

Ep #243: How To NOT Be in a Cult

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With Your Host

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Hey there. I'm Simone Seol and I'm your Korean mom. I help you to drop your fear of marketing, bring joy back into business, and overcome the paralysis, fear, and chaos that's been keeping you stuck. Let's do this.

Hey, friends, let's talk about cults. A lot of people have suspected, with good reason I think, that there's a thin line between self-development communities and cults. And a lot of people who've gathered around ideas relating to self-inquiry and healing and personal growth, have started to question, "Wait, am I in a cult?" People turning away from certain leaders and communities because it started to feel cult-like. I've been seeing more and more of that, just personally around me.

And I've had clients confide in me that they're afraid of growing their businesses that are centered around self-development and healing because they don't want to involve their own clients in any cultish dynamics. They don't want to accidentally be a co-leader, because they've seen that a lot, and they're alarmed by it.

The tricky thing about this is, it's not black and white. People who are in a cult are rarely going to admit that they're in one. In fact, they're probably going to vehemently deny it. And people who lead calls are even less likely to admit that they are in fact leading a cult. Many religious or spiritual communities, and some that are even very big and "mainstream", are accused by critics of being cults. Which of course, the people who are in it will be like, "No, no, no. They don't understand. They have a malicious [inaudible]. We're not a cult." Right?

So, all of this is to say, I think the line between cult and non-cult can be more nebulous and subjective than we think. And looking up what exactly a cult is, in the dictionary, doesn't really help either. When I Google: What's the definition of a cult? The top dictionary definition that comes up is, and I'm going to list them all. One, the first sentence is "a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object." Now, that's a little murky, in my opinion. Because Christians venerate and are devoted to Jesus, does that make it a cult? And in the popular way of thinking about it, no.

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And also, by that definition, a system of veneration or devotion toward a person or thing is, let's say, is a Taylor Swift Fan Club a cult? I'm a really, really big fan of the fast-food chain In-N-Out. I was raised in California, and I love In-N-Out. I will fight anyone who says In-N-Out is overrated. It is not! It is just really, really good. Am I in an In-N-Out cult?

The second dictionary definition is “a relatively small group of people having religious beliefs or practices regarded by others as strange, or sinister.” Now, this is a little tricky for me too, because again, it's subjective. To use the example of religion again, what is sacred to you might be regarded by another as strange or sinister.

Christianity is the biggest religion in the world, and a lot of people think that's strange and sinister, right? And also, having a set of religious beliefs and practices that are not mainstream is how every religion pretty much started, including the biggest, most mainstream, “normal” ones. Buddhism, at first, was a small group of people that other people thought were weird, etc. etc.

The next definition is “a misplaced or excessive admiration for a particular person or thing.” Once again, subjective. How do you define what is misplaced or what is excessive? My husband thinks my excessive admiration for an In-N-Out Burger is excessive, and I disagree. Right? I'm being funny, but you know what I mean, it's subjective.

And the last dictionary definition is “a person or a thing that is popular or fashionable, especially amongst a particular section of society.” And that's like a fairly benign definition of a cult, where it's not necessarily considered bad. This brand of shoes gained a cult following because certain people say that it's very comfortable and whatever. That's not a bad thing. But we call them “this is a cult favorite”. That, too, is all included in the meaning of a cult.

So, you finding what's a cult and what's not can get murky. However, I want to offer a simple definition of a cult, and it's an imperfect definition. I say it's imperfect because a lot of people might, with good reason, point out that

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my definition is missing important nuances or there's exceptions or that's subjective. And yes, I don't disagree with any of that.

But for me, it's important, I think it's useful, to have a good enough working definition of a cult. And this is what I want to offer. A cult is something where people are following or believing in or are devoted to a person, an object, or a system of beliefs, where it is required, that they trade away their critical thinking, their personal agency, and their sovereignty.

So, no matter how much you love, a community, a person, or set of ideas, a set of beliefs, once you stop thinking independently, once you stop exercising your own personal agency, once you replace your own critical judgment with a creed or someone else's beliefs, you are now getting into cultish dynamics. I think it's very much a gradient.

We have good reason to be wary of cult, we don't want to lead one and we don't want to join one. I think most of us would agree. And I want to offer some ideas for how to be immune from ending up in a cult. I think it's safe to say that the vast majority of people who end up in cults don't start out being like, "I'm looking for a cult to join. I'm going to be in a cult." I think most of the times it begins somewhere way more benign, or seemingly benign, and ends up going somewhere wonky.

You might find it easy to envision that somebody might accidentally end up in a cult, where they started out just looking for answers or looking for a community. But I also think it's possible for someone to start out with good intentions and end up having created a cult around themselves.

A lot of people think it's impossible to accidentally start a cult, and I disagree. I think it's entirely possible to accidentally be a cult leader. Here's what I mean: Many cult leaders, they're not cartoon villains who started off being like, "Mwahaha, I'm going to start a cult. I'm going to brainwash people and control their minds." I don't think that's how a lot of them start. That's probably how some of them start. But a lot of them, I think, probably not.

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Many start probably with good intentions, and even solid ideas, useful ideas, but end up creating culty dynamics anyway, because their work gets kind of overtaken by an unprocessed hunger for power, unconscious trauma dynamics, and a lack of curiosity or awareness about where sovereignty is being eroded, where people stop thinking critically.

Now, I think in coaching, spirituality, healing, or health related fields, there's a special danger of running into culty dynamics. Because, one, this is an area where there isn't clear institutional oversight. And by the way, I don't think this is necessarily a bad thing. Not everything needs to be overseen and controlled by an institution, that's just another way to gatekeep. So, I don't think that's a bad thing in and of itself, but it's just true. In these fields, there isn't, often, clear institutional oversight and that lends itself to culty dynamics.

Secondly, in these fields, people tend to come to them with a lot of vulnerability, even desperation. And I think that's really understandable, because people who look for a healing, spirituality, coaching, they're not looking for these because everything's amazing and they feel amazing about life. People come because they often have pain, they're looking for answers, and it puts them in a position of vulnerability.

And lastly, there's a fuck-ton of power and influence and money to be gained from effectively catering to that vulnerability, that desperation. So, I think those of us who are in these fields need to be especially mindful and careful that we stay away from culty dynamics. That we remain aware of them and that we try to be as accountable as possible for, accidentally or intentionally, creating these dynamics.

So, I want to offer some ideas about how to be cult immune. I believe the only way to be safe from either running a cult or falling prey to a cult is a little bit like how we can think about racism. Let me explain. The only effective way to interrogate and dismantle racism is to admit that given how systemic and unconscious racism is, we are all racist. I am racist. Unconsciously, I have absorbed racist ideas and I have internalized racism,

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even though I'm not even white. And so have you, and so are you, no matter what race you are.

We've got to start from a baseline of that awareness. We don't run around in circles proclaiming, "Not me. I am not one of those people. I love everyone. I don't see color." That is not a place to start. Where you do have to start is, "Yes, even if I don't consciously, intentionally have racist thoughts, I'm part of the fabric of this very racist society. I have inherited an economy of political landscape. A culture that was built on a history of racist oppression. And that's true in probably most of the world, so I too, am racist. Therefore, I bear the burden of accountability for fixing, dismantling racism."

So, that's where we've got to start, with the admission of something very uncomfortable about how we are all participating in something not good, something unsavory, because we are human. And I think our proneness to cult is similar in that way. For eons, humans have been starting and joining cults, because there lies a similar unconscious darkness in all of us.

I think it's a part of unchanging human nature, to seek power and to revel in power and to want to have more and more power, and to do everything in one's power to get more power. I also think it's part of human nature to want to hand over your sovereignty and to hand over your critical thinking in exchange for belonging and safety, or at least an illusion of belonging and safety.

In short, I think the most effective prescription against cults, may be to start with knowing that, one, there is an unconscious part of me that is dying to hand over my critical thinking and my own personal agency, in exchange for a feeling of safety and belonging. Because my unconscious mind is desperately seeking safety and belonging. And two, that there is an unconscious part of me also, that adores power, more power, the better. And that part of me will endlessly, endlessly generate creative justifications for doing all kinds of things to gain and hold on to more and more power.

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You think you're different? Study some history. Think, again. All of us have both of these sides in us, the part that just wants safety and belonging and will do anything to get it. And another part of us that wants power over others, and will do anything to get that.

Admitting that you have internalized racism, and that you are part of a society that is racist and perpetuates racism, is difficult. It's terrible. Nobody wants to do it. It doesn't feel good to me to admit that I am racist, but it's true. It's the same thing. Admitting that there's a part of you that either wants to lead a cult or join one is also uncomfortable and painful.

Looking at the darkness in our own murky, shadowy unconscious mind is and should be uncomfortable and confronting. But what happens is that if we're not willing to do this, if we're not willing to own up to the dark dynamics that are happening in our human unconscious mind, that darkness is going to own us and take over and control us outside of our awareness. And that's when really bad shit happens.

So, I'm going to go first. I have cult leader-ish tendencies inside of me. A part of me revels in power, and a part of me wants people to do what I want them to do. Part of me wants people to believe what I believe in. And I want people to agree with me whenever I say things. That power is delicious and sweet, I want it, and the more, the better.

And on the other side, I also have cult member-ish tendencies inside of me too. There's a part of me that really wants to be in a cult because I'm like, "Give me some of that sweet safety and belonging and certainty in this crazy world full of danger and uncertainty and chaos." For safety belonging, and certainty, I would be happy to hand over my brain and my free will. There's that part of me, too.

So, how can I own up to it without shame, because it's not a personal feeling of mine, it is a universal aspect of being human. Right? So, how can I shed light on that, and have compassion for those parts of me? While also being honest with myself about where I'm not in integrity with the values of sovereignty and freedom that I hold dear? This is a hard question to

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grapple with, and I think we can do hard things. I think it's important to do hard things and to ask hard questions, and to be willing to answer them.

Insisting that you'd never be in a cult, or that you'd never lead a cult, I think is not useful because you're being in denial of a fundamental vulnerability that history has shown, again and again, to be pretty much universal to humanity. Better to own it, shed light on it, bring it to the light of day, and develop an intentional awareness of it. So that any part of you that wants to either control other people for your own power, or hand away your power and critical thinking in exchange for safety and belonging and certainty, you're aware of them.

And when you're aware, you can be in conscious relationship with them. And you're making decisions intentionally about how to steward those parts of you. Instead of letting those parts just run amok in your psyche, under the hood, in the darkness, letting them drive your decision making without you being aware of them.

So, in every part of running a business, every part of me exercising leadership, every part of me that is stewarding community, making decisions that affect community. I pause and I asked myself those questions. Hey, how's the cult leader inside me doing? And how's the cult follower inside me doing? I ask those questions with love. And I attend to those parts of me without shame. Because, again, there's no shame in being human.

But then, consciously having a relationship with those parts of me allows me to make intentional decisions that are in alignment with my values, and how I really want to be in the world, and how I really want to relate to other people in the world. I hope you will do the same. I think the day where we are all aware of our own vulnerability to being on either side of cultish-ness, is the day where we have the least amount of cultish-ness in humanity.

I hope that was useful to you, and I'll talk to you next week. Bye.

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