

# The Lure of Fundamentalism

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## Abstract

The author discusses fundamentalism and the human quest for meaning in describing a friend's surprising participation in the antiabortion movement. Concepts of existential pattern theory are presented to interpret both the friend's motivation and the dangerous attraction exerted by fundamentalist movements such as the Christian Coalition.

When I first met Joanna, an elegant, recently divorced woman in her mid-fifties, she talked sadly of having few interests since her recent divorce. Excluded from the social scene she and her husband had shared, she spent considerable time watching TV, often staying up late to see televangelist Pat Robertson's program, which she said helped her feel better.

Six months later, when Joanna visited me briefly, I was startled to find that, instead of her previous unresponsive behavior, she exhibited an assured demeanor, lively movements, and a sparkle in her eyes. Enthusiastically she told me that she had joined Operation Rescue, a militant antiabortion group that is separate from but ideologically similar to Robertson's Christian Coalition. She was participating in their activities for the selfless purpose of "saving unborn babies." As she said, "Thanks to Reverend Robertson, I realized that even when I thought I was happy, my life was frivolous and empty, whereas now it has value because I am contributing to an important cause."

I caught my breath. Shortly before Joanna's visit, Paul Hill, a fundamentalist former minister and a member of Operation Rescue, had killed a doctor and his protective escort outside a women's medical clinic in Florida. Hill justified his action by his absolutist reading of the Bible and claimed that "sometimes you have to use force to stop people from killing children" (Lewis, 1994).

I asked Joanna if she knew about the murders. She said she did. Then, with shining eyes, she

defended Hill's "courage and dedication" and his readiness to sacrifice himself for the cause. She went on to extoll Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition and the "enlightened moral standards" they offer.

After she left, I could not get Joanna out of my mind. The Adult data I had offered to question her new convictions had no impact on her. Why would an intelligent, well-educated person like Joanna, with a good income, living in a free, noncoercive society, give such acquiescence to a dogmatic movement?

## Views on Autocratic Structures

In previous writing about coercive leader/follower relationships (English, 1979), I described how autocratic movements that appear designed to benefit followers inevitably end violently. This interpretation was based on my earlier description of two contrasting character types—Undersure and Oversure—which correspond to the two defensive existential positions of I-U+ (I'm not-OK, You're OK) and I+U- (I'm OK, You're not-OK). People in these positions are attracted to one another because they can exchange complementary strokes (English, 1977, p. 16). The preferred ego state is Child for Undersure persons (who doubt themselves too much) and Parent for Oversure persons (who tend to be absolutely certain about their standards and values). Neither type is in itself better or worse than the other, and neither is pathological, except when extreme (third-degree). If extreme, alliances between such complementary character types—whether in love, business, social relationships, or political movements—correspond to third-degree racketeering (English, 1977) and can become dangerous for the individuals and outsiders if one party feels threatened with the breakup of their system.

Jacobs (1987, 1991, 1994) elaborated brilliantly on such groups, showing how difficult it becomes for resisters and/or protesters to pull out or change such lethal systems once a leader

and his or her team take control. Jacobs also distinguished among various categories of bystanders and described why some are attracted to join such groups while others contribute to their growth by virtue of their passivity. An extension of Jacobs's categories of bystanders can also be used to describe why certain fringe participants evolve over time to become full participants in the system.

### The Attraction of Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism seems to be growing around the world. Under the mantle of religion, Overseas fundamentalist leaders claim special authority, allegedly derived from God (via the Koran, the Bible, or other means). They then *define morality* for their followers in accordance with their *particular version* of Truth. Allegiance to this system becomes equated with finding a "true" religion that meets the person's spiritual needs.

In fact, the word "morality" comes from the Latin "mores," which means customs rather than anything spiritual. However, fundamentalist religious groups use "morality" to define right and wrong according to their particular standards, which include specific labels for what is "good" or "bad" sexual and social behavior. In this way, a fundamentalist leader achieves psychological control over followers, many of whom are relieved to find that by adhering to the leader's definitions of morality, right and wrong and good and evil seem clear. As individuals they no longer have to struggle with the kind of complex internal debates about honest moral choices that most of us face daily.

In *Masks of Authoritarian Power*, Kramer and Alstad (1993) point out that in general "the glue that holds every society together is its morality" (p. 159). However, "when the fabric of society, including its moral underpinnings, begins to break down, the desire to return to the familiar and secure is inevitable" (p. 163). Yet, they tell us, "The old moral order was not originally fundamentalist. . . . It was simply the old order" (p. 166). Fundamentalism, however, defines the old order idyllically because it seeks to counter the uncertainty of the postmodern world. To believe that certainty and emotional security will result from going back to an old

order is an *illusion*, because that old order never truly existed, although it functioned as a system of belief and/or structure wherever there were rulers with absolute power.

### Changing Reality

It has become increasingly clear, as Anderson (1990) pointed out, that "what we call the 'real world' is an ever-changing social creation. . . . We live in a . . . social reality that many people construct together. . . . The earth is not a single symbolic world, but rather a vast universe of multiple realities" (p. 68).

Because diversity is so unsettling, fundamentalism attracts those who have difficulty dealing with it. "The great psychological appeal of fundamentalism is that it offers certainty [which, in turn] is dependent upon an unchanging core of belief . . . [and] always involves a point of view about what reality is and isn't" (Kramer & Alstad, 1993, p. 170). Thus fundamentalists assert that "what must be returned to are the unchanging dictates of a higher power" (p. 166), and to underscore this, they *invoke the idea of danger and evil*. To pull away from their ideology is to have "succumbed to evil" (p. 166). To avoid so terrible a prospect, "fundamentalism offers the promise of control through previously effective authoritarian mechanisms" (p. 171). Thereby, in individuals shaken by uncertainty, which Joanna might well have been, there can arise the hope that a wise, all-knowing leader/father figure might appear to guide and protect them.

Still, all this did not explain Joanna's newfound energy and ebullience on being involved with the euphemistically named Pro-Life movement. Also, even though she was vulnerable because she had been rejected and had yearned for the emotional support derived from connecting to a father figure, and even if she had been seduced by Robertson's convincing television manner and the strokes she received from members of the antiabortion group, once the movement had become violent, why had she remained an enthusiastic member? She had not entered a closed system that threatened her physically if she left, as some cults or sects do. Her joy at belonging to the Christian Right demonstrated that by joining what she saw as an idealistic

movement, she now found sense and meaning for her entire life.

### Do Humans Yearn to Dedicate Themselves?

Apparently, Joanna was responding to more than the need for emotional security and strokes—namely, to the profound human yearning for idealistic dedication to add spice and a sense of purpose to life, regardless of whether this purpose is helpful or harmful in the immediate present or makes sense to others (English, 1994).

History provides us with many examples of average people (not just those with extreme pathological or economic needs) who were coopted into autocratic movements such as national socialism, communism, McCarthyism, and Islamic fundamentalism. They did so even at the cost of personal sacrifice, primarily for the feelings of dedication and exaltation they gained by participating in an absolutist social movement with a clarion call of faith. Such calls, whether secular or religious, claim idealistic goals about change or betterment in this life or in the next, not only for a particular subgroup, but often for future generations and the whole world. The labels of such movements correspond to the prevailing culture, so they sound appealing, even though in practice these groups may represent quite different ideals.

For instance, in the United States, what better resonates with our social culture than coupling morality with majority rule, as does the so-called Moral Majority, without having to prove the accuracy of either claim? And who but godless unbelievers can object to the values proclaimed with infallible assurance by the Christian Right? Finally, what is more delightful than babies, so why not affix the prolife and profamily labels to a movement that disregards the circumstances in which unwanted children must be raised by overburdened, poor, sick, and/or drug-addicted, lone women?

### Theoretical Considerations

Some concepts from existential pattern theory can help to unravel the mystery as to why someone like Joanna would feel so fulfilled from joining a crusading movement such as Operation Rescue. To begin, I refer to the three drives

that influence us unconsciously, which have I described previously (English, 1987, 1992).

The three drives are:

1. the survival drive, which functions on behalf of *individual survival*
2. the expressive drive (previously called the creative drive), which promotes *species survival*
3. the quiescence drive (previously called the sleep drive), which *connects our life to the planet* and perhaps to the universe

Our drives and their functions, influence, and attributes are not overtly visible or palpable.

Many attributes and manifestations of these drives correspond to instinct, but they operate and manifest themselves in the human species differently than they do in other creatures. The specific influence of each drive can be inferred by distinguishing among their attributes, their manifestations, and where they appear.

By *attribute* I mean a quality, property, or characteristic (conscious or unconscious) that pertains to a particular drive. By *manifestation* I mean the specific perception, thought, feeling, behavior, or articulation related to a particular attribute when it becomes conscious or evident in a person. Thus, an attribute is an *ability or tendency* to experience or show a feeling or thought or an ability to act in a certain way; a manifestation is the *actual* thought, feeling, or piece of behavior. Any attribute can be manifested through any one of our ego states.

Since we humans depend less than do other creatures on rigidly preprogrammed responses to stimuli, new forms of potential behaviors are superimposed on our genetic abilities and tendencies. Thus the connection between the evolutionary goals and tendencies of our drives and our conscious purposes or behavior is often nebulous and sometimes distorted.

Mental balance, or feeling OK, is maintained when our drives take turns influencing us, whereby one drive or a combination of two may affect us primarily at a given time, and the influence of a third drive is delayed. However, if the impact of a drive is consistently reduced to the point of being misused or almost cancelled, the result will be chaotic internal emotional imbalance manifested as unmanageable conflictual emotions or feelings of senselessness,

meaninglessness, or despair (see English, 1992).

### Motivation

Until recently, transactional analysts and other psychotherapists have tended to focus primarily on the effect of strokes (present or past) or on object relations to evaluate motivation. But it is only when we are under the influence of the survival drive that we operate in terms of our stroke economy. The expressive and quiescence drives motivate us in relation to other needs that are equally important but quite different from those affected by the survival drive.

Specifically, the needs for excitement and risk taking are attributes of the expressive drive, which can generate joy such as cannot be experienced under the survival drive. However, when under the influence of the expressive drive, we do not evaluate ethics or consequences, so this drive can steer us just as easily to destructive as to creative directions that would benefit humanity.

Similarly, the yearning for transcendence is an attribute of the quiescence drive. In combination, it is the expressive and quiescence drives that bring on the need for meaning in our lives, with the wish to connect to more than whatever gratifies our individual survival or our relationships.

Quiescence's love can be compassionate and can lead to selfless giving; it can provide exaltation, or it can be passive, because quiescence can also promote detachment, which may include obliviousness to human needs or suffering. If expressive joins quiescence, love can become boundlessly generous or overpoweringly ecstatic, with readiness to die for the sake of a beloved or a cause. This also can make an individual vulnerable to being coopted for an idealistic crusade.

For persons who have relinquished hope for genuine love, power is the Beloved Substitute sought under both survival and expressive influence. As with love in general, it differs according to whether it comes on primarily because of survival or expressive influence. Survival is more involved with its manifestations, and expressive with the quest, but most often both drives combine with regard to such

love. Even quiescence occasionally supports love of power for the sake of peace, although it may then bring on survival issues and then become authoritarian.

### Drives and Developmental Stages

Although all three drives influence us in varying degrees at all times, there are stages of development at which a particular drive may assert itself more forcefully.

Specifically, the quiescence drive is dominant during infancy, to be superseded or combined with the survival drive, which takes dominance during the period of childhood dependency when our physical needs, stroke hunger, and vulnerability to shaming are uppermost and condition aspects of our character. The expressive drive makes itself felt actively during the period of the "terrible twos," when children push for exciting activity beyond their abilities, and again in a different way between the ages of three and six and again at adolescence.

During those periods when the expressive drive is especially active, most of us harassed our caretakers and ourselves with the kinds of "why" questions that are the domain of scientists and philosophers. Eventually our survival drive may have reasserted dominance, and we may have settled for Kierkegaard's recommendation: Take a leap into faith. But which faith? Perhaps we tried out one set of ideas or another with greater or lesser devotion, but the basic "divine discontent" remains rumbling underground, seeking outlets and handles to hold on to. We continue to yearn for we know not what.

Sometimes, if disappointment sets in about our personal life, we want a Big Cause to help us gratify that special longing for a sense of idealistic dedication that gives meaning to life. We have seen the horrible example thereof in the murder of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a law student—an intelligent, seemingly nonpathological young man who seems to have felt driven and actually killed on behalf of the extremist convictions he took on.

Along with the yearning for a cause, there also arises the need for one or more leaders whose Parent appears to offer the requisite permissions and answers that may have been missing in childhood by articulating Meaning dogmatically

in terms of their *own definition of reality*. The effect of such permissions can be to suggest that service to a *leader's* cause, based on a *leader's* definitions of reality, and on a *leader's* fabricated concepts can offer the higher meaning sought by potential followers.

### Back to Joanna

In the course of her marriage, Joanna had functioned primarily under the influence of her survival and quiescence drives. Her character type was *Undersure*, so she used the *Child* ego state more frequently than the *Parent*. However, hers was not an extreme pattern, so she comfortably exchanged strokes with others from all her ego states. In fact, her *Parent* never hesitated to express definite values in accordance with conventional American moral and social principles.

Although the survival conclusions that helped her to be a responsible wife and citizen prohibited certain outlets for the expressive drive (such as extreme manifestations of enthusiasm, passion, or idealism), there were opportunities for the influence of her expressive drive in relation to having and raising her children and being an involved partner in her husband's business interests. She did not consciously experience the particular restlessness generated by the expressive drive, and her quiescence drive, also, was satisfied in that she got plenty of rest and enjoyed nature. Thus her drives rotated well enough without her recognizing any particular yearnings for meaning to life beyond the pleasure of dedicating herself to her family.

However, the shock of her husband's desertion shook up the homeostatic balance of her drives, such as it was (for she had never really examined the tenor of her life). She was unable to reinstate even her previous tenuous internal balance when she lost the vicarious opportunities for involvement and excitement she had experienced in conjunction with her husband's career.

Survival's support, which had combined with expressive in social activities that offered strokes, was also sorely reduced. Even survival's alliance with quiescence broke down, as anger, pain, disappointment, and anxiety (negative attributes of survival) invaded her sleep and

peace of mind. Of course, she herself could not have formulated that, even while securely married, she had not allowed herself to recognize certain yearnings of her expressive drive, which might have become the basis for a more meaningful life beyond whatever gratification she obtained from dedication to her family. All she knew was that after her marriage ended, she felt empty and devoid of a sense of value, direction, and meaning. Television became the principal soporific for her quiescence drive, keeping her in a passive condition, which intensified her I-U+ *Undersure* position. This in turn brought on an acute need for parental guidance to steer her away from the chaotic feelings generated by the lack of outlets for her expressive drive and steering her toward the destructive choice of suicide.

Into this void came preacher Robertson, who offered prepackaged answers and purposes that were soothing to quiescence and survival's hope for personal salvation yet exciting to expressive because they brought in concern about the next, unborn generation. Fancy getting a bridge, through quiescence, to both survival security and expressive excitement!

With Robertson's parental permission to acquire new dramatic meaning in her life, Joanna's expressive drive could finally become dominant through enthusiastic, active participation in the antiabortion group. Strokes from other members of the group satisfied survival, and the religious leadership offered quiescence the illusion of love and potential transcendence far beyond the temperate messages Joanna had previously gained from her religious practice. Now, at last, Joanna could rejoice with a clear-cut belief system and a sense of meaning by participating in an overarching program instead of the petty projects that had given her a sense of importance before.

No wonder that from being an uninvolved, apolitical bystander to life she was transformed into a glowing member of Robertson's True Believers! She did not see herself as a mindless sheep in his flock, even though she became one. Although she was now submitting to the dogmatic control of a *Parent* figure who claimed to possess absolute truth as a religious and moral standard bearer, she saw herself as an ardent

member of a crusade that was battling for the betterment of humankind.

### **My Own Motivation**

This article started out because of my puzzlement at seeing that Joanna found happiness by becoming a fanatic member of Operation Rescue. I felt uncomfortable with the clash of values between us when she visited and the feeling that, after all, if she had found a way to be happy, I should simply congratulate her and refrain from contrasting my values with hers, especially since she was not interested when I tried!

However, as a result of wanting to understand why Joanna was attracted to the Christian Coalition, to which I had paid but scant attention until then, I found it useful to apply my theory about drives. I then realized that although people can be coopted into authoritarian structures because of their survival drive's need for strokes and the passive attributes of their quiescence drive, it is primarily because of the *expressive drive* that someone like Joanna can be enlisted into an aggressive, fundamentalist movement when one might assume that its authoritarian aspects would be abhorrent to an otherwise intelligent, independent person. It is the missionary clarion calls for zealotry that can mask the authoritarianism of certain movements and are the magnets that can attract the expressive drive of otherwise perfectly normal, competent persons.

Many worthy citizens lead dull, unimaginative lives structured mainly by their survival drive. The major needs of their expressive drive for excitement, dedication, and passion, as well as the needs of their quiescence drive for a sense of transcendence, are met only in a limited way in their daily activities or through sexuality and religious observance.

This longing for passionate idealistic involvement can be easily exploited by a fundamentalist movement when it claims a religious mandate and when it is led by a self-assured, seemingly loving Parent/Leader who masks his or her craving for power under a spiritual stance.

### **The Christian Coalition**

It appears that Robertson and the Christian Coalition have found the perfect formula for enlisting a much broader range of adherents than

other movements (except, perhaps, the crusades of the Middle Ages or international communism in more recent times) precisely because they can be attractive to all three drives of potential participants in varying combinations. This may be why the Coalition is gaining so many new adherents that they now constitute a powerful political force.

Joanna is not just an isolated case of a formerly conventional, middle-class person who led a fairly dull life and became ignited with fanatic zeal for Robertson's fundamentalist movement. In addition to the typical confused or lonely followers that are found in all religious movements, she represents the numerous well-qualified, intelligent, and energetic persons who are now swelling the ranks of the Christian Coalition. It is precisely such persons whose lives, like Joanna's, have been dulled by the alienating effect of our technological, consumer-oriented society. Lacking opportunities or other outlets for their expressive potential, they are attracted by the Coalition because of their unconscious yearnings for guidance to find Meaning for their lives. They join in what is presented to them as a noble cause and thus add their substantial skills and resources to those of the Coalition, multiplying its power.

According to Lind's research (1995), "The Christian Coalition, a tax-exempt and supposedly nonpartisan institution, founded after Robertson's run for the Republican nomination in 1988, claims over a million members and 1.8 million households on its mailing list" (p. 21). Current statistics show that new members are constantly being added. The Coalition has developed tactics for dominating school boards and other local grassroots organizations, thereby increasing the power of the central organization. Clearly it is proceeding in accordance with a program announced by Ralph Reed, executive director of the Coalition. In 1990 he wrote of the organization's goals as follows: "To take back this country, one neighborhood at a time and one state at a time" (cited in Lind, 1995, p. 21). As of now, it seems to be progressing in that direction. Its increase of power is illustrated by the fact that a many politicians now pay obeisance to it. As Lind (1995) further states, "The religious right now dominates the Republican party

in more than a dozen states" (p. 21). He lists "politicians . . . who have addressed the Christian Coalition's . . . conferences" (p. 21). Among them are well-known figures such as Bob Dole, Newt Gingrich, Jack Kemp, William Bennett, Jesse Helms, and others.

### My Own Concerns

In light of all this, my own alarm about the potential danger to my own rights prevents me from viewing with scientific detachment how the Christian Coalition has found just the right formula to gain adherents at the grassroots level and to get them to feel idealistically involved while performing tasks that affect social and political outcomes. (For instance, many members now dominate school boards and agitate to break down church/state barriers, threatening politicians, doctors, and abortion clinics, etc.). It is clear that the allegedly Christian Coalition is not just a self-contained religious movement. It is a highly controlling, subversive political organization operating under a religious mantle with the ability to undermine my liberty and yours, regardless of our own beliefs.

Here is an example of Robertson's call to arms:

The strategy against the American radical left should be the same as general Douglas MacArthur employed against the Japanese in the Pacific. . . . Blast the individuals out of their power bunkers with hand-to-hand combat. The battle to regain the soul of America won't be pleasant, but we will win it! (cited in Rich, 1995, p. A-26)

Note how the reference to soul combines the religious implication with the militantly political, whipping up enthusiasm at all levels.

In other contexts, the Christian Coalition refers to its "crusade." While the rallying cry to a crusade may sound great, the historical record of the crusades of the Middle Ages shows how feudal lords, out to gain competitive power, enlisted under their banner thousands of eager youths longing for excitement and religious exaltation. As they believed, they marched east to fight evil and the Infidel. On their "glorious" way they ravaged villages and slaughtered uninvolved peasants, all in the name of their Great Cause. Eventually, many in their own

ranks themselves succumbed to war and disease.

Personally, I do not want to be in the pathway of a crusade, like the peasants of yore.

### Conclusion

My own survival and expressive drives will not allow quiescence to bring on rest if I limit myself to scholarly detachment and avoid specific references to the Christian Coalition now that I have become alerted to how their appeal is likely to grow and their dogmatism become increasingly dangerous in the United States. Perhaps others can be similarly alerted. Is it the better part of wisdom for social scientists to offer only detached "objective" observations?

In a previous paper (English, 1979), after discussing the demagogic dangers to liberty posed by McCarthyism in the 1950s, I quoted Jacobs (1987) in referring to Canetti's definition of crowd crystals, which can be "revitalized and, with minor changes in constitution, [be] reinstated . . . [while appearing] as something completely new and dangerously active" (Canetti, 1960/1984, p. 72). I ended by asking whether Pat Robertson may be doing the reinstatement Canetti describes.

Are the threats to our basic liberties that we in the United States experienced during the McCarthy era now being reinstated through the subservience many groups are showing to the power of the Christian Coalition? Are we, bystanders, to shrug off any concern? Was Yeats right when he wrote, "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity" (cited in Bartlett, 1992, p. 596)?

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