

## LAW 27

### PLAY ON PEOPLE'S NEED TO BELIEVE TO CREATE A CULTLIKE FOLLOWING

#### JUDGMENT

*People have an overwhelming desire to believe in something. Become the focal point of such desire by offering them a cause, a new faith to follow. Keep your words vague but full of promise ; emphasize enthusiasm over rationality and clear thinking. Give your new disciples rituals to perform, ask them to make sacrifices on your behalf. In the absence of organized religion and grand causes, your new belief system will bring you untold power.*

## **THE SCIENCE OF CHARLATANISM, OR HOW TO CREATE A CULT IN FIVE EASY STEPS**

In searching, as you must, for the methods that will gain you the most power for the least effort, you will find the creation of a cultlike following one of the most effective. Having a large following opens up all sorts of possibilities for deception; not only will your followers worship you, they will defend you from your enemies and will voluntarily take on the work of enticing others to join your fledgling cult. This kind of power will lift you to another realm: You will no longer have to struggle or use subterfuge to enforce your will. You are adored and can do no wrong.

You might think it a gargantuan task to create such a following, but in fact it is fairly simple. As humans, we have a desperate need to believe in something, anything. This makes us eminently gullible: We simply cannot endure long periods of doubt, or of the emptiness that comes from a lack of something to believe in. Dangle in front of us some new cause, elixir, get-rich-quick scheme, or the latest technological trend or art movement and we leap from the water as one to take the bait. Look at history: The chronicles of the new trends and cults that have made a mass following for themselves could fill a library. After a few centuries, a few decades, a few years, a few months, they generally look ridiculous, but at the time they seem so attractive, so transcendental, so divine.

Always in a rush to believe in something, we will manufacture saints and faiths out of nothing. Do not let this gullibility go to waste: Make yourself the object of worship. Make people form a cult around you.

The great European charlatans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries mastered the art of cultmaking. They lived, as we do now, in a time of transformation: Organized religion was on the wane, science on the rise. People were desperate to rally around a new cause or faith. The charlatans had begun by peddling health elixirs and alchemic shortcuts to wealth. Moving quickly from town to town, they originally focused on small groups—until, by accident, they stumbled on a truth of human nature: The larger the group they gathered around themselves, the easier it was to deceive.

The charlatan would station himself on a high wooden platform (hence the term “mountebank”) and crowds would swarm around him. In a group setting, people were more emotional, less able to reason. Had the charlatan spoken to them individually, they might have found him ridiculous, but lost in a crowd they got caught up in a communal mood of rapt attention. It became impossible for them to find the distance to be skeptical. Any deficiencies in the charlatan’s ideas were hidden by the zeal of the mass. Passion and enthusiasm swept through the crowd like a contagion, and they reacted violently to anyone who dared to spread a seed of doubt. Both consciously studying this dynamic over decades of experiment and spontaneously adapting to these situations as they happened, the charlatans perfected the science of attracting and holding a crowd, molding the crowd into followers and the followers into a cult.

*It was to the charlatan’s advantage that the individuals predisposed to credulity should multiply, that the groups of his adherents should enlarge to mass proportions, guaranteeing an ever greater scope for his triumphs. And this was in fact to occur, as science was popularized, from the Renaissance on down through succeeding centuries. With the immense growth of knowledge and its spread through printing in modern times, the mass of the half educated, the eagerly gullible prey of the quack, also increased, became indeed a majority; real power could be based on their wishes, opinions, preferences, and rejections. The charlatan’s empire accordingly widened with the modern dissemination of knowledge; since he operated on the basis of science, however much he perverted it, producing gold with a technique borrowed from chemistry and his wonderful balsams with the apparatus of medicine, he could not appeal to an entirely ignorant folk. The illiterate would be protected against his absurdities by their healthy common sense. His choicest audience would be composed of the semiliterate, those who had exchanged their common sense for a little distorted information and had encountered science and education at some time, though briefly and unsuccessfully.... The great mass of mankind has always been predisposed to marvel at mysteries, and this was especially true at certain historic periods when the secure foundations of life seemed shaken and old values, economic or spiritual, long accepted as certainties, could no longer be relied upon. Then the numbers of the charlatan’s dupes multiplied—the “self killers,” as a seventeenth-century Englishman called them.*

## THE POWER OF THE CHARLATAN, GRETE DE FRANCESCO, 1939

The gimmicks of the charlatans may seem quaint today, but there are thousands of charlatans among us still, using the same tried-and-true methods their predecessors refined centuries ago, only changing the names of their elixirs and modernizing the look of their cults. We find these latter-day charlatans in all arenas of life—business, fashion, politics, art. Many of them, perhaps, are following in the charlatan tradition without having any knowledge of its history, but you can be more systematic and deliberate. Simply follow the five steps of cultmaking that our charlatan ancestors perfected over the years.

**Step 1: Keep It Vague; Keep It Simple.** To create a cult you must first attract attention. This you should do not through actions, which are too clear and readable, but through words, which are hazy and deceptive. Your initial speeches, conversations, and interviews must include two elements: on the one hand the promise of something great and transformative, and on the other a total vagueness. This combination will stimulate all kinds of hazy dreams in your listeners, who will make their own connections and see what they want to see.

To make your vagueness attractive, use words of great resonance but cloudy meaning, words full of heat and enthusiasm. Fancy titles for simple things are helpful, as are the use of numbers and the creation of new words for vague concepts. All of these create the impression of specialized knowledge, giving you a veneer of profundity. By the same token, try to make the subject of your cult new and fresh, so that few will understand it. Done right, the combination of vague promises, cloudy but alluring concepts, and fiery enthusiasm will stir people's souls and a group will form around you.

Talk too vaguely and you have no credibility. But it is more dangerous to be specific. If you explain in detail the benefits people will gain by following your cult, you will be expected to satisfy them.

As a corollary to its vagueness your appeal should also be simple. Most people's problems have complex causes: deep-rooted neurosis, interconnected social factors, roots that go way back in time and are

exceedingly hard to unravel. Few, however, have the patience to deal with this; most people want to hear that a simple solution will cure their problems. The ability to offer this kind of solution will give you great power and build you a following. Instead of the complicated explanations of real life, return to the primitive solutions of our ancestors, to good old country remedies, to mysterious panaceas.

### **Step 2: Emphasize the Visual and the Sensual over the Intellectual.**

Once people have begun to gather around you, two dangers will present themselves: boredom and skepticism. Boredom will make people go elsewhere ; skepticism will allow them the distance to think rationally about whatever it is you are offering, blowing away the mist you have artfully created and revealing your ideas for what they are. You need to amuse the bored, then, and ward off the cynics.

## THE OWL WHO WAS GOD

*Once upon a starless midnight there was an owl who sat on the branch of an oak tree. Two ground moles tried to slip quietly by, unnoticed. "You!" said the owl. "Who?" they quavered, in fear and astonishment, for they could not believe it was possible for anyone to see them in that thick darkness. "You two!" said the owl. The moles hurried away and told the other creatures of the field and forest that the owl was the greatest and wisest of all animals because he could see in the dark and because he could answer any question. "I'll see about that," said a secretary bird, and he called on the owl one night when it was again very dark. "How many claws am I holding up?" said the secretary bird. "Two," said the owl, and that was right. "Can you give me another expression for 'that is to say' or 'namely?'" asked the secretary bird. "To wit," said the owl. "Why does a lover call on his love?" asked the secretary bird. "To woo," said the owl. The secretary bird hastened back to the other creatures and reported that the owl was indeed the greatest and wisest animal in the world because he could see in the dark and because he could answer any question. "Can he see in the daytime, too?" asked a red fox. "Yes," echoed a dormouse and a French poodle. "Can he see in the daytime, too?" All the other creatures laughed loudly at this silly question, and they set upon the red fox and his friends and drove them out of the region. Then they sent a*

*messenger to the owl and asked him to be their leader. When the owl appeared among the animals it was high noon and the sun was shining brightly. He walked very slowly, which gave him an appearance of great dignity, and he peered about him with large, staring eyes, which gave him an air of tremendous importance. “He’s God!” screamed a Plymouth Rock hen. And the others took up the cry “He’s God!” So they followed him wherever he went and when he began to bump into things they began to bump into things, too. Finally he came to a concrete highway and he started up the middle of it and all the other creatures followed him. Presently a hawk, who was acting as outrider, observed a truck coming toward them at fifty miles an hour, and he reported to the secretary bird and the secretary bird reported to the owl. “There’s danger ahead, ” said the secretary bird. “To wit?” said the owl. The secretary bird told him. “Aren’t you afraid?” He asked. “Who?” said the owl calmly, for he could not see the truck. “He’s God!” cried all the creatures again, and they were still crying “He’s God!” when the truck hit them and ran them down. Some of the animals were merely injured, but most of them, including the owl, were killed. Moral: You can fool too many of the people too much of the time.*

THE THURBER CARNIVAL, JAMES THURBER, 1894-1961

The best way to do this is through theater, or other devices of its kind. Surround yourself with luxury, dazzle your followers with visual splendor, fill their eyes with spectacle. Not only will this keep them from seeing the ridiculousness of your ideas, the holes in your belief system, it will also attract more attention, more followers. Appeal to all the senses: Use incense for scent, soothing music for hearing, colorful charts and graphs for the eye. You might even tickle the mind, perhaps by using new technological gadgets to give your cult a pseudo-scientific veneer—as long as you do not make anyone really think. Use the exotic—distant cultures, strange customs—to create theatrical effects, and to make the most banal and ordinary affairs seem signs of something extraordinary.

**Step 3: Borrow the Forms of Organized Religion to Structure the Group.** Your cultlike following is growing; it is time to organize it. Find a way both elevating and comforting. Organized religions have long held unquestioned authority for large numbers of people, and continue to do so in our supposedly secular age. And even if the religion itself has faded

some, its forms still resonate with power. The lofty and holy associations of organized religion can be endlessly exploited. Create rituals for your followers; organize them into a hierarchy, ranking them in grades of sanctity, and giving them names and titles that resound with religious overtones; ask them for sacrifices that will fill your coffers and increase your power. To emphasize your gathering's quasi-religious nature, talk and act like a prophet. You are not a dictator, after all; you are a priest, a guru, a sage, a shaman, or any other word that hides your real power in the mist of religion.

**Step 4: Disguise Your Source of Income.** Your group has grown, and you have structured it in a churchlike form. Your coffers are beginning to fill with your followers' money. Yet you must never be seen as hungry for money and the power it brings. It is at this moment that you must disguise the source of your income.

Your followers want to believe that if they follow you all sorts of good things will fall into their lap. By surrounding yourself with luxury you become living proof of the soundness of your belief system. Never reveal that your wealth actually comes from your followers' pockets; instead, make it seem to come from the truth of your methods. Followers will copy your each and every move in the belief that it will bring them the same results, and their imitative enthusiasm will blind them to the charlatan nature of your wealth.

**Step 5: Set Up an Us-Versus-Them Dynamic.** The group is now large and thriving, a magnet attracting more and more particles. If you are not careful, though, inertia will set in, and time and boredom will demagnetize the group. To keep your followers united, you must now do what all religions and belief systems have done: create an us-versus-them dynamic.

First, make sure your followers believe they are part of an exclusive club, unified by a bond of common goals. Then, to strengthen this bond, manufacture the notion of a devious enemy out to ruin you. There is a force of nonbelievers that will do anything to stop you. Any outsider who tries to reveal the charlatan nature of your belief system can now be described as a member of this devious force.

If you have no enemies, invent one. Given a straw man to react against, your followers will tighten and cohere. They have your cause to believe in and infidels to destroy.



## OBSERVANCES OF THE LAW

### Observance I

In the year 1653, a twenty-seven-year-old Milan man named Francesco Giuseppe Borri claimed to have had a vision. He went around town telling one and all that the archangel Michael had appeared to him and announced that he had been chosen to be the *capitano generale* of the Army of the New Pope, an army that would seize and revitalize the world. The archangel had further revealed that Borri now had the power to see people's souls, and that he would soon discover the philosopher's stone—a long-sought-after substance that could change base metals into gold. Friends and acquaintances who heard Borri explain the vision, and who witnessed the change that had come over him, were impressed, for Borri had previously devoted himself to a life of wine, women, and gambling. Now he gave all that up, plunging himself into the study of alchemy and talking only of mysticism and the occult.

The transformation was so sudden and miraculous, and Borri's words were so filled with enthusiasm, that he began to create a following. Unfortunately the Italian Inquisition began to notice him as well—they prosecuted anyone who delved into the occult—so he left Italy and began to wander Europe, from Austria to Holland, telling one and all that “to those who follow me all joy shall be granted.” Wherever Borri stayed he attracted followers. His method was simple: He spoke of his vision, which had grown more and more elaborate, and offered to “look into” the soul of anyone who believed him (and they were many). Seemingly in a trance, he would stare at this new follower for several minutes, then claim to have seen the person's soul, degree of enlightenment, and potential for spiritual greatness. If what he saw showed promise, he would add the person to his growing order of disciples, an honor indeed.

The cult had six degrees, into which the disciples were assigned according to what Borri had glimpsed in their souls. With work and total devotion to the cult they could graduate to a higher degree. Borri—whom they called “His Excellency,” and “Universal Doctor”—demanded from

them the strictest vows of poverty. All the goods and moneys they possessed had to be turned over to him. But they did not mind handing over their property, for Borri had told them, “I shall soon bring my chemical studies to a happy conclusion by the discovery of the philosopher’s stone, and by this means we shall all have as much gold as we desire.”

Given his growing wealth, Borri began to change his style of living. Renting the most splendid apartment in the city into which he had temporarily settled, he would furnish it with fabulous furniture and accessories, which he had begun to collect. He would drive through the city in a coach studded with jewels, with six magnificent black horses at its head. He never stayed too long in one place, and when he disappeared, saying he had more souls to gather into his flock, his reputation only grew in his absence. He became famous, although in fact he had never done a single concrete thing.

*To become the founder of a new religion one must be psychologically infallible in one’s knowledge of a certain average type of souls who have not yet recognized that they belong together.*

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, 1844-1900

*Men are so simple of mind, and so much dominated by their immediate needs, that a deceitful man will always find plenty who are ready to be deceived.*

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, 1469-1527

From all over Europe, the blind, the crippled, and the desperate came to visit Borri, for word had spread that he had healing powers. He asked no fee for his services, which only made him seem more marvelous, and indeed some claimed that in this or that city he had performed a miracle cure. By only hinting at his accomplishments, he encouraged people’s imaginations to blow them up to fantastic proportions. His wealth, for example, actually came from the vast sums he was collecting from his increasingly select group of rich disciples; yet it was presumed that he had in fact perfected the philosopher’s stone. The Church continued to pursue him, denouncing him for heresy and witchcraft, and Borri’s response to these charges was a dignified silence; this only enhanced his reputation and made his followers more passionate. Only the great are persecuted, after all; how many understood Jesus Christ in his own time? Borri did not have to say a word—his followers now called the Pope the Antichrist.

And so Borri's power grew and grew, until one day he left the city of Amsterdam (where he had settled for a while), absconding with huge sums of borrowed money and diamonds that had been entrusted to him. (He claimed to be able to remove the flaws from diamonds through the power of his gifted mind.) Now he was on the run. The Inquisition eventually caught up with him, and for the last twenty years of his life he was imprisoned in Rome. But so great was the belief in his occult powers that to his dying day he was visited by wealthy believers, including Queen Christina of Sweden. Supplying him with money and materials, these visitors allowed him to continue his search for the elusive philosopher's stone. Interpretation

## THE TEMPLE OF HEALTH

*[In the late 1780s] the Scottish quack James Graham... was winning a large following and great riches in London.... [Graham] maintained a show of great scientific technique. In 1772 ... he had visited Philadelphia, where he met Benjamin Franklin and became interested in the latter's experiments with electricity. These appear to have inspired the apparatus in the "Temple of Health,"*

*the fabulous establishment he opened in London for the sale of his elixirs.... In the chief room, where he received patients, stood "the largest air pump in the world" to assist him in his "philosophical investigations" into disease, and also a "stupendous metallic conductor," a richly gilded pedestal surrounded with retorts and vials of "etherial and other essences." ... According to J. Ennemoser, who published a history of magic in 1844 at Leipzig, Graham's "house... united the useful with the pleasurable. Everywhere the utmost magnificence was displayed. Even in the outer court, averred an eye-witness, it seemed as though art, invention, and riches had been exhausted. On the side walls in the chambers an arc-shaped glow was provided by artificial electric light; star rays darted forth; transparent glasses of all colors were placed with clever selection and much taste. All this, the same eyewitness assures us, was ravishing and exalted the imagination to the highest degree." Visitors were given a printed sheet of rules for healthy living. In the Great Apollo Apartment they might join in mysterious rituals, accompanied by chants : "Hail, Vital Air, aethereal ! Magnetic Magic, hail !" And while they hailed the magic of magnetism, the windows were darkened, revealing a ceiling studded with electric stars and*

*a young and lovely “Rosy Goddess of Health” in a niche.... Every evening this Temple of Health was crowded with guests; it had become the fashion to visit it and try the great twelve-foot bed of state, the “Grand Celestial Bed,” said to cure any disease.... This bed, according to Ennemoser, “stood in a splendid room, into which a cylinder led from an adjoining chamber to conduct the healing currents... at the same time all sorts of pleasing scents of strengthening herbs and Oriental incense were also brought in through glass tubes. The heavenly bed itself rested upon six solid transparent pillars; the bedclothes were of purple and sky-blue Atlas silk, spread over a mattress saturated with Arabian perfumed waters to suit the tastes of the Persian court. The chamber in which it was placed he called the Sanctum Sanctorum.... To add to all this, there were the melodious notes of the harmonica, soft flutes, agreeable voices, and a great organ.”*

THE POWER OF THE CHARLATAN, GRETE DE FRANCESCO, 1939

Before he formed his cult, Borri seems to have stumbled on a critical discovery. Tiring of his life of debauchery, he had decided to give it up and to devote himself to the occult, a genuine interest of his. He must have noticed, however, that when he alluded to a mystical experience (rather than physical exhaustion) as the source of his conversion, people of all classes wanted to hear more. Realizing the power he could gain by ascribing the change to something external and mysterious, he went further with his manufactured visions. The grander the vision, and the more sacrifices he asked for, the more appealing and believable his story seemed to become.

Remember: People are not interested in the truth about change. They do not want to hear that it has come from hard work, or from anything as banal as exhaustion, boredom, or depression; they are dying to believe in something romantic, otherworldly. They want to hear of angels and out-of-body experiences. Indulge them. Hint at the mystical source of some personal change, wrap it in ethereal colors, and a cultlike following will form around you. Adapt to people’s needs: The messiah must mirror the desires of his followers. And always *aim* high. The bigger and bolder your illusion, the better.

## Observance II

In the mid-1700s, word spread in Europe's fashionable society of a Swiss country doctor named Michael Schüppach who practiced a different kind of medicine: He used the healing powers of nature to perform miraculous cures. Soon well-to-do people from all over the Continent, their ailments both serious and mild, were making the trek to the alpine village of Langnau, where Schüppach lived and worked. Trudging through the mountains, these visitors witnessed the most dramatic natural landscapes that Europe has to offer. By the time they reached Langnau, they were already feeling transformed and on their way to health.

Schüppach, who had become known as simply the "Mountain Doctor," had a small pharmacy in town. This place became quite a scene: Crowds of people from many different countries would cram the small room, its walls lined with colorful bottles filled with herbal cures. Where most doctors of the time prescribed foul-tasting concoctions that bore incomprehensible Latin titles (as medicines often do still), Schüppach's cures had names such as "The Oil of Joy," "Little Flower's Heart," or "Against the Monster," and they tasted sweet and pleasing.

Visitors to Langnau would have to wait patiently for a visit with the Mountain Doctor, because every day some eighty messengers would arrive at the pharmacy bearing flasks of urine from all over Europe. Schüppach claimed he could diagnose what ailed you simply by looking at a sample of your urine and reading a written description of your ailment. (Naturally he read the description very carefully before prescribing a cure.) When he finally had a spare minute (the urine samples took up much of his time), he would call the visitor into his office in the pharmacy. He would then examine this person's urine sample, explaining that its appearance would tell him everything he needed to know. Country people had a sense for these things, he would say—their wisdom came from living a simple, godly life with none of the complications of urban living. This personal consultation would also include a discussion as to how one might bring one's soul more into harmony with nature.

Schüppach had devised many forms of treatment, each profoundly unlike the usual medical practices of the time. He was a believer, for instance, in

electric shock therapy. To those who wondered whether this was in keeping with his belief in the healing power of nature, he would explain that electricity is a natural phenomenon; he was merely imitating the power of lightning. One of his patients claimed to be inhabited by seven devils. The doctor cured him with electrical shocks, and as he administered these he exclaimed that he could see the devils flying out of the man's body, one by one. Another man claimed to have swallowed a hay wagon and its driver, which were causing him massive pains in the chest. The Mountain Doctor listened patiently, claimed to be able to hear the crack of a whip in the man's belly, promised to cure him, and gave him a sedative and a purgative. The man fell asleep on a chair outside the pharmacy. As soon as he awoke he vomited, and as he vomited a hay wagon sped past him (the Mountain Doctor had hired it for the occasion), the crack of its whip making him feel that somehow he had indeed expelled it under the doctor's care.

Over the years, the Mountain Doctor's fame grew. He was consulted by the powerful—even the writer Goethe made the trek to his village—and he became the center of a cult of nature in which everything natural was considered worthy of worship. Schüppach was careful to create effects that would entertain and inspire his patients. A professor who visited him once wrote, "One stands or sits in company, one plays cards, sometimes with a young woman; now a concert is given, now a lunch or supper, and now a little ballet is presented. With a very happy effect, the freedom of nature is everywhere united with the pleasures of the beau monde, and if the doctor is not able to heal any diseases, he can at least cure hypochondria and the vapors."

## Interpretation

Schüppach had begun his career as an ordinary village doctor. He would sometimes use in his practice some of the village remedies he had grown up with, and apparently he noticed some results, for soon these herbal tinctures and natural forms of healing became his specialty. And in fact his natural form of healing did have profound psychological effects on his patients. Where the normal drugs of the time created fear and pain, Schüppach's treatments were comfortable and soothing. The resulting improvement in the patient's mood was a critical element in the cures he brought about. His patients believed so deeply in his skills that they willed themselves into health. Instead of scoffing at their irrational explanations for their ailments, Schüppach used their hypochondria to make it seem that he had effected a great cure.

The case of the Mountain Doctor teaches us valuable lessons in the creation of a cultlike following. First, you must find a way to engage people's will, to make their belief in your powers strong enough that they imagine all sorts of benefits. Their belief will have a self-fulfilling quality, but you must make sure that it is you, rather than their own will, who is seen as the agent of transformation. Find the belief, cause, or fantasy that will make them believe with a passion and they will imagine the rest, worshipping you as healer, prophet, genius, whatever you like.

Second, Schüppach teaches us the everlasting power of belief in nature, and in simplicity. Nature, in reality, is full of much that is terrifying—poisonous plants, fierce animals, sudden disasters, plagues. Belief in the healing, comforting quality of nature is really a constructed myth, a romanticism. But the appeal to nature can bring you great power, especially in complicated and stressful times.

This appeal, however, must be handled right. Devise a kind of theater of nature in which you, as the director, pick and choose the qualities that fit the romanticism of the times. The Mountain Doctor played the part to perfection, playing up his homespun wisdom and wit, and staging his cures as dramatic pieces. He did not make himself one with nature; instead he molded nature into a cult, an artificial construction. To create a "natural" effect you actually have to work hard, making nature theatrical and

delightfully pagan. Otherwise no one will notice. Nature too must follow trends and be progressive.



### Observance III

In 1788, at the age of fifty-five, the doctor and scientist Franz Mesmer was at a crossroads. He was a pioneer in the study of animal magnetism—the belief that animals contain magnetic matter, and that a doctor or specialist can effect miraculous cures by working on this charged substance—but in Vienna, where he lived, his theories had met with scorn and ridicule from the medical establishment. In treating women for convulsions, Mesmer claimed to have worked a number of cures, his proudest achievement being the restoration of sight to a blind girl. But another doctor who examined the young girl said she was as blind as ever, an assessment with which she herself agreed. Mesmer countered that his enemies were out to slander him by winning her over to their side. This claim only elicited more ridicule. Clearly the sober-minded Viennese were the wrong audience for his theories, and so he decided to move to Paris and start again.

Renting a splendid apartment in his new city, Mesmer decorated it appropriately. Stained glass in most of the windows created a religious feeling, and mirrors on all the walls produced an hypnotic effect. The doctor advertised that in his apartment he would give demonstrations of the powers of animal magnetism, inviting the diseased and melancholic to feel its powers. Soon Parisians of all classes (but mostly women, who seemed more attracted to the idea than men did) were paying for entry to witness the miracles that Mesmer promised.

Inside the apartment, the scents of orange blossom and exotic incense wafted through special vents. As the initiates filtered into the salon where the demonstrations took place, they heard harp music and the lulling sounds of a female vocalist coming from another room. In the center of the salon was a long oval container filled with water that Mesmer claimed had been magnetized. From holes in the container's metal lid protruded long movable iron rods. The visitors were instructed to sit around the container, place these magnetized rods on the body part that gave them pains or problems, and then hold hands with their neighbors, sitting as close as possible to one another to help the magnetic force pass between their bodies. Sometimes, too, they were attached to each other by cords.

## THE POWER OF A LIE

*In the town of Tarnopol lived a man by the name of Reb Feivel. One day, as he sat in his house deeply-absorbed in his Talmud, he heard a loud noise outside. When he went to the window he saw a lot of little pranksters. “Up to some new piece of mischief, no doubt.” he thought. “Children, run quickly to the synagogue,” he cried, leaning out and improvising the first story that occurred to him. “You’ll see there a sea monster, and what a monster! It’s a creature with five feet, three eyes, and a beard like that of a goat, only it’s green!”*

*And sure enough the children scampered off and Reb Feivel returned to his studies. He smiled into his beard as he thought of the trick he had played on those little rascals. It wasn’t long before his studies were interrupted again, this time by running footsteps. When he went to the window he saw several Jews running. “Where are you running ?” he called out.*

*“To the synagogue!” answered the Jews. “Haven’t you heard? There’s a sea monster, there’s a creature with five legs, three eyes, and a beard like that of a goat, only it’s green!” Reb Feivel laughed with glee, thinking of the trick he had played, and sat down again to his Talmud. But no sooner had he begun to concentrate when suddenly he heard a dinning tumult outside. And what did he see? A great crowd of men, women and children, all running toward the synagogue. “What’s up?” he cried, sticking his head out of the window.*

*“What a question! Why, don’t you know?” they answered. “Right in front of the synagogue there’s a sea monster. It’s a creature with five legs, three eyes, and a beard like that of a goat, only it’s green!”*

*And as the crowd hurried by, Reb Feivel suddenly noticed that the rabbi himself was among them.*

*“Lord of the world!” he exclaimed. “If the rabbi himself is running with them surely there must be something happening. Where there’s smoke there’s fire!” Without further thought Reb Feivel grabbed his hat, left his house, and also began running. “Who can tell?” he muttered to himself as he ran, all out of breath, toward the synagogue.*

*A TREASURY OF JEWISH FOLKLORE, NATHAN AUSUBEL, ED.,  
1948*

Mesmer would leave the room, and “assistant magnetizers”—all handsome and strapping young men—would enter with jars of magnetized

water that they would sprinkle on the patients, rubbing the healing fluid on their bodies, massaging it into their skin, moving them toward a trance-like state. And after a few minutes a kind of delirium would overcome the women. Some would sob, some would shriek and tear their hair, others would laugh hysterically. At the height of the delirium Mesmer would reenter the salon, dressed in a flowing silk robe embroidered with golden flowers and carrying a white magnetic rod. Moving around the container, he would stroke and soothe the patients until calm was restored. Many women would later attribute the strange power he had on them to his piercing look, which, they thought, was exciting or quieting the magnetic fluids in their bodies.

Within months of his arrival in Paris, Mesmer became the rage. His supporters included Marie-Antoinette herself, the queen of France, wife of Louis XVI. As in Vienna, he was condemned by the official faculty of medicine, but it did not matter. His growing following of pupils and patients paid him handsomely.

Mesmer expanded his theories to proclaim that all humanity could be brought into harmony through the power of magnetism, a concept with much appeal during the French Revolution. A cult of Mesmerism spread across the country; in many towns, "Societies of Harmony" sprang up to experiment with magnetism. These societies eventually became notorious: They tended to be led by libertines who would turn their sessions into a kind of group orgy.

At the height of Mesmer's popularity, a French commission published a report based on years of testing the theory of animal magnetism. The conclusion: Magnetism's effects on the body actually came from a kind of group hysteria and autosuggestion. The report was well documented, and ruined Mesmer's reputation in France. He left the country and went into retirement. Only a few years later, however, imitators sprang up all over Europe and the cult of Mesmerism spread once again, its believers more numerous than ever.

## Interpretation

Mesmer's career can be broken into two parts. When still in Vienna, he clearly believed in the validity of his theory, and did all he could to prove it. But his growing frustration and the disapproval of his colleagues made him adopt another strategy. First he moved to Paris, where no one knew him, and where his extravagant theories found a more fruitful soil. Then he appealed to the French love of theater and spectacle, making his apartment into a kind of magical world in which a sensory overload of smells, sights, and sounds entranced his customers. Most important, from now on he practiced his magnetism only on a group. The group provided the setting in which the magnetism would have its proper effect, one believer infecting the other, overwhelming any individual doubter.

Mesmer thus passed from being a confirmed advocate of magnetism to the role of a charlatan using every trick in the book to captivate the public. The biggest trick of all was to play on the repressed sexuality that bubbles under the surface of any group setting. In a group, a longing for social unity, a longing older than civilization, cries out to be awakened. This desire may be subsumed under a unifying cause, but beneath it is a repressed sexuality that the charlatan knows how to exploit and manipulate for his own purposes.

This is the lesson that Mesmer teaches us: Our tendency to doubt, the distance that allows us to reason, is broken down when we join a group. The warmth and infectiousness of the group overwhelm the skeptical individual. This is the power you gain by creating a cult. Also, by playing on people's repressed sexuality, you lead them into mistaking their excited feelings for signs of your mystical strength. You gain untold power by working on people's unrealized desire for a kind of promiscuous and pagan unity.

Remember too that the most effective cults mix religion with science. Take the latest technological trend or fad and blend it with a noble cause, a mystical faith, a new form of healing. People's interpretations of your hybrid cult will run rampant, and they will attribute powers to you that you had never even thought to claim.

Image: The Magnet. An unseen force draws objects to it, which in turn become magnetized themselves, drawing other pieces to them, the magnetic

power of the whole constantly increasing. But take away the original magnet and it all falls apart. Become the magnet, the invisible force that attracts people's imaginations and holds them together. Once they have clustered around you, no power can wrest them away.

Authority: The charlatan achieves his great power by simply opening a possibility for men to believe what they already want to believe.... The credulous cannot keep at a distance; they crowd around the wonder worker, entering his personal aura, surrendering themselves to illusion with a heavy solemnity, like cattle. (Grete de Francesco)

## REVERSAL

One reason to create a following is that a group is often easier to deceive than an individual, and turns over to you that much more power. This comes, however, with a danger: If at any moment the group sees through you, you will find yourself facing not one deceived soul but an angry crowd that will tear you to pieces as avidly as it once followed you. The charlatans constantly faced this danger, and were always ready to move out of town as it inevitably became clear that their elixirs did not work and their ideas were sham. Too slow and they paid with their lives. In playing with the crowd, you are playing with fire, and must constantly keep an eye out for any sparks of doubt, any enemies who will turn the crowd against you. When you play with the emotions of a crowd, you have to know how to adapt, attuning yourself instantaneously to all of the moods and desires that a group will produce. Use spies, be on top of everything, and keep your bags packed.

For this reason you may often prefer to deal with people one by one. Isolating them from their normal milieu can have the same effect as putting them in a group—it makes them more prone to suggestion and intimidation. Choose the right sucker and if he eventually sees through you he may prove easier to escape than a crowd.