

The Last Draw: Cults and Creativity

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Cult Pseudo-Creativity vs. Creativity in Recovery

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Abstract

This article gives a brief history of The Love of God Community, England ("the Community"). It looks at how the Community used creative arts negatively to reinforce control and thought reform, considers whether this use of creative arts is true creativity, and illustrates with case examples how therapists and ex-cult members can use creativity positively for recovery. All individuals' names and identifying details have been changed.

What Is Creativity?

The creative impulse is deeply human and intrinsic to being free and alive. These ideas are elaborated in several schools of psychology.

Winnicott (2005i) notes that this impulse within us is a source of art, poetry, and other artistic forms, but that creativity and play are even more fundamental than the creation of things (p. 91); they are necessary in the individual's search for self (p. 73). In healthy living, creativity characterizes the individual's approach to external reality. This creative approach may be fostered or hampered by ongoing environmental factors that can enhance or stifle creative processes throughout an individual's life.

Carl Rogers (1967), the founder of person-centered psychotherapy, defines the creative process as "the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand and the materials, events, people, or circumstances of his life on the other" (p. 350). Rogers notes that three conditions are necessary for creativity to occur: openness to experience (lack of defensiveness); internal locus of evaluation and evaluative judgment (rather than compliance); and the ability to toy or play with elements and concepts.

Fundamental to creativity is the "I"—"I have discovered this"; "this is what I wanted to express" (p. 353-5). He also notes that, for creativity to occur, psychological safety and freedom are necessary (p. 355).

Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman, the founders of Gestalt psychotherapy, viewed creativity as the means to contact self, and playfulness as integrating and health-promoting. They utilised a range of creative expressions in their psychotherapy work, including drama, movement, dance, and sound (Perls et al., 1951; Mackewn, 1997). Gestalt psychotherapy conceptualises the self as creatively adjusting moment by moment in contact with self, others, and the environment. The aim of Gestalt psychotherapy is to raise awareness and heighten this contact so the individual is more in touch with self (Perls et al., 1951).

It is particularly the "freedom to play creatively" per Winnicott (2005), "to be non-defensively open to experience" per Rogers (1967), and to "creatively adjust moment to moment" per Perls (1951) that characterize creativity. The individual develops defences or interrupts contact (to use Gestalt terminology) when these features are absent or lacking. Winnicott, for instance, uses the term "false self" to characterize a defensively created sense of self in response to continuous and/or harsh boundary crossing by the environment. He suggests that this false self has a negative impact on the individual's ability to differentiate between "me" and "not me," a state that I suggest becomes increasingly true in the deeply entrenched cult member (Winnicott, 2005, p. 176). Winnicott continues that development of trust in an unimpinging early environment as well as in later life is a key factor in the individual's ability to experience "true self" and the spontaneity necessary for creativity (p. 139).

The cultic group described in this paper exemplifies an environment in which creativity as defined by Winnicott, Rogers, and Gestalt psychotherapy is grossly impeded.

The Love of God Community

The Community was formed in 1970 and disbanded in 1980. It did not begin as a cult, but over time grew to fit Langone's definition (see "Langone's Definition of a Cult Applied" later in this article), and to show evidence of Lifton's (1961) eight

components of 'thought reform' (see "Lifton's Eight Components of Thought Reform Applied to the Community" later in this article).

The Community was founded by James, who was studying at the local School of Music. He believed God had called him to bring a revival of his brand of fundamentalist Christianity to the area. James had a beautiful singing voice, and his charisma drew a good number of young people to him, all under the age of 25, as he brought his passion for Christianity together with classical music, singing, and song writing.

James remained the only leader of the Community until Brian joined in 1974. Brian had been loosely connected and had attended occasionally from the early days but later set himself up as a "Prophet," a messenger from God. Brian said he had had a "word from God" regarding a dubious and harmful preacher who was visiting the Community, information that turned out to be accurate and caused Brian to be seen as a saviour and Community leader. It was Brian's influence, over time, that changed the Community from a "fringe church"ⁱⁱⁱ to a cult.

The Community was committed to growth, and a good deal of energy was put into recruiting other members ("evangelising"). The main attraction for others to join was the so-called radical return to New Testament Christian principles based on St Paul's writings. For example, houses and cars were "shared in common"; many handed over all their earnings and savings into the "common purse"; outsiders were told that members were living together in love and commitment to Christ and biblical principles. The early realisation of "green" issues was discussed, and a number of high-profile, radical Christian speakers came to the Community, including from the United States of America, and expressed their delight at the way this radical biblical "vision" was being lived out.

The Community never had a church building as such; and all activities, including services, took place in the Community houses, especially one with a large living room. To "save the world," the ideology was to be lived in all aspects of life and by all together as much as possible.

The type of Christianity that was taught within the Community was evangelical, charismatic, and fundamentalist. The teaching said that man is fundamentally sinful and therefore alienated from God, and that to restore the relationship with God requires trust in Jesus Christ. This mainstream evangelical theology included an additional twist, and the implication was that trust in Jesus Christ for salvation was insufficient or illusory unless it included total compliance with the Community leadership, who were proclaimed to be "God's chosen and anointed leaders."

So, whilst they were teaching trust in Jesus Christ for salvation from the consequences of sin, the Community leadership actually expected total compliance as a route to salvation. This expectation was not explicitly stated; it was implicit within the teaching and the way individuals were treated. For example, at one time members had to read 10 chapters of the Bible a day and were expected to read Christian books, including Puritan writings that reinforced James' views of this particular brand of Christianity. If members did not comply with these expectations, they would be physically punished or not spoken to for days.

Over the years the Community grew in numbers and by the end had around 80 members. Most members, including families, lived in Community "households" that were all in the same geographical area. There were six houses used by Community members on two roads in the same vicinity; some of the houses were owned by individuals and some were rented. In one case, the Community purchased a property with a lump sum of savings from a number of individuals. Commitment to the Community was confirmed by living in a household, and those who lived outside of the households were seen as second-class citizens. A few individuals worked in the households cooking, cleaning, and looking after their families; but most of the members continued to attend college, university, or work.

Between 1974 and 1976 there was a growth of creative arts and creative expression in the Community. A dance group was formed to dance out the narrative within the songs James and other members wrote. Members made beautiful kaftans from richly coloured silks, embroidered and sequined with tropical flowers and exotic birds; one had a peacock all the way up the front, sequined in rich, jewel-like colours.

The needlework was extended to beautiful, richly coloured hangings, based on the line drawings in *The Good News Bible*. These creations hung in the meeting room. Members initially felt excitement and a sense of pride in creating beautiful things; but because individual talents were not acknowledged, people became disillusioned as they felt exploited and devalued. The creative arts were simply used to reinforce the beautiful false front that the Community was presenting.

Membership in the singing group became a measure of how good or worthy a member was because this group was seen as the spiritual ministry and outreach arm of the Community. Community members implicitly understood that there was a ranking system and those who could minister (meaning let God use them) by singing and dancing were the more highly ranked members (and therefore more spiritual). Those who could not minister were second-class citizens. Although ministry conveyed status, in time the creative arts were used as a means of control for the music group and later the whole Community, pushing them to perform more and more perfectly and punishing and admonishing them if they did not. The punishments evolved from verbal chastisement, to rebuking sessions and threats of damnation in hell and God's punishment, to beatings done at first with hairbrush and in time with bamboo cane. For example, the members of the singing group were excited when they were invited to a church in another city to sing and minister. When they returned to the Community, a hair brush appeared on the fireplace in the meeting room, with a sign above it threatening punishment. It was clear that the group had failed, and an atmosphere of doom and fear quickly spread from the music group to the rest of the Community.

It was Brian who had instigated the hairbrush and the bamboo cane to punish individual members for "sin" (meaning not reaching his standards). He did publicly beat one or two individuals, but generally he had others, including James, do the beatings. In this way he turned individuals against each other, causing paranoia and fear among the ordinary members while protecting himself. This fear extended over many years. It took 23 years before four ex-members could finally rouse the courage to report Brian's crimes to the police; even so, the complaints went nowhere

because of lack of evidence due to Brian's manipulations and lies.

Brian believed that the Community's success required his continuing control. His demands reflect Lifton's thought-reform program as delineated in Table 1. Brian and James had hijacked the creative arts in the group to gain this control, although their stated intention was to follow God, to be radical Christians, and to bring healing to the world. For the members of the Community, this control fostered an atmosphere of "deception, dependency, and dread" (Langone, 1993, p. 7) that led to unthinking obedience and resulted in the diminution of pre-cult personality and the development of cult pseudo-personality.

At this point, Brian was effectively the leader, replacing James, who had by now had a mental breakdown. Brian was sexually involved with a number of the women in his household, saying that James Bond was an ideal Christian man and enjoyed the women walking around in bikini bottoms and drinking Martinis. So what looked Christian, beautiful, creative, and innovative from the outside was in fact a terrible mask that hid horrors of abuse, fear, depression, and paranoia, and for some, psychosis. Members were told God was going to kill them if they didn't do as they were told, and they had curses from the Old Testament of the Bible read to them to reinforce this. Because the Community based its whole life on the Bible, and the indoctrination techniques were strategically designed and skillfully imposed, the members had no reason to doubt that these things would happen to them.

The Community was finally disbanded in 1980 following a serious challenge to the leadership by some of the members who lived in Brian's household. The sexual involvement and un-Christian and unbiblical ways of acting finally convinced them that Brian was not a truly Christian leader, and this led to his downfall.

Langone's Definition of a Cult Applied

The Community accords with Langone's definition of a cult in that it exhibited a great and excessive devotion and dedication to an extreme version of fundamentalist, evangelical, charismatic Christianity; pressure to live in community; and unquestioning obedience to the leadership.

It used a thought-reform program to integrate members into the Community's uniquely controlling and terrifying values and relationships. It systematically induced states of psychological dependency in the members through fear of God's punishment and eternal damnation and through fear of physical, emotional, and mental pain, and by using the scriptures to control and terrify. It exploited the members for the advancement of the leadership's grandiose and narcissistic goals because they wanted the Community (and themselves) to be great and recognised both nationally and internationally. It caused harm to its members, their families and the wider society. Ex-members of the Community suffered great psychological harm, and some still suffer PTSD; they are plagued by memories and triggers. Those who have recovered have done so with difficulty. Family members were separated from their loved ones, and it has taken many years for some of those relationships to be repaired.

Local mainstream church leaders who challenged James and Brian were baffled by their grandiose stance. Although they tried to influence the Community leaders through discussions, their impact was limited because they were unaware of any actual law-breaking or of the extent of abuse and control.

Lifton's Eight Components of Thought Reform Applied to the Community

Lifton's (1961) eight components of thought reform as developed from Andres and Lane (1988) can also be applied to the Community. These criteria are set out below in Table 1, with reference to the use of creativity/creative arts as a means of control.

Was the Artistic Expression in the Community True Creativity?

It has been suggested in cult recovery literature, and substantiated by clinical case work and research, that a cult member may develop a cult pseudo-identity or pseudo-personality (West and Martin, 1994; Singer, 2003; Hassan, 2000). Singer (2003) has attempted to define these terms:

Criteria of Thought Reform	Application to the Community
<p>Milieu Control</p> <p><i>The purposeful limitation of all forms of communication with the outside world, sleep deprivation, a change of diet, control over who one can see and talk to.</i></p>	<p>Most members were forced into some creative art activity, such as exhausting late-night music and dance practice, sewing, or renovating Community houses. Appearance, including diet, was strictly controlled in order to attract new members. Family contact was discouraged.</p>
<p>Mystical Manipulation</p> <p><i>Teaching that the control group has a special (read "divine") purpose, and that the subject has been chosen to play a special role in fulfilling this purpose.</i></p>	<p>The singing and dancing was called "ministry" and imbued with importance and spiritual power. These performances had to be of the highest quality so that other churches would "come and bow" to their superior expression of "God's spirit."</p>
<p>Demand for Purity</p> <p><i>Convincing the subject of his/her former impurity (before joining the control group) and the necessity of becoming pure or perfect as defined by the group.</i></p>	<p>It was necessary to present a mask of perfection to advertise the Community, while the reality of beatings and fear was hidden. Members were encouraged to reject their former way of thinking and adopt a new reality.</p>
<p>Cult of Confession</p> <p><i>Getting the subject to let down his/her barriers and openly discuss his/her innermost fears and anxieties.</i></p>	<p>Members were expected to expose their "sin" to the group. This external control and violation of boundaries precluded the freedom necessary for creativity.</p>

<p>Sacred Science</p> <p><i>Convincing the subject that the control group's beliefs are the only logical system of beliefs and therefore must be accepted and obeyed.</i></p>	<p>Members were punished if they failed to follow the dictates of the leadership, which were presented as God's work (including creative arts).</p>
<p>Loading the Language</p> <p><i>Creating a new vocabulary, by creating new words with special meanings understood only by members of the group, or by giving new and special meanings to familiar words and phrases.</i></p>	<p>Critical thinking was curtailed, leaders' particular biblical interpretation was dictated; for example, "denying yourself" implied "you only do what we say; you do not listen to yourself and do not think for yourself because that is sin."</p>
<p>Doctrine over Person</p> <p><i>Convincing the subject that the group and its doctrine take precedence over any individual in the group or any other teaching from outside it.</i></p>	<p>Personal individuality and goals were abandoned in favour of the Community's requirements and goals; for example, individuals gave up their university education to promote the Community's vision. Beatings were justified, to cleanse members of their "sin." Separating husbands and wives was justified by stating that all members of the Community were "brothers and sisters in Christ" before they were married couples.</p>
<p>Dispensing of Existence</p> <p><i>Teaching the subject that all those who disagree with the philosophy of the control group are doomed.</i></p>	<p>Members were told that God would kill them if they did not comply with the leaders' desire to see the Community become something great, and that those outside were either inferior or "not saved."</p>

Table 1: Lifton's Eight Components of Thought Reform Applied to the Community

As part of the intense influence and change process in many cults, people take on a new social identity, which may or may not be obvious to an outsider. When groups refer to this new identity they speak of members who are transformed, reborn, enlightened, empowered, re-birthed, or cleared [my addition: saved, surrendered]. The group-approved behaviour is reinforced and reinterpreted as demonstrating the emergence of "the new person." Members are expected to display this new social identity. (ibid., p. 77)

It is the cult environment that produces and keeps in place the cult identity. (ibid., p. 79)

This self or identity often falls away quite quickly when the individual leaves the group. (ibid., p. 78)

It has been suggested that the cult pseudo-personality is a dissociated personality (Langone, 1993; Hassan, 2000); but I have argued elsewhere (Jenkinson, 2008) that instead it is an introjected personality that overlays the pre-cult personality, unintegrated and undigested. A number of ex-members have described the cult pseudo-personality as overlaying their pre-cult personality, and I quote one: "I feel as if my real self was like a little dot, like a seed that was buried in deep soil and then a layer of tarmac (asphalt) laid over me." [ex-member quotation]

In Gestalt theory (Perls et al., 1951, p. 189) introjection may be thought of as "...material—a way of acting, feeling, evaluating—which you have taken into your system of behaviour but which you have not assimilated in such fashion as to make it a genuine part of your organism—your self." Further,

Physical food, properly digested and assimilated, becomes part of the organism; but food which "rests heavy on the stomach" is an introject. You are aware of it and want to throw it up. If you do so you get it "out of the system." Suppose, instead, you suppress your discomfort, nausea and tendency to spew it forth. Then you "keep it down" and either

succeed, finally, in painfully digesting it or else it poisons you.

I suggest that with the cult pseudo-personality the individual is unaware of the poison and discomfort that is suppressed within the pre-cult personality (Jenkinson, 2008).

With respect to creativity in the Community, the leaders encouraged and enforced the "creative arts" to promote their grandiose aims. The individual cult members complied, using their natural talents, because they wanted to do their best to please the leaders and to promote those aims, all under the guise of being "true to God." Their creativity was hijacked for the purposes of the group.

The members of the Community therefore had a toxic mix of pre-cult personality and cult pseudo-personality entangled and enmeshed in their great task of saving the world. The cult pseudo-personality was the part that complied with the group. Lalich (2004) explains the process of conversion or "world view shift," which she suggests may be responsible for this change in personality. This change results in a loss of sense of self (p. 270); and the individual, in a sense, becomes the organisation (p. 15–17).

The possible psychological consequences of this process are well documented in the literature and include depression, adjustment disorder, dissociation, PTSD, and relationship and family difficulties, amongst others (Martin, 1993; Singer, 2003; Hassan, 2000; Lalich and Tobias, 2006).

This raises the question: Is it true creativity if it is coming from the pseudo-personality? If psychological safety and freedom are necessary for creativity, and if the most fundamental condition of creativity is that the source or locus of evaluative judgment is internal (Rogers, 1967, p.355), then I suggest this is not creativity in the true meaning because none of these conditions is likely to be present in a cult. If it is not true creativity, then what is it called? We could call it "cult-induced pseudo-creativity." I believe this pseudo-creativity was ultimately an enforced creativity in service to the authority of the leaders. I suggest that the creativity or pseudo-creativity was coming from the pseudo-personality and not from the cult member's pre-cult personality.

Suffering can bring a deeper, richer experience of life and creativity to individuals (Yancey, 1990; Cassidy, 1990), and members of the Community experienced much emotional and physical pain. Perhaps in spite of the pressures, thought reform, and hurt, might the creative and expressive activities of the group have offered members a way of expressing their deeply buried pre-cult personality and its suffering? This issue of where the creative or expressive arts originated from within the individual is hard to answer without research. Anecdotal evidence might suggest that even cult-induced pseudo-creativity may allow some room for the pre-cult personality to express itself.

Winnicott (2005, p. 92) explores the possibility that

there cannot be complete destruction of a human individual's capacity for creative living and that even in extreme compliance and the establishment of a false personality, hidden away somewhere there exists a secret life that is satisfactory because of its being creative or original to that human being.

There may be as many possibilities as there are individuals who have been harmed by these abuses, and perhaps the answers will come only when the individuals themselves assess the situation from the perspective of post-cult recovery.

Lalich (2004) sets out her argument that cult members act with "bounded choice"; their decisions make sense in the cult setting, even if they do not make sense to someone looking in from the outside. She looks at the idea of a "charismatic commitment" that takes root quickly; that can enmesh and trap people, in some cases psychologically; and that causes the individual to be at the service of the charismatic leader or ideology (p. 14). This argument is applicable to the Community. Creativity in the Community was at the service of the grandiosity and narcissism of the leaders, and ultimately of the members too, because it was viewed as the expression of the Community's success.

It is interesting to note that creativity is very often challenging and subversive, and pushes society's boundaries and thinking. One example of this would be the artist Damien Hirst, who pickled half a cow and shocked many

people. In cult-induced pseudo-creativity, this challenge is less likely to occur. It is not true creativity but simply creative arts used for the aims of the cult and the leaders, and therefore used to hold back and stultify the cult members' uniqueness and individual creativity (Hassan, 2000, p. 38). The art may express the cult's challenge to the outside world, but it may not be the individual's challenging expression. The singing and creative expression in the Community came out of fear and compliance and was not a playful and spontaneous expression of the pre-cult personality of the individual members; it did not challenge the status quo of the group until the end.

Natalie Rogers (Internet, 2008) notes that "creativity threatens those who demand conformity. Dictators squelch self-expression and the creative process." The cult leaders in the Community could not afford to allow true creativity because it could lead to a challenge to their control and thought reform. Having said that, I wonder if perhaps the leadership ultimately undid itself because this restriction may have opened the door to the members' doubt. It is possible that ultimately the creativity in the members of Brian's household helped them to reconnect with their pre-cult personality. This in turn may have led to their challenge of Brian's leadership and the demise of the Community. Perls et al. (1951, p. 189) suggest that to

eliminate introjects from your personality the problem is not to accept and integrate dissociated parts of yourself. Rather it is to become aware of what is not truly yours, to acquire a selective and critical attitude toward what is offered you, and, above all, to develop the ability to "bite off" and "chew" experience so as to extract its healthy nourishment.

And, I would add, to evacuate that which is not nourishing. (Jenkinson, 2008). The members of the Community began the process of "biting off" and "chewing over" their experiences, reconnecting with their critical faculties and forming a post-cult identity (Hassan, 2000). To return to the analogy of the tarmac and the seed, the seed ultimately was stronger and more alive and organic than the tarmac and found a way to break through to light, air, and freedom (Jenkinson, 2008).

Creativity in Recovery from a Cult Experience

When a person recruited as an adult leaves a cult, a major task for recovery is reconnecting with the pre-cult personality (Martin and West, 1994; Hassan, 2000; Lalich and Tobias, 2004; Jenkinson, 2008). For those born and/or raised in cults, this process will be a more complex journey since there is often little to offset the indoctrination in the group. In both cases, there is a necessity for the person to experience a trusting environment in which his or her own personality can emerge, and defences or creative adjustments become optional rather than necessary for survival.

In the Community, and in many other groups, great fear of being oneself is instilled in the individual (Langone, 1993), and learning to trust can be very challenging. Nevertheless, with the acceptance and support of others, this reconnection with the pre-cult personality and development of a post-cult identity can occur. Tobias and Lalich (2006, p. 197) note that creative expression through a number of different disciplines, including art, writing, dance, music, drama, or journaling, can help an individual to reconnect with the pre-cult personality. In 2005 I conducted a study into what helps ex-cult members recover. In my research, a number of ex-members identified the importance of creativity for this process, and several specifically mentioned music and singing: "...my parents had a lot of music going on in the house when I grew up and so that was bringing me back to my childhood and so bringing me back to my own personality again" [participant quote]. And "...I eventually started to listen to my old music again, which for me was part of my personality. It felt like it was me again" [participant quote].

Supporting Recovery Through Creative (Gestalt) Psychotherapy

Contemporary Gestalt Psychotherapy (Gestalt) incorporates a fresh, creative, experimental approach to mental-health treatment (Mackewn, 2000). Gestalt writer Joseph Zinker (1977, P. 3) boldly states: "Creativity is an expression of life—my celebration of life: I am here! I love life! I love me! I can be anything! I can do anything!" and "It is not only an expression of the full range of each person's experience and

sense of uniqueness, but also a social act—a sharing with one's fellow human beings this celebration, this assertion in living a full life."

Gestalt is a phenomenological approach that respects people's internal experience whilst helping them modify their thinking and behaviour through graded and carefully timed creative and sometimes playful "experiments" which, Zinker states (1977, p. 123), are the cornerstone of learning. The philosophy behind these experiments is for the individual to heighten contact with his/her self, others, or the environment. Lack of contact, or, to use a Gestalt term, an "interruption to contact," is a blocking of contact with the self, other, or the environment and therefore of growth. So in Gestalt psychotherapy, raising awareness and heightening contact is a primary aim in order for growth and change to take place. Another Gestalt writer, Gary Yontef (1993, p. 51), states that "awareness is formed at the point of contact" and leads to a creative integration of the problem.

Winnicott notes that playing is always a creative experience and that psychotherapy needs to bring the patient to a place where he/she can play (2005, p. 51). He states, "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self" (ibid., p. 73).

One example of working creatively and playfully from a Gestalt methodology is acting out dreams in order to raise awareness of current issues. For example, Denise, an ex-member of the Community, had a dream that she was in a house, crouching down as other Community members were relentlessly searching for her with dogs, bright torches, and shouting. She was shaking and terrified. Her therapist suggested a "safe experiment" (Mackewn, 2000) in which she would imagine, act out, and speak from each character in the dream. Yontef (1997, pp. 80, 81) notes that dreams are not interpreted in Gestalt but are used to integrate. Each part of the dream is considered to be a projection of an alienated part of the individual, including the introjected cult part.

Her therapist observed Denise's intense fear and trembling, and, sensitive to the potential trauma, wanted to avoid overwhelming her (Ogden, Minton, and Pain, 2006). She

suggested Denise bring her (the therapist) in as support by imagining her being with her as they went through this process. She also suggested Denise choose the order in which she would work on each part, so that she would feel more in control.

Denise chose to crouch behind the chair and then verbalised her terror and fear. As she did this, her therapist conveyed her support by holding her hand as they had agreed beforehand. Her therapist spoke reassuringly, helping her to stay with this terrified part and to focus on her body as the shaking subsided. Denise reported that she did not feel alone or frightened anymore, and that it had helped her to have her therapist with her as she faced her original aloneness and fear.

Denise quickly and naturally moved from her hiding place behind the chair to the safety of the house. She noted that now that she had a boundary, the others could not get in and she would protect herself by keeping the lights off, the doors and windows locked, and by being quiet so they would not know she was there. This action felt empowering and new to her. Her therapist echoed and supported her statements in order to reinforce her new thinking.

Finally, Denise took the part of the cult members who were searching for her. This helped her recognise how she had introjected the persecutory thought reform of the group, and how she no longer had to do their dirty work for them because she had left the group and she was safe now. She returned to seeing herself in the house, with her therapist, and this time was able to stand up, open the window, and shout at the cult members. She told them in no uncertain terms to go away, saying that they would never ever have any control over her again. Her therapist asked if she could also speak to the cult members—this excited Denise and she agreed. Her therapist affirmed that she was there with Denise, who was not alone anymore. She made clear that they were no longer part of her life and should stop persecuting her. Experiencing her therapist “on her side” evoked a sense of being understood and allowed a release of soothing tears.

This playful and creative “safe emergency” (Yontef, 1993, p. 183), which balanced challenge and support, raised Denise’s awareness of the residual cult pseudo-personality that

exhibited itself in the control and fear left within her. It also supported her to take another step in breaking free and reconnecting with her pre-cult personality, whilst relying on the close relational support of her therapist.

It is natural to fear being seen as foolish when one is taking a creative risk, but Denise took that risk and exposed something she was afraid to expose. Because the process took place in an ethical, accepting, and safe therapeutic relationship, she was able to take another big step toward her recovery through this creative and playful therapy.

Creative Sand Tray Therapy

I agree with Stevens (2004), who notes that “playing with small objects in a tray of sand is a powerful but simple form of experimentation” (p. 1). The principle is similar to working with dreams, in that the sand tray offers the client a medium for projecting parts of the self into figures that can express their dilemma or difficulty. It is hard to capture in words the subtle nuances, pauses, and nonverbal communications that take place during creative sand tray therapy and use of play in treatment in general. I limit my discussion to the pivotal moments in the session, trusting the reader to imagine the momentum and flow that led from one segment to the other.

A client, J, had always felt that she was dirty. She had been brought up in a cultic environment where she was sexually abused and had very little contact with her mother. Her father lived outside the cult. In the sand tray work with her therapist, J selected a number of figures, including a little girl doll about six inches high, with long blond hair tied back, and dressed in a pretty dress. As she picked up the doll, J told her therapist that this doll was dirty. Her therapist said that she looked pretty to her and she could not see how she was dirty. J was adamant that the doll was dirty, so the therapist asked to hear more. J began to speak about her sexual abuse and how this had left her dirty. Her therapist gently challenged this, pointing out that the abuser was dirty, not her. J kneeled quietly in front of the sand tray for a while, moving the doll around in the sand. She suddenly and jerkily began to take the band out of the doll’s hair and spread the hair out. She said, in a shocked voice, that the doll was just a little girl, there was nothing wrong with her,

and she looked lovely with her hair spread out, innocent, and—well, just a little girl.

The therapist strongly affirmed this perspective by reflecting back to J what an amazing insight this was, and totally agreed that the doll was just an innocent little girl and not dirty at all. This was a turning point in the therapy for J; and whilst she continued to need to challenge the introject of believing she was dirty, she felt she had really seen things differently for the first time.

I suggest that this was a case of J raising awareness and integrating a part of her self that was hidden from her. As she played, and put into words the belief that she was dirty, she was able to assess this belief and challenge it, and this was empowering for her.

Conclusion

Creativity in cults is characterised more by compliance and anxiety than by play. In some forms, creativity may provide a helpful outlet or means of expression for members, but in many cases it is used as a means of reinforcing cult control, thought reform, and the cult pseudo-personality; at this point, it becomes what I have termed “cult-induced pseudo-creativity.” The Community used creativity for its own ends, exploiting and abusing the group’s members and robbing them of the legitimate pleasures and rewards of personal creativity, with it instead becoming negative and harmful.

Creativity can, in contrast, be an important component of recovery from cults, enriching and life-enhancing. As I have illustrated, therapists can use creative arts and playful creativity with former-cult-member clients to enhance recovery. This recovery includes healing, reconnection with their pre-cult personality, and moving forward to create a post-cult identity.

The Door—Creative Writing

“The Door” is a composite of many different experiences. I wrote it for my MA in Gestalt Psychotherapy dissertation, to illustrate the process of entering, living in, and exiting a cult. This piece shows how creative writing can help to communicate and integrate difficult experiences such as the cult experience (Bolton, Field, and Thompson, 2006).

The Door

The signs on the door welcome me in. The colourful, beautiful people take my hand and smile at me. I like what they are saying, it makes sense. They are obviously genuine because they smile and laugh and touch each other warmly. They are generous too, offering me a free meal. They think I will fit with what they are doing and tell me so. We are going to make the world a better place; we are going to save the world. It is so inviting. It fits so well because I have been looking for a way to make the world a better place, to make myself a better person, to belong. I open the door and go in—I have nothing to lose, what could go wrong?

I hear what their leader is saying as he teaches us about their beliefs, about how the world is so full of pain, darkness, evil, sickness. I think about it, and know it's (partially) true. I tell them that there is also beauty, richness, and life in the world.

They smile benignly and shut the door behind me.

I am happy to be in this special place, with special people, with a special purpose and meaning to their lives. Now I belong.

They are so loving, so real, so committed, I feel full of pride to belong to such wonderful people who move with such serenity and certainty, knowing what is right and wrong in the world and for their lives. The work they do is wonderful, they work hard ... I am not quite sure what we practically do but living like this will make the world a more positive, less negative place.

They tell me our leader knows the truth, he really understands the mysteries of the universe, he really knows the Truth—if I listen to him—follow him—I will gain enlightenment—be free of my negativity—be real.....

He tells me he understands the mysteries of the universe, he really knows the truth. I look and see this perfect man, he is all I would want to be, all I am not. They tell me to listen to him, I do because I am beginning to see

they are right—I am nothing in comparison to him. When he notices me I feel so special, I belong in a deeper way than ever.

Then sometimes....

I do things wrong, I make a mistake and they tell me I am falling short. I need his help, his love, and his body to make me whole; he is what is missing from me. I am not sure but I remember how good he is and I believe him because he is my life, my breath, my permission to live. I attach myself to him.

I enjoy my life. I'm doing the right thing. I am confused, they say I did something wrong they are angry with me, I don't know what or which or why.....

They say

he is not pleased with me

I've failed

sinned, polluted the group by my negativity

my memories

of hurt

abandonment as a child

as a damaged human being.

The others are angry with me they believe I have polluted them that the difficulties we suffer are because I joined, I am toxic. He told them so.

I must be punished for going wrong, they hit me for my negativity, they take my body because it belongs to them—I deserve to be used because I am toxic.

I am toxic.

They are being kind to me, they are allowing me to live when I do not deserve to live, I am indebted to them.

I am in a whirlpool

going down,

going down,

going down

I am a little dot,

deep within

I do not deserve to live

The little dot is a faint heart beat—me—I wonder if the door is still there. I creep back, afraid to look, they may find me—

but the room is black

I cannot find the door

I run my hand around the walls, there is an indent that could be a door. I remember the handle that let me in, colourful, beautiful, and feel for one the other side.

There is no handle

I cannot get out.....

*They find me searching and hit me hard, I am hauled in front of the whole group and
the perfect man*

I am sorry

I am sorry

I am sorry

I am deeply, deeply sorry

for betraying the group, for trying to leave when I need
them to clean me up, to make me pure—again

I start to listen. How shall I become pure? I will listen, I need them, I must
not trust myself, I will only cause more difficulties. I will listen. I must not
think, I must simply do what they say, me, the little dot must do as they
say.....

I cannot

little dot will go in the other room so they do not find me

but what if they do find out I am hiding there

they will kill me for good, what shall I do,

where shall I go.....

there is nowhere to go

They are hitting me again, shouting, telling me I am rebellious, disobedient, evil, bad, a pollutant, every sin in the universe belongs to me

I am dying inside, shrivelling up

I find it hard to hide my little dot

I will try harder

I will do what they say

They are right, they must be right

I will tell them what a bad person I am, because it's true and they have always told the truth—that's why they are here

They like it when I do that—when I confess how bad I am, perhaps that's the way out of this deep, dark, dank, hell-hole—perhaps I will become all they want me to be and then they will give me a handle to the door—if I confess—they'll accept me again—I will try

The hole gets deeper,

the faint heart beat is fainter now,

my body hurts,

the dot is shrivelling up

but

the little beat is saying

How can I get out?

how can I find life again?

and

as I question

the shouting gets harder

louder

they know what I think

they see my thoughts

there is nowhere to hide

restricted

dark

Some members challenge the leadership and the group disbands

As I emerge through the door the cold light is too bright

I cannot see
the hand out stretched to help

who can I trust?

I am disorientated and startle at the slightest thing

Will I be struck by a thunderbolt and die as they said I
would?

I'm weird, different now, not like everyone else

I take tentative steps, lost in a desert of fear, loss, my
dreams in tatters, my life a ruin of my former self

My eyes begin to adjust to the light, I see kindness there,

how can they be, only they are good and kind.....

in terror I take the hand outstretched

what if it happens again.....

how can I tell?

how will I know?

I see acceptance,

kindness,

can they

have

felt

the pain

that

fills the universe?

I learn, step by little step to do ordinary things again, the burden of responsibility is off my shoulders, **the relief is huge**

but

the meaning is gone it's all so pointless now, so dull and grey.....shall I return.....

NO..... it hurt too much.

Where shall I go?

How shall I make meaning of the ruins of my life,

the shackles of my life

I read

I watch and begin to understand they did this to me and I did not know

I take the outstretched hand, I feel warmer now, and I hear the words:

"I feel so angry that they did this to you"

and finally weep for that little dot that I became

that was me

for all I lost

I understand

and safety grows—I can go on

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Notes

ⁱ *Playing and Reality* first was published in 1971, and the reference I am citing is from a newer (2005) edition.

ⁱⁱ "...'fringe' churches are generally orthodox in terms of doctrine, but they possess other characteristics that set them apart from mainstream evangelicalism..." (Martin, 1993, p. 31.

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Gillie Jenkinson, M.A., UKCP, has many years' experience working as a counselor and psychotherapist, including specialist therapy to those who have left cults and been abused. She holds an Advanced Diploma in Pastoral Counselling and an MA in Gestalt Psychotherapy. She is accredited in the UK with UKCP. In 1999 Ms. Jenkinson did a month-long internship at Wellspring, Ohio and returned there in the summer of 2008. She has co-authored a chapter entitled "Pathological Spirituality" for a medical textbook book entitled *Spirituality and Psychiatry*, and has presented at a number of ICSA conferences. Her Website is www.hopevalleycounselling.com