
Denying Ritual Abuse of Children Catherine Gould

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How are we to understand the phenomenon of ritual abuse in the 1990s? Throughout the Western world, increasing numbers of therapists and other helping professionals are hearing accounts from children as young as two and adults ranging into the ninth decade of their lives describe mind-numbing accounts of abuses consisting of sexual sadism and pornography, physical torture, and highly sophisticated psychological manipulation which, taken together, we have come to refer to as ritual abuse.

The evidence is rapidly accumulating that the problem of ritual abuse is considerable in scope and extremely grave in its consequences. Among 2,709 members of the American Psychological Association who responded to a poll, 2,292 cases of ritual abuse were reported (Bottoms, Shaver, & Goodman, 1993). In 1992 alone, Childhelp USA logged 1,741 calls pertaining to ritual abuse, Monarch Resources of Los Angeles logged approximately 5,000, Real Active Survivors tallied nearly 3,600, Justus Unlimited of Colorado received almost 7,000, and Looking Up of Maine handled around 6,000. Even allowing for some of these calls to have been made by people who assist survivors but are not themselves survivors, and for some survivors to have called more than one helpline or made multiple calls to the same helpline, these numbers suggest that at a minimum there must be tens of thousands of survivors of ritual abuse in the United States.

Evidence also continues to accumulate that the ritual abuse of children constitutes a child abuse problem of significant scope. In 1988, Finkelhor, Williams and Burns published the results of a nationwide study of substantiated reports of sexual abuse in day care involving 1,639 young child victims. Thirteen percent of these cases were found to involve ritual abuse. Other studies of ritually abused children have been relatively small. Kelly (1988; 1989; 1992a; 1992b; 1993) reported on 35 day care victims of ritual abuse, Waterman et al. (1993) reported on 82 children complaining of ritual abuse in preschool, Faller (1988; 1990) studied 18 children who had disclosed ritual abuse in their preschool, and Bybee and Mowbray (1993) from the Michigan State Department of Mental Health identified 62 children alleging ritual abuse in their preschool and 53 children who reported seeing others be ritually abused. Snow and Sorenson (1990) studied 39 children reporting ritual abuse in five neighborhoods in Utah, and Jonker and Jonker-Bakker (1991) reported on a total group of 98 children, at least 48 of whom were believed to be victims of ritual abuse. The latter case is the only one cited here which was conducted outside of the United States.

Unfortunately, these statistics tell us little about the actual prevalence of child ritual abuse. Much more telling are the data these researchers have collected regarding the effects of ritual abuse on child victims. In Faller's (1994) review of the literature from which these studies are drawn, most of the studies which were selected included a control group of children with sexual abuse histories but no reports of ritual abuse. It is very telling that in every case in which the symptomatology of the ritually abused children was compared to the symptomatology of the sexually abused children, the ritually abused children showed considerably more symptoms of trauma.

In the Finkelhor et al. (1988) study, ritually abused children showed significantly more symptoms of trauma than did sexually abused children. Kelly (1988; 1989; 1992a; 1992b; 1993) showed that ritually abused children had significantly higher scores on the Achenbach (Child Behavior Checklist) than did sexually abused children, indicating more severe symptomatology on the part of the children who had been ritually abused. Waterman et al. (1993) found that both therapists and parents rated ritually abused children as showing more behavioral symptoms on the Achenbach than sexually abused children. Other assessment instruments used in this study found ritually abused children to function less well at the time of termination from therapy than did sexually abused children. Faller (1990) found that more ritually abused children than sexually abused children suffered from sleep, emotional, and behavioral problems, as well as phobias and problems with sexual acting out.

A great deal of literature has been amassed on the often extreme and debilitating effects of child sexual abuse on its victims, effects which may last a lifetime. To have four comparative studies as methodologically sound as the ones presented above all illustrating that ritual abuse causes even greater effects on child victims than does sexual abuse should give us as a nation serious pause. The data reflecting the grave consequences of ritual abuse on children has been coming in for over five years now. Yet we, a nation with mandated child abuse reporting and computerized accounts of numbers of children reported to have been sexually, physically, and emotionally abused each year, still have no systematic means of collecting data on numbers of children reported to have been ritually abused! We could, relatively easily and for minimal expense, obtain statistics on the number of cases of ritual child abuse being reported in the United States each year simply by adding one additional category on the child abuse reporting forms which mandated reporters must complete when they file a child abuse report.

Given the accumulation of data illustrating not only that children reporting ritual abuse are profoundly negatively impacted by those experiences, but that they are even more severely impacted than are child victims of sexual abuse, how can we give any weight at all to the skeptical position that ritual abuse memories are no more than screen memories for Incest experiences that are actually worse, suppressed from awareness and replaced by accounts of impossibly bizarre rituals? If children claiming to be ritually abused were in fact sexually abused only, then clearly their symptomatology should be similar to and no more serious than that of sexually abused children.

The psychological condition of ritually abused children matches the accounts they give of what has been done to them not only in the severity of their symptomatology, but also in its particulars. That is to say, not only do ritually abused children appear more disturbed than sexually abused children on traditional instruments like the Achenbach, they also demonstrate symptoms which relate in direct and obvious ways to the abuse experiences they describe. For example, because ritual abuse usually involves traumatic confinement, ritually abused children often fear elevators, closets, and other small spaces. Because these children have often had urine and feces smeared on their bodies and put in their mouths, they may smear themselves or others with urine or feces, or develop phobias of the bathroom. Because many of these children have witnessed torture and killing, and have been threatened with death of themselves and their loved ones, they often fear that they or their family members will be killed. And so on. (See Gould, 1992, for a more complete account of the symptomatology that characterizes ritually abused children.) The nature as well as the severity of ritually abused children's symptomatology gives eloquent and tragic testimony to the fact that ritual abuse does indeed exist, in all the horror described by its victims, both young and old.

Perhaps no skeptic has done more to obfuscate the issue of ritual abuse than Kenneth Lanning of the FBI, who for years has maintained that no substantive evidence exists for the reality of ritual abuse (Lanning, 1991). (As investigative journalist Civia Tamarkin has noted, for decades the FBI also told the American public that the Mafia did not exist in the United States (1991)). "No bodies...No adult witnesses," as Parenting magazine put it so succinctly, and so erroneously in their March 1994 article "The Satanism Scare" (Ruben, 1994). And why do accounts like the ones given by the 37 ritually abused adults in the Young et al. (1991) study, and the 14 ritually abused families in the Kelly (1992a) study, of group sexual assaults, human sacrifice, forced cannibalism and the like not constitute eyewitness accounts to so-called experts like Lanning?

I am personally aware of scores of adult survivors with memories of ritual crimes (contrary to the position of many skeptics, most of these memories were retrieved without hypnosis or chemical assistance; many were in fact retrieved outside of therapy) who have made concerted attempts to bring these crimes to the attention of law enforcement. The vast majority of these survivor accounts have been met with absolute indifference and inaction on the part of local law enforcement agencies, as well as the FBI, who might reasonably be expected to investigate the charges of interstate trafficking of children and pornography which are commonly made by ritual abuse survivors.

Not only do skeptics such as Lanning choose to ignore eyewitness/victim accounts of ritual criminal activity, they apparently also choose to overlook the significant number of cases of ritual abuse in which perpetrators have confessed to their crimes. In the Bottoms et al. (1991; 1993) study of 2,292 cases of ritual abuse, perpetrators in 30% of the child cases confessed to abusing one or more children, and perpetrators in 15% of adult cases confessed to perpetrating as well. In the case studied by Snow and Sorenson (1990), two adolescent perpetrators admitted to charges of abuse. Both of these sets of data require further analysis to determine which acts of ritual abuse were confessed to by what number of perpetrators.

Corroboration and eyewitness accounts offered by children should also be given serious attention when therapists and investigators can demonstrate that no contamination of the children's disclosures has taken place. In the case studied by Jonker and Jonker-Bakker (1991), children from different schools and different locales gave accounts of perpetrators, abuse locations, and abusive acts that were mutually corroborating. Accounts of tunnels under the McMartin preschool given by children claiming to have been ritually abused at the school were fully corroborated when the existence and location of the tunnels were documented by a professional team of archaeologists (Summit, 1994).

If it were not enough to have a substantial amount of data from well-controlled studies demonstrating the grave psychological impact which ritual abuse has on children, to have eyewitness accounts of significant numbers of adult and child survivors, to have perpetrator confessions of ritual abuse crimes, and to have a whole variety of types of corroboration of children's accounts of ritual abuse, the number of ritual abuse cases in which criminal convictions have been obtained should certainly put to rest any remaining questions about the existence of ritual abuse. It has become fashionable in the last several years for the media to minimize and even dissemble about the data which so strongly support the existence of ritual abuse. Amazingly, this has happened even in relation to ritual abuse cases in which criminal convictions have been obtained. Parenting magazine (Ruben, 1994), for example, asserted that "far more cases (of ritual abuse) end in acquittal" than in conviction.

In fact, 58% of the ritual abuse cases in the Finkehor (1988) study that went to trial resulted in convictions. In the Kelly (1992b) study, convictions were obtained in 80% of the ritual and sexual abuse

cases combined; since there were no significant differences between the rates of criminal conviction in these two groups, we can surmise that convictions were obtained in approximately 80% of the ritual abuse cases Kelly studied. Finally, and most significant given the thousands of cases studied, convictions were obtained in 11% of all ritual child abuse cases studied by Bottoms et al. (1991; 1993). All three sets of data need to be further analyzed to determine in which cases acts of ritual abuse other than child sexual abuse per se were entered into the court record, and on which charges the perpetrators were convicted.

It is because ritual abuse cases are being seen in greater numbers in courtrooms across the United States, and convictions are being obtained, that one by one states are passing laws against crimes that occur virtually exclusively within the context of ritual abuse. In September of this year, California became the sixth state in the country to pass a law against specific acts of ritual abuse.

How can it be that, with significant numbers of criminal convictions of perpetrators of ritual abuse and laws against ritual abuse on the books in a growing number of states, with the clinical data amassed by thousands of therapists in the United States and internationally, with physical evidence like the tunnels found under the McMartin preschool corroborating children's reports of abuse, that we cannot reach a consensus that ritual abuse constitutes a serious problem for us as a nation, and demands to be addressed? Why is it that media accounts of ritual abuse are often filled with so much obfuscation that the public is left wondering whether ritual abuse might not in fact be the "urban myth" or "mass hysteria" that certain skeptics have made a virtual career out of saying that it is?

I propose that there are two major factors at work in this elaborate national dance of deception and denial. The first is economic, and the second sociocultural. The economic reasons for the denial and minimization of ritual abuse are in one sense obvious. Survivors of ritual abuse, especially those far enough along in their recoveries to have moved through the horrific memories of group sexual assaults and bloody sacrifices, usually find that underneath those traumatic ritual memories is a previously dissociated knowledge of having served the cult/perpetrator group in ways that are unambiguously economic. For example, women survivors often discover that they have served as prostitutes for the cult, sometimes since childhood, and frequently for little or no financial compensation. Within the frame of the cult-created Multiple Personality Disorder (Dissociative Identity Disorder, or DID, in the new diagnostic nomenclature) from which most ritual abuse victims suffer, the core personality in such a survivor usually knows nothing of her cult involvement or of her cult "job". In other words, her core personality does not wonder why her work as a prostitute never earns her any money, because she has no idea that she (or, more accurately, one of her alters) is prostituting. The alter who works as a prostitute does so because she has been programmed to function in this manner, usually from early childhood, with extreme torture, and knows no other way of life. (See Neswald, 1991, and Gould & Cozolino, 1992, for a more complete description of how ritual abuse deliberately creates alters programmed to serve particular cult functions).

Survivors of ritual abuse whom I have treated, or on whose cases I have consulted, have also discovered that they have worked for the cult/perpetrator group as bookkeepers and money launderers, as drug dealers and couriers, as pornography subjects, as programmers/torturers of children, as computer programmers, as investment specialists, as legal advisers, and even as government agents, always outside the conscious awareness of their core personalities. Rarely has a case come to my attention in which the survivor was well paid for her contributions to the financial advancement of the cult/perpetrator group which she (unconsciously) served. Most often as the survivor accesses the

memories that are buried under countless layers of torture trauma, she has to contend not only with the rude awakening that since birth she has lived a life of unspeakable pain and horror outside her conscious awareness, but also that she has been literally enslaved to a perpetrator group, since her activities have been dictated by others and enacted outside her own free will, with little or no financial remuneration. In fact, survivors who have generated sometimes millions of dollars for their perpetrator groups, often are virtually penniless when they come to therapy, and are treated for very low fees.

When we understand the fact that ritual abuse is usually perpetrated by groups which are deeply involved in organized crime, the underlying incentives of these cult/perpetrator groups become clear. While ritual abuse is certainly an integral part of some kinds of Satanism, it is most likely that the deeper reason for the prevalence of ritual abuse is that, simply put, it reliably creates a group of people who function as unpaid slaves to the perpetrator group. Because their core personalities are amnesic to their cult activities, these ritual abuse victims pose little threat to their controllers. Without extensive therapeutic help, cult victims are usually unaware that they work for the cult/perpetrator group and are therefore incapable of contemplating quitting their cult jobs. Neither can they turn higher-ups in to the authorities for their criminal activities, since they have little or no conscious access to information about what activities they or their superiors are involved in.

Clearly, the groups who create these unpaid subjugates have considerable economic incentive to do so. How much money do these groups actually generate, and is it enough to impact the culture at the level of, say, media-created public opinion? This, of course, is the cloudy part of the economic argument for why ritual abuse is as wide-spread as it is, in families and in preschools, and why we as a society have been so slow to recognize and respond to the seriousness of this problem. It is by definition difficult to know who belongs to groups whose membership is highly secretive, especially when many of the membership themselves are amnesic to their involvement. Therefore, it is difficult to assess the degree to which members of these groups influence media accounts of ritual abuse, derail ritual abuse investigations by law enforcement, are instrumental in getting children complaining of interfamilial ritual abuse sent back to an abusing parent, or hire officials to make public statements on behalf of a national law enforcement bureau to the effect that no substantial evidence of ritual abuse exists.

No doubt it will take serious, well-coordinated efforts on the part of local and national law enforcement to gather the data that will be needed to know how powerful and deeply entrenched these ritually abusing, criminally involved groups actually are. In the meantime, we as a nation must examine how deep our commitment to child protection really is. Mothers Against Sexual Abuse (MASA), headquartered in Los Angeles, continues to find, despite vigorous efforts at change, that judges across the country are more likely to award custody to fathers than to mothers, even when the child has complained of abuse by the father and those complaints have been substantiated by psychological or medical findings. I am personally aware of dozens of cases across the United States in which a child has disclosed severe maltreatment in the form of ritual abuse in a preschool, and the case has never been properly investigated, other parents with children in attendance at the school have never been notified, the school has not been closed down, and no charges have been filed. Organizations like Believe The Children of Chicago are aware of cases like these numbering well into the hundreds.

In both interfamilial and extrafamilial child abuse cases like those described above, the more extreme and ritualized the abuse, the less likely the child is to be granted protection and the perpetrators are to be apprehended. Clearly this has to do exclusively with cultural bias, not what is in the best interests of

the child, since, as the research makes amply clear, the negative impact of ritual abuse on the child is extremely grave.

In my opinion, we in the United States deny the reality and seriousness of ritual abuse, especially as it impacts on children, in part because it threatens our images of ourselves as Americans. The thinking of the skeptic often goes something like this: Hideous crimes involving torture and mind control "don't happen here." They happen in third world countries, which do not have the freedoms "guaranteed" by our democratic form of government. There would be no purpose served by having a fascist type of group torture United States citizens, as this kind of terrorization is designed to overthrow an existing government, and ours by its very design cannot be overthrown. And certainly there would be no purpose served in torturing children. Since they don't vote and don't form coalitions of any kind, extremist groups would have no interest in coercing them into socio-political compliance.

What this argument misses is the fact that when mind control is put into place with very young children through the torturous programming that is the essence of ritual abuse, then reinforced and further developed as the child victims get older, by the time those children reach adolescence and adulthood they have become valuable resources for the perpetrator group to exploit. That exploitation may or may not be political, but it is certainly economic. To fully grasp this at a cultural level requires the general public to come to grips with a level of understanding of human nature still barely comprehended within the mental health community; that is, that the normative response to severe trauma, especially in early childhood, is dissociation and amnesia for the traumatic events, and that this response can be manipulated by sociopaths and programmed cult members to create individuals amnesic to both their traumatic histories and their behaviors in the world of abuse and criminality into which their alter personalities have been indoctrinated.

Until law enforcement personnel, public policy makers, the judiciary, the child protection system and others who are involved with the protection of children and the betterment of society come to understand this new paradigm, ritual abuse is likely to continue to be minimized in both its scope, its impact, and the insidious way it has of multiplying when left unchecked. The paradigm shift which will need to take place in order to provide truly effective treatment for ritual abuse victims, and in order to successfully curb this extreme form of brutality in our culture, is certain to be a difficult one to achieve. (See Gould & Graham-Costain (1994a; 1994b) for an account of treatment guidelines for ritually abused children.) It calls into question not only the belief most Americans have that systematic brutality on a large scale does not and cannot exist in this country, but also our belief that we operate from our free will, and that freedom of thought and action is inviolable.

To become fully aware of just how vulnerable to utter violation and manipulation that free will really is when sociopaths and programmed cult victim members are allowed access to children demands that we put far greater efforts into safeguarding our children's welfare than we ever dreamed would be necessary. The price tag emotionally and financially for putting that awareness into practice will be very high indeed. But the price of ignoring or minimizing the impact of ritual abuse on our children and on our society will surely prove intolerable.

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