

**DEADLY  
BLESSINGS**  
FAITH HEALING ON TRIAL

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I come from a "privileged" perspective: I was once a Christian Scientist. I was sincere, worked hard at the practice of my faith, and assumed progressively more responsible positions in my branch church. I received class instruction, the prerequisite for becoming an authorized healer. I had been called on for healings by other believers. I was convinced of the righteousness and invincibility of my cause. I left the church when I failed to gain a healing of crippling rheumatoid arthritis.

"We cannot serve two masters," Scientists are admonished, and I left because I felt I must. If I was to seek healing through drugs, I must give up Science. It would be hypocritical to have done anything else. Perhaps someday, I told myself, I would return.

When I left the Mother Church, my teacher phoned to tell me the clerk of the Mother Church had informed him I was resigning. He said I didn't need to leave the church if I submitted to medical care. I couldn't be treated by a practitioner, but I could continue to read and study, to attend services, to maintain my membership in the Mother Church and my branch. And even if I quit the Mother Church and the branches, I would still belong to his association, and could attend the annual meetings. But he would prefer I didn't come if I were somehow incapacitated or forced to use "an obvious medical appliance of some kind. You can understand."

My rheumatoid arthritis had developed slowly. Before I finally sought medical care, the pain in my feet had become so intense that it took me ten to fifteen minutes to lever myself out of bed every day, and every morning's first steps were like walking barefoot on broken glass. I would limber up as the day went on, but my arms were drawing up at the elbows into a permanent contracture, and my hands collapsing as the disease consumed the cartilage in their joints. Though twisting off a car gas cap could bring tears of agony, I still worked to deny the aggressive mental suggestion that material sense is anything other than an impotent false claim about God and His ever-harmonious, divine idea, man. I didn't walk so much as hobble out to the platform on Sunday mornings.

But by then, almost my entire circle of friendships and working relationships centered on fellow Scientists. I put on a good, stoical front, and no one in my church ever asked me why I couldn't straighten my arms or walk smoothly out to my seat on the stage. I was an actor in a musical drama scripted by Mary Baker Eddy, a star before an adoring audience who saw not me but the role I we had both chosen.

We were all working mightily, doing our Christianly scientific best to reject any sensation of mortal error, any lie that would claim to attach itself to the revelation and the revelator: She who discovered the True

Science, founded the Mother Church, and, through her writings and her will (both literally and legally), was forever the leader of the movement. Because of my relative exposure to malpractice as both First Reader and a journalist, I must understand that I was like a lightning rod to error's thunderbolts. Error, personal sense, was attacking the movement through me, suicidally demanding to enthrone itself in matter.

Mark Twain was right. Mrs. Eddy had created something far more valuable than sweet reason. She had indeed created an *environment*, which is easily worth, to the average consumer, far more than something so limiting as life confined to the evidence of material sense.

We all fought to defend her *environment*.

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Did Christian Science influence my professional decisions?

Yes. While a Christian Scientist and a newspaper reporter, I discovered that a man arrested for sexual abuse of young boys was a Christian Science Sunday school teacher. He had taken Polaroid pictures—no risk of a phone call to cops by an incensed commercial film developer—of young boys nude on his bed, *Christian Science Sentinels* clearly visible on a bedside table.

I asked the deputy district attorney handling the case if there was any evidence he had abused any of the children in his Sunday school class. I was told "no." I was the only reporter who worked the courthouse regularly, and I knew that no other reporter was likely to stumble onto the Christian Science angle. I discussed the matter with a practitioner, who suggested an "out": Since none of the victims came from his class, there really wasn't any reason to mention it, was there? Thus relieved, I omitted a significant fact from a story, priding myself for thus denying error's efforts to attack the church.

I also notified the clerk of the branch church to which the man belonged, and told her both of the details of the arrest, including the photographs, and that I did not intend to include the fact of his religion in my report.

I don't like today what I did then. But I was convinced of the rightness of my actions. My intentions were honorable; my motives, the best I could imagine.

# SO WHY CALIFORNIA?

Nearly two decades ago, before I was a Christian Scientist, I was a member of a communal household under a charismatic leader who dispensed mind-altering drugs to his followers for use in carefully controlled circumstances.<sup>1</sup> I earned my keep as scribe and editor for the leader, a Hindu from India, who also performed the rites for my marriage to the mother of my son. With my blessings as the household astrologer—an art I learned from the guru—some of the group members went to India. I stayed behind. Those who went sickened, living in the guru's attic, tended by astrologers and folk healers.

One woman died: I had specifically and sincerely urged her to go, based on my reading of her horoscope. When they finally took her to the hospital, it was too late. They brought her ashes home to her parents; the second of their children they had had to bury.

There was a time in my life when I believed in psychic surgery. Well-known psychologists told me it was real, showed me films.<sup>2</sup> I would have tried it—fortunately, the need never arose.

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In *Influence: How and Why People Agree to Things*, Robert D. Cialdini, professor of psychology at Arizona State University, gives a wonderful plain-language report on what he calls "compliance strategies." These are the calculated persuasion techniques used by parents, Hari Krishnas, Nazis, Chrysler dealers, doctors, teachers, television comedy producers, and advertisers to get other folks to change their minds, to do what they want them to do. They go for the reflexes, using thousands of tricks and techniques. Yet behind a majority of the tactical adaptations Cialdini finds six basic strategic principles that can make us act unquestioningly: