

How to Empower a Guru or Channel: A Book Review by Emma Bragdon

“Easily the most comprehensive, erudite, and timely book...to explore authoritarianism in religion, institutions, power, the family, intimacy and sexual relations, and personal problems such as addiction....Argue[s] persuasively that any system of values that places tradition and the past above the imperative to question the present is destined to become increasingly lethal.” —*San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*

Current news from the Mid-East quantifies the daily bloodshed in battles waged in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Palestine and other countries. It's all about who has authority. The authority struggles in the US involve less killing, but watching the newly released film, *Lincoln*, reminds us that only 150 years ago (shortly before my grandmother was born) in our Civil War 620,000 Americans died, taking sides over the right to hold slaves. Certainly a question about who has authority and how that structures our social interaction.



Dictatorships based on instilling fear with control, reinforced by corporal punishment and death, are just the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the visible authoritarianism in politics and most organizations we generally find a far more pervasive, covert, age-old authoritarianism. We have all been handicapped by authoritarian modes of thinking, often subconscious, inculcated through thousands of years of political and religious hierarchy. This is a key factor in moral breakdown, dysfunction, and paralyzing political gridlock that makes mediation impossible.

The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power by Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad (North Atlantic Books, 1993; e-book, 2012) is widely considered the most in-depth, thorough coverage of this phenomena. Since it focuses on the

distortions that can, and often do arise in guru/disciple dynamics, it is of interest to anyone involved in spiritual community in which there is a charismatic spiritual leader.

The relatively simple traditional guru/disciple structure demanding total surrender to the guru (or “channel”) clearly exhibits what it means to trust another. It offers a quintessential example of how minds can be controlled when one trusts someone else more than oneself. Decoding how these mechanisms of control and surrender so often become corrupt displays the dynamics of “mental authoritarianism” writ large. Gurus’ enticing promises and highly refined, often convoluted justifications make people vulnerable to manipulation.

It is the rare guru figure who can consistently manage this kind of relationship dedicated to the pure, selfless goal of bringing the student to a more expanded state of God consciousness. (The authors of this book do not believe that is even possible; they see self-concern and self-centeredness as an inbuilt and necessary core part of being alive.) Usually some personal drama pollutes the purity, because the “guru” becomes ego-inflated or one or more of his inner circle becomes attached to power and position—and abuses of power often follow—typically involving money, sex, exploitation, or coercion.

The confrontations we see today are between those backing authoritarian traditions that have positioned themselves as “unchallengeable” and those seeking new solutions, strategies, and forms of interaction based on social justice, compassion, transparency, sharing information and feedback, and working out conflicts through mediation rather than bullying and/or domination.



Authoritarians protect the *status quo* and their power structures by blocking new information and feedback. China’s blocking of the world-wide-web is a perfect example. New information and feedback are often blocked silently (muffled) within spiritual organizations as well, especially within the more autocratic organizations that attack and/or threaten anyone who challenges the authority of the “guru” or the “channel”. In the worst cases even reports that the guru has sexually assaulted a visitor are rejected, ignored, written off or dismissed by his inner circle; and the whistle blowers, or those who express concern, are threatened with physical violence, or paid to keep silent.

On the other hand, people's deep conditioning to want "saviors" offering certainty underlies why authoritarianism has such a strong hold and keeps attracting followers. The idea of democracy ignites people's aspirations to have more control over their own lives. But, are we ready for it?

Perhaps the frequency with which we currently expose deception, and savor the details of the stories, is a measure of our desire for truth. Not even highly decorated 4-star generals and religious or spiritual leaders can maintain their status in the face of the unprecedented challenges brought by globalization, digital technologies and information systems that allow for cyber-snooping and instantaneous communications with international news outlets. Many gurus and political leaders are suddenly exposed as the human beings with frailties that they truly are, jerked down from their pedestals, shamed and pilloried in public. (This was the punishment long ago, but we do have better ways today where both victim and perpetrator can be healed.)



Remember how the news of pedophilia in some Catholic priests expanded from village to international media and tarnished the authority of the Catholic Church worldwide?

Now we have General David Petraeus, head of the CIA before his intimate, extra-marital affair with his biographer was publically exposed. That cost him his position. The same fate came to Congressman Andrew Wiener for using the internet for his sexual liaisons without due discretion.

William Broad, in the *New York Times* in February, 2012 cites other examples of abusive spiritual teachers: *"After recent accusations of sexual impropriety with female students, John Friend, the founder of Anusara, one of the world's fastest-growing styles of Yoga, told followers that he was stepping down for an indefinite period of "self-reflection, therapy and personal retreat."... Swami Muktananda (1908-82) was an Indian man of great charisma... At the height of his fame,*

around 1980, he attracted many thousands of devotees — including movie stars and political celebrities — and succeeded in setting up a network of hundreds of ashrams and meditation centers around the globe. He kept his main shrines in California and New York. In late 1981, when a senior aide charged that the venerated yogi was in fact a serial philanderer and sexual hypocrite who used threats of violence to hide his duplicity, Muktananda defended himself, [but the exposure was already in circulation.]” The deceit and manipulation, once exposed, leaves a wide wake of feelings of betrayal and disappointment behind it in those who put trust in what turned out to be an illusion of moral and spiritual authority.

When the imagined superiority of certain identities comes to light for what it is—*imagined*—the political and religious hierarchies lose their glamour, their righteousness, and their authority; change can then come swiftly with far-reaching repercussions. On the positive side, this process can ultimately unleash the intelligence and care essential for personal and social evolution. Transformation within organizations can happen. This is essential for a sustainable life on planet earth based on truthfulness and respect for diversity.

Broad’s *NYT* article in early 2012 continued: *“The drama with Mr. Friend is still unfolding. So far, at least 50 Anusara teachers have resigned, and the fate of his enterprise remains unclear. In his letter to followers, he promised to make ‘a full public statement that will transparently address the entirety of this situation.’ The angst of former Anusara teachers is palpable. ‘I can no longer support a teacher whose actions have caused irreparable damage to our beloved community,’ Sarah Faircloth, a North Carolina instructor, wrote on her web site.”* As of late Fall, 2012, former teachers are creating a new organization that is more transparent, managing leadership in new ways to check duplicity.

Our world of rapidly accelerating change requires these kinds of feedback-based reality checks and balances. In one spiritual center I know in Sao Paulo, Brazil, once a year each person in authority—and this includes many mediums, channels and healers-- is given feedback. If the “feedback panel” finds one or more practitioners to be out of balance emotionally, ego-inflated, no longer able to connect clearly with the pure energy of Source, then he or she is asked to take a break, and do what is needed to come back in balance. Even the head of the community is given this feedback and must comply. Checks and balances.



This kind of observance, like an annual check-up with a primary care physician, empowers individuals and organizations to maintain emotional and spiritual health. In such a system the spiritual leaders can be kindly supported to rest, de-stress, re-engage an uncomplicated contact with Source, get help from a psychotherapist if necessary, recommit or make new decisions regarding their life direction, and be in a better position to collaborate with others. It's the same thing used in "interventions" when addicts-in-trouble are faced with those who care about them, encouraging them to take time out to rest and regroup before returning to work and family life. In the scenario with addicts, they are warned they may lose their job unless they take the needed "time-out" to regroup. Utilizing this simple formula, we will be able to create and maintain new, more viable, sustainable structures in spiritual organizations.

We don't have to rely on news media to dig for dirt, then shame public figures into surrendering their positions forever. This is again the domination game: shaming people into submission. We have lost great minds and great public servants, like Petraeus, in those disgracing displays in which the punishment does not fit the crime. We can empower them, respectfully, with compassion, to change.

By applying the knowledge and know-how in *The Guru Papers* we can protect, strengthen, and repair organizations dedicated to spiritual health and evolution that have gone awry and restore individual autonomy.

The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power

by Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad

North Atlantic Books, 1993; E-book, 2012

Order through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or I-Bookstore

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JoelDiana.com

The *Guru Papers* webpage has Trailers, Videos, Podcasts, Interviews, Reviews, Articles, Book Excerpts & Translations into Italian, Spanish, French.

The chapter on "*Gurus and Sexual Manipulation*" is a free download.

http://www.joeldiana.com/guru_papers.html

Author: *Parts of this book review by Emma Bragdon, PhD. are loosely based on Diana Alstad's writing on The Guru Papers and democracy. Emma Bragdon participated in the San Francisco Zen Center for four years in the late 1960s; took Yoga Teacher Training in the Ananda community in the 1970s; taught courses within the Avatar community throughout the 1990s; and was a guide to 60 groups visiting John of God's sanctuary from 2001-2012. She is a prolific author and maintains a private counseling practice in Vermont. EBragdon@aol.com; www.EmmaBragdon.com*