had to sort her Bumble results by vaccination status.

In the end, I decided against it because honestly, I wasn't all that confident that critical thinking was gonna be enough to penetrate her new age cult persona.

Let's not forget [00:43:00] that, while I was never into anti-vax co spirituality, in many other ways, I used to be like her. I'd boast about how I didn't watch tv. I only ate organic. And because I genuinely believed that energy always follows attention, I considered it a public service to not follow the news.

You're welcome.

I was in an all out rebellion against humanity with its dramas, its highs and lows. And I was all about this anti gravitational pull up, up and away, toward a delusional worldview that fetishizes clean eating, rewards toxic positivity, and teaches us to colonize ourselves and reinforce top-down power paradigms. All in the name of health, love, and light.

An ex-Org employee shares:

"The CEO of the company told me numerous times a week that I [00:44:00] needed to do sit-ups and squats several times a day to flatten my stomach."

Another former teacher writes:

"One day before filming a routine, a colleague and I were told to go on the lemonade diet so that we would appear thinner on camera."

Another shares:

"When I called Marissa out for not offering inclusive sizing on the 'I love my body' clothing line, a trainer personally emailed me to say that it wasn't okay to hurt other people. No mention of how the hypocrisy of dismissing larger bodies hurt me."

And another former teacher writes:

"One of the 'souvenirs' from my time with the Org is disordered eating. A friend and mentor of mine often utilized the culture, language, and philosophy of the Org to plant the idea that I was not taking care of myself by eating the foods I was eating. She stoked that fire until I was consumed with fear of food and how it was gonna make me ill, make me fat, and make me less fit. She fed [00:45:00] the idea that if I wasn't eating an incredibly restricted diet, a diet that would change by the week from her, that I was not embodying The Practice. I am still working through all of this, and I think it's going to be something I deal with for my whole life. A milestone of my recovery has been eating birthday cake with my kids this year."

These stories are painful and disturbing, and they are not unique to the Org. If you haven't heard earlier episodes, the Org is a culty organization where I used to work, and it's still operating full tilt.

Gloria Steinem puts it this way, "perfectionism is internalized oppression."

Indeed. And wellness culture is obsessed with perfection, and it's plagued with variations on the same old patriarchal bullshit. It's just more covert. Body shaming is dressed up in PSAs around healthy eating and wellness, adherence to [00:46:00] impossible norms.

Throughout my thirties and early forties, I tried all the detox fads. Juicing, paleo, intermittent fasting, celery superfood diets, you name it, I tried it. And I told myself that I was doing all of this in the name of better health, nevermind the fact that I was tracking my weight at every turn.

The truth is I was just really trying to lock down my thin privilege, because I knew that I needed to have a certain look in order to fit in and rise to the top.

Back in 2008 I was working as a teacher trainer, traveling regularly to San Francisco where raw food diets were all the rage. I recall co-facilitating at a specific training where one of the trainees was a raw food chef. It was announced at the beginning of day one that she would be providing all of our meals for the next three days. I had some mixed feelings around this, but I was assured that this was the best way to eat, regardless of body type.

Three days in, I developed intense stomach pains and [00:47:00] constipation like you wouldn't believe. My body was not suited at all to a raw food diet, but I guess that's the price you pay for wellness.

Six years prior, while working at the Org's Epicenter, I was invited to model some of the practice's moves for an upcoming book release. I recall how excited and self-conscious I felt about being a part of the shoot. How I'd fussed and fretted about what to wear, because I was pretty sure I was gonna look way too heavy in all the photos.

And now, 20 years later, when I flip through the pages of that book, I cringe. It's a bit hard for me to believe how waify thin I was, unnaturally thin for my body type, and I can tell you with 100% certainty that I never, ever saw *that* body reflected back to me from the mirror.

No matter how thin I was, I never felt thin enough. Not just at the Org, but throughout my 20 year career teaching dance fitness. I was continually [00:48:00] surrounded by thinner than thin women who felt fat and who were continually micromanaging their every meal. But not the way that my college roommate and I had done it all those years back when we were buying low fat foods and actively counting calories. No, now it was all very cleverly disguised as master cleansing and detox purification rituals, clean eating of foods that were pretty much devoid of flavor, and in some cases sustenance.

Now, of course there was, and is, some wisdom in all this... steering clear from pesticides, overprocessed foods, and filler ingredients. These are wise moves to be sure. And veganism most certainly has its dietary *and* ethical merits. But more often than not, clean and healthy eating crosses the line into borderline or full-blown pathology, and it operates more like a depriving neurosis, less like a doorway to greater health and wellbeing.

In fact, in 1996, [00:49:00] Dr. Steven Bratman coined the term *orthorexia*, which is defined as an unhealthy obsession with clean and healthy eating. This is very much a thing. Rates of orthorexia are continually on the rise in wellness communities. And in extreme instances, it can result in nutritional deficiencies and compromised brain functioning. Not to mention the psychological burden of continually obsessing about what one can or cannot, did or did not eat.

And what's more of a mind fuck is how often in the wellness world these obsessive thoughts and emotional compulsions are reframed in terms of personal power and self mastery, when it's very much the opposite.

When it comes to shifting away from a culture that reinforces the idea that thin and healthy is higher up and better than we've gotta get real about what we're dealing with. Enter author and activist, Aubrey Gordon, who describes it this way: "Self-love isn't the issue. [00:50:00] Anti-fat bias is."

In a 2020 article entitled, *We Have To Stop Thinking of Being Healthy As Being Morally Better*, she writes:

" "As a fat person, my health is one of the primary grounds offered by those who mock harm and reject me. Cruel and judgemental behavior is often justified with an offhanded, I'm just concerned about your health, as if my health were their responsibility. As if I owed it to them. A debt I'd never taken out and could never repay. And often as many fat people know, trolling often masquerades as genuine concern. That's what makes it so insidious and what can make it so cutting. But underneath its explicit message of caring concern, there's a clear implicit judgment. You're doing it wrong. You've failed. I've been monitoring your health. I know your body better than you."

In the article, Gordon refers to the term *healthism*, coined by Robert Crawford in 1980. He defines [00:51:00] healthism as: "the preoccupation with personal health as a primary, often

the primary focus for the definition and achievement of wellbeing, a goal which is to be attained primarily through the modification of lifestyles."

Now, on the surface, healthism might not sound all that problematic, but when our value is dependent upon whether or not we fit into certain social ideals, most of which are based on the effed up sensibilities of toxic masculinity, health and behavior modifications can themselves become detrimental to our psychological wellbeing, to our sense of agency, and our ability to simply live and enjoy our lives.

And you've heard me go on and on about this already, but once again, it is our fear of death and the carnal nature of our humanity that compels us to try to outrun and outsmart the aging process. It is this denial of our humanity, of limitations and of human finitude that leads us to project these fears onto other people who remind us [00:52:00] that our bodies will at some point fail us.

And when this sort of denial is re enforced, we inadvertently cause harm toward others through ableism and anti-fat bias for example.

Sonya Renee Taylor, author of *The Body Is Not An Apology* writes:

"Living in a female body, a Black body, an aging body, a fat body, a body with mental illness is to awaken daily to a planet that expects a certain set of apologies to already live on our tongues. There is a level of not enough or too much sewn into these strands of difference."

"Equally damaging is our insistence that all bodies should be healthy. Health is not a state we owe the world. We are not less valuable, worthy, or lovable because we are not healthy. Lastly, there is no standard of health that is achievable for all bodies. Our belief that there should be anchors, the systemic oppression of ableism and reinforces the notion that people with illnesses and disabilities have defective bodies rather than different [00:53:00] bodies."

I could go on and on quoting from this insightful book. Instead, I urge you to read it for yourself. Here I'm using Sonya's beautiful words to circle us back to the point.

That wellness culture's obsession with health isn't necessarily healthy. It's culty. Especially when you zoom out and consider who it so often demonizes, marginalizes, and overlooks.

I often hear spiritual folks argue, quite matter of factly, that we come into the world having on some level chosen the pains we suffer, as if we're each in some sort of spiritually customized bootcamp, deliberately built to serve us at every turn.

Now, I'm not a total cynic. I still have a shred of faith that there might be a higher intelligence at work here, but even so, I certainly won't for a second presume to understand how it works.

And most importantly, what concerns me about this line of logic is once again, the complacency that so often results from it. This idea that our suffering, personal [00:54:00] challenges, situational limitations, are all part of God's plan. That it's all meant to be. It can seem affirming on the surface, but more often than not, this line of logic, and let me be clear,

I've used it myself... it's something that I use to distance myself from an examination of privilege and from convenient assumptions that excuse me from taking meaningful action.

And also, on a micro level, complacency makes me way less available for connection. Because really spiritual platitudes are really more about comforting me than the person I'm supposedly "helping" to "reframe" their "negative" experience.

Yeah. Lots of air quotes there.

Rather than embody true compassion, rather than sitting in the discomfort of their pain with them... pain that I may not be able to do a damn thing about... instead I make an unconscious attempt to fix it.

[00:55:00] Why?

Well, this circles us all the way back to the beginning.

For the longest time, I believed that I wasn't good unless I was doing good, and sometimes my efforts to do good resulted in just the opposite.

Yeah, I know it's messy stuff. But it's really worth looking at because mindfulness is a real thing and it's alternative, complacency... it just sustains the norm and the dangers of this whole overused thoughts and prayers, it's all meant to be argument. The implication that systemic inequalities either don't exist or are somehow destined, frankly, it's pretty gross.

I get that there's a time and place for acceptance of what is. The ability to self-regulate and be at peace with what's right in front of us is a valuable and life-affirming skill. I am a big fan.

But once again, a tool is just a tool. It's all about who's wielding it. I'm just asking for all of us to wake up to the ways we offload our own pains and [00:56:00] insecurities and offer ways of supporting that look and feel more like a shoulder shrug wrapped in a smile.

Also, it's worth adding that why not just accept your fate arguments are all well and good when you're high up on the hierarchy, but well, not so much when it's got its knee on your neck.

This is how the culture of supremacy operates. Those who slip into agreed upon standards, those who are obedient and conforming, they rise to the top. And we all know it. And so we unconsciously encourage one another to fall in line.

Is it no wonder that humans can be so easily conditioned to believe that God... him, her itself, would treat us in this exact way, rewarding goodness.

Coincidence? I think not.

Personally, I'm no longer interested in going higher or being better than anyone else. Or actually, I guess it'd be more honest to say that I'm working overtime to snap myself [00:57:00] out of this head space, this way of thinking and moving through the world, which is the only way I've ever known.

And I no longer prescribe to the idea that what's happening in these human skin suits is all just a dream, and that my worldly desires are somehow unimportant because in my experience, both as survivor *and* perpetrator, the so-called path to higher up and better than enlightenment, looks and feels like moral superiority and inhumanity way too much of the time.

That said, I must admit to being a bit jaded. So if spiritual frameworks are helpful to you, please, please go and get yours. Just be sure to check yourself on the regular.

At the Org, we spoke an awful lot about self-acceptance, unity, and inclusion. Love yourself. Celebrate differences. Everybody is welcome here.

And yet we also operated under a few unspoken agreements. To move and look a certain way. To speak the same [00:58:00] language, wear the same clothes, and to seek to save anyone and everyone who didn't conform to the high minded standards that we held one another to.

If your belief system looks and feels like a ladder with rungs that place you above others. If it preys upon a sense of not enoughness, turning you toward high-minded ideals that perpetually reach you up and out of the beautiful and fleshy insistence of your body. If the teachings you prescribe to encourage you to reject the complexity of your most authentic and human emotions. Well, I guess I'm urging you to think twice about climbing that ladder.

Spiritual, cognitive, emotional bypassing... these are all defense mechanisms against sensing, knowing, and feeling our way, all the way through something.

It's okay to feel shitty sometimes. Let's stop trying to outrun society's polarizing labels. Labels that simply point us to [00:59:00] what it is to live an authentic life.

This is not to say that we shouldn't try to grow and evolve ourselves, but we need to understand that love, fear, light, dark, it's all an essential part of us. Humanity is our birthright, and there is no ideal self to hustle or aspire toward.

You know how to human already. It's all right here.

So let's go be ourselves and thanks for tuning in. I'll be back next week with the first guest and a new lineup.

Keep moving toward what moves you.

Caio.