

*The Guru Papers* webpage at [JoelDiana.com](http://JoelDiana.com) has reviews, descriptions, interviews, podcasts & selections — including: **Part 1's** *Assault on Reason, Gurus & Sexual Manipulation, Sexual Hedonism, Traps of Being a Guru, Healing Crippled Self-Trust*; **Part 2's** *Oneness, Enlightenment & the Mystical Experience*. **Contact:** [info@joeldiana.com](mailto:info@joeldiana.com) 415-868-0778

## How *The Guru Papers* Differs — from other books on gurus & cults

**The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power** by **Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad** (North Atlantic Books, 1993) is widely considered the most in-depth, thorough coverage of guru/disciple dynamics to date. The relatively simple traditional guru/disciple structure demanding total surrender to the guru clearly exhibits what it means to trust another more than oneself. It offers a quintessential example of how minds can be controlled. Decoding its mechanisms of control and surrender displays the dynamics of “mental authoritarianism” writ large. Examining this most extreme form of control reveals less obvious instances of such dynamics that occur in many contexts. This is relevant for Westerners who get involved with guru/follower roles to varying and often lesser degrees. Gurus’ enticing promises and highly refined, often convoluted justifications make people vulnerable to manipulation.

- 1) Unlike exposés of gurus and cults written either by “outsiders” (journalists) or “ex-insiders” (victimized followers), **coauthor Joel Kramer** had firsthand experience with guru dynamics—without being one. As a pioneering yoga innovator and teacher (1968-82), he often experienced people projecting “guru” onto him—in spite of critiquing the guru role and promoting independence. Seeing clearly the temptations and traps of being a guru, along with people’s desire to follow an authority, he tried to modernize and transform the “spiritual teacher” role. But finding the archetype too entrenched to free from its authoritarian roots, he stopped teaching yoga. Instead he and **Diana Alstad**, his co-leader and life partner, wrote *The Guru Papers*. They began teaching together again in 2006.
- 2) **Part 1** is on the dynamics and pitfalls of the guru/disciple relationship and cults. It describes not only how gurus manipulate followers, but also why people let them—and why many stay even after abuses are exposed or cults turn violent. It shows how people have been conditioned to give their power away, and what they get out of it.
- 3) Rather than singling out individuals or groups, Part 1 focuses on how the generic guru/follower structure works and why any unchallengeable leader is prone to corruption. It shows why abuses of power that occur in such contexts are structural—inherent in the roles—rather than merely personal failings. The guru’s absolute power encourages narcissism, abuse and excess. Western “spiritual teachers” typically do not take on the mantle of guru or demand total surrender. The ones who are “spiritual seekers” may have a guru themselves. They often present themselves as “not yet fully enlightened,” but advanced on the spiritual path. If they succumb to their students’ predictable projections of superiority, this can easily lead to excesses or manipulation.
- 4) *The Guru Papers* defines “authoritarian” simply as any person, group or belief system that controls others under the guise of “knowing what’s best” for them—and is unchallengeable. Such leaders exude certainty and are adept at manipulating fear and desire and telling people what they want to hear. Exposing the deceit, denial, seductions and collusions helps people recognize mental authoritarianism, which can disempower it. Listing key traits and predictable patterns of authoritarian groups (page 57) enables people to make their own assessments and avoid the traps. Part 1’s last chapter on healing and regaining lost self-trust is pertinent to anyone who has been deeply deceived or betrayed.
- 5) **Part 2** reveals hidden authoritarianism at the very foundation of the guru’s identity, authority and power—in the spiritual ideals and Eastern worldviews that most gurus promulgate. It shows why the Oneness (unity) worldview’s self-negating ideals (selflessness, unconditional love, ego-loss) are unlivable and promote guilt, self-mistrust and ego-bashing.
- 6) *The Guru Papers* connects the dots between the personal, social, and global by situating gurus and cults in the broader framework of cultural authoritarianism hidden in our minds, relationships, values, addictions, and daily lives. This pervasive social virus is geared at inculcating self-mistrust and undermining intelligence and critical thinking. The degree to which people mistrust themselves makes them susceptible to manipulation.

7) Part 2 shows how basic and global problems are linked with authoritarian beliefs and tendencies so embedded they are taken for granted. Looking to saviors for answers, meaning, and even salvation keeps people childish. People taking back their power can unleash the intelligence and care needed to deal with today's daunting challenges. This enormous reservoir of humanity's untapped potential and stymied creativity offers new grounds for hope. Freeing minds is a doorway to possibility and creating a better world.

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## Chapters Most Relevant — for understanding guru & cult dynamics

### IN PART 1:

**“Gurus and Times of Upheaval”**—on the appeal of authoritarian leaders.

**“The Seductions of Surrender”**—on the yearning to surrender that makes people susceptible to authoritarian control and manipulation. (See also sections on **“Scandals, Saints & Self-Centeredness”** and especially **“Recognizing Authoritarian Control.”**)

**“Guru Ploys”** and **“The Assault on Reason”**—on how gurus induce surrender and maintain dominance.

**“Gurus and Sexual Manipulation”**—contains **“The Betrayal of Trust”** and **“Spiritual Hedonism.”**

**“The Traps of Being a Guru”**—contains **“Narcissism and Adulation”** and **“Deceit and Corruption.”**

**“The Attractions of Cult Hierarchy”**—on the rewards and benefits of being in a “spiritual” hierarchy.

**“Stages of Cults: From Proselytizing to Paranoia”**—on the messianic and apocalyptic phases and what causes “benign” cults to turn paranoid and violent.

**“Healing Crippled Self-Trust”** addresses betrayal, disillusionment, identity, and regaining self-trust.

### IN PART 2:

**Introduction: “The Morals Wars”**—on the planetary struggle for people's minds between the forces of the old (authoritarianism) and the new.

**“Fundamentalism and the Need for Certainty”**—on the polarization within religion between modernizers and rigid traditionalists. It examines the fundamentalist mentality and the quandaries inherent in trying to reform and modernize authoritarian religions.

**“Love and Control: The Conditions Underlying Unconditional Love”** shows the insidious nature of spiritual ideals that distort love with unlivable values and expectations. It offers a framework for intimacy that can help free people from views of love that are set-ups for failure.

**“Oneness, Enlightenment and the Mystical Experience”** describes how the mystical experience of unity has been conceptualized into a covertly authoritarian worldview. On the surface the “Oneness” worldview (unity of all things) appears above reproach and crass manipulation. But it's one of the most sophisticated forms of religious authoritarianism. Its hidden dualism (between spirit and matter, unity and diversity) sacralizes self-renunciation and generates hierarchy. The concept of “enlightenment” derived from the Oneness worldview is itself inherently authoritarian: it creates a “seeker/knower” dichotomy and spiritual hierarchy in which the “enlightened few” (supposed knowers) are defined as spiritually and morally superior—(selfless and without ego)—no matter what they do. This unchallengeability is a formula for corruption and abuse of power.

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**Joel Kramer** is the author of *The Passionate Mind* (1974). He was a founder and pioneering innovator of modern yoga, and a resident teacher at Esalen Institute (1968-70). He did post-graduate work in philosophy and psychology.

**Diana Alstad**, a Yale Ph.D. and Woodrow Wilson Fellow, taught the first Women's Studies courses at Yale and Duke.

Working together since 1974, they developed and teach a yoga of relationship, and coauthored *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* (1993) and *The Passionate Mind Revisited: Expanding Personal and Social Awareness* (2009). Their articles, podcasts, YouTubes and information on their writings, talks and seminars are at [JoelDiana.com](http://JoelDiana.com).