

ASK CONNIE—“Watch Out for Gurus!”

Connie Myslik-McFadden

Dear Connie—

A close friend just told me that she has joined a group in New York that requires her to cut off contact with her family and to turn over her assets to the group leader. She is excited and happy because the group leader apparently has great spiritual wisdom and a retreat center where my friend can live, work, and learn. I am concerned about what is being required of her to join the group. Should I be?

Sincerely,
Nancy

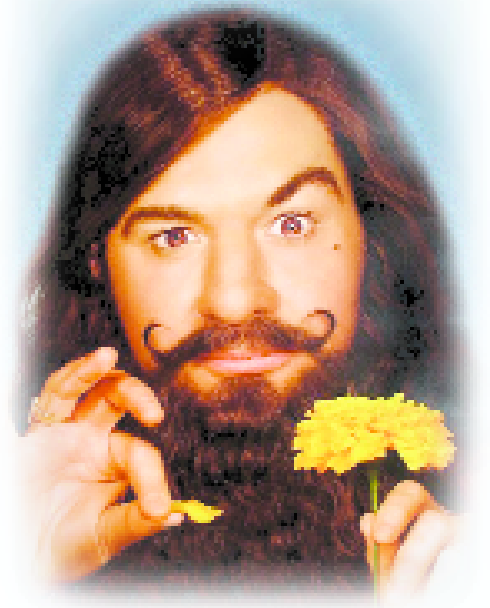
Dear Nancy,

Yes, there is reason for concern. Any group leader who requires a cutoff from families and a relinquishing of assets should raise serious questions in the minds of prospective members, their family, and friends. Many people, however, seek the kind of security and leadership that seems to be promised by such groups. They do not realize that they will be surrendering their freedom and personal power in exchange for the teachings of the leader and the security of the group.

The group leader may appear to offer the kind of parenting that was not available in childhood and was desired—in other words, a parental figure who is wise, caring, and consistent. The guru may then dictate solutions to difficult life issues that we all face, and this can be appealing.

Everything is decided by the authority, the leader, allowing members to be less responsible for making those decisions for themselves. The idea that someone else will be in charge of how life should be lived can be quite seductive. But the wise course is to gather information and think for ourselves, because we need to be conscious that for every complex problem in life someone has a solution that is simple, attractive, and wrong. The problem is that we are all human, and therefore imperfect—even “gurus.”

Any one who sets him or herself up on a pedestal and claims ultimate wisdom has lost the humility which we all need to be in right relationship with ourselves, others, and the divine. Many people who have acquired genuine spiritual knowledge ultimately do harm because they abuse their power. They become grandiose, forgetting that they are really ordinary human beings in spite of how much more they might know. In the late nineteenth century Lord Acton famously said, “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” We have seen many tragic examples of how true this is over the past few decades. There are also wise spiritual



leaders who are conscious of their own flaws and the temptations of power, and use power well, in alignment with higher spiritual values and true humility. They do not require unquestioning loyalty and obedience and the turning over of personal assets.

Abuse of power occurs in all walks of life—in business, politics, families, athletics. It also occurs in areas where we like to think it won't—in churches, psychotherapy practices, yoga groups, etc. People who are considered leaders, or gurus, need to have done and to continue to do psychological and emotional work in order to avoid abusing power. When they don't,

Do you have a relationship question?

E-mail Connie at conniem@mcn.net,
or call 406-582-7450 and ask!

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they are likely to succumb to the temptation to abuse their power.

In the case of your friend, it sounds like the leader has claimed a distorted, ego-based power that is likely to be harmful to your friend. You can share your concerns and suggest that she read some of the excellent material dealing with the “guru phenomenon,” in books such as *The Guru Papers* and on web sites.

Ultimately, she will have to make her own decision. If she does join the group, maintaining a friendship if possible may be of great help to her in the long run. ■

*Good luck, Nancy
Connie*



Connie Myslik-McFadden, MSS, LCSW, is a psychotherapist in Bozeman with 25

years of experience working with individuals, couples and groups. She leads workshops, retreats and teaches Dream work and Pathwork. Connie devoted 9 years to Jungian analysis, training, and supervision, after graduating from the Bryn Mawr School of Social Work. She went on to graduate from the Barbara Brennan School of Healing, and Society of Souls, a kabbalistic school of healing. She is the author of “Gathering the Soul, a True Story of Spiritual Healing.” Pathwork (Pathwork.org) and Imago Relationship Therapy (www.GettingTheLoveYouWant.org) are two easily accessible sources for the theories upon which much of this column is based.