

# My experience of Livermore Discovery Seminar

By Kendall Ross Bean

I understand there are some parents who are considering entrusting their child to the Teen Help family of services, and who are desirous of additional information about the program, perhaps over and above what Teen Help is willing to divulge up front.

I am herein making available to them some aspects of my own experience with, and research into, Teen Help, and in particular with the TASKS Seminars (Teen Accountability, Self-Esteem, and Keys to Success), around which much of the Teen Help program apparently revolves. I am not sure why Teen Help chose this specific training program (TASKS Seminars) for their residential facilities, and I frankly question their reasoning in doing so. But the fact is that the TASKS Seminars seem to have become such an integral part of the total program that, to us, it became rather futile to consider the program without them.

Teen Help is not extremely forthcoming about what goes on in the TASKS Seminars, for various reasons, and their promotional literature does not, in my opinion, adequately disclose what I consider to be the dangers and risks of the training, nor the lack of regulation or oversight. There was some vague and cryptic language in letters we received from the organization some 5 months after our daughter had entered the program, about the seminars being "confrontational," "experiential," and about how "many parents feel like leaving the first day," but that's about it. Parents are exhorted to "stay with it" however, for the good of their child.

While we (my wife Karen and I) had some premonitions that we would possibly be asked to do some difficult things, and though we were not exactly looking forward to having a great time, nothing in the literature we received prepared us for what we were to experience in the seminar.

I think it is important to understand how we initially had felt toward the program up to that time, before attending the TASKS seminar. So far, we had, in general, been satisfied with our daughter's progress in Tranquility Bay, one of Teen Help's residential facilities. Although communication with the staff was sparse, and though it was often hard to get through to Jamaica because of problems with power failures and the small number of phone lines at the facility, our daughter had been required to write us every week and had, from what we could tell, been adapting to the program well.

From what her letters indicated, she had been making adjustments in her life, acknowledging her mistakes, and was taking responsibility for her previous behavior. Initially her letters had indicated dissatisfaction with the program: she complained about the food, the treatment, the substandard medical care, etc., but Teen Help had advised us to expect, and to discount or ignore, complaints or reports of mistreatment from our child. This caveat did cause us some concern, but the spokespeople for Teen Help reassured us that the children would not be abused in any way.

When we went to the seminar, we were initially coming from a position of trust. It is no small thing to turn your child over to the care of others, who are so far away, and where you can't see what is happening. It is an act, in fact, requiring a great deal of trust, at least as far as we were concerned; and that trust was based on, among other things, the referrals we had received from health providers, as well as from other parents with children in the program. In addition, in all the

interactions we had had up to that time with the staff of Teen Help, we felt we had been treated, thus far, with sensitivity, compassion and respect. We were expecting to be treated the same way at the seminar. We were not expecting to be attacked. We were in a vulnerable, open position and our defenses were not up. We trusted these people.

What we were subjected to in the seminar, however, seriously undermined our trust in this organization.

Even then, though, we were willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. We had a substantial investment in this program, and were not about to just take our daughter out because of one bad experience. Initially we supposed it possible that perhaps a trainer had gotten out of line, or that maybe Teen Help was unaware of what was going on in the parent seminars, due to some administrative oversight (or perhaps, lack of oversight, or monitoring). But in trying to bring what we perceived to be problems to their attention, and in trying to get someone to take accountability, we encountered a lot of passing the buck, and also an unwillingness to acknowledge that there was indeed a problem. In effect, we were essentially told "We're sorry you happened to have a bad experience, but as far as we're concerned, there isn't a problem here with us."

We are removing our daughter from the program this week.

I believe that parents who are considering Teen Help have a right to know about what they are getting into. I also believe they need to know what their child, and they themselves, will be subjected to in the way of behavior modification.

There is a tacit assumption that seems to have been made by the people who bring you the Teen Help program, which is: All the parents have a behavior problem just like their child in the program, and they need the same kind of treatment their child is receiving. It would be quite a different matter if they said, "in order to help you understand what your child is going through we are going to put you through the same experience." But no. From what we could tell, that is not what they were saying.

Numerous times during the seminar I heard the following statement, in various forms, but essentially the same message: "You have a child in the program so that must mean there is something wrong with you, too." While we do not disagree that for some families this may be the case, I think it is a rather arrogant and presumptuous position for an organization to just assume that this is true for all, or even a substantial majority, of the families they serve.

"What's good for your child is good for everyone." In essence, they are saying "One size fits all. No matter what the problem, this program is for you." -And not only for you, but all your family and extended family members and friends as well. But as far as "the same for everyone" goes, my personal feeling is: The physician who prescribes the same medication, or surgery, for all his patients, and makes no distinction between different illnesses, or between the sick and the healthy, is not going to stay in business long.

I think it is important for parents contemplating Teen Help's program to know what we had to find out for ourselves, that these seminars are supplied to Teen Help by a for-profit company, "Resource Realizations," which also markets similar training programs to large corporations such as Pillsbury and IBM, we were told. At times one is led to wonder whether there may be a conflict of interest between the expressed mission and aims of Teen Help, and those of "Resource Realizations," whom Teen Help contracts to do the seminars. Teen Help exists ostensibly to help rehabilitate wayward or troubled adolescents. The mission of the TASKS Seminars, on the other hand, seems to be to convert and recruit everyone they can to the training program, and eventually get them to become staff themselves, not unlike what's done in multi-level marketing

companies. Some parents, like ourselves, are starting to wonder just what qualifications these people have for working with their child; and also, just what, exactly, these seminars have to do with their child's rehabilitation, if anything.

The TASKS Seminars are "required" for all teens in the program and their parents. By that I mean that you as parents are heavily pressured to participate in, and later, to help staff, the seminars; and the seminars are basically the core of the training program for all teens in the various Teen Help facilities. There are several stages to the seminars, meaning you have to keep coming back for more seminars if your child goes all the way through the program to level six.

The names of the seminars vary: there is Discovery, Focus, Parent-Child I, II, and III. For purposes of this document I will simply refer to all of these as TASKS Seminars. Great emphasis is put on all the seminars as an important step of reintegrating your child back into family and society. As a matter of fact, as we were later to find out, there really is no provision for parents who, for whatever reason, cannot go through, or choose not to go through, the seminars. It is assumed that you will do the seminars. Period.

Naturally parents feel a great deal of obligation to complete the seminars along with their child in the program. Family members 16 and over, grandparents, relatives and friends are all encouraged to participate. These seminars each take up a whole weekend (3 days) and may require many parents to travel long distances in order to participate, as the seminars are only held in a relatively few major metropolitan areas. Incidentally, the seminars are offered "free of charge" to parents of children in the program. All others pay. (Of course, the term "free of charge" is a matter of opinion, since the parents of children in the program are already paying 2000. to 3000. per month for the services of the program, which I think should include education on what their child is going through.)

One of the disturbing things about the Discovery Seminar, which we didn't find out until we went, is that you are required to take an oath of secrecy in order to participate. You are asked to promise not to divulge any of the processes or proceedings with anyone who has not been through the seminar, and you are also asked to agree to abide by all the rules of the seminar. On the surface this agreement seems relatively harmless: you assume they want to protect trade secrets, and, of course, the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, which is understandable.

However, this contract is potentially dangerous for a couple of reasons: 1) It is open-ended: in other words, you are in effect agreeing to do things before you know what they are. Many people, as well as ourselves, have gotten fairly deep into LGAT (large group awareness training) sessions similar to these and then found the requirements to be in violation of their moral or religious beliefs. 2) If your child goes through the seminars and you elect not to, your child cannot tell you about them or what went on. There does not seem to be any provision for parents who do not wish to go through the TASKS Seminars. We were not told this up front; apparently one has to know precisely which questions to ask.

If you believe that secrecy oaths should be kept no matter what, then do not read any further. If however you believe, as we do, that people are sometimes asked to keep secret something that they later find out is ethically and morally wrong, according to their beliefs; and that by keeping that thing secret they would be protecting, aiding and abetting what they considered unethical or immoral behavior, then you will understand why we made a difficult decision to break silence.

In doing so, however, it was still critical to us to maintain the confidentiality of the people involved in the seminar, because we feel there were many private and sacred things shared by them. But at the same time, we had to ask ourselves, do we really consider a group of ninety-plus people, most of whom we had never met before, to be a private and confidential setting? Did we really

trust the trainer, the program, enough to agree to do anything that they asked us to? After some discussion with legal counsel we are of the opinion that the oath or vow we were required to take constituted an "unconscionable agreement" and therefore would not be considered valid in a court of law.

As I stated before, there is apparently quite a difference between what Teen Help feels you need to know about their program beforehand, and what I think is necessary, in order for a parent to make an informed decision. In a recent conversation with one of the more candid members of Teen Help, it was explained to us this way: "If we told the parents beforehand what went on in the seminars, they wouldn't come."

Those who conduct the seminars reassure you, initially, that they will not ask you to do anything ridiculous; from what Karen and I experienced that is totally a matter of opinion. I can tell you right now that there are many things that go on in these seminars that would be very offensive to numerous people I know.

In order to try comprehend what the seminar was all about, I did substantial research to see if I could find anything similar to what I experienced. To me it seemed like encounter group or sensitivity training, but I failed to see the point; in particular, how it related to me or my child. I wasn't really willing to go though all the seminars in order to "get" whatever it was I was supposed to get, for the same reason that I don't feel it is necessary to go through the act of raping or murdering someone in order to gain sufficient knowledge that it is wrong. I was also tired of being told I thought too much every time I asked them for an explanation.

So far, here is what I have been able to piece together:

In form and format the TASKS Seminar we attended seemed to resemble most closely the Lifesprings Basic Training program, a description of which I was able to find, during my research, at the web site

<http://www.digiweb.com/~ozark/awareness/pathology.htm>

in an article entitled "Pathology as "Personal Growth": A Participant-Observation Study of Lifesprings Training," by Janice Haaken and Richard Adams. (Article appearing in Psychiatry Magazine, Vol. 46, Aug.1983) With some minor differences (the music played was from Strauss's Also Sprach Zarathustra, commonly known as the theme from "2001," instead of Star Wars; the program was concentrated into 3 days instead of 5; some things were added, others left out) our experience was very similar to the description given by Haaken and Adams. Indeed, we were later told that two of the principals of the organization offering the Discovery Seminars, an entity calling itself "Resource Realizations," were former Lifesprings trainers.

For those unfamiliar with Lifesprings training the words "sensitivity training," "T-group training," or "encounter group therapy" may ring a bell. Sensitivity training is an outgrowth of many of the same methods of mind control used by the Chinese Communists on American POWs during the Korean War. These thought reform techniques, used by such groups as Mao's Red Guard on captured U.S. soldiers, were of concern to our government because of the speed with which the enemy was able to cause many of our soldiers to defect or denounce our country, in some cases as little as 48 hours. In post-war years, some behavioral scientists here in the U.S. apparently became quite fascinated with what they considered the speed and effectiveness of these methods. For whatever purpose, they took, and refined them into highly sophisticated, powerful tools capable of inducing severe psychological and emotional stress in individuals, often without their knowledge or consent.

Many modern programs of behavior modification seek to speed up the mental destabilization process with increasingly more sophisticated, intense, and, what many consider to be, dangerous techniques. (In other words, what might formerly have taken weeks or months can now be

accomplished in a 3-day weekend) Most recently, LGAT (large group awareness training) has come into vogue. Apparently the larger the group, the greater the amount of peer and other pressure that can be exerted on the individual. Unfortunately, at the same time, severe psychological damage to an increasing percentage of participants has been reported. Much of this is due to the inability (and also, in many cases, the unwillingness) of the of trainers or staff to pay attention to symptoms of impending psychological crisis in such large groups. Since the goal is to create psychological stress, it can be very difficult for the trainer to know when to quit. Some trainers appear to believe you can't have too much of a good thing.

From what I could discover, the point of creating a psychological stress or crisis in the individual is to cause a state called the "unfreezing phase," where the subject doubts themselves, feels hopeless or powerless, or has a hard time remembering what their original values were. In such a state individuals become more suggestible and receptive to new or different values. In later stages existing values or morals are changed over, or "swapped" for new ones, which are later "refrozen" into the subject's belief system, constituting a new paradigm or world view. Many participants in these and similar training programs have objected to the content on the grounds that their religious or moral beliefs were ferociously attacked, along with other beliefs that the trainer or staff considered to be faulty and the cause of the subjects' problems. The main problem seems to be one of insufficient disclosure: People are not told beforehand what will be attacked, and to what extent. But the promoters of these trainings seem to feel that the nondisclosure, or catching of participants off-guard, is essential to, and one of the reasons for, the program's success.

I discovered from my research that the covert and undisclosed use of these highly refined and effective psychological tools in recent years by such organizations as Mind Dynamics, EST, Actualizations, Lifesprings, Holiday Magic, Insight, PSI World, Scientology, and a host of other "human potential" organizations, has been called, in recent years, "coercive persuasion." (The legal term is "undue influence") Such devices as sleep and privacy deprivation, the flooding or saturation of the psyche with new information, Ericksonian hypnosis, trance induction, no-choice choices, and loaded, thought-constricting jargon are used in these programs to impair an individual's ability to reflect, think, or make decisions. At such moments the mind becomes pliable and can be manipulated or molded to accept new values and belief systems offered by the trainer or group. Participants in these sessions are further thrown off by paradoxical logic and deception. For example, the name "sensitivity training" itself is a twisted use of words; from the uses I have observed, the process serves more to desensitize people than anything else.

Sensitivity Training is often characterized by participants verbally attacking and humiliating each other; the suspension of traditional boundaries, manners and morals; the exposing of the individual's innermost sacred, private feelings and beliefs for the comment, criticism and ridicule of anyone and everyone in the group, and the allowing of the trainer to smash and destroy your values, break down your personality, and remold it in his image. You may have seen film clips or videos of a group of people, usually sometime in the late 1960's or 70's, screaming obscenities at each other or attacking an individual as a group, "letting it all hang out," "no-holds barred," and generally acting in a way totally antithetical to that of considerate people who have been taught civility, manners, and/or respect.

You may have thought that these destructive pseudotherapeutic methods went the way of bellbottoms, paisley prints, and platform shoes, vanishing along with the flowerchildren. Unfortunately, sensitivity training, like heavy metal music, has grown more pervasive, having taken root in a generation who were growing up twenty years ago and who now have taken their positions in the educational and corporate worlds. Sensitivity Training is reappearing under a host of new disguises and names. Its promoters, like anyone with highly developed skills and knowledge who can exploit those with lesser skills and knowledge, often prey on the vulnerable.

Sensitivity Training exploits peoples vulnerabilities and weaknesses: their self doubts, sense of guilt and shame, and desire to be part of the group, desire to be thought well-of. In recent years, Sensitivity Training has put on airs of respectability and dressed for success, going by the name "corporate success training."

I found some of the risks and casualties of this type of training being discussed by Margaret Thayer Singer in her book "Cults in our Midst" (Jossey-Bass) Dr. Singer is a Professor Emeritus in Psychology at U.C. Berkeley who has served as expert witness in nearly 60 legal cases, where organizations selling these and similar training programs were sued for damages ranging from suicides to prolonged stays in mental hospitals. A transcript of Chapter 8 of Dr. Singer's book may be found at

<http://www.digiweb.com/~ozark/awareness/singer.htm>

Some of the specific dangers of this type of training mentioned by Dr. Singer are the intense psychological invasiveness of the processes, and the potential for severe psychological harm to participants, including the precipitation of psychosis, depression, and suicide attempts. Also at issue are the lack of proper disclosure to participants beforehand about the methods used, the insistence on secrecy about the seminar itself, and the inadequate screening, beforehand, of participants for emotional or medical incompatibility with the program. Sadly, I also discovered that Dr. Singer, a woman now in her late 70's, has been, repeatedly, the subject of personal attack and litigation from various organizations who stand to suffer from her disclosure of their use of these controversial techniques.

One of the providers of the Discovery Seminar later told us, when we raised objections about the tactics used in the seminar, that we needed to understand that the training was educational in nature, and not therapeutic. This may seem to some to be a minor point and is also rather vague. But the significance of this statement, we later realized, is that those conducting the seminars are not bound by, or beholden to, the same codes of ethics, or controls or oversight, required of true therapeutic programs. The provider of this Discovery Seminar also seemed very conversant with legal terminology, in a way that was reminiscent to me of people who have had experience with lawsuits.

At this point some may be wondering what a program this risky and controversial is doing in a rehabilitation program for wayward children. We were wondering that too. Is the secrecy agreement also to prevent public scrutiny of the program, for fear too many people would object if they knew beforehand what went on? Are the promoters of these training programs possibly concerned that some of the tactics used are too questionable to risk public exposure? I do not believe, personally, that the sole reason for the secrecy is to "avoid spoiling it for those who haven't yet been through it," as the trainers would have you believe. I believe, from what I have seen, that it creates an atmosphere ripe for deception and exploitation.

On yet another note, does the program work? Does it truly address the problems that people bring to the seminars? Or is it all smoke and mirrors, a modern-day Emperor's new clothes? I found in my research many who feel that coerced behavior modification only lasts so long as the coercive support group remains in place (which, incidentally, seems to be one of the strategies of the programs: to keep you going and get you to recruit others). While there is a good deal of controversy over whether coercive tactics are of lasting effect when the pressure is removed, most authorities on the subject agree that the potential for psychological damage is very real.

I found further helpful information in the following articles:

<http://www.inlink.com/~dhchase/ofshe.htm> "Coercive Persuasion and Attitude Change" From the Encyclopedia of Sociology (Macmillan)

<http://alfa.ist.utl.pt/~dif/ic/cults/coerpers.htm> "Coercive Persuasion: A New Coercive Psycho-Technology" by Lawrence Wollersheim

<http://wellspring.albany.oh.us/thesiren.html> "The Siren Call of Modern Pied Pipers" by Lawrence A. Pile

<http://www.digiweb.com/~ozark/awareness/white.htm> "White Collar Cults, They Want Your Mind..." Article in Self Magazine by Dirk Mathison

Some of these articles attempt to be more scholarly, others tend to be a bit sensationalistic, but I felt that as a whole they offered a relatively good compendium of the pertinent issues.

There are distinct problems in trying to analyze the overall effectiveness and/or risks of the TASKS Seminar and similar LGAT programs. Those who are sold on the methods seem at times like religious zealots in their support of the program, often attacking those who dare question their devotion. To them, it seems, the trainings are the answer to the world's problems, a boon that totally transformed their life. On the other hand, as evidenced by the articles above, there are many others for whom this type of training became a nightmare ending in psychosis or suicide attempts.

The Discovery Seminar we attended was sealed off to public view. Paper was placed over the windows in the doors so people could not see in or out. Participants were not allowed to leave at any time in the proceedings unless given permission by a person in charge. The hours were long (15-hour days for the seminar my wife and I attended). Bathroom breaks were only by permission as well. As with musical chairs, you had to be seated by the time the music stops playing. If you walk out of the seminar, without permission, during an exercise or activity, you are not allowed back in, and have to come back another weekend and do the whole seminar over again, even if you go through everything except the last two hours of the three day seminar. Milieu control and control of communications were enforced, i.e., participants are asked to place personal items at the side of the room, not sit by anyone they know, not do any side talking or commenting to each other while the trainer is talking, and to obey all instructions given by the trainer. The effect, from what I can see, is to cut you off effectively from the world outside, and control all your communications with others, even, at times, your thoughts with yourself.

The seminars are usually conducted in a hotel ballroom or conference room. While they do have to let you go back to your room and sleep, and give you meal breaks, we found it virtually impossible to adequately recover, during any break interval, from the sensory overload and intense psychological saturation of the day's activities. In addition (and this may have been coincidental, or planned) the meal breaks were not predictable, and did not occur as promised to us, and the hotel was right next to the freeway, so I didn't get much sleep. One of the reasons I decided to leave early was that I realized that if I stayed and subjected myself to this intense psychological and emotional assault, I would compromise my ability to work and provide for my family, for probably several weeks. As it was, the seminar still took a toll on my stamina. Nearly two months later, I am still having to deal with the effects.

In addition to an audience of perhaps 80 to 90 parents and family members 16 or older, there were also 18 volunteer parent staffers who had graduated or completed the training in the seminars, and some of the teens who had graduated the program also staffed. We, the audience members, were encouraged to dress casually; however, the staffers dressed up or wore coats and ties, or suits. The trainer himself was very well dressed and immaculately groomed. Thus, to my eyes, through the use of clothing, a caste system was established, with audience at the bottom. The staff's job was mainly to assist the trainer, who pretty much ran the entire program.

Much of the time the staff hovered over us, surrounded us in a circle during exercises, observing, taking notes, and often making criticisms and very negative comments about our performance in the exercises.

From the very beginning of the seminar a trend was initiated to try and get us to start sharing, divulging and confessing our private and personal thoughts, faults, and experiences. In the beginning of the seminar the trainer told us stories of his past and failures. Parent staffers stood and gave emotional, often teary testimony about their experiences with the program and how it had turned their lives around. We were pressured in feedback sessions to confide our private thoughts and impressions, with little or no time to consider the consequences. We were challenged to tell others whether we trusted them or not, and how much. In many ways it was as if a complete stranger were to come up to you and reveal some deep dark secret about themselves, and then say to you, "I've done this for you. Now you need to do the same for me." We were asked to divulge many things that I consider to be of a very intimate and personal nature.

If you disagree with, or voice objections to the things being presented in the seminar, don't expect them to treat you with a lot of respect. Most often you will be told that you have a problem you need to resolve within yourself; in other words, you have unresolved personal issues. Hardly ever will they concede that there is anything wrong with the program. If they ever admit to having a problem, you can bet that it will turn out to be you. ("Yes, we have a problem. Our problem is you.") Expect to be discredited or belittled for disagreeing with the trainer. Humiliated, as well. (They don't see it that way, of course. They will say that by humiliating you they are "honoring your true greatness.")

From the very beginning of the seminar, efforts were made to undermine our current belief systems and values. We were told early in the game that our current belief system was what was causing our problems in life. We were also told at one point that there is no right or wrong, only what works and what doesn't work. Since this philosophy is tantamount to saying "the end justifies the means," the trainer told us that "since no one agrees on what is right or wrong, we can't talk about that, only what works and what doesn't work." To further illustrate he used an example: "Say I were a convicted murderer in prison. Could I believe I was justified in killing a person, could I say I was right in doing that?" -and so on. In a carefully planned way, we were being taken for a ride, but so cleverly and subtly that we were hardly aware our values were being attacked. And in a way, it made sense. Didn't we always have arguments with our teenage children about what was right and wrong? Wouldn't it be easier to just talk about what worked and what didn't? But we weren't given a lot of time to think. If we had, we might have realized, as I later did, that by extension, no right or wrong means no truth or falsehood, no good or evil, and, ultimately, no working or not working. Because who's to decide? The trainer? If there's no right or wrong, how can he be right? How can he give us a right answer? How can he discredit us for giving a wrong answer? How can he really know what's working or not working? For the short term or the long term? What made him an authority, other than our submission? And if he can't be right, why should we listen to him? But they didn't bother to address these issues.

I heard people coming into agreement with what was being taught, saying things like "He's right. There is no right or wrong. He's right." Now if that isn't a self-contradicting sentence, I don't know what is. But the whole seminar was full of such contradictions: What is, isn't. And what isn't, is. Sound familiar? Sounds like orchestrated chaos to me!

In this seminar, I got the distinct impression that there were really two agendas, a public, or apparent one, and a hidden, or covert one. I first caught wind of this when we were asked to do a simple little puzzle where you draw 9 dots in the form of a square (3 rows of 3) and then you are challenged to connect all the dots with four straight lines, drawn without lifting the pencil from the paper. It was a puzzle I had done a couple times before so I knew how to do it. In fact, I raised my hand and said "What if you already know the answer?" I don't remember exactly what he said in

response; to me, I guess, it was something distinctly unmemorable, but Karen remembers him saying something like "Well, keep it to yourself."

We were supposed to solve the puzzle, not showing the answer to anyone but a staff member, who would then tell us if we got it right or not. If we did, we could then leave our seats and take our place among the "winners" standing at the sides of the room. I solved the puzzle, checking to make sure it fit the requirements as given to us, and signaled for a staff member. The staffer, a young man in what looked to be his late teens, came over, gave my puzzle a cursory glance, and shook his head, indicating that it wasn't right. I knew it was right, but held my peace. Karen, who inadvertently happened to see that my answer was the same as that of someone who was told they got it right, shortly questioned the trainer about the inconsistency. He discounted her objection, saying that whether I got it right or not wasn't the issue. I did not object myself, but bided my time to see where they would go with this.

In subsequent lectures some of the things the trainer told us seemed, at least at first glance, to make some sort of logical sense. But I had the uneasy feeling that the true purpose of the games and activities was not what it appeared to be on the surface. I didn't know exactly what they were doing to us, or why I felt so uncomfortable with some of the exercises. He had told us that there was no right or wrong, and I was willing to suspend disbelief, intellectually, in order to consider what he had to say. You see, initially, I trusted these people. I gave them the benefit of the doubt. We also were told that the purpose of the seminar was to "unsettle the mind." Well, I had been through plenty of graduate and undergraduate classes in college where I had been asked to question some of my former beliefs. I thought that was what he meant. And there didn't seem to be anything bizarre about that.

But there were a lot of things that just didn't add up. If there was no right or wrong, why did he ask us to do exercises where there was a "right answer?" Why were we berated for not "getting it?" Why was there so little discussion or explanation of the activities and exercises? Why did I feel like people were being discredited and belittled every time they raised questions or objections to the proceedings? Why did I start to feel like any sort of individual or independent thought was being stifled? Why did I not feel "right" about what they were doing? In the morning and afternoon of the first day, though, I simply suspended judgement, hoping that they would make some point or give some explanation that would account for the inconsistencies. But it never came. It seemed, from things I would later read about sensitivity training and coercive persuasion, that like with Werner Erhard's EST, I was just supposed to "get it."

Perhaps because I tend to be an analytical person, there were certain points in the proceedings that I just did not "get," no matter how hard I tried to understand them. They just made no sense. In one exercise we were required to break into small groups of six or seven, with a group leader, and give feedback to each other. A person was called upon to say something about themselves, and then we all went around the circle and told something about ourselves. Then, out of the blue, we were asked to give our impressions of the other people in the group (i.e. tell them what we thought their problems were) First of all, I could not remember what everyone had said about themselves, and had scarcely had time to process it, and secondly, at least where I come from, what we were being asked to do was presumptuous. You don't just meet a person five minutes before and then give them intimate assessments about their life and problems. The whole idea seemed absurd. Upon my expressing the difficulties I was having with this exercise, one of the other participants, who had been studying me, suddenly drew herself up with an aha!-type look, as if she had just made a tremendous discovery, and said "I know what your problem is! You're in your head!"

I had never heard this particular expression before. I had heard of being "out of your head," but I had never before been accused of being "in my head." I was later to learn that this was part of the seminar "jargon". Being "in your head" is used in a derogatory way. It means that you think too much. I was to be accused of this at least three or four times before the day was over. The term is

designed to put you in your place when you ask too many questions or have problems with what's being done. To me, what they really were saying was "Don't think about what we are doing to you. Just accept it." (Another popular jargon term was "avoidance behavior." If you didn't go along with the program in every way, you were practicing "avoidance behavior"-presumably avoiding addressing your real issues, as they saw them. Other epithets reserved for participants who dissent or drag their feet are "Takers," "Selfish," or "Silent Resisters.")

Don't expect what they are saying to make a lot of sense. The training seminars are replete with contradictions. For example, they will say that what's important is "what works and what doesn't work", but you soon discover that they are not interested in any definition of "what works" except their own. Nor are they, from what I could see, interested in any interpretation of success except their own, which seems to consist, mainly, of being able to pull the rug out from under you at every turn. The trainings are billed as awareness exercises, but again, it seemed to me only to be awareness of what they want you to focus on: your own guilt, weaknesses, and inadequacies. Do not expect them to acknowledge any of their own if you bring them to their attention.

Well, as far as being "in my head," I found what this participant said offensive and I told her so. About this time the trainer came by, seeing that we were having a problem, and basically told me the same thing. He encouraged me to go ahead and do my best, so I did. After I did, however, the group leader, a dour-looking woman who seemed to always be able to find something negative to say, told me I wasn't doing the exercise right and was wasting everybody's time. (Incidentally, I noticed that whenever we did activities and the staff was asked to comment, they nearly always said very negative things and were very critical of us.) I told her that I didn't feel she had adequately explained the ground rules of the activity to us, and how could I be expected to do it properly if I didn't understand. She told me there were no ground rules. That was when I started to throw in the towel on the whole thing. Whatever credibility they had had was swiftly evaporating, in my estimation. But it was time for a break.

During the break, an altercation occurred. One of the parents, who had a son in the program, had started to nod off during the seminar. He wasn't dressed as well as many of the other parents, his clothes were a little tattered and he looked slightly unkempt. For some reason the staff decided to question him about possible drug use. I'm not sure how they did it, but from what was said in the course of the argument it seems like a couple of them approached him in the hallway and began to interrogate him. When we filed back into the hall to resume the seminar there was a heated argument going on between this parent, the trainer and the staff. The parent was demanding an apology, saying he had been unjustly accused of using drugs. He asserted that he did not use drugs, and that his son in the program did not use drugs. He was speaking in a loud voice, and was feeling offended and threatened enough, apparently, to feel the need to make it a public forum in front of the rest of us. For my part I felt the man was in distress, and that he was feeling like he had been attacked. The trainer, on the other hand was not backing down, but seemed to want to escalate the conflict. He also was speaking in a loud voice, saying in effect that no apology was due because the parent had not been accused of anything. (Personally, I felt that any questioning of this parent about drug use was an invasion of privacy, but that seemed to be par for this course) The parent stated that he had driven a long distance and taken time off from work to make this seminar, and he was tired and had nodded off, and he didn't appreciate being treated like this, and that he had had it with this program and was taking his son out. I have to admit, during this altercation I was very uncomfortable about the way this man was treated, and I spoke up against it, and there were several other parents who objected vocally as well. This trainer just did not seem to have the capacity, in this instance, to back down or attempt to be conciliatory. He couldn't seem to understand that to some people, a question asked in a certain way is the same as an accusation. It seemed to me the trainer had no sensitivity for possible cultural differences in this case; again, it was "one size fits all." Finally, after this had gone on what seemed like 15 minutes, one of the staff finally gave an apology, but it practically had to be dragged out of him. By this time the parent, however, had become totally alienated, and left, vowing to remove his son from the program and expressing his disgust with the whole thing. I felt

his complaint had been handled with an extreme lack of sensitivity. But that was to be a repeating pattern in this seminar.

Things were not going well for the trainer or the staff. Everyone was a little on edge, and parents had actually started arguing with each other, taking sides. I was beginning to wonder what I had gotten myself into and was beginning to want out. It had been an effort to make it to this seminar, I, too, had had a long, tiring week, and I really identified, in many ways, with the parent who had left. I felt he had not been treated with respect, and based upon what I had just observed, I wondered what was in store for the rest of us. I had a bad headache from all the information overload and just wanted to leave. Still, I persevered. I was doing this for my daughter. There were only a couple more hours left, I hoped, and then we could go to bed for the night. But it was getting late, already, like around 9 or 10 P.M.

The next exercise, however, was what caused me to walk out of the seminar. It was supposed to be an exercise on trust. In the end of this exercise, we were basically given two choices: To tell a person we didn't trust them, or to tell them we trusted them and to divulge to them our "darkest" secret. In the beginning part of this exercise we were asked to go around among the other audience members and look everyone we met in the eye and tell them whether we trusted them or not; again, like in the feedback exercise, we were asked to make an instant assessment. At this point, I felt everyone was getting pretty tired, I know I was; we had been at this about 12 or 13 hours so far, and to me it seemed everyone was just kind of going along with it in the hope that it would be over soon. We were actually given four choices of things to say: I trust you, I don't trust you, I don't know if I trust you, I don't care to say whether I trust you. But to any person from my culture, the last three choices are basically the same: I don't trust you. We were effectually being asked to choose between two inscrutable evils: To tell a person we didn't know and who may have merited our trust that we didn't trust them, or to tell a person who may not have merited our trust and whom we didn't know that we trusted them. I don't know what you believe, but here in America we generally believe a person innocent until proven guilty. Much of what goes on in our nation is based on trust at first sight. Otherwise we would have a totalitarian state with everyone accusing and denouncing each other, and everyone afraid to speak up because of fear of others imputing ill intentions to them and turning them in. So basically I went around and told everyone I met that I trusted them. The exercise seemed in many ways hypnotic. Repeating the same thing over and over again, virtually the same rhythm. Trance induction? I felt my mind going to sleep. We repeated the exercise, each time with greater commitments. "Would you trust this person with a loved one?" -the trainer would ask. "Would you trust them with your deepest darkest secret? - Something that you have done in the past that you know if other people knew, they would shun you, not want to have anything to do with you?"

I think at this point the trainer felt there was enough trust generated that people would be willing to divulge some deeper secrets. So he said, the next person you come to, if you really do trust them, tell them your deepest, darkest secret. This was my wake up call. Something inside told me that what he was doing was wrong, somehow horribly, horribly wrong, although intellectually I didn't understand what was happening at the time. All of this was new and unexpected. I hadn't had time to think about it, hadn't had time to process it, and the activity we had just done had somehow distracted me from where he could possibly go with it. To me, this was not a safe place to divulge what he was asking. Not in front of 90 people. This was not privacy, this was not confidentiality. The whole exercise then seemed a deception. It had seemed to me all along to be a trust building exercise, designed, I thought, to generate bonding between the parents in the seminar. Now it was being turned against us. My expectations had been shattered. I raised my hand.

I objected to what he was asking us to do because I considered it an infringement of personal privacy. He countered by asserting to me that I was still being "in my head," reminding me, in the tone of voice a parent might use with an errant child, that "we talked about this before." He was an individual about 6' 4" and during the time we were having this argument he came up to me and

stood about 6" from my face, looking down at me. (I am about 5'11"). To me this was definitely a confrontational stance and seemed designed to intimidate me. I stood my ground, however, and did not give in. During the argument he said several things that I perceived were designed to discredit me in front of the audience, such as "Right now your thoughts are kind of scattered, aren't they?" I answered in the affirmative, but told him that at least I was being honest about it, wasn't I? He said "why are you asking me?", and that the purpose of this exercise was to find out about myself, hinting that I had some unresolved internal issues I needed to discover and address. I said, "If that is so, then why are you accusing me of..." He interrupted me at that point, saying "no one is accusing you" in a very stern voice. I had just seen him do this with the other parent, the one who had been questioned about drug use, and I pretty much could see where he was going with it. "Whoa, let's not go there," I said. But I then rephrased my objection: "I perceive I am being accused." He then said some other things I felt were supposed to make me look stupid or confused in front of the other audience members. "You're twisting my words," I said, because he was in effect taking what I said and interpreting it, his way, for everyone there. What he was doing was not, from what I could see, an attempt to try and understand my objections. It was, to me, a deliberately designed strategy to make what I consider honorable behavior, the act of standing up for what you believe are your rights, seem dishonorable. He also accused me of practicing avoidance behavior, by trying to get out of the game. I disagreed. I didn't think that being the lone person standing up in opposition to 90 other people was what should be termed "seeking my comfort zone" or "avoiding conflict."

To me what he was saying was in direct opposition to everything my senses were telling me. I had just watched this other parent, the one questioned about drugs, being told that he was not being accused or attacked, contrary to what I had felt, and now they were saying the same thing to me. I had just watched this other parent being dishonored for what in my book was honorable behavior, standing up and speaking out, in front of a large group of people, for what he felt his rights were. This trainer was now standing in my personal space, right in my face, speaking to me in a very stern, intimidating parental voice, trying, from what I could see, to discredit me in front of everyone, and telling me that I wasn't being accused or attacked. O.K., I thought, two can play this game.

The game we had previously been in the process of playing was about trust. Suddenly I noted a discrepancy about the way it had been done. We had been asked to tell the other audience members whether we trusted them, but what about the facilitator, the staff? Somehow the whole thing then seemed incredibly one-sided: All the burden of proof had been on us.

"You never asked me if I trusted you," I told him.

It was at about this point that his assistant, a woman appearing to be in her 50's, decided, perhaps, that he needed some help. She came up to me and attempted to be more conciliatory. "We're not asking you to do anything you don't want to," she said, in effect, and then tried to show me a way I could do the game in a way that she felt would not be compromising my sense of integrity. Unlike with the trainer, I had the feeling that she was sincere. I followed my instincts. "I believe you," I said, meaning that I believed she was sincere, but not necessarily that I agreed with what she was saying.

I asked her about consequences for withdrawing from the exercise. I told her, in effect, that we felt we were under a great deal of pressure to complete the training for the sake of our children in the program, and that we felt under duress to go along with the seminar. "There are no consequences," she started to tell me. I knew this was not true. "There are consequences for everything," I told her. For one thing, we had been told that if we walked out we would not be allowed back in. And now she seemed to be saying the opposite. But she then seemed to decide to agree with me. "Well, yes," she acknowledged, "that's true."

The trainer then stepped back in. "You're objecting to this on moral grounds, then," he said, in a softer, more conciliatory tone. "Yes," I said. He then said, to the best of my recollection, some more things about my practicing "avoidance behavior," and making it seem like I was trying to get out of confronting my real issues. Finally I put my foot down.

"If you go ahead with this procedure," I said, "I will not participate. Is that clear?"

He seemed to shrug, then ignored me and turned back to the other participants to continue the game. I started toward the door to leave. I was walking out. For me this Discovery Seminar had been informative in at least one way: I had discovered that I didn't trust the trainer, or the staff.

When I walked out, the trainer's assistant and one of the parent staffers came after me, saying "Wait." We had a conversation, the three of us, outside the door. I told them, in the sincerity of my heart, that I felt it improper to do all this divulging and confessing under these conditions. I felt my soul was right with God, and that my personal weakness and shortcomings were between Him and me. I also told them that I felt that the methods they were using were brutal, and that I believed in a personal Saviour who did not teach this way; and that I felt in fact that what they were doing was antithetical to my religious beliefs and what I believed he had taught us.

The parent staffer told me that I didn't really have to divulge anything; she said that she herself had gotten around it by saying, in the last stage of the game, "I don't care to say whether I trust you." I, on the contrary, felt that if I had told someone I trusted them, and they had not done anything in the interim to abridge that trust, it was a matter of honor to continue to trust them. Many people, in the exercise, had told me they would trust me, even with their deepest darkest secret, as I had also told them. In essence, what I had seen happening was the majority of the audience members building trust between each other. And I was supporting this, because I had just witnessed a lot of tearing down and negativism in this seminar, and I was opposed to it. To me, telling others that you trust them is like telling them that you believe in them and in their inherent goodness. But to then challenge us to prove or demonstrate that trust, on demand, by divulging private, even sacred, intimacies or confidences was to me an affront tantamount to blackmail. It was, I was to reflect later, like asking you to prove your love for your wife by having intimate relations with her in front of another person. I told them in effect, that I had reverence for the people there and for myself. I did not think it reverent for them to be forced to hear my confidences or for me to hear theirs, or for either of us to be coerced into divulging them to each other, for whatever reason. I felt then, and do still, that the trainer was toying with sacred things.

I told the trainer's assistant that I believed that she and the trainer were both essentially good people and was assuming she had good intents. I said that after hearing some of the things they had suffered in order to try and help the children, I was persuaded that they were dedicated souls and had made many personal sacrifices in their line of duty. Nevertheless, I also told them that I could not countenance many of the techniques I saw they were using, however virtuous their intents. To me the end does not justify the means. I have too often seen the means become the end.

After I had objected to, as I stated, the brutality, and also the heavy-handedness of the tactics, the trainer's assistant said two things that greatly disturbed me. One, she acknowledged that the methods were severe, but attempted to justify it by saying "We have to do something to wake you parents up." Secondly, she further justified their actions by saying, "Everyone's got a little dirt they need to uncover and sweep out." It is true that she seemed initially much more conciliatory and sympathetic to my concerns than the trainer, but in the end, she simply reiterated the party line, which to me was: You parents have personal problems you need to address, and we have to use these tactics and methods in order for you to see, and correct, the error of your ways.

There were some other things said but at that point they were starting a new activity inside. The parent staffer had, during my conversation with the trainer's assistant, ducked back into the seminar to check on the activities, and had also notified my wife and everyone, as I was later to learn, that "your husband is O.K with the seminar, there's not a problem," (which was not what I had said). She now came back out and encouraged me to "come back in and try this next activity, it's really fun." I decided, on her insistence, to give it one last shot.

I came in, and tried to participate in the last activity of the evening. It was now almost midnight. The lights were turned down low, and there was soft, soothing music playing. People were being asked to write down personal experiences , from their past, that were traumatic, or life-changing. We were asked to list them, in chronological order. When the exercise was finished, we were asked to get together with a buddy, sometime before the seminar the next day, and share these personal experiences.

That night, in our hotel room, I made the decision that I had had enough. I did not think it wise or of any value to continue to subject myself to these indignities, and after some discussion with Karen, it was decided that I would return home, some 40 or so miles away. She wished to continue the seminar, although she too was beginning to have some uncertainties, and was mainly frustrated because I couldn't continue, and thus could not be in on what she and our daughter had experienced. After I made sure that she would be O.K. and had a ride home, she retired, and I stayed up until maybe 2 A.M. writing a letter to those in charge of the seminar explaining my reasons for leaving, saying that I felt physically and emotionally battered. I told them that I considered the trainer to be a very gifted and talented motivational speaker, but that while I had actually enjoyed some parts of the seminar, I had some really deep seated objections to many of the things I observed them doing, and listed several of them.

When I returned home, I tried to work the next day in order to make up for lost time, but was scarcely able to accomplish much, not more than a few hours, so draining had the experience been. In addition, Karen called me up later in the afternoon and asked me to come pick her up, saying that she had had a traumatic experience on the second day and could not finish the seminar. When I picked her up, she had actually been for a time in a state of emotional shock. But since she experienced the reasons for that firsthand, I will let her relate her own account.

We did go back to the Seminar on the third day, to distribute, among the other parents, letters of protest that we had written. Our reason for doing this was twofold; 1) We didn't want anybody to get the mistaken impression that we went along with this travesty, and 2) We didn't know otherwise how to contact the other parents, as they would all be going their separate ways after the seminar.

For me, in summary, there were a number of reasons why we were offended by this seminar:

1. We feel that Teen Help did not adequately inform us in advance of what we would be subjected to in the seminar: the severity of the psychological attacks, the intensity of the group pressure, or the extreme physical and emotional stresses that would be exerted on us. We were not informed that behavior modification and thought reform would be practiced on us.
2. We were not told beforehand that we would be required to adopt a new belief system in order to complete the seminar, one that went against many of our religious and moral principles.
3. We were not informed that we would be asked for total submission to the facilitator and staff during the three day seminar, effectively asking us to turn over our will and agency, and, in our opinion, personal safety, to someone we had never met before, and whose principles, credentials and accountability were unknown to us.

4. We were not told beforehand that we would be required to take a secrecy oath not to divulge what they did to us in the seminar. We were not told that our daughter would be required to keep secret from us any information about seminars we did not attend.

5. There were no safeguards that we could see. We saw people in psychological and emotional distress and no one came to their aid; on the contrary, the emotional stress on the distressed person was often escalated. There were staffers, to be sure, but we found that, as a rule, they never objected to what the trainer did, or countermanded his orders.

6. People were, in our opinion, humiliated and told it was for their good; accused and told they were not being accused; attacked and told they were not being attacked.

7. Analytical or critical thinking was discouraged. Blind submission to the trainer was encouraged. Lip service was given to decision making and choice, but the choices were what we considered "no choice-choices" designed to give only the illusion of choice while promoting the program's covert and incomprehensible agenda.

8. This behavior modification, in our opinion, relies on intimidation, deception, misrepresentation and coercion, rather than honesty and informed consent, to instigate change. This deception carried over into the promotional materials for the program, which we feel, severely downplayed, if not misrepresented, what actually went on in the seminars, along with the risks of possible psychological damage that we feel consumers have a right to know.

9. Little or no interpretive framework was provided. Few, if any, explanations were given for the activities; when instructions were given and a person did not understand, the exact same words were often repeated, just in a louder voice.

10. We felt the program had little relevance to our problems or needs, or those of our daughter.