

Hulu's new cult doc 'Stolen Youth: Inside the Cult at Sarah Lawrence' proves what Trump and QAnon know: It's actually very easy to manipulate people's minds

By Steven Hassan

To the majority of the population, the idea of falling for false truths or "joining a cult" seems completely confounding. However, if you look at radicalized followers of QAnon, or those that stormed the Capitol on January 6th, you'll realize that plenty of people truly believe in things that might seem just plain irrational to you. The question is, how can seemingly intelligent, even highly educated people truly believe in things like Anderson Cooper eats babies or even that the earth is flat? But it's actually pretty simple to exert mind control over individuals. I have personal experience with this. In 1974, when I was 19, I was recruited at Queens College into a front group for the Unification Church, also known as "the Moonies," and very quickly went from being a smart student who loved to read and play basketball to believing that World War III was going to happen in 1977 and that God was sending us the new Messiah in Sun Myung Moon. I had my entire identity completely rewired. I believed my family was evil and satanic, and if I'd been told to hurt my family in the name of our messiah, I would have done so without hesitation.

The new Hulu documentary "Stolen Youth: Inside the Cult at Sarah Lawrence," proves how anyone can be susceptible to mind control — yes, even free-thinking liberal arts students at a private university. The three-part series follows the story of Lawrence Ray, who, in 2010, moved in with his daughter's roommates in off-campus housing and psychologically manipulated her friends into doing whatever he said, including paying him hundreds of thousands of dollars. One of them was trafficked as an escort in order to pay off her (fake) debts to him. The fascinating thing about the series is that it contains video and audio footage taken by Ray, which shows the tactics he used on these promising young men and women, including Felicia Rosario, who was a Harvard University graduate and a graduate of Columbia University Medical School, training to become a forensic psychiatrist before she fell under Larry's spell.

What Ray knew, as most of the narcissists and psychopaths cult leaders do, is that while we think we're rational beings, we're not. We're emotional beings. We believe we know things, but we've been taught things by a network of people we trust, be it teachers or books, or media. We're wired to follow who we think are legitimate authority figures. ("That celebrity drinks a certain beer, so I should drink that beer!") Anyone's mind can be manipulated by someone they believe to be a legitimate authority figure, especially when given a story by someone who is very charming and convincing. When I wrote my book *The Cult of Trump*, I predicted that he would never voluntarily cede power and would attempt to create as much damage as possible if he lost the election—but I also warned that his followers would become violent, because when I was in the Moon Cult, I would have obeyed any order from Sun Myung Moon, including breaking the law. I am certain that if I had not left the cult, I too would have attacked the Capitol on January 6th alongside the Moonies present that day. In 1974, Moon ordered us to fast for 3 days at the Capitol steps, because "God wanted Nixon to be President," despite Watergate.

Unfortunately, we also currently live in a world of undue influence through technology and social media. Anyone could stay up all night reading a conspiracy theory news board, where

they might have artificial intelligence (AI) used on them to trigger a sequence of emotional states and start to believe everything they've just read. It's psyops or psychological warfare, and so much of it is aimed at getting people to distrust experts, science, and institutions. It's a way of disorienting people's anchors of what's real and what's true, which is exactly what Ray did to his followers. Mind control is not some mystical process; it's a specific set of methods and techniques used by individuals, which I've described in my BITE Model of Authoritarian Control at the Freedom of Mind Resource Center. (www.freedomofmind.com) The acronym stands for Behavior, Information, Thought, and Emotional control, and once an individual has lost those controls, it's extremely difficult to get them back.

So what happens if you've lost a family member to the cult of Trump or QAnon or any other cult? Unfortunately, you can't just "snap them out of it." In my experience, the best thing to do is to be warmly engaged and ask them questions in a respectful way. Don't call them names, say they're stupid, or block them on Facebook. Be kind and tell them, "I respect you. How did you come to believe this? Go back in time and walk me through it," and really try to figure out their mindset. That can work when it's done properly. As an individual, you also must look at everything from varying perspectives. Don't rely on just one source. Trust your ability to be discerning, and ask yourself, "Are there facts to support this or evidence or not?" If something's legitimate, it will stand up to scrutiny. And be wary of any institution that wants to separate you from your family, which is one of the most common tactics used by cults.

It was difficult, but I managed to leave the Moonies and have since dedicated my life and career to helping others do the same. I believe we need to treat mind control as a virus. To inoculate the public, we need preventative education. A great way to educate people is to have former cult members share their stories, like Felicia and Santos Rosario, and Daniel Levin do in *Stolen Youth*. They prove that there is life after cults. We also need more resources for those leaving cults because it can be humiliating to admit you were a victim of mind manipulation when it's actually a true signal of strength to be able to say, "I once thought this, but now I think this." Life is a journey. But I have optimism when it comes to undue influence, as long as we remember that love is stronger than mind control. Love is stronger than fear. Truth is stronger than lies, and as a human race, we've survived this far by working in cooperation with each other, not under authoritarianism, coercion, or brute force.