

From the fire to a blessing field: Transitioning from an unhealthy relationship to a life of creativity

**by Karen Pressley
former 16-year Scientologist**

Imagine the life of a woman living as a sacred prostitute to help support the leader of a religious cult that controlled her existence for 15 years. Or a woman restrained for 9 years behind barbed-wire fences under 24/7 security watch at a cult's desert headquarters with no phone or computer access while she and other staff labored to support its celebrity membership. Then ask yourself, what was the likelihood that these two women would manage to break free of captivity where their essence--their individual creativity--was thoroughly oppressed, and start over, finding meaningful and joy-giving work in the world outside their cults?

Why focus on creativity when talking about cults or the squelching of "inalienable" human rights? After all, a healthy self-identity and freedom of creativity may seem less important than dealing with the wanton disregard of basic human freedoms. But the importance of creativity should not be underestimated. Creativity fuels an attitude of "anything is possible" and cultivates the belief that solutions are always within reach. Dictionaries define *creativity* as "the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations; originality, progressiveness, imagination" In a healthy environment, an individual can harness her idea-generating powers and problem-solving abilities to make her life her own masterpiece. But while under the control of a perpetrator--a cult leader, a dominant spouse or abusive parent, a bully boss, an oppressive religious leader--prolonged contact results in a special kind of relationship, one of coercive control that oppresses creativity.

Judith Lewis Herman, M.D., author of *Trauma and Recovery*, says the special relationship of coercive control is found within the public sphere of politics, the private sphere of sexual and domestic relations, and when a victim is taken by a combination of force, intimidation, and enticement as in the case of religious cult members, battered women, and abused children. An environment of coercion reduces the ability to think autonomously and creatively in varying degrees. The perpetrator seeks to destroy the victim's sense of autonomy or "sense of separateness, flexibility, and self-possession sufficient to define one's interests, and make choices."

Dr. Herman describes perpetrators' methods of establishing control over another person that are based upon "the systematic, repetitive infliction of psychological trauma. They are the organized techniques of disempowerment and disconnection." Various methods of psychological control are designed to instill terror and helplessness and to destroy the victim's sense of self in relation to others." Women trapped within coercive control (battered women, prostitutes, cult

members, prisoners) develop the capacity to restrict and suppress their thoughts and limit them to the present. “Thoughts of the future stir up yearning and hope which are unbearable,” so an oppressed woman will narrow her attention, focusing on extremely limited goals. Her future is reduced to considering the next few hours or days.

Breaking free from a cult or other controlling circumstances--much less leaving something that is familiar, regardless of how destructive that familiarity may be--might appear to be impossible, or at the minimum, is a difficult decision to make. A woman subordinated to coercive control will experience varying degrees of constriction in initiative and planning when she thinks about escaping. If she possesses some creative thinking abilities, she can review her circumstances and plan a means of leaving as well as a destination. If her creative abilities are completely broken, she will be unlikely to think of ways to escape, but instead, will think of how to stay alive, or how to make her circumstances more bearable. For example, a prostitute may imagine ways of hiding money from her pimp; a cult member may figure out how to secretly find and enjoy moments of personal time uncontrolled by leaders; a battered woman may scheme ways of hiding when another attack is imminent.

Until a woman finds the inner courage to sever ties with a cult--or with any circumstances to which a woman is subordinated to coercive control--what keeps the embers burning that prevent her inner creative self from being snuffed out forever? Once out of the cults, each of the women mentioned above earned college degrees, built new careers, and became published authors. Both women claim that their “secret creative self” that stayed kindled for years under the smoldering ruins of wrecked lives is what ultimately enabled them to break free of the oppression.

Who are these women? How did they maintain an existence inside the cults where leaders used their power to hold dominion over the disempowered members? And how did their “secret creative self” emerge or help them to manage their circumstances once they broke free of the constraints and started new lives?

Miriam’s Story

Miriam Williams Boeri, a former member of the Children of God (COG) cult, wrote *Heaven’s Harlots* (William Morrow, 1998) to describe her 15 years as a sacred prostitute in COG. She lived in a communal environment while following COG’s messianic leader, David “Moses” (Mo) Berg, throughout Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. Berg used his leadership position as sovereign of the COG’s power elite (leadership team) to propagandize his divine revelations from God to the international COG network through his “Mo” letters, which became sacred texts of the group. Berg’s interpretation of the Bible mandated that female COG members sell their bodies on the street as a means of sharing the gospel with men who otherwise might not hear that message of salvation. The young women’s earnings financed Berg’s lifestyle and overall COG operations, and afforded the girls a controlled lifestyle complete with arranged marriages, childcare for their babies, meals and a home. The women also served the males of the group--which included Fleetwood Mac musician Jeremy Spencer--who assumed the artistically creative roles of musicians, writers, and visual artists who earned legitimate income outside the group.

Though Miriam also earned income for the group during a short stint as a performer dancing for some of the COG musicians' concerts, her creative urge as a writer was criticized and suppressed. Berg inadvertently read one of Miriam's stories she wrote for the children of COG. Angered at her independent creative expression that had not received his approval, he deemed her "uncreative." This stigma prevented her from ever holding creative roles in the group. Refusing to limit her perception of herself to the persona (a "looking glass self," (see Figure 1) influenced by Berg and his supporters, she continued to write in secret. She believes that her secret creative self birthed during this time. She shared some of her writing with people outside the COG whom she met on the streets, and who encouraged her to get published. Her decision to finally leave the COG to pursue writing led to a move back to the United States where she rebuilt her life.

Miriam earned her bachelor's and master's degrees and then her Ph.D. in sociology. Her academic research receives strong grant support that enables her to focus on analysis of deviant groups such as drug subcultures and certain new religious movements. She has become a published author of books, as well as dozens of scholarly articles, including several that she is presenting in London and New York in 2010. Writing *Heaven's Harlots* helped her to make sense of her COG experiences by examining the details of her past and integrating them into her ongoing life story. Disavowing her experiences would have allowed fragments of her past to remain alive and cause difficulty in the present from traumatic memories. Miriam is presently conducting research and writing a book about women addicted to meth-amphetamines, exploring how women live through drug addiction and drug recovery.

Miriam now works as a professor of sociology at Kennesaw State University in Georgia. She raised a family of five children, each of whom pursued journeys through higher education. Two sons work as mathematicians, one in South Korea, and one in Berlin. Two daughters have become sociologists, one in Ft. Lauderdale, FL., and one in New York. Another daughter is pursuing her MBA in a Boston-China program. Miriam enjoys traveling to see her children during breaks from research, teaching, and writing, and sometimes co-presents at conferences with them.

Karen's Story

I am the second woman. I met Dr. Miriam Boeri, the professor of one of my honors writing classes in 2005. I got to know her better in a class she taught on religious studies, during which I shared my cult experiences for the first time with a professor. I'm a former 16-year member of the Church of Scientology International (CSI). Just a decade ago I recruited celebrities for Scientology in Hollywood and then worked behind barbed wire fences for 9 years at CSI's senior management headquarters in the Southern California desert. Before Scientology, I enjoyed a creative career as a fashion designer in Hollywood and co-directed our music publishing company and recording studio with my (then) husband. We achieved a taste of the good life from our hit songs including "On the Wings of Love," a 1982 Grammy-nominated song he co-wrote with recording artist Jeffrey Osborne, and the theme song to Sylvester Stallone's film "Rambo: First Blood Part II." We met Hollywood people who told us about Scientology's Celebrity Centre. There we were lured by L. Ron Hubbard's ideology emphasizing the artist's role in spearheading a new civilization, a world without war, criminality, or insanity.

Scientology's indoctrinations eventually led to our abandonment of careers and home. We pledged our life and future lifetimes--indeed, we signed a billion-year contract--to spreading Scientology in order to help "clear the planet" of its destructive urges to destroy humankind. I worked for CSI in various creative roles, including as the international staff image officer, helping to improve the image of Scientology so as to increase its acceptance and income worldwide. I traveled to Scientology bases around the world where I designed and manufactured clothing and uniforms for church staff. However, the power elite of CSI (the church leader and his staff) controlled and censored my creative work as well as nearly all aspects of my life (see Figure 2 for an illustration of this situation). I never consciously relinquished sovereignty over my life to the leadership, but my gradual indoctrination led to the leaders' near absolute sovereignty over me. I couldn't enjoy the adventure of world travel because it was done within the mental confines of the groups' regulations. But my travels did enable me to observe leadership's abuse of power over staff members in the form of human rights violations such as staff working in slave-labor conditions with substandard pay, food, housing, and childcare conditions. At the International Management headquarters, I experienced other egregious human rights violations. Like hundreds of the other staff, I lived under 24/7 security watch, was forbidden to have a television, a cell phone or a telephone in my room, could not own a personal computer or access one whenever I was off base; any calls that I did receive from outside callers were monitored by security guards. Women who got pregnant were coerced into having abortions to maintain their ability to work for the Church of Scientology undistracted by a family.

Hating the thought that I might have to remain in what I felt had become an Orwellian nightmare, I frequently fantasized about gaining my life back where I was free to express my creative talent in ways that could forward a lucrative career as a designer. Worse, I would waver in and out of having a grip on what I considered to be my true self. I saw myself through the views others formed of me--my "looking glass self" (see Figure 1). In a desperate attempt to retain my essence, I believe that a secret creative self birthed at this time. A self developed that I kept private and secret; a self that imagined, expressed ideas, and designed beautiful images, if only in my thoughts. I believe it was this secret creative self that kept me alive during these nine oppressive years.

My appeals to my husband to leave and recover our lives fell on deaf ears. I attempted to escape in 1990 and 1993, but both times was coerced into returning to be with my husband, before I escaped for good in 1998. During my 16 years with the Church of Scientology, I had sublimated my creative abilities to the dictates of charismatic authoritarian leadership; my 20-year marriage dissipated from a passionate and vibrant relationship to an estranged partnership; and I loathed supporting the management of a "religion" whose actions contradicted the ideology that had lured me to it in the first place.

Beginning the long process of recovering my life and assimilating into "normal" American culture felt like moving back to Earth after a long sojourn on another planet. Thus began the era I call my "personal renaissance." I established KAP Communications, Inc. in Atlanta and now work as a consultant to media and families affected by cults. My primary healing process, however, has been writing. By connecting with the details of my circumstances, particularly the

most painful moments with CSI perpetrators, including my former husband, I've managed to diffuse the power these memories could have otherwise had on me in the present. Avoidance of the memories could have brought to bear all the powers of thought control that I experienced in CSI. I contracted with publishers in 2001 and 2006 to write my Scientology story, but CSI discovered their publication and levied threats that suppressed them from release. Nevertheless, I've become an avid writer and active speaker. Through interviews broadcast on *CNN*, *Dateline NBC*, *CBS Inside Edition*, the French television network *M6*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, I have shared some of my Scientology experiences in the hopes of exposing the oppression and human rights violations that I experienced and cautioning others from subjecting themselves to this.

Converging journeys

My college education unfolded not only new ways of thinking but led me to develop invaluable relationships through some unusually unique opportunities, which I count as part of my blessing field. How likely was it that Miriam Boeri and I would meet at a Georgia university with her as the professor and with me as her student after we had each traveled the globe and left a cult? Individually, we had begun separate journeys at universities to study how people end up in oppressive environments such as cults. We discovered each other's background in the cultic groups and began to share stories. I could hardly believe that not only had I met another woman near my age who had escaped from a cult but that she, too, had survived it and successfully rebuilt her life. What I saw in Miriam inspired me. She already embodied what I was becoming--a highly educated, productive professional who draws strength from her past and uses it energetically to advance her personal and professional goals. I believe she recognized my passion for learning and the unleashed initiative that came from reclaiming control over my life like she had experienced. Though I was a fledgling scholar, she saw my determination to advance my education, and we began to collaborate as researchers and writers. Her scholarly support and personal encouragement--added to my growing autonomy--marks a significant period of empowerment in the ongoing process of rebuilding my life.

Miriam had already published numerous scholarly articles before she invited me to collaborate with her to write a journal article about cults' affects on creativity. Our first collaboration was published in *Cultic Studies Review* (June 2010), "Creativity and Cults from Sociological and Communication Perspectives: The Processes Involved in the Birth of a Secret Creative Self." In the year-long process of writing that article, Miriam mentored me as we developed our ideas of how oppressive experiences in a cult affect individual creativity. One of the questions we strove to answer was *how does an individual communicate or function when she feels powerless to express her creativity?* Miriam used her experiences in the COG and I used mine in CSI as our initial case studies, with the plan to expand our research through interviews with other former cult members. Meanwhile, she drew from sociology theories while I drew from my field of communication theory to show how suppressive relationships may be fertile ground for birthing a secret creative self that actually helped each of us to survive in and then flourish once outside of the cult.

The issues Miriam and I explore in our article are relevant to many women we encounter who are not in cults but who feel stuck in unhealthy situations or are trapped within some kind of coercive control. I'm sharing some of the most significant concepts here so that individual

women, counselors, researchers, and other professionals can gain insight from our experiences and improve their own circumstances or help others. The most important concepts include an understanding of what creativity is and how it affects the self, how the use of power affects communication and autonomy, how turning points build up to become breaking points, and the options a disempowered individual has when responding to a perpetrator.

Understanding creativity: Miriam and I developed an expanded definition of creativity that builds on the “power” aspect of cult life and oppressive relationships. Creativity is “expression of thought (i.e. feelings, emotions, and/or philosophies) that originates from the freedom to think with minimal restraints from the social environment.” Complete freedom of thought is impossible--we’re always influenced by some outside force, rule, or message--so it is more useful to think of creativity along a continuum of power. This can range from an unconstrained environment on one end that encourages freedom of thought, to total restriction of thought within a cultic milieu or other coercive control on the other end.

Creativity and the self: Since creativity is inseparable from the self--and a plethora of social science theories exist that explain the “self”--we drew from sociology’s “symbolic interaction” theory to show how the self is socially constructed. Sociologist William James saw the *I* as the knower (the creative self); the *me* is the known, the self-concept formed by how one sees oneself through the eyes of others. “Who I think I am” is influenced and shaped by what I think others perceive about me. The process starts with how I imagine my appearance (self) in the eyes of others, followed by my perception of how others evaluate me in a situation, and ends in my reaction to this perception. The collection of perceptions the individual gathers from others and the individual’s reaction to these perceptions form a sense of self. This “looking glass self,” a concept developed by Herbert Cooley, can be troubling when it is out of alignment with how we see ourselves. We connect the looking-glass-self theory to our belief about the development of a secret creative self and how it affects creativity. We suggest that it is at that critical point, when the individual reacts to her perception of others’ evaluations that the birth of a secret creative self may occur. See Figure 1 for an adaptation of our original illustration of this concept. Once a woman realizes that a perpetrator enforces an image of her onto herself, she can see that power is used to oppress her self identity and creativity. One of the most essential elements to understand or a woman who wants to break free from this oppression is how to respond to power when she feels powerless in an oppressive relationship.

Communication in a controlled setting: Various characteristics shape the communication between an oppressor (such as a cult leader or an abusive perpetrator), and less powerful individuals. First, the flow of communication is totalistic, hierarchical from the top (perpetrator) down, versus equal two-way dialogue, or even servant leadership that works from the bottom up. For example, in Miriam’s and my cult environments, orders and controlling behavior from the leadership suppressed our creativity and autonomy.

To help illustrate this idea, I’ve created an adaptation of my original communication model for you to examine. Figure 2, “The Communication Model of Power Plays in Oppressive Relationships,” shows the options a woman has under coercive control when choosing her response to the dominant perpetrator. For example, the ideology of an abusive spouse could be “You’re lucky to have a roof over your head so you better show appreciation for what I give you

or you'll be on the street and have nothing." The ideology of a cult leader could be "This is the only group that can save mankind so don't even think about leaving or you'll lose your eternity." In coercive environments, the options for response seem limited.

Figure 2 shows the choices or routes of thinking that the disempowered individual has when responding to the perpetrator. She will use the submissive route if she exercises no mental effort to question or interpret the oppressor, whether out of fear or because she believes she cannot act on her own free will. She will use the independent route if she is free to exert some mental effort to interpret the perpetrator. She may negotiate her autonomy and hide her creativity and independent thinking so she can stay safe while harboring a hidden will for self-autonomy. *The secret creative self may birth at this point.* Or, she may challenge the perpetrator and take action to change the circumstances, or she may leave the environment.

The looking-glass-self theory suggests that at that critical point, when the individual reacts to her perception of the perpetrator's evaluations, that the birth of the secret creative self may occur. A woman trapped under coercive control may feel defenseless against the power of her perpetrator. A battered woman, an oppressed worker, and a cult member build up "turning points" that can lead to breaking points.

Turning points and breaking points: Suppressive incidents (such as an abusive spouse inflicting injury on a battered woman, or a cult leader telling a member that she may not express herself creatively), stack up in the woman's life. A woman can bury her creative ideas as well as troubled emotions that follow each incident, and store these memories like boxes on a shelf in her mind. We call these incidents "turning points." Leading cult expert and sociology professor at the University of California at Chico, Dr. Janja Lalich, told me that "Enough turning points pile up on the shelf, the shelf will break. That breaking point can be the very thing that causes an individual to mentally or emotionally shut down, or to cause the individual to make the decision to get out of the oppressive relationship in order to survive."

Observing the abuse of power is a good way of also observing how power seems to benefit the dominant individual at the expense of the less powerful. This process includes actions like the perpetrator's power to define what should and should not be done, what is right and wrong, good and bad, legal and illegal. For example, Miriam and I ultimately relinquished sovereignty (power and control) over our lives to the leaders of the group by joining COG and CSI. The leaders held the power to monitor our daily behavior and even control our communication and mobility. They held the power to draw arbitrary lines between our choices such as which people in the "outside world" were friends or enemies of our groups; who we should be married to; whether or not we should have children; what behavior is normal or abnormal. Each of our personal stories reveal various turning points that piled up until we reached our final breaking point and chose to leave the group. Reaching a breaking point and choosing to get out of the bad relationship, though traumatic, is a good sign of the woman's strength in reclaiming power over her life. That is just one of the life lessons I gleaned from these experiences.

Life Lessons

When you read Miriam's and my stories about living inside and then outside two different cults, you might have wondered, why did we get involved in those groups? And why didn't we just leave when we wanted to? As you can probably surmise by now, when we first got involved, neither one of us woke up one day and decided, "hmm, I think I'll joint a cult today." After reading our stories, you might understand how easy it is to miss the signs that could have prevented a bad experience. Just as you may never have made a conscious decision to become involved in a relationship or organization that ended up oppressing your life to some degree. If you ever do end up in oppressive circumstances always ask yourself, *did I miss the signs that led to my entrapment, or did I ignore them by compromising what was right for me?*

Just as there were signs leading to the unhealthy relationship with CSI that I found myself in but compromised what was right for me, there were also signs that pointed to a road of recovery once I left the oppressive group. I've learned that recovery from heavy control is highly dependent on the empowerment of the individual through creation of new connections in various aspects of life. Creative thinking plays a strong role in this recovery, particularly "the recreation of basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy," Dr. Herman wrote. Connecting with Miriam and then with other scholars and professionals who encourage me in my work serves to empower me and propel me into my career. The outcomes of these productive and encouraging relationships include my accomplishments of finishing my undergraduate degree, starting a new company, pursuing a master's degree, getting a literary agent, and writing several new book proposals on top of the book contracts I've already received.

I also learned a broad-reaching principle about starting over: Many well-meaning relatives or friends of faith may offer to help, but no intervention that reduces a woman's power or creativity can foster her recovery. A woman must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery. Here are a few more nuggets of wisdom gleaned through my experiences that you might find helpful if our story has inspired you to review your life or the life of a loved one:

- Staying true to basic instincts of what is right for you will help you avoid compromise. Compromising can lead to reduction of autonomy, entrapment, and relinquishment of self-sovereignty.
- Turning points pile up in the mind like weight on a shelf. Enough weight, and the shelf breaks. At the breaking point you have to say, it's time to get out of the unhealthy situation, or *you* will break.
- Reclaiming sovereignty over your own thinking, autonomy, and decision-making will restore your creativity and can even cause a personal renaissance.
- Empowerment comes from the convergence of autonomy and support from your environment.
- Higher education can help make sense of past experiences in new ways and lead to resurgence of self and restructuring of critical thinking skills that trigger creativity and productivity.

Miriam and I are no heroes; we're just women with enough courage and determination to save our life. I hope our experiences are an eye-opener. If they've waved red flags or sent up rockets trying to get your attention about similar circumstances in your life, take heed; now is not the time to ignore them, or to compromise. It's always easier getting into than getting out of

oppressive relationships or organizations. But I hope that our suggestions and life lessons about the importance of creativity offer a helpful solution for you and any woman you know whose creative self is obscured to any degree by unhealthy relationships. Of course, personal gain can also be costly.

Price of freedom

Women who find themselves trapped in an oppressive relationship and controlled by a power elite like Miriam and I found ourselves may harbor the desire to reclaim sovereignty over their free will and creative abilities. But the idea of making the break and starting over again may be so daunting that we decide to remain where we are, *despite the costs*. What *are* the costs? Speaking from my experiences, the costs of staying in the cult included my loss of self identity, free will, creativity, and ability to flex critical thinking skills, to name just a few. The costs of getting out included the loss of my husband of 20 years, accepting that I had made substantial errors in judgment, and facing the overwhelming task of starting over.

But the benefits of the blessing field I inherited in my new life outweigh my losses. I rejoined my family after 16 years of estrangement, purged my old beliefs and vocabulary, rediscovered my opinions and shaped a new world view, got a job without having much of a resume, rebuilt my career, and decided that I, too, could be successful in marriage again and took that leap. The constraints that once choked my initiative are now unleashed. It seems that everything I touch--every opportunity that comes my way, every new friend I make, every element of my life that I develop--is a special gift. People who know me well know of my hyper-exuberance about school and professional opportunities, and my hyper-gratitude about everything I've inherited as a result of gaining my freedom. And each gift comes with a blessing, a special measure of opportunity to make the most of what I regained. With the freedom to pursue my education, every book I crack, story I read, and fact I learn, every essay I write or project I do, serves as yet another explosive opportunity, a new discovery, a milestone, the promise of more new growth, another gift.

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