

Question Authority

An interview on The Guru Papers with Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad

by Ravi Dykema

Once upon a time, in a different time and society, the guru-disciple relationship made sense, according to authors Diana Alstad and Joel Kramer. In fact, it may have been essential not only to an individual's survival, but to the evolution of the species as a whole. But that day is past, say Alstad and Kramer, who are dismayed by what they see as veiled authoritarianism even within the so-called New Age spiritual movements. At the end of the 20th century, humankind needs a new morality, they say, not one based on dysfunctional authoritarianism. The authors believe that our desire to find an ultimate, unquestionable authority (or to be one) is keeping us from a new kind of creative problem-solving that will address humankind's pressing problems.

How the hierarchical systems grew and what we need to replace them are both explored in depth by Alstad and Kramer, who began their work on the book in the early 80s. Alstad received a doctorate from Yale University and taught the first women's studies courses at Yale and Duke universities. Kramer, a resident teacher at Esalen Institute in the late 1960s, is a philosopher and adept of physical and mental yoga. Having written and led seminars together since 1974, they live in Bolinas, California, and spoke to *Nexus* publisher Ravi Dykema.

RD: Joel, you have been in a position to see what this guru thing has been about since the 1960s. Tell us a little bit about that.

JK: As a teacher of yoga and as a teacher of "spiritual awareness," I was not only often placed in the position of "guru," but many people came to me who had been involved with other gurus. So I got a good look at the temptations both from the inside and from the outside.



Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad

“The guru/disciple relationship contains an essential assumption that makes it particularly susceptible to abuse: Namely that it is possible for a person to be totally immune from the corruptions of power. What this must also mean is that such a person is totally free of all self-interest, for self-interest necessarily entails the possibility of corruption. Our perspective is that no one, no matter how exalted in awareness and understanding, can totally escape the psychological fact that self-interest is an element in being human, and is also a necessary element in being alive.”

– Diana Alstad and Joel Kramer

RD: Tell us about those temptations.

JK: Well, adulation is one of the most powerful energies directed at you. And it's a great temptation to feed the images that foster the adulation. You become the kind of ideally perfect person that your students think they want. Because if you know the game, you can do that. I know what people's images of perfection are and it's very easy to fill those images – if I want to. For myself, I felt that it was not only destructive for the relationships involved, but it was ultimately destructive for me, so I passed on it.

RD: Why would it be destructive for you and for the relationship?

JK: Because I think that as soon as people create an image and one tries to be an image, it's destructive. Also, observing the people that I have seen play that game, I found that they became increasingly more isolated, increasingly more emotionally detached from the processes of living.

So it didn't look very appealing to me. And the problems we are facing collectively are not solvable by deferring to an ultimate authority who is going to tell you what to do or how to live. I felt that was the old paradigm that moved us to where we are now, but is part of the problem that we're facing as a species.

RD: Diana, do you want to add something?

DA: Yes, some of the images that gurus have to fill in order to get people's trust and surrender are unconditional love, being in a state of oneness or having access to it all the time, looking happy, blissed-out, peaceful, that sort of thing. Those are the kinds of traditional images associated with enlightenment and spiritual teachers.

RD: Were either of you disciples of a guru so that you saw it from the other side?

JK: No.

DA: I was interested in finding a guru before I met Joel, so I checked out different gurus. But being one of the early

feminists, I found a lot of them entirely too patriarchal and medieval in terms of the sex roles and the power structures for me to take them seriously.

RD: Give us a mini-course in what to look for in your relationship with your spiritual teacher and what you consider a healthy relationship to be.

JK: The traditional guru/chela (disciple) relationship is a relationship where the chela, in order to get the transmission of information, is expected to surrender, and to take the guru on as the leader or guide, and to treat the guru as if they were perfect, whether or not they are. We feel that the guru/chela relationship is one of the most extreme examples of a human being giving away their power in the hope of a return.

RD: I learned in India that the students must accept what may seem to be often illogical guidance in order to understand their fundamental nature, because on their own they would never realize it.

JK: That's the rationale.

RD: The surrender made the student teachable. Without the surrender, they were stuck with their own illusion about themselves and the world.

JK: That is the rationale; yes, exactly. But I am looking at the structure of power. And surrender is tied in to that form of structure.

DA: Yes, because regardless of the rationale and whether it's right or wrong, it's an example of the most extreme form of giving away your power to someone else. In an actual tradition that is voluntary, that isn't based on guns or violence, (in most cases – until people want to leave).

RD: Why doesn't that work? Did it work once, do you think? Is it a flawed system?

JK: In order to answer that properly, I would have to give you my view of where we stand historically at this moment. I feel that humanity can be looked upon in a very similar way to what I call

a biological model. I look at our species as having a developmental process just like aging and maturing are developmental processes. The early tribal period, when our ancestors were trying to get a toe-hold on survival and were totally dependent upon the tribe, was our species' infancy, when we were totally interdependent on each other. Then the coming of agriculture, accumulation and authoritarian hierarchies was humanity's childhood. In terms of how information is transferred, authoritarian transmission of information is the simplest, the fastest – and it's what we do with children. Our adolescence as a species was the beginning of the industrial revolution, when we began to play with power for the sake of power, as adolescents do. Adolescence is marked by a total self-absorption, and our species was into that also. Adolescence is also marked by feeling immortal, and that is evident among humankind also.

Now, one moves into adulthood, when one confronts one's own mortality at a certain level, and I feel that is what humanity is doing now. It's confronting the possibility of its morality. And I feel that in order to grow and to change and to evolve, it has to become adult. The authoritarian mode of information transmission was appropriate for a particular era, but is no longer appropriate for moving into adulthood. Our deep predilection for authoritarianism is keeping us from doing the kind of problem-solving we need to do as a species. And it's an incredible challenge that we are facing from so many different domains and so many different arenas.

DA: I would like to add that these structures provided social cohesion in a pre-technological era, when life was simpler. They also provided social control mechanisms that kept societies together. Social control was dependent on beliefs of divine retribution and reward in an after-life or a better next lifetime. And now beliefs in those are breaking down, so that without that retribution backing up the authoritarian rules and relationships, things are getting out of control. We feel that these authoritarian structures are fostering social disintegration because they're dualistic and they can't cope with technological complexity.

JK: One of the things we are trying to show is the authoritarianism in the moral structures on the planet. From our point of view, morality is an operating system that tells us how human beings are to treat each other. We feel morality has become dysfunctional.

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DA: I think that the angst and desire for spiritual renewal we see today are linked with the social disintegration and moral breakdown. And unfortunately our authoritarian conditioning is to look for saviors, to look outside for answers, to look outside for someone who knows the truth, who knows what’s best for us. That’s part of the authoritarian conditioning that has been implanted in us – to either want to be or follow an authority, or both. So, I’m not surprised by this spiritual renewal in the United States. But I think that people are following the old patterns, like the ones I just mentioned, looking for saviors rather than taking responsibility. I must say here, we’re not denying that there are teachers, because we can all be teachers for each other. We’re not denying that authorities and experts exist. We’re saying that the problem is the authoritarian teachers, not teachers per se. We’re also not denying spirituality.

RD: What does an authoritarian teacher say?

JK: If the person comes on with certainty that they know best for you and know what you should be doing, this is an ultimate mark of authoritarianism. If the head of the system comes on like they’re morally superior to you, this is almost a sure-fire guarantee. If the system works such that the power flows from top down and there’s no feedback mechanisms that can change how things are going, this is another fine indication that one is in-

involved in an authoritarian structure. If the group isolates itself from other groups to keep its purity: another sign. If the group looks at itself as “the saved,” this is another sign of a deep authoritarian structure. I can go on.

DA: It’s difficult to communicate with anyone who is not in the group because you have certain beliefs and language that cut others out. One trusts the leader or others in the group to know what’s best for you. Whatever the authority does is regarded as perfect or right, so that behaviors that would be questioned in others are made to seem different and proper. You find yourself defending actions of the leader or other members without having first-hand knowledge of what occurred. And at times one is confused and fearful without knowing why. That’s a sign that doubts are being repressed. No deviation of the party line is allowed. Anyone who has thoughts or feelings contrary to the accepted perspective is made to feel wrong or bad for having them.

So by contrast, a good teacher is someone who is open to feedback, who is open to being shown when they’re wrong, and will change their message based on that feedback. That’s an evolutionary model.

JK: Also, if the group tries to separate you from other emotional liaisons, whether it be family or loved ones, or something like that, that’s another sign that you’re involved in an authoritarian structure. These are guidelines.

RD: I believe that one can be involved with an authoritarian teacher and have emotional wounds, but have gained some useful teachings. Do you think the authoritarianism eliminates the chance of useful transmission?

JK: You know, if somebody tells me that they have gained something useful from an experience, it is not my place to question that. And I do feel that there are human beings that can gain from whatever experiences they’re in. Somebody could say with total conviction to me that, yes, they have been used, but in the tradeoff of things, they profited, and I would say, “Okay.” But in terms of the overall structures and what this planet needs in order to move on, and the overall structures of what is holding us back, in terms of the way information is transmitted and the way knowledge is gained and how creativity can be utilized to do something new and different, I find that these structures are hindrances.

RD: Give me the personal consequences. What’s wrong, what’s harmful to me if I get involved with an authoritarian spiritual tradition?

DA: One of the things that authoritarianism depends on is instilling self-mistrust in the person, through making them feel somehow they’re wrong, or bad, guilty, inadequate or not good enough. So that then they will give their power away to the one who looks better or fills the images of what these people think perfection is. Any authoritarian belief system or group, or whatever, that undermines your self-trust is in the long run crippling you. I think that’s one of the most devastating things that these authoritarian groups do.

Another is that we feel one of the deepest conditionings in people all over the planet is their authoritarian conditioning – but it goes beyond gurus. We’re conditioned by our parents, by social institutions, to feel that we’re not good enough, that we should be more selfless, more loving, more this, more that. So a self-mistrust has been conditioned into us that’s at the core of civilization. This is the hidden authoritarian “social virus” that we’re attempting to unmask and decode. Gurus play into conditioning that is already there by reinforcing the self-mistrust. Like when you question the guru, he’ll say, “That’s your problem;” or “that’s your ego;” or “that’s your resistance;” which increases your self-mistrust. You can’t trust your own judgment. That’s just an example of the personal consequences. Then there’s the

cynicism and bitterness that can result from disillusionment and deep feelings of betrayal, which are poisonous and toxic to your health. If you surrender to someone, you can have growth experiences, breakthrough experiences, because through surrender habits and conditioning can easily be shifted. But the one conditioning that this authoritarian setting cannot shift is one of our deepest conditionings. And it needs to be shifted if our species is going to survive: the conditioning to mistrust yourself and give your power away to authority. That's the one conditioning that they reinforce instead of helping you grow out of, because their power is based on keeping you in it and making it worse – manipulating and deepening it.

RD: Do you view the popular new eclectic kind of spirituality – the new thoughts, new religion kind of eclectic spirituality – as largely fraught with these authoritarian pitfalls?

JK: We feel that even New Age models that purport to be evolutionary often have hidden authoritarianism, because they're not watching out for it. And that New Age models that start not being authoritarian often end up that way. I'm not saying that's true for all.

DA: Some of the places where we are unmasking and decoding hidden authoritarianism in this New Age spirituality are in the relationship people have with channels, in "A Course in Miracles," in the idea that "You create your own reality," in the ideal of unconditional love, and in the Eastern ideology of oneness and enlightenment, which permeate New Age spirituality. We do a philosophical critique of the ideology of Oneness – without negating the value and importance of mystical experiences.

RD: The rise in fundamentalism must be spine-chilling for you.

JK: No, it's not. From my point of view, the big changes in history come about when a moral order isn't working, when the operating system that created social cohesion begins to break down. In these times, there is always a tear in history that takes two opposite directions. One

direction always takes this fundamentalist form: People say the problems that we are facing are a function of having strayed too far from the verities of old. So fundamentalists proclaim we have to do them stronger, do them harder, do them better. Then the other movement in history is folks who are trying to reformulate a new way of dealing with the problems. This struggle between the forces of the old and the new tears the historical moment in two. Each one of them begins to gain momentum. We're in the midst of the "morality wars" – battles over what's right and who has the right to determine it. I find it part of the historical necessity of the time and the challenge we are facing.

DA: Because there is a dialectic between the new and the old.

JK: From my point of view, the old cannot win. Historically, over centuries, the old would always gradually wear out, and the new would form. But we are facing a time clock that has never been faced before by humanity. So the forces of the old can win, not by proving themselves right, but just by holding us back, by attrition, by delaying the kind of changes that we need. From my point of view, the verities of old cannot solve the problems because they are actually the source of the problems.

RD: Is that what you call the hidden authoritarian social virus?

JK: It lives in there.

DA: It lives in the morality we're trying to use.

JK: We feel that authoritarianism was the essential cohesive factor of the way information was transmitted in the old order. That was the way it worked. And it is very difficult to change. But we also feel that this particular form is now leading us to destruction. We're interested in a new paradigm, as are many people. This is not necessarily a new form, a new structure, that's going to make things click in and make everything work. From our point of view that is insidiously part of the old paradigm, where the leader describes the

goal and says, "Come follow me and let's do it." The new paradigm needs to consist of a process of self-correction that can move humanity forward through its joint efforts. This would necessarily involve a shift from the authoritarian mode to what Diana has been calling a more evolutionary feedback model in terms of self-correcting. Any paradigm that contains hidden authoritarianism in terms of how to get you there is not the new – it's the old in disguise.

RD: Do you think that we have a time limit, a deadline of sorts?

DA: Yes; it's related to the ecological system that supports us.

RD: Do you think we're going to make it?

JK: I think we've got a shot. I think having a shot is a whole lot better than not having a shot.

DA: Part of our optimism comes from this: the hidden authoritarianism at the core of civilization that is creating self-mistrust is blocking humanity's potential and intelligence and creativity. And our morality, our "operating system" is distorted and non-viable, which causes huge distortions at all levels – in intimacy, in addictions, in social- and self-control mechanisms, and in political and racial arenas. So having identified the problem as being cultural conditioning, rather than genetic, gives us optimism that human potential could soar if it could shift away from this authoritarian conditioning. Just as we soared, technologically speaking, once we challenged the authoritarian metaphysics of the Catholic Church. So far the authoritarian morality of the world religions has never been challenged adequately. And that's our main planetary operating system. It is not working. So in *The Guru Papers* we are challenging Eastern metaphysics, the ideology of Oneness, which is the most sophisticated form of religious and spiritual authoritarianism on the planet and hasn't been unmasked – just as monotheism was in the 18th century.

RD: Well, please unmask it.

DA: Because it's a complex topic, I'll just describe one key aspect of it. We use the term "social virus" like computer virus, mental virus. It exists in morality, which means that it's transmitted by parents, schools and religions, from generation to generation, unwittingly. We've coined the term "renunciate" to describe the morality of self-renunciation, sacrifice and selflessness that all the world religions propagate. While Eastern metaphysics is far more sophisticated and seemingly more credible than Western religious dualism (monotheism), Eastern religion has the same dualistic, simple morality as monotheism. It's renunciate. What that means is you are expected to renounce an important part of being human, the self-centered aspect, self-gratification, attachments, etc., in order to become egoless. This renunciate model is a dualistic model that makes people feel guilty about being human, because self-centeredness is an integral part of any species that is not mainly driven by instinct. Whenever you have a high degree of individuation, you also have a high degree of self-centeredness coexisting along with the natural altruism and bonding that any social animal would have. So our species has a dual nature: self-centered and altruistic. And to make one part of it bad, as the renunciate moralities do, and make people feel guilty, gives religion enormous control. Parents use guilt around self-centeredness to control children because it's the easiest form of mental control without resorting to violence. That's where all this self-mistrust comes from. It's a planetary phenomena.

So we're saying yes, it's true that self-centeredness is the cause of a lot of the world's greatest problems, but it's also an inherent part of creativity and health and a balanced life in the form of self-gratification. To villainize it is a simplistic approach that doesn't work. It's just an authoritarian approach to make people give their power away.

JK: Another example that we like to use, which is very pertinent I feel for modern people, has to do with this business of competition vs. cooperation. Everybody says we have to become more cooperative as a species, but if we look very carefully, we reward winners. It causes a deep

schizophrenia in our culture. From our point of view, competition and cooperation are also embedded in each other. In almost any instance where you find cooperation on one level, there's competition on another. I would like to give an example. People get together to raise a barn. Where's the competition in that? There are all those nice folks getting together to help their neighbors build this barn, and what they actually are doing is

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competing for turf and winning. And all of the fauna and flora that had occupied that space where the barn goes up now die or leave. That's competition on another level. What we have to do is cooperate with more awareness and compete with more awareness, because they are totally intertwined with each other. But any morality that separates the two creates the underbelly that we're seeing.

DA: And that's where so much abusive power comes from with gurus. They have to pretend they're not self-centered, that they have no ego.

JK: Or that they're not competitive.

DA: It's one of the most competitive professions there is! To succeed, one must appear more selfless and enlightened than others.

JK: One of the amusing questions I asked myself when I was a young man was, "How come gurus don't hang out together?" Here are all of these enlightened human beings. Don't they get tired of dealing with people on lesser levels? How come they don't, for some respite,

hang out together? But they can't do that because every move they make is fraught with implications. All of the disciples are very carefully looking at who goes to see whom, who comes out on top and things of that sort. Though the spiritual world puts out messages of being competition-free, one sees the most extraordinary kinds of competition. So what Diana was saying is that we feel we need an operating system, a morality, that acknowledges

the beauty of altruism, but also recognizes that you don't become more altruistic by becoming less self-centered. It's that false polarization that we feel is where the hidden virus of authoritarianism lives.

DA: We need an operating system that has a more intelligent and realistic approach to self-centeredness: instead of villainizing it, acknowledging it's a problem and that it's also a valuable source of well-being and creativity. ■

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