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The Seed

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The Seed was a controversial youth drug-rehabilitation program that flourished in south Florida when I was a teen in the early 1970s. Founded by former comedian and recovering alcoholic Art Barker, it was modeled after adult treatment programs and administered by unlicensed staff. The Seed utilized coercive techniques such as aggressive confrontation, intimidation, verbal abuse, sleep deprivation, and restricted access to the bathroom to tear down a teen's sense of self and replace it with the ready-made identity of a "Seedling."

The Seed was highly publicized, and the attention eventually proved destructive to the program. In 1974 the U.S. Senate published a study that accused the Seed of using methods similar to North Korean communist brainwashing techniques. The bad press, in conjunction with legal pressure from the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the drying up of federal funds, forced the Seed to scale back its operations dramatically. By the 1980s it had shrunk to a fraction of its former size and was officially admitting only voluntary clients. The Seed endured in this diminished capacity until it finally closed in 2001.

Today hundreds of similar programs are in operation throughout the United States and abroad. Some are even run by former Seed staffers. By most accounts, these programs are much harsher than the Seed.

I was in ninth-grade science class one afternoon in October 1972 when a note arrived summoning me to the dean's office. My older sister, Judy, was already there. "Mommy needs us," she said. I could tell by the apprehension in her eyes that she knew nothing more. I imagined my grandmother might be very sick, perhaps even dying.

My sister and I sat in front of the school until our parents pulled up. There were two other adults with them, a couple they introduced to us as "Mr. and Mrs. J." I was relieved, because I could tell from my parents' jovial attitude that nothing terrible had occurred. My sister and I got in the back seat. I didn't think it unusual that Mrs. J. took the window seat next to my sister and Mr. J. got in on the other side, next to me; my mood had lightened considerably by then. Our mother encouraged us to try to guess where we were going. After a few minutes she gave my sister a hint: "Remember that news story we saw on TV the other night?"

"Oh," my sister replied. "The Seed."

I had heard of the Seed. It was a drug-rehabilitation center. My experience with drugs consisted of having smoked marijuana about ten times. My parents didn't know this for a fact but were concerned about the company I was keeping and my disrespectful attitude toward them. Judy was also a source of worry to them because of her more blatant drug use and rebellious streak. I imagined they were taking us on a tour of this place to scare us. I mentioned to my father that I had a chess-club meeting that afternoon and did not want to miss it.

We arrived at an old warehouse surrounded by a chain-link fence. Two young men sitting on chairs by the driveway stopped our car briefly, then let us park. In the reception office a middle-aged woman named Vera sat down to talk with us. She

addressed my sister first, asking her age, grade in school, and the kinds of drugs she had used. My sister answered frankly. There followed a peculiar exchange in which Vera made insulting remarks about my sister's character and lifestyle, for no apparent reason other than to goad her. Judy's reaction was first astonishment, then hostility. Meanwhile young people came in and out of the office, calling out greetings to Vera or bringing her messages. These were not kids receiving treatment but Seed staff members, I'd later discover, all of whom had been through the program. After each interaction Vera would say in a singsong voice, "Loovoo you."

Toward the end of her prickly conversation with Judy, Vera revealed that my sister and I would be staying at the Seed for a while, and that we had no choice. I was shocked. We were not "druggies," as Vera charged. I had no concept of what was really going on, and was sure we would get out soon, once the Seed realized its mistake. I even said to my sister, who was upset, "It's OK. We'll just agree with what they say, and then we can go."

When Vera finally got around to me, she asked how old I was (fourteen) and what drugs I had used. I told her just pot. "Don't bullshit me," she said with a sweet, contrived voice and an intimidating stare.

While Vera was doing my intake, my sister had to use the bathroom. She was accompanied by a chaperone, another girl her age. A few minutes later a female Seed staff member approached my parents and informed them that my sister's attitude was rotten. She explained: "We have a rule here that when a newcomer goes to the bathroom, someone must be there to hold her hand. Your daughter didn't accept this, and she swung at the other girl."

My sister and I were taken to separate rooms to be searched. I had to strip, and my keys and money were turned over to my parents. Then Judy and I were led to a long, stark, cement-walled room where about three hundred young people, ranging in age from twelve to their midtwenties, sat in rows of folding chairs. They all faced a young man seated on a high stool and holding a microphone. The boys and girls — whom the man referred to as "guys" and "chicks" — were separated by a wide aisle down the middle of the room. (Males and females were always separated at the Seed.) The windows were eight or nine feet up on the walls, and the two doors were guarded by Seed staffers. A sign on the wall proclaimed, "You're not alone anymore."

Upon our arrival, the "rap" in progress was briefly interrupted, and Judy and I were made to stand in front of the group to be introduced by our name and the drugs we had done. When it was my turn, the rap leader said, "And this is Marc. He *says* he's only done pot." The group then greeted us in unison with a resounding "Love ya, Judy and Marc!" and we were led to seats in the front rows of our respective sections.

We stayed there until ten that night. At the end of the day's final rap, the rap leader said, "OK, all oldcomers picking up newcomers, pick 'em up." The program had no overnight facility, and "newcomers" were not allowed to live at home, so they went home with "oldcomers" who'd been in the program a while and were deemed trustworthy. My first night I went

home with Aaron, who was fifteen. I tried to explain to him that I was not a druggie, but he insisted that I was, even if I had smoked pot only once — or, for that matter, even if I just had a “druggie attitude.” When I told him I thought my attitude was fine, Aaron replied, “Listen. Don’t argue with me. Your attitude sucks.” I don’t think he was being mean. At the Seed it was an indisputable tenet that any newcomer’s attitude sucked, and there were only three roads a person could travel after his or her first puff on a joint: prison, insanity, or death — unless he or she was saved by the Seed.

I slept on the floor of Aaron’s bedroom. He had removed the handles from the windows, and he slept with his bed blocking the door. I still felt this was all a big mistake and entertained hopes of getting home soon. The Seed was probably a good place for some people, I thought, but I obviously did not belong there.

As a “Seedling” I lived by a strict schedule. Until the Seed determined you were rehabilitated enough to sleep at home and go to school, you had to spend twelve hours a day at the warehouse. Even after they’d returned to school, Seedlings were required to be at the Seed from the time school ended until ten o’clock at night. In the final stage of the program, attendance was required only three evenings a week, and one day on the weekend.

The Seed day began at 10 A.M. with the “morning rap,” which lasted more than two hours. The rap leader sat on his stool and called on people to stand and “participate.” Everyone who had been in the Seed more than a few days had to raise his or her hand to be called on or else be accused of “copping out.”

There were a limited number of topics for raps. Some were about how you and your old druggie friends had used each other for drugs or money or status and had only pretended to be friends while secretly despising one another. “Honesty” was a standard topic too. Being honest meant admitting you’d been “full of shit” before coming to the Seed, that all your relationships had been “bullshit,” that you had been horrible to your parents, who loved you, and that you’d been a dishonest, insecure, unkind, thoroughly worthless mess.

On my first day the morning rap was on “conning,” which meant parroting the Seed philosophy without really subscribing to it. No one could successfully con the Seed, I learned, because “everyone knows just where you’re at.” Seedlings were so supremely “aware” they could spot a con a mile away. This was when I realized that the Seed was after a different, more fundamental change than I’d imagined. Now I was scared.

Just as bad as conning were “analyzing” and “justifying.” “Analyzing” was just mixing up the facts and making them more confusing. “Justifying” was what you achieved by doing this. You analyzed your past actions to make it seem as if you’d had good intentions, or you analyzed what the Seed was telling you and tried to twist it in such a way that it seemed as if the Seed were wrong and you were right, though you knew in your heart that the Seed was right and you were an asshole. In fact, everyone was an asshole before he or she came to the Seed. Most of us had to proclaim this before the group at

least once before we got to go home. Occasionally there were feel-good raps about “love” or “happiness,” which inevitably elicited ecstatic comments about the “vibes” in the room, but even these came back around to how you had never truly been happy when you’d been “on the streets.”

Sleeping during raps was strictly prohibited, though virtually everyone was sleep deprived due to the long days at the Seed, followed by extended carpool rides to the homes of oldcomer hosts and after-hours “rehabilitation” with oldcomers. If you saw someone sleeping nearby, you were supposed to shake him or her awake. Even daydreaming was forbidden. If you looked as if you weren’t paying attention, the rap leader or a staff member would shout, “Hey, get out of your head!” “In your head” was a bad place to be caught at any time. Private reflection and introspection were counterproductive, because they inexorably led to analyzing and justifying.

During raps, a person who’d been unwilling to be “honest” might be “stood up”: made to stand before the group while everyone else took turns saying how appalling he or she was, using name-calling, derision, and profanity. Boys were “twerps” and “pussies.” Girls were destined to become prostitutes if they didn’t shape up.

On my second day a young man named Jerry was made to stand up in front of the group. Apparently he had turned eighteen and had decided to leave the Seed, as was his legal right. A staff member said dryly, “I think we should try to talk him out of it.” One by one, members of the group told Jerry what they thought of him. The boys said things like “If I had met up with a guy like you on the streets, I would have used you for what I could get from you, walked all over you, and then beaten the crap out of you.” The girls emphasized that he was pathetic and ridiculous and unmanly. When the rap leader asked, “How many of you chicks would have had anything to do with a guy like this when you were on the streets?” no girl raised her hand. After the group was finished with Jerry, he was crying and had to beg to be allowed back into the Seed. The rap leader contemptuously told Jerry the precise words to say, and Jerry dutifully repeated them through his tears.

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