

August 2006

# Spirituality & Health

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TRUE OR FALSE?  
“THIS IS A SAFE  
PLACE”

*We would like to believe it. Workshop leaders promise it.  
To let go or hold back — What’s safe in the world of self-help?*

BY BETSY ROBINSON



**T**he teacher was a big, warm woman. A therapist. So she must have known what she was doing when she said, “You are now two weeks old.” Okay, I thought, and I let go: Limp-bodied, I fell backwards through time; I was a lump of flesh with useless arms and legs, a head too heavy for my flimsy rubber neck. After a while, the big, warm woman directed the other half of the workshop — the “mothers” — to come to their “babies.” “Cry for your mothers,” she instructed us, and I froze. I didn’t even try to cry. And

CREATAS/PICTURE QUEST

so began a nightmare. Friday night through Sunday, I stopped sleeping, eating, and talking, and I lost all sense of time, vacillating between infancy, early childhood, adolescence, and my real age — and nobody at the workshop noticed! It took till late Monday to even think to ask for help, then a month of intense therapy to glue me back together.

Since that time, years ago, “This is a safe place,” the invitational mantra that precedes so many healing, self-help, and self-actualization workshops, has become a red flag to me. In his book *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless* (Crown, 2005), author Steve Salerno says that “the self-help guru has a compelling interest in not helping people” to keep them coming back for more. I don’t go that far. But I wonder how many well-meaning workshop leaders end up doing that by default — because they believe their own idealistic promises. And how many well-meaning seekers abandon their self-directing instincts in the hope that saying yes to a leader’s directions will change them, cure them, “fix” them?

## ■■■■■ What Is a Safe Place?

I am sitting in the rosy-walled, womblike psychotherapy office of Jacqueline A. Carleton, Ph.D. After more than 25 years in private practice and decades of teaching and supervising helpers in training (including a growing number of integrative, complementary, and alternative medical practitioners in the major teaching hospitals of New York City), she is an expert on realistic promises.

“To me,” says Carleton, “this is a safe place’ can only mean that the standard rules of confidentiality will be observed: nobody takes anything that happens or is said in this room out of the room. And nobody will be allowed to attack someone else physically or verbally — if that starts, the workshop leader will stop it. But I don’t think that’s what teachers think they’re promising. I think they’re promising that this is a place where all your feelings will be held

and taken care of and nothing dreadful could possibly happen to you because ‘we’ll be here.’ Frankly, I think that’s unrealistic — first of all, because no teacher could possibly know that about people. In a lot of psychological workshops — like est [large group awareness training] years ago — people are required to be in psychotherapy and bring the name of their therapist to the workshop.”

Carleton settles back in the soft bucket chair that fits around her body like a hug. “I think the promise of a safe place can lull people into exposing parts of themselves that they’re not ready to expose. At worst, it can lull some people into not being responsible for what they share or what they allow themselves to feel in a group setting. To me, the only real safety is in holding on to yourself, in knowing yourself and your limits. For example, I teach at a healing school near New Paltz where I train students by having them give practice sessions to each other. Before they begin, I caution them not to share their deepest problem when the healer is a student and the session is 15 minutes.

“The best protection is to advise people to be responsible for themselves. And perhaps to teach them techniques at the beginning for stopping something — such as doing something else if a feeling becomes overwhelming. Also, it’s very important for workshop leaders to make it totally okay for people to opt out of any exercise, because there can be a kind of peer pressure to be part of it. Fragile people usually know they’re fragile, and you have to super-respect people’s boundaries.”

## ■ Resistance Has a Purpose.

Since 1985, Carleton has been a senior faculty member of the Institute for Core Energetics, a practitioner training center where an unsuspecting visitor in the reception area might be taken aback by the stereophonic moaning, sighing, and screaming emanating from unseen groups in “processing” rooms scattered about the floor.



“Coming out of the sixties and seventies,” says Carleton, “there was a lot of strong encounter work, strong bioenergetic or body work that people did in groups that was thought to be cathartic and incredibly healing. But as the years have worn on, we’ve found that it isn’t always that way, and that people need to be safeguarded, that things need to be taken more slowly, that bigger isn’t better. That’s an important topic of discussion in the U.S. Association for Body Psychotherapy — and especially among our board of directors. [See *S&H*, August 2005, “Standards for Alternative Therapies.”] Sometimes catharsis is exactly what a person needs, but not as often as practitioners formerly thought.

“In workshops where a large number of people are opting to have a deep experience, I think you’re going to have a percentage of casualties of people for whom this is not good. A workshop leader just takes that chance, and usually the participants blame it on themselves when things go wrong, so the leader doesn’t have a problem. Those who lead a lot of workshops can develop a guru complex; they think they’re incisive and always right. And probably 99 percent of the time they are. But not always. And they don’t get feedback, because people aren’t going to tell them.”

with so many unknowns in workshop situations, how can we discern whether we’re holding back because of distorted judgments that we would do better to surrender, or whether our resistance is the voice of wisdom saying, “Get the hell out of here”?

Carleton laughs. “If you’re in doubt, get the hell out. And you’ll live to surrender some other time. It’s just not worth falling apart or dissociating. I think people can only wonder about it themselves: Was I a coward to leave or was that really a safe thing I did?”

“Defenses are good things. If we didn’t have defenses we’d be a bunch of jellyfish. But it’s hard to know what to do. For instance, someone who has authority issues knows that he will most likely distrust or want to fight with a workshop leader. Unless the workshop is about that, he’s going to have trouble knowing if his judgment is clouded about what’s safe and what isn’t. If he jumps over his defenses, the defenses either stay — secretly directing him so he’ll just be acting — or there’s a good reason the defense is there, and he may land in a puddle.”

## ■ “If in Doubt, Get the Hell Out.”

One of the reasons we seek help is that we believe that we are holding ourselves back in some way. But

### How to Know What’s Right for You

- Tap into as many channels as you can: What sensations do you feel in your body, what are you thinking, what does your intuition tell you? If all your channels agree, that will help determine your choices.
- Read teachers’ credentials: How careful are the workshop leaders? How carefully have they been trained?
- Get word-of-mouth recommendations from people whose opinions you trust.
- Leap, try something unknown — giving yourself absolute permission to walk out if it doesn’t feel right. Don’t stay just because you paid.

## ■■■■■■ Whom Can We Trust?

In his book *SHAM*, Steve Salerno points out that various authentic health-care licenses aren’t hard to come by — in fact, a psychologist in Philadelphia once obtained five of them . . . for his cat! A website called Licensing Revenue Secrets encourages the growing population of life coaches to take “a shortcut to the big leagues”: To “gain undisputable credibility,” “make high-paying clients, who only want to work with the best, choose you,” and garner a six-figure income, all you have to do is invent your own workshop, then license others to teach it! And conversely, many gifted alternative healer-teachers have trained for decades with the world’s finest teachers and have no formal titles or credentials. So how can we know who’s competent to help us?

“I don’t think you can judge only by the letters after somebody’s name,” says Carleton, “which isn’t to say that it doesn’t matter whether you’re an M.D., a Ph.D., or whatever. Something to look at is whether teachers’ degrees are or are not relevant to whatever they’re teaching. In other words, if you’re taking a healing workshop, it would give you some safeguard if the teacher had been to a reputable healing school — just as when you’re having surgery, you’d hope



that the surgeon has been properly trained — and practiced a lot! If teachers are doing things with psychology or psychotherapy, you would want to ascertain that they had training in that and, preferably, degrees. Degrees don't guarantee a thing, but they're a start. You have to ask."

## ■■■■■ An Honest Promise

Smiling, Carleton recalls an occasion when she was supervising faculty members at a school where the director had promised the students that this would be a safe place. "The students took that as one of the measures of how much they were learning or how well the class was going — how 'safe' they felt. They would complain to the teachers or the director if they didn't feel safe. And rather than working with a student on why she didn't feel safe, the blame or the responsibility went to the teacher. So then the teachers started feeling unsafe because they thought they were about to be fired. So this 'safe place' promise became one that nobody could fulfill. An honest

promise would be "There is no safe place. People will make mistakes, I promise you. You may feel bad."

So that's how it is: No matter how much regulation there is, no matter what the licensing standards, despite our good intentions, we will all make sometimes-horrible mistakes. Perhaps the only honest option is to acknowledge this and to look inside — deep inside — to the still middle ground between fear-based skepticism and blind leaping. In the workshop that followed my inadvertent regression, I had the opportunity to try this. Before I fell backwards off a table into the arms of my classmates, I looked into each of their faces. Some looked back; some didn't; some smiled encouragingly; some looked frightened or annoyed. I looked at the school director and all the student-teachers: same thing. This was not a safe place; it was real life. And knowing that I was *choosing* to fall into it was my first experience of a true safe place. ❖

Betsy Robinson is managing editor of *Spirituality & Health* and a graduate of a four-year healing school.

## How to Lead a Good Workshop

Alexis Johnson, Ph.D., is cofounder of the Center for Intentional Living ([intentionalliving.com](http://intentionalliving.com)), a three-year school for healers, body workers, clergy, and other practitioners who need more training in the psycho-spiritual dimensions of the healing relationship. She offers the following advice for leading workshops ethically.

### 1. Make an Honest Promise

Workshop leaders can only promise information — if the workshop is about a content, they can say "I know that content and I can deliver it. But I can't promise anything about your personal process. I can only say I will be present and will honor anything that comes up in the process world."

### 2. Use the "I, We, It" Formula

This was developed by Ruth C. Cohn, the founder and director of the Workshop Institute for Living-Learning in Switzerland. Advise the participants:

I: "To the best of our ability, each of us is responsible for our own 'I.' I cannot read your minds, so whenever you have an anxiety or upset, signal to communicate. You have to tell me something is going on in your own 'I,' and I will do the same."

We: "If you have an upset with somebody in the group, including me, we need to find a format to at least express that; there is room here for that to be stated, not processed."

It: "'It' is the content of the workshop. I will take responsibility for the content, and you are welcome to contribute to it."

### 3. Use this "Disturbances Take Precedence" Statement

"If you are disturbed, you can no longer attend or be Present (with a capital P) to what's going on in the room. You need to speak up. If I'm in the middle of a lecture or a piece of process with somebody else, you might have to wait a couple of minutes. But don't let your disturbance take away from your capacity to be present in this learning circle."