

Nicole Schneider, author
of "Seven Years Under Influence"¹

Women in Cults, Female Gurus and Victims

My name is Nicole. Today I am 59 and mother of four children. I have been divorced twice, I live alone, but not isolated, in a very rural and wild setting, which reflects many of my personal character traits, those that I always had.

Because it was that side, the wild, natural, simple side, that attracted me to Guy-Claude Burger's cult. He promoted a "return to nature": eat everything raw by trusting our instincts, just like before the invention of fire and sedentary life.

As a teenager, I was part of the scout movement. I lived my first experiences of freedom with my peers: evenings singing, drinking and dancing around a fire in the middle of the forest. My parents were very strong supporters of scouting. They were part of the La Rochelle group since they were teenagers. They may have met each other there. In the 1970s, they would take us camping with the "nudists". I don't know why they liked that, walking around naked. I didn't.

When I attended Burger's conference on anopsology (eating raw), my father was sitting beside me. He was the one who suggested I come. He had always been interested in nutrition, more for managing his weight than concern for his health or ecology. He only found it interesting. For me, it was a revelation. I just came back from a two month stay in Vietnam, a country still at war then. I had seen misery and hunger, everywhere, the violence of war, the devastation caused at each level. I was 17. On my return, I was traumatised and confused. But I didn't have any one to talk to. If one sentence caught my attention during Burger's conference it was this: eating raw calms nervous tension. Raw food eaters are calmer. Additionally, eating only what nature offers us allows us to feed the whole planet. There would be no more hunger, no more violence. There would be no more wars.

This shortcut could make you smile. And it made many smile, I guess, in 1974, at the time that Burger stated this. For me, it was the total opposite. I couldn't see how I could continue my life where I had left it before leaving for Vietnam. But a man, Christ-like, a scientist and musician, offered me a solution that could fit ALL my needs: calm my worries and my guilt by allowing me to act, while not necessarily opposing the values that my parents had given me. I could be an actor in this movement that wanted to change the world through healthy nutrition and a simple life in the country. When Burger asked me if I wanted to join him on his farm where he lived in a community with his wife and six children, because, according to him "I would fit in well in the country", this declaration, however weird, made me ecstatic: I said YES.

I still had not reached 18 when I entered the main room of this farm for the first time, located in the Gros-du-Vaud, a place where I would spend several difficult years. But I still didn't know that. Accompanied by my parents, who came with me that day, and

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Burger, it was never supposed to be more than a six month “internship” before I was to start at the Source nursing school in Lausanne, where I was already registered. The idea of this internship in the country probably pleased my father, who read Mao and spoke to me of these young Chinese who had to go to the countryside before, for those who wanted to, go on to higher education. And the image of the broader family in the perfect natural setting reassured parents who would much prefer the farm than knowing their girl was in a nightclub consuming too much alcohol, like most young people were doing at my age.

Burger immediately sized me up. He did what no one had ever done – he gave me responsibilities and his trust in my ability to fulfill them. It was very gratifying for me, as I had lived in the shadow of a powerful and constraining mother. I was finally someone, a capable person, someone you could count on. I worked very hard. And I quickly proved my worth and became the manager of the bio-food store located in the basement of the farm. I spent my days there under the neon lights. But I liked to prepare the orders, wrap up the fruit and vegetables that we sent to followers of anopsology. I piloted this ship to port every week, and on Fridays and Saturdays I loaded the bus for the markets in Geneva and Lausanne to sell our bio products. We were like a precursor to eating well and eating bio. And I liked it.

When the end of my internship was approaching, Burger offered me another deal: No to go to school and stay with them. In return he would provide me with a course from a follower who was a doctor, a sort of training programme that would allow me to receive patients who came to Burger because they were unhappy with traditional medicine.

This traditional medicine had condemned Burger, who had throat cancer but which was healed by raw food. He explained this in detail to me to change my mind. Traditional medicine wasn’t reliable. Anopsology was the medicine of tomorrow.

He was so persuasive that I gave up my studies. Of course, I never received the training that I was promised.

And this was the role of women, at least in this community. For Burger, women did not need to be trained but needed to work. He always encouraged the men to complete their studies. Those that he associated with were all graduates: a doctor, two mathematicians, a biologist, an architect, etc....he himself was a physicist. Women were only good for housework, administrative tasks, sales, repetitive and difficult work.

Additionally, he denigrated women’s bodies. Starting from puberty, but above all from the moment where hips and breasts developed, his look changed, accompanied by humiliating and unflattering remarks. Women’s bodies, sensuality, eroticism seemed to turn him off. Make love to a mature woman, and above all to enjoy it and want it, was a form of failure for which he blamed the woman who, according to him, made “men fall into a basic state, an animal state, focusing on reproduction” and dragged them down to the “bottom”. The other, second state, a state that opened one up to the “extra-sensorial, the spiritual”, could only be experienced between initiates, particularly between a man and young or very young people.

That's how it was for women in this community. And, despite the distaste he had for women, they nonetheless had to be "tossed into the pot" as our grandmothers would say, the goal being to mark their bodies while his statement marked their spirit. These "relations" (again a term from our ancestors), at least those I experienced, were only "formal". The act was mechanical, accompanied before and after with a drawn-out speech that hid the deviance of the abuser, his affective poverty, his need to control and dominate the other, etc. I never felt destroyed after this "act". It was no more or no less than what women experience with their spouses all the time, just a bad moment to get over with. In contrast, everything else was destructive. The fact that this man was my father's age, the fact that he tried to force things on me, take control of my life, his contempt. I could only describe it as paradoxical with what should have been a moment of exchange, beauty and love. I guess it affected me very deeply, surreptitiously, and had serious consequences subsequently, both for my life as a woman and for my children, especially my daughter.

Abuse never leaves you unscathed, either physically or mentally. In the case of the women in Burger's community, the abuse took place both physically and mentally. We no longer owned our bodies and our minds. Burger did what he wanted, controlling all our relationships (sexual, friendship) with others, building them from scratch to serve his interests. This is what happened with the father of my children. Burger knew that I needed an affective reason to stay, and he did what was necessary. Like he did what was necessary to "get rid of" my first pregnancy, judging that the time was not ripe. As he did what was necessary to have control over the father of my first son and prevented him from leaving the community while I was praying he would. And for a long time, he succeeded in keeping us in his prison, until his craziness, his deviance, became too much and ended up alerting the man that became my husband. We left the cult with our two very young children before they could fall, like we did, into the hands of the guru.

After having written the book that told the story of my time in Burger's cult, titled "Seven Years Under Influence", I often heard, and justifiably so: you are lucky you could leave! But it is a sentence that only those that have lived the same experience can say. First, for me, during that period I was not aware that I was living in a cult. No one was talking about cultic communities in 1982, at the time me and my husband found ourselves alone with our children. In this regard, before I could express anything about this topic, I had to listen to others, which made me realise that I was not crazy when I suffered, that my suffering was legitimate, not pathological as the guru said. Someone had to express the suffering that they would have felt if they had been in my situation, because I could then look in the mirror and access my own suffering. But it didn't happen. And for years, I wasn't able to talk about this experience, and the suffering remained deep inside, leading to life choices that harmed rather than healed my life. Additionally, and even when being taken care of, which can be the case today for victims of cultic excess, the process is long and hard. We left the cult, the guru, the followers, the rituals, etc., but we remained bound, influenced, subject to ways of thinking that did not belong to us, and in such an insidious way that we could live years under the influence, without even knowing it.

Leaving a cult, like any other form of influence, does not solve the problem permanently. On the contrary. To free oneself, if and when you can do it, you need

patience and help. Without it, ones' mental health can be strongly altered, as it was the case of the first of Burger's chosen ones once they left the cult. I don't quite understand by what miracle I was able to escape. Probably thanks to my children who, just by being present made me want to fight. Thanks to them and thanks to the work that I did for myself, over time, when I was able to let my experience emerge, what I was able to write about it and that my life allowed me to meet several particularly good people who listened to me helped me transform this trauma into a work, an account to transmit to my children so that, in the words of Boris Cyrulnik, "the ghost returns to its grave". This ghost that haunted our lives for so many years.

Yet it still haunts mine, sometimes. But no longer in the same way. Today, I take care of my wounds slowly, after I finally understood that no man, irrespective of his love, can heal me in my stead. I envelope it, I cradle it, in order that it feels recognised and placed where it should be, its rightful place, not intrusive but not inexistent. In my heart. An integral part of who I am.