

CULT FICTION:

*One Writer's Creative Journey
Through an Extreme Religion*

by **K. Gordon Neufeld**

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Introduction:
On Writing about Extreme Religion

Introduction: On Writing about Extreme Religion

This book consists primarily of a series of academic papers I prepared for the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) for presentation at their conferences. The first three essays survey the creative work I completed as a writer before, during, and after my involvement in the Unification Church of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. All three of these essays were prepared for the ICSA conference held July 3 to 5, 2014 in Washington, D.C. The first of these three essays (“Lost in the Metro”) was presented at the conference and the other two were made available to interested participants by email or through the purchase of this book. The final essay, which forms the Conclusion to this book, was prepared for, and presented at, an ICSA conference held June 13 to 14, 2003 in Orange, California.

As I set out to publish these essays as a collection, I felt it would be important to include examples of the creative works that I discussed in the academic papers so the reader can get a full sense of what I was thinking and feeling during the three years leading up to my involvement in the Unification Church, during the six final years of my active involvement in the Unification Church, and throughout the many years following my decision to leave the group.

This book may be considered complementary to my memoir, *Heartbreak and Rage: Ten Years Under Sun Myung Moon, A Cult Survivor’s Memoir* (College Station, Texas: Virtualbookworm.com, Inc., 2002). That book attempted to tell, through an honest and carefully-crafted chronological narrative, what happened to me while I was a member of the Unification Church from 1976 to 1986, and in subsequent years up to the time of writing.

This book re-examines the same material, but from the standpoint of the creative writing I produced before, during and after my involvement. The goal is to examine and present these creative works as primary source material to understand what led me, (and, indeed, what might lead any person,) to join an extreme religion such as the Unification Church; what effect my involvement in an extreme religion had on my creativity (and, conversely, what effect such creativity had on my involvement); and finally, what effects my creativity had on my recovery from such an experience.

That said, I feel it is necessary to add a few words about why I believe the creative or artistic approach to addressing extreme religion is just as important as the more straight-forward non-fiction or memoir-style approach. Both are needed, and it could be argued that for many former cult members, it is actually essential to their recovery for them to write a

straight-forward account of what happened to them; not only because it informs others, but more importantly, because it assists them with their own process of understanding and healing.

That was certainly my experience. After trying to write a number of short stories and a novella based on my experiences in the Unification Church, I resolved to tackle my story in a series of personal essays, but then finally concluded that nothing would do but to recount the complete story in a full-length memoir. That memoir eventually became (after seven years of drafting and revisions), the book titled *Heartbreak and Rage: Ten Years Under Sun Myung Moon, A Cult Survivor's Memoir*.

Yet, even after I completed that memoir, I continued to feel that the experience of being involved in an extreme religion deserves to be treated in poetry and short stories as well as in memoir, in part because literature has an enduring power that non-fiction can only dream of matching. Literary works are more than just a record of a particular time and chain of events; they are capable of encapsulating an entire way of being, and as such, they can persist in the public imagination long after more factual accounts of the same time and events have been lost to obscurity. Consider, for example, which non-fiction accounts of Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia are still remembered and read with the same zeal as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*? Similarly, it may well be that the heart-wrenching memoirs of people whose lives have been affected by cult involvement will not, ultimately, be as long remembered in the public mind as may be the imagined recreations of those lives in enduring literary works.

That said, an important question needs to be addressed about the process of treating cults in fiction. Like any literary artist, I have taken real facts and events, and kneaded them into a dough that also contains credible but imaginary happenings, together with similar facts and events that were told to me by others. The result is a literary artifact which is neither unvarnished truth nor total fantasy, but something in between.

I once encountered a former member of an extreme religion who was unhappy that I was writing about cults in fiction, rather than sticking to the facts as I experienced them. Her point of view was that I was discrediting the real accounts of former members by creating fictional stories that cannot be shown to have literally occurred. Cult apologists, she reasoned, would seize on these fictional works as proof that all such accounts by former cult members are fabrications.

I can offer no rebuttal to this argument except to point out the legacy of literature as an enduring part of the human dialogue. The literary impulse persists; and for those who, (like me), feel it is a compelling impulse, there is simply nothing for it but to address extreme religion through literature, as we must do for all other aspects of human experience.

In that spirit, then, I offer these essays, poems and stories, as evidence of what was going on in my mind before, during, and after my

involvement in an extreme religion. Many of the stories and poems were written during an immature phase of my literary development, and consequently, they are not exceptional works that could stand on their own merits or would be likely to find publication outside of this exemplary context. I have included them anyway, because they are instructive of my state of mind during those three eras; and therefore, they may provide a glimpse into the states of mind of other cult survivors before, during and after their involvement in extreme religions.

K. Gordon Neufeld
March 2014

Part One:

Lost in the Metro

Lost in the Metro: One Writer's Creative Journey on the Eve of a "Radical Departure" (1973-1976)

Abstract

*The author surveys the creative writing works he completed in the period of his life from 1973-1976, just prior to his joining the Unification Church. The author details the predominant themes of his creative work during this phase of his life, drawing conclusions about both his psychological vulnerability and his intellectual resistance to being caught up in an extreme religion. The author examines the evidence of psychological vulnerability and compares it to the model proposed by Saul Levine in *Radical Departures: Desperate Detours to Growing Up* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984). The author draws upon his memories of the conversion experience to determine whether psychological vulnerability is a sufficient explanation for his conversion, or whether it should instead be attributed to mind control and mental manipulation, and concludes that his conversion is attributable to both psychological vulnerability and mind control.*

Introduction

I have dreamed of being a writer since the fourth grade, when my teacher asked that everyone in her class create his or her own magazine, the centerpiece of which would be a short story. I decided to try to write a story that would be as exciting as the Hardy Boys mystery series or the Enid Blyton adventure series that I was then reading. And so I wrote "Mystery Canyon", in which two boys, while on vacation in the mountains, stumble across the hideout of some bad guys and, after being captured, manage to escape and expose their evil deeds. Once I had finished that story I knew that when I grew up, I would be a writer.

Even so, I didn't do much to advance these ambitions until after I had been a university undergraduate student in Calgary, Canada, for two years. I had been studying English, but I felt that I was getting nowhere in terms of my writing dream. So I dropped out of university and decided to hitch-hike to Eastern Canada, where I hoped to settle down to do some serious writing.

In the late summer of 1973 I travelled through Quebec and Canada's Maritime provinces, but eventually returned to Montreal to conduct my experiment. Naturally I had to get a job, find an apartment, and so on, and so I didn't get much real writing done during the nine months I was in Montreal, with the exception of one bleak poem titled "Lonely Man's Song" and one quirky short story titled "How to Be Forgiven for Existing" which was about

(among other things), a man who dives into the World's Largest Ice Cream Sundae wearing an explosive belt. It was a start.

In the spring of 1974 I came up with a new plan: I would resume studying for a Bachelor of Arts in English, but I would do so at a school which offered a serious program in Creative Writing. I transferred to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. And so from 1974 to 1976, shortly before I met and joined the Unification Church, I studied English and Creative Writing at UBC, and while I did, I wrote a series of poems and stories that reflected my obsessions during those years.

Four themes emerge from the stories and poems I wrote during this time period. The first was a desperate feeling of loneliness and alienation. The second was an earnest quest for life's ultimate meaning which invariably led me to the conclusion that trying to discern life's ultimate meaning is a fool's errand. The third was a concern about the destruction of the natural world and a belief that this destruction was due to humanity's alienation from its natural self. The fourth was a growing conviction that the solution to what disturbed me emotionally was to rediscover and re-experience the forgotten sources of my emotional pain through a process known as Primal Therapy. I will examine each of these four themes in turn.

1. Stories and Poems about Social Anxiety and Existential Alienation

During the time period that I am discussing I was aged 20 to 23 years old. I desperately wanted to feel normal, to feel that I could love and be loved, and to find a girl friend who would love me. And yet, due to my intense shyness, I simply couldn't bring myself to do what was needed to find a partner. Whenever I attempted to approach a woman, I was overwhelmed by a feeling that I shouldn't even attempt it, and that love and sex were really for other people, and not for me. And so, to overcome the tremendous anxiety I would experience when I tried to approach a woman, I would be forced to invest all the emotional capital I had – literally everything I had in me – just to get up the nerve to make the initial approach. After that, I had no ability to follow through.

I should mention that shortly before I left Calgary in 1973, I did approach one young woman, and we developed a sort of connection which did not include sexual intimacy. After I moved to Montreal this turned into a long-distance relationship, and even though we resumed the relationship when I moved back to western Canada, it never developed into the kind of love affair I was seeking. My creative work throughout this period often touches on my profound feelings of social anxiety and existential alienation. The piece that expresses this most forcefully was in fact the first thing I wrote when I recommenced writing in 1974, namely the poem titled "Lonely Man's Song".

"Lonely Man's Song" is divided into several poetic segments written in different styles, some employing poetic meter, some not. In two places this refrain appears:

O let me taste once more the melancholy wine
that gently trickles down to soothe my roughened throat
like tears that smooth again with tender wet those cheeks
made raw and chapped from over frequent flows of tears.

These lines reflect my awareness that my depression was a kind of self-reinforcing thing, in which the more I indulged in it, the more I was entrapped by it. “Lonely Man’s Song” is a poem about a depressed man sitting by himself in a café drinking a cup of coffee and staring out the window. He is asking himself, “Why do I live?” Then a young woman comes into the café, accompanied by a young man, and both are laughing. The sight of the attractive young woman with her companion enjoying the kind of relationship the depressed man longs for pushes him into a kind of despair. For a moment, he even considers suicide. In his thoughts he exclaims: “Death! / Joysorrow word! / Alters me to accord with that never!” Eventually, he pays for his coffee and leaves, and the poem concludes:

His eyes looked at no-one; he paid the bill quickly,
then made his escape to the winter air’s harshness
congesting his lungs with the stench of the city,
and choking on life and defeat of his making.

As these lines show, the intense feelings of alienation I was experiencing were accompanied with a kind of self-disgust or exasperation with myself for not being able to overcome these feelings. This exasperation reappears in a brief short story I wrote early on during my time at UBC, titled “Glimpses of the Hitchhiker”, which contains the lines: “With sudden clarity I realized that he was afraid: afraid of people, afraid to stay in one place, afraid to experience one clear moment, and I could have dashed the earth against the sky for his monumental cowardice.”

Similarly, I passed judgment upon myself for my sheer desperation to have a love affair in a short story I wrote during late 1974 or early 1975 at UBC titled “Two Minutes (With Dessert)”. This story was loosely based on my renewed relationship with the woman I had approached before I left for Montreal, who came out to Vancouver at the same time I did, and who similarly studied at UBC, though she later dropped out. In the story, a young couple is sitting in a restaurant, and the man is almost desperate to show the woman his affection for her, in a way that ultimately seems overwhelming to her. Following his declaration that he wouldn’t want any other woman than her, she reflects: “He waved [his words] about like a knight would brandish his sword, thinking perhaps to sacrifice himself and his pride honorably in the name of some ideal concept called ‘love’. She realized then that she could never be pleased by his kindnesses so long as they were not meant so much for her as to serve that ideal.”

In late 1975, I started to view social and existential alienation as something more than just a personal problem. I came to see it as something that is experienced by everyone to some extent – what I began to think of as “the primal alienation of Western man.” For example, in a short story written in early 1976, “At the Point of Intersection,” the narrator is a nameless amnesiac walking on a highway at night who views himself as a single point travelling along a geometric line through empty space. I will examine this story more fully later when I talk about the idea of the primal cure.

However, it is my favorite work from this period, a surrealistic piece titled “Going to Bonaventure”, which is perhaps my strongest treatment of this recurrent theme of social anxiety and existential alienation. In this story, written in late 1975, a nameless man is lost in the Montreal Métro system. He is trying to get to Bonaventure, which at the time was the last station on one of the Montreal subway lines. Yet every time he gets off the train, he loses his sense of direction, becomes confused, and ends up getting on the wrong train. Once he is safely back on the subway car, his composure returns; his clothes suddenly become neat and tidy, and his shoes regain their shine. But then – to quote the story, “as usual” – someone approaches him, and as soon as he or she does, his clothes begin to disintegrate again. It takes all he can do to rebuff their attempts to convince him to go somewhere other than Bonaventure. First, an attractive young woman sits down next to him, starts to take off her clothes, and begs him to come with her to Peel. Then a fierce woman, carrying two machine guns in a guitar case, addresses him as “Comrade” and tries to convince him to hijack the train at Champ-de-Mars. Then an ascetic-looking young man wearing a crucifix urges him to take the northbound train to Sauvé. After turning them all down, he finds himself at the station where he must change trains for Bonaventure. He stumbles in confusion to what he thinks is the right platform, then realizes that, once again, he is on the wrong one. Suddenly the P.A. system blares:

“Attention, quarante-sept. Quarante-sept, communiquez.”

Forty-seven. His age. And he had no way to respond. Almost made him fall over, too. He leaned against the wall, still looking for the train. The platform began to tilt slowly, but he had the low end. Would it tilt so high that everyone slid down on top of him?

At this moment, my nameless Everyman realizes he is lost. The story concludes:

Lost. The young man said that. Was he right? With a sudden access of fear he remembered the remark. But all was not as usual. It had never occurred to him before that the young man might have been right. He shrank against the wall. Would

he travel forever, around and around inside those beautiful trains? Never knowing one face in the crowds.

The headlights reached out to him, appealing, and he poised on the very edge, waiting for just the right moment. And suddenly he felt sorry for that train, pounding, screaming, ramming, endlessly along those empty tunnels, back and forth without rest.

2. Stories and Poems about the Futility of Seeking Ultimate Meaning

The second theme that occurs repeatedly in the creative work I produced from 1974 to 1976 is a sort of agnosticism, or to be more exact, a belief that ultimate Truth is unknowable, and that therefore, no matter what you decide to believe, it is a pure gamble. I felt then that if I could somehow discern my ultimate purpose for being, and then assiduously follow it, I would no longer have to feel guilty about consuming natural resources in this increasingly crowded and polluted world. So one day in early 1974, I decided I would take the entire day to see if I could reason out what the purpose of life is. I lived at that time in an unfurnished third-floor walk-up apartment in Montreal, and for nearly the entire day I paced back and forth across the hardwood floor, speaking aloud to myself as I struggled to understand by what means I could know with certainty what life is about. After a few hours of pacing, my neighbors in the apartment below became annoyed with the noise and began pounding on the ceiling with a broomstick. Yet I kept going until the early evening, when I finally concluded that there was no definite way to know this ultimate Truth. This conclusion then became the basis for numerous poems and short stories I wrote over the next three years. It appears briefly in “Lonely Man’s Song”, and it is the theme of the first short story I wrote as an adult, “How to Be Forgiven for Existing,” which, despite its dark title, is actually somewhat humorous.

“How to Be Forgiven for Existing” is not a good story. It uses the tired premise that all the events in the story turn out to be a dream, and the characters have ludicrously obvious names like “Ernest Tryon” and “Onier Konchenz.” But it is revealing because it sets out plainly the theme that I continued to develop right up until I joined the Unification Church: that people who argue about the Truth are like fools squabbling over the messages in fortune cookies, and that life is nothing more than a casino in which you are forced to bet on ultimate meaning.

Over and over again I underlined this theme in poems like “Interview” which purports to be an interview with God. Even where this idea is not the dominant theme, it is a secondary theme, for example in “Going to Bonaventure” and “At the Point of Intersection.”

The story which deals most fully with this idea is “The World’s Longest Non-Stop Monopoly Game,” which is also the only story I wrote that was published during this period. This story appeared under the title “Parker’s

Elect” in a collection published in 1976 by Intermedia Press of Vancouver called *Canadian Short Fiction Anthology*. The book came out just as I was becoming immersed in Reverend Moon’s organization.

“The World’s Longest Non-Stop Monopoly Game” depicts six men in a very formal setting who set out to play the longest Monopoly game in history. Each of the six men represents one possible approach to the meaning of life, and the narrator, who is the character I most identified with, is a logician named Ernest Reasoner. Reasoner’s opponents are an aesthete named Art Sieker; a cynic named Mortimer Snerd; a person who always went along with conventional wisdom named Roger Givens; and a mercurial visionary known as “Bright Vision.” Overseeing the Game and acting as banker and rule-giver is “Mr. Pope.” Eventually Mr. Pope is overthrown and all the players are eliminated except Reasoner and Vision. Finally Reasoner prevails with the help of a little logical sophistry, and Vision, in despair, commits suicide, using a starter pistol. Yet even though Reasoner has seemingly won, he feels miserable, and the story ends as follows:

Again and again I cast my eye over the game for evidence of Parker’s presence, or looked about the room for reassurance. But there was nothing that could make me logically certain. At last I laid down my money and put my head on the table, feeling wasted and alone. My sobs boomed off the walls because the place was empty, a void; I could not feel the closeness of Parker, and I knew that when I returned to the outside, there would be no friend waiting to take His place.

“Parker”, of course, is a reference to the Parker Brothers, the “god” of Monopoly. The ending of this story shows how ultimately dissatisfied I was with this philosophical position, even though I could see no way out of it. As I saw it then, life was a gamble, but the prospect left me desolate.

3. Stories and Poems about Pollution and Environmentalism

The third theme which appears in a few of my stories and poems, and which was certainly a major concern of mine generally, was environmentalism, or as it was known back then, “pollution”. I felt that the world was becoming overpopulated and its resources over-taxed, and in the process, our natural heritage was being destroyed, and I loathed the fact that I was part of this destruction. Being an admirer of the Mahatma Gandhi, I tried to live as simply as possible. While I was in Montreal, I volunteered for an anti-pollution group.

My first treatment of the theme of environmentalism was a short piece titled “Arrogance” written shortly after I returned to university in late 1974. “Arrogance” describes a pleasant city park which contains a wish pond in which people throw coins. The narrator confides that he knew the place before

it was turned into a park, and he states that once the pond was a “dank and redolent slough,” and lyrically recalls the life that once lived there. He likens the conversion into a park to a military occupation. He recounts watching a young father with his small daughter while they observed one of the few remaining fish in the pond. The father presses a coin upon her and she dutifully throws it in. Speaking of the fish, the narrator concludes: “even for them, it is a struggle, as the barrage of tainted metals infects their puny space. Sometimes now I find the withered corpse of one among these man-made shoals.”

During my second undergraduate year at UBC, I studied the Romantic poets, especially William Wordsworth, and I became attracted to their idea that Nature is the best teacher and that we can best know our true selves by staying true to Nature. I strongly agreed with Wordsworth’s pronouncement that “The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” I even ended up writing a poem consciously in the manner of Wordsworth titled, “Composed in Stanley Park”, which imagines the ghost of the native Indian poet E. Pauline Johnson still restlessly gliding her canoe over the waters of the lagoon in Vancouver’s Stanley Park.

Speaking of the lagoon at the end of the poem, the poet proclaims:

With freshened eyes I see these waters
 Cleansed of seaweed, scoured of life
 That swam among the weeds along the edge;
 Silent, sullen, still it lies
 A prisoner, while the foreign feet of men
 March on in countless ranks to occupy
 The park. Another captive, too, they hold
 Which they have learned to distrust and despise,
 And have come to view as savage and uncouth:
 It is their natural selves, the inmost man
 That feels a common bond with sky and earth;
 And when they torture him, they feel that pain
 Burning dully in their very core.
 And so they must march on, and subjugate’
 The Earth, for only thus can they
 Subdue the gnawing emptiness within.
 Yet I will hope; for I was given
 This sign that Nature’s presence lingers here
 Which no man can every utterly destroy.

This passage shows how I was beginning to connect the idea that existential alienation is a universal problem with the idea that modern humanity has become alienated from its natural self, and that therefore a return to these primal roots is needed.

4. Stories and Poems about Primal Therapy and the Primal “Cure”

This brings me to the fourth theme that appears in the works I wrote before the Unification Church, namely, the idea of a so-called “Primal” cure, which was inspired by reading about Arthur Janov’s Primal Therapy. In 1970 Janov published *The Primal Scream*, and when I read this book a few years later, I became totally persuaded by his argument that talk therapy is ineffective, and that only by re-experiencing the original sources of trauma, through a process Janov called “primalling”, can emotional pain be relieved. This gave me hope, given that I was feeling so much distress about my own social anxiety. But given that I had begun to expand the idea of existential alienation to include everyone, I wanted to see if I could also turn Janov’s Primal Therapy into some kind of universal solution. This was the idea I was working toward when I met the Unification Church, though I never really formulated it beyond what I have already mentioned.

I began to use Janov’s theory in a number of short stories and poems. The stories would usually consist of three incidents of an escalating nature which would progressively bring the main character closer to rediscovering a repressed memory. The third incident is the one that triggers the memory, and thus results in a kind of release and relief for the character. I first did this in a realistic story written in late 1975 about an elderly woman sitting in a chair in her farm house, knitting. The story, titled “The Pattern of Her Quilt”, shows the woman revisiting incidents in her life until she finally recovers a forgotten incident from childhood which had affected her entire life.

I then returned to this theme in a surrealist story written in early 1976 titled “At the Point of Intersection.” In this story, the narrator is traveling down a highway at night, and is unable to remember anything about why he is there. He has a knife in a leather casing, but does not know why he has it. He has fragmentary memories that he may have used the knife to commit a violent act, and he briefly wonders if he is a psychopathic killer. The highway seems deserted, but then he sees the light of a gas station ahead, and enters it. The gas station attendant is no help, however. The narrator demands to know who he is and where he is, but the attendant merely shrugs, arguing that these questions are pointless:

“We are all of us points, lost in an infinity of space. Our identities are nothing, relative to infinity. You have no choice but to complete your line, whatever your identity. It does not matter.” He goes over to the cash register, and pecks at six keys carelessly with his finger, then rings them in. “You have a number now. Here is your identity,” he says, handing me the receipt.

The narrator leaves and goes over to a phone booth to call the number written on a piece of paper in his wallet, which happens to be 911, the number