Communication for planetary transformation and the drag of public conversations: The case of Landmark Education Corporation

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Communication for Planetary Transformation and the Drag of Public Conversations: The Case of Landmark Education Corporation

by

Patrick Owen Cannon

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Department of Communication College of Arts and Sciences University of South Florida

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Date of Approval: June 14, 2007

Keywords: Abraham Maslow, Politics 3, cults, qualitative methods, focus group, autoethnography, Society of the Spectacle

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my mother, my father, and Pratt.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Besides the author, the following three people are the most responsible for the report you are reading. They deserve my heartfelt thanks:

My major professor, Dr. Eric M. Eisenberg, for his openness, patience, and incisive comments.

My good friend, Dr. Charles Grant, who talked me through the journey from the perspective of someone who had “been there,” and helped me stay focused on the goal.

Marilyn K. Babb, whose love provided the support and encouragement to help me complete this project.

Great thanks also goes to my wonderful dissertation committee—Drs. Carolyn Ellis, Jane Jourgenson, and Marilyn Myerson—for teaching me, providing valuable insights, and expanding my perspective.
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COMMUNICATION FOR PLANETARY TRANSFORMATION AND THE DRAG OF PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS: THE CASE OF LANDMARK EDUCATION CORPORATION

Patrick Owen Cannon

ABSTRACT

This study employs qualitative methods to: (1) compare and contrast public conversations about a complex social phenomenon with my experience of that phenomenon, and (2) explore the nature of those public conversations and their impact on planetary transformation.

This study is divided into two parts.

Part One of this dissertation compares my personal experience with Landmark Education Corporation, a private personal development company, with how it is characterized in public conversations. The public conversations chosen for analysis include: (1) an episode of the television show, Law and Order: Criminal Intent (Balcer, et al., 2003), (2) a Time Magazine article about Landmark Education Corporation (Faltermayer, 1998 March 16), and (3) psychological research on large group awareness trainings, of which Landmark Education courses are one example. Each of these public conversations contrasts significantly with my personal experience and therefore fails to account for what I see as the potential for work like Landmark’s to transform the conversations that constitute our society, and ultimately, life on our planet.

To help account for the value I see in Landmark's courses, Part Two of the dissertation examines the communication of Landmark participants to ascertain whether their communication in fact poses the possibility of global transformation through open, compassionate, reciprocal communication practices learned in Landmark courses. It draws from qualitative interviews, a focus group, and a focus group observation interview.

Based on the results of this research, I argue that the communication of Landmark participants has the power to transform society, and that the public conversations about Landmark Education examined here are a drag on global transformation. Most broadly, I respond to the following question: When we examine particular public discourses about unusual social phenomena, what can we learn about the relationship between these discourses and the social phenomena aimed at transforming them?
OVERVIEW: WHAT DO WE KNOW AND HOW DO WE KNOW IT?

This study employs qualitative methods to: (1) compare and contrast public conversations about a complex social phenomenon to those based on my own experience of that phenomenon, and (2) explore the nature of those public conversations and their impact on planetary transformation.

Complex social phenomena that are not easily understood or described can become inflected in interesting ways in public conversations, with wildly varying degrees of credibility and authoritativeness. Despite this, people show a tendency to think we know about something, even when it is based on incomplete, superficial, or sensationalized accounts. When we think we “know” about something with which we have no direct experience (e.g., “Well, I saw it on the news…” or “I read about it on the internet…”), to what extent are we cognizant that this knowing is made possible by the ability of some parties to make particular discourses known on a mass scale? And that these discourses embody certain agendas? What are some implications of this ability for what we loosely call “knowledge”?

This study is divided into two parts. Each part contains its own chapter-by-chapter summary. Through discussion and analysis of various public conversations, Part One compares and contrasts my personal experience with Landmark Education Corporation, a private personal development company, to
the ways in which it is characterized in those public conversations. The public conversations examined include: (1) an episode of the television show, *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* (Balcer, et al., 2003), (2) a *Time Magazine* article about Landmark Education Corporation (Faltermayer, 1998 March 16), and (3) psychological research on large group awareness trainings, one example of which is offered by Landmark Education. Each of these public conversations contrasts significantly with my personal experience and therefore fails to account for what I see as the potential for work like Landmark’s to transform the conversations that constitute our society, and ultimately, life on our planet.

To help account for the value that I experience in Landmark’s courses, Part Two examines the communication of Landmark participants to determine if their communication poses the possibility of global transformation through open, compassionate, reciprocal communication practices. I use the results of interviews and a focus group, plus an interview with a third party who observed the focus group, to argue that the communication of Landmark participants has the power to transform society, and that the public conversations about Landmark Education examined here are a drag on global transformation. Most broadly, I respond to the following question: When we examine particular public discourses about unusual social phenomena, what can we learn about the relationship between these discourses and the social phenomena aimed at transforming them?

My passion for the topics discussed has produced a somewhat lengthy volume. For readers interested in specific topics, I suggest the following. For
historical background on Landmark Education, see Chapter Two, and for a
discussion of whether Landmark is a cult, see Chapter Four. A review of
psychological literature on courses like Landmark’s may be found in Chapter
Five. For a sobering account of the current state of our environment and
civilization, and a discussion on the possibility for transformation, read Chapter
Six and the Epilogue. Those most interested in mass media and rhetoric might
visit the Prologue, Chapter Three, and the Epilogue. For those attracted to
narrative modes of inquiry, Chapters One, Eight, and Nine may be of most
interest. Chapter Seven describes the methods used in this study, and
discussion of the results of the study appears throughout Chapters Ten and
Eleven, and the Epilogue.
PART ONE

LANDMARK EDUCATION CORPORATION: PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Part One presents various public conversations about Landmark Education Corporation and compares and contrasts these conversations to my personal experience.

The Prologue recounts an episode of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*—*Con-Text* (Balcer, et al., 2003)—and establishes that the company portrayed in it strongly resembles Landmark Education Corporation. Chapter One describes my personal experience with Landmark Education and explains some of the concepts taught in their courses. In Chapter Two, I examine Landmark’s company history and describe it as an anomaly in capitalism, operating as a secular, evangelical non-profit corporation. Chapter Three contains a rhetorical analysis of a *Time Magazine* article (Faltermayer, 1998, March 16) about Landmark Education inside a cynical perspective that addresses controversies associated with Landmark. In Chapter Four, I confront controversies raised in the *Time* article, particularly, whether or not Landmark Education is a cult, a scam, or utilizes brainwashing techniques. In this chapter, I conclude that Landmark is not a cult, nor does it employ techniques that may be described as coercive, nor is it a scam posing as a benevolent enterprise. Having debunked mainstream public
conversations about Landmark, I then in Chapter Five review psychological literature on the kind of courses Landmark offers, called “large group awareness trainings” (LGATs). The results of this research are inconclusive.

Having examined three prominent public conversations about Landmark’s work, I then consider in Chapter Six what value may be attributed to Landmark’s work that would take into account my personal experience. If we agree that communication is at least partly responsible for the type of world we live in, it would appear that transforming our communication would be one place to start if we wish to reverse current disastrous trends in global conflicts over resources and the polluting of our planet. What kind of conversations might reverse these trends, and what are their distinguishing characteristics?

I find a potential source of Landmark’s value in Maslow’s (1977) *Politics 3*, namely, that training people in open, compassionate, and reciprocal communication may have the power to transform the status quo of a deeply troubled planet. Since no previous academic literature has examined Landmark or LGATs inside this context, I move on to pursue questions not addressed by the psychological literature and describe the methods I shall use to pursue these questions.
PROLOGUE

CRIMINAL INTENT: REPRESENTING SELF-IMPROVEMENT COURSES

Con-Text

The first public conversation about Landmark Education Corporation I examine is Con-text, an episode of NBC’s Law and Order: Criminal Intent series.¹ I choose this episode for three reasons: (1) It depicts a company strongly resembling Landmark Education; (2) the lead character accuses that company of being a cult, a scam, and of using thought control methods; and (3) The episode was viewed by approximately 14.6 million viewers (Fienberg, 2004) and has to this day been replayed numerous times in reruns and syndication. For these reasons, this Criminal Intent episode constitutes a significant public conversation about Landmark Education and its work.

Con-Text tells the sordid tale of self-improvement gone badly (Balcer, et al., 2003). In Con-text, Randall Fuller, founder of the fictional self-improvement company, GraceNote Powerful Living, and his attractive female assistant, Lena, manipulate an unsuspecting and vulnerable Doug Morgan to make a multimillion dollar donation to GraceNote. Doug, an impressionable young man in his twenties with a ninth grade education, obtains the money by bilking his Irish fugitive father out a two million dollar bank heist by torturing him and his brother

¹ Con-text first aired January 5, 2003.
through dehydration, starvation, and sleep deprivation. The torture ended in a murder-suicide with Doug’s brother shooting and killing their father and then turning the gun on himself.

Detectives Goren and Eames are assigned to the case. After some sleuthing, the detectives arrest Doug, who, once questioned, immediately confesses to the crime. Assistant District Attorney Carver suggests that if Doug was influenced to kill his father and brother that this would mitigate his responsibility: “I am responsible,” Doug declares, eschewing the ADA’s plea offer.

Goren tries to understand the motivations for Doug’s actions. When he questions Doug about a letter he wrote his mother, Goren asks, “You did it to transform yourself? That’s what it says in the letter to your mother. Your ‘negative self-programming’ was leading you to a ‘counter-effective life strategy.’”

“Yes,” confirms Doug.

“You wanted to transform your context.”

“Yes. That’s what I did.”

“What’s a context, Doug?” Goren asks.

Doug stammers a bit, but an answer eludes him. He looks up with a searching expression that reminds Goren of the murderous Manson Family cult members. Goren sticks the letter in Doug’s face. Doug stammers some more.

“It’s in your letter—you don’t know what it means?” Goren probed, squinting at Doug to scrutinize him more closely.
Doug stammers some more and finally spits out his weak reply: “It’s hard to say.”

“Because someone told you to write it? This girl?” Goren asks, pointing to a bank surveillance photo of Lena, who convinced Doug to make the donation. “Is that who you picture when you look up?” referring to Doug’s habit of looking up when he is confused.

Appearing confronted, Doug begins to shut down, albeit in an odd way: “No. I am the author of my life and I make the choices. And I choose I don’t want to talk to you anymore.” Doug closes his eyes and folds his arms like a child. Goren looks at him curiously.

Intrigued by the “interesting vocabulary” in Doug’s letter, Goren and Eames do a Web search on “context transformation” and “tuition $400” (“the going rate for self-improvement,” Goren sarcastically comments). They find a web site for a personal development program entitled *GraceNote Powerful Living*: “Optimize your psychic drive. Learn the principles of context transformation. Tuition for the two-day seminar is $450.” A quote from *GraceNote* founder Randall Fuller reads, “I help people discover their hidden context.” Also on the web site is a photo of Lena, the woman from the bank surveillance photo. The detectives set out to find her.

To do this, Goren and Eames go undercover and confront Fuller at one of *GraceNote*’s introductory seminars, but Fuller “makes” the detectives and brushes them off, claiming he’s not sure who the woman is they’re looking for,
but that she’s probably a “student volunteer.” At Fuller’s invitation, the two detectives attend *GraceNote*’s introductory seminar.

After the seminar, Eames and Goren brief ADA Carver. Eames complains, “Four hours without a bathroom break. I thought I was going to pop a valve!”

“Four hours of constant promises of a better life or a more confident self” says Goren mockingly.

Eames continues, “It was a sales pitch for their weekend seminar, which is a warm up for their *Insight Series*, the *Mentors Program*, and their *Destiny Workshops*. You could spend 30 grand on the whole nine yards.”

Carver asks: “Is it a cult? Mind control?”

Goren and Eames simultaneously answer “yes” and “no,” respectively.

Noting this difference of opinion, Carver jokes, “How reassuring.”

Raising his voice in disagreement with Eames, Goren’s criticism has a decided edge: “They use the same psychological coercion as cults!”

“So did the guy who sold me my car,” counters Eames. “No one forced those people to stay last night. They were enjoying themselves!”

“They stayed because of peer group pressure, manufactured peer group. They pay to sit in the room for hours on end. They submit to group hypnosis, deep breathing, guided imagery…”

“That’s a relaxation technique!” Eames interjects into what is now an argument. “Those people did not look like zombies when they came out.”

“No, they were *euphoric!*” exclaims Goren, getting agitated. “They got a *shot* of optimism. It’s *very* powerful. They can’t *wait* to repeat the experience.”
“So they sign up for another seminar. If it helps them, what’s the harm?”

After speculating that unhappy people with no clear sense of self could be susceptible in the way Doug Morgan was, Goren offers his summary of what he heard from the seminar.

“Look, strip down all the doubletalk. What is it that Randall Fuller really said to those people? Everything that you’ve done is wrong. Everything you are is false.”

“But it’s not your fault, you were programmed that way,” Eames finishes his thought.

“Leave it to GraceNote to give you back your life. It’s very seductive.”

Carver suggests that if anyone has complained about GraceNote, he might be able to shut them down. Looking into such complaints, they interview a dentist who registered a grievance with Consumer Affairs. Eames asks him why he kept taking classes. The dentist confesses, “Being in that room, being told that my life had limitless possibilities…I needed to keep hearing it.” It turns out Lena, as with Doug, had also encouraged the dentist to give large donations to “the program,” and when he complained, GraceNote blackmailed him because he had been “involved” with Lena. Before Goren and Eames are able to locate her, however, she is found dead of an apparent suicide. They learn subsequently Lena had also given a lot of money to GraceNote, so Carver gives the detectives the go-ahead to pursue Fuller.

To learn more, the detectives try again to interrogate Doug. Eames questions Doug about the large amounts of money he paid for GraceNote
courses: “400, 500, 1200. It goes on and on, Doug. All the money you paid to GraceNote.”

“I took their classes because I wanted to. They helped me a lot,” says Doug.

“Well, tell us what you learned, Doug,” asks Goren, sounding genuinely curious, but sensing Doug doesn’t have a clue.

Doug starts out, “Well, I learned that, I, uh, I wasn’t living a real life. I was making decisions because of things that happened to me in my past.”

Goren adds, “Right! And then you start questioning everything you did: ‘Am I really making a free choice or am I being controlled by bad programming?’ And—what is it GraceNote calls it, my ‘psychic drive’?”

Doug confirms, “Yes, because you can’t trust the past. There’s what happened, and what you tell yourself happened. It was holding me back.”

Carver asks, “Holding you back from what?”

Doug strikes a self-satisfied, proud grin and answers: “From, from being extraordinary.”

Goren pretends to understand and tries to identify with Doug: “It’s hard to explain if you haven’t been through GraceNote.”

Apparently thinking he and Goren are on the same page, Doug says, “Yes, they don’t get it,” referring to Eames and Carver.

“It was worth a lot to you and you showed your appreciation with gifts. The money that you took from your father wasn’t for you, you gave it to GraceNote,” explains Goren.
“As a gift,” adds Doug, seeing that Goren understands him. Carver asks, “Did Mr. Fuller know where the money came from?” Doug states haltingly, “I told him my family gave it to me.” Goren asks, “Doug, you remember the girl from the bank? Her name was Lena, you met her at GraceNote?” Doug smiles, “She was taking classes with me.” Goren goes on, “She helped you decide to make those gifts to Randall Fuller.” Doug corrects him: “We talked about it. But I decided,” insisting that he alone was responsible for the donation. Eames interjects, “Randall Fuller used Lena to convince you to give that money to GraceNote.” Goren asks, “She manipulated you into killing your father and brother?” “No, no. Lena is in love with me. She decided to be with me. She made that decision,” Doug states. Goren moves in tight to explain, “Fuller makes the decisions,” he says slowly in a hushed but firm tone. “It’s not true,” Doug denies. Goren raises his voice as he confronts Doug, who doesn’t yet know Lena is dead. “Doug, LISTEN TO ME! LENA IS DEAD! She committed suicide last weekend.”
Showing him the autopsy photos, Goren continues, “You see how her lips are chapped, the cracked cuticles on her fingers? Those are the same things we found on your dad and your brother. Lena was denied sleep, food, water.”

Doug whimpers in horror and panic.

“Doug, he broke her.”

In shock, Doug protests, “It’s not true!”

“And he drove her to suicide.”

At this, Doug completely loses his composure. He stands up, walks backward, gestures oddly, and begins rattling off GraceNote stock phrases, sounding a like the robot from *Lost in Space*: “It’s bad programming. It’s the story from your past.”

Goren says, “Doug, it’s what happened.”

Doug objects, sputtering, “No! It’s, it’s, it’s, it’s—it’s how you see it, it’s—it’s the story you tell, it’s how you see it. It’s not the way it is. You can’t differentiate one thing from another. You…”—he bangs on the door to summon the prison guard and crosses his arms defiantly—“I know how it is. I get it. You don’t. You’re not…clear,” he says finally and leaves the room.

Upon Doug’s exit, Cooper, his lawyer, bemusedly informs Carver, “I’m getting a sense my client might be amending his plea.”

“Not guilty by reason of mental disease,” Carver guesses.

Attorney Cooper smiles wryly, snaps his fingers, points at Carver affirmatively, and walks out of the room.
“I don’t know about an insanity defense, but his credibility as a witness against Fuller is doubtful.”

This realization presents a problem for making the case against *GraceNote*, so, the detectives try another angle. Concluding that Doug did not act alone, and learning that Doug’s attorney will present an insanity defense, Goren tells Fuller he’ll “fix it with the D.A.” so Fuller can keep the stolen money if he meets with Doug under the pretense of straightening him out. Fuller agrees to meet Goren, Eames, Carver, Doug, and Cooper at the police station.

In the episode’s final sequence, Fuller enters the room. Doug greets him excitedly: “Mr. Fuller!”

“Hello, Doug,” says Fuller.

Goren offers Doug a seat.

With compassion, Fuller says, “You’ve been going through a challenging time, Doug. I’d like to assist you.” Doug smiles.

Carver then says to Doug’s attorney, “Mr. Cooper, you’ve explained to your client that we are prepared to accept his claim of sole responsibility for the two murders?”

Attorney Cooper says, “Yes, Mr. Carver, I did.”

“Before we proceed, we need precise details of how you committed the crimes. Do you understand?” Doug’s lawyer pats him on the back as a show of support, and Doug nods. “Go ahead,” says Carver.

“Well, I took my father’s money and he found out.”
Eames interjects, “Hold on. We said *precise details*. The money. How did you find out about it?”

Fuller intervenes, and, speaking to Doug, asks, “What’s the hidden context, Doug?”

Doug looks at Fuller and says knowingly, “I’m not a competent person. I can’t handle money.” Fuller nods. Doug then speaks to the officers, “I was getting my finances in order. I had sent away for my credit report. The bank accounts were listed on the report.”

Goren asks, “Weren’t you afraid your father’d come after you”?

Doug looks at Fuller and says, “I’m still a child. I let fear control me.”

“Yes, that’s the context,” Fuller says approvingly, in the tone of a master speaking to his disciple.

“I wanted to use the money for a good purpose, something that I’m passionate about. I wasn’t afraid,” Doug says, smiling.

Goren resumes the narrative: “So when your father came after you…”

“I took his gun, I made Jimmy tie up Dad, and I tied up Jimmy.”

Continuing for him, Eames adds incredulously, “And then you kept them in that motel room for twelve days, just you alone. And those two guys.”

Doug perceives that Eames doesn’t believe him, and says to Fuller: “I know this one: I’m not strong. I’m not powerful. No one listens to me.” Doug turns to the officers, “Yes, just me alone. I made them give up the rest of the money. I drove them to Dad’s office.”
Goren shows he understands Doug by articulating Doug’s thought process regarding the murders.

“And that’s when you overcame your…your biggest fear.”

Apparently this expression did not contain enough *GraceNote* jargon, so Goren rephrases, “You changed your way of being.”

“Yes.”

“You killed your dad and you transformed your life.”

Doug answers, “Yes, I did.”

“And you killed your brother for the same reason,” Eames joins in.

“Yes.”

“The brother who loved you, who watched out for you,” Goren inquires.

“It wasn’t real love. The context wasn’t authentic. He watched out for me out of guilt. It’s old stuff.”

“It’s in the past,” adds Goren, “You killed your dad and you let it go.”

“Yes.”

At this point, Fuller is getting uncomfortable with the conversation’s turn. To make him more uncomfortable, Goren begins to praise Doug for successfully applying to his life what he learned in *GraceNote*.

“Well, so then you became everything that *GraceNote* promised you. I mean, like it says right here in the brochure, look!” Goren walks to Doug, stands him up, and reads from the brochure, “You became the creator of your own destiny!”

Doug smiles and says, “That’s right! That’s right!”
“Wow! Look at you! You’re a success story!” he says, congratulating Doug.

Goren now turns to Fuller, “Doug’s a success story.” After conveying his support, Goren—using his characteristic ploy of pitting people against each other—now begins to play Fuller off Doug, having laid the groundwork to humiliate Doug, which he hopes will get him to turn on Fuller.

Perhaps not yet seeing where this is going, but getting nervous nevertheless, Fuller says, “Well, Detective…”

Knowing that Fuller is now in the hot seat, Goren engages Fuller on whether Doug is a “success story.” “Well, look at him! He’s the master of his own fate. He put the past in the past. He transformed his way of life. He created his own destiny. I think he hit the GraceNote trifecta. Yes, Mr. Fuller!” slapping him on the back in mock congratulation.

“Well, in a manner of speaking, sure,” Fuller agrees timidly, trying to hedge his bets without directly contradicting him.

“So, aren’t you going to use him as a shining example of what can be accomplished with GraceNote’s help?”

Fuller looks puzzled and somewhat sickened.

“I don’t know about that,” Fuller nervously equivocates.

“But don’t you want your students to follow his example?”

Finally pinned down, Fuller replies, “I would hope that they would find another path.”
“Oh,” says Goren, his voice trailing off, pretending to be surprised and disappointed in Fuller’s response. After pausing for effect, he asks Fuller, “Um…what do you mean?”

Now that Fuller is close to outing Doug, the large Goren walks over to the diminutive Doug, shoulders him aside, and takes his place at the table. Putting his hands on the table, Goren leans over and asks Fuller, “You mean murder is not the right path?”

“I would have to say no, Detective.”

“He failed? Wasn’t killing his father a way to free him from the past?”

“Of course not!” Fuller exclaims.

“Did you hear that, Doug? You failed the course.”

At this, Doug is visibly agitated and angry.

Goren lays into Doug, “You’re the same scared loser you were when you joined GraceNote.”

Horrified that he has “failed,” Doug finally turns on Fuller: “You told me if I killed him, if I killed him, I’d make the break.”

Fuller stands up to correct him: “That’s not true, Doug. That’s a myth you constructed.”

“You told me… you…I did everything you told me, Mr. Fuller.”

“Everything?” asks Goren.

“To get the money, all the money, and to kill them. He said it would be the last step to…power. To excellence. That’s what you said!”
Goren: “That was a lie, Doug. That was a big lie.” He then turns directly to Fuller, and accuses Fuller of Lena’s death: “And that’s why you killed Lena.”

“Did you? Did you do it?” Doug asks Fuller in shock.

“Of course not,” denies Fuller, “she slashed her wrists, she committed suicide,” inadvertently revealing the cause of Lena’s death when in fact no one but the police knew how she died, thereby exposing his connection to the murders.

“How do you know that, Mr. Fuller?” Carver interjects.

Fuller, nervously, says, “Well, I can’t say exactly.” Goren suppresses a grin, knowing Fuller has now implicated himself. Fuller continues: “She knew someone at GraceNote, they must have told me there.”

Eames explains, “The only people we informed of her death were her parents, but they weren’t told how she died.”

Goren begins to take Fuller into custody, who now tries to flee—inside a police station, mind you—and utters something indistinguishable in a panicky tone, but Goren grabs him before he reaches the room’s exit: “Randall Fuller, you are under arrest for murder.”

Doug, staggered by this turn of events, plops down in his chair. Completely beside himself now, he searchingly asks Fuller, “What did you do to my life?”

“It wasn’t much of a life to begin with,” derides a sneering Fuller.
“And I’m not sure the rest of yours will be something to write home about,” chides Carver, obliquely referring to the practice of letter-writing in GraceNote’s courses. Fuller is taken away by a uniformed officer.

“At least Doug learned one of GraceNote’s lessons—taking responsibility for his actions.”

“Something even Randall Fuller couldn’t do,” comments Eames.

“Well, he’ll have plenty of opportunity to learn where he’s going,” Goren utters, ending the episode in typical Law & Order fashion, with a pithy, clichéd comment.

GraceNote’s Resemblance to Landmark Education Corporation

Each Criminal Intent episode contains a disclaimer: “This story is fictional. No actual person or event is depicted.” Be that as it may, there is an unmistakable resemblance between the fictional GraceNote Powerful Living and the real-life Landmark Education Corporation, which offers courses in personal effectiveness. Anyone familiar with Landmark would undoubtedly recognize a startling number of common features. Some correspond more directly than others, while some appear dramatized for effect. These resemblances primarily consist of similarities between (1) GraceNote and Landmark as companies, and (2) the language and ideas used by both (see Table 1). (There are important differences, however.² ³

² Those unfamiliar with Landmark Education may be tempted to suggest that this episode could just as easily be about Scientology. A number of considerations dissuade me from this view. As I show in Table 2, Con-text employs language that is distinctive to Landmark Education courses, and in several cases, appears to come directly from the Landmark Forum syllabus. Landmark Forum participants will recognize this. Furthermore, I think the otherwise inexplicable appearance
*Criminal Intent’s Con-text* depicts an evil, murderous, brainwashing, manipulative, and hypocritical “self-improvement cult.” As such, the episode’s tone consists largely of fear, suspicion, and paranoia toward work like Landmark’s. If one considers the number of people who watched *Criminal Intent* and add in the other millions of viewers who have seen it in reruns or syndication, this number dwarfs the 850,000 people who have participated in Landmark Education’s programs.

Regardless of the episode’s fictional status, and despite the fact that people *can* distinguish between a TV show and reality, anyone exposed to the fear, suspicion, and paranoia conveyed by *Con-text* and later learns about Landmark or similar programs, that person would likely think twice about participating in such courses. Such is the power of mass media to disseminate public conversations about unusual social phenomena, and influence opinions about them—even when audiences may have no experience with those phenomena. I know if I had seen this episode, I would probably never have done the Landmark Forum.

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of the Bay Bridge on *Grace Note*’s website is decisive (see Table 1 and footnote 4): Scientology’s spiritual world headquarters is in Clearwater, Florida, while Landmark’s global headquarters is in San Francisco. If *Con-text* was about Scientology, I believe it would be noticeably different. While admittedly speculative, I suggest the following. Most obviously, *Grace Note* would be a *church* (not a corporation) and promote a religion (not “self-improvement courses”). Also, such an episode would likely make references to stereotypes associated with Scientology, like unconventional beliefs about aliens. It would also depict its founder as possessing mythic qualities (like Hubbard), perhaps mention celebrities who promote its religion, and feature an image from Clearwater (instead of San Francisco) on its website.

3 The extent to which there is any further resemblance between Landmark Education as fictionalized by *Criminal Intent* and the lived experience of Landmark participants will be explored in considerable detail throughout this study.
Table 1

*Company Comparison between GraceNote Powerful Living and Landmark Education Corporation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GraceNote Powerful Living</th>
<th>Landmark Education Corporation (LEC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On GraceNote’s website is a photo of the Oakland Bay Bridge, which connects Oakland to San Francisco⁴</td>
<td>Landmark Education Corporation’s world headquarters is located in San Francisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Founder/guru’s name—“Randall Fuller”</td>
<td>LEC’s predecessor, est (Erhard Seminars Training), was founded by Werner Erhard (same number of syllables as Randall Fuller); the actor playing Fuller bears some physical resemblance to Werner Erhard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuller is involved with deceit, torture, and murder</td>
<td>Erhard was rumored to be involved in disreputable activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a free four-hour introductory seminar that is a sales pitch for its other programs</td>
<td>The Landmark free three-hour “introductory seminar” includes an opportunity to register for the Landmark Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eames complains GraceNote’s introductory seminar has no bathroom break for four hours</td>
<td>In est, people were reportedly not allowed to leave the classroom to go to the bathroom except on designated breaks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend course is $450</td>
<td>The Landmark Forum (a three-day and one evening course) is $440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers a number of courses that total $30,000</td>
<td>Offers numerous courses, varying in price from around $100 to a few thousand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses “student volunteers”</td>
<td>Uses “graduate assistants”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carver asks if GraceNote is a cult or uses mind control</td>
<td>Detractors have made accusations of LEC being a cult and using mind control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁴ This bridge is an interesting choice for a couple of reasons. The caption above the photo reads, “Introductory seminars are offered every weeknight at convenient locations in the Tri-state Area.” “Tri-State area,” is, in this “context,” New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut (or Pennsylvania, depending who you ask), and yet the accompanying photo shows a bridge located in Oakland/San Francisco. It is also interesting that the creators chose the lesser known Bay Bridge over the Golden Gate. My guess is that, since the show is an obvious dig at Landmark Education, using a photo of the Golden Gate Bridge would have been too much of a tip-off.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>GraceNote Powerful Living</strong></th>
<th><strong>Landmark Education Corporation (LEC)</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uses “an interesting vocabulary, “high level gobbledygook”</td>
<td>LEC uses a technical vocabulary of “distinctions”(^5) that may sound unusual to the uninitiated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses give its participants a “shot of optimism”</td>
<td>People appear to leave courses feeling more optimistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps people discover “their hidden context”</td>
<td>Landmark refers to “the hidden power of context”: “context is decisive... the hidden contexts from which we live determine what we see and what we don’t see...all ways of being and acting—are correlated to the context(s) from which we live our lives” (Landmark Education Corporation, 2007b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug refers to “excellence” and “being extraordinary”</td>
<td>These are names for two Landmark seminars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice is a pivotal concept: “I choose I don’t want to talk to you any more”</td>
<td>The nature of choice is a pivotal Landmark concept, and is featured in the Landmark Forum Syllabus (Landmark Education Corporation, 2007b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug says, “I am the author of my own life”</td>
<td>Landmark courses all teach the notion that individuals create their own reality through language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In his letter to his mother, Doug apologizes for past actions, thanks her for all she’s done for him, and lays out his plans for the future</td>
<td>Doug’s letter is similar in structure to a letter assigned in the Landmark Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The name of the company is <em>GraceNote Powerful Living</em>.</td>
<td>The phrase “living powerfully” figures prominently in LEC courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug says, “You can’t trust the past...There’s what happened and what you tell yourself happened”</td>
<td>“We suggest that it is a human tendency to collapse what happened, with the story we tell about what happened” (Landmark Education Corporation, 2007b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug numerous times claims responsibility for his actions and expresses that he is responsible for the murders</td>
<td>Responsibility is a fundamental value in Landmark Education courses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^5\) See Chapter One.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language and Ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>GraceNote Powerful Living</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The dentist Goren and Eames interview says, “Being in that room, being told that my life had endless possibilities. I needed to keep hearing it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug says, “You don’t get it”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilizes the notion of being inauthentic</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE

RECLAIMING POWER AT THE SOURCE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF THE LANDMARK FORUM

As discussed above, *Con-text* is a thinly-disguised mass-mediated public conversation about Landmark Education. The dramatic intensity of this episode promotes fear, suspicion, and paranoia toward operations like Landmark, and because of this, I believe it would deter those who might consider participating in Landmark Education. Having recounted a prominent public conversation about Landmark, I now turn to my personal experience.

What is Landmark Education like from the perspective of a participant? Other than the similarities between *Grace Note Powerful Living* and Landmark Education noted above, to what extent is there any resemblance between the “world” of Landmark Education as fictionalized by *Criminal Intent* and the lived experience of someone who has participated in Landmark courses for almost ten years? This chapter recounts my experience with Landmark Education and discusses a few of the concepts taught in its courses.

Narrative

In February of 1997, I was in the third year of my doctoral program in Communication when, just three days after my 36th birthday, my father died suddenly of a heart attack. One week later, I was informed that my graduate
funding was being discontinued because I was not making satisfactory progress toward my degree. I was devastated, and I soon became depressed and angry. My father's death was bad enough, and the funding issue only served to compound my pain. I spent much time trying to understand the department's decision and attempted to have it reversed without success. Although I had a girlfriend, I didn't have any other close friends locally. I felt alienated and lonely. These feelings began to give way to desperation. I felt like my life was going nowhere. I wasn't happy with my department or my career path, and were it not for the fact that I felt loved by my partner, I'm not sure how I would have made it. One of my professors recommended I take advantage of sliding scale counseling at a place specializing in assisting those dealing with loss from the death of a loved one. The goal of this therapy was to help me grieve my father's death and figure out what had gone wrong with my doctoral program. The therapy helped considerably, and after a while, I was less depressed. After about five months, however, I cannot say the quality of my life or my general orientation to the world had undergone any significant improvement.

In July of that year, a close friend of mine, James, came to see me. He had received his doctorate from my program and had since moved out of state. He recommended a personal development course called the Landmark Forum. He was in town to complete the second Landmark course called "The Advanced Course."

I didn’t know anything about the Forum apart from what he told me and that it had evolved from a rather infamous program from the 1970s called est, the
brainchild of Werner Erhard. What I knew, or thought I knew about it, consisted of bits and pieces from popular culture, and in particular a spoof of est in the hilarious film *Semi-Tough* (Bernstein, 1977), starring Burt Reynolds, Kris Kristofferson, and Jill Clayburgh. In the film, real-life game show host Burt Convy played the guru of a marathon personal improvement program called *Beat*. Reynolds took the course and pretended to “get it” so he could win over Jill Clayburgh, the romantic interest Kristofferson was after as well. The course was filled with jargon that supposedly mimicked that of est. I didn’t remember much about the movie except for the fact that people were locked inside a room for a long time and could not take bathroom breaks. Burt Reynolds’ character knew in advance about this constraint, and in an obscure pawn shop, purchased a rather odd antique device, “the Railwayman’s Friend.” This was a glass flask that strapped onto a man’s shin and connected to a rubber tube that attached to the penis at the other end. When the user felt the urge, he could simply urinate into the tube, whereupon the warm golden fluid would be transported to the flask. I remember watching with delight as Reynolds watched others in the room “give it up,” soiling and pissing themselves. When it was his time, that famous Reynolds’ grin came over his face as the sound of streaming urine could be heard flowing into the flask. It was hysterically funny. Despite my recollection of the film, however, I was not scared off from considering the Landmark Forum, but neither was the film a selling point.

James discussed the Landmark Forum with me in detail, and spoke highly of it. I was skeptical and explained to him that it was no different from ideas I had
already encountered either in therapy or in my extensive reading in psychoanalysis, post-structural linguistics, and communication studies. I was mildly resistant to the idea and thought it would offer nothing new. Undaunted, James told me that he really thought I should at least check it out, and invited me to an Introduction. He was assertive without being pushy. He said I didn't have to do the Forum, but he did want me to know more about it.

Tuesday night I met James at a hotel conference room where the Advanced Course was taking place. There I encountered over one hundred smiling happy people who were completing the Advanced Course. One hundred smiling happy people. I was immediately suspicious. I mean, c'mon, maybe a few smiling people, but not a hundred! This was a red flag for me. “There’s no good reason why so many people should be so happy,” I thought to myself. It was a little off-putting, but I tried to suspend my suspicion enough to learn what was going on.

The Introduction was run very professionally. After a few glowing testimonials from course participants who shared about breakthroughs they had in their relationships, John, a man dressed in business casual attire took our group of ten or so to a breakout room. He gave a presentation about the Forum and answered questions, all the while being amazingly composed and sincere. This man had a way about him that was both unassuming and thoughtful. It was curious. “I’d like to be like that,” I thought.

John answered each of the guests’ questions thoroughly—except mine. Like most people when they encounter something unfamiliar, I tried to map the
Forum onto things I already knew, mostly psychology. In trying to understand what the Forum was all about, I asked for comparisons between psychoanalysis and other psychotherapeutic techniques and those taught by The Forum. After a few unsuccessful attempts to satisfy my curiosity, John must have caught on that he was out of his element. He told me very politely, without evasion and without being dismissive or condescending, that he was an engineer, not a psychologist, and that he was not qualified to respond to my questions. At first, I was a little dissatisfied that my questions had not been answered; later, however, I came to admire his frankness. He didn't try to make something up just to answer me or brush off the questions or make me feel bad because I was being “difficult.” He simply told me he couldn't answer the question. That kind of authenticity was not what I was accustomed to from “sales people.”

At the end of the Introduction, I still wasn't convinced that doing the Forum was such a great thing, and for me it was one of those things I'd prefer to “think about” doing, “maybe in the future.” (The truth is, if I did not register that evening, I most likely would never have done it.) James persisted. As luck would have it, James was registering for the next Landmark course, “The Self-Expression and Leadership Program,” however, the course was not yet scheduled in his area, so Landmark couldn't accept his fifty dollar deposit. This snag created an opportunity: “I'll pay for your deposit for the Forum if you register for it tonight,” James said.

"Hmmm," I thought. That made the offer more tempting. Still, I couldn't shake off the thought that James stood to benefit financially somehow, like this
was a multilevel marketing strategy. I was suspicious. Why all those smiling faces? They must be getting something out of it! Everyone I spoke to told me it was such a great experience and that I wouldn’t regret it. Yet I couldn’t understand why all these strangers would care so much that I did this. What was in it for them? Call me a cheapskate, but in the end, the fifty dollar savings on the program made the biggest difference, and I registered for the Forum even though I had only a vague hope that it would help me.

Prior to my participation, I did not have much faith that the Forum would deliver on its promises. The invitation to the course James gave me billed the Landmark Forum as

a penetrating, challenging, practical inquiry into issues that determine our personal effectiveness in all areas of life. It is engaging, stimulating, and powerful, and produces an extraordinary advantage in performance, creativity, and self-expression.

This all sounded well and good, but I was skeptical: How would it produce such an "extraordinary advantage" in only three days and an evening?

According to the program brochure, "The Landmark Forum is a means of gaining insight into fundamental premises that shape and govern our lives—the very structures that determine our thinking, our actions, our values, the kind of people that we can be" (Landmark Education Corporation, 1996). When I first read this, I thought, "Yeah, I already know this stuff, so why am I attending?" I felt I had read enough Freud and numerous self-help books, been through enough counseling, and had thought so much about why I am the way I am, it was difficult to fathom how one weekend could contribute significantly to this lifelong process. Besides, it was way over my budget (I had to split the $275 balance on
two credit cards). I did not feel pressured into registering, but I had doubts that my time and money could be spent more productively elsewhere.

As the first day of the Landmark Forum approached, my expectations continued to be low, and fear was beginning to creep in. James had told me that a portion of the course would entail something called "completing the past" with our parents. I thought about what this might mean, and it struck me that I might have to deal with my father's death during the weekend. This made me anxious. The image of me breaking down and crying in front of 150 people did not appeal in the least! "No, I will not deal with my father's death during the Forum," I decided.

My Landmark Forum took place at the Don CeSar Hotel on St. Pete Beach. It was a beautiful setting, but I was irritated that I had to drive a half hour from South Tampa to St. Petersburg when they had told us the Forum would be in "Tampa." (I later learned that Landmark uses “Tampa” to include the Tampa Bay area," much like “Chicagoland" encompasses the city and surrounding suburbs.) Proceedings began at 9 A.M. on Friday and I was running slightly late, not taking potential parking delays into account. I hurriedly entered the hotel, carrying my pillow and a huge red and white cooler of food and drink—carrots, celery, sweet potatoes, trail mix, tuna sandwiches, water, and juice sprinters.\(^6\) I had been told that while there are regular breaks during the course, there would be little time to dine out, so, in my typical thorough fashion, I wanted to be prepared. And I was.

\(^6\) I brought the pillow because of the long hours of sitting involved, and thought it would make the chair more comfortable to sit in. It was a big help!
Forum guides wearing yellow nametags were strewn all along my path to the room where the course was held and they kindly pointed me in the right direction. Their presence was alternately welcome and disturbing: I was pleased I didn't have to look around for someone to tell me where to go, but the sheer number of guides (four or five along the way from the hotel entrance to the conference room) seemed excessive, and each guide told me the Forum was just about to start. "Okay, already," I thought to myself, perturbed. "Jesus Christ, I'm not helpless, just tell me where the damn room is!"

I arrived on the fifth floor of the hotel, perspiring and feeling a little fatigued from hauling my heavy cargo, walked through a long corridor, and approached the conference room. It was a typical hotel meeting room, not unlike those encountered at academic conventions. It was decorated in a style I refer to as "generic elegant": yellowish-beige walls with rectangular gold moldings, fake chandeliers, and a long crimson curtain that stretched across the front wall. The room held about 150 Forum participants and Landmark's crew of assistants (seated in the back of the room at a long row of conference tables). Filling up the bulk of the room, chairs for the participants were arranged in four columns, two large columns divided by a center aisle and two smaller columns set off diagonally on either side of the center sections. In this respect, the layout was pretty standard for a lecture-type event.

At the front and center of the room was a riser spanning approximately the width of one of the larger sections of chairs. Microphones on stands were positioned just to the right and left of the platform. On the back center of the
platform was a long conference table with a white table cloth, a few water goblets, a pitcher of ice water, and a dictionary. A tall director's chair was placed in the middle of the platform. Next to it was a black music stand. On either side of the table were three green chalkboards, two to the left of the center table, one on the right. Written on the far left chalkboard was the schedule of the four-day program in writing so neat and rows so straight and uniform it was uncanny. Next to it was a description of the Forum derived from Landmark's printed literature. Taped to the far right chalkboard was a large piece of paper with a chart depicting Landmark's "Curriculum for Living."

In restaurant maitre d' fashion, one of the guides escorted me to a seat on the far right, second row from the front, and very close to a loudspeaker. ("Great seat," I said sarcastically to myself.) There seemed to be an air of impatience in his demeanor. I concluded at the time that Landmark was very "picky" about rules (like being on time), and I was running a minute or two late. I barely had a chance to catch my breath when a tall, broad, middle-aged white man with straight, sandy brown hair and a somewhat rough and ruddy complexion approached the platform. He was wearing tan pants and a white dress shirt open at the collar, epitomizing the bland inoffensiveness of "business casual." Before I could judge and assess him more, he began speaking. His voice boomed out of the loudspeaker, and I nearly jumped out of my seat. "WELCOME, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, TO THE LANDMARK FORUM. MY NAME IS TOM JACKSON AND I'LL BE LEADING THE FORUM."
His voice was so loud it actually hurt my ears. "Why do they need a loudspeaker in the first place?" I complained to myself. "This isn't even that big of a room. God! How long before they figure out how ridiculous this sounds?" It was so loud, in fact, my head started to pound later, compounded by the four or five hours of sleep I got the night before. To put it mildly, I was not receptive to this glitch in the presentation.

As Tom began speaking, I became rather preoccupied with his eyes. They were narrow, almost reptilian, creating a rather strange and enigmatic look. I wasn't sure how to read them. I would later identify him to a fellow disaffected participant as "the evil Captain Kirk" from the original Star Trek series episode, Mirror, Mirror (Bixby, 1967), in which Kirk and his landing party are mistakenly switched with their doubles from a parallel universe. The "evil" Kirk had on heavy eyeliner which accentuated his frenzied eyes. This Kirk was base, hostile, savage and thoroughly unlikable. My projection of this association onto Tom resurfaced periodically during the program.

Tom began to lecture, again too loud for my sensitive ears: "THE FORUM IS DESIGNED TO BE AN INQUIRY INTO WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN. WHAT WE WILL DO IN THE NEXT FEW DAYS IS MAKE SOME DISTINCTIONS. THE FIRST DISTINCTION IS LISTENING. YOU DON'T

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"Distinction" is a Landmark term. The closest term to "distinction" is "concept." A distinction is a type of concept, but it is also a recognition one makes in discovering something about oneself. If I distinguish something about myself in Landmark courses, that thing I learned was not "distinct" prior to "making the distinction." An example used at Landmark introductions is that if I know nothing about the inner workings of a computer, I don't have the "distinctions" that a computer expert would. If I looked into a computer, I would see wires and other electronic-looking components. A computer expert, however, would have the distinctions necessary to understand how a computer works (i.e., hard drive, power supply, video card, USB ports, etc.). Distinctions in
LISTEN. IN FACT, YOU'RE NOT LISTENING NOW. YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT LISTENING IS. YOU THINK YOU KNOW WHAT LISTENING IS, BUT WHAT YOU THINK LISTENING IS, IS JUST YOUR CONVERSATION ABOUT WHAT I AM SAYING...THAT'S NOT LISTENING."

Tom spoke more about listening. Lydia, a woman I met at my Introduction to the Forum, raised her hand and was called upon. I later learned Lydia was a successful mortgage broker who drove a Mercedes and had studied Asian religions, particularly Buddhism. Having studied Buddhism in college, I felt we had some compatibility. Lydia protested, "But I listen to people and everyone I come into contact with. I see them and listen to them as the person they are and not my preconception or stereotype of who I think they are."

Tom laughed mockingly as he turned his back on Lydia and said, "Stop fooling yourself!"

I was both shocked and amused. I had to laugh. This was a rather audacious statement, considering he didn't know Lydia. How could he be so sure? It was a bit strange, I thought, that the leader of a course on relationships and personal effectiveness would so obviously make fun of one of the participants. This is not the kind of thing I'd expect from a classroom setting.

The conversation on listening continued for quite a while, and I was getting a little bored. The basic idea was that we have an "always/already way of listening," an internal monologue that accompanies the physical act of listening. This way of listening creates a frame through which we perceive our world. The

Landmark courses describe how human beings are designed. The current description of the Landmark Forum covers a few of a Landmark's major distinctions.
material seemed very familiar to me, especially since I study communication. I kept wondering, “When are they going to tell me something I don’t already know?”

After more talk on listening, Tom moved onto the next distinction. "THE NEXT DISTINCTION IS BETWEEN 'WHAT HAPPENED' AND 'YOUR INTERPRETATION OF WHAT HAPPENED.'" Tom wrote this distinction on the center board, drawing a circle around each. This was also for me a very mundane concept. The idea, as I understood it, is that humans don’t access reality except through language, and it is by using language that we form our understanding of what happens. What we perceive to be happening therefore is not what actually happens, but is rather our symbolic construction that arises in response to what happens. Intellectuals have names for it: symbolic interactionism, social constructionism. Ho hum. I was beginning to worry that I was "beyond it all," and that the material was too familiar for me to receive benefit.

Tom elaborated further on the distinction. I tried hard to listen, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I had heard it all before.

Tom left the podium while we were supposed to be speaking with the people next to us about what we thought about our own listening. In the Forum, this is called "sharing with your partner." The gentleman who had been sitting next to me had actually already quit the course (within the first two hours), so I was sitting without a partner. (The Forum leader had given participants a few opportunities to bail and still get their money back.) I took this opportunity to go to
the bathroom (not having the “Railwayman’s Friend” at my disposal). On the way, I asked the "maitre d’" if he could turn the volume down on the PA. He said he would. In the bathroom, there was the Forum leader, washing up. I patted him on the shoulder and smiled. I'm not sure why, except it was probably to suggest some acceptance of him and of what he was doing as well as an attempt to win his approval. (Later, I felt a little silly having done this.) He looked at me, nodded and left. I did my business and returned to the room.

The next distinction perked me up, as it seemed at the time to be new to me and have more personal relevance. On the chalkboard, Tom wrote the following equation:

BEING LATE BUT HAVING A GOOD REASON ≠ BEING ON TIME

After writing this equation, he read it to us. Apparently they did in fact turn the speaker volume down, and his voice, though still a little too loud, was a more tolerable decibel: "Being late but having a good reason is not the same as being on time. I know for many of you it seems like the same thing, but it's not. For example, it is very important to be on time for all sessions of the Forum or it will be less effective for you. If you miss any part of the Forum, we will not be responsible for your not getting the maximum benefit out of it."

This made me chuckle. I myself had been slightly late and felt like I had a good reason (traffic was very bad in the driveway to the hotel parking lot). I snickered. Then I laughed. And then I couldn't stop laughing. A revelation hit me like a sack of potatoes: This is so true! How many times in my life have I failed to fulfill a responsibility or promise, but considered it okay because I had a "good
reason" for not doing so? Having that good reason wasn't the same thing, but in
my mind, I treated it as though it was!

Tom continued with a short lecture on "integrity." He spoke a little louder
this time. "IF YOU DON'T DO WHAT YOU SAY YOU'LL DO, THEN IN THAT
SITUATION, YOU HAVE NO INTEGRITY. AND IF YOU HAVE NO INTEGRITY,
WHO ARE YOU?" He paused. "NOT ONLY ARE YOU A PERSON WITHOUT
INTEGRITY, YOU'RE HARDLY A PERSON AT ALL. YOU DON'T EVEN EXIST
IF YOU ARE NOT YOUR WORD!"

I started to dwell on this. "Wow! Integrity—what a concept!" It suddenly hit
me how little integrity ever came up in my conversations, in political discourse, or
on TV news or dramas. Or if it did, it had more to do with other people's lack of
integrity—never my own. I began to reflect on my own life and how often I felt let
down by others who didn't follow through on their commitments (to me, that is).
But I couldn't count the number of times I agreed to do something and then didn't
deliver. It was embarrassing. I became intrigued at the thoughts going through
my mind: "Maybe this Forum will work out, after all!"

Later in the evening, when I was getting really tired of sitting, Tom
introduced another distinction, "rackets." A racket was defined as: a fixed way of
being coupled with a persistent complaint. Rackets are a way we justify
ourselves in our complaints. Rackets include meager payoffs such as: I get to be
right and make others wrong, I validate myself and invalidate others, I get to
dominate others and avoid domination, I win and you lose. The costs of rackets

8 As discussed in Chapter Two, Landmark's ideas borrow from previous work. For example,
"rackets" may have derived from Berne (1964).
are far more substantial, such as losses of: love and affinity with others, health and vitality, satisfaction, self-fulfillment, and self-expression. Rackets impede our ability to accomplish goals and connect with others.

I thought about my rackets.

My complaints often focus on the faults of myself and others. In my case, my persistent state of being was disappointment and disengagement accompanied by the complaint that I and others around me weren't "good enough." "Disappointment haunted all my dreams," as The Monkees once sang (Diamond, 1967). I tried to have a good time and enjoy my life, but it was trying in the face of a general attitude of disappointment toward the world. Nothing lived up to my expectations. Yes, this was a definite pattern in my relationships, particularly with my male friendships. Apart from a very few, guys almost invariably did something unreliable or untrustworthy that would result in my breaking off the friendship. Was it me? Was it them? I couldn't figure it out. The first day's session ended with techniques to "disappear" headaches, tiredness, and other discomforts. It worked for the people who participated in the exercise, but it didn't work for me. And I was sick of sitting in that fucking chair.

When I arrived home, I was very tired and in a somewhat agitated state. "What had I gotten myself into?" I thought to myself. I'm spending a whole weekend doing this?

I phoned James to tell him about my day.

"They're talking about stuff I know already. It just seems like a waste of time."
“Well, have you wasted a weekend’s worth of time before?”

His question took me aback. I laughed, “Well, yeah.”

“So, what’s the worst thing? You’ll just waste another weekend doing this instead of what you usually do.”

That made sense to me.

"Just hang in there," was James' suggestion. "What you're experiencing is you. What's coming up for you now is the way you react to things."

"Hmmm," I thought. "I can see that." I said.

I thought about my rackets again. I told James my major racket about being disappointed a lot.

"See," he replied, "this is your racket. You're finding fault with the Forum already even though it's not over, and you're not happy with it. This is your racket!"

I cocked my head. "Huh. I see what you mean. Yeah, I'm criticizing how it's going and I'm disappointed with it. And I do that a lot!" I began to see that this was perhaps the dominant narrative of my life. It wasn’t that the Landmark Forum cannot be criticized—like anything else, it can be criticized. Rather, what I began to see is that I was the source of the criticism, and that my critical remarks are my creation, and not intrinsic to the Landmark Forum. This insight was making me feel a little strange, but better, since I had learned something about myself.

"So what do I do with that?" I asked.
James recalled that he too had been irritated the first day and was not happy with the way it was going. "I did the same thing the first day. Trust me, it'll get better. Just hang in there. You're right where you ought to be."

I hung up the phone and had given up on the idea of not returning to the Forum. I thought more about rackets and how they seemed to follow the logic of social construction. Berger and Luckmann (1967) write that we construct our reality through communication and that people behave as though symbol systems created through communication are "real" or "true," instead of being "myths of reality." These symbol systems in turn produce real consequences. I eventually came to understand that rackets are constructed in our minds through language and are reenacted in our behavior and in conversation with others. A consensus of "what is real" is often generated by rackets, and this consensus limits possibilities for people, often depriving them of vitality and satisfaction.

Friends and colleagues play an important role in maintaining rackets. According to Steve Zaffron, LEC Vice President of Development,

Friends become those who are willing to agree with your persistent complaints. They don't do that for free. What do you pay them back with? You have to agree with theirs. We have these little conspiracies. You let me run my racket and I'll let you run yours. You commiserate with me and I'll commiserate with you. Those are your good friends. (Wruck and Eastley, 1997, p. 18)

By contrast, as I was to later learn, people who do the Forum encourage other participants to give up their rackets, rather than participate in maintaining them.

As homework, we were assigned to write a letter that night to someone telling them what we intended to accomplish in the Forum, what we were
accomplishing, and what we planned to do the rest of the time. Here is the letter I wrote:

Dear James,

I came to the Landmark Forum to accomplish a few important goals. I wanted to live my life more fully and to improve my personal and professional relationships with others. Namely, I wanted to widen my social circle and enhance my interactions with the faculty in the department.

What I am actually accomplishing is I'm trying to better understand my "rackets" and the limitations I am imposing on myself and my relationships. I'm seeing that my response to how the Forum is going is unexpectedly paralleling my rackets with my personal and professional relationships. To be specific, I find fault or criticize what's going on in the Forum, i.e., the way the Forum is facilitated, the way the leader is treating participants. What I am discovering is that the act of criticizing the way things are going is a way I give myself an "out" from being fully present and directs attention away from myself (thereby relinquishing responsibility for making this experience benefit me) and instead, focuses it on the Forum itself. I am beginning to understand that this act of criticizing others (scapegoating) justifies my own irresponsibility. Poor me!

I plan to use the Landmark Forum to make more connections like these so that I will want to "get off it," as Tom says. In this way, I will diminish the hold my rackets have on me so that I will be oriented more toward productive possibilities than unproductive rationalizations. My goal therefore continues to be to live life more fully and to improve my relationships, only now I have a clearer sense of how I will achieve that goal.

I look forward to speaking with you more about this.

Take care,
Patrick

I read the letter aloud the next morning, as did a number of others. (This was the first time I spoke in front of everyone, and I was nervous.) Many letters were quite moving, but one letter in particular stood out. Hernando, a Latino gentleman, read a letter he wrote to his wife whom he had been taking for
granted. His English was clear, however, he spoke in a rather heavy accent I found very charming. "I have not been there for you because I have been too busy seeing only my own problems. Please forgive me. I pledge I will be a better husband. I love you very much."

Hernando stirred a number of feelings in me: regret, sadness, grief, all in reference to my romantic partner. I had also taken her for granted. It was not so much the content of his letter that stuck out, however, but the emotion. The love he showed, the depth of feeling, the longing for connection, the regret, all these were expressed with such passion and sincerity, it almost made me cry. I began to consider the letter I wrote rather paltry compared to his. How cold and detached my letter seemed in contrast to his!

After we finished our letters, Tom drew a tennis court and stadium on the chalkboard and made an analogy to introduce another distinction. "You may have noticed that some letters were different than others. The next distinction is 'on the court' and 'off the court.' Some of you are on the court and some of you are off the court." He drew two stick figures on opposite ends of the court. "When you're playing tennis, you're on the court, running around, hitting the ball, stopping, leaping, stretching." He then drew many circles representing heads of people in the stands of the stadium. "When you're off the court, in the stands, you are observing the game. You will get more out of the Forum if you're on the court."

Up until that moment, I had for much of the time been off the court, or to be more precise, in the commentator's booth, describing and criticizing “the action down below.” Only there was no "down below," it was all me and my
perception of what was happening. What was happening was not “the Forum” so much as my "already always listening," the habitual way I listen to others and process information. And yet this was the Forum. There was no Forum apart from my experience of it. As Derrida (1974) might say, "there is no 'outside' the Forum."

I reread my letter to myself. It seemed very "intellectual" and off the court. I began to "get something": I was distancing myself from the Forum by being critical of it. I was not applying what I heard to my own life. The only emotions I felt were anger, irritation, and disappointment. In the next 24 hours, the situation would dramatically change.

Tom began the next distinction:

“What we're going to do now is have a conversation called ‘completing the past.’

“Something happened when you were growing up, something you didn't like. You made it mean something, and you “checked out.” For many of you, this occurred with the people in your first relationships, those with your caregivers, and for many of you, this was your parents. They did something, and you made them wrong, and since then, you didn't actively participate in the relationship. You checked out."

I immediately started thinking about a story my mother told me.

My father rejoined the Navy around the time I was born, "to save the marriage," he once confessed to me and a girlfriend one holiday. A few years later, my mother, who had not been working, took a full-time job at the local
newspaper. So, at age four, for the first time, I was not staying at home with my mother, and, with an absent father, getting dropped off at what we now call “day care” was more than I could handle. "When I started to work at the newspaper," my mother said, "you were about four years old. I took you to Candy Cane Playschool and on the first few mornings, you would cry, cry, cry. I felt so bad that I didn't want to leave, but the folks there were saying, 'He'll be alright in a little while.' So I left, and you were still crying, but they said that you stopped after awhile.'"

I began to interpret this incident as the time when I "checked out" of my relationship with my parents. After being virtually fatherless and then, it seemed, motherless, my little four year-old brain concluded that my parents could not be trusted. From that point forward, I never felt comfortable sharing myself with them. (That pattern continued until the Landmark Forum.)

One example of this lack of trust stood out in particular. The summer before beginning high school, my girlfriend had broken up with me. I felt I had no one to talk to. I was lonely, depressed, and feeling desperate for a period of a few months. One weekday, I was home alone and, overcome with grief over my situation, I started crying. I cried so loud, I turned up the stereo volume to drown out my moans and screams. All of a sudden, my mother came into the room (I did not hear her arriving home for lunch) and wondered what was wrong. I couldn't tell her. I couldn't tell her that I was desperately lonely and had no friends. So, there I was, feeling like I wanted to die rather than tolerate the pain or move past it, and I couldn't tell my mother what was going on.
"Man," I thought to myself, "I must have checked out a long time ago."

"Until you complete the past with your parents," Tom continued, "all of your relationships will be affected by that relationship you checked out of. Completing the past means to clean up any messes that were made in the past with your parents. It means being 100% forgiving of anyone you think has wronged you. And to the extent that you don't forgive your parents 100%, you will behave toward your relationships as though they were your parents who wronged you."

"Oh, no," a little voice said in the back of my mind. The one thing I was hoping to avoid reared its ugly head: my father's death. My father was an alcoholic and was rarely around except on weekends, when he sat in front of the TV all day watching sports, yelling and cursing at the referees. I grew up hating my father for not being around, for being mean-spirited and critical, and for yelling at stupid shit. Growing up at home, I was never close to him. I can recall doing two “father and son” activities with him my entire life: going fishing (once) and to the police firing range (once). The relationship for me consisted of fear, anger, and hatred.

"Now I want you to turn to your partner and talk about a part of your past you might complete and how it's affecting your current relationships."

I turned to my partner, Anne, who was in her early fifties. Anne had done the Forum once before. She was "reviewing" it, in Landmark’s terminology. "My father died this year and I’ve been in therapy. It's helped pretty much, and I can see that I'm projecting my relationship with him onto the male members of the
faculty in my department. But I don't really want to deal with this here. I think my therapy can take care of that." I was resisting. My big fear going into the Forum was peeking through. "I'm not going to deal with this here," I reassured myself.

"Well," said Anne, "therapy is good, but if you address your father issue here, it will accelerate the process."

I thought about it.

At the end of the night, Tom gave us our homework instructions. Among them was to write a letter to someone we needed to "complete" with. He said that in the letter we should be generous, and that on a generosity scale of one to ten, we should be a ten.

I decided to write a letter to my father. I wept as I wrote it and tried my best to be a "ten" in generosity. The next day I knew we would be asked to share our letters. I had decided to face my fear and volunteer to read my letter. If I cried, I would not have been the only one (or the only man), and so what? This was important enough to work through. "If I cry, I cry. Big fucking deal," I said to myself.

As anticipated, the next morning we shared our letters. A young woman sitting next to me read hers, then I read mine. I stood up at the microphone and, in front of 150 people, I began reading:

Dear Dad,

I am very grateful that we were able to be friendly and loving before you died, but I know that things are not complete between you and me. I have been holding onto my bitterness and alienation even after your death. I know this because I am still acting out my disappointment toward our relationship with the people I know personally and professionally. I'm
writing you this letter because I want to make peace with you and so that I can move on and achieve the success and happiness I long for.

Since I started the Landmark Forum, I have gained some clarity into why I have been so unhappy these past few years. You see, I have been projecting my incomplete relationship with you onto my friends and particularly the faculty in my department. They have done things like been overly harsh in their criticism or have not returned papers and I have more or less shut them out. Their actions have hurt me in the same ways I was hurt by your meanness and unavailability. I have been using my disappointment in them as an excuse to be less intimate, less successful, and less happy than I could be.

As I grew up, you were not around because you were in the Navy or working a lot or just not into being a father. I was hurt by your absence and needed your love and support, although I didn't know it at the time because I was so busy hating you for your unavailability and for the effects of your alcoholism. I don't blame you for not being around. I myself, at thirty-six, am still not ready to take on the responsibility of children and it looks like I may never have any kids of my own. Being a father is an awesome responsibility, and even if we were not close, I am grateful that you worked so hard to support your family and am very proud that you were able to make a living in spite of your drinking problem.

I want you to know that I do not blame you for the way I am, nor do I blame you for your alcoholism. Now that I am an adult I am much more compassionate, wise and understanding toward you than I was when I was living at home. The pressures of graduate school at times are for me unbearable, but when I think…

All of a sudden, a huge rush of sadness rose up from my stomach and came out of my mouth as a sob. I started crying—hard—making it difficult to continue reading. Tom reached over to the box of tissues on his table, but I raised my hand to stop him, bending down to grab a tissue I had stowed in my sock. "I came prepared," I joked in a snuffly voice. I blew my nose and continued reading:

…but when I think what you must have gone through at Pearl Harbor, nothing I have felt could compare to the horror of that experience. If this is what pushed you to drink too much (or even if it isn't), I want you to know that I love you for the person you were and I will remember you with love.
Again, I started sobbing. This time they were deep, painful, liberating sobs of grief, sadness, and regret. I was so overcome, I had to stop reading. I stood there crying for what seemed like several moments. Time stopped. In the background, I could hear several others crying and blowing their noses. (Later, I was told by the Landmark assistant who handed out tissues that she started crying herself and had to ask someone else to pass them out.) I cried some more, and when I felt I could, I continued.

I don't remember when, I think it was very early on (like first grade), but I "checked out" of our relationship and never treated you with any respect or kindness or love. I know this action contributed a great deal to our fighting, and it must have hurt your feelings, although you never expressed this as such. We fought about trivial matters, but it was not the content level of our meanings over which we fought. Rather it was our unsatisfying relationship that entangled us in those horrible fights. Every angry word and deed I directed to you was out of pain. I hope you will forgive me for the things I did to cause you unhappiness, checking out, rebelling, the whole punk rock thing, and whatever else.

At "the whole punk rock thing," muted giggles chirped through the room.

You were a remarkable, intelligent, talented, and courageous man. Your record four front-page stories [at the Oklahoma City newspaper where he worked] lives in my memory. I was always impressed at your sense of the epic sweep of history. Your photos impressed me. And when I think about how you survived that terrible bout with cancer, and the stroke, I wonder how I could ever muster the courage to stay alive in the face of such horrible physical maladies.

Again, I cried, this time louder and harder than previously. I thought of my father, and how sad his life was, how unhappy he must have been, and what a rough time of it he had. Here I was in graduate school, not setting any records or winning awards, but I was becoming a "professional," whatever that meant. My
troubles paled by comparison. I blew my nose yet again and read the rest of my letter:

I only wish I had been able to say more about this to you when you were alive. I was too much inside my own pain to notice or care, and I hope you will forgive me for this.

Thank you for giving me my life, your smarts, your eye for composition and your corny and ironic sense of humor. I am eternally grateful to you. I hope you are happy wherever you are right now, and that we might be able to share the stories of our lives with each other sometime out there in the Great Unknown.

I love you very much and I miss you.

Your son, Patrick

I ended the letter, and as customary when anyone finishes sharing, the participants clapped to show their support. Their applause was loud and strong, and it lasted several moments. I returned to my chair to comforting glances and caring words.

As I sat in my chair, I had an unforgettable experience. I felt a huge relief. It was as though the weight of the world had been lifted off my shoulders. Things around me looked brighter. My head felt clear (and not just from the nose blowing!). A sense of joy had begun to take root. What had happened?

By reading the letter, I had unburdened myself from the grudge I had held against my father and had been projecting onto so many of my relationships, past and present. All of a sudden, I felt alive, seemingly for the first time. It was remarkable. As the day progressed, I felt this sense of joy and of being alive more fully than I can ever remember feeling. I had checked out when I was five, but now I was back. I thought of George Costanza from Seinfeld (David, 1990):
"I'm back, baby! I'm back!" This joy pervaded the rest of the day, until the evening, when my emotions again went on a rollercoaster ride.

On Sunday evening of the Forum, previous graduates are invited to attend the session. Forum participants introduced their guests, who are generally the people who first told them about the Forum. There were parents, brothers, sisters, other relatives, wives, ex-wives, husbands, ex-husbands, partners, ex-partners, friends, employers, and employees, all of whom came to support their loved ones that night. During these introductions, guests and participants expressed their love and concern for each other. Their words were so sincere and powerful, I was overwhelmed by the experience. Never had I been in a room with so much love and connection between people. The closest I had come was at a Unity Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where there was a lot of good feeling. But here it was much stronger. The love in the room was palpable. I could feel it racing through my body. There was electricity in the air.

That evening, I felt several emotional swings from the peak of happiness to the depths of sadness. I was elated to see people so intimately related and it was so beautiful, I began crying. Several times I started laughing and then I would cry. Laugh, then cry. Laugh, then cry. "Why am I crying?" I asked myself. Then I realized, "This is the kind of connection to others I have been missing most of my life. I never knew such connection was possible! These people are so lucky to have others in their lives they feel so close to." Then it dawned on me: "I could have this kind of intimacy if I let go of the past and deal with people on their
own terms, and not as reflections of my parents. When I stop being a victim and reclaim the power to create my life, my relationships will be more joyful.”

Postscript

Nine years later, I continue to participate in personal development programs offered by Landmark Education Corporation. The Landmark Forum and all subsequent programs I took had a very positive impact on my life: I made more friends, became more active, took on more responsibilities, made more money, returned to doing volunteer work, experienced less stress, and got much closer to my family. In addition to my personal development, I saw possibilities for research into how particular approaches to communication could have the power to transform people’s lives. Landmark Education is a particularly intriguing organization to examine because of the way it recognizes the role language and communication play in the constitution of “reality”:

DISTINGUISHING OURSELVES AND OUR WORLD THROUGH LANGUAGE: We primarily exist in a world that arises in and is constituted by language. While we come to think of ourselves, our lives, the personalities we develop and the reality we know as set and fixed, The Forum proposes that our world and the reality we know is largely malleable and can actually be created and altered through language. (Rosenberg, 1998, p. 5)

Since 1997, I have participated in the following courses:

- The Landmark Forum (including two reviews)
- The Landmark Advanced Course (including one review)
- The Self-Expression and Leadership Program
- Numerous Landmark Seminars: Accomplishment, The Landmark Forum in Action, Breakthroughs, Commitment, Integrity, Living Passionately, Relationships, Excellence, Causing the Miraculous, Being Extraordinary, Effectiveness, Velocity, Sex and Intimacy, Money, and Beyond Fitness (I reviewed several of them)
- Communication: Access to Power
- Communication: Performance and Power
The Introduction Leaders Program (as a participant and as a coach twice)  
Wisdom Unlimited (as a participant and coach)

Adding up the amount for the courses I’ve taken over the past nine years, I estimate I have spent around $5000. I derived significant value from each of these courses, and they were well worth the money. I once took a three-month Landmark “sabbatical,” but began to see that when I was not in a course, I did not operate to my potential as a person and as a professional: I was not as cheerful, more easily upset, tended to hold grudges and have interpersonal conflicts, and in general was not as good of a person as I could be. During a two-week interval between seminar sessions, I came to understand the function these courses played in my life: It was not about “fixing” me once and for all; rather, the courses provide an opportunity and a structure for ongoing growth and development. Each course session serves as a type of “ontological cleansing,” perhaps not that different from those attending a church. Bottom line: The courses help me keep my head on straight.

There is a rather simple reason for this: Landmark courses include course assignments that get me to do things I would not otherwise think to do or be motivated to do on my own. Table 2 shows an assignment from the second session of *The Landmark Forum in Action* seminar series. Landmark seminars consist of ten three-hour sessions spread out over approximately three months. Their cost is around $100. Seminar series are opportunities to put into everyday practice lessons learned from the course sessions. This particular series is a ten-
session “review” of the Landmark Forum. The assignment in Table 2 employs terminology which I define below.

Table 3

The Landmark Forum in Action: Session #2 Assignment

THE LANDMARK FORUM IN ACTION
SESSION #2 – ASSIGNMENT

• In tonight’s session, we spoke about going beyond the reasons that stop you from fully participating in life. Between now and next session, practice going beyond your reasons and take action in areas where you have previously been constrained.

  ➢ Take at least one unreasonable action every day between now and the next session. As we spoke about in the seminar, what you may have to go beyond is your own resignation and cynicism, and your concern for looking good and avoiding looking bad.

  ➢ Here are some examples of unreasonable actions you could take: taking an action in an area where you have been procrastinating, cleaning up a mess with someone that you haven’t been willing to clean up, or getting in communication with someone with whom you have been unwilling to be in communication.

• As we set up in the seminar, have enrollment conversations with three people. 9

  ➢ In these conversations, share what you saw regarding being inauthentic, the impact that has had on your life, and the new possibility you invented. Share in a way that leaves people moved, touched and inspired.

  ➢ Come back ready to share about breakthroughs and breakdowns you had in these conversations.

BONUS: Be unreasonable, go beyond just doing the assignment. Have the enrollment conversation with more than three people.

RECOMMENDATION: Between now and next session, be in communication with the people in your group.

INTENTION OF THE SERIES:
To leave you able to deal powerfully with each and every aspect of your life

INTENTION OF TONIGHT’S SESSION:
To free you from the constraints of a reasonable life, leaving you causing results beyond what’s predictable

9 While “enrollment” is discussed below, I note here that “enrollment” conversations are not limited to conversations about Landmark Education or its courses, but, as discussed below, are specifically conversations that move, touch, and inspire.
**Being Unreasonable**

In contrast to conventional usage, being *unreasonable* does not mean being irrational or difficult. It means being a particular way for no other reason than being that way or acting for the sake of acting. We have plenty of reasons we use to keep us from participating fully in life: “I don’t have time,” “I cannot make a difference,” “Other people won’t let me,” and so on. “Reasons” in this context are really excuses or rationalizations. In the seminar series, participants are invited to consider that what drives human beings is our concern for “looking good” and “avoiding looking bad.” We use these “reasons” to keep us from fully engaging in life.

It is important to understand that there is nothing wrong with being “reasonable.” Being reasonable is what people expect others to be. Being reasonable is not wrong, it is simply an *ordinary* way of being. Landmark courses encourage people to be *extraordinary*.

The examples of unreasonable actions in Table 2 are things I would not necessarily do on my own unless I was encouraged to do so from someone else. My tendency would be to be *reasonable*. Being instructed to take such actions helps set that action in motion. It does not guarantee it. If I am to keep my promises in the seminar, however (one of which is to do all course assignments), then keeping my word creates a double opportunity: (1) I keep my word (and therefore have integrity in that area—in Landmark courses, integrity is the power of honoring one’s word), and (2) I do something that will make my life better.
Enrollment

Like most terms in Landmark’s vocabulary, enrollment is not opposed to the standard usage of the term. Instead, it takes a component of the standard usage and expands that aspect. (One might say it does so metonymically, making the part stand for the whole). When someone enrols in a program (e.g., college courses, a health insurance plan, etc.), they are moved to action in regard to that program. Landmark defines enrollment as “causing a new possibility to be present for another such that they are touched, moved and inspired by that possibility.”

Landmark’s use of enrollment has a rigor that standard usage does not. For example, in standard usage, there is no difference between the act of being moved to take action and actually taking action. Landmark, by contrast, distinguishes between enrollment and registration. To enroll someone in the Landmark sense means to have a conversation that leaves others moved, touched, and inspired. Registration results in someone taking action. “Enrollment” in this assignment would mean that I would share how I have been inauthentic with others or myself.

Inauthenticity

The notion of authenticity is philosophically complex. Landmark’s usage simplifies this complexity and makes it a practical issue. Rather than define what authenticity “is,” Landmark teaches that when we are being inauthentic, we experience “a loss of power, freedom, or full self-expression.” Thus, individuals themselves determine when they are being inauthentic.
When we feel a loss of power, we suffer. This loss of power is not “real,” however, it is symbolic; it is not based in physical survival. Rather, it is a product of a meaning-making process. When we are inauthentic, we are usually pretending to be a way that hides how we really feel about something. For example, let’s say I have an issue with a co-worker. I pretend and act “OK” about it, but the truth is, I’m seething with anger and resentment. That inauthentic way of being has an impact: I am unhappy, angry, feel frustrated, and am suppressed in my communication. Being authentic in Landmark parlance means being honest about one’s inauthentic ways of being.

What makes such losses of power inauthentic goes back to the notion that we construct our personal realities through communication. Landmark’s method distinguishes the meanings we make of our experiences that produce suffering. Once the constructed meaning is distinguished, a new, empowering meaning can take its place—one which we choose instead of a meaning that appears thrust upon us from “the outside” (i.e., circumstances and other people). Individuals and those around them suffer (or at least get short-changed) when someone feels a loss of power. In my view, then, Landmark’s methodology has the capacity to reduce unnecessary suffering, which opens possibilities for constructive action.

**Breakthrough**

A breakthrough is an unpredictable, non-incremental result. As in the Landmark Forum, I did not anticipate that I would come to peace with my father’s death and our troubled relationship. The effect of this breakthrough has
continued unabated since my Forum experience. Whenever I think about him, I remember him with love and generosity of spirit.

**Breakdown**

In Landmark terminology, a breakdown is not a “mental breakdown” or associated with some form of mental illness. A breakdown is a type of emotional upset, a situation where we don’t get what we want or are disappointed in a particular result. In this respect, everyone has breakdowns. Such breakdowns are usually accompanied by one or a combination of the following: (1) a thwarted intention, (2) an unfulfilled expectation, (3) or an undelivered communication. Landmark teaches that one can move past breakdowns by identifying which component is operating, and taking appropriate action.

**The Benefit of Course Assignments**

Landmark course assignments provide an impetus for overcoming resistance to doing things that make my life work. The seminar itself provides a structure to fulfill my quest to live an extraordinary life. Landmark courses are workshops in which participants’ lives become laboratories for growth and development. While some people may attend courses like others go to church (and many do both), the primary differences between Landmark Education and a place of worship are: (1) Landmark does not deal with religious issues (i.e., the existence of God, the holiness of historical figures, etc.), and (2) while places of worship do teach congregants about the importance of living life according to a set of values and offer opportunities to consider how one might live a life consistent with those values, Landmark courses provide course assignments that
instruct participants to take action that may help make their lives work or create breakthroughs in various areas of their lives.

Asking What If?

I have encountered no more widely divergent accounts of Landmark Education than Con-text and my personal experience. While the dominant moods of Con-text are those of fear, suspicion, and paranoia, my experience with Landmark has had the impact of not only reducing these moods, but of promoting positive values like communication, understanding, intimacy, openness, awareness, and compassion. As we shall see, this divergence between Con-text and my experience is not restricted to this Criminal Intent episode.

My positive experience with Landmark makes me wonder: If I have learned so much about myself and have become a better person in the process, what if everyone on the planet were exposed to this kind of learning? What might the impact be? These are the questions that inspired this study.
A fundamental principle of Landmark Education's work is that people—and the communities, organizations, and institutions with which they are engaged—have the possibility not only of success, but also of fulfillment and greatness. The ideas, insights, and distinctions on which Landmark's programs are based make Landmark a leader and innovator in the field of training and development.

(Landmark Education Corporation, 2007e)

CHAPTER TWO

LANDMARK EDUCATION: CAPITALIST ANOMALY?

Dissecting My Pet Frog

My nine years of experience with the courses and people of Landmark Education stand in stark contrast to Landmark's creepy fictional portrayal in Criminal Intent's Con-text (Balcer, et al., 2003). My experience with Landmark has seen a reduction in what Con-text promotes: fear, suspicion, and paranoia. Unhindered by Con-text's unflattering portrayal when I first did the Landmark Forum—and thoroughly intrigued and inspired by how much I learned from Landmark Education about myself, communication, and relationships—I set out to learn more, possibly turning my personal interest into a dissertation topic.

"Patrick’s dissecting his pet frog," a professor was overheard to say. I laughed when I first heard this, but I'm not sure I grasped the full implications of this wise, pithy remark. Over time, however, its meaning became clearer, and I hesitated: "Am I sure I want to do this?" What's the phrase? There's no better way to kill a joke than to explain it.
Furthermore, I was cautioned by my dissertation committee about the potential to be uncritical toward Landmark given my obvious affinity for its work. In fact, my committee expressed a concern that this would become an advocacy piece and therefore be inappropriate for scholarly research. To avoid this, I would need to get “distance” from my own personal experience and broaden my perspective. Given my experience, this could prove a difficult task, indeed.

Would “getting distance” from my topic include learning something about Landmark Education that would turn me off? Or would researching a personal topic be like listening to my favorite song over and over and then getting tired of it? Turning my personal interest into a research study might result in losing a valuable source of personal growth, and that would be the biggest shame of all.

These were valid concerns, however, they are all fear-based. Perhaps the biggest fear of all was of failing. Could a research study be designed that would do justice to the topic? Was I up to the task? Would I be disappointed in the product?

What is missing from these concerns, however, is the possibility the project might express. It was obvious after doing the Landmark Forum that there is something unusual and extraordinary happening in Landmark culture. Eventually, these issues worked themselves out. Nine years after becoming a doctoral candidate, I am now writing up the project.

The current study explores possible implications of the work of Landmark Education. This chapter serves as a brief discussion to the colorful and interesting (if not controversial) Landmark Education Corporation. To offer some
background, this chapter: (1) describes Landmark Education Corporation, (2) discusses the precursor to the Landmark Forum, est, and its founder, Werner Erhard, and (3) elaborates on Erhard’s conceptual influences.

Background on Landmark Education Corporation

Basic Facts

Based in San Francisco, Landmark Education Corporation provides education and training in personal effectiveness. Landmark Education was founded on February 1, 1991 when Werner Erhard and Associates (a sole proprietorship owned by Erhard) sold its assets to its employees, who licensed the right to use its intellectual property and assumed some of its liabilities (Wruck and Eastley, 1997). Landmark Education was incorporated and is an employee-owned company. It is governed by a Board of Directors elected by current and former staff. No employee owns more than 3% of its stock.

The flagship program offered by Landmark Education is the Landmark Forum (described in Chapter One). “The Landmark Forum” (Landmark’s entry-level course) began as “The Forum,” a program of Werner Erhard and Associates, which was itself preceded by est. By the time Landmark Education was founded, over 750,000 people around the world had taken part in either est or The Forum (Wruck and Eastley, 1997). Landmark courses are now offered in seven languages and in 22 countries on every continent except Antarctica. In 2006, Landmark Education's revenue reached $86 million (Landmark Education Corporation, 2006b). The company employs over 450 people worldwide and has over 650 trained leaders. In addition to the Landmark Forum, Landmark
Education Corporation offers an extensive curriculum on wide-ranging topics (see Table 4). Many Landmark Education courses qualify for Continuing Education Units (CEUs). Landmark Education and its subsidiaries hold memberships in various professional associations and organizations, including: the American Society for Training and Development, the International Society for Performance Improvement, the American Management Association, International Association for Continuing Education and Training, and the Academy of Management (Landmark Education Corporation, 2006b).

Landmark Education also has a business consulting arm, Landmark Education Business Development (LEBD). (For a partial client list, see Table 5.) LEBD designs initiatives for organizations by construing them as networks of conversations, particularly the “background conversations” that impede organizational change. Landmark consultants seek to identify and transform these conversations, thereby transforming the organization’s culture. Logan (1998) describes the results LEBD achieved when BHP New Zealand Steel contracted them as consultants. LEBD designed a program customized to their particular needs. The results of this program were as follows:

The set of interventions in the organization produced impressive measurable results. According to BHP personnel, safety performance improved by 50%, key benchmark costs reduced from 15%-20%, return on capital increased by 50% and raw steel produced per employee rose by 20%. According to management of BHP New Zealand Steel, the workforce was also reduced by 25% in a positive, constructive, and cooperative manner. (p. 25)
Table 4

*Courses Offered by Landmark Education Corporation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Landmark Forum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Advanced Course</td>
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<td>The Landmark Seminar Program</td>
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<td>The Landmark Forum in Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breakthroughs—Living Outside the Box</td>
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<td>Commitment—The Pathway to Adventure</td>
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<td>Integrity—The Bottom Line</td>
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<td>Living Passionately—The Art and Mastery of Playing the Game of Life</td>
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<td>Relationships—The Basics of Love, Romance, and Partnership</td>
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<td>Excellence—In the Zone</td>
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<td>Creativity—Life by Design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Causing the Miraculous—A New Realm of Possibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being Extraordinary—The Art and Practice of Living from Possibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Producing Breakthrough Results—Part I: Effectiveness</td>
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<td>Producing Breakthrough Results—Part II: Velocity</td>
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<td>Sex and Intimacy—From Predicament to Possibility</td>
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<td>Money—From Concern to Freedom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beyond Fitness—A Breakthrough in Well-Being</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Self-Expression and Leadership Program</td>
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<td>The Landmark Communication Curriculum</td>
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<td>The Communication Course: Access to Power</td>
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<td>The Advanced Communication Course: The Power to Create</td>
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<td>The Wisdom Courses</td>
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<td>Wisdom Unlimited</td>
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<td>Partnership Explorations Course</td>
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<td>Power and Contribution Course</td>
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<td>Conference for Global Transformation</td>
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<td>Vacation Courses</td>
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<td>The Family Coaching Session</td>
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<td>Leadership and Assisting Programs</td>
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<td>The Assisting Program</td>
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<td>Introduction Leaders Program</td>
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<td>The Seminar Leaders Program</td>
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<td>The Team, Management, and Leadership Program</td>
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Table 5

Landmark Education Business Development: Partial Client List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apple Computer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baytown Refinery, Exxon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bellevue Hospital Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>BHP-Billiton (Australia, Chile, Peru)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glaxo Wellcome</td>
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<td>Guidant Corporation</td>
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<td>Johnson &amp; Johnson Pharmaceuticals (China)</td>
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<td>JP MorganChase</td>
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<td>Lockheed Martin Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Magma Copper Company</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marsh McLennan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mercedes Benz USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minera Escondida Ltda.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monsanto</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Zealand Steel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northern Indiana Public Service Company (NIPSCO)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northrop Grumman Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Panamco (Coca Cola Bottling Company, Brazil)</td>
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<td>Petrobras (Brazil)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reebok International</td>
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<td>SAP (Brazil)</td>
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<tr>
<td>State of Bahia (Brazil)</td>
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<tr>
<td>State of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telemar (Brazil)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNUM Insurance</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>U.S. Department of the Navy</td>
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Secular, Evangelical, Non-Profit

Given its global reach, broad course offerings, and foothold in the arena of corporate consulting, Landmark Education Corporation appears a rather unique business, perhaps even a capitalist non-sequitur. In this section, I discuss how Landmark Education appears to operate like a secular, evangelical, non-profit organization.
Secular

On one hand, the content of Landmark’s courses are secular humanist in that they promote the use of reason, compassion, scientific inquiry, ethics, justice, and equality. (While not always explicitly stated, this is apparent from my years of exposure to their courses.) No religion or religious tradition is favored. Nor is religion criticized, however, making Landmark Education seem a paragon of tolerance.¹ People of all faiths (and no faith) attend Landmark courses. In my Landmark experience, I have met participants who are Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindi, Wiccans, Buddhists, agnostics, and atheists. Although providing an unusual service—existential humanist education—Landmark Education delivers its programs to diverse populations around the globe. This transcultural applicability suggests the potential relevance of its curriculum to all people, which, in and of itself is quite remarkable, especially given the different religious, philosophical, and cultural orientations people bring to the training. This applicability also speaks to its potential to have a global impact (an idea I will explore in Chapter Six).

Evangelical

As much as the content of Landmark’s courses is secular in nature, Landmark’s worldwide expansion, in concert with its mission of global transformation,² also gives it an evangelical character. I choose this word very

¹ This is in contrast to some secular humanists, who sometimes disdain religion.
² See, e.g., the Landmark Education Corporation Charter (¶2, Appendix A, Figure 2): “Our mission is to have the power and magic of transformation alive and real for all people.” Also see Landmark’s “Our Vision for Serving Our Customers,” (Appendix B, Figure 3.)
carefully. If another sufficed, I would gladly use it, however, I believe it is
descriptive of at least one aspect of culture created by Landmark Education.

Strictly speaking, evangelism is defined in regard to spreading the Gospel
of Jesus. Clearly, this is not the “literal message” of Landmark’s courses. When I
say Landmark is “evangelical,” I mean the **communicative form** of sharing one’s
experience with the intent to transform the planet, not the **content** of its message
(when applied to Christian religion, for example, one might use the term
witnessing). Landmark Education may be seen as evangelical because it intends
to deliver its work to the largest number of people possible and to transform the
culture of human civilization. Take “Jesus” and “Gospel” out of the definition of
evangelical (that is, make it **secular** and substitute the **communicative form** of
sharing) and the outcome is something that is both secular and evangelical.

The ascription of “evangelism” as conventionally employed, stands in
relative opposition to secularism. Thus, the resulting semantic tension, while not
intended, is an outcome of the complex and contradictory nature of reality and

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3 Galanter (1990), below, uses the term “charismatic,” another term with religious connotations.
4 Using Burke’s (1984a) “perspective by incongruity” (pp. 308–311), one might wonder whether
virtually all multi-national corporations engage in a form of secular evangelism in that they
promote their commitment to global expansion. What distinguishes Landmark Education in this
regard, however, is that Landmark’s goal is to transform the planet and the way we operate as a
civilization. Landmark’s case is therefore not merely a case of market penetration, however, but
of transforming the structures and processes that maintain the current cultural, economic,
philosophical, and political paradigms. I do not believe this is the case with most corporations,
whose goal is not so much to transform the infrastructure and social systems on which they rely,
but to maintain the stasis of the systems to which they belong. In addition, it does not take much
imagination to see that one possible outcome of Landmark’s work could be to replace the world’s
profit-based economy with one that is more cooperative in nature (see Epilogue).
language. It therefore contributes to a description that is consistent with my personal observations and is not a priori determined as logically coherent.

**Non-Profit**

Lastly, Landmark Education operates similarly to a non-profit corporation. To date, no dividends have been paid to shareholders. Apart from operating costs, all Landmark profits have been put toward staff and overhead, in addition to opening more offices around the world. This means that, apart from salaries (of which the top figure is approximately $100,000 for Landmark Forum Leaders), no one at Landmark Education is “cashing in.”

**Anomaly**

Taken together, these characteristics make Landmark a rather anomalous capitalist enterprise. The anomalies do not end there, however. As discussed below, Landmark’s history and the conversations had about it are varied and span a love-hate continuum (although I believe the distribution leans heavily on the “love” side). Landmark’s origins and the controversies constructed around it also create an anomalous picture (more on the controversies in Chapters Three and Four).

*Werner Erhard and est*

Landmark Education’s historical roots may be found in Erhard Seminars Training or “est.” Examining est’s founder, Werner Erhard, is helpful to understanding how Landmark gets framed in public conversations.

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5 When I used the word “evangelical” to describe Landmark to long-term participants, they were dumbfounded.
Bartley’s (1976) biography charts the life of the est founder. Born Jack Rosenberg in Philadelphia on September 5, 1935, Erhard was the son of a Jewish father and Episcopalian mother. Erhard led a colorful and controversial life, and, according to Erhard himself, took the "low road to enlightenment." As a young man, he took an interest in yoga and had what he referred to as conversations with God. As a young adult, he sold cars under the name of Jack Frost. He had an extramarital love affair with a woman he eventually married, assumed a false identity, and led a double life. He left his wife and children and sold encyclopedias door to door. He educated himself and cites his primary influences as Zen Buddhism, Napoleon Hill, Maxwell Maltz, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers. In 1971, Erhard developed his own training, later known as est (which is both an acronym for Erhard Seminars Training and Latin for “it is”). Popularity for "the training" (as it eventually became known) spread quickly. In its first year, est expanded from San Francisco to Los Angeles, Aspen, and Hawaii. Erhard returned to see his family and asked for forgiveness. Eventually, his ex-wife and family began working for est.

Erhard’s “low road” is regularly cited in connection to est, not just for historical interest, it seems, but also as an attempt to undermine his credibility. While est/Landmark detractors may use Erhard’s past to discredit its work (i.e., that Erhard is a “flimflam man”), Landmark fans hold a contrary view. For example, those favorable to est or Landmark Education can easily see how

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6 It is interesting and perhaps exceptional, and possibly another instance of est’s/Landmark’s anomalous status is that its founder is so forthcoming about his shortcomings and did not hide such offbeat or “damning” details about his personal life from his biographer.
Erhard’s “checkered” past produced a training that exposes the phoniness of human beings—the ongoing inauthenticity of our communication and relationships. Erhard’s sketchy past allowed him to see deeply into human nature and find ways to transform himself and teach others the same.

Several accounts of est have been published. These accounts take different approaches, using narrative, nonfiction, or combinations of narrative and nonfiction. Frederick (1975) writes in a freewheeling lecture mode to convey the ideas he learned in est. Bry (1976) provides testimonials of people who have taken the training. Rhinehart (1976) describes the training in a storytelling style, showing the reader what happened at est, although the author remains distant and does not divulge what he learns from the experience. Hargrove (1976) also describes est in a narrative style that includes his own participant experience. Fenwick (1976) combines both personal narrative and analytic writing.

Using participant observation and interviews, Tipton (1982) examines the morality of the est training and its participants in terms of its belief systems, organizational structure, ethics, and tenets. His intention is to “become familiar with the shared language and activity through which its members appropriate a public ideology and communicate their private experience” (p. xv). Based on his experience and the interviews he conducted, Tipton defines est’s belief system as “psychologized monist individualism” and its ethic as “consequentialist.” To simplify, Tipton believes est sees the source of experience as the singular individual who relates to the world through particular psychological processes and makes choices based on the perceived consequences of those choices. (It
should be noted, however, Tipton recounts an est staffer objected to his categorization of est as consequentialist or individualistic.)

Accounts of est are colorful and lively. Since no notes or recording devices are allowed, all accounts are based on memory, and selected “facts” about the rigors of the training are in dispute. It is fairly well agreed upon, however, that est trainers did indeed yell at participants and call them “assholes.” There are other aspects of the training that may be neutrally described as “unusual.” These accounts make for fascinating reading for those interested in learning more about “the training.”

It must be pointed out, however, that the more striking elements of these descriptions may have limited relevance to the Landmark Forum, since it (and The Forum before it) are not the same courses and have changed with the times. Specifically, much of the weirdness of est has been deleted from subsequent Landmark Education programs. Faltermayer (1998, March 16) describes Landmark as a “kinder, gentler est,” which is perhaps a fair enough way to put it.

Of Puppets and Stories: Erhard’s Influences

As stated, three influences on Erhard are Maxwell Maltz, Abraham Maslow, and Carl Rogers. A brief glimpse at these writers provides insight into the conceptual foundations of est and Landmark Education.

Maltz's (1968) self-improvement book—Psycho-Cybernetics—was an early influence on Erhard. According to Maltz, "self image" is central to understanding human personality and human behavior. Using a cybernetic

7 For example, whether people were allowed to go to the bathroom except at breaks.
model, Maltz describes how the human brain and nervous system make up a "goal-striving mechanism," "a sort of built-in automatic guidance system which works for you as a 'success mechanism,' or against as a 'failure mechanism'" (p. ix). By changing one's self-image, according to Maltz, one can change one's personality and behavior. The new self-image increases an individual's capacity to achieve new successes not possible with the old self-image. Maltz provides exercises for readers designed to help them implement his self-image changing ideas. These exercises are designed to help readers discover their own "success mechanisms," "dehypnotize" themselves from false beliefs, acquire personality traits of successful persons, and transform crises into opportunities. One can see traces of Maltz's thinking in Landmark's curriculum, where participants see how their self-images limit their effectiveness, and in particular, the notion of the "strong suit" (formerly "winning formula"—see Chapter Three).

The Landmark Forum inquires into the nature of what it is to be human. Maslow's (1968) influence in this regard is clear, particularly in his notion that self-actualization is the highest need in humans' hierarchy of needs. Maslow develops his theory of the psyche in opposition to behaviorism and Freudian psychoanalysis, and their attendant philosophies of human nature. Both philosophies place humans at the mercy of conditions beyond their control and allow little room for transformation. This is not so with Maslow. According to Maslow, humans possess a biologically based "inner nature." This inner nature is essentially good. Basic human needs (according to Maslow: life, safety and security, affinity with and respect for others, love, self-respect, and
self-actualization) are either at least neutral and pre-moral, or at best "good."
Negative potentials for human behavior (destructiveness, sadism, cruelty, etc.)
are reactions to a state of unmet needs. As we shall see in his (1977) discussion
of *Politics 3* (see Chapter Six), Maslow postulates that when philosophies of
human nature change, large-scale changes occur in politics, economics, ethics
and values, and interpersonal relations. As with Maslow, a basic tenet of
Landmark's curriculum is that transforming a dominant philosophy that sees
humans as *powerless victims* into one that regards humans as *powerful agents*
creates the possibility of personal and global transformation. This transformation
can be achieved through communication (see Chapter Six).

Carl Rogers was another Erhard influence. Rogers (1967) noted that
traditional value orientations were collapsing and that this led to a concern over
the possibility that no universal, general or cross-cultural value orientations exist.
He argues that humans contain in their organisms a basis for valuing. When
people are aware of or are in touch with their valuing processes, they will act in
self-enhancing ways, and naturally come to value sincerity, independence,
self-direction, self-knowledge, social responsivity, and loving interpersonal
relationships (p. 28).[^8] Being open to one's "experiencing" is a self-enhancing
orientation Rogers believes promotes a "positive evolutionary process" (p. 28).
Landmark Education's courses are designed to encourage people to get in touch
with their valuing processes, being fully present to who they are. Becoming

[^8]: This assumption undergirds much work in the Human Potential Movement and while perhaps
unprovable and open to debate, it is nevertheless an *empowering* interpretation of human nature.
aware of oneself allows people to more greatly appreciate sincerity, independence, and love.

Among the more memorable quotations in Erhard’s biography is: "Until people are transformed, until they transcend their minds, they are simply puppets" (Bartley, 1976, p. 45). This quote refers to an unconscious adherence to that which one is unaware, whether it is one’s past or a political philosophy. This unconscious enslavement to prevailing masters and ideologies parallels work in the field of communication, in particular within narrative studies. In narrative studies, the equivalent of buying into the prevailing ideology is unreflectively participating in a "received" or "canonical" story (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Bochner, 1995). While not identical to story reframing, a resemblance between the two is worth noting. To illustrate, Jago (1996) narrates her experience of father absence and shows how accounts of one’s life become "canonical" stories through socialization. She describes the power of canonical stories of abandonment on her personal life and exemplifies the process of story reframing. Story reframing can free one up so as to minimize the tendency to project unresolved parental issues on contemporary relationships. Much of the work of Landmark Education entails recognizing or "distinguishing" one’s canonical stories to clip the puppet strings of the past and create a future based on what is possible.

Thus, three of Erhard’s influences—Maltz, Maslow, and Rogers—place Erhard’s work solidly in the human potential movement. Erhard used these influences (among others) to create Erhard Seminars Training, a training
intended to alter people’s perceptions of themselves, others (and life in general),
attain self-actualization, and thereby transform cultures.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the colorful and interesting (if not controversial)
Landmark Education by describing the corporation, est and Werner Erhard, and
elaborated on Erhard’s influences. I described Landmark as operating like a
secular, evangelical, non-profit enterprise. In this interpretation, Landmark
emerges as somewhat anomalous in our culture. This anomalousness, along
with the rather unconventional service it offers, results in particular
consequences in our contemporary culture, namely: Things that don’t easily fit
inside a ready-made label are often shuttled to the nearest familiar classification
(if not stereotype) for easy digestion. I believe this is what happens with
Landmark Education and therefore partly what makes it vulnerable to the kind of
attack it receives in *Criminal Intent’s Con-text*. The next chapter further
demonstrates this point through an analysis of another prominent public
conversation about Landmark Education.

\[\text{---------}\]
\[\text{9 Another vulnerability to this kind of attack is discussed in the Epilogue.}\]
CHAPTER THREE
A CYNICAL INTERPRETATION: RANKING TIME MAGAZINE’S
CONSTRUCTION OF CONTROVERSY

Chapter Two described Landmark Education Corporation as an anomaly in our capitalist culture and suggested that its anomalous character opens it up to being unfavorably depicted in public conversations. In this chapter, I examine a Time Magazine article (Faltermayer, 1998, March 16) that further demonstrates the consequences of its anomalousness. Time’s article in some ways mirrors the treatment GraceNote gets in Criminal Intent in that Landmark Education Corporation is (at least implicitly) portrayed as a cult, using thought reform methods, and engages in unethical business practices. This article, like Con-text, occupies a prominent place in the realm of public conversations. In 1998 (the year of the article’s publication), Time’s circulation reached 31 million readers in 210 countries (Cable News Network, 1998).

Even though this article is now almost ten years old, the themes I extract from it persist to the present day. These themes, while not dramatically depicted (as with Con-text), still exhibit levels of fear, suspicion, and paranoia toward Landmark Education. I have therefore selected this article for two reasons: (1) Time Magazine has a wide readership, and (2) the article contains charges discussed in the Prologue, and to that extent, may be considered a
“representative anecdote” (Burke, 1969a) of the kinds of negative public conversations about Landmark Education from the journalistic arena, as compared to the fictional Criminal Intent.

While numerous published accounts put Landmark’s work in a favorable light (Landmark Education Corporation, 2007d), there is also considerable “bad press,” mostly on the internet.¹ A review of media coverage and internet communications reveals that est and Landmark Education are considered by some as “controversial.” Reading such bad press is strange to me, since my own personal experience has been positive and fulfilling. In the Epilogue, I address social forces that may help account for this discrepancy. In this chapter, I address how such negative characterizations are constructed by means of various rhetorical moves.

The article examined here (Faltermayer, 1998, March 16) reports on Landmark Education. It is entitled The Best of est?—Werner Erhard’s legacy lives on in a kinder, gentler and lucrative version of his self-help seminars. In the article, the author: (1) reviews the history of est and Landmark Education; (2) contrasts est to Landmark’s courses; (3) describes the Landmark Forum and its “outreach” efforts; (4) provides observations from detractors, fans, and critics; (5) insinuates that because of the controversy associated with him, Erhard is behind

¹ See, e.g., Anonymous (1999, July): “Landmark Education destroyed my life—from the Forum to a psych ward”; for more anonymous negative testimonials, see Ross (2000b). These negative testimonials are also pervaded by fear, suspicion, paranoia, insult, and condescension.
the scenes pulling Landmark’s strings; \(^2\) and (6) discusses a Harvard Business School case study on Landmark Education Corporation.

To analyze the *Time* magazine article, I use Rank’s (1976) intensify/downplay schema, a framework he developed to show how persuasive claims are made. This schema attempts to show how a rhetor intensifies the weaknesses and downplays the strengths of the “opposing rhetor.” Weaknesses are intensified through the physical composition of the message, repeating certain ideas, and associating the rhetorical target with things already viewed negatively by audiences. Strengths are downplayed by omitting and diverting attention away from positive qualities and by using language to confuse the audience about the other’s position.

What follows, of course, is only one possible interpretation of the *Time* article. While the article is not entirely unfavorable, I construct what I consider the rhetor’s perspective in terms of a cynical interpretation of Landmark Education Corporation. Using Rank’s schema produces what may be referred to as a “background conversation” about Landmark Education. That is, applying the schema to the *Time* article allows me to see what seems to be implicitly expressed by the article, but never explicitly stated; or, if explicitly stated, the claims are made by intermediaries, not the article’s author. What are identified as

\(^2\) According to Landmark Education, Werner Erhard has never had an ownership interest in Landmark and has never had any involvement in the management of Landmark.
weaknesses and strengths do not exist in and of themselves, but are constructed as such by me through my reading of the *Time* article.³

The Best of *est*?

The title and subtitle define the article’s content by framing Landmark Education in terms of *est* founder Werner Erhard. As a question ("The Best of *est?*"), it raises another: “Even if Landmark represents the “best” of *est*, if *est* was no good, what difference does it make whether Landmark Education is ‘the best of *est*?’” Furthermore, the title suggests the article will be primarily about Landmark Education, especially since Werner Erhard—no slight intended—is rather “old news” and hardly relevant to what goes on today with Landmark Education. And yet, the article’s composition, association, and repetition imply that, in the background, Landmark Education is an Erhard-run mass-marketed cult, which creates an air of fear and suspicion around Landmark Education.

*Intensifying Landmark’s Weaknesses*

What the *Time* article implicitly construes as Landmark’s weaknesses may be revealed through its use of composition, repetition, and association. Its composition frames the article about Erhard. Repetition is used to emphasize the notions that Erhard’s past has been the subject of controversy and that Landmark Education is a for-profit business. Lastly, by associating Landmark

³ The subtlety of this reading is not lost on me: It is not the case that *Time* explicitly states, “these are weaknesses, these are strengths,” but, rather, as I apply Rank’s intensify/downplay schema to the text, the schema, through my application of it, *produces* Landmark’s weaknesses and strengths. In other words, Landmark’s strengths and weaknesses do not pre-exist my reading, but instead come into existence through my application of Rank’s schema.
with the controversial Erhard, the article suggests Landmark should also be viewed as a cult or cult-like.

Composition

Composition refers to how the physical layout of the message is used to persuade audiences of the rhetor’s perspective. In this article, the layout consists primarily of photos of Erhard, with one exception. At the top of the first page of this two-page spread is a photo occupying almost half the page. It shows Landmark Forum Leader Beth Handel sitting in front of “volunteer staff in the New York office” (Faltermayer, 1998, March 16, p. 52). Below it, in the center of the page, is a photograph of Werner Erhard, with the caption: “EST, 1978: Werner Erhard tells a roomful of his disciples, ‘There can be a transformation here into a miraculous town’” (p. 52). Four photos take up about a third of the article’s second page, with the heading: “Werner Erhard’s Good Years: Before the Disappearance” (p. 53). With five of six photos depicting Erhard, the article’s composition clearly frames an article ostensibly about Landmark Education in terms of Werner Erhard.

Note: Unless indicated otherwise, all page numbers in the remainder of the chapter refer to this text.
THE BEST OF EST?

Werner Erhard’s legacy lives on in a kinder, gentler and lucrative version of his self-help seminars

By CHARLOTTE FALTERMAYER

When Werner Erhard (born John Paul Rosenberg) founded Erhard Seminars Training, Inc. in 1971, the former used-car salesman from Philadelphia had a hunch. Born of the theater-of-the-absurd atmosphere of the late 1960s, est (Latin for “it is”) promised to help people get “it,” whatever “it” was. Erhard’s 60-hour seminars were strenuous ordeals, complete with “body catchers” and burf bags for the weak of mind and stomach. Trainers applauded bladder control and cured those who didn’t get it. Still, Erhard and his message proved popular, even winning celebrity advocates. Then, after two decades and two divorces, the self-help messiah vanished amid reports of tax fraud (which proved false and won him $500,000 from the feds) and allegations of incest (which were later recanted).

Unlike est, est is still around—sort of. In 1991, before he left the U.S., Erhard sold the “technology” behind his seminars to his employees, who formed a new company called the Landmark Education Corp., with Erhard’s brother Harry Rosenberg at the helm. Rosenberg admits that Erhard was in Toronto briefly last June for a family reunion, but will not elaborate: “I’m not my brother’s keeper. I’m not his spokesman.” But he has proved to be an able keeper of his brother’s legacy. Landmark appears to be thriving. At its core is a four-part “Curriculum for Living,” which starts with a 35-day seminar called the Forum and proceeds to courses that expand upon its brand of enlightenment. Since 1991, approximately 200,000 mostly professional and well-educated seekers have taken the introductory Forum (an estimated 700,000 took Erhard-era seminars). Revenues, which had been averaging $4 million annually, hit $6 million in 1997, with profits approaching 4%. Landmark is becoming a global brand name, with 42 offices in 11 countries, including a well-appointed San Francisco headquarters. Says Rosenberg: “If we were doing a bad job, we wouldn’t have the growth that we have.”

The secret to its success? Landmark lacks est’s showy, celebrity following, but its programs are not as costly (tuition is down some 50% from Erhard days); they are not as lengthy (the basic course was originally spread over two weekends); and—most important—they are less in-your-face, nearly devoid of the shouting and door monitoring imposed by est’s stern trainers. Says a former ester who attended a 1997 Forum: “est was much more militant. You had to have a doctor’s note just to go to the bathroom. People humiliated themselves for it. est tried to break you. Landmark doesn’t do that.”

At a recent Forum weekend in a nondescript room on Manhattan’s East Side, 52 men and 47 women gathered for a variety of reasons. The meek sought a voice;
the proud, humbling; the lonely, companionship. All had signed a form stating that they are mentally and physically well. It is important that attendees be healthy. The Forum, which costs $250, still requires endurance. It consists of three 12- to 16-hour days—with time out for meals—and after a one-day break—then a one-day wrap-up.

The Forum started promptly at 9 a.m. on a Friday morning, when a spotty, spiny-haired woman named Beth Handel walked in and introduced herself as the Forum leader. The Forum, she said, is a game called transformation. Like every other game, it calls for good sportsmanship. One should be "coachable," or open-minded about the Forum's concepts, and committed to "forwarding the action." The name of the game is participation or, more specifically, "sharing," which is to take place at three microphones. The weekend, Handel warned, will be "an emotional roller-coaster ride."

First, though, Handel took a few preliminary questions. "What is Werner Erhard's role?" someone asked. Handel simply described him as the man who developed and sold the technology behind Landmark. "What if I once off?" "Then you come off," Handel replied with a shrug. A visibly nervous woman stepped up to the mike. "You said this was going to be a roller-coaster. But I'm afraid of roller-coasters. I never get on them." "You will learn how to stop letting fear hold you back," Handel reassured her.

Handel, 29, drew diagrams on a blackboard as she held forth on a series of concepts: facts have no meaning; it is the stories we concoct out of those facts that give them meaning. She explained that "our controls," that is, our ongoing complaints, are "killing our lives." And our winning formulas are really losing formulas. She cautioned that Landmark's ideas ("Do for each other like that" and "People 'is to death' aren't meant to fit together."

The Forum is holographic. It's not linear.

But outreach was clearly part of the agenda. Pupils were assigned to call or write people with whom they wanted to have a break-through, thereby introducing others to Landmark. On graduation night participants were encouraged to bring guests, who were then led away to learn more and sign on. From Day 1, attendees were told that for a limited time, the Forum's tuition included a $55 follow-up, "The Forum in Action." The crowd was also repeatedly invited to sign up for the $700 "Advanced Course." Act now and get a 10% discount.

Some Forum grads weren't old. Rabbi Yisroel Perksky, 24, who chose to get his money's worth and take "The Forum in Action," today remains "unfazed" by what he calls the Forum's common-sense concepts colored in exotic packaging. For Richard Giordano, 49, a software executive, the Forum was enough. "I'm still high on the Forum's main message, that my life is in my control. But I can do without the narcotic effect of their reinforcement."

Others, though, are hooked. Anthony, 32, a stockbroker, came to the Forum because he didn't know whether he wanted to be married anymore. He owned up to stashing $50,000 in cash for a clean getaway. During the Forum, he said, "I had been poisoning the finger at my wife. But I've got to work on me."

Now Anthony has completed the "Advanced Course," and is taking the final course in the curriculum, "Self-Expression and Leadership." He says he feels like a newlywed. His wife agrees. "It's a miracle," she says. And a miracle of roller-coasters? Mildred Reddick, 33, has signed up to be a Landmark volunteer. She says she's "glad I got on for the ride."

Critics say Landmark is an elaborate marketing game that relies heavily on volunteers. Says Tom Johnson, an "exit counselor" often summoned by concerned parents to tend to alumni: "They flog your brain; they make you vulnerable." Says critic Liz Samolin: "They support the underground way we're creating recruiters. That's the whole purpose." Psychiatrists who speak on Landmark's behalf dispute these claims. But Samolin says a 1993 Forum turned her sancé (now her ex) into a robot. She organized an anti-Landmark hot line and publications clearinghouse. Landmark officials made sounds to sue her.

Landmark alumnus Walter tywna, a Colorado electronics engineer who took off the company after his daughter ran up a $3,000 tab on course fees, thinks Erhard is still pulling the strings. Says he: "Erhard is like the Cheshire Cat. He has gone away, but the smile is there, hanging over every-thing." Rosenberg says his brother is not and never has been involved in Landmark. Steven Pressman, author of a scathing 1983 biography of Erhard, calls that slick corporation manuvering: "They've gotten out of the yoke of Werner because he became their worst p.s. man. But it's one of the greatest success stories in mass marketing."

Indeed, the transformation has been such a success that it was the subject of a recent case study by the Harvard Business School. According to the study's co-author, Karen Wruuck, the product that Landmark sells is "an abrupt or jarring change, like an 'aha'—a 'peculiar' one, certainly, but patentably marketable. But Landmark, the study notes, has challenges ahead. It will have to gauge the effectiveness of its volunteers in expanding the business and weigh the need to raise outside capital. Perhaps, Wruuck says, it will need to go public. — With reporting by Richard Woodbury/San Francisco
Repetition

By repeating ideas, a persuasive message underscores its main points. Two prominent examples of repetition pertain to Erhard and marketing issues. First of all, in addition to the photos being almost exclusively of Erhard, the article begins with a discussion of Erhard and returns back to him in the next to last paragraph. The repetition of Erhard in words and images throughout the article strongly reinforces the notion that Landmark is linked to Erhard. Secondly, the article drives home the point that Landmark Education is a business, describing both it and est in the language of advertising and marketing: “hook,” “global brand name,” “outreach,” “packaging,” “marketing game,” and “mass marketing.”

I interpret the repetition of this class of terms as a form of intensifying weaknesses here because, in their context, they may be seen to undermine (or at least mitigate) Landmark’s stated commitment to transforming life as we know it by drawing attention to the profit motive—an ulterior motive. This contributes to a reductive and cynical view of Landmark’s work. The article goes beyond this, however, suggesting, as does one of Landmark’s critics quoted in the article: “The participants end up becoming recruiters. That’s the whole purpose” (p. 53). Subscribing to such a view regards Landmark Education’s transformational work as incidental to the raison d’être of the business.

Association

Rank defines association as linking someone to something already disliked by the audience. The repetition of Erhard in the article creates an association between Erhard and Landmark Education and insinuates (offering no
supporting evidence) that his influence still looms large in Landmark and its work. And as “we are known by the company we keep,” a strong association with something controversial implies controversy for that with which it is associated. The composition frames the article about Erhard and the photo captions create associations between Erhard and “controversial” matters.

For example, the photo on the first page depicts Erhard sitting in front of an audience, mirroring the photo above it of Landmark Forum Leader Beth Handel. The similarity between the photos creates visual continuity between Landmark courses and est. In the photo of Erhard, the caption uses the word “disciples,” which creates an association with religion, and particularly (in this context), with cults. The symmetry of these photos also perhaps suggests that those people making up the “volunteer staff” are the Landmark’s “disciples.”

The four photos on the second page also create negative associations. Above them, the heading “Werner Erhard’s Good Years: Before the Disappearance,” creates an air of mystery surrounding Landmark Education and its past. Photo 1 depicts Erhard in front of a large audience. The caption reads, “1975: Erhard drew standing ovations at est meetings like this one in San Francisco” (p. 53). This caption thus associates Erhard with charisma and a popular following. While not negative in and of itself, when linked in combination to the other photos, an impression is created. Photo 2 pictures Erhard with his family. The caption reads: “1976: Erhard and his brood: his seven children and two ex-wives are est grads” (p. 53). Using the word “brood” here is unflattering at best (since the word denotes the offspring of animals). In addition, since ex-
spouses generally do not choose to work together (outside belonging to a cult or having done some kind of transformational work), this contributes to the impression est was a cult. Thus, these two captions together again associate Erhard with the image of a cult-like leader. Photo 3 shows Erhard in a racing car with the caption, “1979: Erhard loved to race cars: it was while driving that he was ‘transformed’” (p. 53). This caption associates Erhard as an adventurer, and perhaps a reckless eccentric. The use of quotes around “transformed” implies skepticism or condescension, if not derision. Photo 4 is a close-up of a pensive Erhard and includes the caption, “1988: Erhard, three years before he left the U.S., is now thought to be in the Caribbean” (p. 53). The last caption (since it does not describe what is actually depicted in the photo) fabricates mystery and suspicion where none existed (since the photo was taken three years prior to Erhard leaving the country). Thus, with five out of six photos being of Erhard, the article keeps the discussion of Landmark firmly rooted in est's “controversial past,” and associates Landmark with cults, weirdness, and shady dealings.

The *Time* article also associates Erhard with controversy and an alleged lack of credibility: identifying him as a former used-car salesman, coming from the theatre-of-the-absurd 1960s, going through two divorces, referring to Erhard as a “self-help messiah” complete with “disciples,” plus repeating previously debunked controversies (IRS tax evasion and incest). In addition, it also states,

Unlike Erhard, est is still around—sort of. In 1991, before he left the U.S., Erhard sold the “technology” behind his seminars to his employees, who

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5 As the last photo in the series “Before the disappearance,” I imagine one of two thought balloons rising above Erhard’s head: “I am an enigma,” or “I am going to disappear in three years.”
formed a new company called the Landmark Education Corp., with Erhard’s brother Harry Rosenberg at the helm. (p. 52)

While it is not illegitimate to associate Erhard with Landmark, Erhard’s dominating presence in the article, given his (limited at best) role in Landmark Education’s operations, creates a stronger link between Landmark and Erhard than facts warrant.

The repetition of marketing language in the article associates Landmark with commercial activity. The only non-Erhard photo underscores the idea in the article that Landmark relies on volunteers, which in part constitutes “an elaborate marketing game” (p. 53). For some odd reason, the subject of marketing is treated by Time in a negative way. (Does Time do this with other companies?)

The article then moves directly from an explanation of Landmark Forum distinctions to the marketing issue, then to criticisms of the Landmark Forum, a brief note on people who benefited from the Forum, and back into more criticism.

Thus, through its composition, association, and repetition, the article intensifies what is constructed here as Landmark Education’s weaknesses: Landmark is solidly linked to Erhard and est’s controversial past and is construed as an elaborate cultish marketing game. This serves to associate its activities not with an intention to make the world a better place, but primarily with making money.

**Downplaying Landmark’s Strengths**

In this section, I discuss the ways Time downplays Landmark’s strengths. Time downplays Landmark Education’s strengths by: omitting reference to established facts about Erhard and Landmark, diverting attention away from the
benefits of Landmark Education’s programs, and by confusing readers regarding the Landmark Forum’s concepts.

Omission

In Time’s description of Erhard’s “disappearance,” the article fails to mention published reports that a death threat may have precipitated his departure from the U.S. (Self, 1992). By leaving this out, the article implies there is something suspicious about Erhard’s disappearance, as though he’s running away from something he did, perhaps ethical lapses or culpability in some unsavory situation. It also omits awards Erhard has won and acknowledgments received.6

Even when Time attempts to explain Landmark Education’s accomplishments, it does so in terms of negatives: “The secret of its success?... its programs are not as costly...and most important—they are less in-your-face, nearly devoid of the shouting and door monitoring imposed by est’s stern trainers” (p. 52, my italics). That the programs cost less and that trainers don’t shout at participants cannot in and of itself explain Landmark Education’s success, however. It is not enough that people pay less money for the Landmark Forum than est. A more pertinent question is why people pay any money at all for the courses. Furthermore, it is equally insufficient to say Landmark Education is successful because trainers don’t yell at participants. Imagine someone thinking,

6 Among them: Erhard won the Gandhi Humanitarian Award (1988). Fortune Magazine40th Anniversary issue (1995, May 15) credited Erhard with popularizing “the empowerment model” of organizational development. The article did not have had enough space in the two-page spread to mention such things, given its inclusion of five photos of Werner Erhard.
“Oh, I’m going to sit in a room for three days and not get yelled at? And they’ll let me go to the bathroom? And it only costs $440? Sign me up!”

*Time*’s “explanation” of Landmark’s success is not an explanation at all. The article barely addresses that people report significant benefits from the Landmark Forum and that this is why they do it (see surveys conducted for Landmark Education, e.g., Daniel Yankelovich’s study, Landmark Education Corporation, 2007f; and Landmark Education Corporation, 2007g). The “explanation” gives the impression Landmark’s success is related to anything but the benefits of its courses. It almost seems to say, “The value of the courses is minimal at best (since not everyone loves the Landmark Forum), so there must be other reasons why it is successful” (i.e., its success is a result of “an elaborate marketing game”).

The article, by virtually ignoring benefits reported from the Landmark Forum, omits survey data showing 7 out 10 participants stated that it was one of their life’s most rewarding experiences, or that around 50% of Forum graduates go on to take the more expensive Landmark Advanced Course (Landmark Education Corporation, 2007f). With all the criticism of Landmark Education’s marketing practices, no mention is made of how Landmark does not advertise, which necessitates some other way of generating customers, namely, through voluntary testimonials of participants who felt the Landmark Forum made a difference for them.

In addition to ignoring reported Landmark Forum benefits, the article’s summary of what goes on in the course omits the context and the “action” that
makes the Landmark Forum what it is: a conversation about what is possible for human beings. For example, *Time* quotes Beth Handel’s responses to questions—“‘What if I doze off?’ ‘Then you doze off,’ Handel replied with a shrug” (p. 53). The description omits any context for her remarks, which gives a possible impression she is rather cold, impersonal, and uncaring. This in turn associates her with those qualities used to describe “est’s stern trainers” (p. 52).

The *Time* article suggests Landmark manipulates vulnerable participants through a kind of brainwashing. When quoting critics of Landmark—“They tire your brain; they make you vulnerable” (p. 53)—the article ignores a basic tenet of the Landmark Forum, namely, that each person is responsible for her/his own mind and well-being. It is true that the courses have long hours and it is also true that this helps sustain participants’ attention on their lives so they might confront existential issues. The criticism goes too far, however, when it takes away agency. Similarly, when describing one Landmark detractor—“Sumerlin says a 1993 Forum turned her fiancé (now her ex) into a robot. She organized an anti-Landmark hot line and publications clearinghouse. Landmark officials made sounds to sue her” (p. 53)—again, there is no context, and we get only one side of the story. The idea that the Landmark Forum could “turn someone into a robot” is on its face a ridiculous statement, but *Time* includes it nevertheless. This type of exaggeration contributes to an aura of fear, suspicion, and even paranoia about Landmark.

7 For more on this, see Chapter Four.

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Diversion

(Time diverts attention from the work of est and Landmark Education to the controversial past, and particularly, to Werner Erhard. Again, est’s benefits are omitted and attention is diverted to the sensational: “Trainers applauded bladder control and cursed those who didn’t get it” (p. 52). Likewise, when describing the Landmark Forum, Time deflects attention from its beneficial effects and skips from an unelaborated and confusing glimpse at some of the Landmark Forum’s ideas to the marketing issue: “But outreach was clearly part of the agenda. Pupils were assigned to call or write people with whom they ‘want to make a breakthrough,’ thereby introducing others to Landmark” (p. 53).

This is one possible interpretation of what happens in the Landmark Forum. Here’s another interpretation. When someone does the Landmark Forum, opportunities present themselves to make peace with others, and participants make phone calls during course breaks. Sometimes these calls may appear to non-participants as coming out of the blue, and they may be curious about why they are being called or treated so nicely. It makes sense to say something like the following: “I am in a seminar this weekend and I’m looking at my life and my relationships and I thought of you.” That’s all that really needs saying. Would Landmark like such callers to mention the company by name? Of course. Is there anything wrong with that? What would that be?

Time also uses humor to divert attention from the work that gets done in the Landmark Forum and instead focuses on the marketing issue: “The crowd was also repeatedly invited to sign up for the $700 ‘Advanced Course.’ Act now
and get a $100 discount” (p. 52). This diversion frames the work of Landmark in terms of commercial activity. It’s not a quote from the Landmark Forum. It is true that the Landmark Advanced Course costs less during the Landmark Forum and it is reasonable to say it is an inducement for people to register for the Advanced Course. But the tone is clearly sarcastic and demeaning. It serves to focus on the commercial dimension of Landmark and not the effects of its work.

The article concludes by quoting a Harvard Business School case study of Landmark (Wruck & Eastley, 1997):

According to the study’s co-author, Karen Wruck, the product that Landmark sells is “an abrupt or jarring change, like an ‘aha’”—a peculiar one, certainly, but patently marketable. But Landmark, the study notes, has challenges ahead. It will have to gauge the effectiveness of its volunteers in expanding the business and weigh the need to raise outside capital. Perhaps, Wruck says, it will need to go public.” (p. 53)

Once again, in strikingly parallel fashion, the *Time* article moves abruptly from a superficial description of what the Landmark Forum actually does (and hence, a possible explanation of why it is successful) to marketing and business issues. The service or value Landmark provides its customers is overshadowed again and dismissed by the “but”—almost strangely inferring that the “aha” provided by the Landmark Forum and its marketability are somehow at odds. It is as if the effects of the course have some intrinsic “un-marketability,” and this must be compensated for through the utilization of some gimmick or “elaborate marketing game.”

8 I know it was for me. But so what? I saved $100 on a course I already wanted to do.
9 Written in 1998, as of 2007, Landmark Education has continued to expand its business globally, still relies on volunteers, and has not gone public.
Confusion

The article creates confusion around what the Landmark Forum actually provides people. First of all, it begins with a flippant and superficial take on est: “est (Latin for ‘it is’) promised to help people get ‘it’, whatever ‘it’ was” (p. 52). By not describing or accounting at all for what est provided, the article leaves est shrouded in mystery, a mystery that carries over into its descriptions of the Landmark Forum. At times like these, one begins to question the author’s intention: Is it to inform or obfuscate?10

Secondly, when Time does discuss what happens in the Landmark Forum, it confuses readers about the course’s basic ideas:

Handel, 39, then drew diagrams on a blackboard as she held forth on a series of concepts: facts have no meaning; it is the stories we concoct out of those facts that give them meaning. She explained that “our rackets,” that is, ongoing complaints, are “killing our lives.” And “our winning formulas” are really losing formulas. She cautioned that Landmark’s ideas (“Be for each other like that” and “People ‘is’ to death”) aren’t meant to fit together: “The Forum is holographic. It’s not linear.” (p. 53)

Through its glibness, the article attempts to make course material appear nonsensical, or at least abstruse. The entire paragraph quoted lacks depth and context. Below I take each of these non-sequiturs and show that, upon elaboration, they not only make sense, but are actually quite profound.

“Facts have no meaning; it is the stories we concoct out of those facts that give them meaning.” These statements mislead or lack rigor, at best. It is more

10 A colleague joked with me that, by making such an observation, I am expecting too much from Time Magazine. In any event, I am not suggesting here that the Time article is flippant and superficial because of its subject matter (i.e., Landmark Education), but simply that I regard this article as superficial, and expound on the ways I consider it so.
precise to say *events* are themselves meaningless, but that once the “stories” of the events are articulated, events immediately take on meaning. Landmark’s “uncollapsing the vicious circle” methodology\(^{11}\) attempts to show participants how they construct meaning through language (story-telling), and that, once the story is reduced to its “motion” (versus its “action,” using Burke’s terminology, 1969a, p. 136-137), the (typically) disempowering interpretations initially given events no longer have the storyteller in their grip. Thus, “uncollapsing the vicious circle,” is an exercise that attempts to distill particular situations to a more value-neutral state and then distinguish what meanings get attached to them.

To illustrate: I check my phone machine and see a “zero” on the message counter. The “fact” (or “what happened”) is that there is a “zero” on the machine. I might take that “fact” and make it mean (like Al Franken’s Stuart Smalley) that “I have no friends, no one loves me, and I’m going to die homeless, penniless, and 30 pounds overweight.” Seeing the meaning we add to our lives helps diminish the unnecessary suffering we cause ourselves through our meaning-making machinery. Without connecting “facts have no meaning” to the purpose or lesson for making such a statement, most readers are left with no context to interpret Handel’s words in a helpful way, resulting in—using Detective Goren’s words—“high level gobbledygook.”

“Our rackets,” that is, ongoing complaints, are “killing our lives.” As discussed in Chapter One, our persistent complaints deprive us of love,

\(^{11}\) “Uncollapsing the vicious circle” means to distinguish between “what happens” and the interpretation we give to those events. In human experience, we “collapse” what happens with our story about it, which often leads to suffering.
satisfaction, freedom, and full self-expression. The phrase “killing our lives,” while perhaps dramatic, is a metaphorical expression. I can speak from experience that when I distinguish my rackets, I realize the devastating effect they have on my relationships, effectiveness, and overall attitude toward life. “Killing our lives” is indeed a strong statement, but in the context of a discussion about the costs of running rackets, its meaning is readily graspable.

“Our winning formulas are really losing formulas.” This is an inaccurate and superficial description of a more sophisticated concept. For example, Landmark’s Rosenberg (1998) explains it this way:

Everyone has formulas for success, ways of being that have worked in the past and that we use again and again. Sometimes relying on these formulas keeps us from seeing new, more effective ways of being in difficult situations. In the Landmark Forum, we have an opportunity to look into our formulas for success, and discover the origin of our identity. (p. 5)

Because a winning formula helps people achieve success, it is not a “losing formula.” It becomes, however, a rut or pattern that prevents us from pursuing alternative approaches to situations (or other possible ways of being, acting, and communicating), and, by doing so, limits our potential.

“Be for each other like that.” As discussed above, Landmark Education is heavily influenced by ontology, the study of being. As such, this influence permeates both the language and the syntax of Landmark participants. “Being for” someone means to constitute oneself as a person committed to another in some way—e.g., as someone who loves another or treats them with respect or compassion. Since the phrase, “be for each other like that” is not connected to
any particular way of being, whatever suggestion Handel is making here is completely lost, even to a Landmark graduate like me.

“People ‘is’ to death.” The Landmark Forum contains a discussion of what Landmark calls “myths” or “superstitions.” According to the course, the major myths of human beings are: “is,” “because,” and “I.” Consider this excerpt from the Landmark Forum Syllabus:

The Myth of Is, Because, and I

In this section, we explore the nature of what we think of as reality, which includes an objective world that exists independent of us, where cause and effect are key operative factors; where I, as an identity, is a collection of characteristics, attributes, and experiences from the past. In exploring the nature of reality and taking apart these myths, something else becomes possible.

Here, we observe not so much the particulars of the realities we construct, but that it is human to construct such realities, and then forget that we are the ones who constructed them. As a result, we see that we no longer need to be confined to living within this limited range, and we gain the freedom to express ourselves fully. (Landmark Education Corporation, 2007b)

When Beth Handel says people “is” to death, she is saying that, as in the excerpt above, we forget how such words (like “is”) are constructions and in fact have no objective reality. In particular, because humans experience reality through a perceptual filter, nothing really “is.” That which we designate as having “being” is, rigorously speaking, only accessible to our minds as an “occurring.” Conflating “is” with “occurring” leads to assumptions that can create difficulties, particularly in interpersonal communication.

“Landmark’s ideas aren’t meant to fit together: ‘The Forum is holographic. It’s not linear.’” Indeed—from participants’ perspectives—not all things in the
Landmark Forum fit together neatly in a straight line. The concepts themselves, however, make sense. Furthermore, it is not that the concepts are logically inconsistent, which is one impression the description creates, but rather, as the course proceeds, it moves from one conversation to another, and as the conversation shifts, one does not obviously “build” on the previous one in the sense that it is a linear, cumulative, and logical construction of an “argument.”

The nonlinearity of the Landmark Forum pertains to ways participants experience the shift of their own engagements with the course material from one conversation to the next, and in the manner in which people “get it.” To combine two quotes without justifying their selection in the first place helps mystify the work of the Landmark Forum, which, I believe, is the rhetorical effect (if not function) of the paragraph.

Thus, in its attempt to explain Landmark’s success, Time downplays Landmark’s and Erhard’s strengths (mainly, acknowledgments for their contributions and benefits reported by graduates) by omitting favorable facts, diverting attention away from the actual work done in the courses to controversial and commercial issues, and confusing readers about est’s and Landmark’s concepts.

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12 This is in contrast to standard education, where, for example, one learns arithmetic before algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus.
13 The “holographic” effect of the Landmark Forum may be expressed in the notion that everything I say and do reflects the whole of my personality. In the Landmark Forum, how one reacts to each moment is like a piece of a hologram: It reflects back on the whole person, their personality, or way of being.
Can Landmark Escape Its (Constructed) Past?

The *Time* article is purportedly about Erhard’s legacy, yet the focus is on Erhard and criticisms of Landmark as a business. One possible interpretation of the *Time* article is: “*est* lives on in the successful Landmark Education Corporation. It’s a cult-like marketing scheme, although they tell you it’s about transformation.” There appears to be a bias against the kind of work Landmark does (the reasons for which are not clear from the article) and against the fact Landmark is a business (equally unclear from the article). I interpret the background conversations of the article as cynical. In brief, according to the article, Landmark Education is successful because the courses cost less than *est*, the trainers are less confrontational, Landmark Education relies heavily on volunteers, their courses have a “narcotic” effect, and they have successfully diverted attention away from “their worst p.r. man” (p. 53), former used car salesman, Werner Erhard.

As noted, *Time* is not without positive things to say about Landmark. When it is positive, however, the positive attributes refer to Landmark as a business: “Landmark appears to be thriving” (p. 52); “Landmark is becoming a global brand name, with 42 offices in 11 countries…Says Rosenberg: ‘If we were doing a bad job, we wouldn’t have the growth we have’” (p. 52). Okay, so Landmark is thriving and is framed in terms of a “global brand name”—that is, it is defined in terms of its corporate-ness and its marketing. In sum, the positive qualities of the programs are framed and blurred inside a cynical and superficial treatment of what Landmark Education does.
Time’s article contributes to unfavorable public conversations about Landmark Education: Landmark Education grew out of a controversial course (est) with a controversial founder (Erhard) and it is mostly an elaborate cult-like (or cult-light?) marketing game that gets participants to become unpaid recruiters, thereby saving money on advertising and other costly marketing methods. How might the business of Landmark Education be otherwise placed in context? It is helpful to look at Landmark’s activities in the current economic milieu in which we all operate.

Humans have a need to express themselves, and all humans live inside a context determined by social, cultural, economic, and political forces. Regardless of context, self-expression manifests itself in particular ways. In our own era, Americans live in a consumer capitalist society. To provide a service, one can either operate not-for-profit or for-profit. If the latter is chosen, this necessitates the following conclusions: Landmark either makes money so it can transform lives, or it transforms lives to make money, or it has nothing to do with transformation, or the truth lies somewhere between these. Could it be any other way?

In a capitalist economy, what other ways of communicating messages to large audiences are available? Landmark becomes in this light an avenue for self-expression whose existence depends on staying in business. A persistent complaint about Landmark relates mostly to the fact that participants must invite guests in order to keep the courses going. How else are they going to do it? Is advertising somehow “more ethical”? The criticism is cynical, and at times,
hypocritical. Such critics apply different criteria to Landmark Education than they
would to other capitalist enterprises.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Time}'s attitude toward Landmark's
marketing thus appears contradictory and even superfluous.

I find it curious and fascinating that Americans generally seem willing to
overlook the financial aspect of higher education (for example), but become
fixated on it in Landmark's case. Clearly, a double standard is operating here,
since people see value in education, and therefore do not in principle have a
problem with the idea of paying for it. Such a contradiction suggests other factors
are at work. I therefore think it has less to do with the fact that money is involved
than it does with people having other concerns. One of these concerns relates to
the question of whether Landmark Education is a cult (see Chapter Four). I think
two other factors are also at play: (1) a general distaste for network marketing
and (2) the personally confronting nature of Landmark's work.

I have personally felt "put off" when approached by friends or
acquaintances involved in "network marketing," which I view as an intrusion of
commerce into the interpersonal realm. It seems to cheapen the relationship, like
I'm being used or there is an ulterior motive to their friendliness (evidence of my
own fear and suspicion). Rather than have friends or acquaintances sell me
something, I'd rather be sold something through less interactive means: TV or
print ads, for example. (Now, of course, a huge difference between network
marketing and Landmark is that my friend who introduced me to Landmark did
not make money when I registered for the Forum.)

\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, even non-profits (and academic researchers) must raise money to survive and
continue their work.
In addition to an aversion to network marketing, the personally confronting nature of Landmark’s work may also contribute to a double standard. It has been my experience that many people have a visceral reaction to the kind of personal development that Landmark promotes. Participating in Landmark’s work requires confronting personal demons, foibles, and shortcomings. It’s not always pretty. Such an inquiry takes us out of our comfort zones, and the “fight or flight” mechanism takes over. With regard to Landmark’s business practices, some people “invent” reasons to attack or criticize Landmark, even if the critique makes no logical sense.

Viewed more dispassionately, however, Landmark’s marketing approach appears not only necessary, but also sound business practice in at least two ways. First of all, participants who do not experience sufficient transformational power in the programs won’t share Landmark with others because the programs lack value for them. In this sense, Landmark would fail to meet a market need. Second, and interrelated to the first point, by not advertising via broadcast or print media, Landmark Education’s “marketing” may actually appear more genuine and authentic, since the folks who do the “recruiting” (“inviting”) do so because they value the programs. On the whole, advertisements (even with testimonials) do not communicate as credibly as face-to-face conversations with people we know, particularly since such testimonials involve intimate personal issues.¹⁵

¹⁵ The apparent resistance to and criticism of this one-to-one connection between people is viewed as suspicious while mass mediated advertising and marketing is somehow more acceptable. The reasons for this are explored in the Epilogue.
There is yet another wrinkle to the “recruiting” issue. Landmark Forum graduates who get value out of the courses want people in their lives to support them in what they are up to. This can most readily occur when their friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances participate in the Landmark Forum. Doing so provides a common frame of reference (the shared experience of their participation) and a common vocabulary (rackets, strong suit, possibility, et al.) that can enhance communication and the achieving of mutual goals.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the rhetoric of *Time*’s article (Faltermayer, 1998, March 16) on Landmark Education Corporation. By using Rank’s intensify/downplay schema, one may see how rhetorical resources are used to construct Landmark Education negatively in public conversations. The *Time* article is of particular interest to communication studies because it keeps Landmark’s various “controversies” alive by performing indirect rhetorical moves. In essence, *Time* does not come right out and say “Landmark is a cult, uses mind control techniques, or is a scam,” so it found ways to get this message across by more implicit means (like quoting a third party saying Landmark turned her ex-into a “robot”). The net result is to create an aura of fear, suspicion, and paranoia around Landmark. Whether Landmark can escape the controversies of its constructed past is an open question. Perhaps that could only happen when its work is taken seriously by researchers. I try to do so in the next chapter by exploring these controversies in detail.
CHAPTER FOUR

DOING THINGS WITH WORDS: A CULT (OF POSSIBILITY)

BY ANY OTHER NAME?

As discussed in the previous chapter, the *Time Magazine* article (Faltermayer, 1998, March 16) is a prominent public conversation about Landmark Education and contains implicit claims that Landmark Education Corporation is a cult or cult-like, which contributes to an environment marked by fear, suspicion, and paranoia. This chapter examines these implicit claims.

“Cult” is a heavily-charged word, evoking images of crazy, violence-prone, deluded, brainwashed people with irrational beliefs who follow leaders who are also deluded, crazy, and violence-prone. Contrary to prevailing views, however, the results of studies of contemporary cult members run counter to these stereotypes. Stark and Bainbridge (1985) found that cult members were more likely to be from the more cultivated classes (if you will) than those discarded by society.¹⁶ Levine (1994) found there is no more occurrence of abnormal psychology in cult members than in the general population of the same age group and that cult members tended to be young, educated, and from

¹⁶ The word “cultivate” belongs to the same root as “cult” and “culture.” It derives from the Latin *cultus*, meaning “care, cultivation, worship,” which originally meant “tended, cultivated,” and comes from the past participle of the Latin *colere*, meaning “to till.” Thus, there is an historical linkage between tilling the land, someone who worships, and someone who is “cultured” or “cultivated” by training or education.
prosperous, stable families. Melton and Bromley (2002) have shown that, contrary to public perception, a very small minority of cults exhibit violence, and when they do, it is usually directed toward themselves. According to Dawson (1996), those who join cults are not, as popularly characterized, socially marginal or deprived. Dawson (2003) argues that the public is sympathetic to the more dramatic and disparaging perceptions of cults, because they “fit our prejudices about unknown and seemingly deviant groups”:

The strangeness of the beliefs and practices of many NRMs [new religious movements], especially when reported out of context, combined with the fervent character of the faith espoused by converts, makes people feel uncomfortable. The groups are stigmatized by the rest of society as a natural protection against dealing with ideas and experiences that are subversive of the status quo. (p. 113)

Prior to the 1970s, “cult” had a more or less value-neutral connotation. Since then, “cult” has become a decidedly dirty word and has attained the status of infamy. This shift in public perception about cults may largely be attributed to the reporting of a number of high profile cult atrocities (Barker, 1995; Beckford 1999; Pfeifer, 1992; Van Driel and Richardson, 1988), coupled with the increasing influence of mass media and a corresponding decline of academic influence on public conversations regarding cults (Lucas, 2004).

One controversy that has dogged Landmark Education is that some have called it a cult. My personal experience is that the question—Is Landmark Education a cult?—often gets raised early in the experience of attending introductions, taking Landmark courses, or knowing someone before and after they’ve done the Landmark Forum. The source of the conversation about
Landmark being a cult is not limited to those who believe it harmful or controversial. \(^{17}\)

Since a comprehensive and authoritative treatment of this issue is beyond the scope of this work, this chapter is intended as an introduction to the subject to give readers a sense of the complexity of the debate. It asks two questions: (1) What is the current state of academic research on cults? (2) Why do some consider Landmark to be a cult?

**Competing Cult Constructions: A Contested Terrain**

The term “cult” has received considerable scrutiny, as has the question of its desirability as a sociological category. Academic debate on the subject has produced competing constructions and perspectives over the definitions of cults, their relative harm or harmlessness, and ethical guidelines regarding their study. The complexity of the debate is owed in part to the contrasting roles played by people making claims about them. This section reviews academic debates over the implications of defining and naming social groups as cults.

According to Dawson (2003c, p. 33) there is little academic consensus on a definition of “cult.” As stated, most scholars studying such groups these days no longer even use the term, preferring what they consider a more value-neutral moniker, *new religious movement* (NRM) (Dawson, 2003a, p. 2; Hankins, 2002). This shift in terminology is partly due to “cult’s” currency as a negative, value-laden term, and also a reaction to the frightening implications of actions

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\(^{17}\) I am excluding here possible smear campaigns against Landmark and am only dealing with what otherwise fair-minded people might innocently think. These people include those who have never read anything that portrays Landmark in an unflattering light. I am also not concerned here with motivations behind the conversation.
undertaken on behalf of what is called (depending on the critic’s perspective) the anticult movement (ACM) or cult awareness movement (CAM) (Melton, 2004, p. 236).

Historically, the term cult (i.e., as “sect”) referred, for example, to Roman Catholics or Protestants, these being “subsects,” if you will, of Christianity. Cults and mainstream religions do share certain rituals and practices, however, they both adhere to religious doctrine, and are devoted to or worship spiritual leaders. These shared characteristics also include a potential for abuse. For Beckford (2001), differences between traditional or mainstream religions and “cults” are ultimately a matter of degree. He argues that the dramatic and tragic events associated with various religious movements such as the Peoples Temple, Aum Shinrykyo, the Branch Davidians, the Solar Temple, and Heaven’s Gate, are more extreme variations on numerous controversies surrounding more established religions. Among these, Beckford includes: systematic sexual abuse of children in the care of Catholic priests; clergy malfeasance of various kinds in many American churches; sexual improprieties among Methodist clergy in the United Kingdom; racism in the Church of England; the exploitation of women in many Christian churches; and collusion between church officials and some of the world’s most brutal regimes.

While the above abuses may not always be as dramatic or violent as those groups called cults, Beckford believes there is a near total failure to recognize that these abuses occur in many religious organizations, and not only in so-called cults. His point is that such controversies are not qualitatively
different, but rather, vary from bad to worse. Rather than making hard and fast
distinctions between cults and mainstream religions, Beckford believes
sociologists should substitute “continuum” for distinctions.

These days the term “cult” more often refers to religious groups “outside the
mainstream” (or even groups that are not religious, but occur as “strange”).
Further complicating the already muddy picture, is that, according to some (e.g.,
Melton, 2004; Mooney, 2005), groups need not be “religious” in nature to be
called cults, while others attempt to “find” religion in groups with little trace of it in
order to locate them within the NRM category (see Wallis, 1984, below). Writers
have proposed different solutions for this dilemma. Lalich (2001) suggests
dropping the “religious” element in the definition of cults partly because groups
may display cultic qualities without being religious. In addition, she maintains that
the “religious” component of cults is not what is problematic about so-called
“destructive cults.” Lalich argues that conceptualizing cults as “religious” also
creates a tendency for researchers to look away from “pathological” or
“antisocial” practices in the name of “religious freedom.” Zablocki and Looney
(2004) recommend shifting the emphasis from the “religious” to the “social
movement” aspect of new religious movements. Mooney (2005) also suggests
dropping the “religious” appellation and instead recommends the term
“marginalized movements” to account for both the derogated status of such
groups popularly called “cults” and to allow for the inclusion of non-religious
groups that otherwise might fit the “cult” label but display no specifically religious features.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Moderating an Academic Split}

While in academia a shift toward greater tolerance to groups called cults or NRMs appears to be taking place, some disagreement remains over the nature of cults and their relative harmful/harmlessness. Zablocki and Robbins (2001) write that this split in academic research on cults is polarized by “cult apologists” on one end and “cult bashers” on the other. Apologists view the term “cult” an insult to the groups it names, while bashers believe substituting the term “new religious movement” is misleading as (in their view) not all cults are religious. This polarization leads Zablocki and Robbins to attempt to bridge this gap. The authors advocate a “moderate agenda” consisting of: (1) tolerance toward different approaches, (2) forming a consensus around conceptions about cults, (3) respecting the privacy while demanding accountability for both scholars and the cults/NRMs themselves, and (4) de-emphasizing policy issues in research. These appear reasonable suggestions, however, the notion of a consensus about cults for the foreseeable future seems unlikely. Most fundamental, perhaps, is the issue of whether a group must espouse religious beliefs in order to be classified as a cult, since the exclusion of religiosity as a criterion for defining cults renders the term increasingly problematic.

\textsuperscript{18}It is interesting to note further that Mooney’s rhetorical analysis of “cultic” recruiting shows that such literature is not intrinsically different from recruiting literatures of non-cultic groups and organizations. Her analysis has implications for cults in general: To what extent may corporations, and other social groups (e.g., the military, schools, and prisons) also be construed as “cult-like”?\textsuperscript{18}
Another issue dividing academics pertains to the funding sources of cult/NRM research. Beit-Hallahmi (2001) discusses the problematic nature of academic research when researchers ignore new religious movements’ potential for doing bodily harm. For example, members of Japan’s Aum Shinrykyo were accused of killing twelve people, seriously injuring 54, and causing vision problems for nearly a thousand more. According to Beit-Hallahmi, two noted NRM American scholars—their travel paid for by Aum Shinrikyo—went to Tokyo to deny that the group’s members could have produced the sarin gas used in the attack. It was later determined the group was responsible. Beit-Hallahmi uses this incident to argue that NRM funding of academic researchers who advocate for NRMs may cloud researchers’ judgment.

By contrast, Robbins (2001) argues that NRM funding of academic research need not mean that such research is compromised, noting that traditionally established religions fund a great deal of research in the sociology of religion. While agreeing that any financial relationships should be disclosed, Robbins believes critics of NRMs apply a double standard toward those researchers funded by NRMs. According to Robbins, the work of researchers “exposing” cults is viewed as more legitimate than that of those who support NRMs’ religious freedom and defend them against persecution.

Cults or New Religious Movements? An Issue of Perception

The lack of agreement around defining cults and new religious movements, whether they are harmful, and how they should be studied are not
the only issues that make contemporary discussions of cults complicated. Add to this the contrasting versions of cult “reality” proffered in different social realms. How cults are described (regardless of the name given them) depends on the particular subject-position of cult observers.

Barker (1995) identifies six arenas most involved in the construction of public conversations about cults and new religious movements: sociology, the new religious movements themselves, the anti-cult movement, mass media, the legal system, and psychotherapy. According to Barker, their aims and interests include the following: (1) Sociologists attempt to provide accurate descriptions and explanations based on systematically-obtained empirical data; (2) new religious movements promote their religion and way of life; (3) The anticult movement attempts to expose and destroy “destructive” cults; (4) Media look for a “good story” while maintaining their audience (and advertising revenues); (5) The legal system metes out justice according to the law and determines winners and losers; and (6) Therapists attempt to help “cult victims” cope with their “post-cult” experience. Understanding these agendas and motivations enables one to assess better the accuracy and fairness of accounts presented.

Barker believes mass media are largely responsible for popular conceptions of what are called “cults” and that mass media rely heavily on the anti-cult movement for source information. Furthermore, Barker notes, the ACM appears to engage in practices they themselves ascribe to cults and are opposed to any balanced view of them. Using those “opposed” to cults as authoritative sources of information negatively skews public perception of cults.
In service to their goal to gain and maintain audiences, mass media dramatize situations involving NRMs and thus create a disproportionately negative picture of them:

Unlike social scientists, the media are under no obligation to introduce comparisons to assess the relative rates of negative incidents. Thus, when reporting a tragedy or some kind of malpractice, they note in the headline that the victim or the perpetrator was a cultist, but are unlikely to mention it anywhere in the report if he or she were a Methodist. The result is that even if such tragedies and malpractices are relatively infrequent they would still be more visible and, thereby, become disproportionately associated with NRMs in the public mind (Barker, 2003, p. 17).

Thus, the foregoing discussion demonstrates the importance of considering the source of information when looking at cults.

_Whom to Believe?

Taken together, these competing “cult constructions” make for a complicated picture. Interestingly, it appears that those most invested in retaining use of the term are those advancing an anticult agenda. A term like “cult,” having been subjugated to overwhelmingly negative portrayals, serves this agenda well. The question, “Who is credible?” is therefore not easily or quickly answered. Thus, when engaging in discussions involving cults, one is well-advised to attend to the particular interests and aims of the source.

In any event, it is thus clear that “cult” is a contested, if not problematic term, and that it perhaps should appear within quotation marks. People will define “cult” in different ways, and, depending on the definition, one could say Landmark Education is a cult. The “messiness” of conversations about cults thus established, I now turn to the question of how it is Landmark Education, could be said to be a cult or cult-like.
Is Landmark Education Corporation a Cult?

Given it is no simple task to define cults or evaluate cult research, it is similarly difficult determining whether a specific social group is a cult. This section discusses: (1) the dearth of scholarly evidence supporting the claim that Landmark Education is a cult, (2) civil suits Landmark litigated when it was accused of being a cult, (3) two scholarly examples describing Landmark’s predecessor, est, as resembling a cult, and (4) a discussion of what would give rise to the claim that Landmark Education is a cult.

**Current Research and Opinion**

To date, there is a lack of scholarly evidence to support the claim that Landmark Education Corporation is a cult. Furthermore, as discussed below, notable professionals have explicitly rejected this claim. For its part, Landmark’s website includes testimonials from people familiar with cults who have explicitly stated that Landmark Education is not a cult.

Margaret Singer, advisor to The Cult Awareness Network and a Member of the Board of Directors of the American Family Foundation (both anti-cult groups), made the following statement: “I do not believe that either Landmark or The Landmark Forum is a cult or sect, or meets the criteria of a cult or sect” (*Landmark Education Corporation v. Singer*, 1997). (For more on Singer’s statement, see below.)

Reverend Otis Charles, former Dean and President of the Episcopal Divinity School (Cambridge, Massachusetts), writes:

As a bishop of the Episcopal Church (Anglican) in the United States who was formerly responsible for one of the dioceses of the Episcopal Church
and am currently responsible for the training and formation of national and international students at our seminary in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I understand the concern about the nature of any secular programs and their potential to affect those who take part in them.

I have 13 years of direct experience and observation of the programs offered by Landmark Education. While I have never known them to deal with God, worship, divinity, or theology, each person’s religious preference and practice is considered his or her private concern and is completely respected.

At the same time these programs have actually allowed me to enhance my own grasp of faith tradition, and have helped me to be more effective in my religious responsibilities and practice.

As you must know, there are many definitions of the word “cult,” but by no definition that I know can The Forum or Landmark’s programs be considered to constitute or be part of a cult or sect. In fact, quite the opposite, the organization and courses are conducted in a way that is entirely consistent with any accredited education institution. (Charles, 1992, September 24)

Lastly, former Executive Vice President and Chief Executive Officer of the American Psychological Association, Raymond D. Fowler, Ph.D., writes,

The Landmark Forum has none of the characteristics typical of a cult. Most cults have a charismatic leader or leaders who maintain, with their members, a strong relationship over a prolonged time period. Cult members become very emotionally attached to their leaders, even if they do not come in close contact with them. They are encouraged to follow the instructions of the cult leader and to devote significant amounts of their time and resources to activities directed by the cult leader. Typically, cult members remove themselves from their families and usual environments and undergo periods of social isolation, peer pressure to conform, and significant modification of their behavior, lifestyle, dress, food and relationships. None of these characteristics are even possible in the relatively brief encounters that take place at a Landmark Forum; the level of intensity and duration are not sufficient to encourage the intense, addiction-like behavior said to be exhibited by cult members…

In my opinion, the Landmark Forum is not a cult or anything like a cult, and I do not see how any reasonable, responsible person could say that it is. (Fowler, 1999, November 30)

I would interject the following regarding Fowler’s comment—that “None of
these characteristics are even possible in the relatively brief encounters that take place at a Landmark Forum." It is true that the level of intensity and duration is not possible in the short time of the Landmark Forum, however, one could argue that taking Landmark courses could become part of one’s lifestyle (as it has with me), and that the issue of “limited duration” would not necessarily apply in the case of long-term participation. This is not to argue that Fowler is mistaken in his main points, but rather that the issue of limited duration ceases to apply in the case of continued participation.

Nevertheless, based on the perspectives of a cult expert harshly critical of cults, an Episcopal Bishop, and a former APA Vice President, the notion that Landmark Education is a cult would appear debunked. Of course, skeptics can claim the latter two opinions are suspect because they have been "tricked" by Landmark or are cult members themselves, and that Singer’s statement (above) was made “under duress” of litigation (see below).

*Landmark Libel Lawsuits*

While no scholarly peer-reviewed journals report studies claiming Landmark Education is a cult, a few mainstream publications have described Landmark Education as a cult or as displaying cult-like qualities. To witness that cults have become marginalized social groups, one need look no further than litigation initiated by Landmark Education. On those occasions when someone has published the claim or inferred that Landmark Education is a cult, Landmark sued for libel and secured retractions from those publications. Since its incorporation (1991), Landmark Education has filed a number of defamation
lawsuits in the United States in which publications accused Landmark of being a cult or inferred that it is a cult.\textsuperscript{19} Were it not for such negative and potentially damaging connotations, it would be unnecessary to contest attributions of cult status. Below I summarize lawsuits that involve an accusation of Landmark cult status.

\textit{Self Magazine}

Mathison (1993, February) wrote an article appearing in \textit{Self Magazine}, entitled, \textit{White Collar Cults—They Want Your Mind}. In the article, Mathison ascribed various characteristics to “white collar cults,” saying they use coercive pressure and deception to get others to join, use mind-manipulation techniques, and that members cut themselves off from the outside world. The article included Landmark Education in their list of so-called “white collar cults.” The case was settled out of court, and \textit{Self} agreed to publish a retraction, alongside a letter from Art Schreiber, Landmark Education Corporation’s Chairman of the Board of Directors, rebutting the magazine’s accusations (\textit{Landmark Education Corporation v. Condé Nast Publications}, 1994).

\textit{The Cult Awareness Network}

In 1994, Landmark Education sued Cynthia Kisser, Executive Director of the Cult Awareness Network (CAN), for defamation and commercial disparagement (among other complaints). Among them, CAN knowingly defamed

\textsuperscript{19} At least one other publication accused Landmark of being a cult and published a retraction, but not on the basis of a civil suit. \textit{The American Counseling Association (in Guidepost, July 1993)}. Also, The Rick Ross Institute’s website (Ross, 2000a) contains a plethora of material on Landmark Education, including numerous negative accounts, reportedly from people who had negative experiences with Landmark, although Ross has not claimed Landmark is a cult. After about a year, citing “significant post-complaint changes in the law,” Landmark dropped their complaint with prejudice.
Landmark Education by claiming in its leaflets that the Forum is a destructive cult. The case was eventually settled out of court after CAN’s Board of Directors agreed to issue a statement that not only is Landmark Education not a cult, but that it never had any evidence justifying such a position in the first place (Landmark Education Corporation v. Cult Awareness Network, 1999).

Dr. Margaret Singer

Singer’s (1995) Cults in Our Midst discusses Landmark Education in the context of her discussion on cults. Singer did not explicitly state that Landmark Education is a cult in her book, however, from its appearance in the book, one could infer that she believed this was the case. Singer made the statement (above) that she did not believe Landmark Education is a cult as part of an agreement from a civil suit filed against her by Landmark. Furthermore, Singer removed references to Landmark Education from subsequent editions.

Est: A Cult by Any Other Name?

As stated, there is a lack of scholarly evidence to support the claim that Landmark Education Corporation is a cult. The available literature, however, discusses est, and not its descendent, Landmark Education. It is problematic to apply what has been written about est to Landmark for a number of reasons. While their aims are similar, est is not Landmark Education Corporation. Landmark’s approach has evolved over time and is a distinct organization. Furthermore, I have no experience with est, and this makes a comparison between the two both difficult and ill-advised.
To be clear, I am not saying in the following discussion that “there are things about Landmark that are cult-like.” It’s not that “there are things” about Landmark that “are” cult-like as much as: People question the Landmark experience, and in that questioning, aspects of the experience get labeled as things people associate with cults (mistakenly or otherwise). Said another way, the world of Landmark Education is a complex social phenomenon and is constructed through communication (rather than having an “essence” of its own, for example). The questions, “Does Landmark display these qualities?” or “Is Landmark a cult?”, are therefore displaced by “How does Landmark get constructed as a cult through communication?”

To a certain extent, the question itself, “Is Landmark a cult?” is a Rorschach of our culture, and from the standpoint of a student of communication, the “answer” to the question is perhaps not as interesting as the fact that the question is raised in the first place. While further interrogation of this notion would prove worthwhile, I will not examine the cultural and historical context in which such a question gets raised. A thorough discussion of the context which makes possible such a question regarding the cult status of a “self-improvement” company is beyond the scope of this work. Instead, I here focus on the attempt to make sense of how and in what ways people might consider Landmark a cult or cult-like.

I confine the discussion to two authors who have discussed est as falling within a related category. Wallis (1984) defines est as a “new religious movement,” and Galanter (1990) describes est as a “charismatic self-help
group.” While neither of these terms are the same as “cult,” their resemblances to cults will be clear. In general, I find the use of these terms lacking. First, in Wallis’ case, I do not believe the term “new religious movement” is appropriate to describe Landmark using his own criteria. Second, while Galanter’s description of est yields worthwhile observations, problems with his terminology, like Wallis’, renders his classification of est a charismatic group inadequate.

Wallis: est as “New Religious Movement”

Wallis (1984) does not use the word “cult,” but instead labels est a “world-affirming new religious movement” (in contrast to “world-rejecting” and “world-accommodating” new religious movements). Wallis writes that world-affirming religions: exhibit a more secularized and individualized conception of the divine; offer access to supernatural, magical, and spiritual powers and abilities; require no religious discipline; entail no extensive doctrinal commitment (at the outset); and do not insist on belief in a theory or doctrine.

According to Wallis, “While it is one of the less transcendental of the new world-affirming salvational movements, est is clearly part of the same domain as its more overtly religious counterparts” (1984, p. 22). While it may be clear to Wallis that est belongs to the typology he lays out, I am at a loss to understand how est (or Landmark Education, for that matter) qualifies as “religious” for several reasons. First, the notion of a “secularized” conception of the divine in est would appear to be oxymoronic without being ironic or self-reflexive. Are not ests...

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20 As discussed above, the term “new religious movement” is preferred over “cult” by many sociologists of religion.

21 Beckford (2004) also includes est in his discussion of new religious movements.
“divine” and “secular” antonyms? The “secularized divine” (were there such a thing) would be akin to “opaque transparency” or “dry water.” Second, I am equally at a loss to understand Wallis’ claim that est provided access to supernatural, magical, and spiritual powers and abilities. While est and Landmark Education have referred to the “magic” of transformation, I do not interpret this “magic” to be supernatural, but rather, that transformation may occur to someone as “magical” because it may be unanticipated, difficult to explain, or fail to conform to one’s conception of a natural process (grounded in language, communication, and interaction). Third, the absence of religious discipline and extensive doctrinal commitment/belief, while consistent with his typological definition, further strains the meaning of “religious.”

So, if est does not deal with any standard sense of the “divine,” if nothing about it is “supernatural,” and there is no religious discipline or extensive doctrinal commitment—how is est “religious”? Perhaps this is an example of the intellectual tendency to make things fit inside a classification system, regardless of the contradictions.

Galanter: est as “Charismatic Group”

Galanter (1990) makes a number of interesting observations that may help understand why people might think groups like est and Landmark Education are “cult-like.”

Galanter labels est a “charismatic social group,” a category which he says can generically describe “modern cults and zealous self-help movements” (p. 22)

At the same time, it is interesting the degree to which what Galanter describes as features of a charismatic group might apply to virtually any number of social groups.
According to Galanter, these groups are “charismatic” because their members are committed to a fervently espoused, transcendent goal (hence, I suppose, the potential for “zealotry”), frequently articulated by a charismatic leader or ascribed to the group’s progenitor. Charismatic groups shape member belief and behavior through three psychological forces: a high level of social cohesiveness, an intensely held belief system, and a profound influence on members’ behavior by altering consciousness (p. 544). Such groups, Galanter asserts, can both relieve and precipitate certain psychiatric symptoms.

Galanter believes that cults and zealous self-help movements belong to the same family of social group—the charismatic group—but are sufficiently different to maintain the distinction between them. Besides retaining the idea that cults display a more specifically religious nature, Galanter asserts cults are very different from other charismatic groups in their character and impact on members. While retaining the use of the term “cult,” Galanter explicitly distinguishes est and similar groups from cults. In his typology, cults are different from self-help groups in that cults are more specifically religious, their beliefs deviate from established beliefs, and they often strive for transcendental experiences (more so than other charismatic groups). By contrast, Galanter describes a self-help group as “a voluntary program that operates to promote mutual aid among its members” that may either matter-of-factly dispense information and advice without asking participants for intense commitment or

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Note that in 1990, Galanter retains the term “cult” well after the introduction of the term “new religious movement” as a substitute for “cult.” I believe the retention of this term, in addition to the use of “zealous” to describe such views are clues to the bias he brings to his discussion of est.
alternately appear “highly zealous” (p. 543). (Galanter considers cults generally as being “zealous.”) One may infer, then, that self-help groups are not specifically religious and their beliefs do not significantly deviate from the mainstream.

Since Galanter writes about est and not Landmark Education, I discuss how his observations might apply to Landmark Education by asking three questions: Does Landmark fit Galanter’s description of a charismatic group? To what extent does Landmark Education exhibit the three psychological forces of charismatic groups Galanter describes? To what extent may it be said that Landmark courses precipitate or relieve psychiatric symptoms?

Is Landmark Education a charismatic, zealous, transcendental self-help group? Galanter believes est is a (1) charismatic, (2) zealous, (3) transcendent, (4) self-help group. Below I discuss each of these characterizations.

(1) For Galanter, “charismatic” entails a “commitment of members to a fervently espoused, transcendent goal…frequently articulated by a charismatic leader or ascribed to the progenitor of the group” (p. 543). In common parlance, the word “charismatic,” has a generic, non-religious meaning, that is: able to lead or influence a large group of people or be attractive to others—having a “magnetic personality,” for example. Landmark course leaders are frequently regarded as inspirational and charismatic (in a general, non-religious sense), qualities often ascribed to cult leaders or evangelists. (Should “charisma” be restricted to cult leaders?) On the other hand, when applied to groups of people, “charismatic” also carries historical baggage relating to Pentecostal Christians
who speak in tongues and prophesy, neither of which takes place in Landmark courses.  

Based on my experience, it is clear that Landmark entails a commitment to a fervently espoused goal—to have transformation alive and real for all people. This commitment may be seen in part by Landmark’s unusual organizational structure. Landmark has approximately 450 paid staff and 8,000 volunteers, a proportion more resembling a church than a for-profit corporation. (Landmark even calls their leadership groups “bodies,” i.e., the Introduction Leader Body, the Landmark Forum Leader Body, etc.). That a for-profit corporation’s “workforce” consists of over 90% unpaid assistants and is able to secure such a high level of participation is evidence of this commitment.

The sometimes intense dedication by its participants to the work of Landmark Education (versus dedication to the corporation) could lead some to associate it with spiritual or religious attachment, and therefore appear cult-like. When I attended my Introduction to the Landmark Forum (described in Chapter One), I found the atmosphere unusual because people seemed so happy and enthusiastic. While it was different, it did not occur to me that it was “cult-like,” and once I researched Landmark and discovered some have claimed it is a cult, I was both surprised and disturbed.

24 My use of “evangelical” (Chapter Two) admittedly has its own baggage (i.e., preaching the Gospel of Jesus), I believe, however, that it more accurately describes Landmark Education.  

25 A spiritual attachment may manifest itself as a function of individuals’ particular religious or spiritual practices, if they have any. In other words, each person brings to Landmark Education their own value/behavioral orientations and background experience. In other words, if someone is an enthusiastic Jehovah’s Witness and also participates in Landmark courses, then that enthusiasm for Landmark might be construed as religious.
As stated, Landmark course leaders are certainly revered and are charismatic in the conventional sense. est's progenitor (founder), Werner Erhard, is not involved in Landmark's operations. People do not “follow” or “worship” Erhard as cult members might their progenitor. With Erhard gone, Landmark Forum Leaders and other course leaders may be considered charismatic, however, their numbers disrupt the organizational leadership style traditionally attributed to cults—stereotypically marked by centrality and authoritarianism. This creates further difficulties in applying Galanter's criteria.

(2) Would “zealous” be a fair term to apply to Landmark Education? Galanter does not define “zealous,” nor does he provide examples of “zealotry.” It appears more like an assumption he makes, i.e., he brings this judgment automatically to the labeling process. In any event, “zealous” is doubtless value-laden, and hence, not desirable as a sociological term.

Nevertheless, one thing that turns people off of Landmark Education could be referred to as zealotry. This may help account for why people might think of Landmark as a cult or cult-like. Anecdotally, est was reportedly much more “zealous” (hence the stories that est participants were so militant about registering people in courses they were called “est-holes”). While I have no direct experience with what I would refer to as “cult-like” experiences or otherwise “extreme cases,” I shall nevertheless relate two anecdotes shared by my friend James (who introduced me to the Landmark Forum—see Chapter One). Both stories provide some insight into the kinds of things that may happen and subsequently contribute to the “Landmark is a cult” conversation.
In one incident, James was told that someone complained of having received seven phone calls to their business phone from Landmark Education in the same day. This would no doubt be a source of irritation or concern for many and could be interpreted as “zealous.” I was not a witness to this, and cannot factually account for it. I can see it happening, however. Landmark operates with many volunteers and at this stage of its development has not integrated a computerized customer call center database. My guess is that someone screwed up and did not record the fact that previous calls were made. While this does not excuse the incident, this mundane explanation, if true, would considerably tone down the “drama” that would otherwise accompany the more exotic interpretation, i.e., that Landmark Education is crazed, zealous, and out of control.

The second anecdote is not so easily explained due to the lack of detail available. James informed me that his partner had a family member who was involved with Landmark and that his family was disturbed that he had “taken it too far.” They consequently felt the need to have an “intervention” to get him to terminate his participation in Landmark activities. This kind of story shows: the potential level of resistance people can show to loved ones’ Landmark participation, the degree to which people may be perceived as overly engaged in Landmark (or any other group), or how this situation resembles that of families who have sought to “de-program” family members who belonged to cults. According to James, he knows of at least one other similar situation. A communication study of such incidents would be fascinating.
While I would assert these anecdotes are not representative of Landmark Education, the fact that they reportedly happened and get retold in stories is the point: Even if rare, they perpetuate the conversation about Landmark Education being cult-like.

As with so many things, zealotry is in the eyes of the beholder. Still, Landmark participants are neither trained nor encouraged to be “zealous.” They are trained to be enrolling, which is explicitly not a form of persuasion or proselytizing, but a demonstration of the lessons learned by uncovering one’s own inauthentic behavior, and the possibilities for living invented as a consequence. Sometimes after enrollment has occurred, an invitation to participate in Landmark’s courses is proffered, but not always, nor is it required as part of the enrollment process. Based on my observations, Landmark’s concerted efforts to transform their Introductions and the way people interact with non-graduates appears to have diminished their “bad rep” in this regard.

I think it would be fair to say that sometimes Landmark provides information and “advice” (in the form of coaching), and a commitment (intense or otherwise) is always invited. That is, at Landmark Forum introductions, customers are asked to commit either to registering because they see the possibility of what the Landmark Forum has to offer, or to choose that it’s not for them. Fence-sitting on the issue is discouraged, partly on the grounds that, for

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26 To reiterate, enrollment is distinct from “inviting” or “registering” someone in a course.
27 For more, see the section below entitled, “Two Sole Purposes: Recruiting Members and Fundraising.”
the customer, not making a powerful choice becomes yet another thing that remains incomplete for them.

While I have no personal experience to corroborate this, some Landmark staff or participants have been criticized by others for being what could be termed “zealous.” It really all depends on the person. While some participants (including staff, leaders, and others) may have appeared to others as zealous (whatever that means), I would argue that it is not fair to label the entire organization as zealous. I think James said it best: “There are people who are not good ambassadors for Landmark Education.”

(3) I would not choose for several reasons the word “transcendent” to describe Landmark’s goals. Of course, like everything else, it depends on how one defines “transcendent.” I believe, however, the term carries a lot of (mystico-philosophical) baggage that does not adequately apply to its courses—transformative, yes, but not “transcendental.” Both terms—transformative and transcendent—entail different conceptions of human reality, and these conceptions have consequences for understanding teachings promulgated in Landmark courses. “Transcendent” generally signifies something outside the senses, beyond the concrete and the tangible. People use “transcendent” in conversation, but often as an exaggeration, without meaning it in the more literal sense of “transporting” one to an extrasensory realm.28

While Landmark’s goal might be stated as “transforming one’s ability to experience living,” this is not a “transcendent” process, but rather another

28 “This salad dressing is absolutely transcendent!” for example.
possible way of being in the world. Landmark’s methodology does not transport people beyond their senses, rather, it provides an alternative and empowering interpretive frame through which to view life and the existential tools to gain access to a new realm of possibility, which is itself grounded in language. Landmark participants are trained to situate themselves in empirically-verifiable reality—in “what is so”—and not in some extrasensory realm. Labeling Landmark’s goals as anything resembling “mystical” or “transcendental” would be adding meaning or a quality to the experience that is inessential to the process of transformation as taught by Landmark Education.29

(4) Galanter’s definition of self-help group, while providing some relevance to Landmark is nevertheless inaccurate. To be rigorous, neither est nor Landmark Education was/is a self-help group, using Galanter’s own definition.30 In the strictest sense of the term, Landmark Education is not a “self-help” or “support group” (like Alcoholics Anonymous), but a corporation that offers classes on communication, relationships, and personal effectiveness. While it may diverge from conventional education, Landmark Education nevertheless teaches a curriculum, and is therefore distinct from a self-help group. It has a paid staff and a corporate structure and therefore does not display the more emergent, self-organizing, and self-regulating character of conventional self-help groups.31

29 Likewise, Zen Buddhism is sometimes thought of as “mystical,” with similar consequences.
30 Furthermore, it appears Galanter conflates “self-help” with “self-actualization,” as if the two were identical (p. 546).
31 On the other hand, the application of the term “self-help” is complicated by the unusual nature of Landmark’s organizational practices. As discussed above, some courses are generated by
One could say, nevertheless, that Landmark exhibits some features Galanter uses to define self-help groups: (1) people participate voluntarily; (2) mutual aid is provided between participants (however, again, the difference in organizational structure is that of a classroom, i.e., teachers teach students, as opposed to the more decentralized and mutual interaction of support groups); and (3) information in the form of communication tools and “coaching” (“advice”) is provided. Ultimately, while Landmark’s anomalousness deflects attempts to categorize it, calling it a “self-help group” would be inaccurate.

*Psychological forces of charismatic groups.* As stated, for Galanter, charismatic groups shape member belief and behavior through three psychological forces: (1) a high level of group cohesiveness, (2) an intensely held belief system, and (3) a profound influence on members’ behavior through the altering of consciousness. To what extent to do these apply to Landmark Education?

(1) Galanter defines group cohesiveness as a psychological force that bears on the psychiatric disposition of recruits. It is the product of all the forces that keep members engaged in a group: “When cohesiveness is strong, participants work to sustain the commitment of their fellow members, to protect them from threat, and to ensure the safety of shared resources” (1990, p. 544).

In addressing the issue of group cohesion, questions of relevance and applicability would be determined in part by which segment of the “Landmark population” is being examined. There are at least three: paid staff (including paid local groups who rely on the corporation to provide technical support to ensure the courses take place, which may be said to exhibit self-organization.)
course leaders), assistants (including unpaid course leaders and Landmark Introduction Leaders), and customers. The degree of cohesion depends on the group about whom one is speaking. Paid staff, as one would expect with any corporation, might display a greater cohesion than the other two, followed by assistants and customers. That having been said, Landmark Education works harder to maintain participation than any other social group in which I have been involved. Promises made in a Landmark seminar illustrate this point (see Table 6). These promises, combined with a communication structure that supports participants in keeping them, demonstrates a high level of intentionality—one I find to be far from average.

A specialized terminology and particular ways of using language also contribute to group cohesiveness. Landmark employs a unique technical vocabulary and an unusual syntax that may sound strange to non-graduates.\textsuperscript{32, 33} When non-graduates hear lay people use unfamiliar terms and syntax, with no other frame of reference, listeners select the closest category in their vocabularies. Among the things non-graduates might think are strange about Landmark, the communication of participants is perhaps the most obvious characteristic of something someone might think of as cult-like. Possessing a technical vocabulary and different way of speaking, however, in and of itself does not make a social group a cult any more than an engineering conference could be called a cult.

\textsuperscript{32} Landmark course leaders themselves refer to this as “jargon.”
\textsuperscript{33} For an examination of the ontological rhetoric of the Forum, see Hyde (1991).
LANDMARK EDUCATION
SEMINAR PARTICIPATION PROMISES

1. I promise to attend all sessions. I will miss a session only in the case that:
   - I've already communicated at session #1 or #2 that I have a previously scheduled commitment.
   - An emergency occurs. If this happens, I promise to call as soon as possible to let them know I won't be attending. I will have someone recreate the seminar for me.

2. I promise to be on time to all sessions unless I've already communicated at session #1 or #2 that I will be late.

3. I understand that all material presented in the Seminar is copyrighted by Landmark Education. I promise that any notes I take will be for my personal use.

4. I promise to respect the confidentiality of all participants.

5. I promise not to participate in gossip. If I have a complaint, I will take it to someone who can do something about it.

6. I promise to come to the seminar prepared by having done all the assignments and bringing my notebook.

Another aspect of the Landmark experience may lead people to consider it cult-like. As discussed, Landmark graduates practice a “possibility orientation.” This orientation goes against the grain of our cynical culture. Adopting a possibility orientation is an act of non-conformity, which may be met with resistance, marginalization, and sometimes hostility. When a non-graduate interacts with a graduate, she/he might think, “That person is not like me,” because of their way of speaking or an existential attitude. This determination of

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difference displays a tendency to make the “other” (in this case, a Landmark graduate) “wrong,” thus marginalizing that other based on the perception of unfamiliarity and oddness. This perceived difference, now viewed as undesirable or “bad,” leads the person to find a way to name the other, but in a way that helps legitimate and rationalize her/his own discomfort. Who are the “bad guys” in our current era? Cults rank near the top of the list.

Landmark Education graduates also appear distinct by virtue of their unusual level of mutual support. People who participate in Landmark Education (as a customer, assistant, staff, or course leader) are committed to transformation and to each other, but also to non-graduates. For people unaccustomed to a group who cares deeply for each other, this level of support appears unusual.35

There is a sense that Landmark graduates want to be with other graduates for several reasons—they feel freer to communicate openly, graduates whine and complain less, and their possibility orientation keeps things lighter, easier, more constructive, and less dramatic. If you asked me, “Would you prefer to hang out with people who have completed the Landmark Forum over those who haven’t?” The answer would be yes, mostly because the chances I will come away from the encounter with more insight and a possibility orientation are significantly greater.

Still, when one speaks of group cohesion, especially in regard to cults, images of exclusion and secrecy often ensue. In Landmark Education, there is

35 Particularly with an increasingly cynical mass media that financially benefits from sensationalizing growth groups like Landmark Education.
no demand or boundary control enforced to remove people from their non-Landmark social circles or to keep “outsiders” on the outside. To the contrary, emphasis is placed on having as many of one’s social circle as possible participate in Landmark Education. It is not exclusive, but rather expansive in terms of group cohesion. No limits are placed on with whom one associates, and Landmark graduates do not associate exclusively with other Landmark graduates. What occurs has less to do with group identity—that is, identification with the group as such—but rather an identification with the transformational work in which they engage.

(2) Putting “intensity” aside for now, Landmark’s belief system, roughly speaking, is that humans use symbol systems and that the relationship between language and reality is two-fold. On one hand, there is a “world to word” fit, which refers to language’s descriptive properties. For example, “It’s a sunny day” describes the kind of day it is. On the other hand, there is also a “word to world” fit, which attributes to language the ability to shape reality. In this case, one can make a promise to do something (“I will make this happen”), and by virtue of making that promise, the reality becomes shaped by the corresponding action, which itself grew out of language.

While this may be considered a belief system, in my experience, the focus in Landmark is not so much on a belief system as on employing the methodology that assists people in living more fulfilling lives. People may value the

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36 The exception being those who do not meet Landmark’s well-being standards, and even in those cases, it is up to applicants to decide if they wish to go against Landmark’s recommendation not to participate in a course.
methodology, and this might be considered by non-graduates (or disenchanted graduates) as “intense.” The word “intense,” however, connotes for me “extreme.” In either case, these terms suggest a value judgment.

What would be the basis for using the word “intense”? What distinguishes “intense” from simply being committed to something? As with the term “zealous,” Galanter offers no examples or explanation. My experience is not that the faith in Landmark’s methodology is “intense” as it is that the methodology is to varying degrees rigorously applied, depending on the level of the graduate’s training, her/his awareness in the moment, and the frequency with which she/he practices the tools.

At the same time, for those who have known someone before they’ve done the Landmark Forum, the change appears akin to some form of conversion (see Chapter Nine). People appear to behave differently, especially in the areas of self-expression and vitality, and in their willingness to admit to mistakes or poor treatment of others. Changes such as this having occurred in such a short amount of time (three days and an evening) are indeed unusual, and it is not surprising that people would be taken aback, surprised, curious, and perhaps even suspicious of such a change. I would venture to speculate that it is the perception of such a “conversion” that observers might most associate with either a mainstream religion or a cult, even more so than the different ways of communicating (although, clearly, these two are related).

(3) Does Landmark have a profound influence on group behavior by altering consciousness? To some extent, the word “profound” entails similar
drawbacks as “intense,” however, it is more “value-neutral” and at least does not convey a disapproving attitude. That have been said, I think it is fair to say Landmark has the potential to have a profound influence on group behavior. The degree of this influence is determined by the role one plays in relation to Landmark (i.e., whether one is staff, an assistant, or a customer). In conversations in and out of courses, Landmark graduates frequently invoke their gratitude for having taken the Landmark Forum and say it has had a profound impact on their lives.

Speaking from my own experience, I can say Landmark has had a profound influence on how I relate to my word—i.e., my integrity, the things I say, and the ways I interact with others. Most important, however—and this is what suggests Landmark Education is not a charismatic group—group forces there do not produce an “altered consciousness.” This description would be considerably problematic as applied to the Landmark experience (similarly to the unsuitability of “transcendental,” above). “Altered consciousness” is more appropriate to describe trance states or the effects of drug use. Do Landmark courses change participant outlooks? I would say yes. Do they “alter consciousness”? No.

*Relief or precipitation of psychiatric symptoms.* Galanter asserts that charismatic groups can both relieve and precipitate certain psychiatric symptoms. While it is possible Landmark courses could relieve or precipitate psychiatric symptoms, this claim has not been conclusively demonstrated in studies with
Galanter also writes that groups like est “disregard standard psychiatric treatment” (1990, p. 546). This is not the case with Landmark Education. Landmark makes it clear that if one is receiving therapy and/or taking medication for emotional issues, a mental health professional should be consulted. Landmark is explicit that its programs are not intended as a treatment of mental problems and are not a substitute for therapy. Regardless, Landmark’s purpose is not to deal with issues that belong to the domain of psychology. For example, in a Landmark Forum I reviewed, near the start of the first day a young man shared he had recently been contemplating suicide. He was asked to withdraw from the class, which he did.

Despite the inadequacy of using the term “charismatic group” to apply to Landmark Education, exploring Galanter’s criteria provides insight into Landmark Education and shines a light on activities that bear enough resemblance to charismatic groups that might lead some to consider it cult-like.

To sum up, then: I am not sure that people involved with Landmark Education are any more socially cohesive than other groups; Landmark

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37 Its demonstrated impact (or lack thereof) on psychiatric symptoms is discussed in Chapter Five.
38 “In the Program [i.e., the Landmark Forum], you will inquire into fundamental issues that have been of interest and concern to us as human beings. The experience of the Program is unique to each individual and there is no way to predict in advance exactly what you may think or feel. It is normal for some people to experience unwanted or unfamiliar emotions from time to time, such as fear, anger, sadness, regret, hatred, irritation and impatience. For most participants, exploring thoughts and feelings that they have not fully explored before is a useful and positive learning experience. Some participants have found that exploring life’s issues honestly may evoke uncomfortable and unpleasant feelings. For others, the Program may occur as physically, mentally and emotionally seriously distressing. If you are unwilling to encounter any of these powerful experiences in yourself or in others, or if you have any concern about your ability to deal with such experiences, THE MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS WHO ADVISE LANDMARK EDUCATION (‘OUR ADVISORS’) STRONGLY RECOMMEND THAT YOU DO NOT PARTICIPATE in the Program” (Landmark Education, 2006a, p. 2).
graduates may appear “intense” to some in their commitment to transformational work; Landmark courses do have a profound influence on behavior, but perhaps not so much “group behavior” as that of its individual members (and not via “altered consciousness”); and, it is possible, depending on the mental health status of participants, that Landmark courses might relieve and precipitate psychiatric symptoms. Some individual leaders, staff, and customers may be charismatic (and sometimes zealous), however, describing Landmark as a “zealous” or as “transcendental” organization is problematic; finally, Landmark is clearly not a self-help group, using Galanter’s own definition. Thus, while there does appear some marginal relevance in these cases, I would again suggest that the anomalousness of Landmark Education keeps it from being accurately labeled a “charismatic group.”

The Cult Stereotypes Checklist

As stated, scholarly consensus around the term “cult” is lacking, and there is disagreement over whether cults are harmful or benign. Furthermore, attempts to categorize Landmark Education as a new religious movement or charismatic group yield unsatisfying results. Given that the curiosity of many would not be satisfied with a simple rejection of the term (or just say, “it depends on who’s speaking”) and leave it at that, it would be helpful to confront the question of whether Landmark is a cult head-on.

In this section I explore what may be considered “typical” features and/or stereotypes of cults and—regardless of their acceptance in the academy—apply my knowledge and experience of Landmark Education to answer the question,
“How, in what ways, and to what extent may Landmark get constructed as a
cult?” In lieu of a standard accepted definition, below I assemble my own list of
commonly-held stereotypes of and/or criteria for cults and discuss how they
compare to my own experience of Landmark Education.

Religious in Nature

While not all sociologists of religion agree that cults must be religious, let’s
look at that question anyway. Landmark Education courses, as stated, are
secular in nature and are not religious. The issue concerning what I describe as
the “evangelical” aspect of Landmark, however, may appear almost religious or
perhaps “zealous” to some (e.g., Galanter, 1990, 1999). Participants’ enthusiasm
for Landmark’s work—the work of transformation—can appear unusual, and the
closest analogue for people may be some kind of religious fervor. (That, in and of
itself, is an interesting commentary on cultural attitudes.) Furthermore, as noted
above, Landmark participants may belong to any religion and this may have them
bring the same kind of quality to their communication about Landmark.

Strange Beliefs and Behavior

“Beliefs” becomes a very interesting word when applied to Landmark
Education (see discussion on Galanter, 1990, above). Even so, the relationship
between Landmark participants and their ideas is not “belief” per se—it’s not so
much a belief in the perception of reality offered by Landmark Education (which
is itself not strange at all, but is remarkably consistent with contemporary
communication theories). Rather, it is viewed as an empowering interpretation
that is available for the choosing. Furthermore, “belief” in that interpretation is not a prerequisite to employing Landmark’s methodology.

As far as behavior is concerned, clearly Landmark’s style of communication occurs as distinctive to some, and perhaps strange to others (e.g., the vocabulary and syntax; in addition, I would say, outlook and attitude as well.)\(^{39}\) Some people have a “low bar” for what is “strange”—for others, the behavior of Landmark participants might be perceived as simply different. I have seen very few people I would call “intense.” Some people exhibit a wide-eyed enthusiasm—some might call it the look of a “true believer”—but this is rare. There are a few “characters,” however, which makes things more fun (and I myself might be one of them). One fairly consistent trait is that people look “alive” and being actively engaged in the present moment. Still, I have never found participants to behave “stranger” than people in general. In fact, the opposite is the case: I find there to be less “strangeness” in my Landmark experience than “outside” of or prior to my participation. I think the emphasis on possibility as opposed to cynicism and despair, because it is not “ordinary,” can be viewed as strange by many. Other behavioral aspects of Landmark Education are scattered throughout this study and readers can draw their own conclusions.

**Authoritarian Power Structure**

As stated, Landmark Education is an employee-owned company with a Board of Directors elected by current and former staff. The Chief Executive Officer serves at the behest of the Board, like many other corporations. Since no

\(^{39}\) The communication of Landmark Education participants will be explored more fully in Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten.
employee owns more than three percent of company stock, Landmark’s power structure would appear less authoritarian than many corporations or organizations. Furthermore, in some areas without a staffed Landmark center—like Tampa Bay—unpaid assistants produce and deliver courses (although the corporation pays for space, materials, and related expenses). Especially in these cases, Landmark is more participatory and decentralized than other corporate structures, further discounting claims of authoritarianism.

Charismatic and Dictatorial

One could easily argue that Landmark course leaders are “charismatic” to varying degrees, in the generic sense discussed above. They are not, however, “divine creatures” with special knowledge, nor do they coerce, pressure, or instruct participants to abandon their families, jobs, careers, friends, hobbies, or any other relationships or activities to serve the corporation. Given the lack of “control” over participants’ lives, in addition to the fact that leaders of various groups can be “charismatic” without being cult-like, the comparison to Landmark appears weak at best.

Self-Appointed Leaders on a Special Mission

Landmark course leaders are not self-appointed. They achieve their positions through three to seven or more years of extensive training and development. Landmark Leaders are those who produce outstanding results, and, contrary to much of the business world, promotion and opportunity have little to do with “who you know,” or being in the right place at the right time. Having taken and coached the Introduction Leader Program (the entry-level
leadership program), I can attest to the rigor of this training, and can only imagine the high level of training Landmark Forum Leaders undergo. On the other hand, while Landmark Forum Leaders are not self-appointed, they do have a special mission in life: to bring Landmark’s transformational work to the largest audience possible. Using this criterion, many companies, organizations, and religious groups whose leaders espouse a special mission could be called “cult-like.”

Reverence of Members Directed upon Leaders

First of all, Landmark does not have “members.” Secondly, Landmark course leaders accrue respect and admiration (I would not say “devotion”) from participants. In Landmark’s current phase of existence, their 57 Landmark Forum Leaders are spread across the globe and do not generally lead courses in the same geographical area with any frequency. As a matter of practical consequence, therefore, individual Landmark Forum Leaders are not in a position to maintain any kind of “following,” nor are participants in a position to become “followers.” Furthermore, participants are taught to honor their word and to live their own lives with integrity, not to heap praise or adoration on course leaders. In fact, it would not be going too far to say that, in contrast to cult leaders, Landmark course leaders really don’t care what others’ opinions are about them. Certainly, they do not ask (much less “demand”) respect, allegiance, admiration, or devotion from anyone. Much the same could be said of other course leaders.
Totalitarian Control of Member Behavior

Course participants are never told what to do, eat, or wear, nor are they told where to work, sleep, or live, or who to date, befriend, marry, or work for. Autonomy and self-determination of all people are promoted in Landmark courses. Participant decisions are made by participants, not by the group or the leaders. This is not to say that group influence does not operate—clearly it does—but as a social support structure for individuals’ self-declared commitments.

Ethical Double Standards

Generally speaking, double standards are rules applied more stringently to one party than to others, however, accusations that someone exhibits a double standard occur in situations in which accusers believe a higher standard is being applied to themselves than to those applying the double-standard. With regard to Landmark Education, there does not appear to be a higher set of ethical standards espoused for participants and leaders on one hand and for non-participants on the other, nor does it appear there are higher standards for participants and program leaders. If anything, program leaders and participants hold themselves to a higher standard than non-graduates, given the fundamental place integrity holds in the training (in comparison to society at large).

Believing that I am “better” than people who have not done the Landmark Forum is a trap. At the same time, I would say holding such a view is both understandable and probably pervasive. The clarity one gets from the training, particularly in sensitizing oneself to how meaning gets constructed out of “what
happens,” is in stark contrast to non-graduates’ fervent belief that “this is the way it is, not just my interpretation.” On the other hand, the hypocrisy of this “more transformed than thou” attitude is expressly undermined by the consistent practice of the “authenticity work” (i.e., uncovering one’s own inauthenticity—see Chapter Ten). When I begin to think I’m better than a non-graduate, it does not take long to see my own foibles. One could say Landmark graduates and non-graduates are exactly the same in every way—it’s just that graduates see this more frequently.

Two Sole Purposes: Recruiting Members and Fundraising

Again, technically speaking, Landmark Education does not have “members”—it has staff, assistants, and customers. Landmark wants to expand its market and it does so by finding new customers. In contrast to cults or new religious movements, however, it also offers a service in exchange for tuition (like other educational institutions). It does not solicit “donations” for its own activities from customers.40 It has solicited donations for other causes, however, very infrequently. In my nine years, I can recall three solicitations for non-profit organizations in which the Seminar Leader asked for donations for the Hunger Project, American Red Cross Hurricane Relief (in the wake of Hurricane Katrina), and the Foundation for Global Transformation. In these situations, it was clearly communicated that giving was voluntary.

As described, Landmark Education is not a typical business or educational institution, and does not always operate in conventional ways. Some people

40 Like GraceNote Powerful Living did in Criminal Intent.
claim Landmark Education is a disreputable and fraudulent business, there are unflattering accounts of Landmark Education on the internet,\textsuperscript{41} and it has been accused of being an elaborate marketing game (see Faltermayer, 1998, March 16, above).\textsuperscript{42} Mahoney (1998, August) published an article in \textit{Elle Magazine} asserting that the Landmark Forum is an elaborate pyramid scheme and implies Landmark participants are hypnotized into believing the results they experienced are valid. The case was dismissed before going to trial, and Landmark received no retraction or apology.

Of course, any business will have its critics. When one takes into account reports of customer satisfaction with the Landmark Forum, for example, the charge appears rather curious.\textsuperscript{43} A few of its business practices may seem strange to some, and for this reason, people may come to believe Landmark is a scam. For example, (1) although they are a global business, Landmark does not advertise, (2) customers bring in new customers, and (3) Landmark relies on

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} Numerous internet accounts (e.g., Ross, 2000b) are both unfavorable and dramatic. I find the credibility of these accounts wanting. I question not only their credibility with regard to the validity of their interpretations, but have cause to believe that they are completely made up. For example, in its unsuccessful attempt to sue Rick Ross, Landmark hired a forensic linguist who determined that many of the supposedly different accounts on Ross' website were written by the same person. If this is true, it raises fascinating questions as to why such a thing would occur. These questions will be put aside, however.
\item \textsuperscript{42} This charge is almost amusing, since there is nothing “elaborate” about Landmark’s marketing. Landmark Education does not hide their use of unpaid assistants or course leaders, and customers generate new customers without receiving fees or commissions for referrals. It’s that simple.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Among them, a survey of Landmark Forum graduates (Landmark Education Corporation, 2007f) found that more than 90% of participants report practical and enduring value for their life; more than 90% of participants report a better understanding of relationships and their role in them; and nearly every participant received unexpected benefits. Landmark critics (e.g., Mahoney, 1998, August, above) believe participants are “hypnotized” to believe they are getting these results (while offering no proof).
\end{itemize}
unpaid “staff” (called “assistants”) to introduce and deliver its courses. I discuss these practices next.

(1) Landmark Education does not advertise or offer sales commissions. The company does not advertise, but stakes its existence on course leaders and participants finding new customers through a somewhat unusual practice of unpaid network marketing: Participants register friends, family, co-workers, and acquaintances into Landmark Education courses, and receive no money or other material compensation for doing so. (The exception to this is Landmark Education’s Introduction Leaders, whose members receive a 50% discount on Landmark Education courses but do not receive payment in the form of salary or commission). Since participants register new customers and are not paid, some think Landmark Education is a scam. It is ironic to consider that if customers or staff did receive commissions or bonuses for registering Landmark participants, this would also lead (perhaps more) people to charge that Landmark is a “scheme” (a double-bind, to be sure).

(2) Landmark encourages participants to invite guests and register them in courses, and this is their primary means of generating revenue. Given that Landmark does not advertise, generating new customers through other means is imperative. Participants are regularly encouraged to share their experiences and invite guests to events. No doubt this “encouragement” occurs for some people as “pressure.” I know I was at times annoyed by what is informally referred to as “the guest conversation” or “the marketing conversation” (a regular fixture of Landmark courses).
I believe the issue of inviting guests is at the center of many people’s discomfort around potential participation in Landmark’s programs, especially as it bears a family resemblance to bad experiences people have had with organized religions. For example, the Unification Church (“Moonies”) practiced “heavenly deception” (also called “divine deception”), that is, they deliberately deceived people (e.g., when soliciting funds) to further the Church’s goals (Galanter, 1999, p. 107). Does Landmark or its participants engage in similar practices? In the main, the answer to this question is no. In my experience, invitational conversations are transparent in their intent. I have never personally witnessed anything I considered deceptive. To be rigorous, however, I will distinguish between the policy, potential practice, and common practice.

In terms of Landmark’s policy toward inviting guests, leaders do not participate in anything that might be called “deceptive.” In fact, they are very straightforward about this. Near the beginning of Introductions, leaders say,

There are two parts to tonight, including a short break.

In the first part, we’re committed that you get something of value that you can take away tonight. Then we’ll take a short break.

After the short break, we’ll tell you about the kind of material that gets covered during the 3½ days of The Landmark Forum and give those of you who would like to register an opportunity to do that. (Landmark Education, 2002, p. 6)

Participants are coached by leaders to invite others in an ethical manner. Leaders might say, for example, “Tell them what you got out of the Landmark Forum, what they might get out of it, and invite them to an introduction. Let them know that the Landmark Forum is three days and an evening, and that it costs
$440 with a $100 deposit. Do not invite them to dinner and then bring them to an introduction without telling them you will be bringing them to an introduction.”

Landmark continues to evolve its business practices. In some cases these changes have been geared toward minimizing guests’ perception that they are being pressured to register. At Introductions, assistants are trained not to approach guests who have already declined an invitation to register. This seems like common sense, but there was a time when, albeit unintentionally, guests were approached by more than one assistant, and this understandably annoyed them (“For crying out loud, I said I wasn’t interested, damn it!”). I view such instances as more amateurish and embarrassing than troubling.\textsuperscript{44} From a guest’s perspective, however, it might occur as being “pressed.”

Here’s another example. As described above, during my Introduction Leader experience, Landmark invented a distinction between “enrollment,” “invitation,” and “registration.” To review, enrollment is “causing a new possibility to be present for another such that they are touched, moved, and inspired by that possibility.” Inviting is extending an invitation to learn about the Landmark Forum (or other course, or a Landmark event). Registering is when someone completes a registration card and pays their deposit. (The culture at large makes no distinction between enrollment and registration, and I think it’s helpful to separate them.) Landmark course leaders also instruct participants that enrollment is not a means to an end or “an in order to,” as they are called. “Do not enroll people with the intention to invite them. This is manipulative, it will fall flat, and seem like a

\textsuperscript{44} As with so many of the negative interpretations of Landmark participant behavior, Burke’s (1984a) notions of the comic and tragic frame come to mind.
hidden agenda.” While enrollment must be present to effectively invite others, an
invitation is not required.

Thus, in terms of policy, Landmark appears transparent in their inviting
practices.

Because we are dealing with human beings, the potential for inviting
guests in an unethical way exists. Just because participants are coached to be
ethical does not mean it always happens that way. It is possible that some
people might be deceptive. I recall the first time I did the Landmark Forum, a
disgruntled man sitting next to me commented that, based on what a colleague
told him, he thought the Landmark Forum was a “business” seminar. As it did not
conform to his expectations, he was not pleased. Since I wasn’t a witness to that
conversation, I cannot say what happened. Either the person lied to him and said
it was a business seminar or he was told about the Landmark Forum, and that he
would benefit from it professionally. Who knows? Based on how people rarely
listen, I am apt to speculate that the latter scenario is just as likely. Honesty and
integrity are such prominent values in Landmark courses, it just doesn’t make
sense that this type of occurrence is at all prevalent, and I cannot recall hearing
about any similar incidents in nine years of participation.

While people could be deceptive, I do not believe this is common practice.
It is more likely that invitees will not be properly prepared for what to expect from
an introduction, namely that personal issues are discussed. Someone attending
an introduction who did not know this beforehand might be upset. If the invitee
has not been prepared, however, the Introduction to the Landmark Forum makes this clear near the beginning:

I know we have just met and we may be strangers, and it’s not a common conversation to talk about one’s life with a stranger. Most of you didn’t wake up this morning and say, “Gee, I’d like to talk with a stranger this evening about my life or what’s important to me.” However, what makes tonight valuable is that it is about you and your life, and whatever way you are tonight works. (Landmark Education, 2002, p. 6)

So, if guests do not know that the conversation they are attending is of a personal nature going in, they at least know it early on in the introduction, and can always choose to leave at that time (or at any time).

What is also likely in terms of common practice is that people often make “clumsy” invitations. This is understandable, since, a lot of people want to “know what it is” before they will accept an invitation to an introduction, and as has been discussed, the Landmark Forum does not easily fit inside ready-made categories. Landmark graduates may have difficulty finding the words to describe Landmark programs. Indeed, it takes the six and a half month Introduction Leader Program to adequately train people to talk about the Landmark Forum effectively. For this reason, course leaders generally instruct participants simply to tell people a “before and after” story. These might range from the dramatic to the mundane.

For example, a middle-aged woman might say,

My father went away when I was very young and I never knew him. After I did the Landmark Forum a few months ago, I decided to find him. I learned he was in prison, so I wrote him a letter. He wrote me back, and now we are in communication for the first time since I was a child. Not only that, but I learned that I had three brothers and some cousins I didn’t know I had, and, as of last week, I’ve now met every one of them in person.
Or, alternatively, a husband might share, “Before the Landmark Forum, I never helped my wife with the housework. After the Landmark Forum, I now help her with cooking and the dishes, and she’s never been happier!”

It is up to graduates to gauge whether the person to whom they’re speaking is moved, touched, or inspired (“enrolled”) by what they share. If not, an invitation would be regarded as inauthentic, inappropriate, and ineffective. If they are enrolled, then it becomes appropriate to invite them to check it out.

Still, even with enrollment present, this still may not be enough for someone to accept an invitation. Because people want the course explained to them (as I did—see Chapter One), failure to meet this demand may result in people declining the invitation. When people decline such invitations, the inviter may feel frustrated, “This was so great for me, and I know it would be great for them, why can’t they see that?” In the absence of enrollment and an acceptance of the invitation, the participant may succumb to the temptation to “persuade” or “argue” with the person they’re inviting, usually resulting in a failed result.

I understand the discomfort felt on both sides. For example, if I invited a born-again, evangelical Christian to an introduction to the Landmark Forum and he in turn invited me to his church, I would probably feel a little uncomfortable and feel the need to explain why I’d decline his invitation. He could just as easily make an analogous argument for why I should attend his church. This discomfort is all part of being human, and no matter how Landmark trains or prepares graduates to extend invitations, given the personal nature of the experience, the potential for discomfort will likely always be there.
With regard to sharing and inviting, I have eventually come to see the following: When I don’t share my transformational experiences, my transformation ceases to be. Inviting guests is itself an opportunity to share such experiences. I like what Landmark has to offer and the integrity in which they operate and whether I get “annoyed” or not, it’s fine that they spend time encouraging participants to invite guests. When I don’t invite or have people in my life participate, my life does not work as well. People who do the Landmark Forum and think it makes a difference for them want other people to do it also because it has a collateral effect of making their own lives work better. It is true participants are encouraged by course leaders to share their experiences, however, sharing their experiences does not always mean mentioning Landmark Education.

(3) Landmark Education utilizes “assistants” to deliver its work. These assistants are not paid monetarily. This may appear odd or unusual. Providing context for this practice may help to understand it better. Landmark’s Assisting Program is populated by Landmark Forum graduates and is in itself a form of training. This is because assistants apply course distinctions as they assist with the course. Assistants experience courses by delivering the courses (versus “participating”), and by doing so, they have opportunities to learn from the courses without paying for them. In this light, the practice may no longer seem strange.
Innovative and Exclusive

There is no question that Landmark Education claims to be innovative (Landmark Education, 2007e). At the same time, it does not consider itself exclusive. Furthermore, course leaders repeatedly stress they hold no lien on truth. They actually tell people not to believe anything they say. Rather than claim exclusivity, course leaders have stated that other ways of achieving transformation are possible, legitimate, and worthwhile, however, they believe the Landmark Forum is the fastest and most reliable way to learn the practice of transformation.

Significant or Total Devotion of Time and Resources

It is clear that Landmark customers are encouraged to devote time and resources to its activities. “Significant” is relative, “total” less so. For example, in the anecdote about the Landmark “intervention” (above), the family believed that their relative was spending too much time on Landmark Education activities. Landmark invites all customers to extend their participation beyond taking courses to assisting. So, it is possible that people could devote “significant” amounts of time to its activities. While encouraged, however, no one is compelled or coerced to do so. The amount of time spent on courses depends on the level of individual commitment (i.e., whether one is a consumer or a producer of the work). Understandably, extensive time commitments are required for leadership positions.

45 “The ideas, insights, and distinctions on which Landmark's programs are based make Landmark a leader and innovator in the field of training and development” (Landmark Education, 2007, “About Us,” ¶1).
Landmark’s weekend courses may make for long days (twelve to fifteen hours in some cases), but these do not recur over a long period of time. It is true that one is likely to get less sleep than usual during a weekend course, however, this is known well in advance by participants who are willing to do so. When the course ends, people go back to their lives. Courses held on weeknights are around three hours. Depending on the particular course, assignments are generally not time-consuming, and value is frequently placed on achieving results with “velocity.”

Landmark courses, like most things, cost money. Their courses are less expensive than many other educational services, however. At $440, the Landmark Forum (with the first seminar being free) comes to about $5.60 per hour. The tuition for other weekend courses is in line with that of the Landmark Forum. Ten-session seminars at $110 are about $3.70 per hour. Those who “re-take” the same course (called “reviewers”) pay about half of the cost of first-timers. Compare that to the cost of other educational programs (see Table 7). Could someone spend a lot of money on Landmark courses? Sure.

Social Isolation

While Landmark Forum participants endure long hours, they do not stay with the group overnight and are not required to be away from their families and friends. To the contrary, participants are encouraged to speak to their friends, families, and co-workers during regular breaks throughout the course as part of their assignments, and not, as is sometimes portrayed, solely to recruit new customers. My experience has taught me that Landmark graduates, as a result of
their participation, become more engaged with their families, friends, co-workers, and communities, not less.

Table 7

Cost Comparison of Landmark Forum to Other Educational Programs (figures approximate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Tuition per course</th>
<th>Cost per hour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landmark Forum&lt;sup&gt;46&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>$440</td>
<td>$5.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Robbins, <em>Unleash the Power Within</em>&lt;sup&gt;47&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>$895.00</td>
<td>$19.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State university (University of South Florida)&lt;sup&gt;48&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>$312 (residents)</td>
<td>$104 (residents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$1581 (non-residents)</td>
<td>$527 (non-residents)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private university (University of Chicago)&lt;sup&gt;49&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>$4,669</td>
<td>$1556 per hour&lt;sup&gt;50&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Brainwashed” Members<sup>51</sup>

Another feature commonly ascribed to cults is that those who join them are brainwashed. “Brainwashing” belongs to a “family” of manipulative techniques, along with “mind control,” and its more gentle counterparts, *thought reform* (Lifton, 1961; Singer & Lalich, 1995) and *coercive persuasion* (Schein, 1961). Compared to the latter two, brainwashing requires physical coercion, and

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<sup>46</sup> Landmark Education Corporation (2007h). The Landmark Forum takes place over three and one-half days and includes a ten-session seminar (three hours per session).
<sup>47</sup> This course takes place in 44 hours over 4 days (Robbins, 2007, “Dates and Locations”).
<sup>48</sup> University of South Florida (2007)
<sup>49</sup> University of Chicago (2007)
<sup>50</sup> Private schools often do not charge by the credit hour, but by the course. This figure was arrived at based on tuition for one College course per quarter (each class being approximately 3 hours per week).
<sup>51</sup> Alternate descriptions of the kind of process that takes place in Landmark courses that do not carry an ethical judgment may be found in Wilson’s (1984) “resocialization and deconditioning” and Moore’s (1995) “dereification.”
the others do not. This section discusses the notion of brainwashing in cults and asks the question of whether Landmark participates in any form of “mind control.”

The idea that cult members are brainwashed is mostly promulgated by members of the Anti-Cult Movement (ACM) and is a rather common stereotype of cults. The “evidence” offered by ACM groups as to who joins cults and why runs counter to social scientific research (Anthony, 2001; Anthony and Robbins, 1994; Barker, 1984; Dawson, 2003b). Research shows that people are not “victims” of a nefarious, involuntary process.

Much academic literature on “cultic brainwashing” appears to mirror that of academic discussions of cults in general: (1) There is no consensus on definitions or even whether such a process “exists” (i.e., that brainwashing occurs, achieves its ends, is effective, etc.—similar to the question of whether there “are” such things as “cults”); moreover, a definitive argument for the “existence” or effectiveness of thought reform or coercive persuasion is yet to be made (Anthony & Robbins, 2004); (2) there is an academic split in the “brainwashing” debate—cult “apologists” say cults don’t brainwash their members, cult “bashers” do; (3) whether one thinks cults/NRMs “brainwash” depends on one’s orientation, predisposition, or attitude toward cults (Robbins, 1984); and (4) the notion of brainwashing and its various forms appear increasingly regarded as antiquated, incorrect, and/or unsubstantiated ideas. Thought reform has failed to gain a foothold among most NRM scholars in part because brainwashing is a problematic notion theoretically, and (logically, as a
result) there is a lack of empirical evidence that such processes have their (allegedly) intended effects.

Does Landmark “brainwash,” use thought reform methods, or “coercively persuade” participants? While it is tempting simply to say “no,” as usual, it depends on definitions and the frame of the interpretation. With respect to the current study, there is no social scientific research *demonstrating* that Landmark (or *est* before it) brainwashes participants. At the same time, *claims* have been made (or implied) that *est* and the Forum engaged in thought reform methods. These claims, however, are not grounded in scientific method.

Some characterize the techniques used in courses like *est* as “manipulative” and “authoritarian,” even classifying them as “brainwashing” (Brewer, 1975; Rome, 1977). Others, like Spiegel (1983), claim that authoritarian techniques are used to produce the intended effects. The question should be raised as to whether these techniques rise to the level of “authoritarian” or simply employ some mode of “authority.”

I would suggest that the accusation of “authoritarianism” is not particularly unique to courses like Landmark’s. What is perhaps more unique is that, at least in the early days of *est*, trainers were reportedly voracious in their treatment of participants, sometimes calling them “assholes” (Rhinehart, 1976). The alleged justification for such treatment was to shock participants into realizing how phony and lacking in integrity they were. This practice has been eliminated from programs offered by Landmark Education Corporation, so Landmark can claim their course leaders “present [their] programs in a powerful, provocative, and
respectful manner” (Landmark Education Corporation, 1996, p. 6). During the est days, “respectful” might not have been used to describe leaders’ presentation style. It has been my experience that participants are treated with more respect in Landmark courses than in most everyday life situations. Furthermore, it is important to note that trainees are clearly free to leave or quit a course if they choose. The accusation of “authoritarianism,” I believe it fair to say, is therefore overstated, and that many cultural practices bear such characteristics without being authoritarian.

Exercising authority in courses is not unique to courses like Landmark’s. The concern over authoritarianism may have in fact influenced est’s (and subsequently Landmark Education’s) shift away from the more “shocking” and dramatic techniques reminiscent of the 60s and 70s. Thus, with respect to Landmark, this issue has to a certain extent been addressed in a revised training style considerably less stern and “in your face.”

As a personal observation, my experience has been that course leaders who originally took the est training, while still being “powerful, provocative, and respectful,” appear to retain some of est’s edginess, compared to those course leaders who were trained since Landmark Education was formed. This is a pedagogical-historical legacy that will likely dissipate over time as more of the original est leaders retire.

Authoritarianism aside, the issue of “brainwashing” is a different matter. Part of this lies in the different meanings of the term. “Brainwashing” has two

52 Recall that Time Magazine refers to LEC as a “kinder, gentler est” (Faltermayer, 1998, March 16)—see Chapter Three).
senses, one more coercive, the other more subtle. Brainwashing can use force to indoctrinate someone into giving up basic political, social, or religious beliefs and attitudes and replacing them with contrasting regimented ideas. Another definition of brainwashing makes it a form of persuasion, whether through propaganda or sales techniques.53

There is no forcible indoctrination in Landmark courses. Course leaders frequently remind participants something to this effect: “None of this is true. We made it all up. Don’t believe any of it. What we offer is merely a way to look at yourself and your life. All we ask is that you try it on while you’re in the course. If you decide it doesn’t work for you, don’t use it.” In addition, participants must promise to be responsible for their own well-being. If anyone feels coerced, they are free to speak to the Course Supervisor or the Landmark Forum Leader to resolve it. If no satisfaction is obtained, they are free to quit the course and receive a full refund.

Regardless of the validity of the above critical viewpoints, let’s examine how such claims are constructed. Here I discuss two academic examples of attempts to link pre-Landmark courses (est and The Forum) to thought reform—Singer (1995) and Galanter (1990). First I outline Singer’s six conditions of thought reform and apply them to my experience of Landmark Education. I then report Galanter’s description of est, evaluate his interpretation of that training, and investigate his perspective by applying it to Landmark courses.

53 Given the ambiguity and subjective nature of “propaganda” and “sales techniques,” this question requires further investigation, however, it will not be resolved in this study.
Singer’s six conditions of thought reform. The notion of thought reform comes from Lifton (1961), who studied “brainwashing” in China. Lifton distinguishes between “brainwashing,” which entails forcible imprisonment, with “thought reform.” Thought reform does not involve forcible imprisonment, but instead employs methods that persuade without obtaining permission from the persuaded. Lifton identified eight themes involved in changing people’s minds without their agreement: (1) milieu control (controlled relations with the outer world); (2) mystic manipulation (the group has a higher purpose than the rest); (3) confession (confess past and present sins); (4) self-sanctification through purity (pushing the individual towards a not-attainable perfection); (5) aura of sacred science (beliefs of the group are sacrosanct and perfect); (6) loaded language (new meanings to words, encouraging black-white thinking); (7) doctrine over person (the group is more important than the individual); and (8) dispensed existence (insiders are saved, outsiders are doomed).

Singer (1995) modifies Lifton’s theory, with the result being her six conditions of thought reform: (1) Keep the person unaware of what is going on and how she or he is being changed a step at a time. (2) Control the person's social and/or physical environment; especially control the person's time. (3) Systematically create a sense of powerlessness in the person. (4) Manipulate a system of rewards, punishments and experiences in such a way as to inhibit behavior that reflects the person's former social identity. (5) Manipulate a system

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54 The notion that obtaining permission is a prerequisite to non-coercive persuasion is indeed a curiosity. When I watch a TV commercial, am I asked if it’s okay to be persuaded to buy the product?
of rewards, punishments, and experiences in order to promote learning the group's ideology or belief system and group-approved behaviors. (6) Put forth a closed system of logic and an authoritarian structure that permits no feedback and refuses to be modified except by leadership approval or executive order.

Singer claims that the Forum employed thought reform methods to achieve its goals (pp. 182-212). Based on my own observations and analysis, Singer’s conditions for thought reform as applied to the Landmark Forum occur as either simply incorrect, or when fitting, beg the question (meaning, it’s not clear what the problem is). In general, Singer’s ideas, as all theories of brainwashing or thought reform, deprive individuals of their agency. Supposedly, one minute a person is in control of themselves, and after non-coercive “conditioning,” lose that control. For Singer, when exposed to the “cults in our midst,” individuals cease to be agents of their own lives, and become “victims” of a manipulative process. Below, I take each of her six conditions of thought reform and evaluate their pertinence to the work of Landmark Education.

(1) Keep the person unaware that there is an agenda to control or change the person. It is difficult to fathom that anyone participating in Landmark courses would be unaware of an agenda. Whether that agenda is to “control” or “change” the person is a different question. As with anything else, it depends on how one interprets the situation. One could say that Landmark wants to control people so it will make money, and that they want people to change at least insofar as they become repeat customers or get others to pay for courses. This is a cynical and

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55 Theories of brainwashing and thought reform fail to support with evidence the notion that people lose their agency (Anthony & Robbins, 2004).
reductive interpretation—an *attribution of motive* seemingly based on a suspicion without scientific evidence to justify the suspicion.

(2) Control time and physical environment (contacts, information). To the extent that courses take place in time and space, there is “control” in the sense that courses are scheduled during specific times and at specific places. There is a timeline for the lesson plan and the timeline is adhered to for the most part, but not to the detriment of the course goals. For example, breaks are not scheduled at specific times, but rather, every two and a half to three hours, and only once the particular goal of the session is achieved. Communication with others outside the course is not restricted. People are free to pursue whatever information they choose, and apart from the time spent in the classroom, participants do what they choose, and communicate with whom they want. As has been stated, course leaders *encourage* participants to communicate with family, friends, and co-workers.

(3) Create a sense of powerlessness, fear, and dependency. Of all Singer’s conditions for thought reform, this condition departs the most from observable reality.⁵⁶ If Landmark courses “create” anything, it is not a sense of powerlessness. To the contrary, empowerment is at the center of the curriculum.⁵⁷ In the Landmark Forum, fear is explicitly recognized and acknowledged (distinguished), and is then confronted. People are not “left” with

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⁵⁶ In fact, Fisher, et al (1991) showed a slight increase in “locus of control” for Forum participants (see Chapter Five).
⁵⁷ It is ironic to consider that theories of brainwashing, thought reform, or coercive persuasion themselves create a sense of powerlessness and fear: “Ooh, I’m being manipulated against my will by these hucksters”—the *thought of this* is scary.
fear. They are taught that fear is a common emotion (physiologically indistinguishable from excitement), and that we are all afraid from time to time, and more often than we’d like to admit. They are also taught that courage is not the absence of fear, but rather acting in the face of fear—“feel the fear and do it anyway.”

As far as dependency goes, one could say people become “dependent” on Landmark courses. One could also say this about any ritualized behavior—meditation, church-going, exercise. My virtually non-stop Landmark participation, for example, could be considered dependent. Like the dentist in Criminal Intent said, “Being in that room, being told that my life had limitless possibilities. I needed to keep hearing it.” While the dentist phrases this in terms of need (or dependence), the “need” for repeating the training may be explained without reference to pathological dependence: Conversations for possibility, as phenomena of communication and language, are transitory—they go away. Furthermore, possibility is not generally supported in the culture. Consequently, without a structure or context to “remind” us of what is possible beyond what the past teaches us, we forget. Possibility disappears (and stays “disappeared”) as quickly as it arises. Without ongoing training, we lose facility in having such conversations. The word “dependent” therefore misconstrues the nature of personal transformation⁵⁸ and mischaracterizes the necessity for repetition, reinforcement, and social support.

⁵⁸ Transformation is not a one-time thing—“yesterday’s transformation is today’s ego trip.”
(4) Suppress old behavior and attitudes. What might be called “old behavior” in reference to Landmark Education would be “past-based” behavior, that which forms our identity. Such behavior limits what is possible, and participants are encouraged to live into possibilities that move, touch, and inspire them. I do not regard this as “suppression”: instead, past-based ways of being are distinguished as potentially limiting, and ultimately, unfulfilling. Participants have the opportunity to choose which behaviors and attitudes they wish to retain. Potential consequences of ways of being are examined, but no one is told how to be or act.

(5) Promote new behavior and attitudes. Landmark offers a form of existential education, so new behaviors and attitudes would be an expected outcome. Are new attitudes and behaviors “instilled” or are they “adopted”? Again, Singer’s implication is that in thought reform, the direction of causality moves from outside-in—some outside force changes people. Indeed, new behavior is promoted (no argument there), but I think it is more rigorous to say that new behavior and attitudes are available from the inquiry into what is possible, and it is up to participants to choose (or not) to adopt these new behaviors and attitudes.

Singer writes that thought reform manipulates a system of rewards and punishments to promote the group’s ideology and approved behaviors. This is one of her descriptions that appears to beg the question: Other than the subjective “manipulates,” to what extent may one attribute this feature to any social group? At the same time, describing possible negative reinforcement in
Landmark courses as “making people feel wrong” again takes agency away from individuals and contradicts the notion that individuals are the source of their own feelings. Furthermore, participants are not discouraged from raising questions since entire courses consist of inquiries into the nature of human beings. Questioning is an essential part of the process. In fact, one of the first conversations in the Landmark Forum is a question and answer session, where people have the opportunity to ask any and all kinds of questions before they commit to staying in the course.

(6) Put forth a closed system of logic. Singer discusses the issue of a closed system of logic in the context of “an authoritarian structure that permits no feedback and refuses to be modified except by leadership approval or executive order” (Singer, 1995, p. 68). Landmark has a feedback system in terms of its corporate behavior and within courses themselves. Participants are provided “Communication forms” they can complete in order raise questions, concerns, or complaints. Participants are also allowed to voice their concerns in classes, and complaints are directed to those who can do something about them. I have complained myself and have witnessed many examples. My early experience was mixed. On a couple of occasions, I felt that I was being made wrong for making an observation about the treatment of a participant (i.e., that the Landmark Forum Leader was being unnecessarily hard on someone). On other occasions, I felt my complaints were heard and that I was not made wrong.

In a seminar recently, I had become somewhat frustrated that participants at the microphone were going on too long and getting into extraneous detail while
sharing. On a communication form, I requested that the Seminar Leader call people out when they did this. At the very next session, the Seminar Leader addressed the issue and provided coaching to participants in being both more concise and more effective in their sharing.

On the whole, over the course of my nine-year experience, I believe Landmark has gotten better about receiving complaints without making people wrong (and I have become “better” at complaining by taking responsibility for my own interpretation). In addition, I have witnessed course leaders apologizing when confronted by someone who was upset for something said to them. So, it would not be accurate to say that the leaders always “win.” As far as “refusing to be modified” is concerned, I don’t know that Landmark is any more rigid than any other company or institution, for that matter. While I am unaware of changes to courses or processes having their source in participant feedback or complaints—Landmark continually revises its courses.

Applying Singer’s six conditions of thought reform to Landmark Education reveals an attitude of suspicion that may be at least tempered through an elaboration of the trainings. I believe her observations are in some cases off the mark. In others, I fail to see where the problem is. To sum up: It is possible that participants are unaware that part of Landmark’s strategy is to get them to become repeat customers and bring in new customers, although anyone who has attended an Introduction to the Landmark Forum would already know this. The social and physical environment is controlled to the extent that, as with other educational programs, there is a physical space and time frame in which the
course takes place. There is also “homework” which must be undertaken outside course hours. (The length of Landmark’s weekend courses may help account for the perception that more control is exerted than in other contexts.) In addition, not only is there is no evidence that Landmark courses create a sense of powerlessness, this goes against the one research study that examined the issue (Fisher, 1991). While behavior associated with a person’s pre-Landmark Forum experience may diminish, describing this as “inhibiting” locates causality in the course, depriving individuals of their own decision-making. Likewise, promotion of new behaviors may be said to occur, however the choice to engage them is the participant’s. Lastly, I have found that feedback is encouraged in Landmark courses. It is common, given the inquiry into oneself can be troubling at times, that course leaders instruct participants, “Please do not leave upset. If you’re upset about something, please speak with me.”

The extent to which Singer’s “conditions” even superficially describe what goes on in Landmark courses does so again by denying agency, which thus disempowers people by identifying them as “recipients” or “victims” of a process over which they have no say. The question that runs through this entire discussion on brainwashing is: Where does one locate the source and/or direction of causality? While it is ultimately a matter of one’s hermeneutic (largely arbitrary), my extensive experience tells me that what goes on in Landmark courses could not be accurately described as “passive conditioning.”

59 Once could say with Burke (1969a) that in Singer’s attribution of motive (as with Galanter, below), the “scene” “calls the plays” for the other pentadic elements, while Landmark, on the other hand, locates motive in terms of the agent. Neither is necessarily more “true” than the other, it is a rotation from one element of the pentad to another.
Participants do the work on themselves. It is an active process. Regardless of my disagreement over the use of thought reform methods in the Landmark Forum, it is indisputable that “thought reform” as a theory of a practice must deprive individuals of their agency.

Galanter: The action is (in) the frame. Galanter (1990) provides the second example I offer of an academic linking the work of Landmark Education’s progenitor (est) to thought reform. Here I report his claims about est and investigate his perspective by referring to my experience of Landmark courses. Galanter states that charismatic groups like est do not brainwash recruits or overtly coerce them (physically or otherwise). His stance appears more “neutral” and slightly little less accusatory than Singer with regard to thought reform, but the overall logic is basically the same: Galanter regards est as an intense and manipulative course. He stops short of accusing Werner Erhard and Associates of using thought reform methods by name, however, his description of est implies he does consider it as engaging in thought reform.

After labeling est a zealous charismatic self-help group, Galanter (1990) writes the following:

Erhard Seminars Training (est), a highly influential and zealous self-actualization movement, illustrates many characteristics of the charismatic group. It was established by a layman in 1971 and attracted scores of thousands of persons who were well adapted with the promise of ‘transforming their ability to experience living.’ Like the Unification Church and other charismatic groups, est engaged recruits in a setting where communications were subtly controlled by long-standing members and where intense commitment to the group’s worldview was promoted. Like many indigenous healing groups and modern cults, it made use of altered consciousness induced through manipulation of the social setting. This was achieved during induction workshops where participants underwent
Distortions in sleep, eating and toileting patterns and were exposed to intense emotion and verbal abuse (p. 546, italics added).

As with Singer (above), I am struck by the attitude Galanter brings to his description.60 His interpretations frame est’s work with a disapproving, condescending, or suspicious eye. Galanter’s framing of the action lends itself to considering est as a manipulative enterprise: communications were “subtly controlled,” “intense” commitment was promoted, the social setting was “manipulated,” sleep, eating, and toileting patterns were “distorted,” participants were “exposed” to “intense” emotion and verbal abuse. Unfortunately, Galanter omits specific examples, and it is difficult to adequately respond to his comments. Still, it is easy to see that by taking the “drama” out, these characterizations may be seen differently.

(1) Communications were “subtly controlled.” Like most insinuations that est used thought reform, this claim cannot be rebutted or affirmed. Communication takes place in Landmark courses the way it takes place. There is a curriculum and a methodology operating in its work, and much of the training is in communication. There is “direction” and “instruction,” and it is explicit and far from subtle. “Control” would be a sinister characterization.

How one characterizes communication in Landmark courses depends as much on the perspective brought to the description as it does on what transpires in the course. Landmark does not prevent contrary perspectives any more than a college classroom does: Participants are allowed to speak openly, as (one hopes) students in a classroom would. Like est/Landmark, a classroom teacher

60 While there are similarities to Singer, however, Galanter does not go so far as to deny agency.
would be expected to respond to differing points of view from a perspective consistent with the purpose of the course and its subject matter. Does this constitute “control”?

(2) “Intense” commitment was promoted. The issue of “intensity” has been discussed above. Again, commitment is encouraged and promoted. Again, intensity is in the eye of the beholder. A less dramatic way to express this notion is that, once participants conclude for themselves that operating with integrity and communicating openly makes life work, it would be logical and rigorous to commit to a consistent application of these principles. Are “rigor” and “consistency” equal to “intense”?

(3) Sleep, eating, and toileting patterns were “distorted.” It is not unreasonable to regard the schedule for Landmark’s weekend courses as demanding. Courses are 12-15 hours long, with scheduled breaks every two and a half to three hours, plus a 90-minute dinner break. Indeed, this is not a standard classroom schedule. Given that the course may last until midnight, it is possible participants get less sleep than they are accustomed to (especially given varying travel times to and from the classroom). It is also likely that eating schedules may be different during the course.

As far as toileting patterns are concerned, this is perhaps the one element of Galanter’s description that rings the truest. People are pretty much used to “going” when they need to (with obvious and regular exceptions), and going to the bathroom at times other than breaks is discouraged. This means either one does not have to go until a break or needs to go before the break. In the latter
case, one can either “hold it in” or go to the bathroom. In Landmark courses, however, no one is forced wet their pants or soil themselves. I have it on eyewitness accounts that stories about est’s barring the doors to prevent people from using the restroom are greatly exaggerated. (This is not to say that people in est did not wet their pants or soil themselves.) Landmark takes a “kinder, gentler” approach than its predecessor, and in my nine years of participation, I have never heard of this happening.

As a matter of practice, I try to put off going to the bathroom until breaks when I do Landmark courses. If I really need to go, I leave the room. I am not going wet my pants. I do, however, pay attention to those times when I feel like I might need to go. For example, when I notice that I could go, it’s usually because I am bored or I don’t want to have to sit there and listen to whoever’s sharing. Landmark course leaders have therefore encouraged participants to reflect on whether there is something about the conversation taking place that makes them want to leave the room. I think it’s good coaching.

The point of all this is not to have people ignore their biological needs. Rather, it’s a pragmatic issue: It helps minimize distractions. People are also instructed to refrain from eating in the classroom and to either set their phones to vibrate or turn them off completely. These practices help maintain an orderly environment. In a room of 150 people, the potential for distraction is great. If participants weren’t specifically told it’s best to wait until the break, every few minutes, people would “spontaneously” leave.

61 Or, like Burt Reynolds, purchase the Railwayman’s Friend!
Still, in contrast to Galanter’s wording, one could just as easily say that toileting patterns are “different” or “altered” as much as “distorted.” It’s all how you spin it. “Distorted” conveys there is something “wrong” about it and serves one agenda. A more neutral description takes the “wrong” out of it and serves another agenda.

(4) Participants were “exposed” to intense emotion and verbal abuse. One may be a witness to “intense emotion” without being “exposed,” but “exposed” is more dramatic and reinforces the notion that something untoward is happening. As far as verbal abuse is concerned, it is true that est participants were called “assholes.” I will not quibble over whether this constitutes “abuse.” Landmark has abandoned this approach, however, and a lot of what has been characterized as the “shock” value of est has been replaced by a more subdued pedagogy.

In comparison to Singer (1995), Galanter’s (1990) observations are less heavy-handed. With Galanter, it is less a question of “accuracy” and more one of attitude. One could make a case for each of his characterizations as long as one is willing to acknowledge the possibility of a more mundane, benign, or benevolent flavoring. Both Singer and Galanter (explicitly or otherwise) argue that programs like est and the Forum employ thought reform methods. While there is in some cases an observational basis for some of Singer’s and Galanter’s interpretations, however, I see no evidence that Landmark engages in thought reform.

I hope it is clear through this discussion that identifying something as “brainwashing” or “thought reform” is ultimately a matter of perspective (as is the
larger question of Landmark’s “cult status”), and that an interpretation of brainwashing brings with it a view that individuals must experience a loss of power and agency at the hands of their “coercive persuaders.” Proving this happens would be a problematic endeavor, not only because thought reform lacks an adequate theoretical base and empirical evidence for such claims, but also because accusing a group of brainwashing starts from a context of suspicion. Suspicion can lead to premature closure of an inquiry that does not even get off the ground. The failure of Singer and Galanter to self-reflexively examine their suppositions and “report” their observations as fact (and not interpretation) prevent a more nuanced view of what happens in courses like est.

For his part, Fowler (1999, November 30) flatly rejects the notion that Landmark Education engages in any kind of thought reform:

In my opinion, “brain washing,” “mind control” or “thought reform” are very dubious concepts. There is little evidence to support that they ever take place except in situations in which extreme coercive pressure is put on a vulnerable person in circumstances of isolation, deprivation, and mistreatment such as a prisoner of war situation. The relatively brief encounters in a pleasant environment that characterize the Landmark Forum program could never effect such extreme and unwanted changes in personality and behavior as those attributed to the various forms of “mind control”.

In my opinion, the Landmark Forum does not place individuals at risk of any form of “mind control,” “brainwashing” or “thought control.” (p. 4)

Of course, this is yet another opinion, and the reader would have to determine the answer for herself.

Conclusion

Humanity has the capacity to commit horrible atrocities, and there is a certain fascination that appears to draw people’s interest—“cults” are weird,
freaky, and creepy. Creepy, scary movies are a permanent part of the entertainment landscape. The fascination with cults is part and parcel of this landscape—characterized by fear, suspicion, and paranoia—and informs a prominent public conversation about Landmark Education. I would speculate that people who use the word “cult” do so from the standpoint of the danger and harm they associate with cults, regardless of whether this is representative of cults in general. It’s not that cults are “bad” in and of themselves, but rather, when cults are “bad,” this gets media attention, and people project this onto all cults.

This chapter has discussed academic cult research and has explored the question of to what extent Landmark Education Corporation might be seen as a cult. It has done so by reviewing academic discussions on cults, examining claims that est is cult-like, and assessing potential resemblance between Landmark Education Corporation and traits associated with cults. Using my experience of Landmark to engage the above analysis, it appears that, while the question gets raised of whether Landmark Education is a cult, there is little, if any basis for concluding that it is. I say “little, if any” instead of “no basis” in an effort to acknowledge that something has people ask the question, regardless of the conclusion.

In summary, of all the characteristics associated with cults, I find minimal resemblance in only two: (1) innovativeness (but not exclusivity), and (2) encouragement to devote significant time and resources. Even in these cases, while it is not unreasonable to posit the question of a possible comparison, these

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62 There is an awards ceremony known as The Scream Awards, a show that acknowledges scary movies. Fear has thus been commoditized, memorialized, and “institutionalized.”
qualities are not exclusive to cults, and are appeals commonly made by any number of other enterprises. Thus, while it is clearly possible to say Landmark Education is a cult, new religious movement, or a charismatic group, my overwhelming and unequivocal conclusion is that Landmark is none of these.

Once I was exposed to the criticism that Landmark employs coercive techniques to achieve its business goals, I asked myself, “Have I, for the past nine years, been brainwashed or hypnotized into believing I have received great value from my Landmark experience?” My response was (and remains), “No, I have not been manipulated or coerced to participate in Landmark courses.” Not only that, however, for on a deep existential level, I know and I have daily evidence that my participation has resulted in greater compassion and understanding. In addition, it has reduced the level of fear, suspicion, and paranoia I experience in my own life.

The subject of Landmark’s “cult status” arises in public conversations (including cyberspace), and the seriousness of the charge warrants discussion. No academic research considers Landmark Education a cult, but since this is an “absence” of research, as opposed to definitive, affirmative research, for some, the question may still be unresolved.

The lack of definitive research may be due to a number of factors, including: (1) few professionals or intellectuals would conclude this simply because it is erroneous—e.g., Margaret Singer, Otis Charles, Raymond D. Fowler (above); and (2) Landmark has successfully defended itself against this claim through litigation, securing retractions from publications that stated it was a
cult. Still, since the question routinely comes up, addressing it head-on seems appropriate. While it is (always) possible to “see” cult-like features in Landmark Education (in the sense of “anything is possible”), based on my research and experience, and examining the issue in detail, Landmark Education is clearly not a cult.

Besides displaying virtually no features of cults, one difficulty in calling Landmark a cult lies in that the Landmark experience, like the company itself, is not easily encapsulated by a single term.\(^63\) Unable to find a more precise term, some would settle on the closest corresponding term from their frame of reference. In those cases, “cult” or “cult-like” are the closest. Landmark’s divergence from these terms is thus cast off as a casualty of indifference.

Given my personal investment in Landmark, my analysis is open to critique. If ideology is unconscious to those holding it, having a long-term Landmark participant (especially a novice in the sociology of religion), address the question—Is Landmark Education a cult?—may not satisfy some, who might think someone uninvolved with Landmark should undertake the analysis. In this entire study, I believe this chapter is the most vulnerable to charges of bias.

Being both a participant in Landmark Education and a “social scientist” puts me in a precarious role. On one hand, I am fully involved in the group I am studying, and that gives me an “insider’s” perspective. On the other, as I approve of and sometimes promote Landmark Education’s programs, I could be viewed as an “unreliable” source of information and critique.

\(^{63}\) Recall that Goren and Eames in Con-text disagreed on the cult status of GraceNote.
The awkwardness of the situation does not elude me. When Barker (2003) describes the conflicted and difficult role of social scientists in discussing cults, I find myself in a similar predicament:

Broad-minded and liberal media often ask us to give an objective and balanced point of view in the middle—which usually means halfway between an NRM [new religious movement] and the ACM [anti-cult movement]. But…to give a balanced account is not necessarily to be in the middle. Science is not summing two extreme positions and dividing by two. Sometimes one “side” is right—but to say so may be seen, even by ourselves, as “taking sides.” Indeed a question that is constantly posed by both competitors and potential buyers is “whose side are you on?” The social scientist’s answer might be “the side of accuracy and balance,” but we find ourselves being pushed and pulled in a number of directions. (p. 21)

Despite my lack of detachment here, I have attempted to present relevant information and perspectives that educate readers on the subject, while striving to be open, fair, and reasonable in considering the various issues involved. My aim has been to be credible while also bringing my intimate experience and knowledge to bear on my descriptions of Landmark Education Corporation.

While Landmark Education may not appear to be a typical capitalist enterprise, simply labeling it a cult (or even cult-like) does not make it so. In the internet age, anyone with a domain name can “publish” (knowingly or otherwise) false and defamatory claims, often with impunity. Sensationalized content gets a lot of hits and shows up prominently in web searches. Were it for nothing else, this, through sheer repetition, keeps the “cult” conversation alive.

Landmark participants and course leaders usually express a combination of ridicule and bemusement (and sometimes resentment) toward the idea of Landmark being a cult. Occasionally people make jokes about “What did they put
in the Kool-Aid?” and I even used to joke with new Landmark Forum graduates, “Welcome to the cult!” Sometimes course leaders will confront the question by speaking to guests about it, saying something like, “You might be thinking, ‘Okay, why is my husband acting so nice? Why is he taking out the garbage without me having to nag him? Is this some kind of cult?’”—followed by the answer, “No, it’s not a cult.”

A Landmark seminar leader recently said, “I really get pissed off when people say Landmark is a cult because that would mean I am brainless. Wait a minute—a cult means you follow a charismatic leader—and that would be me!” These remarks reflect a combination of resentment and a playful attitude toward the issue. The resentment derives in part from the hated status cults occupy in our society and the stereotype that cult members are brainwashed. The playful attitude is typical of Landmark course leaders.

The resulting picture of Landmark Education is both complex and fascinating, and ultimately sheds light on the nature of contemporary society. On a personal note, researching this field has had a substantial impact on me. Having examined the subject of cults, I realized that I had fooled myself into believing I am beyond stereotypical thinking. While I did not previously have what I would call an “anti-cult bias,” my thinking about cults was nevertheless “hegemonized,” shall we say, by stereotyped thinking about cults. I had considered myself to be an open-minded person who embraces diversity in thought and background. When I became familiar with recent cult research, however, I saw that I had a stereotyped and uninformed perspective toward cults.
It was disturbing to me that I was not “immune” from such stereotypes, but at the same time, it reinforced an important lesson I have learned: Unless we actively seek out reliable sources of information, our pervasive “default” setting is a view compatible with that of mass media (see Epilogue). This default setting is particularly obvious in regard to cults. It is a view pervaded by fear, suspicion, paranoia, and polarization. Based on my reading and analysis, it is safe to say, that, unless one has researched cults rigorously and systematically, opinions expressed about them will suffer from ignorance and stereotyping, thus producing what this study refers to as the *drag* of public conversations.¹⁶⁴

As this is a case study, I believe discussing such mainstream views is helpful in understanding how Landmark gets constructed in the social realm through communication. I also believe these issues do not exhaust the interest Landmark’s work may have for communication scholars, sociologists, and, in particular, the impact Landmark’s work might have on a troubled civilization. Given the discrepancy between my lived experience and negative public conversations about Landmark Education in *Criminal Intent, Time Magazine*, and on the internet, it sometimes appears that no one is addressing the potential

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¹⁶⁴ Many readers may be curious about how questions in this chapter might be answered in regard to the Church of Scientology. Scientology is more “(in)famous” than Landmark Education, and in many ways has received similar treatment by critics as Landmark (accusations of being a cult, a scam, or employing thought reform methods), but on a larger scale, including court battles with national governments over its status as a religion, tax-exempt status, etc. While it would be fascinating to compare and contrast Landmark Education to Scientology, such a task is beyond the scope of this work. Having researched cults and new religious movements, however, I am inclined to believe that much of what people think they “know” about Scientology suffers from the same media spin (i.e., “ignorance”) as many so-called new religious movements. This is not to render a premature evaluation about Scientology, but rather to invite readers to question what they’ve “heard” about it. For a dispassionate account of the history of the Church of Scientology and a brief treatment of the “cult” and “brainwashing” issues, see Melton (2000).
positive benefit Landmark’s work might produce on a global scale. After all, despite its critics, Landmark is in the business of transformation, and further research into its work may be helpful in learning more about what Landmark courses have to offer. To do this, I next explore another public conversation about the type of courses Landmark offers, a term psychologists use: *large group awareness trainings*. 
CHAPTER FIVE

PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES OF LARGE GROUP AWARENESS TRAININGS

So far, I have examined two public conversations about Landmark Education and have drawn comparisons to my personal experience. Psychological studies about the type of courses Landmark Education offers form another notable public conversation about Landmark.¹ As discussed in the previous chapter, labels that have been used to describe groups like Landmark Education—cult, new religious movement, charismatic group—fail to adequately characterize it. Psychologists who have studied courses like Landmark’s employ their own term: large group awareness trainings (LGATs). This term has potential value in that it describes in a more dispassionate way the type of work found in courses like the Landmark Forum. Below I examine the historical background of LGATs, controversies surrounding them, LGAT outcome research before 1990, and LGAT research since 1990.

Historical Background

As the name implies, large group awareness trainings involve large groups (approximately 100-150 participants) and they train people to become

¹ Some may wish to distinguish between academic conversations and public conversations, however, I regard academic conversations to be a type of public conversation.
more aware. LGATs, were historically preceded by small groups (SGs), which emerged from the Human Potential Movement.

The human potential movement utilized small groups (SGs), which are used as vehicles to promote and further personal growth and understanding of group interactions. SGs, composed of a group of 12 or so participants, consisted of both sensitivity training that promotes understanding and tolerance of differences between people, and encounter groups, where people develop capacities to express feelings and to form emotional ties through direct confrontation with individuals in the group. Popular in the 1960s, SGs were used for personal development in university curricula and management training programs.

In the 1970s, however, the appeal of SGs declined (Back, 1978; Fisher, et al., 1990; Wheelan, 1990). Since then, however, a great deal of literature on various kinds of group training has emerged, including an entire literature on sensitivity groups. Wheelan (1990) comments on this increased interest in training:

Rapid expansion in the training field has led to the application of group models and techniques to a wide variety of organizational and educational settings. Methods of group work are being employed to enhance everything from managerial effectiveness, knowledge of group and organizational dynamics, leadership abilities and communication skills, to self-awareness and relationship skills. Even this list does not fully represent the applications of group work today. (p. ix)

Wheelan argues this explosion of interest has generated advantages and disadvantages, creativity and confusion. On one hand, there has been a burst of creativity in ideas about group process, combined with a focus on growth and
human potential. A large number of group models have led to the design of various group training techniques currently applied to a wide variety of educational and organizational settings. On the other hand, this increased interest in group training has led to some confusion, whereby different types of training groups are conflated with others. Names for different types of training groups are used interchangeably, leading to what Wheelan characterizes as the inappropriate utilization of techniques from different types (p. ix). This has hindered training groups in achieving goals, assuring quality of training, and protecting consumers.

Wheelan distinguishes three types of training groups: T-groups, personal growth groups, and skills training groups, arguing each type requires a particular style of leadership. T-groups seek to facilitate member learning about group processes and interpersonal styles. T-groups look at the group itself to learn how it operates dynamically. Personal growth groups are distinct from T-groups in that where T-groups focus on group goals, personal growth groups are primarily concerned with individual growth. Such groups assist “normal” individuals (i.e., those not needing psychotherapy) in furthering their personal growth in self-acceptance and self-directedness and in becoming more interpersonally effective. These groups help individuals develop attainable goals and change strategies to be implemented and evaluated upon completion of the training. Skills training groups teach human relations skills such as assertive communication, leadership, and management skills. These groups assist participants in improving their interpersonal skills in both personal and
professional environments. In addition to these differences, Parloff (1970) (cited in Wheelan, 1990, p. 38) describes differences in the overall orientation of the various types of training groups, explaining that some groups are more process-oriented (such as T-groups and Tavistock groups), while others are more individual-oriented (personal growth groups, self-awareness, and encounter).

Wheelan (1990), echoing Back (1978), reports a decline of some small groups in the 1970s:

By virtue of the many types of personal growth groups and some abuses and human casualties that occurred, personal growth groups fell into disfavor by the mid-1970s. Recently, however, there is renewed interest in personal growth models among professionals and consumers. They are seen as having a role in both personal and professional development efforts. There are still a variety of models under the rubric of personal growth but the primary goal remains the same—individual growth. (p. xi)

It thus appears that the original small training groups have transformed and proliferated, making them considerable cultural phenomena, having once been regarded as “experimental” or “weird” to presently playing a significant role in mainstream American life: from the employee workshop on sexual harassment or stress management in the workplace, to all sorts of self-help and support groups. This development has been accompanied by a heightened interest in relational and communication skills over the past few decades.

Large group awareness trainings, or LGATs, are distinct from SGs in the following ways: SGs are led or managed by health professionals and have a small number of participants. SGs generally take place over relatively short periods of time (e.g., an hour or possibly up to a few hours), and may recur over a period of weeks, with no pre-determined terminal point. By contrast, LGATs are
run by private corporations that operate outside the established mental health field, and from their descriptions (e.g., Bry, 1976; Haaken & Adams, 1983; Winstow, 1986, March-April), are similar to each other in structure and content, while allowing for variations between different programs. LGATs have anywhere from several dozen to potentially several hundreds of participants. It should also be noted, however, that in the “culture” of LGATs, group trainings consist not only of the training groups themselves but also of smaller groups, including intimacy groups within a course; furthermore, some courses have less than twenty participants. Trainings may last over 12 hours per day and take place from two to five days. In some cases, courses may take place over the course of months and up to two years, using the 12-hour classroom time frame (for example, five weekends of 12-hour days over the course of 9 months). The physical space of the training typically takes place in a conference room-type setting, where seated participants face a course leader who speaks from a podium or riser (see Chapter One). In Landmark Education courses, for example, an average cost of a weekend program is from $440-$795.

In addition to est, similar groups formed in the 1970s, such as Lifespring and Relationships. Today, there exist a large number of companies who produce comparable programs. The most popular of these in terms of longevity and numbers of participants is Landmark Education Corporation.

According to Wheelan (1990), large group awareness trainings may be considered hybrids of sensitivity training, encounter, and consciousness-raising groups. Wheelan ascribes problems to these groups, arguing that they establish
broad and unattainable objectives for participants: “People cannot actualize their personal potential in a weekend, two weeks, or even ten weeks. However, they can achieve concrete and realistic goals” (p. 39). LGATs borrow from the three training group types in the following ways: they allow for observation of group dynamics, offer opportunities for personal growth, and teach communication skills.

LGATs may be considered a form of existential education in which participants, through the guidance of a trainer, engage in questions relating to communication, personal productivity and relationships. These trainings share a central assumption with Abraham Maslow’s work: that it is possible and desirable to transform individuals’ lives through communication.

In their literature, Landmark Education describes the Landmark Forum as an “inquiry,” a “conversation,” and a “dialogue.” The leader lectures and provides the class with ideas to apply to their own experiences. Trainees are given opportunities to share their thoughts about lecture content and to ask questions. Trainers interact with participants and provide feedback. LGATs might include structured exercises, including guided imagery. In the class, most of the communication occurs between the leader and the entire group, or between the leader and a single participant. This contrasts with SGs, where members typically interact with each other. LGATs may, however, include paired sharing and other small group work. During and upon completion of the training, graduates are encouraged to discuss what they are learning with family, friends, and coworkers and to invite them to register for the training themselves. Finkelstein, et al. (1982)
believe LGATs are worth studying for the following reasons: large numbers of people participate in these trainings, therapists will have clients who have done such trainings (so familiarity with them is advised), and therapists might learn from LGATs to aid them in their own practice.

While much has been written on LGATs besides what is reviewed here, these texts go beyond the scope of this work. Psychological outcome studies appear most relevant because they deal with the results of these courses and at least attempt to look at LGATs in systematic ways. In fact, the term “large group awareness training” is itself a psychological term. Consequently, LGATs have been studied primarily from a psychological perspective, and specifically in terms of potential psychological changes experienced by participants which are measured using various instruments. Thus, LGATs have mostly been assessed in terms of psychological outcomes, that is, measures pertaining to self-esteem, life satisfaction, locus of control, and the like. Numerous studies have examined the effects of large group awareness trainings. Most of these early studies have been summarized and critiqued elsewhere (see Fisher, Silver, Chinsky, Goff, and Klar, 1990). Fisher, et al. find previous LGAT outcome research lacks the methodological rigor necessary to evaluate the claims made in those studies. Fisher, et al. provide an extensive review of previous research that suits our purposes. In the following sections, I discuss controversies associated with LGATs, and summarize Fisher’s findings regarding LGAT outcome research.

2 A few other fields have examined LGATs, such as social influence theory, large group effects, and social support.
LGAT Controversies

Fisher, et al. (1990) report that LGATs are the subject of some "unresolved" controversy (p. 3). Small groups of the 1960s were controversial themselves, even though conducted by mental health professionals. LGATs, by contrast, operate outside the domain of the mental health field, which appears to have made some psychologists and other health professionals skeptical, if not outright hostile to LGATs. LGATs have been criticized for the following reasons: the people who lead the courses have no recognized professional or academic background; there is no written theory or rationale for LGATs; and LGATs do not utilize the conventional one-on-one interaction style characteristic of therapy. Some have suggested the large participant numbers in LGATs may make for a dangerous form of social influence (Cinnamon & Farson, 1979; Rome, 1977).

Fisher, et al. (1990) single out three areas that form the basis of the LGAT controversy: (1) techniques used (discussed in “Brainwashed Members,” Chapter Four, above), (2) whether LGATs are a form of psychotherapy, and (3) whether they are helpful or harmful to participants. I discuss these latter two areas below.

Are LGATs a Form of Psychotherapy?

The question has been raised as to whether LGATs are a form of psychotherapy. If answered yes, then the question becomes whether LGATs are a legitimate form of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is based on a psychological model and generally refers to the treatment of some problem using spoken interaction (and other means) between therapist and client.
Some consider LGATs to be a form of therapy because they include therapeutic elements and may be used to supplement therapy (Berger, F. M., 1977; Paul & Paul, 1978; Simon, 1978). Baer and Stolz (1978) point out behavior modification techniques used in LGATs, Yalom (1980) sees a similarity between LGATs and existential group therapies, Klein (1983) likens LGATs to transactional analysis, and Efran, Lukens and Lukens (1986, March-April) and Simon (1986, March-April) compare LGATs to family therapy. An est publication (1977) cites mental health professionals who claimed to make use of est techniques in their own work.

Some mental health professionals, on the other hand, claim large group awareness trainings are an illegitimate form of psychotherapy in part because nonprofessionals (untrained in the mental health field) lead courses that utilize therapeutic principles and techniques (Fenwick, 1976; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1984). Weiss (1977) observes that the Hawaii State Board of Practicing Psychologists ruled est was in fact practicing psychotherapy without a license.

Organizers of LGATs claim the courses are not therapeutic by design or intent, but instead claim they are educational experiences. Hamsher (1976) suggests therapy implicitly casts clients as in need of improvement and the goal of the therapist is to effect that improvement. By contrast, he argues, est believes participants are perfect as they are. The goal of est (and the Landmark Forum, for that matter) is not to “improve,” which the organizers claim is impossible, but to “transform” people to break free of the past and more fully explore their potential. LGAT participants must sign waivers on their course applications.
stating they understand the trainings are not therapeutic. In spite of this, Fisher, et al. (1990) note that people with problems still register for these courses hoping they will get “fixed” (perhaps based on implicit claims of LGAT recruiters).

Who in the semantic-social realm has the authority to decide and enforce what is “therapeutic” and what is “not therapeutic”? Generally speaking, the medical profession and the courts do, as indicated in the State of Hawaii example above (Weiss, 1977). Still, there is no certain definition of psychotherapy (Frank, 1961, 1985; Friedman, 1976; and Grinker, 1956)—even though there are those who seek to enforce a certain definition. This makes for an interesting situation. Just because LGAT organizers say what they do is distinct from therapy doesn’t mean it’s not therapy, or therapeutic, for that matter. The converse may also be true, however. Just because some health professionals say LGATs are a form of psychotherapy does not mean they are. Landmark Education explicitly disputes the claim they are practicing psychotherapy, calling their programs “educational” and based on an “ontological” model, not a psychological one. Landmark’s disclaimer on an earlier version of the Landmark Forum application specifically addresses this issue, and in particular, the fact that applicants may have been told that their programs are therapeutic in nature:

The Landmark Forum (the “Program”) is an educational program. It is not therapeutic in design, intent, or methodology and is not a substitute for medical treatment, psychotherapy, or any health program, regardless of what you may have heard from anyone. The Program will not address issues which are best dealt with by physicians, psychotherapists, or other health professionals.
Because some people may, contrary to everything we have specifically stated, participate in the Program as a way of dealing with issues that are properly addressed by health professionals, we advise you specifically that the Program Leaders are extensively trained educators in the Landmark Education Curriculum and are not health professionals. We further advise you that no health professionals will be in attendance at the Program [for the purposes of providing professional treatment, i.e., some participants may be health professionals]. (Landmark Education Corporation, 2000)

The question whether LGATs are a form of therapy might be regarded as a semantic issue, and in this case, like so many others, it is (momentarily) resolved when someone says, “they are therapeutic” or “they are not therapeutic.” While “therapy”—a technique—has a particular definition, that is, a treatment of bodily, mental or behavioral disorders—“therapeutic”—an adjective—has a much broader sense. Therapeutic can refer to just about anything that contributes to overall health or well-being; it may do so without employing techniques one would describe as “therapy” (e.g., massage, a talk with an old friend, a walk on the beach). When Landmark Education says their programs are not intended or designed to be therapeutic, they are referring to specific techniques utilized in therapy, which, in the scientific-medical sense, requires a certified health practitioner. In part, the crux of the debate lies in the slippage between the two meanings of therapy and therapeutic. This semantic question aside, maintaining a “non-therapeutic” stance is essential to LGATs’ survival, as it prevents companies offering them from having to use licensed therapists, thereby allowing them to stay in business. One could refer to this as a legal (or perhaps, “ontological”) loophole.
Based on my experience, Landmark courses sometimes occur to me as therapeutic, even though Landmark explicitly declares they are not. For example, I have felt profound emotions and have gotten to know myself in significant ways. The effects of these experiences resemble and in many ways rival most treatment I have received as a client in a counseling context. Landmark courses feel therapeutic. If I thought they were harmful, however, I wouldn’t participate in them or encourage others to do so.

People experiencing severe emotional difficulties and whose physician or therapist do not consider them emotionally well would best not do such trainings, however. The reason for this appears in the Landmark Forum Application:

In the Program, you will inquire into fundamental issues that have been of interest and concern to us as human beings. In the course of such an inquiry, it is normal, from time to time, for some people to experience emotions such as enthusiasm, excitement, compassion, sympathy, empathy, fear, anger, sadness, or regret. Some participants may find the Program physically, mentally, and emotionally taxing. If you are unwilling to encounter any of the above experiences in yourself or in others, or have any concern about your ability to deal with such experiences, we recommend that you not participate in the Program at this time.

Stress is recognized by most people as a normal part of everyday living. Since different people find different events stressful, you should assess your own participation in the Program. Health professionals have found that numerous kinds of physical ailments may reduce a person’s tolerance to even “normal” levels of stress. We have been advised by medical professionals that persons who have suffered physical, mental or emotional problems may be more susceptible to stress than others. We have also been advised by medical professionals that people who have a history of mental illness or serious emotional problems in their immediate families may be more susceptible to stress than others.

If you or anyone in your immediate family has a history of mental illness or serious emotional problems, we recommend that you consult with a mental health professional about your ability to handle stress. If you have any questions or concerns about your ability to handle stress, we
recommend that you do not participate in the Program. (Landmark Education Corporation, 2000, p. 3)

Because the Landmark Forum can be stressful for some, it is possible, for example, that a person inquiring into her past might encounter repressed traumatic memories of physical or sexual abuse. In such a case, the participant, depending on her ability to handle stress and her level of mental or emotional well-being, might be unable to deal successfully with the resulting stress and may become disturbed. Landmark’s programs are not designed to treat such disturbances.

Companies like Landmark know this, so they warn applicants that it is their strong recommendation they do not participate if they: have a personal or family history of a mental disorder, or had such hospitalization been recommended to them by a health professional; are currently in therapy and the therapist sees a health reason for not participating; discontinued therapy before it was terminated by the health professional; have recently taken or been prescribed to take medication that affects mental processes or treats a “chemical imbalance”; have an unresolved history of drug or steroid abuse; or are uncertain about their physical, mental, or emotional ability to participate.

Some applicants may go against Landmark’s recommendation, and some folks who are not “well” might do the Landmark Forum (or other LGAT), and become disturbed. On the other hand, people can be disturbed and have “episodes” in a variety of different social situations—waiting in line at the grocery or being stuck in traffic, for example. The question is, are people more likely to have such episodes in LGATs? (See below: There is no proof this is the case.)
While Landmark’s applicant screening process tries to minimize this possibility, it cannot prevent it.

Here I only touch on these controversies. At present, and based on my experience, I can say these concerns get raised even when there is no factual basis for them. Because they do arise in conversations, however, it is interesting to consider what it is about LGATs that causes people to ask these questions.

In the Landmark Forum, participants discuss past and current life events. They inquire into and have conversations about the meanings they’ve assigned to these events and the impact those meanings have had on their lives. They also discuss how their identities were formed from the interpretation of childhood events. These questions could come up in any conversation, therapeutic or otherwise. The ambiguous semantics of psychotherapy as distinct from other types of conversations sustain the legal possibility for the perpetuation of LGATs.

Are LGATs Helpful or Harmful to Participants?

Perhaps the most significant controversy regarding LGATs is the issue of whether LGATs are harmful to participants. LGAT organizers claim to produce significant positive results. According to Landmark, for example, people report five major benefits received from the Landmark Forum: (1) effectiveness in relating to others, (2) personal productivity, (3) confidence, (4) making the right choices/pursuing what is important, and (5) living life fully (Landmark Education Corporation, 1998). Some, on the other hand, criticize LGATs as being potentially harmful: Fenwick (1976) fears LGATs may subvert defenses, destroy resistance, increase anxiety, and cause regression to primitive modes of
functioning (p. 171). Haacken and Adams (1983) postulate ego functions may be undermined, reasoning abilities disturbed, and participants may regress to infantile states. Cinnamon and Farson (1979) and Conway and Siegelman (1978) foresee broader negative societal consequences. All these concerns are speculative, however, and have never been scientifically demonstrated. Fisher, et al. (1990) conclude, “There is little rigorous scientific evidence to support such fears” (p. 5).

The most recent application to the Landmark Forum contains the following statement:

From time to time, during or shortly after participating in the Program, a very small number of people who have no personal or family history of mental illness or drug abuse have reported experiencing brief, temporary episodes of emotional upset ranging from heightened activity, irregular or diminished sleep, to mild psychotic-like behavior. An even smaller number of people have reported more serious symptoms ranging from mild psychotic behavior to psychosis occasionally requiring medical care and hospitalization. In less than 1/1000 of 1% of participants, there have been reports of unexplained suicide or other destructive behavior. While we know of no independent studies to suggest that people who are physically, emotionally and mentally healthy are at risk in the Program, certain persons have claimed that the Program has caused or triggered in them a psychosis or psychotic event. (Landmark Education Corporation, 2006a, p. 3)

Thus, while the occurrence of reported psychological problems after participation in the Landmark Forum is very low, as with any other life experience, one cannot preclude the possibility that someone might experience emotional or psychological problems after their participation. At the same time, there is no evidence such problems arose as a result of their participation.
Fisher, et al. (1990) observe most LGAT outcome studies suffer from methodological shortcomings: they lack an adequate control group, few of them use pre- and post-measures when needed, they neglect the issue of response bias, and no studies have included outcome assessments of multiple dimensions. Consequently, they argue, it is impossible to assess if LGATs actually achieve any of the effects attributed to them, beneficial or otherwise: “Up to this point, no LGAT outcome studies have dealt effectively with the complex methodological issues” according to Fisher, et al. (p. 17). The types of studies performed thus far are: studies of psychological outcome, descriptive outcome surveys, and pre-post treatment of self-report studies. Below I summarize the results and limitations of these studies.

Case Studies of Psychological Outcome

Case studies provide comprehensive descriptions and explanations of particular social phenomena. Such studies on LGATs have thus far provided mixed results. Some find evidence of harm, others find either benefit or no harm. Still, others find no significant evidence of any effect at all. As stated, organizers claim LGATs produce various benefits. Others, however, are very critical of LGATs. This is evidenced in part by the emergence in the 1970s of the term “LGAT casualty.” Lieberman, et al. (1973) defines an LGAT casualty as someone who (1) functions significantly less effectively after the LGAT than previously, (2) experiences decreased effectiveness over the long term following the training, and (3) attributes this decreased effectiveness to LGAT participation. One study
reports clinical observations of seven psychiatric disturbances following LGAT participation (Glass, Kirsch, and Parris, 1977). Another reports that out of fifty subjects, one client with a previous history of mental illness displayed transient psychotic symptoms after a training, 30 appeared clinically improved, and the remaining 18 appeared unchanged (Simon, 1978). Hamsher (est, 1977) reports mental health professionals claiming the LGAT experience to be beneficial, but would not recommend it for clients with severe mental disorders. Lieberman (1987) found no evidence showing a causal relationship between LGAT participation and pathology.

Fisher, et al. (1990) question the validity of these studies because of the weaknesses inherent in case study methods to measure LGAT psychological outcomes. Three of these weaknesses are: (1) the self-selected population may not be representative of LGAT participation; (2) LGAT participant results are usually based on “clinical impressions,” not on “objective measurements”; and (3) there is generally no comparison between participants’ psychological states prior to and following the LGAT, making alleged benefit or harm ascribed to them impossible.

Descriptive Outcome Surveys

Studies in which participants are asked to complete evaluations of LGAT outcomes following completion of a course are called descriptive outcome surveys. Ornstein, Swencionis, Deikman, and Morris (1975) report participants responded they had improved overall health, fewer sleep difficulties, a decreased use of addictive substances, fewer headaches, and less anxiety, irritation or
depression. Ross (Lifespring, 1986) reports the vast majority of respondents assess their Lifespring training very positively.

Such studies are also flawed, claims Fisher, et al. (1990): “At best, descriptive outcome surveys can be informative regarding participant satisfaction with various LGAT programs” (p. 8). On the other hand, “It is not valid to assume that the purported benefits...occurred as reported” (p. 8). They cite two problems with such methods: (1) If the research is conducted by the organization offering the LGAT (which applies to the above studies), respondents may feel obligated to report favorable results to that organization. (2) When people expend great time, energy, or money to a particular activity, they may present themselves as more enthusiastic than those who expend fewer such resources (Aronson and Mills, 1959). Furthermore, it is possible that respondents may exaggerate past difficulties to make the period following the training appear improved (Frank, 1961; Richardson, Stewart and Simmonds, 1978; Ross and Conway, 1984).

None of this invalidates descriptive outcome studies, however, their ability to assess results is limited.

*Pre-Post Treatment of Self-Report Studies*

Some studies question subjects before and after LGATs in order to assess change. A few studies using pre-post treatment self reports showed, for example: improved self-image and lower anxiety, guilt, and dependency (Tondow, Teague, Finney, and LeMaistre, 1973); decreased stress levels (Weiss, 1977; Hazen, 1980); and increases in ego development (Hartke, 1980). Like previous studies, however, those using pre-post measures still suffer from methodological
problems because they use either an inadequate control group or no control
group at all. Furthermore, because subjects in each of these studies knew the
investigation was looking for changes attributable to LGATs, this may have
resulted in response set bias on the part of the subjects, which raises questions
about the validity of the findings.

LGAT Research Since 1990

In addition to these shortcomings, the above studies generally focus on
only one psychological dimension such as personality changes, potential
psychological harm, or effects on physical well-being. This severely limits the
inquiry into the potential effects of LGATs. In an effort to redress these
methodological shortcomings, Fisher, et al. (1990) designed a quasiexperimental
study of the (pre-Landmark Education) Forum offered by Werner Erhard and
Associates using a non-equivalent control group design, pre-post measures, and
multiple outcome indicators, while attempting to minimize bias. They found no
negative effects due to Forum participation, no evidence for dramatic shifts
relating to subjective well being, perceived life satisfaction, or world view, and
al. write, “the picture is one of stability rather than psychological change. If the
Forum had wide ranging psychological effects, we believe that they would have
been evidenced in the current research” (p. 80, italics added).

I searched numerous databases (see Table 8) for research using the
following search string: “large group awareness training” or “erhard seminars
training” or “Landmark Education” to see what research has been conducted
since 1990. Since Fisher’s, et al. (1990) study examined the Forum, a few studies have been conducted, including master’s theses doctoral dissertations and peer-reviewed academic studies, among others. I summarize these below.

Joyce (1991) studied the Lifespring Training using survey instruments. The author argues that her results show demonstrated gains in scores on specified personality dimensions that measure self-esteem. While pre-post measures were utilized, there was no control group, no use of multiple outcome indicators, and bias was not minimized.

Goldentyer (1991) used content analysis of participant responses to determine motivations to take the training, cognitive and affective impact, and actions attributable to the training. She concludes that motivations to take the training were positive referrals, timeliness, and a desire for self-healing, self-improvement, consciousness raising, family enrichment, or curiosity. She found three categories of reactions to the training: (1) positive recollections of specific exercises, (2) the emotional experience of taking the training, and (3) specific concepts conveyed in the training. Attitudes and emotions impacted by the training were found in both intrapersonal and interpersonal realms. The former included self-awareness, self-acceptance, personal responsibility and empowerment, feelings of happiness, self-confidence and well being, and healing. Interpersonal impact included improved relationships with friends, family, and business associates, and being more responsible, assertive, and accepting in relationships. Finally, subjects attributed actions to participation in the training such as: pursuing more personal growth activities and taking action in other
realms (social life, job and enhancing productivity), taking better care of themselves, improved life circumstances and a more positive style of behavior. As the author notes, however, “the limitations of self report, selective memory, the Hawthorne effect, all could have biased these results” (p. 152). Furthermore, no control group was used in this study.

Hughes (1994) looked at the impact LGATs can have on the moral development of adults. The author concludes LGATs can facilitate moral development. Hughes’ study is based not on a direct examination of participants, however, but rather on previous LGAT studies, accompanied by his own speculation of possible moral development effects. His work is therefore a speculation based on weak studies. (This does not necessarily invalidate his observations, however.)

Table 8

*Databases Searched for Research on LGATs, est, and Landmark Education Since 1990*

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Denison (1995) argues that previous literature fails to capture the specific experiences of LGAT participants. To remedy this, he completed multiple observations of the Forum training and conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 20 research subjects. He presents the results as personal self-reports. According to Denison, data indicate qualitatively significant results were produced in participants' cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of functioning, and that most participants in the study attributed significant life effects to their Forum experience. This use of qualitative methodology is helpful in obtaining information previously unavailable in more quantitative studies, but its lack of pre-post testing makes it vulnerable to the same criticisms proffered by Fisher, et al. (1990).

Marzano, Zaffron, Zraik, Robbins, & Yoon (1995) discuss the difference between first- and second-order change with regard to educational methodologies. They surveyed participants in a three-day seminar conducted by Landmark Education Corporation. They found that:

participants experienced a heightened awareness of a new paradigms [sic] and an opportunity to commitment [sic] to selected paradigms in the domains of: (1) relationships with colleagues, (2) relationships with supervisors, (3) relationships with supervise [sic], (4) alignment with the school or district’s goals, (5) effectiveness as a change agent, and (6) effectiveness as a communicator. (p. 170)

Thus, the results of this study demonstrate a shift in perception of participants before and after the seminar. As the authors do not elaborate on the methodology used in the study, it is difficult to evaluate the rigor of the method used.
Hughes (1998) used pre-post measures, multiple indicators, a quasi-experimental design with a nonequivalent control group and attempted to minimize response set bias. He sought to identify changes in values and psychological development following participation in the Lifespring Large Group Awareness Training. He observed no change on the most important developmental measure, and concludes with Fisher, et al. (1990) that “the picture is one of stability rather than psychological change” (p. 162).

The Talent Foundation (2000, June) surveyed participants from the Landmark Forum and found that the course “produced radical and sustained change in the way individuals relate to their own development” (p. 6). The study did not adequately address the methodological pitfalls Fisher, et al. discuss, most obviously, minimizing response set bias. For example, based on the limited information provided on the study’s methods, respondents were provided background information that could have biased the results. Specifically, researchers informed respondents the purposes of their organization and the purpose of the study, which includes language reminiscent of Landmark Education. In describing the organization conducting the study, respondents were informed that the Talent Foundation “envisages a world in which work organizations realise the advantages of developing their employees for the mutual benefit of the individual and the organisation” (p. 12). They described the purpose of the study this way: “This is an exercise in finding out how self-esteem, motivation, and confidence can affect individuals in their work environment” (p.
12). Including such information helps frame the questions asked in such a way that might encourage a “parroting” of the language of the training evaluated.

Rubinstein (2005) examines characteristics of participants in the Forum and compares them to psychotherapy clients and control participants using a demographic questionnaire and various psychological instruments. As the study compares characteristics of Forum and non-Forum participants, it does not qualify as an outcome study.

LGAT research since Fisher, et al. (1990) has not contributed significantly to our understanding of the impact such training can have on participants. In lieu of others doing the work required to redesign and retest previous LGAT outcome studies using an adequate methodology, it is difficult to say with any confidence what kinds of psychological benefits can be demonstrated from large group awareness trainings.

**Conclusion of LGAT Literature Review**

According to Fisher, et al. (1990), based on previous LGAT research, "it is impossible to assess whether or not LGAT participation is responsible for any reported effects" (p. 10). Fisher et al. claim we possess an inadequate knowledge base with regard to personality, lifestyles, and attitudinal factors of LGAT participants. Consequently, it may be impossible to measure LGAT outcomes using conventional scientific methods and categories—"nevertheless, in order to perform psychological research, *one has no choice* but to translate proposed LGAT outcomes into measurable psychological constructs" (p. 26, italics added). So, lacking both an adequate knowledge base and while
acknowledging the possible incongruity between psychological categories and LGAT outcomes, the authors forge ahead, perhaps committed to "the law of the hammer." It is as if to say, “Even if psychological categories are inadequate to understanding LGAT outcomes, these are what we know and what we are familiar with—so that is what we will use.” In essence, one might suggest that no "scientific, psychological" studies of LGAT are adequate. Here I am in agreement with Hughes (1994) who suggests that conventional psychological measures of personality and of mental and physical health may not adequately account for “improved role performance, ego development, and the subjective experience of ‘growth’” (p. 46).

Previous to 1990, LGAT research has lacked methodological rigor, so it is exceedingly difficult to assess its validity. The situation since 1990 remains essentially unchanged. There is little reliable scientific evidence that LGATs have any measurable long-term psychological effect on participants. While some of the psychological literature reviewed here—like Context and Time Magazine—contributes to an environment of fear, suspicion, and paranoia about large group awareness trainings, in general, psychological literature does not demonstrate the value I perceive in Landmark’s work.

Questions remain, therefore: If there is no substantial psychological effect, does the measurement of psychological factors exhaust the inquiry of potential benefit from courses like the Landmark Forum? Since Landmark Education courses place a prominent emphasis on communication, might something in this
domain yield observable benefit? The next chapter will begin to explore this question.
CHAPTER SIX

We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Preamble from *The Earth Charter* (2000, March)

If public conversations about Landmark Education examined here—TV shows like *Criminal Intent’s Con-text* (Balcer, et al., 2003), magazine articles like that in *Time* (Faltermayer, 1998 March 16), and psychological studies of large group awareness trainings—produce negative, indifferent, or inconclusive views of Landmark Education, am I completely mistaken in my belief that their courses offer something important? Is the divergence between these public conversations and my lived experience reflective simply of my own favorable view of Landmark?

Fortunately, research often proceeds in an emergent, non-linear fashion (see Chapter Seven). In the course of my research on Landmark Education, I
discovered that one influence on est’s founder, Werner Erhard, is the work of humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow (see Chapter Two). As I began to entertain the thought of writing on Landmark Education’s transformational work, I serendipitously encountered a somewhat obscure essay by Abraham Maslow (1977), the posthumously published *Politics 3*. Having been an on-again, off-again political activist, and having a keen interest in political affairs, the title of this essay leapt off my computer monitor and immediately piqued my curiosity: “Politics 3? What could that be?” That a humanist psychologist interested in self-actualization might attempt to bridge between the level of individuals and the larger social realm really spoke to me. As a student of politics, I was already interested in the prospect of examining potential political effects of Landmark’s work in a global context. I felt I was on a fruitful path.

As a young lad in the fifth grade, our home room class once discussed what the world might look like in the year 2000. In 1972, 2000 seemed very far away. I did the math—“Gosh, I’ll be 39 in 2000. That’s old!” I recall reflecting on the kind of world I would live in: “Will humans survive that long?”

The lyrics of the old Zager and Evans song, *In the Year 2525* (Evans, 1969), ran through my head. The song haunted me. It’s *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932) scenario was frightening for such a young person. I was already fearful of the prospect of nuclear holocaust (this was still during the Cold War, after all). The song’s images of an overly-medicated and mechanized society, combined with my concerns over the effect of pollution on our planet, made the future for this young kid in Oklahoma look extremely bleak. As I grew older, my
concerns about global devastation of one kind or another persisted, and grew
deeper. The more I learned about the world, the more concerned I became.

After participating in the Landmark Forum, however, I became inspired by
the possibility that if enough people learned what I did, the world would be
transformed. The facility I had gained distinguishing the past from what is
possible seemed such a valuable lesson, that maybe things weren't as hopeless
as they had seemed to that fifth grader. As discussed in Chapter One, I began to
pursue the question of how particular approaches to communication could
transform people’s lives, and possibly, the world. My reading on est and
Landmark Education had hitherto failed to address this question. The prospect
that Maslow, an influence on the origins of Landmark’s work, might deal with this
issue in the realm of politics appeared exciting and promising.

Maslow’s (1977) *Politics 3* describes the role interpersonal communication
can play in achieving a better world and proposes a model transforming our
society and our world by building a truly representative democracy. In order to
effect such transformation, Maslow believes humans must engage regularly in
open, honest, reciprocal, and compassionate communication. According to
Maslow, “Politics 3” is based on the notions that:

1. Personal growth and interpersonal relating are both necessary (and in
some ways inseparable); and

2. Widespread transformation requires increasing the number of small
groups of individuals engaged in open communication with each other
and doing this on a large scale.

Upon reading this, Maslow’s notions immediately struck me as consistent
with the ways I had begun understand the potential impact of Landmark’s work:
that communication is a source of personal growth and by learning different ways to communicate, we can transform ourselves and our relationships, and that the more people who do this, the ripple effect would eventually spread across the planet. My reading of Politics 3 thus became a catalyst for the remainder of the present study.

In this study, I explore these notions and inquire into their relevance to the work of Landmark Education. In this chapter, I discuss (1) the dire circumstances in which we find ourselves, (2) Maslow’s Politics 3 and the possibility for a transformed planet, (3) the use of training groups and the role communication plays in contributing to global transformation, and (4) the relevance of Maslow’s work to my discussion of Landmark Education Corporation.

Reality Check

Opportunities for transformation of our planet abound. Perhaps the most important regards our ecological environment. We depend on delicately intertwined biological systems for our survival, and draw great pleasure from their beauty. What happens to these systems affects us all. It is well established in the scientific community that continued environmental degradation may result in the deterioration, if not the demise of the human adventure. All animals (including humans), plants, and all the diverse ecosystems of the earth are threatened by a technological and industrial revolution that has outpaced human civilization’s ability to create ecologically safe alternatives.

For example, according to Dale Hurst, an atmospheric chemist from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the ozone hole over
Antarctica is now the size of North America and is expected to persist until 2065, two decades longer than previously thought (McFarling, 2005, December 7). Global temperatures are increasing twice as fast as previously expected, and are very likely to increase 1.4 to 5.8 degrees Celsius by the year 2100; consequently, the polar caps are melting and seas are expected to rise .09 to .88 meters by 2100 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2001, January). Floods along coastal areas will likely devastate our increasingly interdependent global economy. Rapid economic globalization, by accelerating global warming and multiplying its presence across the planet, may make these concerns particularly urgent. Many believe the destructive components of industrial activity must be reversed (and soon) or our planet will soon become a toxic furnace, not the lovely “greenhouse” evoked by the unfortunate appellation in the phrase “greenhouse gases.” In fact, some think it is already too late. Scientist James Lovelock, who theorized that the Earth is as a great living super-organism (“Gaia”) argues that, as a result of climate change, humanity is “past the point of no return” and that “civilization as we know it is now unlikely to survive” (McCarthy, 2006, January 16).

At the completion of this study, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was about to publish its 4th Assessment Report. This report, which took 6 years to complete, draws from over 2500 scientific expert reviewers, more than 800 contributing authors, over 450 lead authors from more than 130 countries, is the most comprehensive and authoritative report on climate change ever produced. In the Summary for Policymakers from Climate Change 2007: The
scientists across the planet have “very high confidence” that human activities are responsible for global warming. Among the report’s findings:

- Warming of the climate system is “unequivocal” (p. 5)
- The rate of increase of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide) during the industrial era is very likely to have been unprecedented in more than 10,000 years (p. 5)
- There is widespread melting of snow and ice (p. 5)
- The average sea level is rising (p. 5)
- Discernible human influences now include ocean warming, continental average temperatures, temperature extremes, and wind patterns (p. 10)
- Continued greenhouse gas emissions would cause further warming and lead to more significant changes in the global climate system than that of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century (p. 13)
- Typhoons and hurricanes will become more intense (p. 16)

Perhaps the worst news is that, even if greenhouse gas production levels off, global warming and sea level rises “would continue for centuries due to timescales associated with climate processes and feedbacks” (p. 17). Clearly, then, not only must we proliferate non-polluting energy sources, we must also develop technologies that remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere if we are to avoid a global environmental catastrophe.

Decision-makers in corporations and governments appear to underestimate the urgency and danger. Politicians claim to be “pro-environment,” however, business interests (who pay for political campaigns) rarely see ecological improvements as “cost-effective.” The problem of the perceived bottom line militates against the likelihood of a greatly needed environmental cleanup. The problem lies not just with politicians and CEO’s, however. It is much more pervasive.
Even though it is widely recognized that industrial activity is contributing significantly to environmental degradation, people succumb to their fear of communicating alarm and dissent, and consequently, frequently do not say what they believe. I suggest this is a problem of communication. The consequences of evading environmental conversations—and therefore environmental solutions—are both frightening and disturbing.

Meanwhile, instead of uniting the earth's peoples around an effort to save the environment and protect its most vulnerable plant and animal species, human societies are distracted by conflict, competition, consumption, and war. People around the world are still sold into slavery while others work for slave wages. Struggles over diminished resources, complicated by ethnic and religious tensions, have produced a second U.S.-Iraq war, which will doubtless not be the last of its kind so long as civilization is dependent on petroleum as an energy source.

Between 1985 and 2000, the share of total state and local government spending on higher education has declined as spending on prisons has increased. Furthermore, state spending on corrections grew at 6 times the rate of state spending on higher education. By 2000 there were nearly a third more African American men in prison and jail than in universities or colleges (Justice Policy Institute, 2002).

The U.S. voting population is so cynical and resigned about politics that less than 40% of eligible voters voted in the 1998 U.S. Congressional elections (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, August) and about 57% of eligible voters voted in
the 2004 U.S. Presidential election (Federal Election Commission, 2004)—a comparatively “high turnout.” Our nation faces environmental pollution, rapid technological change, displaced workers, children killing children with guns, the persistence of poverty and homelessness, and an increasing gap between the richest and the poorest citizens.

If our world is constructed through communication, then the quality of our conversations determines the quality of our lives. Our contemporary conversations are producing commensurate results. It would thus seem an upgrading of our conversations is not only desirable, but needed. Landmark Education courses devote considerable energy to upgrading conversations from those that disempower to those that empower. Landmark is committed to transformation of culture on a global scale, and would thus appear to provide a possible avenue to confront the dire circumstances described above. In the following section, I discuss another model I believe is compatible with Landmark’s work.

Maslow’s Politics 3 and the Vision of a Transformed Planet

I suggest that Maslow’s Politics 3 depicts a possible model for producing upgraded conversations. In this section, I discuss (1) the conceptual background of Politics 3 and the role communication plays, (2) describe Politics 3 and provide examples of documents that express its notions, (3) and explain the role communication plays as social and political mechanism that forwards self-actualization.
Politics 3 grows out of Maslow’s interest in “good people” and “good organizations.” Maslow, along with Carl Rogers, helped give birth to the Human Potential Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, derived from their own brand of humanist psychology. This movement emerged as a response to two other 20th century psychological movements, behaviorism and psychoanalysis. According to humanist psychologists, because behavioral psychologists understand humans in scientific and quantitative terms, they overlook the “inner experience” of human beings, that is, their feelings, thoughts and wishes. As a result, behaviorism reduces human beings to mechanical entities with little control over their destinies. At the same time, humanists regard psychoanalysis as overly deterministic by regarding so decisive the effects of early childhood experiences on future attitudes, values, and behavior, as to deprive humans of freedom and their potential for growth.

By contrast, humanist psychology asserts that people are unique among animals and should be understood and treated as such. In contrast to some behaviorists, humanist psychologists believe people are responsible for their lives and actions and can, through intention and will, alter their behavior. Humans possess the potential to fulfill our dreams beyond the limits of scientific formulas and childhood demons. Given opportunities and a supportive context, humans relish self-fulfillment. Consequently, humanists encourage the fullest growth of individuals in the areas of autonomy, fulfillment, love, and self-worth. From this
perspective, individuals reach their full potential when they live authentically
according to their own set of attitudes, beliefs, and values.

Maslow is widely recognized as a major inspiration in the Human Potential
Movement, and is best known for his hierarchy of human needs (1954). He
believed that for people to reach their full potential, certain needs must be
satisfied, including: physical (such as food, clothing, and shelter); social-
affectional (needs for provide support and nurturance); self-esteem/dignity
(including self-respect and the respect of others); and self-actualizing or creativity
needs (the pursuit of activities appropriate and desired by particular individuals).
If all of these needs are met, then, according to Maslow, a person may be
fulfilled. For Maslow, the main obstacle to achieving widespread self-actualization
is that many people operate at the first three levels, rarely attaining the fourth.

Politics 3: Eupsychean Vision, Contemporary Politics, and Universalist Ethos

Maslow characterizes the politics of his time as atomistic, adversarial, win-
lose oriented, zero-sum, countersynergistic, and as fostering an us/them
mentality that creates “outgroups.” The planet’s division into national territories is
a consequence of this “countergrowth” politics. To remedy this, according to
Maslow, “political, social, and management machinery can be deduced from
humanistic psychology” (1977, p. 12). In essence, Politics 3 sets out to
accomplish that very task. It outlines a Eupsychian vision (from the Greek, “good
psyche,” or “well-being”) of how—by fostering human growth and fulfillment—the
earth might evolve into a more equitable, safe, peaceful, and supportive place. It
also offers a method for achieving a kind of transformation that might assist the
human family in creating a world populated by self-actualized individuals in relationships of self-expression, mutual respect, and dignity. In *Politics 3*, Maslow advocates inculcating values fostering human fulfillment on a global scale and suggests how that might be achieved. Indispensable to this process is communication—particularly open, honest, reciprocal, and compassionate communication.

Maslow identified the following barriers to human fulfillment:

all polarizing, splitting, excluding, dominating, hurting, hating, insulting, anger-producing, vengeance-producing, put-down techniques are atomistic and antiholistic and therefore help to separate humankind into mutually hostile groups. They are countergrowth and make species-politics less possible, put off the attainment of One World Law and government, and are war-fostering and peace-delaying. (p. 14)

Maslow decries a host of specific cultural and political formations, setting them against his vision for *Politics 3*:

Politics 3 is against adversary justice and law; amoral science; lower need economics; jungle journalism; medicine from above; technologized nursing; separative expertise; docility education; antitranscendent religion; intrusive and non-Taoistic social work; nonpersonal psychology and sociology; nonparticipatory ethnology; merely punishing criminology and jails; selfishly antisocial advertising business and industry; business-first radio and television; health as merely survival; the use of personal talents or superiorities primarily to acquire selfish privileges; the use of other human beings without regard to their personal growth; antiquality manufacturing; noncompassionate radicalism; polarizing of relations between classes, castes, subcultures; nonsynergic salesman-customer relationships; and despair art.

Politics 3 is against all that rests on a merely evil conception of human nature or of society, or on a merely good conception of human nature or of society; despair and hopelessness; any we-they polarizing; malice, hatred, revenge; the wish for one’s own death or the destruction of others, or of the world; any splitting of humankind into inherent classes, castes, or
At the heart of a politics opposing personal growth is authoritarianism. The authoritarian, writes Maslow, has a particular communication style: he/she does not listen to others or seek their feedback, but rather, gives orders regardless of their impact on others. The resulting political climate from such communication turns people into pawns rather than active participants, leaving them feeling helpless, controlled, manipulated, or dominated.

Maslow inquires into what it would take to transform authoritarian culture, suggesting that at this stage of human development we have the ability to transform ourselves and the world. Maslow uses the term “Politics 3” to describe his vision of a transformed planet. While he does not specify what Politics 1 or Politics 2 are, one may infer they refer to right-wing and left-wing political orientations: “There is some evidence that the extreme right and the extreme left, and a lot of people in between, share many of the same goals” (p. 7). Politics 3 would be a third way, a transcendence of divisive political orientations, a synthesis combining the common concerns and values of both sides of the political spectrum:

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3 Burke (1969b, p. 141) might say that we-they polarizing is inevitable, and that these ills may also therefore be inevitable since language is hierarchical by its very nature. Furthermore, it may be said that Maslow himself engages in his own polarizing and hierarchization in his articulation of Politics 3. While this might be the case, hierarchies have different qualities. Maslow is recommending an upgrading of these hierarchies through training people in authentic communication. Furthermore, as we shall see, Maslow did not believe using the T-group technique would be a “panacea”; rather, he recommends it because “it is available, widely used, and increasingly accepted” (p. 16). Recall Burke’s epithet at the beginning of the Grammar of Motives: “Ad bellum purificandum”—toward the purification of war. This purification might occur by taking self-reflexive perspectives on our communication, and specifically teasing out elements of our conversations that contribute to the kinds of ills Maslow laments (such as war).
Politics 3 asserts that the real problem is of personal goodness, that is, of producing good human beings. We should now consider ourselves self-evolvers. This is a new age, a new era in the history of mankind, because now we can decide ourselves what we are to become. It is not nature or evolution or anything else that will decide. We must decide, and we must evolve ourselves, shape ourselves, grow ourselves; we must be conscious of our goals, values, ethics, and the direction we want to go. (p. 7)

In this “new age,” people are responsible—individually and collectively—for growing, for self-actualizing, and we cannot have individual transformation without a corresponding transformation in society: “You must simultaneously and in tandem cleanse yourself and your society” (p. 17).

In what ways may this be achieved? Maslow recommends establishing common ground across all societal divisions through a focus on communication. At base, Maslow believes all humans share the same fundamental values. The required task, then, is to write down these values and to share them. He asserts it is possible to arrive at a consensus regarding the values of such a new age: “We need to explore and develop this sharing in a universalistic value system” (p. 7). As human beings sharing the same material reality, we all have common needs, desires, and wishes. By exploring the possibility of a universalist ethos, a universal value system might emerge that would produce One World Law. Citing the Bill of Rights as an example, Politics 3 therefore involves the drafting of a document of values shared by all planetary inhabitants.

Two additional examples of such documents are The Earth Charter and the United Nations’ Declaration on Human Rights. The preamble to this chapter is from The Earth Charter (2000, March). The Earth Charter expresses a holistic vision of the planet and outlines goals we must adopt and advance in order to
create a sustainable future. The values of *The Earth Charter* embrace a respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and democracy, nonviolence, and peace.

Another example of a universalist ethos may be found in the United Nations’ *Declaration on Human Rights*, (United Nations, 1948) which, in some ways goes beyond the *Bill of Rights*, and is already recognized by many nations around the world. In addition to the more basic rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of person, this *Declaration* includes additional examples of Maslow’s Eupsychian values:

*Article 26:*
Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

*Article 29:*
Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

What the *Declaration on Human Rights* thus demonstrates is that the possibility of consensus around a Maslowian universalist ethos already exists.⁴

As stated, Maslow believes humans share a common set of values, and that the task at hand is to formally establish, by writing down, what he refers to as a universalist ethos. This ethos Maslow argues must extend beyond conventional

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⁴ Of course, in today’s culture and contemporary intellectual climate, such a vision as Maslow’s seems fraught with questions, if not intractable problems: What are good people and good organizations? Who gets to say? The problem becomes one of “measurement,” and before that, one of “consensus” on what “good” means—no easy task, since it has been debated the whole of human history. One issue in particular is the *blase* and cynical attitude pervading Western society (Goldfarb, 1991; Hart, 2001, April). These questions will be deferred. Here I entertain Maslow’s ideas simply as possible ways to engage planetary transformation.
notions of “politics.” Politics and politicians are often seen as scapegoats for the ills of the world, when, in fact, we are all responsible for the way things have turned out—either through engaged participation or silent complicity. In Maslow’s *Politics 3*, *everything* falls under the domain of politics, for politics contains all the elements of social life for the individual. Maslow therefore sees politics as having precedence over other realms of activity:

I am proposing here that we conceive of politics as superordinate to other realms of thought such as authentic interpersonal relations, the authentic community, the brotherhood of man, because politics means essentially the actualization of the whole of life… Democratizing the whole of life and making a larger definition of it—the need to grow translated into the right to grow—is crucial for full humanness, for self-actualization. (p. 20)

Politics therefore encompasses what Maslow, citing Moynihan (1969), calls “secular morality,” a set of values participating with, but not exhausted by society’s laws and legal systems. Such a secular morality must be acceptable to both the religious and non-religious alike, while accommodating itself to what people actually do and who people are, which is to say, imperfect creatures. For Maslow, secular morality is that which helps “get the work of the world done, below the level of government” (p. 9). It exists at the cultural and interpersonal level of interaction, and for that reason, everyone is involved in its creation. A secular morality, characterized by an emphasis on human fulfillment, would provide guidance for creating global peace and harmony:

One can describe Politics 3, ideal politics, as part of the creation of a secular morality. That is, the Eupsychian ideal of society as a fostering of human fulfillment is part of the secular morality. The two main problems of creating the good person and the good society are interwoven inextricably. Only a clear vision of these interwoven goals can serve as the basis for a secular morality and, therefore, for a political and social philosophy that
will tell what direction to go, what to do, how to do it, and what needs to be done. (p. 9)

Thus, for Maslow, creating a secular morality requires fostering human fulfillment. How is this achieved through the social realm?

*Communication Forwarding Self-Actualization*

Maslow articulates three characteristics of social and political mechanisms that help forward self-actualization, and a significant factor in these mechanisms is communication: (1) upward and downward communication—that is, reciprocal communication from the grassroots to elected officials (and not just the other way around), as well as communication between hierarchical structures such as leaders and the led—owners, managers, workers, and consumers; (2) empowering individuals to be masters of their own fate; and (3) increasing the participation of all societal members in the organization of social/political life. These characteristics aim for empowerment of the grassroots, and an invigorated level of participation across every spectrum of the population. Each of these mechanisms, though Maslow is not always explicit, involves communication: whether it be mutuality in interaction, showing people the possibility of being “at cause” in their lives (as opposed to being “at effect”), or bringing people into the political process.

For Maslow, creating a secular morality means forming a truly representative democracy. Thus, *Politics 3* offers a democratic alternative to authoritarianism. The democratic attitude contrasts to its authoritarian counterpart in that the democratic attitude respects and feels compassion toward people. This orientation is manifested in a particular communication style: It is
open and is willing to listen. It provides a context for people to freely choose among real alternatives. Democratic social management is thus participatory, local, and decentralized. Control exists at the individual, personal, grassroots level, and integrates feedback from consumers in determining the production of goods and services. In a democratic society, it is necessary that people see themselves as making a contribution to the greater good and as being listened to and understood. According to Maslow, “Democratic, compassionate, loving, respecting, growth-enjoying attitudes in strong persons are growth-fostering and self-fulfilling in weaker persons” (p. 12). By increasing participation in the affairs of social organization, individuals may become self-actualized, which would hypothetically lead to collective transformation. All this would occur in a social context where people feel free to express themselves, to communicate their experience and be listened to by others.

For Maslow, creating a world that supports human fulfillment and holds peace and harmony as its highest values requires the articulation of a “species-politics”—a set of values and practices that unite humans all over the planet: This “growth politics” would “transcend (not abolish) national sovereignty in favor of a more holistic inclusive species-politics” (p. 14) and would bridge gaps between classes, religions, sexes, races, nationalities, tribes, professional groups, and IQ groups (p. 15). As discussed in the next session, Maslow believed training groups (T-groups) can help foster his brand of Politics 3 communication, which would in turn facilitate the articulation of a species politics.

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5 Maslow refers to this attitude by another name: “Taoistic respect” (p. 11).
T-Groups and Communication

According to Maslow, global transformation could be achieved through the progressive organization of society using what he terms small intimacy groups, or T-groups (“training groups,” see Chapter Five). Through the group process defined by the particular training, T-groups assist participants in becoming self-aware, giving them opportunities to examine how they think about themselves and how they relate to others through their communication. Participants are trained to communicate experiences without fear, thereby learning how they relate to other people in the process. By doing so, they may obtain insights into their lives, their relationships, and their selves. Maslow suggests that by transforming individuals to be communicative, self-actualized, peace-loving, and compassionate, the entire planet can be transformed.\(^6\) Having discussed the historical origins of T-groups in the previous chapter, in this section, I discuss the role communication plays in T-groups and Maslow’s belief that T-groups might serve as the basic components for social organization.

It should be noted that Maslow does not make the distinctions articulated by Wheelan (1990): “T-groups (encounter groups, sensitivity training, and so forth), as well as different other techniques [are] now used in growth centers” (Maslow, 1977, p. 15). This suggests he considers T-groups, encounter groups, and sensitivity training similar enough to each other so as not to warrant separating them from T-groups. This may in part be attributed to the

\(^6\) The stakes for the planet (given the alarming conditions described above) would seem to warrant such an investigation.

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fragmentation of T-groups into more specialized groups since Maslow’s day.\(^7\)

This being the case, it is difficult to compare contemporary definitions of group training to what Maslow means by “T-group” in Politics 3.

While Maslow considers T-groups as interchangeable with sensitivity groups and encounter groups, T-groups are generally distinct from “encounter groups” in that these are usually unstructured, may have no leader and attempt to develop the individual by unrestrained confrontation of individuals in the group. Besides having a leader, what distinguishes T-groups from encounter groups is that, in the former, participants do not necessarily confront each other—communication takes place more between leader and participants and not so much among participants. In Maslow’s model, a T-group is “a face-to-face group moving toward intimacy and candor, valuing self-disclosure and caring feedback” (p. 13). Thus, a T-group is primarily a communicative phenomenon, and it is clear from their descriptions that in the various types of group trainings Wheelan (1990), communication is both a prominent feature as well as the vehicle for the training.

The values and processes of T-groups are consistent with a democratic style of communication as Maslow describes them, for T-groups value open communication, emphasizing honesty, intimacy, authenticity, self-exposure, feedback, and trust. Ideally, according to Maslow, people would experience this mode of communication in all other social organizations in which they participate (p. 13). To achieve this goal, Maslow recommends T-groups of 12 or so

\(^7\) Likewise, Rogers (1970, cited in Wheelan 1990, p. 38) uses “encounter groups and “personal growth groups” interchangeably.
individuals as the ideal size for face-to-face interaction. This “group of 12” model would be characterized by its openness and efficiency. In Politics 3, T-groups would be widely used as a holistic political tool with the endgame of creating a “brotherhood of all human beings” (p. 16).

T-groups, according to Maslow, maximize the advantages of big and small groups while minimizing their disadvantages. For this reason, and because they can embrace Maslow’s three growth-fostering characteristics, Maslow suggests T-groups might serve as a basic “modules” for social organization. In Politics 3, Maslow recommends using T-groups to “holisticize” society and eventually the world (p. 15). One way this might work is to establish “communities small enough to have town hall meetings, and then to have such groups on a face-to-face basis elect a representative to the next hierarchy of, let us say, the 5,000 people level which, in turn would elect to the next higher level, and so forth” (p. 8). In this model, that which is best left to localities would be managed at the local level, while national tasks would be left to groups like the U.S. Federal Government or the United Nations. “The size of the total group should again be dictated by simple efficiency (i.e., which jobs are best performed by a group of twelve, by a group of one hundred, or by a group of ten thousand, and so forth” (p. 13).

Maslow does not elaborate much on how this might happen, so, as such, there is considerable work to fill out the details! Nevertheless, by fostering the fulfillment of their members, encouraging self-expression, tolerance, and understanding, and by extending these types of encounters beyond the local to increasingly larger groups at the planetary level, Maslow believes a form of
global transformation may be achieved. The goal of using such methods is to avoid war under the one global law ("One World, One Law," p. 19). Thus, Maslow is essentially describing a communication network and process model, infusing it with humanist values. The aim is that by establishing open and intimate communication between small, interconnected groups of people, Maslow hopes the net effect will be a renaissance of planetary peace and growth.

These are merely proposals, however. As far as Maslow is concerned,

Any method is good that fosters communication, understanding, intimacy, trust, openness, honesty, self-exposure, feedback, awareness, compassion, tolerance, acceptance, friendliness, love, and that reduces suspicion, paranoid expectations, fear, feelings of being different, enmity, defensiveness, envy, contempt, insult, condescension, polarization, splitting, alienation, and separation. (p. 16)

Thus, Maslow’s goals in Politics 3 feature communication as the sine qua non of planetary transformation.

Does Size Matter? Maslow’s Relevance to Landmark Education

I find Maslow’s Politics 3 inspiring and see relevance to the work of Landmark Education. As discussed in Chapter Five, Landmark Education utilizes a type of T-group, the large group awareness training. Since LGATs had not yet emerged, Maslow did not write about them in Politics 3. While LGATs are not “small” groups, I believe Landmark’s training aims to teach people to communicate in ways to achieve Politics 3. Such training, by fostering open, reciprocal, and compassionate communication, has the power to create intimacy groups.

Recall what Landmark CEO Rosenberg (1998) writes about the role language and communication play in the constitution of “reality”:
DISTINGUISHING OURSELVES AND OUR WORLD THROUGH LANGUAGE: We primarily exist in a world that arises in and is constituted by language. While we come to think of ourselves, our lives, the personalities we develop and the reality we know as set and fixed, The Forum proposes that our world and the reality we know is largely malleable and can actually be created and altered through language”. (Rosenberg, 1998, p. 5)

The notion that language is constitutive of reality and therefore has the power to alter that reality, lies at the heart of Politics 3—that the ways we communicate, and the relationships we form can transform political reality and the entire planet. When Maslow writes about how *democratic* communication is open and is willing to listen, this is precisely the kind of communication Landmark promotes.

Landmark’s courses stress the importance of being in reciprocal communication with others and being fully self-expressed. 8 Listening, and particularly “listening” to the ways we listen to people (distinguishing our already/always way of listening—see Chapter One) is part of this open, reciprocal communication. Also emphasized in Landmark is training people to become masters of their own fate, that is, taking responsibility for the meaning we have added to life without blaming circumstances or others for the way things turn out, and seeing that we have the power to shift our perspectives to ones that are more empowering.

These qualities are clearly in evidence in the letter I wrote my father (Chapter One). Despite the fact that my father had passed away, I opened myself

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8 I should note here that “being fully self-expressed” does not mean saying whatever comes to mind. Saying whatever comes to mind would not always be compassionate, and one can easily imagine how ineffective this would be. For example, I could say to someone, “You’re a selfish jerk.” That person might be hurt by the remark, and I could say, “Well, I was just being honest about my feelings!” This would mean “being on loudspeaker,” and is not “compassionate” communication. Being fully self-expressed, as distinguished by Landmark, means in part communicating in such ways that are consistent with the possibilities and values we invent for ourselves and listening to others as the possibilities they invent for themselves.
to re-examining our relationship and distinguished the “listening” for him that closed off our communication. The impact of the Landmark Forum here was to get me to see that I was responsible for my communication in the relationship—I was the source of this listening—and I could transform this listening even in his absence. Prior to the Landmark Forum, I had never felt such compassion toward my father as I was too busy making him wrong for the things he had done “to me.” A common refrain in Landmark courses is that “it only takes one person to transform a relationship.” This notion is no clearer than in the letter I wrote.9

What about increasing societal members’ participation in the organization of social/political life? While this is not necessarily an explicit “teaching” of Landmark Education,10 one might argue that it is a logical extension of the Landmark distinction “being at cause.” In fact, one component of Landmark training pertains to the idea that a group can be responsible for itself. For example, there is integrity at the individual level, and there is integrity at the level of group. This is explicitly addressed in the Landmark Advance Course and the Self-Expression and Leadership Program (among others), where group members are responsible for how the group as a whole performs. This is achieved—through communication—by providing support that calls upon each other to live with integrity and consistent with the possibilities we invent. Furthermore, in the Self-Expression and Leadership Program (SELP) participants design community projects that speak to them. In these projects, participants take the possibilities

9 Admittedly, this instance of communication is clearly not “reciprocal,” however, more examples of this kind of communication will be demonstrated in Chapter Eight.
10 Thus LEC might only now represent one phase or only limited aspects of an evolution toward Politics 3—see Epilogue.
they’ve invented and attempt to bring those possibilities to fruition at the community level. Depending on the individual, this may or may not result in “political” action. In the case of my SELP project, this training led to the formation of the University of South Florida’s Graduate and Professional Student Organization, the first self-sustaining campus organization of its kind. The message from this emphasis on community work is that if we are truly to be at cause, it is insufficient that people take responsibility only for their own individual lives, we must also collectively be at cause for the social and global environment in which we live.

Based on my nine years of experience with Landmark Education, participants of their programs have obtained access to communication practices that support human fulfillment and promote understanding, peace, and harmony. This access is obtained by means of the type of training that takes place in courses. Landmark teaches communication practices and emphasizes the importance of open, honest, and reciprocal communication in achieving effective interpersonal relating. Like Politics 3, Landmark Education is concerned with global transformation through communication. It would thus appear a contemporary attempt to achieve the type of global transformation envisioned by Maslow.

Recap: Maslow, Communication, and Planetary Transformation

In summary, human society is in crisis and opportunities for transformation are not merely abundant, they are necessary for continued survival. As Maslow’s Politics 3 suggests, previous models of social organization are not sufficiently
humanist and holistic, and especially, given the current global “climate” (so to speak), are inadequate to ensure our survival. In *Politics 3*, Maslow lays out a blueprint for global transformation by promoting a model of communication intended to foster human fulfillment through the use of intimacy groups or T-groups. T-groups are designed to empower individuals and to develop participants’ abilities for authentic self-expression and intimacy. They do this by employing an open communication style consistent with democratic values.

According to Maslow, Politics 3 may be achieved through the use of T-groups that train people in open, compassionate, and reciprocal communication, and that, given the choice, self-actualized individuals would choose active participation in social life consistent with the commitments of a democratic society. Such transformation could reverse current destructive trends.

Maslow’s explicit focus on communication and planetary transformation is highly relevant to the work of Landmark Education because his vision of cultural and political transformation through Politics 3 is consistent with the stated mission of Landmark Education. It would be necessary, however, to *demonstrate* how this might be the case. Before I do that, in the next section, I attempt to sift through the issues discussed thus far to see how such a question may be articulated.
Hammering Screws into a Window Pane: A Further Statement of the Problem

"If the only tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting to treat everything as if it were a nail."
—Abraham Maslow (1966, pp.15-16)

Large group awareness trainings are one attempt to transform human beings and the way we operate. I have had positive transformative experiences with Landmark Education’s LGATs, and I believe their focus on humanist and holistic approaches could be considered one way to achieve the goals of Politics 3. My experience, however, is not confirmed by research, research that is either methodologically inadequate or which largely holds these groups to be relatively ineffective. Thus far, research on LGATs has produced little to suggest that these courses have any lasting impact on participants, much less anything that could be reasonably associated with the goals of Politics 3.

When I consider Fisher’s, et al. (1990) results—no dramatic shifts relating to subjective well being, perceived life satisfaction, or world view, and minor indications of short-term changes in perceived control—this fairly accurately describes my own experience. For example, I do not feel my personality changed or that I am “a different person,” and in some sense, I do feel more in control of my life.11 In other words, based on my experience, I cannot dispute Fisher’s et al. findings.

11 Put more rigorously, though, this perception of control is not so much control “over” my life as it is the realization that I am the source of my own experience, and that my interpretation of events and people affects my actions, and particularly, the ways I communicate. As a result of my training, I now examine how I interpret things and determine whether such interpretations cause me unnecessary suffering or have me interact with others in ways inconsistent with my values. Additionally, I express myself to others in less arrogant, less brash, more considerate ways.
Still, given my positive experience of Landmark courses, and the enduring benefits I derive from them, it puzzled me to encounter no research studies demonstrating benefit (other than self-reports). Based on my extensive personal and ethnographic experience, current research appears to be missing something. What is it that?

*What is Missing Here? Four Possible Explanations*

LGAT research consists primarily of what are considered unreliable self-reports, unreliable studies, or, in the case of Fisher, et al. (1990), little evidence of measurable impact. Fisher’s, et al. study is the most rigorous LGAT outcome study to date. Since their research and my personal experience appear in some ways to contradict each other, I believe current LGAT research may be overlooking key components in its conceptualization of the object of study. In other words, applying psychological measures to LGATs may not yield adequate results. Based on personal and academic experience, *communication* is a possible place to explore.

In this section, I offer four possible explanations for why psychology has been unsuccessful demonstrating LGAT benefit. Each has to do with the *lens* through which previous outcome studies have been used to look at LGATs. Previous outcome research on LGATs, including the methodologically rigorous study by Fisher, et al. (1991): (1) Regards LGATs as therapeutic rather than educational experiences; (2) Focuses on individual cognition rather than communicative behavior, leading to an emphasis on individuals rather than relationships; (3) Examines short instead of long-term change. (4) Does not
address the importance of ongoing training as a means of applying learned communication practices. I elaborate on these explanations below.

*Regards LGATs as Therapeutic, Rather than Educational Experiences*

One possible explanation for why psychological measures may not be well-suited to LGATs is that it is not necessary to alter one’s psyche or personality to transform lives, relationships, or situations. Despite the possibility that LGATs may have therapeutic benefits, Landmark courses *teach* communication practices and are not designed to be or substitute for any form of mental health treatment. Thus, these trainings, as their name implies, are primarily *educational* in nature.¹²

*Focuses on Individual Cognition, not Communicative Behavior*

Another limitation of LGAT research is related to the first. That is, the *object of study* in LGAT research is the individual. Psychologists have studied large group awareness trainings largely by asking individuals how it affected them using various psychological instruments and measuring the “results.” Consequently, LGAT outcome research has been limited to individual psychological effects. Since cognitive measures focus on individuals rather than relationships, they do not reveal communication behavior, which must be studied in a dyadic or group setting. Thus, studying LGATs only in terms of individuals may therefore not be broad enough to understand potential benefits from the training.

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¹² It may therefore be no coincidence that Werner Erhard and Associates gave way to Landmark *Education* Corporation.
It therefore appears necessary to expand the frame of reference beyond particular trainings and individuals, and examine interaction between them. Landmark courses teach participants how to communicate, and I believe the most significant impact of Landmark’s LGATs may be found in the nature of the conversations participants are trained to have with others and practice in their daily lives. In other words, LGAT impact may have less to do with psychology than communication. To answer questions relating to the relevance of Politics 3 to LGATs, I believe it is therefore necessary to examine the communication of LGAT participants.

*Examines Short-Term versus Long-Term Participation*

Communication practices are not mastered overnight and must be employed over time to acquire facility using them. Fisher’s et al. (1990) longitudinal time period was under two years. While I am not asserting LGAT benefit cannot be demonstrated from two years of participation, I recommend examining long-term participation. My experience has taught me that continued practice has a kind of cumulative effect. The longer people take courses, the more Landmark’s communication practices became second nature (among other benefits). Improved communication produces better outcomes in life, and better outcomes create a context for even greater results. Sustaining and repeating new ways to communicate takes time to put into practice, so it makes sense to explore *long-term* LGAT participation.

Below I elaborate the rationale for this assertion and particulars around defining long-term participation.
Rationale for studying long-term participation. A rationale for studying long-term LGAT participation might be the following:

1. LGATs teach communication practices (among other things) and participants learn how to apply these in their lives.

2. Communication must be practiced in participants’ lives to establish behavior patterns that yield results derived from practice.

3. Practice does not make perfect, however, practice is all we have. Without it, there is no possibility for transformation.

4. Practice takes time.

5. Continual practice can lead to greater competence (not to say mastery), or at least increased frequency of practice.

6. While there is no guarantee of competence, there is a possibility of competence.

7. In order to explore the possibility of Politics 3 communication, it would be helpful to look at long-term participation.

Defining long-term participation. Given est has been around since 1971 (and I have met several people who have done est, for example, who continue to participate in Landmark Education), 1½ years would not be considered “long-term.” While survey data of this type is currently unavailable, it has a potential range of over 30 years. Long-term participation could therefore be defined as 20-30+ years.

The Importance of Ongoing Training

Previous LGAT research does not address the importance of ongoing training as a means of maintaining competence in communication practices. My experience tells me that the fewer Landmark course assignments I do, the poorer my outlook and interpersonal relations become. If transformation is not ongoing,
it ceases to occur, and my “meaning-making machinery” continues to cause problems unabated. One must continue to practice new ways of communicating on a regular basis in order to maintain the benefits of the training. Such training must therefore be ongoing for at least two reasons: People have a tendency to revert to familiar past-based behaviors, and this tendency is compounded by a social environment that largely does not support such practices. These conditions make it easy for participants to lapse into pre-training communication patterns.

Conclusion

To date, no one in communication studies (or in any field, for that matter) explicitly addresses LGATs in terms of communication indicative of Politics 3. This qualitative study is designed to supply what is missing in the current body of research on LGATs and provide a different perspective into their potential value. It pursues the following questions: How might one describe the communication of long-term LGAT participants? To what extent, if any, does the communication of long-term LGAT participants resemble the communication described by Maslow in Politics 3? What would Politics 3 communication look like in practice?

Thus, in contrast to the public conversations examined thus far, this qualitative study attempts to go beyond the apparent impasse of divergence between public conversations about Landmark Education and my lived experience by exploring the possibility of global transformation through open, compassionate, reciprocal communication practices learned in Landmark Education courses. To do so, it will: (1) look at communication practiced by
participants and determine how and to what extent this communication contributes to the goals of Politics 3; (2) focus on communicative behavior, not cognition; (3) incorporate long-term participation; and (4) examine participation that is ongoing.
CHAPTER SEVEN

METHODS

Having presented three prominent public conversations about Landmark Education—Con-text (Balcer, et al., 2003), Time Magazine (Faltermayer, 1998 March 16), and psychological studies of large group awareness trainings—and found no attribution of value to the extent I experienced in my own life, I sought to formulate a question to explore the potential value of Landmark courses engaging Maslow’s (1977) notion of Politics 3. To answer that question—does LGAT participation produce a brand of Politics 3 communication?—requires using qualitative methods that examine the interaction of LGAT participants. This chapter discusses the methods used in this study to explore this question.

An Inadvertent Case Study

While not originally intended, as I proceeded to investigate my subject, I ended up producing a case study. Due to the complex nature of my subject, this approach appears warranted. According to Tucker, et al. (1981), a case study draws from a variety of sources and methods to produce “a comprehensive description and explanation of a variety of components of a given social situation” (p.110). Case studies seek to describe many details of a particular phenomenon rather than focus on a single variable relating to the object of study: “By learning
as much as possible about one individual, one group, or one event, the research aims to provide insights that might have generalized applicability” (p. 110).

In addition to researching published literature, my methods consisted of:

1. Nine years of virtually uninterrupted participant observation in courses offered by Landmark Education
2. Four open-ended face-to-face qualitative interviews of approximately 2 hours each with participants meeting the selection criteria
3. A three-hour focus group with the same participants
4. A three-hour discussion of the focus group with an observer unfamiliar with Landmark Education who viewed the focus group videotape

Non-Linear, Emergent, and Unfolding Nature of Qualitative Inquiry

My thinking about the project went through various twists and turns, evolving over time, in typical qualitative inquiry fashion. Below I detail the trajectory my project traveled.

Given that LGAT literature is unable to decisively demonstrate significant effects on participants, I was initially interested in accounting for long-term participation. It was at this point that I serendipitously encountered Maslow’s *Politics 3.* Once the interviews began, I shifted my interest toward establishing the core of the Landmark experience by eliciting stories from participants that, according to them, catalyzed their personal growth. This question took me into the thoroughly researched areas of identity and narrative. Once the interviews were completed, however, I felt I was not getting the results I was looking for in regard to Maslow’s *Politics 3.* Self-reported reasons for long-term LGAT participation became less interesting (and perhaps less able to validate), given my curiosity about Politics 3.
At this stage, I experienced an epiphany from reading an essay by Elias (1978) (see below), who argues that the individual is an insufficient unit of sociological analysis. Consequently, looking at individuals and their stories did not appeal as much as observing their communication, which led me to explore the communication dynamics of participants. Furthermore, since my interviews were designed solely to elicit informants' experiences and were not interactive interviews (see Ellis, et al., 1997), the interaction between people trained in Landmark's methodology did not clearly emerge from the interviews. I therefore moved away from trying to explain long-term participation through an examination of individual accounts of participation, and instead directed my attention to seeing how people with such training exhibit particular kinds of communication through their interaction. Landmark does not allow for tape recording of their course sessions, and more significantly, these would not be examples of how their training shows up in life “outside” the courses. These considerations suggested the viability of employing a focus group to answer my questions.

Given my full member status, it seemed valuable to remove myself from the interaction as much as was practically possible so as to allow for observation of participants in a relatively non-directive manner. The focus group thus conducted allowed for the spontaneous emergence of communication influenced by LGAT participation. This was done by: (1) beginning the focus group with a very broad prompt—“share about an area of your life that is important to you”—
and (2) asking participants to determine the topics themselves (i.e., what areas of life they would share from).

Along the same lines (i.e., my “full participant” status), and in an attempt to address readers’ potential concerns over my own bias and preconceptions toward the material, it seemed helpful to get a fresh perspective on my subject matter. To address this as a “condition of rebuttal,” I obtained the participation of a qualified professional unfamiliar with Landmark Education to observe the focus group videotape and interviewed her. The interview was designed to supply open-ended feedback, reactions, and responses about the focus group and to answer any questions she had about it or about Landmark in general. This “observation” of the focus group would be used to compare and contrast her observations with mine.

Finally, it was also serendipitous that in the midst of my writing, I chanced upon Criminal Intent’s Con-text episode (Balcer, et al. 2003). Viewing this show, and noting its popularity, created an opportunity to draw a comparison between this public conversation and the lived experience of participants, thereby adding another layer to what had now become a case study. Discussing Con-text allowed me to reflect back on issues relating to public conversations about Landmark and discover a way to think about relationship between such public conversations and the social phenomena aimed at transforming them (see Epilogue).

Below I provide more specific detail about the methods used in this study.
Participant Observation

Much of this study is based on my own participant observation of Landmark Education Corporation’s personal development courses. During the period of late August 1997 to the present, I have operated as a "complete participant" (Gold, 1958), that is, I am a full participant in Landmark’s curriculum and not merely a participant as observer, observer as participant, or complete observer. To use Adler and Adler's term (1987), my role is that of the "complete member," one who studies a topic from within a group of which one is already a member.

Participant observation has undergone considerable scrutiny and revision since the early days of the first anthropological expeditions. Concerns over the nature of ethnographic observation, writing ethnographies, and the relationship between ethnographers and their informants have transformed the ways ethnographers think about, perform, and report fieldwork. The problematic nature of representing ethnographic experience has been a preoccupation for several years, and has been treated in considerable depth (Clifford, 1988; Hastrup, 1992; and Marcus and Fischer, 1986). The so-called "crisis in representation" in anthropology has led to a rejection of the notion of a neutral observer, and has heightened interest in finding alternate ways of depicting the lives and views of other people. This acknowledgment of the inextricability and implicatedness of the ethnographer's subjectivity in the observation of cultural phenomena (one's site, subjects, and processes) has shifted ethnographic description away from the positivistically motivated accounts of early anthropology toward a style that
includes the thoughts and perceptions of the ethnographer. Contemporary
ethnography thus mediates between two impulses, the ethnographic and
autobiographical (Neumann, 1996).

To present my own experience and that of my informants, my purpose
seemed best achieved therefore by using a style of writing more closely
resembling the genre of fiction than "positivistic" description. Agar (1995) refers
to this style as "creative nonfiction." These days, it is not clear the extent to which
any writing is "non" fiction. Agar suggests that while writers of fiction shape the
content to fit the form, ethnographers might shape the form to fit the content.
That is, as an ethnographer, I should avoid making up observations contrary to
my recollection just to make my text more literary. Unlike writers of fiction,
ethnographers are bound by ethical constraints that forbid them from fabricating
details to make a better story. Perhaps this is why some call literary ethnography
"bad fiction." And while I'm not sure one can rigorously define the line between
form and content, I think Agar's emphasis is helpful in inquiring about the issue.
The difference between creative nonfiction and fiction may, however, boil down
to the ways data are collected. As Ellis (1997, personal communication)
suggests, the difference between creative fiction and "creative" ethnographic
"non-fiction" may lie more in the method, rather than in the style of writing. The
latter is generally believed to be more "systematic" than the former and
ethnographers are expected to reveal methods used in fieldwork. Fiction writers
are not accountable in such ways.
Being personally involved in my fieldwork, I am particularly sensitive to the slant I place on events. The observer, however, is always present at the scene of fieldwork and in the writing of the report. One way to write is to include one's own perceptions and interior monologue to approximate as "full" a disclosure as necessary. In that vein, when performing ethnography, Jackson (1989) advocates "radical empiricism," in which one acknowledges the blurred line between observer and observed.¹ This means including the ethnographer's perceptions as part of the "scene" of ethnographic observation. Thus, the story form, by including my own internal observations, allows readers to glimpse how I was framing events.

This state of affairs suggests that all writing is autobiographical, and by extension, all ethnography is autoethnographic, whether or not the writing explicitly acknowledges this. Ellis (1997) defines autoethnographic stories as those that "focus on the self in social context" and suggests that writing emotional experience serves the goals of reproducing uniquely human events, and at the same time, "connects the autobiographical impulse with the ethnographic impulse" (p. 132-133). Autoethnography is a style of writing in which the author does not lurk in the shadows as an afterthought, but rather is fully present in the narrative. My account of the Landmark Forum (Chapter One) is an autoethnographic account of my experience that focuses on my personal development. In this case, since showing introspection and personal growth interests me, my frame of the scene becomes the scene, therefore,

¹ See also Conquergood (1991).
autoethnography was an appropriate genre to utilize. The inclusion of personal experience in this project lends itself nicely to storytelling as a means of communicating one's experience in the field.

Among the most difficult aspects of this project has been engaging the material from what readers would consider a "balanced" perspective without denying the validity of my own experience. I perceive in academia an obligation to emphasize the negative to avoid criticism for being unbalanced, or worse, "duped." Minimally, my intention is to be credible. This entails managing the risk of being overly "selective" in my observations, reflecting on and reporting both pros and cons. I report what I have learned and what I have to say about it, all the while intending it as a contribution to social transformation.

Qualitative Interviewing

In addition to my ethnographic experience, I performed qualitative interviews with long-term Landmark participants. Qualitative inquiry requires both preparing open-ended questions and being open-minded to the results of one's research. Open-ended questions by their very nature ask qualitative researchers to see something they were not prepared to see. For this study, I conducted four open-ended face-to-face qualitative interviews of approximately 2 hours each with participants meeting my selection criteria (see below). I created an interview instrument that combines two types of qualitative interview genres: "informant interviews" and "narrative interviews" (Lindlof, 1995). The advantage of informant interviews here is that participants were well-acquainted with Landmark. The
narrative interview component allowed informants to tell their stories without a lot of direction on my part. Most questions were open-ended.

Instrument

The interview instrument was designed with Lindlof’s (1995) considerations in mind:

- Learning things I could not observe directly by other means
- Understanding informants’ perspectives
- Inferring communicative characteristics and processes of informants’ interpersonal relationships
- Corroborating or invalidating information obtained by my own participant observation
- Testing the hypothesis I had developed
- Eliciting informants’ distinctive language
- Achieving efficiency in data collection

The original instrument was adapted after each interview as the project evolved (for more on this, see below). Interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed. The Interview Instrument may be found in Appendix C.

Participant Selection

I wanted to study a population that had enough experience with Landmark so that they had adequately integrated what they learned into their lives. Given that the longest amount of participation from previous studies was one and a half years, I thought it necessary to go beyond that length of time. Even though (as I argue above) I knew the range of participation could be over 30 years, I was concerned about the availability of such a population for my study. For that reason, and given my own experience, I decided to set a minimum of three years. While three years is not a long time in the larger scheme of things (as previously discussed), it indicates a significant commitment to and investment in
Landmark Education courses. In addition, three years allows for participation in a significant bulk of Landmark’s primary courses: the Curriculum for Living (with four components: the Landmark Forum, a seminar series, the Landmark Advanced Course, and the Self-Expression and Leadership Program), the Communication Curriculum, the Introduction Leaders Program, and Wisdom Unlimited. This would entail continuous participation for approximately three years. As this study is the first of its kind, and is largely exploratory (rather than definitive) my “three-year rule” worked out fine, since my participants ranged from seven to fourteen years. Whether one considers this as “long-term” may be left for future discussion.

Not only did I want participants with at least three years Landmark experience, I also wanted participants to be currently participating in a Landmark program. I had two reasons for this. First, as I noted above, I discovered that when I was not participating in a Landmark course, my effectiveness was diminished. While the Landmark tools are always available to anyone who has taken courses, when one is not taking a course, there is an increased probability that these communication tools will either go unpracticed or be practiced with less frequency. To capture the communication of participants, it made sense that they currently be in a Landmark program. Second, Maslow requires that Politics 3 communication be ongoing. This means that open, honest, and reciprocal communication is not a one-shot phenomenon, but must be continual. Otherwise, the dangers of we-they polarizing, win-lose politics may re-emerge.
I defined a participant as someone who was either currently taking a course or who was coaching, assisting, or leading a course. In addition to the above, I wanted two men and two women. One man and one woman had completed the Introduction Leader Program (ILP), the other man and woman had not. This criterion was developed because, based on my extensive experience, there appear noticeable differences between those who have completed the ILP training and those who have not.

The Introduction Leader Program (ILP) is an intense, rigorous, and demanding six and a half month course that trains people to lead Introductions to the Landmark Forum. Introductions are presentations that (as the name implies) introduce the Landmark Forum to those interested in learning more about it. The Introduction itself generally takes over two hours and requires a significant attainment of listening, coaching, leadership, and customer service competence to be successful in registering new participants in the course. The ILP requires about 15 hours per week of participants’ time. While people who take the course are not required to become Introduction Leaders, those who do are asked to commit to two years as an Introduction Leader.

Participants were selected using different means. In keeping with Lindlof’s (1995) recommendations, I selected participants based on their knowledge, long tenure with Landmark Education, and their willingness and ability to provide articulate, detailed responses (p. 123). This is because the purpose of my study is not concerned with what is “average,” “typical,” or “representative,” but rather with what is possible. I personally invited Jeff and Melanie to participate because
I knew them well, having participated in courses with them as a coach (Jeff led two Introduction Leader Program courses and we did Landmark’s Wisdom Unlimited together; I coached Melanie in the ILP). Knowing them as articulate speakers and deeply committed to Landmark’s work were the primary reasons for selecting them.

Finding people who met the second criteria (above) were more difficult to locate, since many people who participate at least three years will often have taken the ILP. I stood up in front of a Landmark seminar and explained my selection criteria. Amanda, whom I had known superficially through Landmark seminars, volunteered. Another person volunteered, but was not in a course by the time my interviews began, so I used word of mouth to find the last participant. In the end, Jeff recommended Raymond, whom I did not know, but may have been in a seminar I took (there are around 100 people in a seminar). While the level of detail Raymond provided in the interviews (and subsequent focus group) was not as great, Raymond’s succinct responses served the project well and made a great contribution.

Focus Group

Once my four interviews were completed, I sensed I was not finding relevance to Maslow’s Politics 3, or that if I was, I was not sure these results had validity in light of Fisher’s, et al. criticism of previous LGAT outcome studies. Self-reported reasons for long-term LGAT participation therefore became less interesting to me. Furthermore, since my interviews were designed solely to elicit informants’ experiences and were not interactive interviews (see Ellis, et al.,
the seemingly unique interaction style between people trained in Landmark's methodology did not emerge.

Furthermore, I was inspired by a notion Elias (1978) expresses, that the individual is an insufficient unit of analysis. For Elias, human identity is not "autonomous," but is so intertwined with the identities of other members of society as to make the self-society construct that underlies sociological inquiry nonsensical. As a remedy, he suggests humans be conceptualized in terms of "figurations," groups of interdependent individuals with open personalities. By doing so, Elias hoped to go beyond the traditional individual/society opposition (a false binary in his thinking) and liberate sociology from inherited conceptions lacking in methodological and theoretical rigor.

Elias’ ideas seemed particularly relevant, so I began to conceptualize my project in terms of characteristics of group interaction instead of individual change or growth. In other words, looking at individuals and their stories did not appeal as much as what their communication practice looks like, which suggested the value of looking at communication dynamics in a focus group. Thus, my study no longer examined individual accounts of participants or tried to explain long-term participation. Instead, I wanted to show how people with such training exhibit particular communication qualities in their interaction.

According to Morgan (1997), focus groups have advantages over participant observation and individual interviews. Compared to participant observation, focus groups allow researchers to observe a large amount of interaction in a small amount of time. Compared to individual interviews, focus
groups allow for observation of interaction on particular topics. According to Lindlof (1995), individual interviews “cannot capture very well the dynamic processes of natural group interaction or collective interpretation” (p. 174). Focus group interviews, on the other hand, provide a “methodological response” to such limitations: “Focus groups create settings in which diverse perceptions, judgments, and experiences concerning particular topics can surface” (p. 174):

"Persons in focus groups are stimulated by the experiences of other members of the group to articulate their own perspectives. The ways they support, debate, or resolve issues with each other can resemble the dynamics of everyday social discourse." (p. 174)

Thus, focus groups create the possibility of a dynamic interaction between participants of a study that even interactive interviews would not.

Krueger (1994) writes that the focus group "presents a more natural environment than that of an individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others—just as they are in real life" (p. 19). While "a more natural environment" is (at best) a problematic description of what goes on in a focus group (it is in fact a created and “artificial” environment), the point is not lost that such groups go beyond obtaining information from single individuals. That is what I was intending by using this method.

To preserve the record of the focus group, I used three recording techniques: two audiocassette recorders and a digital video camera. I wanted to create as many fail-safes as possible in case there was a problem recording, and also to plug any gaps in the transcription resulting from changing the audio and videotapes in the process.
**Instrument**

The focus group instrument was designed to allow for the spontaneous emergence of conversation indicative of LGAT participation. (This instrument may be found in Appendix D.) This was done by: (1) asking participants to determine the topics (i.e., what areas of life they would share from), and (2) beginning the focus group with an extremely broad prompt (share about those areas of your life). Along the way, I probed for more details when warranted, invited participants to share when someone had finished their portion of the conversation, and on rare occurrences summed up what I heard people say.

Given my full member status, I felt it particularly important to remove myself from the interaction as much as was practically possible so as to allow for observation of participants in a (relatively) non-directive environment. I stayed as far in the background of the focus group as was practical, offering only a few observations along the way, and asking probing questions to clarify what they were saying, thus partaking in what Morgan (1997) terms “low-moderator involvement.” According to Morgan, “With low levels of moderator involvement, the discussion of the broad discussion-starter question may be the basis for the entire interview!” (p. 52). This was pretty much the case with my focus group, as all but about 20 minutes of the three hours were spent discussing the first question, and even in that instance, only two out of the four subjects chosen by the group were discussed. Given the group dynamic of the focus group discussion, time did not allow me to ask all questions. Still, the material we did cover proved most interesting.
**Participant Selection**

I chose the same participants from my qualitative interviews. This may be seen as a controversial decision. I came to see through the investigation, however, that I was not interested in creating a positivistic “laboratory,” but rather to show the kind of communication that takes place between LGAT participants. As I note in Chapter Eleven, while this was not necessary, it did provide a level of background that made for a thicker description (Geertz, 1973).

**Focus Group Observation Interview**

Given my full participant status, and in an attempt to address readers’ potential concerns over my own bias and preconceptions regarding the material, it seemed helpful to get a fresh perspective on my subject matter. To accomplish this, I asked a qualified professional to observe the focus group videotape and asked her to offer her feedback, reactions, and responses.

**Participant Selection**

A colleague—previously my supervisor at a university research institute where I worked—agreed to assist me with my project. She has a Ph.D. in Sociology and a Master’s degree in Marital and Family Therapy. These credentials, in addition to her intellect and articulateness, made her an excellent partner in this project. Furthermore, she knew nothing about Landmark Education prior to observing the focus group. We viewed the focus group videotape together and I asked her questions from an instrument I designed for the purpose.
In the interest of full self-disclosure, a few comments on my selection are in order. My colleague, Chloe Walker, was my supervisor for one year. She was the best supervisor I ever had. She was professional, thoughtful, tactful, diplomatic, emotionally mature, and supportive. Secure in her own personhood, when it came to tasks involving some of my specialties (e.g., layout and design of instruments, presentations, etc.), she empowered me to create what was needed without any hint of insecurity or professional jealousy. When discussing how to proceed on various matters, I felt free to raise concerns and offer solutions to problems, always knowing that she would listen carefully and thoughtfully, and when convinced, would go with my suggestions. When she felt her own ideas were preferable, she pursued them without leaving me feeling like I was not heard. In short, we had an outstanding professional relationship and my respect for her knows no boundaries.

Because we had such an excellent working relationship, one cannot ignore that, despite her unfamiliarity with Landmark Education, the very fact that I participated in their courses, combined with her favorable opinion of me as her assistant, it would be reasonable to believe that this favorable opinion would have at least a minor impact on her receptiveness to the material presented to her in the form of the focus group videotape. In other words, her approach to the focus group, in the context of our positive and constructive relationship, could not help but be somewhat influenced by our relationship. Furthermore, since she knew I had participated for many years in Landmark Education, she may have
been more sensitive to being critical. (One could argue alternatively that had we had a stormy or difficult relationship, she might be less receptive.)

I express these things not to suggest that such a bias significantly impacted the result (I do not think it did), but rather, in the interest of acknowledging that such a consideration forms part of the overall context of the observation. Ultimately, however, I believe her insight, maturity, and credentials as a scholar outweighed the potential impact of this bias, resulting in a straightforward articulation of her observations. I do not believe the positive remarks she made about the focus group were motivated out of a desire to avoid offending me.

Instrument

The initial questions of the focus group observation interview instrument were open-ended and non-directive. Once these questions had been answered, I moved toward more pointed ones so I would be able to compare her observations with mine. The three-hour interview was audio taped and transcribed. (The instrument for this method may be found in Appendix E.)

While I for the most part stayed in the background in my interviews and focus group, my focus group observation interview was more interactive. According to Ellis, et al. (1997), interviewing is

a collaborative communication process occurring between researchers and respondents…interactive interviewing involves the sharing of personal and social experiences of both respondents and researchers, who tell (and sometimes write) their stories in the context of a developing relationship. In this process, the distinction between “researcher” and “subject” gets blurred. (p. 42)
This means that what will be analyzed as the “results” are not merely the “answers” subjects supply to questions, but will also include the questioner’s speech as well. The analysis will look at the interaction of the speakers as a phenomenon that in fact creates the “data.” In interactive interviewing, the purpose is not so much to “get answers” (like a dog retrieves a bone), but to reveal the process of the communication taking place between researcher and subject. While I began the observation interview without supplying my own point of view, it appeared desirable to engage Chloe in a conversation in order to clarify the questions I asked.

Telling Stories

I elected to present my “results” in the form of stories, recounting the focus group and the focus group observation in “creative non-fiction” fashion. My objective was to remain faithful to what was said and to capture the conversational tone, while at the same time omitting or modifying things that make interview transcripts, for example, difficult to read: sentence fragments, “false starts,” unnecessary “likes,” “you know’s,” “ums,” and other such phrases that interrupt the flow of the speaker’s meaning. Furthermore, in very rare instances, I added verbiage that helps make sense of what was said where what was said was clear at the time, but in the written form, torn from the speaking context, may have been unclear to readers. This was done only when absolutely necessary. I believe this approach is justified for two reasons. First, it increases readability of content. Secondly, since I am not conducting a “content analysis,” I am not analyzing the particular words participants use, but am rather attempting
to present the “performative” aspect of their communication, that is, what speakers are doing when they say what they say, thus preserving the function their speaking is trying to achieve (Austin, 1975).

Method of Analysis

My method of analysis includes two issues: (1) How do I report the results of the interviews, focus group, and focus group observation interview? (2) How will I know if the question I am asking here gets answered? The following two sections address these questions.

Self-Reflexivity

Given my “full member” status, the difficulty of presenting my report in a way that would address bias was continually on my mind. Having an outside observer view the focus group tape was one way of addressing this concern. Creating an open ended instrument for the observation was another. But what about the analysis of the material? As I devised a method to analyze my results, I was particularly concerned with avoiding as much as possible imposing a pre-established structure and point of view on the material. That is, presenting excerpts of particular conversations allowed the focus group observation to provide much of the raw material upon which my analysis would be based.

Despite this, however, a dialectical and emergent process continued to ensue. On one hand, I am interested in demonstrating the relevance of Politics 3 to the study of LGATs. This interest increased the risk that a structure of expectation would become the filter through which the observation would be presented. On the other hand, I consciously attempted to allow the ideas from
the focus group observation interview provide for the emergence of ideas that might otherwise go unnoticed. This was done by assembling topics and themes from the observation and presenting them regardless of whether they confirmed or contradicted my hypothesis. Readers can judge for themselves whether the results presented adequately attend to the concerns over ethical self-reflexivity.

**Politics 3 Communication**

How would I know if the question I am asking gets answered? Maslow provides a list of communication methods to promote and to reduce that would contribute to Politics 3 (See Table 9). In order to determine if LGAT participants communicate in ways consistent with Politics 3 one would look to see if these qualities appear in the focus group discussion.

Table 9

*Politics 3 Communication Methods to Promote/Reduce*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods that foster the following are good:</th>
<th>Methods that reduce the following are good:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Suspicion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Paranoid expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>Feelings of being different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Enmity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>Defensiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Envy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-exposure</td>
<td>Contempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring feedback</td>
<td>Insult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Condescension</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where We’ve Been, Where We’re Going

Part One of this study has introduced the work of Landmark Education Corporation in different lights, comparing and contrasting public conversations with my personal experience. I recounted an episode of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent—Con-Text* (Balcer, et al., 2003)—and established that the company portrayed in it strongly resembles Landmark Education Corporation. I then described my personal experience with Landmark Education, expressed my appreciation for the training, and explained some of the concepts taught in the training. I then examined Landmark’s company history and described it as an anomaly in capitalism, operating as a secular, evangelical non-profit corporation. After that, I rhetorically analyzed a *Time* article (Faltermayer, 1998, March 16) about Landmark Education inside a cynical perspective that addresses controversies associated with Landmark. I then confronted questions raised about Landmark Education in the *Time* article, particularly, whether or not Landmark Education is a cult. Specifically, I concluded that Landmark is not a cult, nor does it employ techniques that may be described as coercive. Having
debunked mainstream public conversations about Landmark, I then reviewed another public conversation about the type of courses Landmark offers, psychological literature on large group awareness trainings (LGATs). The results of this research are inconclusive.

The divergence between public conversations examined here and my personal experience led me to consider what value may be attributed to Landmark’s work that would take into account my personal experience. I found a potential source of Landmark’s value in Maslow’s *Politics 3*, namely that training people in open, compassionate, and reciprocal communication may have the power to transform the status quo of a deeply troubled planet. Since no previous academic literature has examined Landmark or LGATs inside this context, I chose to pursue questions not addressed by the psychological literature and described the methods used to pursue these questions.

In the remainder of this study, I test the relevance of my hypothesis that a connection may be made between the communication of Landmark participants and Maslow’s (1977) notion of Politics 3. I present the results of my inquiry into the questions asked, attempt to explore the possibility of global transformation through open, compassionate, reciprocal communication practices learned in Landmark courses, and investigate the relationship between the public conversations examined in this study and the lived experience of Landmark participants.
PART TWO

LARGE GROUP AWARENESS TRAINING COMMUNICATION RESEARCH
AND THE DRAG OF PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS

Having established the significant divergence between public conversations about Landmark Education and my experience, Part Two examines the communication of Landmark Education participants to determine if their communication resembles that described by Maslow in *Politics 3*. I present the results of my inquiry into the questions asked, and explore the possibility of global transformation through open, compassionate, reciprocal communication practices learned in LGATs.

Chapter Eight introduces my participants, summarizes my interviews with them, and recounts two conversations from the focus group that demonstrate the kind of communication Maslow promotes in *Politics 3*.

In Chapter Nine, I present the results of an interview with someone unfamiliar with Landmark Education who observed the videotape of the focus group and respond to the following question: How would such an observer regard the communication of the focus group participants? In the first part of the chapter, I present excerpts from the observation interview and include the following points of discussion: (1) how the focus group’s conversation compares to that of the general population; (2) how Landmark Education’s training resembles that
undertaken by mental health therapists; (3) other characteristics of the group’s communication; (4) inconsistencies and/or contradictions in their communication; (5) the surprising impact the training appears to have on participants; and (6) the revolutionary quality of the group’s communication.

In the second part of Chapter Nine, I discuss issues not addressed in the focus group observation interview, and directly respond to the question: To what extent does the focus group display the kinds of communication qualities that Maslow ascribes to Politics 3? Based on my nine years of Landmark experience and my analysis of the focus group, the communication practiced by Landmark participants did not seem typical of the general population, and moreover, their communication practices might contribute to the goals of Politics 3, since their conversations may be described as open, reciprocal, and compassionate.

In Chapter Ten, having presented prominent excerpts from the focus group and focus group observation interview, I then turn to an analysis of my results. Drawing from my personal experience, interviews with four Landmark participants, a focus group, and focus group observation interview, I formulate a model for LGAT communication practices, generalize my observations about LGAT communication and Politics 3, and begin to glimpse what such practices might mean for human interaction.

Chapter Eleven discusses limitations of the study and suggests future directions for research into the communication of LGAT participants.

In the Epilogue, I step back to think more broadly about the relationship between the types of public conversations about Landmark discussed in Part
One (specifically, *Criminal Intent’s Con-text*) and my direct experience with Landmark (including the results of my interviews and focus group). To do this, the Epilogue: (1) revisits *Con-text* in terms of the previous analysis and articulates a way of thinking about the forces that make such public conversations possible by employing Debord’s (1983) *Society of the Spectacle*; (2) asks whether Landmark’s work has the power to transform the planet in the face of spectacular constraints, and (3) reflects on the author’s subject-position vis-à-vis the society of spectacle.
CHAPTER EIGHT

LISTENING FOR DISEMPOWERMENT AND INVENTING POSSIBILITIES:
COACHING CONVERSATIONS IN A FOCUS GROUP

If we agree that communication is at least partly responsible for the type of world we live in, then our ways of communicating may be partly responsible for the global mess we are in. These ways of communicating include public conversations about unusual social phenomena like Landmark Education. It would thus appear that transforming our communication would be one place to look if we are to reverse the current disastrous trends. What kind of conversations might advance the goals of Politics 3, and what are their distinguishing characteristics?

Based on nine years of Landmark experience, the communication practiced by LGAT participants did not seem typical of the general population, and moreover, their communication practices might contribute to the goals of Politics 3. To be able to show what the communication of LGAT participants is like, and to examine the validity of my hypothesis, I conducted a focus group where little direction was given in order to allow for a spontaneous interaction.¹

To give readers a sense of what a “Landmark Education conversation” might look like, this chapter presents two examples that emerged as most

¹ For more on my approach to the focus group, see Chapter Seven. The Focus Group Question Guide is in Appendix E.
prominent. These excerpts were chosen for a number of reasons. First, they compose the longest (in terms of duration) of the entire focus group. Second, these excerpts involve all four participants. Third, they exhibit the greatest amount of back-and-forth interaction. Fourth, these excerpts display qualities that are distinctively “Landmark” and I believe to be representative of the kind of communication consistent with that Maslow describes in *Politics 3*. Specifically, in these conversations, one participant, through her speaking, indicates she is experiencing a loss of power. At that point, group members intervene. This intervention takes a particular form and the interaction proceeds in a certain direction through a Socratic dialogue, sprinkled with reminders about Landmark distinctions. The communication in these conversations is marked by openness, reciprocation, and compassion. The conversations are narrated in the first person. I have attempted to give readers a sense of the way the focus group was conducted (low moderator involvement), conveys some of the thoughts that ran through my mind at the time, and provides necessary background to make the conversation more accessible to readers unfamiliar with the subject matter.

The following section introduces the participants of my interviews and focus group.

**Participant Descriptions**

I secured the participation of four people who met my selection criteria. I interviewed each participant for approximately two hours a few weeks prior to the three-hour focus group. My selection criteria called for two graduates of Landmark’s Introduction Leader Program and two non-graduates. As stated
above, this criterion was developed because, based on my experience, there appear noticeable differences between those who have completed the ILP training and those who have not. While it is not my objective to compare these two groups, I believed differences between them would show up in the focus group discussion. Below I describe these participants, their Landmark participation, and disclose prior relationships between the participants and myself.

All participants were white, middle class/upper middle class in their mid-40s to mid-fifties. In the Tampa Bay area, a disproportionately small number of people of color participate in Landmark courses (relative to the general population). For example, in a seminar of 100 people, there might be a maximum of three or four people of color, usually one, and frequently, none. This does not excuse the absence of non-whites from the study (see Chapter Eleven). It should be recalled, however, that Landmark Education conducts programs throughout the world, and has therefore delivered their programs to diverse cultures. By happy coincidence, on the other hand, there was a decent distribution along left-right political lines (i.e., politics 1 and politics 2).

The next section introduces the two graduates of Landmark’s Introduction Leader Program, followed by introductions of the other two participants, who have participated for at least three years and have not completed the ILP.²

² For more on my participant selection criteria, see Chapter Seven.
Jeff

Jeff is a white male in his mid-forties. He was born in the Northeastern U.S., and has lived in the Tampa Bay area for over 35 years. Jeff has a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration and a Master's Degree in Education Counseling. He worked in the school district for 17 years. He taught for seven years and left the school system, running a tutoring company for five years. He sold the company and went back to the school system. He then moved into financial planning and real estate investments. This did not work out, but he learned enough about the business to begin conducting real estate investment seminars. He has since become quite successful, now travels the U.S. and Canada, and is very happy with it. Jeff is on his fourth marriage and has two children, a teenage boy from a previous marriage and a baby boy from his current marriage. He also sings in a classic rock band. He attends the Unity Church perhaps once or twice a year. Jeff “thinks” he is a registered Republican, but considers himself apolitical. His wife—a former ILP participant herself—is a staunch Democrat, and at her urging, Jeff researched the Presidential candidates in the 2004 campaign. He ended up voting for Kerry, or as he said in our interview, “I voted for the guy that lost, I don't even know his name.”

Jeff has participated in Landmark Education for seven years and has led Landmark seminars for three years. I first met Jeff about six years ago at a “Home Introduction to the Landmark Forum.” “Home Introductions,” as the name indicates, usually take place in a home (they might occur to non-graduates as
“Tupperware parties for transformation”). This one, however, took place at Jeff’s private tutoring office. Jeff was at the time training to be a Landmark Introduction Leader, and as I was already an Introduction Leader, I assisted with Jeff’s Introduction. I was immediately impressed with Jeff’s smile and friendly demeanor. Jeff is warm, approachable, and very charismatic. His crystal blue eyes gleam and sparkle.

I got to know Jeff very well when we did Landmark’s nine-month Wisdom Unlimited course together, having shared road trips to other Florida cities for the weekend sessions. I’ll never forget the time we drove back to Tampa at the end of the course. Jeff told me he would be the next Classroom Leader for the ILP and asked me to coach it. I had no interest in coaching the course because it occurred to me as quite demanding and time-consuming. But Jeff was very inspiring in his request and not pressuring in the least. He said to me, “It’ll be a blast!” I agreed, but would probably never have done so had Jeff not been leading the course. I knew Jeff would make it fun because that’s what he does: He makes things fun. He displays a distinctive playfulness and has a wonderful sense of humor.

In our first interview (I interviewed Jeff twice), I was setting up the microphone and tape recorder, which became an awkward process: I have a micro-cassette recorder, two clip-on mikes, and the tentacle-like cords become twisted and difficult to untangle, making for a rather comical sight. Dennis amusingly commented, “I don’t like this—it’s like a double-ended dildo… Can I say that here?” I couldn’t believe he said this, and enjoying ribald humor, I laugh
hysterically: “YOU JUST DID!!! That’s tremendous!” Imagining what it would be like for the interview’s transcriber, Dennis jokes: “What did he say?’ D-I-L…” We both giggled and got the cords untangled. That first interview was just after Jeff’s third divorce. “I’m three for three! Three for three!” he joked good-naturedly. I ended up coaching the program twice (over one year in total) in part because I got a lot out of it, which Jeff made possible by making it fun. Jeff has since become a Landmark Seminar Leader. As stated above, Seminar Leaders are unpaid, so, Jeff spends about fifteen hours a week or more teaching Landmark courses for free.3

When I asked Jeff to give me his main reasons why he continues to participate in Landmark courses, this is what he said:

I keep participating because I keep expanding. My participation gives me the opportunity to expand, to be bigger in life, take on bigger things in life, whether it’s my marriage and our kids, to my family, to my job, to the other people that I can make a difference with. It’s all that. It’s why I keep participating because it’s an opportunity to expand… What it does is it will have me go beyond who I currently know myself to be. Allow me to play bigger…

Leading seminars for Landmark Education is just who I am. It is an opportunity to fulfill on my own self-expression. I love being in seminars. I love the conversation. I love the opportunity that there is to make a difference for people. I love the structure of it. It calls me to be, it actually requires me to be bigger than I know…

I’m interested in the game. The game is transforming life itself. I’m actually interested in the game of transformation. If you consider that all of everything is all inside of a conversation, I’m interested in the game of transformation being a conversation that people are born into, not one that they have to go out and find.

3 The issue of unpaid assistants (which includes Landmark Seminar Leaders) is discussed in Chapter Four. Suffice it to say here that Seminar Leaders perceive value in the training they receive and that this yields benefits in their professional and personal lives. It also enables Landmark Education to keep costs low so they can expand their global market.
Because if you look at things that are happening in the world, it doesn’t have to be like that… There’s too many people that just are not happy. It makes them crazy that they’re not happy. You know, why would people go through life and not have a great life? That just doesn’t even make any sense.

**Melanie**

Melanie is a 46 year old white woman. Raised in the Midwest, she’s lived in seven different states in 46 years. She has a Bachelor's degree in Marketing and is a nationally certified group fitness trainer, work she has been doing for the past ten years. She’s been married for 25 years with her husband, Robert, her first marriage, his second. They live in a spectacular house in an affluent Tampa neighborhood. They have two teenage children, an 18 year-old son in college and a 16 year-old daughter in high school. Melanie was raised Catholic and now attends the Unity Church with Robert, who is Jewish. They attend services about twice a month. Melanie described Unity as “the religious version” of Landmark Education. She is an ardent Democrat and voted for John Kerry in 2004. “Down with George Bush!” she joked when I asked her about her party affiliation. She expressed strong opposition to the Iraq War.

I met Melanie during one of Jeff’s Introduction Leader Program courses I coached. Melanie was an outstanding participant and required very little “work” on my part to coach her. She had been doing Landmark courses six years more than I had, plus she had previously completed the ILP. Being a fitness trainer, as one might expect, Melanie is fit and energetic. I have come to know her as compassionate, genuine, and, like Jeff, a joy to be around. Her extraordinary commitment to making a difference for people is obvious. Since the focus group,
Melanie has become a Landmark Forum Leader. Being a Landmark Forum Leader is not just a “job,” and it’s not just an adventure. Like the priesthood, it is a lifelong commitment. In addition to fitness training, at the time of the interview, Melanie leads Landmark’s Self-Expression and Leadership Program, of which she said, “The reason I’m leading that is because I think of the difference it made in my own life, and I know what is possible out of people participating...so I trained and developed myself to lead that program.”

In addition to continuing her training to become a Landmark Forum Leader, when I asked Melanie about her reasons for participating fourteen years, she said:

I am a fitness trainer by profession. If I stop training, it’s not going to be very pretty [she says, laughing]. In other words, some side effects could be I could put on weight, I won’t have strength like I do right now, endurance, I could end up with some diseases that maybe all the exercises have kept at bay. There is a definite impact if I stopped exercising and practicing that, right? So it’s the same thing—there would be some definite side effects if I didn’t continue to practice the tools, the education in my life.

It’s like—I would become resigned about people [laughing some more], because (this isn’t what people see today, but it’s definitely there) I get very annoyed by people, and that I know that by engaging in this education and the tools, that doesn’t show up very often, and I have some facility over it by participating.

You look at people that are masters in their field, like what I would call a master, at the top of their game. Do they ever take their eye off of the game? And I say they don’t because if they do, then the game is kind of over for them, so to speak, or at least at the level that they are currently playing at. So, I don’t foresee that I will be stopping playing at anytime soon...

I look for the future generations. What we pass down to them—that actually can get altered, like the level at how we live as a human being can actually be altered. I’d like to see that happen in my lifetime. I don’t
know how that would look, and I’m starting to look because I can see that my kids’ generation altering. And I’m up for seeing it finish, so to speak."

Non-ILP Participants

Raymond

Raymond is a 56 year-old white male. A gentle giant of a man, he was born in the Midwest and moved to Florida when he was nine. He has a Bachelor’s degree in Geography. He worked as a general contractor for a number of years, but got “burnt out” and moved into construction sales for ten years. After he did the Landmark Forum, he went back to general contracting. Married over thirty years, he and his wife have two grown children. Raymond had some exposure to “the Southern Baptist thing,” as he calls it, but has no religious affiliation. He is Republican, voted for George W. Bush in 2004, and in our interview, spoke highly of Ronald Reagan.

Raymond has participated in Landmark Education courses for eleven years. I was having difficulty lining up someone who has been participating for three years and had not done the Introduction Leader Program, so I asked a few people, without success. Finally, Jeff recommended Raymond, who was at the time participating in a seminar Jeff was leading. Of all four participants in this study, I was least familiar with Raymond, although he and I agreed we had probably done a seminar together.

In our interview, I felt it difficult to draw out Raymond and get him to elaborate on his answers, in stark contrast to the other three participants. At first, I thought it had to do with the lack of familiarity or even perhaps a suspicion on his part with respect to my study, my intentions, and so forth. After conducting
the focus group, however, I began to see that Raymond simply does not waste words and the words he does use are direct and to the point. (I came to nickname him "Mr. Short, but Sweet.")

Raymond described why he continues to participate in the following way:

It’s really pretty simple. My life keeps working better. And that really sums up the big picture of it. It is amazing to get together with other people in the course and have a conversation about things we talk about in Landmark Education, the type of conversation you don’t have anywhere else. You know, real conversations for possibility…

It never fails to amaze me, the humanity of it, and of the people in the course and all different ages, walks of life, different backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, all we’ve got in common…

You have amazing conversations in those courses. Right now, doing the seminar, I’m in a group and the group’s pretty successful because we all take a stand for each other’s greatness. And we listen for each other’s greatness. And that’s a great experience…

The money is empirical evidence because I got burnt out on general contracting at one time and for ten years I was in sales in the construction industry, and that’s when I did The Forum. And then I was doing the courses and then my opportunity was drying up in sales and there was an opportunity to get back into general contracting, and I did. Then I got to sort of design my business to where I didn’t have to do any of the things I really didn’t like about general contracting before. I got to design the work and see how it would work, and it worked out real well. So I am making more money than ever before. And not doing the things I don’t like to do.

Amanda

Amanda is a white woman in her early fifties. Born in the Midwest, she moved to the Tampa Bay area when she was ten years old. She has been a nurse for 26 years. At the time of my interview with her, she counseled women with breast cancer, helping them obtain financial assistance and community resources for their treatment. She recently started pursuing a Mary Kay cosmetics business. On her second marriage (to another Landmark participant), Amanda is
a mother of two teenagers from a previous marriage. Raised Catholic in a Bohemian family, Amanda no longer practices any religion. Several years before doing the Landmark Forum, however, Amanda studied for the Pentecostal ministry. At seventeen, “during the ’70’s with the Jesus movement,” she told me, Amanda ran away from home to Ketchikan, Alaska, “with all the lumberjacks and sled dogs on the street…and I became a born-again Christian. And I came back because, at the time, well, I alienated everyone…I don’t want to alienate anyone again.” Amanda is a registered Democrat, but she really considers herself an Independent. She voted for Ralph Nader in 2004.

Amanda has over twelve years of Landmark Education participation under her belt. Before our interview, I knew her only superficially from taking a few Landmark seminars with her. She volunteered to be a part of my study from an invitation I extended to a seminar I was taking. It seemed somewhat a coincidence that she volunteered, since I had previously learned she was the person who introduced Jeff to the Landmark Forum seven years prior.

In contrast to Raymond, Amanda was very talkative and it was easy to draw her out and get her to elaborate on specific issues. She spoke with emotion as she described her work with breast cancer patients. Her long length of service to the nursing profession and various community projects showed her to be a person of deep conviction to making the world a better place.

For example, in the focus group, Amanda described a “peace project” she established with the schools in her county:

Before I did the Forum, I couldn’t go to PTA meetings. “You don’t understand, I’m a single mother, and I do not have time to go to the PTA
meetings.” Well, after I did the Forum, I started going to the PTA meetings and the next year I became the PTA president, which is probably about the time that I met Jeff [from the focus group]. And it was a no-brainer. Then I got this idea that I wanted to make sure that the schools were safe for children, and so I designed this Peace Project in the schools, and it started with the middle school, it started with the school that my kids were going to. I just would start talking to people. I just walk in one day like this, no ideas: “Principal so and so, I’m interested in doing a Peace Project in this school.” “Really.” “Yeah, would you be up for that?” I had no idea at all. Nothing. It was just like out of nowhere.

At the time, I had no idea what it meant. All I knew was that I just wanted the net result to be that, no matter where children were, that they would be safe, and to build a climate where forgiveness was present, because forgiveness is key for peace to be present. And I wanted them to have the opportunity to have a vision for that and to make a commitment to it for their life. And so we just started talking, just like we are doing right here, and so that year it was one school, the next year it was three schools, the next year it was 20 schools, and then it was 50 schools. And in the interim, I had met this guy who said that the U.N. has an International Day of Peace, and that he does something in his school on the International Day of Peace. So we linked at the beginning, linked the school project to a global project, and so things started happening.

I’d be at work, and they’d say, “Amanda, the South African Embassy called and left you a message and wants you to call Washington.” And I’d say, “Oh, good, I was expecting their call.” Then, you know, all of a sudden, I’m living this life, I mean, there was no way that I could be living that life. And I’d pick up the phone, and I’d go “Hi, this is Amanda. You called?” “Yes, we have a message for you from Nelson Mandela’s office.” “Oh, okay, well what did he say?”

And I learned all these things about the proper protocol of how you address letters to people like this, to the Pope, and different people like that, and met all these tremendous community activists, and I won all these awards. I won Humanitarian of the Year Award for the YWCA. That was 1999 or 1998 or whatever, and the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and all kinds of stuff like that, so in the realm of pursuing my dreams, at that moment, it was like my life could be done now…

Amanda listed her reasons for her long-term participation this way:

My own health and interest in having a great future, because if I’m not healthy, then I’m not going to have a great future. I mean mental health by that but also physical health.
And then, choosing ongoingly the things that are most important to me. What I mean by that is that a lot of people, including myself, they talk about what they’d like to have and then they don’t actually have it, you know? I like being on the edge of my seat where, there’s never a time that I go into a seminar that it doesn’t remind me of what’s important to me and how I am addressing that issue, if I say that’s what’s important to me. Then because a lot of times we have things that we say are important to us, but we don’t even address it. So it helps me stay on the court, addressing the things so that I have the life that I have always dreamt of having.

Another reason Amanda mentioned regarded her quality of life:

I would say my sense of satisfaction in my everyday life. Like if I’m off track. Like today, this guy came by that I don’t even know and he said, “You internalize, don’t you?” and I said, “It’s killing me.” And he said some things to me about what you say and giving it power. And he thinks that patience is a very incredible virtue, he was telling me everything about patience, and he told me it turns the whole thing around. That moment I decided to give it up, he said because when you say that what I’m left with is this, how weak is that? Because you will be done in…

It’s like that, that I can have little things that will turn me in the direction that I say I am interested in, not because that’s the way it has to be, but it’s just that the quality of life that I have when I’m working at being for what I’d like to have rather than why don’t I have it, is drastically different…

And then family would be after that… That listening from a new perspective to what they have to say, and I can tell if I’m not listening to them. I try to leave everyone the way I would want to leave them if I would not see them again. I’m really, really present to that, just given the whole picture of my life and also the training that what is it I really want to say? Because I only have right now, so I don’t know about tomorrow, from what I want to say today. It keeps me on that game.

_Who Knew Whom_

In terms of previous acquaintance, Jeff, Melanie, and Amanda knew each other well, however, their relationships were almost exclusively limited to their Landmark participation. In other words, none of the three “hangs out” together as friends do. Raymond knew Jeff in terms of his participation in Jeff’s seminar.
Raymond and Amanda had not met before the focus group. To recap, I did not know Raymond, knew Amanda only superficially, and was well acquainted with Jeff and Melanie.

Family Life and Pursuing Dreams: Two Coaching Conversations

Having introduced the participants, in the remainder of the chapter, I excerpt two conversations from the focus group. One conversation relates to family and the other to personal goals.

The day of the focus group, having arrived at Melanie’s home, I set up the recording equipment and waited nervously for the rest of the participants to show up. Jeff was running late, but he had been in communication, so I could relax a little. Once Jeff arrived, I started the focus group.

After explaining the ground rules, I began the discussion:

“I’d like for each of you to please name an area of life that is important to you. I’ll write them down on my fancy flip chart here. We’re only going to name four, so please take a moment to think of what’s most important to you.”

I pause for a few moments, and went around the table. Raymond said “family,” Amanda said “career,” Jeff said “pursuing dreams,” and Melanie said “travel.”

“OK, for each of these four areas, I’d like each of you to share things from your lives in those areas—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Let’s speak about what your life has been like in those areas. I’m very interested in your personal experiences and stories. When you speak about them, I’m interested in learning
about your hardships as well as your victories—like I said, the good, the bad, and the ugly.”

Two conversations in the focus group stand out. Below I tell the stories of these conversations. They demonstrate to me the type of listening and support Landmark participants provide each other. I believe this listening and support is indicative of Politics 3. In both conversations, the three other participants engaged the person whose turn it was to share. Both conversations recounted here took place during Amanda’s turn.

*Inventing the Possibility of a Peaceful Home*

Responding to the request to share her family experiences, Amanda states,

“Before taking the Landmark Forum, there was consistent negativity on my part as far as always feeling like I could not measure up to whatever the job would be, you know, except for being a nurse, I’ve always been pretty confident about doing a really good job. But at home, and in my personal life with family, it was always that I was not doing a good enough job. I just wasn’t measuring up to my own expectations about myself, and somehow I was always falling short of what I should be doing.”

“Can you give me an example of something like that?” I ask, wanting her to flesh this out.

Amanda replies, “It really is only happening inside of my head. It’s not really anything that’s really real. And in reality I’ve always provided for my family for the most part. There was a time, of course, when I was a teenager that I
wasn’t there for my dad, you know, make sure I would be there and comfort him and stuff like that, but in reality, especially with regards to my children, I’ve always been there for them and taken care of them and making sure that they had everything that they needed. And so since I’ve participated in the Landmark Forum, I still have that come up for me, and it sometimes is not coming up for me or I can let it go and see that it is *that* conversation that I’ve had about myself all of my life. And so I have access to just being present to how much I love the children and not present to that conversation that I’m so down on myself about not doing a good job.”

Not feeling like this was enough detail, I follow up: “Could you elaborate a little bit more on this ‘not measuring up’? What do you tell yourself when you have those thoughts? What’s your experience from the standpoint of your emotions and your body?”

“I just feel sick to my stomach and just not doing a good enough job and not being the mother I want to be, you know. The kids are foremost in my mind.”

This is where Melanie intervenes, “Can I ask a quick question?”

“Sure,” replies Amanda.

“What do you have that based on? Is there a picture that you have in mind that looks like the ‘good job mom’? Do you know what I mean? It’s like you have an idea of what it would look like if you were successful, I’m assuming. What would be the evidence out there in the world to have you get that you were doing a good job? Because that’s what it would take to have you get that. Do you understand the question?”
“Yeah. Yeah. It seems like it’s pretty nebulous. I don’t have a measure of what it would look like.”

Melanie understands, and in typical Landmark fashion, replies, “Got it.”

Melanie does not just take Amanda’s word for it that she’s not measuring up, she wants to know what that perception is based on. She assesses the situation for Amanda in the following way: “So then you’re telling yourself that you are not measuring up, but you don’t even have what the measure is.”

“Well, I guess what I’m thinking the measure would be is that when I’m having interaction with the kids, if I’m telling them something, they would respond in a way that—“

Melanie interrupts: “You want them to respond.”

“Yeah,” Amanda confirms.

Melanie chuckles, “Yeah.” This is humorous because—without saying it out loud, Melanie has honed in on what some might call a control issue for Amanda.

I sense this, and as it appears to me Amanda’s frustration is not so much with herself, but with her family, I ask, “So is it you’re not measuring up, or are they not measuring up?”

Amanda replies, “I’m ineffective in my communication with them, otherwise they would be behaving in a different way and our interaction would be always loving and always very harmonious.”

Always loving and always harmonious? This seems to me like pie in the sky. Furthermore, Amanda appears to collapse effectiveness in communication
with achieving a desired outcome. After all, it is possible to communicate effectively and still not get what we want. I choose not to share this for now, as I believe it will no doubt be said by someone. Instead, I want more detail: “Can you give us an illustration, like an example of a situation like that? Maybe a recent one?”

Amanda replies that she had an agreement with her son that she would pay for Tae Kwan Do classes if he would commit to attending twice a week, however, he had recently only been going once a week: “So it just keeps on happening that he’s not taking responsibility for being there twice a week and I keep not putting something in place to make sure he did actually fulfill on the agreement.”

At this point, Raymond intervenes to make the point I was thinking about: “I heard you say something interesting, where you were connecting something about your kids behaving and love, like one was conditioned on the other. Did you catch that?”

“No, I did not catch that,” Amanda says.

“Yeah, yeah. It was real interesting,” Raymond adds.

Amanda’s expression changes, and it appears she has realized something as a result of Raymond’s observation. Melanie notices this as well, and says, “You just got something, didn’t you? In that conversation, about the connection between—I’m saying you just saw something for yourself about the connection, either you have something at stake inside of another relationship that we’ve talked about earlier, right? And this is the same type of thing that you deal with...
with Andy [Amanda’s husband], that you’re dealing with Ethan [Amanda’s son]. They’re not abiding. You have an agreement and they’re not doing what they said that they would do. And then you don’t go back and ask them, ‘So why aren’t you doing that?’ and then trust that they be accountable for what they agreed to. There’s no consequence,” referring to the fact that Amanda “lets it go” and does not address integrity issues with her family.

Amanda agrees, “There’s no consequence, yeah. I seem to feel uncertain of what the consequence should be.”

“You get to make it up,” Melanie declares. Apparently being well acquainted with Amanda’s scenario, she adds, “But it is exactly the same thing over and over again.”

“Yep,” Amanda agrees.

“Definitely,” Melanie underscores.

“I really appreciate this conversation because I feel like I am not on track with the conversation. It’s a recurring conversation that’s been there from the beginning until now. And I can distinguish it when we’re talking now. I can see that that’s what it is. But when I’m by myself and I’m just talking to myself I can’t see that it’s just that same conversation. I can’t see that it’s not true when we’re not talking, because talking now, now I feel like I’m present, I feel like a load has been lifted and, you know, I don’t have a clue if I’m on track in the conversation or not.”
I am not sure what conversation Amanda is referring to—is it the conversation (really, "monologue") she has in her head about herself or is it the conversation we are having now? So, I ask her:

“I don’t know if this is about…”

Amanda anticipates my question and answers before I finish, “This one that we’re having right now.”

“Oh,” I reply.

Amanda recalls a conversation that occurs early on in the Landmark Forum where the Forum leader first answers questions from the participants and goes over the ground rules for participating. For some participants (like it was for me, as I recall), this could seem like a preliminary conversation, and that we’re waiting for the Forum to begin, when in fact it has already begun. How we are in such conversations tells us something about how we relate to rules and process.

Amanda recalls, “This is a little bit like when we are in the Forum and you’re sitting there and you’re saying, ‘When are we going to start?’” The group identifies with what she’s saying and laughs.

Melanie joins in, laughing, “Oh no!”

Amanda continues, “When’s it going to start? You know? I’m now thinking, ‘It’s me.’”

Jeff jokes, “It’s already over.”

Raymond, having heard what Amanda said, recalls an experience from Landmark’s Wisdom Unlimited course. A major portion of this course is spent distinguishing the thoughts we have in our head as “monologues,” and verbally
expressing those thoughts to others as “conversations”: “Wasn’t that in a course somewhere about getting the monologue out of your head, and language in the world, and getting a committed listener? That sounds sort of familiar.”

A “committed listener” is someone who listens to another for what’s possible and goes beyond how things “seem” to them since that “seeming” is based on an interpretation of something that happened in the past, which, by its very nature, limits conceptualizing the possible.

Amanda realizes she had a concern about exposing herself to the group, and verbalizes this: “I’ve been really protecting myself lately so people would not know that I am just not okay—again.” This is a recurring phenomenon for her, as she revealed to me in our interview:

“What there seems to be for me to deal with is that I come from a family of psychos,” she says, laughing. “They are not exactly psychos, but they have a history of depression in my family, and so for my entire life until I did the Forum, really, until I was about 37, and basically any time anybody would ever ask me, I would go and talk to people, I would talk to counselors, I’d talk to my friends, and nothing that people said to me would help me at all. I would walk away exactly the same as I walked into the conversation.

“And one of the things that has shifted is now [since her Landmark participation] everything people say to me makes a difference. So if I enter into a conversation with someone and I’ve got some reality I’m dealing with, then they talk to me about it or they give me a tool, and I’ll walk away with the tool, and I’ll stop whatever it is that has been bothering me or that I’ve been dwelling on. And
so my whole life I’ve been, when any time a doctor or anybody would ask me, ‘Do you have a history of depression in your family?’ I’d say, ‘No.’ And I was serious. And the whole time I was just struggling all the time. I never managed it, taking medication or anything like that. So I seemed to have a tendency to become anxiety-ridden and fearful, and things like that.

“So after I did the Forum, I started telling people about things like that and it seems to have really helped a lot of people, at least when I talk to them, because they don’t think of me as somebody who has this big problem, they just start talking to me about whatever’s going on with them and they don’t seem to think it’s that weird.”

It is noteworthy to me that Amanda displays this same openness in the focus group discussion.

Getting back to the conversation at hand, I try to recap what Amanda just said in the focus group: “So you say you are not okay in the area of family…”

“Just not okay,” Amanda replies.

“Just not okay,” I repeat.

Raymond, knowing that we all feel this way from time to time and that we needn’t make it “heavy and significant,” asks, “Are you okay in not being okay?”

“I haven’t been,” Amanda says, laughing good-naturedly.

Jeff tries to shift the conversation to the realm of the empirically verifiable, an oft-used technique: “What’s so?” Asking this question is a way to get at “what happened?”, that is, it is the first step in “uncollapsing the vicious circle”4 The

4 For more on this, see Chapter Three.
next step is to inquire into what meaning was assigned to the “what happened” and in particular, what is disempowering about the meaning she has assigned her family life.

At Jeff’s question, Amanda makes a face and exclaims (sotto voce), “Shit!” Everyone laughs because we all know Amanda is disempowering herself and that she has not yet distinguished it. Amanda’s response is humorous to the group because it is clear that by articulating “what is so” will mean giving up her interpretation, which means she can no longer be “right” about it and will have to give up the racket she is running. We all want to be right (even in our suffering), and sometimes it’s perceived as difficult to move through this conversational space.

Melanie, echoing where Raymond is coming from, approaches Amanda with understanding and compassion: “Where you’re at is ‘no one else has that,’ don’t you? I’m mean, you’ve got to think for a moment, and this is where we get so stuck, is that we all are okay and then not okay, and then okay and then not okay. And we think that we do some work, we should always be okay. And the truth is, we’re not! And then we stop and don’t go to work on getting okay again or whatever you want to call it.”

Amanda, getting what Melanie said, adds, “Or distinguish what it is that had me not be okay.”

“Yeah.”

“You really have that,” Amanda says, laughing.

“Yeah, I do,” Melanie replies.
It is safe to say that all Landmark participants have experienced moments of self-doubt. At these times, we wonder, “Where did my transformation go?” The key is that training and development must be ongoing and is not a one-shot deal. It is like brushing our teeth. We (hopefully) don’t do it only one time. Or, like Melanie describes it, we don’t exercise just once and consider ourselves fit. Just because we have had breakthroughs in performance, relationships, and so forth, is no guarantee we will not have breakdowns. Recall, a “breakdown” in Landmark terminology is not a mental or emotional breakdown, and carries none of those connotations. Rather, a breakdown is a reaction to a situation conventionally referred to as a “problem.” A breakdown has one of three or a combination of three sources: (1) an unfulfilled expectation, (2) a thwarted intention, and/or (3) an undelivered communication. Recognizing which of these is the source of the breakdown is the first step in moving past what has stopped us so we may create a breakthrough (defined as a non-linear, non-incremental, unexpected result).

Jeff tries to steer the conversation back to the topic at hand: “So, we’re looking at family, right?”

“Yes,” Amanda says, laughing still, and now crying a little, apparently moved by what Melanie has said.

“So, what is your intention? You know what I mean by an intention?” asks Jeff.

“Yeah,” she answers.

“So what’s your intention for your family, your vision, or…”

“To have a peaceful home,” states Amanda.
“Yeah. So, just having a peaceful home, right?” Jeff reflects back. His tone suggests he really understands that that is truly what is important to Amanda.

“Yeah,” Amanda affirms.

“Yeah, and then all there is then is just kind of a black and white world of this is a peaceful world, this isn’t a peaceful world.”

I am not fond of this way of speaking. “Black and white world” is not a phrase Landmark Forum Leaders utilize, and furthermore, it reminds me of Lifton’s (1961) work on thought reform in that one method of achieving agreement without others’ consent is to encourage black and white thinking. This is not, in my view, a rigorous application of Landmark’s technology, but even when Jeff uses this phrase again later in the focus group, I don’t offer any criticism, preferring to stay in the background.

“Yeah, peaceful home, this is not a peaceful home, yeah,” Amanda assents.

“And then there’s what actions are there that actually will cause a peaceful home.”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“But that’s going, it is what Melanie would say, I was kind of pointing at, start looking at what would it take to bring accountability to it, right? It’s all there, just what’s not there?”

“I see it, I really do, right now.”

“Yeah.”
Amanda again reveals that she is overcoming a concern for exposing herself emotionally to the group: “Thank you very much. I really had it that I have to hide something from you guys. I don’t know why I would feel like that, and why I thought that. Thanks a lot. I see that, I really do. You know, to figure my own properties of what it would look like to have a peaceful home. I’m really attracted to that.”

Melanie reiterates the notion that Amanda is in charge: “And this is only based on you, Amanda, nobody else. You get to call it.”

(“Calling it” is a Landmark phrase borrowed from baseball and refers to how a pitch is only a strike if the umpire calls it one. It’s another way of saying, “You get to choose how you want it to be or how you want to relate to the situation.”)

“Okay,” Amanda says.

Melanie reiterates the power Amanda has to “call it,” and suggests she approach people who appear to have a peaceful home and ask them what they did to achieve it: “I mean, don’t base it on what anyone else might think, or if you see something that someone else has inside of a family—relatedness or whatever—and that’s something that looks peaceful to you, then you should inquire with them. Just say, ‘Well, how did you get it to go that way?’ Look around, be informed by that, but don’t have that be what runs the show for you, because it may not be applicable. But you get to create it.”
“Yeah. I can see that. But I can also see that you know it may be that I’m not peaceful, or I’m the one that’s not being peaceful, everything is okay around me and now I’m not sure.”

Raymond interjects: “Did you ever see that movie years ago with Steve Martin called Parenthood?”

“I never saw it,” Amanda replies.

“Well, anyhow, Steve Martin’s always upset because he wanted a peaceful home.”

Everyone in the group laughs as Raymond’s reference appears to be quite apropos.

“Really?” asks Amanda.

“And he had all these kids,” Raymond continues, but the group is now laughing so loud he pauses and repeats himself, “He had all these kids, and all the chaos and activity and ups and downs that went on all the time with this really dynamic family and everything, and his mother-in-law and his wife, they enjoyed the roller coaster ride. And Steve Martin’s breakthrough in the movie was that he distinguished that. That you can have fun on a roller coaster. You know?”

“Oh, uh-huh,” Amanda replies, but does not sound convinced.

“Roller coaster” is a metaphor used in the Landmark Forum to describe the ups and downs, highs and lows, happiness and sadness that participants are likely to experience during the course and in life. After the Landmark Forum Leader gives people their last opportunity to leave and still get a refund, she/he says, “One of the worst things you can do is get off a roller coaster before the
ride is over,” which is a way of encouraging people to stick it out through the entire course.

“And some people don’t like roller coasters,” Raymond continues, “and Steve Martin distinguished that that’s what was operating in his relationship with his wife and his family and everything.”

“Oh, uh-huh. That’s great,” says Amanda, though I’m still not sure she is convinced to “enjoy the roller coaster” or whether she is just being polite.

“Huh,” I remark. I had not seen the film, so I’m curious as to the interpretation Raymond gives it.

“I don’t like roller coasters very much,” is Melanie’s retort.

I laugh.

“Yeah,” Amanda seems to agree.

“That’s what Steve Martin said,” says Raymond.

The conversation joggs a memory for Jeff, who begins to recount the circumstances of how Amanda and he met at his tutoring business. Amanda’s son was his client at the time.

“You know what? It’s funny. You said ‘a peaceful home’—that is how we met, because you walked into my office one day—I don’t know if you know or not,” now speaking to Raymond, “but Amanda is the person that invited me to come to the Landmark Forum.”

“Oh!” Raymond exclaims, apparently having heard the story, but did not know it was Amanda to whom Jeff had been referring.

Jeff continues, “It was Amanda.”
“This is the person who is responsible, all right,” Raymond comments, with a little ironic humor in his voice.

“It’s a habit,” Amanda remarks, referring to inviting people to learn about Landmark.

“It’s a great habit,” Melanie adds.

“Yeah, right? And it’s great,” adds Jeff.

“Yeah, right,” I say.

“Right? That’s how you walked into my office that day, talking to me about some ‘peace project.’ That was how we started a conversation. This is amazing.” Jeff stops reminiscing and moves forward with the conversation, “But one thing, okay, so here’s this intention for a peaceful home, right?”

“Yeah…”

“All right. So you have this intention, and if you actually use the technology of our education, what would there be to do with that intention?”

“Put a structure for fulfillment into it,” is Amanda’s answer.

“Before doing that,” says Jeff. The group laughs because a step is missing. Before one creates a structure to fulfill an intention, one must invent a possibility that the structure will fulfill.5

5 Passage translation: Landmark’s work is about inventing and fulfilling possibilities that are created out of nothing, i.e., on a foundation of nothing, namely that life is empty and meaningless and it’s empty and meaningless that it’s empty and meaningless. (The ultimate inauthenticity is that our lives hold any significance whatsoever.) Creation cannot take place on a foundation of meaning based in the past. This can only be achieved once one has established a “clearing.” A “clearing” is analogous to a painter’s blank canvass. To establish this clearing, Landmark participants distinguish the “listening” we bring to the situation (our interpretive filter), and our subsequent way of being, which is typically based in the past. When the past is distinguished (that is, we recognize that our interpretive filter is based on a disempowering interpretation of some past event), this makes available the possibility for creation. At this stage, one invents
Melanie knows this and confirms, “I know right where you are. Yep.”

Jeff continues, “Okay, so you’re sitting in the seminar or you’re at any Landmark event, right? And there’s always two boards up in front of the room, right?”

“Yes,” Amanda recalls.

In every Landmark course, two display boards appear on both sides of the room. One is entitled, “Transformation: The Genesis of a New Realm of Possibility”:

In the Landmark Forum, you will bring forth the presence of a New Realm of Possibility for yourself and your life.

Inside this New Realm of possibility:

The constraints the past imposes on your view of life disappear; a new view of life emerges.

New possibilities for being, call you powerfully into being.

New openings for action, call you powerfully into action.

The experience of being alive transforms.

The other display board reads, “The Way the Landmark Forum Works”:

Anything you want for yourself or your life is available out of your participation in the Landmark Forum.

(creates) a possibility free from the past. Once invented, to fulfill on this possibility, one creates a “structure for fulfillment,” which is basically a “plan” to achieve the specific measurable results that will manifest the invented possibility in a concrete, tangible, and empirical way. “Structure for fulfillment” is used instead of the more mundane “plan” because such a structure might involve elements that would on first blush be outside the scope of what one needs to “do” (and thus “plan”) in order to “get the job done.” For example, one might seek support for other projects or delegate responsibilities to others that would help create a supportive context that enables one to “get the job done” around the expressed intention. Or, one might establish an exercise routine that would provide the necessary energy for being in action around the goal. These would be part of the “structure for fulfillment.”
You can have any result for yourself or your life that you invent as a possibility and enroll others in your having gotten.

Enrollment is causing a new possibility to be present for another such that they are touched, moved and inspired by that possibility.

The results you get out of your participation in the Landmark Forum are a product of the possibilities that you invent for yourself and enroll others in your having gotten.

Jeff begins, “If you think of the one that says ‘the Way that the Landmark Forum works,’ you can say whatever portion is doing the course work.”

“Okay,” says Amanda.

“So, what is always right there, first thing that's always there?”

“Anything is possible for you out of participation in the Landmark Forum.”

“Okay, good. Do you know what it says right underneath that?”

“Um…” It appears Amanda does not recall what it says.

Jeff and Julie, as program leaders, know this board well, and speak in unison: “You can have any result for yourself and your life that you invent out of the possibility of participating and enroll others in your having gotten.”

“Okay,” Amanda remarks.

“So, use this intention of a peaceful home,” Jeff instructs.

“Or the possibility of a peaceful home, if that's what you wanted, okay?”

Melanie says, correcting Jeff a little.

“Or a possibility, yeah,” Jeff says, realizing his mistake.

Amanda replies affirmatively.

“And so what would be…” Jeff continues.
Melanie interrupts: “So what’s the next step? So where do you go now? So you’ve got the possibility, you created and invented the possibility of a peaceful home. Now what is there to do, so to speak?”

“Enroll the other people in the household into it,” she replies.


“Okay.”

“And maybe not just them. And absolutely them,” Melanie says, meaning Amanda need not limit the enrollment of others to her immediate family, but that her family at the very least must be enrolled into the possibility of a peaceful home for it to be realized.

“Right. Right. Start talking about the vision of being the possibility that I see for our future. The possibility of having a peaceful home,” Amanda says, now getting the conversation.

Melanie can see that Amanda is becoming moved, touched, and inspired by the conversation: “Yeah, this is your dream, Amanda, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s what you’ve always wanted.”

“Yeah.”

“Forever,” adds Melanie.

“Mmmm,” I utter neutrally.

Raymond, reprising his point about roller coasters, “Or were you starting to enjoy the roller coaster?”

“That’s part of the peacefulness,” adds Jeff.
Melanie continues, “Exactly. But you just haven’t spoken to and enrolled them in that. You’ve kept it to yourself, expecting them to get it. It’s like speaking straight, you know, ‘All I really have ever wanted in life is a peaceful home. I’m not quite sure what that looks like,’ or ‘That’s really what I have in mind, and are you guys interested in that?’”

“Yeah.”

“I hope so, because I am,” Melanie continues, simulating the conversation she is coaching Amanda to have.

“Yeah.”

Melanie continues the simulation, “So, what would it look like to you, Ethan, to have a peaceful home?’ I guarantee a 17 year old is probably interested in something like that. He may say no, but there’s something there for him.”

“Yeah,” Amanda says, sniffling and crying a little.

“I want to know what Amanda is experiencing, so I ask: “Amanda, what are you present to right now?”

She replies: “Surprise, you know, something else is possible. Love, appreciation, friendship, the possibility of communication.”

“That’s awesome,” I say with encouragement.

“A lot of things,” she says, now laughing and sniffling at the same time.

Recalling an earlier part of the conversation, Jeff addresses Amanda: “There was something that you said earlier. So you said there was a conversation you have with your son, or you may speak with your husband, but it
would go a certain way, and it was you who was responsible for how the conversation went.”

“Yeah, but in front of it being who I was supposed to be, then the outcome would be different.”

“Yeah,” Jeff replies. Then, appearing to have an insight himself, exclaims, “Whoa. What if they actually could be responsible for a peaceful home?”

“That would be…great,” she remarks.

“Well, it would, wouldn’t it?” asks Jeff.

Amanda is now laughing with relief, having gotten some freedom around the issue we’ve been discussing.

Jeff continues: “That’s part of what enrollment looks like. It’s like having a conversation. You get some partners in that. They can be a stakeholder in it, or be responsible for it. Because it’s not you are being a certain way and then your son’s life goes down this road. They’re connected and they’re not connected. There’s not the—

“Cause and effect,” adds Melanie, completing Jeff’s sentence.

“Yeah, it really isn’t that. You know, he’s going to Tae Kwan Do once a week instead of twice a week.”

“Oh, okay.”

“No problem,” Jeff says, attempting to take the “there’s something wrong here” out of Amanda’s space.

“Okay.”

“And it’s not that you’re not—“
“He’s not going to Tae Kwan Do because I’m not being…” Amanda interrupts.

“Yeah, exactly. They’re not connected. It’s not that you’re not being a good mother that he’s not going to Tae Kwan Do. They are not connected.”

“Uh-huh,” replies Amanda.

While I certainly understand that if Amanda wants a peaceful home, she must enroll her family in the possibility of having a peaceful home, I do not want to neglect the issue that Amanda is responsible for herself, and that peace begins with her. This reminds me of a song sung in the Unity Church:

Let peace begin with me
Let this be the moment now.
With every step I take
Let this be my solemn vow;
To take each moment and live
Each moment in peace eternally
Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me.

“Also, I’m wondering, being peaceful is not contingent upon the circumstance…” I add.

“That’s right,” interjects Jeff.

“…whether he goes twice a week or once a week,” I say, finishing my sentence.

Jeff piggybacks on my idea: “Yeah, you could actually still be peaceful and he’s only going once a week. Of course, then there would be whatever conversation happened.”

“Hmm. Yeah,” says Amanda.
“There would be space for them to be accountable for themselves,” says Jeff.

“Right,” Amanda agrees, “Enroll them into the conversation, enrollment into the possibility of having a peaceful home, and have them be responsible for their end of it and not like it’s up to me to have it happen that way,” says Amanda.

“Yeah, there’s not much peace there,” Jeff observes.

“No,” Amanda says, laughing.

I attempt to expand on the distinction I am making between a peaceful home that depends on the enrollment of others and being peaceful inside oneself: “You have it that there is a peaceful home and then there is you being peaceful, and you could say that regardless of whatever’s going on with everyone else, that doesn’t mean that you get pulled away from your own goal to be peaceful.”

“You know what’s really great?” Jeff asks.

“Yeah?” asks Amanda.

“All right, so our conversation now has been about what? About a peaceful home.”

“Yes,” she says, laughing, “I was like, oh gosh, it’s a trick question!”

“Well, we didn’t come up with that. You did. We didn’t say, ‘Hey, what you need is a peaceful home.’ We just looked at, well, what is your intention? And you said ‘peaceful home,’ but now that’s all our conversation’s been about since
then. Well, what could have that possibility fulfilled in your life? I mean, you’re actually thinking about what would actually have that be there.”

“Oh, uh-huh. Right. Yeah.”

“We did a lot of work here yesterday,” Jeff says, laughing, as he recalls the leadership training he and Melanie took part in the day before, “We were working on that yesterday.”

“Were you really?” asks Amanda.

“Yeah,” Jeff replies.

“On what?” Amanda inquires.

“On intention, you know, and what’s missing is intention, or a vision. Like that’s what’s missing from your life,” Jeff observes.

“Instead of focusing on what’s missing, focus instead on what you want to have present,” Amanda says, attempting to follow where Jeff is going.

“Yeah. We’re always focusing on what we don’t know. We tend to focus on what we don’t know as opposed to focusing on…if you focus on an intention, that’s all you’re going to be, all you are going to be in that world.”

“Okay. I see it,” she states.

“Yeah. It’s funny,” says Jeff.

“It is. It’s awesome. It is,” asserts Amanda.

“Right!” Raymond exclaims, apparently familiar with the phenomenon just described.

“It’s awesome!” Amanda says laughing.
I attempt to sum up what I’ve heard inside the context of what I had learned through my Landmark experience: “It seems to me that, it’s like the phrase, ‘nature abhors a vacuum.’ And what I heard you say was that you had this ideal but it was very vague (of what a good mom would be), but there was no form to it, no details, you didn’t really have any specific measurable results, or even really a possibility of what that would be like. Absent that possibility, then everything, all the crap gets thrown into that, gets stuck into that, like our thrown way of being, all of that. That’s what I heard.”

“Uh-huh,” Amanda assents.

“In the absence of inventing a possibility,” I continue, “that’s what’s going to happen. And all there is to do is just notice, ‘Oh I’m not being my possibility right now. That’s Amanda from the past. This is my intention.’ And then at that point, something can change, or should. Does that make sense?”


“Does that make sense to you, Jeff?”

“Yeah, that’s great.”

“Cool,” I add.

Amanda, appearing to have understood the implications of the conversation, recalls, “Yes. There was one point, I’m just saying this for the sake of the conversation of the tape, that there have been times that that possibility was present, and I stopped generating that possibility and so…”

“Like what?” I ask.
“There was a possibility of having a loving family. I had created the possibility of having a loving family, the possibility of the children having their dreams fulfilled, and then I wrote measurable results that would let me know that that was present, some way I could measure whether love was present or not, and then while I was generating it that way, then I could really, I really felt like that was what was present.”

“Can you name a specific example?” I ask.

“My son, he is an extreme sport kind of guy, but he didn’t have anything he was doing with other people. So he would just be skateboarding with the skateboarders and he was doing a little stuff at the church I think, but I’m pretty sure this was before even that happened that he started getting involved in the church. Well now, what’s happening was, he was a loner kind. He had friends, but they were all just into their own individual things.

“And now Ethan is still an extreme sports person, but he does it with large groups of different people. Like he’s a surfer and a skimboarder and he’s got a group of kids he goes around with and they are wanting to travel across the country together. And when he starts talking about the surf, it’s as though you can see it, you know, the vision that the water is for him. He looks at the water continuously when we’re there together and he explains to me, ‘Do you notice this? Do you notice that?’ and he’s just incredibly inspired. He’s a fantastic artist. And I remember that he didn’t have any interest at one point.”

I am curious as to how that came about: “What happened to change that?”
“I just started generating that thing about him being a participator and having a life that would inspire him. And then there were actually times where I made him start to go to this youth group, against his will at first, but then he would start wanting to go. And those are the kids that he now goes to the beach with all the time and travels with them to Venice to go surfing. He goes across the state with those kids. But I did actually take action and didn't take no for an answer.”

“All right. So you encouraged him,” I surmise.

“Yes. What had been happening wasn’t in line with the measurable results,” she says.

“Gotcha. Alright.” I sense Amanda has “gotten the coaching” and feel that it’s time to move on to the next topic, so I ask, “Do you have anything else to be complete with that?”

“No. That’s great. Thank you,” Amanda says, now giggling, “Thank you very much.”

Pursuing Dreams: Distinguishing Rackets and Commitments

The second conversation in the focus group was about pursuing dreams. As in the first conversation, the most notable portion for our purposes concerned a marital issue of Amanda’s.

Amanda shares how she had achieved success in the realm of career and volunteer work, and that she has come to know herself as someone who makes things happen. According to her, however, it appeared success had eluded her in
the area of her marriage: “And the exception seems to be at this moment this thing about being married,” whispering, “It’s not how it should go.”

The group laughs a bit. Perceiving “there’s something wrong here,” is usually accompanied by (in the background, anyway) “it shouldn’t be this way.”

Rather than think, “it shouldn’t be this way,” one could alternatively say, as suggested in Landmark courses, “this is how life looks when it’s working,” which means that there is nothing “wrong.” “Wrong” is a word we use that has no objective or empirically verifiable meaning. The experience that “there’s something wrong here” may be different for different people, however, for me, it is usually accompanied by frustration, sometimes anger, sometimes sadness, but always disappointment.

“So, anyway…” I say to move things along.

Amanda continues: “But anyway, the thing with the marriage, it’s the only thing that seems not to be working.”

Raymond says, “Well, at least the streets have been safe for the last four years,” referring to the Peace Project Amanda described earlier in the discussion.

Amanda confirms his understanding, “Yeah, yeah they have. I think that’s about it.”

I saw this as an opportunity to stimulate a group dynamic and said, “Anyone want to say anything?” Everyone laughs at my question, and it is clear that they, too, think of this as a chance to make a contribution to Amanda.
Jeff, nodding his head and laughing, says, “Uh, yeah,” with a touch of sarcasm. “Well, it’s just kind of funny. All right, let’s see. You know yourself to be who?”

“Someone who accomplishes what they set out to accomplish.”

“All right. What are you going to accomplish in your marriage?”

Amanda pauses, appearing to formulate an answer. “Can I ask a question before I answer your question?”

“Sure,” Jeff obliges her.

“What if the conditions for satisfaction are not being met?”

This seems to me to be a way of avoiding the question, and I anticipate someone will point that out, which turns out to be the case, since Jeff engages where Amanda is coming from: “I don’t know. I don’t know what your agreement is. I’m just going to relate from whatever you are out to accomplish, you accomplish, right?

“Yes,” Amanda affirms.

This is a “Landmark” way of listening to people—not from their personality or their complaints, but from what they say they are committed to.⁶

“So what were you out to accomplish by being married?” Jeff inquires.

“Having a lifetime partner.”

“Okay, great.”

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⁶ This is an example of what I refer to in Chapter Ten about how Landmark trainees listen to others for what they have invented for themselves, and attempt to hold them to account for realizing that possibility in their lives.
“Someone to have fun with. And to be in partnership with in life—all of life—money, everything.”

“Yes, so having a lifetime partner,” Jeff reflects back to Amanda.

“Yes.”

“Okay, great. Well, how would you not have, I mean, how would there be conditions of satisfaction that wouldn’t be met in that?”

“If—” Amanda begins, but Jeff has asked a rhetorical question, and supplies his own answer:

“The deal breakers, right?”

“Deal breakers, yeah.”

“Like…” Jeff probes.

Melanie chimes in, “Saying one thing and then not doing it. I mean, that would be a deal breaker, right? Like I promise to do this, and I don’t, right? Things like that.”

“Well, it depends what the thing is,” says Jeff. “I mean, it could be something like taking out the trash,” and he begins to laugh. “Right? That wouldn’t be a deal breaker then. What is your deal breaker? What is your condition of satisfaction that is not being met?”

Amanda hesitates, expressing a concern that she may violate trust by revealing the details of the situation: “I don’t know if it is an integrity issue for me to talk about this.”

Jeff, respecting her desire for confidentiality, replies, “Well, that’s okay. You don’t have to.” He then steers the conversation in a general way, staying
with what Amanda had said about herself earlier. “You know yourself as someone who can accomplish anything you create, right? And you created a lifetime partnership.”

“Yes,” Amanda agrees.

“And right now, whatever the circumstances that’s having that not be fulfilled, right, you can impact that. I don’t know what it is, but you can impact it.”

There is silence as Amanda pauses. She then says, somewhat skeptically, using the subjunctive mood, “That would be true.”

“And it doesn’t have to be true, but it’s possible,” Jeff adds, remaining consistent with a fundamental tenet of Landmark Education courses: Course leaders specifically and explicitly state that what is taught in the courses is not “the truth,” but rather, a possible way of looking at the world.

“It’s possible,” Amanda echoes, but here meaning “possible” in a “someday, one day” conventional sense of its meaning. This is not the kind of possibility Landmark addresses:

What we mean by “possibility” in the phrase “you can have any result for yourself or your life that you invent as a possibility…is not the everyday, ordinary understanding of the meaning of possibility. If someone says to us, “X is possible,” we would normally understand them to mean that X does not exist now, and that its existence, even someday, is uncertain.

The everyday interpretation of “possibility” is that is a “someday, maybe, but-not-now thing.”

We are not speaking about that kind of possibility, the kind of possibility that is out there, somewhere in your future, maybe. We are not speaking about the ordinary kind of possibility, something somewhat remote for you, not really a presence in your life right now, not actively impacting you in the present. We also don’t mean the kind of possibility meant by people when they say, “Well, anything is possible.” It is not possibility like a pipe dream, or a fantasy, or merely something you want. It is not even a goal,
something you are striving toward. This new kind of possibility is much
more than all of that…

This new kind of possibility alters and impacts who you are being in the
present. It alters the way you see yourself and your life, it impacts your
thoughts and feelings, and it shapes your actions—all in the present. You
invent a possibility for yourself or your life that moves you, touches you,
inspires you, and if it is this new kind of possibility, it impacts who you are
being in the present…

This new kind of possibility is not a “someday-but-not-now thing.” It exists
now, in the present. This new kind of possibility is not a “maybe thing.” It
is real right now—as a possibility. You are not pretending it is real as an
actuality. In fact, you are pretending nothing. This new kind of possibility
you invent for yourself or your life is real—as a possibility. (Landmark
Education Corporation, 2003)

Jeff continues, “Yes. And it’s real. So what would it take to turn around
whatever it is that is in your marriage?”

“I’m not sure what it takes to have someone else be their word when they
haven’t been their word, and have them take action that they said they would
take themselves.”

“Uh-huh,” Jeff says.

“So, I don’t know.”

“Well…”

Melanie intervenes: “Could I? Let me just add something.”

“Yes,” says Jeff, deferring to Melanie.

“Because I’m listening, and I know for myself… So, are you always your
word?”

“Almost always,” Amanda replies.
Amanda’s answer shocks me. If there is one thing I have learned from my Landmark experience, and it is demonstrated in every course: Human beings do not have integrity, or if they do, it’s in rare, fleeting moments, and usually to look good, avoid looking bad, or out of obligation.

Jeff appears to agree with my thought: “Nah. Try on that you are not.”

“Try it on?” asks Amanda. “Okay, all right.”

While Jeff tried to steer Amanda to the recognition she might not “almost always” keep her word, Melanie takes a different tack: “Well, she said ‘almost always,’ so that means that she isn’t always, there are times that she is not, but pretty close.”

“Pretty close,” Amanda says.

“Okay,” Jeff assents.

Melanie continues: “So, that’s great. Now, I want to go to when you are not.”

“Okay,” agrees Amanda.

“What do you do with that? When you are not, like maybe you made a promise and didn’t fulfill on it or you didn’t, like what times can think of when you didn’t do what you said you were going to do?”

Amanda pauses, then says, “I said that I would coach the Self-Expression course and then I told you that I would not—”

“You weren’t going to.”

“—that I wasn’t going to.”

“Mm-hmm,” says Melanie.
“But the integrity is still in, at least on that, something like that.”

Melanie reflects back to Amanda, “So you said you were going to do something and then you communicated to me that you were not going to.”

“Right.”

“You are still walking around and, like, no problem with that, right?” implying that the sky has not fallen as a consequence of Amanda breaking her word.

“Right.”

“So, can you consider that you have a very high standard of how people are about their word?”

“I do. I really do. Yes.”

“So there may be something there, and when they are not, who are you about it? You call them out on it, but not like they should have done it, not like that, because that won’t produce the results that you are committed to producing. Inside a partnership, anyway.”

“Right.”

“It’s great because Jeff has experience, is in a place that I don’t have experience, right?” She is referring to the fact that Jeff has been married more than once.

Amanda knows this, and laughs. Melanie continues, “I mean, you’ve been through two marriages?”

“Oh, no, man, four marriages,” Jeff corrects her. (Jeff is on his fourth marriage.)
The group bursts into laughter, and Melanie puts the best possible spin on it: “Oh, all right. He’s a master,” she jokes, “But then inside of creating partnerships, I’ve been in relationship for 25 years, so it’s really great. We can tell you this definitely doesn’t work, you know?”

“Right,” Amanda agrees.

Melanie adds, “Then Raymond has 31 years, so there’s lots of stuff here.”

Having been singled out, and knowing Jeff because he’s been in his seminars, Raymond pipes up: “See, the one thing Jeff has experience in marriage that we don’t is that he sat down with his fourth and future wife and created the relationship inside of the distinctions of Landmark Education.”

Jeff confirms, “That’s right.”

Raymond continues, “The only reason my wife and I have been married for 31 years is that without even knowing what is out there, we are both subconsciously standing in faith over and over again on an endless blueprint. Once you get married, you stay married, you’re committed. We didn’t even know what was out there. Otherwise, we just would have gone by the wayside, too, you know? Because Jeff, you know, he and his future wife, I’m just acknowledging it, there are some special marriages, and I thought that before. You and Emily were inside a game.” (Emily is Jeff’s wife.)

“Uh-huh,” says Jeff.

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7 “Being in relationship” is a Landmark phrase. It is a more general way to describe “being in a relationship.” “Being in relationship” refers to the act of relating between people that constitutes the “relationship.”
Raymond continues: “They interviewed people with successful marriages and they created a life, you know?”

“It’s true,” Jeff adds.

“And you constantly share in the seminar how often you and Emily get upset with each other.”

“We always have. Usually she just doesn’t agree,” Jeff says, laughing.

“You disagree at least as much as the average married person, if not more so.”

“Absolutely,” Jeff confirms.

“It’s that you have something to go back to.”

“That’s right. All right. So here’s this issue with Andy,” Jeff says, steering the conversation back to Amanda and her husband.

“Yes,” Amanda acknowledges.

“And there’s this thing that he has given his word to that he is not fulfilling.”

“Right.”

“Is he telling you that he is not fulfilling on it?”

“No,” answers Amanda.

“Okay, and are you talking to him about it?”

Melanie says, “Not if he doesn’t fulfill on it.”

“No, no, that hasn’t happened,” explains Amanda.

“So, have you had a conversation?

Amanda: “Yes.”
Trying to respect Amanda’s privacy, but at the same time trying to get enough information to find out “what’s so,” Jeff asks, “Is this around—you don’t have to get specific, but is this around work?”

“Around money.”

“Around money. Okay, good. So there’s whatever there is around money, and that he’s not—did he make a promise?”

“He did.”

“He made a promise. And he’s not keeping his promise.”

“Not yet,” says Amanda.

“Okay. Maybe there is, inside of a partnership, or did you say that you were out to have a what?”

“Partnership.”

“What kind?

“Lifetime partnership.”

“A life partnership. So maybe inside of the partnership is the design of the promise, and is it inside of the partnership?”

“I say not from the beginning.”

“Well, maybe that’s all there is, is just to get the promise complete, from what already was there, and then to create the promise inside of a partnership. How would it look?”

I add, “A well-designed promise structure, right?”
“Oh, absolutely. There is, you know, because a promise could look like, okay, so ‘By the end of the year I’m going to make $50,000,’ or whatever that is, you know?”

“Yes, there is something in here, you know, like when you’re in a conversation,” Melanie says.

“Yes,” Jeff affirms.

Melanie confirms her prior understanding of the situation with Amanda: “You have it that he hasn’t kept the promise and the date is December 3rd.”

“Yes.”

“You already have him losing the game,” Melanie observes.

Jeff, realizing he, unlike Melanie, is not privy to the details of the situation, remarks, “Oh, you know there’s a date.”

“Yes, there is a date,” says Melanie. “Is it December 3rd? I don’t know, is it December 3rd?”

“Yes,” according to Amanda.

“That’s pretty soon,” says Jeff. (The date is about two weeks away.)

“It is,” replies Amanda.

Melanie digs in a little: “And you’re already in the place that he’s lost, no matter what, because you aren’t standing for it to be a win for him. Are you?”

“Yes,” she admits.

Raymond says sarcastically, but good-naturedly, “What a wonderful opportunity to make him wrong and prove him wrong. Perfect!”

“Yes,” confesses Amanda, perhaps stung a bit by the remark.
Raymond pushes on, “I mean, what could be better?”

The point has sunk in for Amanda, and, laughing sheepishly, declares, “I hate you people!” Of course, she doesn’t literally mean this, it’s just that she has just been called out for not being committed to her husband keeping his word, and she knows it.

Melanie tries to go deeper, “You know, Amanda, the thing is…”

But Raymond, sensing Amanda is in the hot seat, capitalizes on the potential for humor, and pokes a little fun. “Let’s zoom in,” he says, referring to the video camera recording the focus group. All laugh.

Undeterred by the humorous distraction, Melanie picks up where she left off, saying, “I think you’re not a stand of your staying in the relationship.”

The possibility that this might be true hits Amanda like a ton of bricks. “Oh, no!” she exclaims.

“Because what I know about you is, and you’ve said that, when you want something you will find a way to get it, right? You said that. Isn’t that accurate, what you said?” asks Melanie.

“Yes,” replies Amanda.

“I think we can all stand for that. That’s how you created the listening of you with us. So, this is your habitual complaint.”

“Fuck!” exclaims Amanda in hushed tones.

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8 As Landmark’s work is based in ontology (“the science of being”), the language used tends to employ verbs of being rather than doing. Hence, “You are not a stand” or “You are not being a stand” is spoken (which is consistent with the Landmark philosophy). Using verbs of doing, e.g., “You are not taking a stand” does not fully capture the notion that making a commitment is something that encompasses our entire being, and not simply something we do.
Melanie has uttered the magic words, “habitual complaint.” Amanda now recognizes she is “running a racket” on her husband, Andy.

By calling Amanda out on her racket, Melanie demonstrates a distinction from the Self-Expression and Leadership Program—“ruthless compassion,” which may be thought of as a form of “tough love”: “And I love you and I listen to you, but, okay, already, Ms. Powerhouse, get it handled! What would life be like for you not to have to complain or be a complaint?”

“You have more time in your day. I figured that one out,” shares Jeff.

Melanie continues, “You know, there’s having complaints and being your complaint or how you are about the complaint, and it really takes a lot of energy and time to be those complaints. Because we all have complaints, but we don’t have to be our complaints.”

“Damn!” Amanda whispers, signifying further recognition of how she’s been being in her marriage.

Jeff asks Amanda, “So, what’s rattling through your mind right now?”

Before Amanda can answer, Raymond says, “Chocolate, vanilla—choose, without consideration or reason. Marriage or divorce—choose.”

What Raymond has said derives from an exercise in the Landmark Forum on the nature of choice. In the Landmark Forum, the option of chocolate or vanilla ice cream is (hypothetically) offered to a participant. The Landmark Forum

9 As discussed in the preceding footnote, the language here is one of being, not doing. Melanie is also making a distinction: having a complaint signifies that one is experiencing a problem and has distinguished it as such, that is, one has obtained some analytical distance through a self-reflexive inquiry; being a complaint, on the other hand, indicates that one is caught up in a past-based disempowering “attitude” which manifests itself in the articulation of the complaint.
Leader says, “You have a choice between chocolate and vanilla ice cream. I’m going to say, ‘Chocolate, vanilla. Choose.’ And you say, ‘I choose chocolate (or vanilla).’ Then I’ll say, ‘Why did you choose chocolate?’ And you say, ‘I choose chocolate because…’ and finish the sentence.”

Usually, a few passes are made at this exercise with the participant saying things like, “I choose chocolate because I like chocolate better than vanilla.” But this would be a “reason” for choosing, which would make the selection of chocolate a “decision,” because it is based on reasons, not a choice. A choice is a free selection after taking into account various considerations involved in the choice. To “get” what choice is, ultimately, the participant will say, “I choose chocolate because I choose chocolate.” The lesson is that one can make a decision, which is based on reasons and the past, or one can choose, which takes reasons and considerations into account, but the actual choice is not based on those reasons. It is a free choice, an act of will. This means that one can make a choice that appears consistent with those reasons and considerations or not. Landmark’s definition of “choice” is therefore choice for the sake of choosing. It is a creative act, versus making a “decision,” which, based on reasons, is always past-based. Raymond misstated the distinction of “choice” when he said, “without consideration or reason.”

“There are things you want to consider,” Jeff corrects Raymond.

“That’s what Melanie is saying, right?” asks Amanda, who is trying to understand where the group is coming from.
Jeff reiterates what he meant, “Well, you want to consider everything first and then choose.”

“Consider,” repeats Amanda.

“Yes,” replies Jeff, “Consider, consider, consider, consider, consider—then choose.”

“Okay, that’s good, I see what’s going on,” Amanda asserts.

Melanie joins in, “You know, it’s kind of like, if Andy’s the one, you get to say, and if he’s not, you still get to say.”

Jeff asks Amanda, “Do you like him?”

(This question strikes me as a bit odd. One would hope that you love the life partner, not merely like him/her, but I let it go.)

“Yes,” is her reply.

“Good. Is he fun?” asks Jeff.

“Sometimes.”

“And then sometimes he’s not… Can you actually have him be like ‘he’s the one’ and ‘he’s the champion of your life?’”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

Amanda’s response seems huge to me, and I get a little nervous. I start thinking, “Oh, my God! My focus group is going to lead to the divorce of one of my participants!” I did not want to be a catalyst for that. I imagined Andy—who I know and like and with whom years prior I had done some volunteer work—stalking me down, yelling at me, “Thanks a lot, Patrick! Your stupid dissertation
ruined my marriage!” Not that this would happen, but its improbability didn’t prevent the thought from popping into my head.

“Have you ever?” asks Jeff, referring to whether Amanda ever construed Andy as the one for her.

“When we first met,” she replies.

“And how was it then?” asks Jeff.

“We weren’t living together then, and it was great.”

“Ah, the death knell of so many relationships—moving in together or getting married,” I joke silently to myself.

“And what happened was that, there would be a ‘what happened’—there’s this moment in time that it stopped feeling like that?”

Amanda confirmed this, “Something happened.”

“Yeah, well… yeah…?” says Jeff, waiting for some elaboration—Amanda knows this is what Jeff was waiting for. Jeff laughs and asks, “So, what happened?”

“What happened…?” Amanda pauses.

Jeff tries to get her on track, “You moved in together, you got married, he said something and didn’t do it…”

Amanda finally comes out with it: “What I said originally was that I wanted to talk about how we were going to handle finances. I assumed we were all going to put it together, and he said we don’t need to talk about it. And I didn’t say anything, even though I wasn’t comfortable about it.”

“With him paying…?” Jeff is trying to understand.
“I wasn’t comfortable about not having that conversation and I wasn’t comfortable about not being able to read his e-mail or open a letter or anything like that. He had set up what was his and it wasn’t for me to see, unless he asked me to look at it. And I didn’t say that I wasn’t comfortable with it.”

You can see how this would have been a breakdown for Amanda: thwarted intention, unfulfilled expectation, undelivered communication.

Jeff persists in attempting to get at the “what happened?” versus “the interpretation” of what happened, and continues: “Okay. So was that a conversation? Or that's what happened? I don’t get what happened yet.”

“He didn’t pay, and the first month came, but he didn’t give me the money.”

“How long ago was that?” asks Jeff.

“That was four years ago.”

“And has he not done that yet?

“Not really.”

“Well…”

“Occasionally he has, but mainly not.”

“Mainly not. Okay. So he hasn't been honoring the agreement he had to pay half the expenses?”

“Yes.”

“And provide half of the income?”

Amanda replies, “Yes.”

“Okay. And you’ve been tolerating this for how long?”
“Four years.”

“Uh-huh. And why are you tolerating it?”

Amanda is becoming a little self-conscious. She’s had this conversation with Melanie many times apparently, and turns to her, saying “Melanie, are you sick of hearing this shit? I know you are now! You told me now.”

Melanie joins in: “You’ve just got to get it.”

“I’m not getting something, that’s for sure!” Amanda laughs.

“You’ve got to hear the question,” Jeff instructs in a soft voice, but firmly, attempting to get through to Amanda on this point.

“Okay.”

“So, why are you tolerating it? Why are you allowing it to go on?”

“Because I thought that maybe it was my problem,” Amanda says.

“It is,” says Jeff.

I don’t know if I audibly laugh or visibly smile here, but this is one of the things I love about Jeff. He is so light-hearted and fun to be around, but this doesn’t keep him from being straight in his communication.

“That, really, it’s okay, but I just think it’s not okay” explains Amanda.

“Well…maybe that. But if you look at it like you’re tolerating it, there’s no action to interrupt it, there’s no walking into the principal’s office, and sitting down and saying, ‘Hey, let’s do a peace project.’ There’s no ‘I’m going to live on the beach by such-and-such a date,’ and then you are living on the beach.”

“Yeah,” concedes Amanda.

“Okay. That’s…”
Melanie interrupts, simulating how the conversation with Andy might go, and says, “I’m committed to having a partnership with you, Andy, and I see that what I’ve done is anything but that.”

Here, Melanie, in a proto-typical Landmark move, shifts the emphasis from Andy not keeping his agreement on the finances to having Amanda take responsibility for the fact that she did not call him out on it, and for not keeping her commitment to the partnership’s workability.

“Yeah,” Jeff agrees.

Melanie elaborates, “I mean, there would be some action consistent—”

“Yeah,” Jeff chimes in, continuing the simulated conversation: “‘We had an agreement. I’ve let it slide for four years.’”

“YOU did that,” stresses Melanie.

“Yeah,” Jeff agrees again.

Amanda has gotten it, and admits, “Yeah, I did that.”

“And it’s obviously okay because he’s been bankrolled for four years,” Jeff observes.

Raymond chimes in, “Boy! You’ve been getting something out of that!” referring to the payoff Amanda is getting from running a racket on Andy. As discussed, the “payoffs” of a racket are what keeps it in place: being right/making others wrong, justifying oneself/invalidating others, dominating others/avoiding their domination, winning while someone else loses.

Jeff confirms Raymond’s observation since this is what he’s been getting at: “Yeah. That’s what I mean by tolerating it. That’s why we tolerate things.”
Raymond, still amazed at how long Amanda has been running the racket, exclaims, “Four years! You can eat off that. That’s a long time, man!”

Amanda appears a little defensive, and tries to justify her racket: “But Raymond, I thought the alternative was that I would have to end the relationship. And I thought that it was one of those things that sometimes one person is better at something than another.”

Jeff asks, “Do you want to get right in on that?” meaning: Does Amanda want to get at the root of the issue?

“Some kind of bullshit, I guess,” says Amanda.

“No, do you want to get right in on a secret?” Jeff asks, persistent in his commitment to work this through.

“Sure,” says Amanda.

“You ended the relationship four years ago.”

Melanie agrees, “There’s no chance for it.”

“You already ended it,” declares Jeff. He pauses, then exclaims, “Surprise!”

Amanda, overcoming her shock at the realization, begins laughing.

Jeff continues: “The game’s already over. So now comes December 3rd…”

“You never got that before,” Melanie observes, speaking to Amanda.

“No,” is Amanda’s reply.

“It had no chance to flourish,” Melanie says.

“Yeah,” Jeff concurs.

“What should I have done then?” Amanda asks.
“There is—” Jeff begins to say, but Melanie speaks at about the same time.

“That won’t make any difference now,” Melanie says, referring to the fact that it’s “spilt milk” at this point.

Jeff tries to wrap things up: “So can you, and now I don’t know if you have, if you even can see what you’re tolerating. What is it and I mean ‘tolerating,’ like what do you mean to think it is “okay”? You tolerate it. Let me give you an example of tolerating. I tolerate being 15 pounds overweight.”

“Okay,” Amanda says, listening to Jeff.

“I tolerate that. Okay? Should I be? No. Should I do something about it? Yes. Okay, but am I? No. I’m tolerating it. Do I complain about it? Sometimes, okay, but it’s usually just when clothes don’t fit a certain way, right?”

(I can only imagine for how many people this rings true.)

“Yes,” says Amanda.

Jeff continues, “Okay, so I’m tolerating it. Did I eat Sunchips while I was here today? Heck, yeah. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, so can you get that that’s my way of tolerating something? So I’ll tolerate that, okay?”

“Yes.”

“My fifteen year-old—I tolerate him having a Mohawk. Okay. Do I like it? Not really, but that’s his expression in life right now. Will I tolerate him being in a gang? Absolutely not. Not going there. Right?”
“Right,” Amanda agrees.

“You just want to see, what are you tolerating in your relationship? Because it’s okay with you that it’s like this.”

“Yeah.”

“If it wasn’t okay, it wouldn’t be like that anymore, right?”

“Okay.”

“Right! So what are you really tolerating?”

“Tolerating myself being unhappy.”

Jeff seems to understand that Amanda has answered the $64,000 question, and says, “That’s really great. You’re actually tolerating being unhappy,” he summarizes.

Jeff doesn’t mean it’s great she’s tolerating being unhappy, but rather, it’s great that she sees this.

This conversation has been going on for what seems like a long time. It was obvious that, due to time constraints, we would have to skip two of the life domains (career and travel) that we had planned to discuss. Plus, I have two completely different topics remaining and there would be no time to flesh them out. I’m not upset about it because, at this point in the focus group, I feel I have gotten enough material to address the project’s major questions, but it seems, at this rate, we could go on forever, and I am a little nervous. I have tried my best to let the group dynamic take over the discussion, but I wonder if I went too far in that direction.
Reluctantly, I intervene: “I have to say this. I have to intervene. I apologize. I want to invite you to—”

“Continue this, right?” asks Jeff.

This is not what I want to hear, but I assert myself nevertheless: “Well, no, because we’ve only got about 20 minutes left.”

Amanda apologizes, “I’m sorry.”

“I know, I know. This is perfect,” says Jeff, “Yes. Game in action. That’s it.”

I feel bad for Amanda—it’s not her fault I did not manage the timeline well enough or that I want to address a couple of other topics, so I try to reassure her, “No, don’t be apologetic. Apology not accepted. Everything’s great. I just want to make sure we get to a couple more questions before we finish up.”

Jeff understands: “Yeah. That’s great. Well, here’s what I invite you to do, okay? Use the questions Patrick is going to ask. I don’t even know what they are. Use the questions he’s about to ask to just get complete whatever you’ve been tolerating. There’s nothing more than to get clear about what it is you are tolerating and then develop an intolerance for it.”

“Oh, okay,” she replies.

“Okay?” he asks.

This is a surprising thing for Jeff to say, and in the moment I don’t see how Amanda could get her issue resolved through my remaining questions, so I say, “And if you can get that out of what I’m asking, then that will be incredible!”

“Hey, know what?” Jeff asks. “It could happen.”
Melanie joins in, “She really probably doesn’t need much more than that anyway.”

“Yeah, I think so,” I add.

Jeff asks permission to say one more thing: “Oh, can I add just one thing?”

“Go,” I say.

“So when Melanie asked you about integrity, and you keep your word, right? I’m going to give you this as a tool, because you know yourself as someone who has a high level of integrity and you keep your word, right? All right. So, I’m going to give you this as a tool.”

Amanda says, “Right.”

“Because you know yourself as someone who has a high level of integrity and you keep your word most of the time, right? Great. So I’m going to invite you to do something.”

“Okay.”

“To give your word to being happy.”

“Okay.”

“You got that?”

“Yes.”

“And then when you’re not, you are breaking your word.”

“Okay.”

“And now it’s an integrity issue.”

“Damn! That’s great.”

“Okay?”
“Yes.”

I interject: “And you’re someone who keeps their word, right?”

“Yes.”

Jeff finishes up: "That’s right. And whatever he’s going to ask, I don’t know what that is, we’ll use it for that, okay?” and the group laughs, perhaps with a little relief that the conversation has reached completion.

This has been a sustained conversation with only brief interruptions for nearly three hours, perhaps too long for a focus group. Furthermore, Melanie had been subtly yawning for a while—she had entertained about thirty people the evening before. For his part, Jeff had thrown down two huge mugs of coffee, and was both wired and fatigued from a late night. That they both showed up and participated fully was a much-appreciated indication of their integrity and their commitment to support me in my project.
CHAPTER NINE
HAVING A REAL CONVERSATION: FOCUS GROUP OBSERVATION
INTERVIEW

This case study examines the communication of long-term Landmark Education participants in order to determine if their communication resembles that described by Maslow (1977) in Politics 3 and to test my notion that there is a significant divergence between the public conversations examined in Part One and the lived experience of Landmark participants. The previous chapter provides raw material for analysis (i.e., lived experience of Landmark versus public conversations about Landmark) and attempts to offer readers unfamiliar with Landmark’s work a window into the kind of conversations participants have. In this chapter, I present the results of an interview with someone who observed the videotape of the focus group.

Given my “full member” status in Landmark Education, it appeared important to engage an observer unfamiliar with Landmark to provide a different perspective from my own. How would such an observer regard the communication of focus group participants? This chapter addresses this question by presenting a conversation with a colleague who viewed the focus group videotape with me. As a Ph.D. in Sociology and having a Master’s degree in Marital and Family Therapy, my colleague seemed a good choice.
In the first part of this chapter, I present excerpts from the interview (organized thematically) and include the following points of discussion: (1) how the focus group’s conversation compares to that of the general population; (2) how Landmark Education’s training resembles that undertaken by mental health therapists; (3) characteristics of the group’s communication; (4) inconsistencies and/or contradictions in their communication; (5) the surprising impact the training appears to have on participants; (6) the revolutionary quality of the group’s communication; and (7) observations of issues not discussed in the focus group observation interview. In the second part of the chapter, I directly respond to the question: To what extent does the focus group display communication qualities Maslow ascribes to Politics 3?

The Interview

I sit down in the home of my former supervisor, Dr. Chloe Walker. Two weeks earlier, we sat together to watch the entire videotape of the three-hour focus group. She was feeling under the weather at the time, but, despite her discomfort, she kept her commitment to me, and watched the entire tape. Given the length of the tape, her feeling ill, and the need to discuss the tape, we agreed to meet at another time to discuss her observations of the focus group.

I first established Chloe’s level of familiarity with Landmark Education (“What knowledge, if any, did you have about Landmark Education?” “None”). Then, in similar fashion to the opening of the focus group, I asked her a very broad question, designed to allow her to express her observations without prejudice on my part: “What would you like to share about the focus group?”
What follows are thematic narrative accounts based on our conversation. These accounts occupy the overwhelming duration of interview time and are also those conversations in which Chloe provided the bulk of the material.

Chloe was impressed by numerous features of the group’s communication. She regarded their conversation as meaningful, thought the conversation’s implications were provocative, made an interesting comment on the nature of therapy, and she observed that the participants displayed healthy communication styles. She also talked about things she considered to be inconsistent with the goals of Politics 3. Despite these inconsistencies, however, she believed that the communication was revolutionary, and ultimately confirmed my hypothesis that the communication of these long-term large group awareness training participants is consonant with the major values of Politics 3.

Meaningful Conversation

Chloe begins with some general observations: “One of the most striking things about watching the tape, was the,” she begins to laugh, “…communication…”

I laugh with her, since I am studying communication and that is what was most striking to her about the focus group.

What was striking to her, she says, “was the level at which the participants could communicate with each other. It’s very unusual to experience or observe people having real conversation. They were talking about meaty, important issues. It was very striking that they didn’t talk at a surface level. They got into it. They talked about their own issues, thoughts, and history, and so on, in a really,
it seems like a *meaningful* way. And then the exchange between them I thought was also very meaningful. People occasionally challenged and questioned and prodded. It’s difficult, outside of the therapy room. And as a therapist, it’s the kind of conversation I would expect therapists to have with each other, or to witness in the context of therapy, of some sort of counseling, like a group therapy sharing.”

Without taking for granted that I know what she means by “the kind of conversation therapists would have,” I say, “Yeah, I can see that, and for the purposes of clarification, what does that mean to you?”

“That we finally get beneath the pleasantries, of ‘How are you doing?’ Or talking about work, those problems. The subject matter. Which is what you are doing, but I could imagine very easily, for example, if you ask that very same question of different people, people who have not been through the Landmark Forum would have struggled more to—not necessarily because they didn’t want to, obviously, or maybe they would not have wanted to—but I think not many people would have been as open to have a conversation, as open as these folks were, to have that kind of conversation.

“So people in the general population would have struggled more, you would have to work harder, as the director of the focus group. You would have had to work harder to draw them out. And, in this case, the participants were, had clearly thought about, talked about all of these meaty issues and they are very comfortable. So, it was unique. Some of those questions would be things that people may have thought of, but they never talked about, or they rarely did, and they certainly don’t want to discuss with a bunch of…”
Unintentionally violating my principle not to interrupt, I anticipate what she is about to say and join in, “Yes, there is some familiarity between them, but they’re not even ‘friends’ or ‘close friends.’”

Chloe continues, “But they are not friends, right. And it was not therapy so, that’s what I was going to say—the ability to talk about personal, I would say, yes, personal issues. Your first focus group question—there is a level of importance here when they talk about family and experience and family of origin issues and then at the end got into it with the woman and her husband,” referring to Amanda and the discussion about her marriage (see “Pursuing Dreams: Distinguishing Rackets and Commitments,” above).

She goes on to say, “They listen pretty well. They listen in a way the general population does not listen, referring to not just hearing the words, but reading the subtext. They hear the words that are being said, but they hear also what’s not being said, what’s implied, what’s so, people asking about feelings. Inside that, I heard a couple of times where her recognition of the difference between an intellectual thinking about things, versus the feelings. That’s the kind of thing a therapist would help people to do.

“This is not criticism, but it occurs to me this may sound like a criticism, and it’s not. Because it’s a good thing. I didn’t feel like they were practicing therapy without a license or something. I think it’s a good thing that people can have that level of meaningful conversation, that’s definitely amazing. I don’t know if that’s what I called it before, but I think it’s meaningful conversation.”
Thus, in this conversation, Chloe concurred with my perception that the communication of these participants is substantive, and they did not have the usual superficial conversations found in everyday life. Despite the varying levels of familiarity between the participants, this is a significant finding.

*Training People to be Their Own Therapists*

Given Chloe’s marital and family therapy experience, her mention of therapy in the context of the focus group conversation was not unexpected. I thought she would provide a (at least somewhat) different perspective from mine, so I pursue this theme further. I recall a number of things I had read and conversations I had with others who criticize what Landmark does because it resembles therapy (see Chapter Five). Why this would be a problem is open to speculation. Nevertheless, discussing this theme results in a rather unexpected conclusion.

“I guess there are two things on the therapy issue,” I say. “One is the, and you were very careful in your wording, you’re saying that it resembles therapeutic sessions, but you weren’t being critical of that, and a lot of people would be, and have been, like ‘Oh, that sounds like therapy,’ or whatever, like there’s something wrong with that.”

“Right,” she confirms.

“And would you respond to this statement—that one of the goals of therapy is to help people be comfortable with themselves, express themselves freely—”

“Mm-hmm,” she replies affirmatively.
“So that they can function in life without the need for therapy,” I continue.

“Yes.”

“Would you say that?” I ask again to confirm my understanding, and to get Chloe to say more.

“Yes, definitely. Yes. You’re not supposed to be in business to keep yourself in business. Just establish and have the same people keep on coming. They are supposed to go off and do their life.”

“Right. So would you then say, or did I hear you say, that what you saw in the focus group resembles the kind of result that you would be looking for, at least in the realm of communication for people?”

“Oh, yes, definitely. Oh, most definitely. Except that really I would be surprised to see it.”

What she said throws me off a little, and I’m not sure I heard her correctly, so I ask her to repeat what she said, saying, “I’m sorry?”

“But I would be surprised to see it as a result.”

That’s what I thought she said. The implications appear to call into question the efficacy of conventional client-centered therapeutic approaches.

“You would be.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Because therapy is not as comprehensive?” What I meant by this, I’m not certain, but at least Chloe is there to say what’s on her mind.

Chloe answers: “In many cases, I think the training that therapists receive probably would make therapists do that. Not that people can’t extrapolate, but I
think one of those things is how you can deal with something in the room this
time that may not translate so well outside of that setting. So, in other words, it’s
less tools and more situation-focused. Now people could sort of pull back and
say, ‘Okay, well, what did we do here?’ but that takes a kind of a skill, the ability
to do that and want to do that.

“I don’t know, I mean that’s an interesting question and I don’t even know,
as a therapist, am I consciously thinking that I’m trying to impart skills? I guess in
a type of therapy, certainly not in a more psychoanalytic version, I would say this
is not the case. There would be introspection, but in terms of the tools, I think
that’s a stretch. Now, with some solutions-focused approaches—some ways I
actually really thought was fun to do—would be showing people how to have
conversations. That is skill. That is what I saw in the focus group.”

“Mm-hmm,” I affirm.

“So I think with that, it’s, to me, easier for a person to say, ‘Okay, you
know, that’s how we ask this kind of question, that’s how we move a
conversation and take that away.’ That’s provocative. I haven’t thought about
that. That’s a very provocative idea. I will even think about that some more. See
that’s one reason why it was striking to me, because it really sounds more like I
wouldn’t know the things I know because I went to therapy. I know them because
I was trained as a therapist.”

“Right.”

“Very different,” Chloe stresses.

“Right. Yeah. I see what you mean.”
“Yeah, and because it’s interesting, I never thought it through that way, but I know a lot of times when I think of people who I think could use some of that training, I often don’t think they should go to therapy, I often think they should get trained as a therapist.”

“Mm-hmm,” and now I laugh a little: What if the entire therapeutic enterprise is now being turned on its head?

“Not because I think they should practice therapy, but because I think they would be learning good skills.”

What Does “Healthy Communication” Look Like?

In addition to observing that the communication of the focus group was healthy, Chloe made a number of other observations about specific characteristics of the focus group’s communication that congealed into two major themes through our conversation: (1) that the participants exhibited awareness, openness, and self-reflexiveness in the conversation, and (2) they had integrated the notions of choice, options, and responsibility for their lives.

Openness, Self-Reflexivity, and Awareness

“The participants had apparently discussed how they got to be how they are, you know, their story and their history, and understanding how that shapes, in fact, how they communicate. If I remember Melanie saying this, and she’s the one with the good example. There were a few of those, actually. She was the one who told about her father, right?”

“Yes, he didn’t go to her wedding,” I add.

“Right” Chloe says.
“It was like a ten-year grudge.”

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As stated in Chapter Eight, during the first part of the focus group, the participants shared about family issues. Melanie wasn’t sure how to begin, but after a little prompting, told the following story.

“You know, it’s hard to even remember what the ‘before’ was like,” speaking about her pre-Landmark Forum existence. “And I have a sense of what it was like, and I never ever want to go there again. I mean, because—I’ll be married 25 years now—around the ten-year mark is when there was ‘surviving the relationship’ and one another. We knew that that’s what had been going on. But we didn’t know that until someone pointed it out to us, someone who we obviously respected. And her name was Melanie as well. And you know, thank goodness, we could hear what she had to say to us. Because otherwise, we had our kids by that point in time (at the ten-year mark), and it wasn’t going very good. It was like I had bought into the picture of ‘you get married, you have your babies, and life should be pretty good.’”

Raymond piped up, adding, “Then you survive it,” cracking up the entire group. “Surviving,” in Landmark parlance, is the most ordinary way to live one’s life, constrained by the past, devoid of possibility, and driven primarily by concerns of “looking good” and avoiding “looking bad.”

Melanie continued: “It was like, well, surviving is not so much fun, I’m not really into this, and so then I was questioning—there’s got to be something else. And I didn’t know if that meant staying in the relationship or not. And then I did
some counseling and then out of the counseling, the counselor said, ‘Go do this thing called the Landmark Forum.’ So she said, ‘What I can guarantee you is, life will continue to happen to you.’ I said, ‘Really, now!’ and she said, ‘You know you’ve got some issues to deal with about your dad,’ and she said there will be some other things, too.

“And so I did the Landmark Forum and it was miraculous. I mean, that’s the word I use. And I don’t think I ever shared in the Landmark Forum, but as Jeff shared [earlier in the focus group], I listened, and was watching the interactions between the Landmark Forum leader and other people. And my big thing that I went in to deal with was my dad. And what my counselor had said is, ‘if you’re not complete with your relationship with your parents you have not a chance in’—can I cuss?”

I give Melanie permission to “cuss.”

“Have not a chance in hell.”

“That was cussing?” Jeff jokes.

“That’s some kind of a swear word (but there is another word for that)—but ‘you don’t have a chance in hell to really have a successful relationship with your spouse if you’re not complete with your parents,’” Melanie said, quoting her counselor.

“Mm-hmm,” I say.

“And she was specifically talking about my dad, and then I said I didn’t want to believe that, and so I did the Landmark Forum. And for ten years I had this thing with my dad because he didn’t come to my wedding. And so there I just
said, ‘I have kids and this is their only grandfather, so I’ve got to do something,’ because I wasn’t telling the truth about myself. I wasn’t happy with how the relationship was going.

“And then I could also see how that correlates to my relationship with Robert [her husband], which wasn’t good at the time. And there wasn’t enough alcohol to numb all that out, either. I tried that, that didn’t work very good. So that was 14 years ago, and then I just started to go to work out of what I heard in the Landmark Forum, and really putting myself out there because when things don’t go well, you walk away most of the time from those relationships because you figured out you don’t know what the hell to do, so you just might as well leave in one way or another.

“And so I made up with my dad, apologized for being a jerk—like Jeff said in his relationship with his folks—and out of completing that, then things started to get better with my relationship with Robert. And we started to actually create a partnership in our relationship. And so we could see what we needed to do inside of parenting with our kids. And so I have engaged in this education for almost 14 years now and wouldn’t have it any other way. Because I don’t know the answers, and I’m always going to have stuff I have to deal with, either with my relationship with Robert, you know, kids grow, and they are out, and we have more stuff we are doing.”

“So you apologized to your dad for being a jerk, right?” I ask.

“Yes, yes.”

“So what happened before that that had you—“
“Have him be a jerk?”

“Yeah, or had you apologize. So you saw something about yourself.”

“When you have your ‘position’ or you just do what you do in life, right? And I was 21, thinking I knew everything, and was basically going to tell them what I was going to be doing, whether they liked it or not, and they didn’t like it much. And then for ten years—and then when it was time to get married, he didn’t come to the wedding because he didn’t agree with the way we were doing things, and that was his way to let us know that.

“And then, that gave me all the evidence, all the justification that I needed to have him be a jerk. You know, kind of write him off and not be willing to put myself back out there.”

Melanie here is using the word “evidence” in an ironic way, consistent with lessons learned from Landmark courses. That is, when we take a position that someone is “wrong,” for example, we look for things that support that point of view ex post facto. What we call “evidence” is manufactured through the interpretive filter we use to make others wrong, which in turn justifies our initial position, judgment, or assessment.

Melanie continues: “And, when you get to actually see that you’re the one suffering, like I thought I was making him pay, right? Don’t we all do that? We think we’re making someone else pay, and then that’s when we can actually see that we are the ones who pay. And that’s what happens in the Landmark Forum: You actually get to see what your actions actually have happen or don’t happen. And you’re the one who actually is paying for it, dearly. And you actually get
present to that, unless you run it that way continuously. But I think most people, once they see that that’s what they’ve done, want to transform the situation.”

“So you got present to what it was costing you?”

“Yes.”

“And what was that?”

“Well, lack of love in my relationship with Robert, and also I could see it happening with the kids. You know, because of what happened with him, I, of course, reserved a part of myself not to give to people.”

Melanie has begun to cry a little, and I begin to observe this: “I can tell, you’re …”

“I just—and all what I wanted was to be able to give that to people, but would pretend to for fear of repercussions happening… And the story goes on, right?” she says, as she laughs a little through her tears.

***

Such stories as Melanie’s left a marked impression on Chloe: “It is striking that I wonder, what are they doing in these trainings?!? That it’s clear that the trainings help people get a handle on their past. The impact that this training has had on them is that they are able to look at their own lives without navel-gazing.

“The other piece of the training I see is that they come down to this issue of choice, having options, and so there is utility in having understood that, so, ‘Okay, now I can make new choices and now I can interact with my dad in a different way. I understand why, how we got here, why we got here, and now I’m
going to write a new story and I’m going to have the new childhood, the
childhood that I always wanted, or at least some kind of version.’

“That seems to me very powerful. And that’s a powerful skill. And it seems
to me that all of the participants got that from this training. Very clearly. And just
like in everything in life, maybe they can do it at times better than at others and
that they can do it in some situations better than others. Amanda maybe was
having trouble working the program, so to speak, with this issue, but at least she
had a perspective and she had some tools to use that with some coaching she
could use.”

“And I guess maybe from me what I’d throw in is the openness…”

“Yes.”

“…to exploring, which that for me is a characteristic that is not typical—”

“Mm-hmm.”

“—of everyday average people.”

“Yes.”

“That you can tread, you can go too far with a lot of people where they will
just push you away if you try to get them to be more intimate.”

“Oh, yes. Far before this.”

“Yes,” I say, laughing in agreement.

“Way out there…That’s part of what I was referring to earlier when I was
talking about what’s different about this group. Yes, the willingness, yeah, that’s
nicely said, yes, the willingness to be open, they are very open, unusually so.”

“Okay, great!”
“And this occurs to me, so I’m going to say it. How much of you as the writer will be in the dissertation? It did occur to me that watching the tape it explains your communication better to me, because you are many of those things. You are much more communicative and open and self-reflective and aware.”

“Thank you,” I say softly, touched by the acknowledgement.

“And wanting to try all those things that were really serving you very poorly in that situation we talked about!” she says, referring to a difficulty I had with a co-worker for which I sought Chloe’s counsel.

“Right—yes!”

“But would generally really serve you very well! And I thought, ‘Oh, so maybe this is where you got much of this from… Cool!’”

“Thank you for that. Yes, I would say that while I had these leanings before, the training I’ve gotten has made me more effective at being myself and communicating. Being tactful, I think, more so, and more sensitive and compassionate.”

“Well, I should definitely say this now, I may have said it the night [we viewed the videotape] but I should underscore that, it’s so basic—communication—it’s so basic, we all suck at it so often.”

I laugh heartily, knowing how true this is.

*In the Realm of Possibility: Choice, Options, and Responsibility*

Another observation Chloe made about the focus group’s communication is that the participants distinctly saw that they were not “stuck” with their suffering
or lack of closeness to others. They had options and choices, and recognized
that it is their responsibility to exercise those choices.

“When we viewed the tape, and you also mentioned it again—I want to
flesh this out a little bit—but an emerging theme in the focus group is choice and
options on one hand versus feeling stuck with no options on the other.”

“Yes, yes.”

“I was wondering if you could elaborate on that theme and how you saw it
play out or what you thought about it.”

“I had written here with an asterisk,” referring to her notes, “I can’t
remember now what sort of made it jump out to me, but I thought like the training
had done both of those things, got people aware, giving them tools, but what I
guess is part and parcel of having the tools, was the really clear message, it
seemed to me that it would have been a stated one, that you have a choice, and
so now you can use these tools, and decide what you want to do now, so what
do you want to do with them? For Melanie, you don’t have to have the same
relationship with your father that you did. And that’s a good example. She has a
choice to change the relationship completely, using the tools. And then Raymond
talked about the son, right, with a son who was underachieving—”

“Dropping out of high school,” I supply.

“Right. Right, right.”

“He was almost 18.”
During the focus group, Raymond told a story about his son dropping out of high school just before his eighteenth birthday: “So at the time my wife and I did the Forum, our son was finishing up his senior year in high school and he was dropping out of school. He wasn’t coming home anymore. And so I was upset with it and my wife was REALLY upset with it. It just was not the way it was supposed to go in our family, you know? And we both, out of the Landmark Forum, got okay with that, and realized that even if he didn’t know it, he was committed to being an independent adult.

“So we began to honor him that way, which sometimes he didn’t like, especially when we kicked him out of the house for not paying his room and board. But we kept honoring him as an independent adult, and kept treating him as an adult, with no loss of affection or no upset, and it worked out, man. He’s been a fully independent adult for the last ten years. There’s no loss of affection or affinity whatsoever.”

I was curious as to how parents could transform what I would consider the typical dramatic response to such a situation: “How did that happen?” I ask, “Because it seems like one of those experiences like parents would say, ‘Oh my God, my kid’s going to drop out of high school. Their future is over. I failed as a parent.’ Whatever that conversation was like. How did you go from…” I stopped myself, realizing I was about to characterize him and his wife’s attitude through my mind-reading, so I shifted to asking him instead: “Where were you around that to this acceptance? What was that process like?”
“Well, a part of it was, like in the Landmark Forum, you get present to what is happening right then and what’s so, free of the past, and we realized what we could and couldn’t do, and it’s a typical thing—a parent’s jumping up and down, making stress and everything. It wasn’t going to work.”

At this, the focus group laughs heartily. “In a couple of months, he was going to be 18 and that was it, you know, ‘You’re an adult, you can do whatever you want.’ And traditional threats and bribes just weren’t going to work, and so we distinguished what he was really up to and that’s how it worked out.”

“Was it out of, ‘I could react this way, but that’s a dead end, so I’m going to do something different?’”

“Yes,” Raymond answers. “Once again, it was a clear choice. It wasn’t there before the Landmark Forum. That choice didn’t exist.”

“So it actually didn’t even occur to you that you could be okay with it, right?”

“Not even remotely. Not even remotely. It was like this big upset that we had no idea how to handle. No idea at all.”

Melanie asked Raymond more about it: “Did the thought ever occur like, how on Earth did it happen this way?”

“Well, my wife usually goes there—real, real quick—about what we did wrong and all this other stuff. Yeah, yeah, yeah,” says Raymond, “but there is just no power in that unless you’ve got four more kids waiting in the wings, you know, to practice on.”
Then Melanie asked him, “But you don’t know at that moment. I mean, at first I think, that’s a pretty typical conversation, that people ask, ‘how did that happen?’ You know, here we are, decent human beings, go to work, we’re not doing this, at least we’re looking from a level here, and not necessarily looking down here, you know, because this is where there is something to probably go to work on. Had you done any work at all prior to Landmark?”

“No, but one of the things I had distinguished prior to Landmark was that, you know, here I am, I get married, married for a few years, have a kid, the first born’s a son, so being a young guy I think, ‘Oh geez, he’s going to be just like me.’ Well, it was soon pretty obvious in his first three years of life that he wasn’t going to be like me, that he was his own person. He was different than me.”

The group laughs at Raymond’s startling “revelation.”

“And I distinguished that pretty quick, you know. He’s his own person. He came out with his own personality traits and everything and that’s the way it was going to be. So he found his own way.

“So how’s your relationship with him now?” I ask.

“Great. He lives five minutes from the house. We hug each other and see each other, no problems.”

“It sounds like something that in ordinary circumstances would be potentially separating” I add.

“It would have been one of those stories where people stand up and they say, ‘I haven’t talk to my brother, I haven’t talked to my son, I haven’t talked to
my mother in ten years.’ It would have been one of those. That would have been
the almost certain predictable future.”

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Chloe continues her observation: “I can’t remember the details, but I think
he mentioned something, whereas before it might have freaked him out, but they
had a choice now how to respond to it. He had to handle a real one that could
yank your chain…”

“Oh, God, that would have been everybody!”

“You know? That’s it!” meaning that this would be a crisis in many
families—the limit.

“Yeah,” I say in agreement.

“It’s a big deal, right?” asks Chloe. “Actually, all of them, I guess, Jeff,
what did Jeff tell us about? I remember he shared something like this. I can’t
remember what.”

“Yeah, he had the ‘20-minute rule’ with regard to his family.”

***

In the focus group, Jeff shares about the relationship with his family before
and after the Landmark Forum: “So, before the Landmark Forum, I had what
was, what I lovingly called—at that time, lovingly called—the 20-minute rule. And
that meant that no family members could live within 20 minutes of where I was.”

The group bursts into laughter.

“My parents, my sister-in-law, it was, they had to live 20, they could live in
the same city, but it had to be 20 minutes away, right? So that was in 1998.”
“Was this an explicit rule, like you said to yourself…”

“Oh, I said it, I said it out loud—everyone knew.”

“Everyone knew that was the rule.”

“Yeah, that was my rule.”

“Okay.”

“Live in the same city, but you are going to have to be 20 minutes away. That’s the game. And kind of funny, isn’t it?”

Amanda said, “It is, yeah.”

The group laughs again.

Jeff continues, “So funny. That was then. So, needless to say, when I did the Landmark Forum, I wasn’t married.” This generates another burst of laughter.

“No one wanted to live in separate houses,” I explain.

“I was alone, yeah. So, anyway. I was living in St. Petersburg and I moved to Sarasota, with my wife now, Emily, and I was there for about, oh, I don’t know—not even a month, and I called my parents and I said, ‘You guys have got to come to Sarasota. I don’t know what you need to do, just sell your house and come on.’ So they did. And now we live about three quarters of a mile away from each other. And my wife’s in-laws are about two miles from us. That whole 20-minute thing is gone.

“But the thing that I noticed about family is that I had a life that looks like this,” putting his hands palms out in front of his body in a “stay away” gesture. “Don’t get too close. Come in and we’ll wave at each other from across the way, but don’t get too close.’ But that was how I was with my family. And, you know, it
was Friday morning, I’m in the Landmark Forum, I’m on a phone call with my mom, apologizing for being, just for being a jerk, you know, it really wasn’t anything other than that.

“And I’ll never forget, she first said, ‘Where are you?’” sending the group into a round of knowing laughter.

“And then she said, ‘Stay there,’” which cracks up the group even more.

(When people get phone calls from Landmark Forum participants, they sense something is different. For Jeff, anyway, at least it wasn’t, “Oh, my God! My son has joined a cult!”)

“But now they are a mile away. They come over and they see the baby and they are there and they see the baby all the time, and my—"

Before Jeff went off on another subject, I interrupt, asking, “If I may, what happened between the time of your 20-minute rule and now they live three quarters of a mile away?”

“Well, I had a relationship to just letting my parents know or people know just enough so that they would know I was okay. And what I noticed was that they weren’t interested in that. They actually wanted to know what was going on in my life, because it was all from love. That was their way of expressing love. It was like, ‘All right, but what’s happened? We want to know,’ just like you said,” referring to my instructions at the beginning of the focus group, “the good, the bad, and the ugly. And then I just realized it was like I was withholding that from them by not letting them know what was happening in my life. Our relationship was created as an open book.”
At that point in my research, I was trying to nail down the nature of the shift that people experience out of their Landmark participation, so I probe: “What do you think got you to see that, that you were being withholding? How did that happen?”

“It was something in the Landmark Forum,” Jeff answered. “There was something, there was this moment of somebody was having a conversation with the Landmark Forum Leader and it was something in their relationship, and whatever they said about the distance that was there, I saw this all of a sudden. It was like, ‘Oh my God, that’s my life. And that’s my relationship with my parents, with my dad and my mom, and my sister-in-law,’ and it just went on and on and on.”

“So you identified with what that person was sharing in the Landmark Forum?”

“Yeah, I looked at what they were looking at in their life and it was like—there was my life.”

“So you identified with that experience and then somehow something happened at that point that got you to—“

“Yeah, well, the only thing that had the 20-minute rule in place was me. So it was like, well, that’s pretty silly.”

“What made you decide it was silly or what made you change?”

“Because my conversation with my parents was, ‘Hi, how are you? How’s the weather? I love you. Have a good day.’ And it was always ‘I love you,’ right? It was okay, it was good. We lived in the same city. We saw each other on a
semi-regular basis, but what wasn’t there was they didn’t know what was going on in my life, and I didn’t really know what was going on in theirs. And I wanted them to know that they had done a great job.”

“Mmm,” I say.

“And so I’m still letting them know that.”

Melanie joins in, “Because that’s a huge conversation in the Landmark Forum.”

“It is,” says Jeff.

“It’s that parents relationship,” Melanie adds.

“Absolutely,” replies Jeff.

Melanie goes on to say, “And just recently I was going through some ‘distinction work,’ and I was so present to that conversation in the Landmark Forum about your parents. And that you actually get the opportunity in that conversation—whether or not you are engaging in it personally with the Landmark Forum leader—of what’s possible in that relationship.”

“Yes,” agrees Jeff.

I’m still trying to get at how the shift for Jeff occurred. “Can you describe that? Like you saw something possible in your family’s relationship that you didn’t see before? Or that you didn’t want it before and now you want it, or…”

“Yeah. There was being able to share everything with my family, specifically with my parents, and even with my ex-wife and my son back then. What I recognized was possible was that I actually could have a conversation about anything with them and that there would be more love present. There
would be a relationship there. That’s what was possible, was being able to say anything and everything.”

“Did you not want that before?” I ask.

“Yeah, well I didn’t, because I had it like I wanted to know them, okay, but I don’t want to, if I don’t tell them this, then they won’t worry and if they worry they are going to call me because they are worried about me.”

Melanie asks, “Don’t you think we have it kind of backwards because we think that if we share only the good stuff—”

“Then people would leave us alone!” Jeff says, laughing.

“Yeah, they absolutely leave us alone, but it’s in sharing all of it. But this isn’t how we’ve been trained, though. I know for myself I didn’t think of sharing all of it. And I was scared to share it all for fear of they’ll think I’m a loser or whatever. But it’s in sharing all of it that people are actually getting all of you.”

“Yeah,” says Jeff.

“And then you get all of them and all that love at a level that you never knew was possible,” Melanie explains.

“Yeah,” Jeff says again.

“I mean, you didn’t know that it could go that way,” Melanie says.

“And there was a moment that I noticed that if I would meet someone, I’d be really intimate with them, and there would be this real connectedness, and that I wasn’t willing to give that to my parents. There was just me being able to share that with my parents, all there was, was this huge freedom. And now, I see them all the time.”
“They are great. You’re folks are great,” Melanie says, apparently having met Jeff’s parents before.

I still haven’t found what I was looking for, so I take another stab at it, “So, how did you move from the ’20-minute rule’ to where you are now? Was it that you didn’t want something before and then you decided you did want something, something different from what you had, or was it that you had a different priority, or you saw something possible from what other people were saying and said, ‘I want that for myself’?”

“Yeah, let’s see. Part of it was I wanted that for my relationship with my own son. I could see where I didn’t want him to be like I was at 35, and I was sitting in the Landmark Forum and I didn’t want my son to be 35 and he and I have that relationship. And I noticed one way to get in that world was to actually create that relationship with my own parents because I knew I didn’t want that with my own son. I was certainly sure that my parents didn’t want that with me.”

“Okay. So maybe a certain level of dissatisfaction, or…”

“It wasn’t dissatisfaction. It just, it was just not knowing. Like it just didn’t even occur to me. It wasn’t that I didn’t know it, it wasn’t that I was dissatisfied, it just didn’t occur like that.”

“Didn’t occur that that kind of relationship was possible?”

“It didn’t even occur that it was missing.”

“Right!” I say, both of us now laughing together.

Raymond identifies with Jeff’s situation: “Well, that’s exactly how it was for me, Jeff.”
“Yeah!”

“Exactly.”

“Yeah, it was like it didn’t even occur to me.”

“Just…like…that. You didn’t even know it was operating,” explains Raymond.

“Yeah, it would be like finding out there is a language called Spanish, and all of a sudden going ‘Wow!’ and there was a time that I didn’t know that there was that language, right? You know, it’s like it was there, but I did not know it.”

“How did it show up?” I ask. “That it was there all of a sudden?”

“Just through listening, listening to others, listening to the woman that was talking to the Landmark Forum Leader. It was just so just crystal clear. But it’s funny because it’s like a lot of people have that same experience.”

“No idea what’s operating,” Raymond says from experience.

“Yeah!” Jeff agrees.

“No idea how to distinguish it. No idea knowing that you have a choice in the matter.”

“That’s right. Yeah. And there’s one other thing I want to say about family. I was in the Landmark Forum and I was very clear that I was able to date the same woman over and over and over and over again. It was crystal clear that I had figured out how to do that. Not knowing that I knew how to do that, but it was just who I kept dating over and over again.

“And I was reviewing the Landmark Forum a few years ago. And the Landmark Forum Leader said, ‘Want to handle relationships right now?’ It was
like, ‘Yeah, yeah, let’s handle this, right? That would be really great.’ ‘All right, let’s handle this in a couple of minutes,’ and he said, ‘Look in your life: Who do you want to play with?’ And it was, he said, like two little kids that play at the park and you just can go up and you can play with anybody and they’ll be your best friend. And he said you can have a relationship with anyone. He said you just figure out who you want to play with.

“And I used to have this criteria: They have to look a certain way, you know, there was all this stuff. And sex was going to have to be a certain way, they’d have to be a certain way, their job would have to be—it really was a checklist. And soon there was no checklist, just who I want to play with. I called my wife that day, and we actually sat down and we said, ‘Okay, we’re going to have a relationship—what would we want it to be for? How would it look? What would we want to create?’ And there was no checklist. It was something that we created. It was ridiculous. And it’s not a question of whether or not that relationship ends. And any other relationship I was ever in, that was part of the checklist, was how long am I staying or how long is this. There is another thing about family, it’s like you know, my marriage was nothing that was predictable based on all of the other relationships I have been in. Which was actually a miracle,” Jeff says, laughing, “and it still is!”

“Because she got to know you,” Melanie says.

“That’s right, that’s right. Right.” And the group laughs some more.

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“Right. Yes, right,” Chloe continues. “I think all of those things had to do with choice, with the choice, which wasn’t clear to me, or maybe when we talked about Landmark, I had to put some things together. So it’s not clear to me that it said, you know, that this is your choice. I can’t remember that. I don’t remember anybody saying that. Maybe they did, but I mean as something that, for example, when you go, it is something you hear all the time.”

“Mm-hmm,” I reply.

“In the training.”

“Right.”

“Or is it just every day that you are now going to choose to do everything and choose? But the fact of it is clear to me, the fact that they see choice and they see options. But it’s up to them. It’s really important knowledge, which really spoke well of the training. I had the idea that they could impact, as one person, they could change the dynamic. If they came to the person in the system with a different framework, like Melanie approaches her father differently, it impacts the system. And that’s systems theory, you know, but they got it somehow, whether it was implied or spoken specifically. It’s about choice.”

*Pitfalls of Transformed Communication: Condescension and Blind Spots*

Given my full member status and favorable view of Landmark’s work, it was important to inquire into perceptions of contradiction or inconsistency to which I might otherwise be blind. One of the appealing outcomes of having someone without exposure to Landmark observe the videotape is in the discovery of unanticipated attitudes and observations.
While overwhelmingly positive about the communication in the focus group, one unexpected outcome of my discussion with Chloe dealt with two instances in the focus group discussion that, in response to my direct question, she characterized as a contradiction or inconsistency in the focus group. These instances relate to (1) a potential for condescension and intrusion (this is not news to Landmark detractors), and (2) a questioning of the efficacy of the training.

**Coaching, Condescension, and Intrusion**

As described above, near the end of the focus group, Jeff and Amanda discussed Amanda’s marital problems.

“Now towards the end, I’m very ambivalent about the Amanda conversation, and it was mainly Amanda and Jeff, I think. A part of me thinks he did sort of come off like a therapist or a guru or something, and sometimes I don’t like it. Didn’t like it. Something about that I didn’t like.”

“Because—let’s see if I have that in my notes.” She shuffles some pages of the videotape transcript. “On to the videotape,” she jokes,” and I laugh at her playfulness.

“He pushed her, I felt,” she continues. “If I remember correctly, he prodded her into getting into it in more detail, and really, this is now a couple of weeks go, I apologize, but it sticks in my mind, this thing.”

She then reads from the focus group transcript, “‘What are you tolerating?’ ‘Being unhappy.’ But there is something in Jeff’s interaction with Amanda that became condescending. And that’s the part I’m struggling with, that’s what I said
I didn’t like. That’s what I didn’t like. Now, in the earlier exchanges, people going back and forth, I didn’t have a problem with that. It didn’t, it seemed okay, seemed fair.

“But in this exchange it became, I felt like he put himself in the role of ‘I know something that you don’t. I get this in a way that you don’t.’ I’m very ambivalent here in my confusion about this or my ambivalence about this because interestingly, in a way, I guess, it worked. Because by the end of this, Amanda did appear to come to some new, it might be old, new/old news (because it’s likely that she knows many of these things because this is her life). But she did say, ‘Oh, I’ve been thinking about this, you know?’ So I guess that’s good, then. It was useful. But there is still something to me that I don’t like about Jeff.”

I definitely see what she is referring to, and had similar thoughts myself. Still, rather than assume I know what she’s talking about, I probe, “Like his tone?”

“Tone, yes.”

“Right, I got what you’re saying.”

“But the reason I’m belaboring this issue is because I’m trying to think about how this education then—I guess what I’m saying is that one could argue that this knowledge could be used to intimidate or harass people—someone who has not got it quite as well as you do, or doesn’t have it at all. And maybe had you only showed me a snippet or I had only seen the end of the tape, I might have come away with that impression. So what kind of a deal is that? But
because I didn’t see that in most of the tape, that’s why I am waxing and waning and going back and forth.”

In other words, her criticism is limited to that particular exchange and she does not think it characterizes the focus group discussion as a whole.

“Right,” I affirm.

“I think I should stop on that now,” says Chloe.

I have a sense that Chloe did not want to belabor this point, but I think this is a good topic to flesh out. I want to affirm her point of view while at the same time providing background and context.

“Okay. I can think of what happened that would have you arrive at that observation, and what I would say, I think, is that, by way of explanation, there are different levels of expertise in the training. Jeff is a Seminar Leader, and the Seminar Leaders, they are not paid, and then there are Forum Leaders, who are paid, and the level of training will make a difference in terms of a pitfall there, of appearing in the know or potentially superior. So—I can see that.”

My use of the word “superior” triggers Chloe to continue: “Oh, and another thing about what I saw, and when you said ‘superior,’ it reminded me, because I was having all these thoughts, after we met and I viewed the tape, and I don’t know enough about Landmark, but it seems as though this would not be the intention of what the folks who designed it intend for you to use it in this way, for lack of a better phrase, you know?”

While it would be appropriate to probe here and better understand what she is saying, I mistakenly go on to reply to what I thought I heard rather than
what she meant. At the time, I am collapsing “coaching at all” with “coaching a
certain way.” In that vein, I ill-advisedly respond: “Yeah, I’m not sure that’s the
case. I think that it kind of goes different ways. On the one hand, anyone, and
they call this process of what Jeff is engaging in as ‘coaching,’ that if you reach a
certain level of training, then you are in a position to coach, and Jeff has reached
that level.”

“Right,” responds Chloe.

I continue: “There is a boundary issue in terms of ‘Are you willing to be
coached?’ Like asking the question, which was not asked in this circumstance.
But among people who are long-term participants, it’s almost expected.”

“Oh, what you,” she replies.

“It’s almost expected that people call you on your shit, as it were, and
there are various ways to do that, and I think what I’m getting from you is that you
think that maybe there was some way of being that Jeff was in that conversation
that you would not endorse.”

“Mm-hmm. Yes…”

(At least I have not completely missed her point.)

I continue: “You know, if you are going to have a conversation like that, or
if you have a result that you are trying to achieve by helping her see something
she didn’t see, or it comes to some resolution or closure or action plan or
something, that you wouldn’t endorse the tone of what he did.”

“The tone, there was, this was a focus group, you drew them together for
a reason, it wasn’t that Amanda came to him for coaching.”
“Right.”

“There were other people there, and I intuit and from what I saw, I gather that these people would have some sense of confidentiality and so on. But, still it didn’t, it sounded a little like, okay, you know there are these other people, and ‘Let’s not turn it into let’s talk about Amanda’s shit’ shit—the Amanda’s shit shit.”

We both laugh at her scatological wordplay.

At this point, I begin to realize that Chloe’s observation had as much to do with the fact that Jeff was coaching as it did with the way he coached her.

“I was actually hoping that this kind of thing would happen,” I admit.

“Hmm,” she says in a surprised tone.

“In order to demonstrate through the narration of what happened in the group—”

“Aaah,” she says in a tone of recognition.

“—to try to capture what that communication is like,” I say, completing the thought.

“Oh! Well, fantastic!” Chloe exclaims.

“Mission accomplished!” I intone ironically, recalling the infamous banner’s words on board the USS Lincoln.

“Well that’s just, that’s just fantastic. Well, certainly, if it didn't happen, I wouldn’t be able to describe it. So, yes, exactly, true.”

“Right. Yes. If it had been, and because this is one of those things, where if it had been simply if each person shared their own story, there really wouldn’t have been much of a focus group in terms of a dynamic interaction between the
participants. And having been around this stuff for eight years, I fully anticipated that sort of thing to happen, with Jeff being a Seminar Leader and Melanie being a Self-Expression and Leadership Program Leader. So, and based on my observation that, regardless of how Jeff came off tone-wise, Amanda was still okay with it.” I say, referring to her openness to being prodded, in Chloe’s words.

“Yes,” Chloe agrees.

I continue to elaborate: “As far as the confidentiality thing goes, or ‘let’s not turn this into Amanda’s thing,’ the courses have these kinds of conversations.”

In case there is anything else that struck her in terms of any inconsistencies or contradictions, I ask her (in more point-blank fashion), “Did you see any contradictions in what was said by individuals or by the group to each other?”

“No, not generally. My one little section you know I’m going to come back to again is Jeff, and I did wonder if there was any inconsistency in that and maybe in that section of the coaching, whether there was inconsistency in that I don’t think he ever said to Amanda, ‘I’m going to coach you now.’”

“Right.”

“And so my thinking was, he sort of assumes this role which she goes along with, but is it honest to do that without saying it—”

This time, trying to make sure I understand, I ask, “Kind of like what I was saying before, like, ‘Are you open to coaching?’”

“Yes, yes.”
“Like explicitly broaching that subject.”

“Explicitly, yes. I did wonder about, I thought, ‘Now is that contradictory to the whole concept?’ I did wonder about that.”

“Yes, I definitely see what you are saying. I think, and what’s interesting, this is why it’s great to get your perspective, is that it never even occurred to me that that might not be appropriate in the course of the conversation—because partly knowing people, knowing the participants in the group to varying levels, but also just because it’s so standard that that kind of thing goes on. The distinction in the course that Melanie teaches is known as ‘ruthless compassion,’ and it’s like, you feel for people and you want the best for them.”

“Yes.”

“You see the greatness in them and all, like I think what Raymond said, but you don’t hold back your, mmm, that effort to bring out the best in them and help them out. Now, I think what you saw, it was funny, because Amanda said this thing about—I’m on page 45-46,” looking at the transcript, “she said the exception, the bottom of 45, she says, ‘an exception seems to be at this moment that this thing about being married, it’s not how it should go. But anyway you know this thing with the marriage, it’s the only thing that seems not to be working.’ And blah-blah-blah, whatever, and then I say, ‘Well anyone want to say anything? And Jeff said, ‘Well, yeah.’ You know, like he couldn’t wait to say something.’

“Yes, I remember that, he was chomping at the bit, yes.”
“And then he also said when they were asking, he was engaged in the conversation, I think either he asked Amanda or Melanie did, ‘are you always your word?’ and Amanda said, ‘Well, almost always,’ and Jeff said, ‘Well, try on that you are not.’”

“Right, right. I remember that. Oh, yes.”

“And this is really interesting because Melanie said—can you see the difference in approach?—with Jeff you could interpret that as condescending. He is not drawing her out, but saying ‘no,’” as in, ‘No you don’t always keep your word.’”

“Yes.”

“Like you’re wrong.”

“Yes.”

Now, it must be said that “making someone wrong” is regularly discussed in Landmark courses. It’s not wrong to make someone wrong, however, when we do, we lose out on love, affinity, self-expression, satisfaction, and vitality.

I continue to distinguish Jeff’s approach to Melanie’s: “Whereas Melanie said, ‘Well, what she said was, “I’m almost always my word.”’ So she took what Amanda said.”

“Right.”

“And said ‘Alright, so sometimes you are and sometimes you are not.’”

“Sometimes you are not. She said that.”
“Right. ‘So what do you do when you are not?’ And so she took the flow of what Amanda was saying without giving her the hand,” I say as I extend my hand, palm out, as in the phrase of rebuff, “talk to the hand.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Like Jeff kind of did.”

“Yes.”

“And that’s a—”

“It’s a style, probably.”

“It’s a style, yes, a tone, a technique. I mean, really, I have to say though from my own perspective, that I was a little flabbergasted that Amanda said she is almost always her word.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Because one of the things that people get out of doing the Landmark Forum is that we have NO integrity.”

“Right,” Chloe says, laughing, “Yes. Pretty shocking, right?”

“I mean, I say no integrity, but I mean so little compared to what we think we have, and you get to see that. You get to see all of your broken agreements, the promises, how you are not living true to your principles, ideals, and not being true to yourself, you’re not living life fully, whatever that is. So it was just a little shocking.”

Chloe and I share a good laugh over the integrity issue, and I continue.
“So that’s good that you pointed that out because I think that just in those three or four lines of transcription, you can see how you might approach things a little bit differently.”

“Yes. Yes.”

“The first time I did the Landmark Forum, I witnessed an interaction that I didn’t particularly like either, and yet it’s funny, because everyone will have a different perspective. Some people didn’t have any problem with the person who engaged with the leader. I was sensitive or thought maybe it shouldn’t have gone that way, but the funny thing is that the result gets achieved.”

“Right.”

“Now, is it an ‘end justifies the means’ thing? I think that Jeff, if he was here right now, he would be open to your coaching and he would say, ‘Yeah, I think you’re right. There was an edge to what I said that I’m not committed to. It’s not what I really want for myself.’ Just so you know. That would be predictable.”

“That’s interesting. Hmm. Hmm.”

Just to make sure there aren’t other inconsistencies or contradictions that struck her, I ask, “Any other, anything that strikes you as a contradiction or inconsistency?”

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1 The issue of ends and means would require a more detailed discussion. A question here would be: Does the means of getting in someone’s face in an “unkind” way justify the end of providing effective coaching? My short answer would be no. I would emphasize, however, that, especially in the Landmark Forum memory I recall above, the interpretation of the course leader’s behavior I describe as not liking was not a unanimous one. In addition, from the focus group example, I did not think Jeff was out of line with his coaching of Amanda, so the ends/means question does not arise for me. Perhaps the question is asked most appropriately by the two people involved in the exchange.
“No, I think that will do. I think I was, yes, it was striking that there wasn’t more,” she says, laughing. “You know? They really stuck with it. They are being direct the whole time. It would have been more obvious if people reverted to type of the normal, untrained kind of discourse.”

“Right, right, yeah.”

“That was not, I mean that would have been a noticeable contradiction for me, which I didn’t see.”

Upon further reflection, after our conversation, I concluded that, yes, indeed, this is a pitfall of transformation, and it’s not limited to Jeff or his fatigued, caffeine-induced coaching. It is something we are all prone to when we feel we know or see things (or think we know or see things) others don’t see. Are Landmark participants more susceptible to this kind of “know-it-all” attitude?

*Blind Spots*

At another point in the conversation, I want to ask Chloe about some comments she made when we initially viewed the videotape. At that time, she was a little puzzled that Amanda had the problems she did, and wondered how that could be the case, given her many years of Landmark training.

“You said when we viewed the videotape something to the effect that you were surprised that Amanda had not previously realized something.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“About her marital problems.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I was wondering if you could elaborate on that.”
“Oh. I think that I was mentioning this too when we began this conversation. Yes, maybe that is contrary. That’s what I’ll say now is, maybe that is contradictory, too. That given this self-awareness, she, this marriage is what—four, six, eight years?”

“Four years.”

“One of those,” she laughs. “The problems she described have been ongoing for four years, and she has learned from this training to be self-aware, she has at least these three people and I know they are not all friends, but I guess she doesn’t have a husband that has taken the training, or—”

This is somewhat amusing and ironic, so I say, “They did and he does, and they are in a seminar together.”

“Oh, okay, well, I don’t know, but something ain’t happening there!” she says with some mirth.

“Right.”

“But, okay, if she’s had this problem for four years, and she has the tools, she has the awareness, so the fact that they, that Jeff really gets into it with her, but it was said at the end for her portion of the discussion, ‘Oh, okay, here’s a new idea (whatever it was) of working this through kind of a thing.’ That’s not too vague, right?”

“No. Well, okay, there is the grudge that she’s been holding for four years—”

“Yes.”

“And Jeff said, ‘You know, you killed off the relationship four years ago—’”
“Right. Yes.”

“And you haven’t, you don’t realize that that’s what happened.”

“Right.”

“You didn’t want to talk about the finances in the way that you wanted to, so you’re making him wrong about it, and you killed off the relationship at that point.”

“Right, right. I had forgotten that. So part of me says, well, in four years, why didn’t she figure that out?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“The other part of me says, well, as per usual, that’s the whole sort of point. It’s hard for us to figure things out about ourselves. Several times, though, why didn’t she have this conversation with some other person? Maybe these are not her friends, but her husband, for example? Well, I didn’t know, but some friends or somebody and it would not have been the same problem for four years. It seems to me that it does beg the question then, because I saw that this is really a big thing for her, and so then, what good was having these tools?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“That’s really contradictory. I mean, what good is this training in her life if it’s not helping her to deal with this, change this big thing. And now, the flip side is, if she’s not applying it, do I know? If she didn’t apply it, then it’s not like a miracle that she took the course and it’s going to go away by itself…”

“Right,” I say, laughing.

“But I don’t know, but I sort of…”
“Yeah, I mean, I, I, I don’t know the answers to your questions,” my stammering self-reflexively illustrating the content of my answer (or lack thereof). “Hmm.” “I could follow up with Amanda about this, and it would probably be a good idea.” “Hmm. Mm-hmm.” “All I can say is that the course doesn’t fix people.” “Yes.” “It doesn’t change them once and for all, so that now, all of a sudden their lives are perfect, or they don’t have problems or they don’t have blind spots about themselves. And I think that that is an illustration of why it’s not brainwashing—” “Yes.” “Because people still have problems.” “Yes. We did talk last time, I think, you did talk about blind spots.” “We all have them, and it’s easy for everybody else to see someone’s blind spots.” “Yes.” “Not easy for us to see our own, and all I can tell you is, based on my experience, every time I’ve done the course, I’ve seen something like—‘Wow!’”—referring to having reviewed the Landmark Forum a few times. “Each time I’ve done it, I have seen things about my life and my relationships that I was blind to.” “Yes.”
“And it’s one of those things somebody else could tell you right to your face, ‘This is what you’re doing, this is what you are looking at, this is why you are suffering,’ and it won’t make any difference because people have to see it for themselves.”

“For themselves, yes, yes, yes. Okay.”

“But that’s a good question. I will ask her.”

“Yes, that’s what your question was about, where I see some kind of contradiction, I mean I’d just go back to it with her. Yes, I agree with that. I agree with what you said. I think that’s true, that really you do have blind spots and this is one and I think as you said in this statement that, this was an example showing how the training or coaching could help her see her blind spots, and she did sound like she did.”

“I guess, the question this raises, not maybe for this project, but what is it that has someone actually introduce, even ask the question or, say, describe the situation that would then lead to that conversation? So you could imagine—has she complained about her husband before? Most likely, because everybody does.”

“Yes,” says Chloe, laughing.

“And so, how was it that she came this far without ever addressing that issue?”

“Yes.”

“I think that’s a legitimate question.”

“Yes.”
“I think, and we don’t know whether she had addressed it or not, or addressed it ineffectively, or however it went. Obviously it was ineffective because it’s still going on.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“But if the person who’s suffering doesn’t broach the subject, it won’t get handled.”

“Right.”

“So what is it that has them actually bring it up? And all we can say, at least in this context, was she—we had a conversation about things that were important to people, and one of those things was her marriage, and she happened to say that wasn’t working out.”

“So this is just one of, flipping through pages of the transcript, I’m thinking, might be interesting to see, and maybe you know the answer I’m thinking about, maybe see how she brought it up in the context of the focus group.”

Amanda had begun this particular conversation speaking about her success in community projects, awards she had received for her service, and how she had recently doubled her income.

“And what’s she’s got going on now, other things she did in the past, like in that area, things were great—“

Chloe and I read the transcript at the same time: “An exception seems to be at this moment, this thing.”
I continue solo: “‘The exception is that,’ and so it was more kind of a dialectical process. When you start thinking about what’s great, the next instant you think about what’s not so great.” I laugh a little at this thought.

In this conversation, Chloe expressed puzzlement over how it is possible for someone with as much Landmark training as Amanda to be having such a major problem in her marriage and appear not to have benefited from her training in this particular area. At the same time, Chloe also acknowledged that it is more difficult for each of us to see our own “stuff” than it is to see it in others.

For me what is most germane about the “blind spots” discussion is that Amanda had a blind spot around an issue in her marriage and participants had a conversation with Amanda that helped her see this. This signifies two things. First, that Amanda still has problems and does not always employ Landmark’s methodology in areas that are important to her. What this means is that Landmark has not turned Amanda into a “robot” that never has problems or always applies Landmark distinctions. Second, in order to be in a position or have the opportunity to see one’s own blind spots, it is important to receive ongoing training and spend time with supportive people willing to call us on our “stuff.” Had this conversation took place among non-graduates, I do not think it would have had the same result, and that’s the news here: Landmark training gives people facility in having these conversations. This point cannot be stressed enough, particularly in light of Politics 3 communication. Thus, if blind spots and losses of power are fundamental conditions of being human, then finding or teaching ways to transform those conversations would impact the quality of life
for people. This impact has the potential to ripple beyond the immediate circumstances of the person experiencing the loss of power to impact the entire planet (see Epilogue).

What the Heck Is Going on in Those Trainings?

As discussed, Chloe was so struck by the unusual level of substance in the focus group, so I ask her if there is anything she is curious about.

“I want to know what the heck is going on in those trainings!” was her reply.

I laugh.

“I want to go.”

I am always excited when someone expresses interest in doing the Landmark Forum, but I had previously remained conspicuously silent on this issue. “Okay, great! Well, to avoid any conflict of interest or anything like that, I was going to hold off until we were done until we discussed that possibility…”

“Yes,” she replies.

I continue: “because I thought you might look at it and think, ‘Hmm,’ you know? Especially, with your background, even if for only that?”

“Yes.”

“That it would have some interest. That would be a whole other conversation.”

“Yes.”
“Because there is the training, and then there are the results people get,” meaning that there is a methodology to the training which is distinct from how it impacts participants.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Anything else? That you are curious about?”

“Well, yes, it’s along the same lines, but basically, it was so impressive, is it a cult in the sense that are they opening people’s brains or putting things in there, because it really was that impressive, that I think, ‘Really! What the heck are they doing over there?’”

It just so happens that I had included this issue in my instrument, so I had planned to ask it, but Chloe beat me to the punch. At the same time, my heart sank a little—after over eight years of exposure to Landmark Education (at the time of the interview), and having read several unflattering accounts, and having heard numerous people associate Landmark with the “C-word,” I sighed in my mind and moved forward in my detached, qualitative interview-minded way.

“What would make you say that? Use that word ‘cult?’” I ask.

“To demonstrate or to indicate how striking their level of communication is. This is not your average regular run-of-the-mill people…”

“Because ‘cult’ has certain…” I pause. Keeping in mind the guidelines for doing qualitative interviews, I stop myself, and rather than providing a definition, or an answer, I want to find out from her what she means: “Well, what do you mean by ‘cult’ when you say that? It’s one of these things that really depends on the definition.”
“When I hear ‘cult’ there is often this idea of brainwashing, which is negative, and so it’s odd to use it, but I use it because, in this case—not for any of the negativity, but because I see such a shift—not that I saw these people before, but such a difference in their communication that it brings to mind that kind of dramatic change in your brain, that’s why I say opening up their brains and putting something in, that’s why I say a ‘cult’.”

“Like more of an analogy?”

“Yes.”

“It’s analogous to the indoctrination process that people go through, the conversion process,” I offer as a way to try to understand her point.

“Yes, yes. That’s it,” she says, laughing.

So, in spite of myself, I stumble my way through the rest of the conversation.

“Well, I’ve got to say, I guess I need to draw you out a little bit more on that. Is there any, because I’ve looked at this issue, and gosh, it’s so hard to do a qualitative interview…. Well, what have I got here? I do know what you mean. This is like, well, gosh, how could people be so open and all that without having something like that kind of experience, like a brainwash, and for me, there’s training that allows people to have conversations like that. It’s just the training, you know?”

“Yes, and I know, but the reason I’m saying that is because the training has to be so impacting, so that’s where the analogy comes in, because you know, you could have read a little bit or gone to some other training, but it doesn’t...
get down deep and in the core and stay with people and their lives and to use it, *really use it*, it’s part of their life.² And so I know, and this is not a negative, this is just sort of an aside, mainly more in the sense of a general cult. Everything has its little lingo. They had all the lingo down, and of course you have to have a language, and that’s not a negative either, but it’s really about how they’ve digested this.”

“They use the word ‘technology’ that they use, the set of ‘distinctions’—“

“What does ‘technology’ mean again? The ability?”

“The tools that you can use, like guiding concepts.”

“The tools, yes, okay.”

I continue: “They use the word ‘distinction’ because there is something, like for Amanda, in both those instances, that was not distinct. She was in this kind of amorphous unhappiness, and then through the conversation she had come to be able to see how she’s being or distinguish how she was being in the moment that was having her get the results that she was getting.

“There are a lot of reasons why I think people get the impact they do, but I think by far one of the biggest ones is the concentrated amount of time that people spend in the course. So for the first course, the Landmark Forum, it’s Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from 9 a.m. until 11 or midnight. So, I think you probably agree that in no circumstance would you ever spend that long looking at

² One implication of Chloe’s comment is that it speaks to the complacency (to the point of neglect) we have in our culture around existential education: We tolerate an educational system that does not effectively address human relations training. This complacency, coupled with dire planetary circumstances (see Chapter Six), necessitates (in my view) the kind of training Maslow writes about and Landmark offers.
your life. Almost nonstop. There are breaks and you can go to the bathroom, and meal breaks and that sort of thing. I think that—they used to say, when they introduced the thing, three things, one is that you are in a group of people, a large group of people, and you can see yourself in others, so even if you never share anything in the course you see other people share and you go ‘Wow, that’s just like me.’

“There is the technology, and there is also the expertise of the leader to be able to listen and help people see things they didn’t see before. And then there’s course assignments. So it’s like, ‘Have a conversation with someone about what you learned today.’ Okay, call somebody up like Melanie did. She called her father out of the course. This is a typical thing, people who hadn’t spoken for years, you call them up and say, ‘Hey I was a jerk, I’m sorry, I want to be close to you, and are you up for that?’ That is a Landmark conversation—typical.”

“Right.”

“I think that is what a primary reason for the effect, the dramatic effect, is the concentrated amount of time, along with those other factors. Now, it does wear off…”

“Right.”

“…if you don’t continue to practice. Now, you could do the course and if you were one of those incredible individuals like—‘Oh, wow, okay, well, this is what I’m going to do all the time.’ Most people aren’t like that. So, for me I take a Landmark seminar just like I would exercise. It’s something I do because it’s
ongoing training, and the whole thing with the Maslow thing is like, you can’t just say, ‘Be honest once…’”

“And it covers you.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Inoculation.”

I laugh at the notion of being “inoculated” from the human condition.

“But it’s very fascinating you brought that up,” I continue, “because I had questions I was going to ask you if you thought that they appeared to be brainwashed.”

“Oh!” she says, laughing. “Hmm.”

Having spoken with her about it a little, I feel I can interject my own thoughts, “I know it all depends on the definition, so I’m going to provide a little one.”

“Yes.”

“Well, for me, brainwashing means to more or less replace the free will or autonomy of individuals with a doctrine that is not of their own choosing and therefore is not their free will and now they are robots, just repeating things that don’t really mean anything to them based on the repetition, conversion, and that sort of thing.

“So there is brainwashing, which is extreme, a lot of people don’t even believe that brainwashing is possible, but Robert Lifton, the term he uses is ‘thought reform,’ which is analogous to brainwashing, and thought reform is where people’s minds have been changed without their agreement. And he
describes in detail eight methods which he says are used to change people’s minds without their agreement.

“And I’ve looked at those and this is something I’ll write about and say, ‘Well is this present? Is that present?’ That sort of thing. And I’ll give you my take on it, but given those kinds of parameters of what you want to say brainwashing is, thought reform, that sort of thing, do these people seem to be brainwashed or victims of some undue influence of some authority?”

“Yeah, I did start to have a conversation like that with myself, Chloe says. “And when, the reason where the cult and the Forum came in for me, in thinking about it, was in the, I think your definition of the word ‘replacement.’”

“Like their autonomy?”

“Not their autonomy, I thought their previous way of communicating was replaced with something else, and that to me, and because from personal experience and professional experience, I know how difficult it is often for people to change, and that’s why I use the word ‘cult,’ because it’s so radical to be able to replace and change your way of being. I mean, that to me is huge.

“Now, this idea of lack of free will or being robotic is interesting in this context and unless they’re going to say they didn’t know what they were getting into so there is a little puppeteering, that you think you’re coming in for one thing and winding up with another, so I suppose that’s possible. I did think about it, though. Is there anything that is not of your choosing? Is there anything robotic about it?
“And what made me start thinking about it, was the language, and again, I know there isn’t anything wrong with that, it’s natural and I think it’s a useful insight because you know this probably better than I do, communication, in terms of having language to help people even think about what they’re trying to do and so on. And so you would need to know their words and have all the meanings and all the concepts in this context, here is the lingo and so on. But somehow I went off in thinking, ‘Okay, does this become—quoted ‘become’—robotic. I don’t know ...”

Chloe pauses for several seconds. She’s trying to formulate her question, almost like she’s reticent to ask it.

“Can you only stick to your own kind? You know what I mean with that?” she laughs as she asks the questions.

I laugh, too. I have thought this on a number of occasions, particularly when I am experiencing a problem with someone who hasn’t done the training. It’s so much easier to speak with Landmark graduates when there’s a problem because I almost never have to worry about how they will react (or over-react), or even if I am uncomfortable with their initial reaction, we can work through it very quickly.

“Yes,” is my short answer to her second question (i.e., did I know what she meant).

“Is that a danger? I don’t know about all that, you know. I just think of these things, but it does not seem particularly plausible to me.”
“Well, I think that one of the characteristics that people who have studied cults (and there are different characteristics), one of them is that it removes people from their families.”

“Right.”

“And in every instance of the focus group, the training brought these participants closer to their families who had not done the training.”

“Right.”

“So it wasn’t, it doesn’t move in that direction.”

“Right.”

“Consolidation—“

“Right, remember like you can only stick with your own kind…”

“Right, right.”

“Exactly. Yes, because—”

“It is more expansive than it is contracting.”

“Right, right. Oh, yes. That’s right. That was part of my conversation. I had forgotten what I meant when I was thinking about it. Because I did notice exactly that, which is what I see good family therapy does. I can’t help but see so many similarities. I mean, good family therapy and that’s where I’m going to separate subtly some of the other things because of the focus on the families. Melanie’s story would be the same story, is it Melanie?”

“Right.”

“The trainer.”

“Right.”
“Yes, Melanie. She was the one who took the training. Her dad didn’t. She learned some skills and she was able to apply it to something in her life that she wanted to be done differently, and I would see similar things in family therapy. You know, her family didn’t have to come in, but she learned the same thing—to affect her life in a way that she couldn’t do prior to this, and in fact, as you say, I like that distinction, is that it does allow her to speak to somebody who has not gone through the programs, the training, so if that’s a major characteristic of a cult, then clearly it would fail as a cult,” she said, laughing.

I find this particularly funny, and I laugh with her.

“But that did strike me and I had forgotten that I had thought, ‘That was really good,’ that people were able to use it in that way, because I do think, and I don’t know the training on this, I do think that with therapy as well, and sometimes it’s the therapist, the trainings, and sometimes it’s the person. You can become so overjoyed and know that person could sort of create that circle. Would they really only want to talk to their kind? And that may have nothing to do with the fact that the training is cult-like.”

“It’s like a potential collateral effect,” I begin to explain.

“Yes. There has got to be people who go through this and who do that. It’s like people who, you know, who go to therapy, they are acting crazy because they haven’t learned how to separate. They are so excited about what they learned in therapy that they go along trying to ‘therapize’ people. And to have this relationship that’s not there and they don’t learn how (how do I want to say this?) that they haven’t learned how to integrate those skills back into regular worlds,
given that we are not all in the T-groups. But I was really struck by that. I think that Landmark has got to have people who give them a bad name from that perspective, who go around and…”

“Yeah, well, it’s funny, because in the Forum, one of the things that the leader says near the end of the course is, ‘Now just because you’ve done this doesn’t mean that you can go out and be Junior Forum Leaders. The problems you have with other people, they are not other people’s problems, they are your problems. Other people don’t have…’ they don’t say it this way ‘…but other people don’t have the problems. You’ve got a problem with them, that’s your problem.’”

“You’re right.”

“And so you should deal with it yourself.”

“You’re right.”

“Don’t go around trying to fix people.”

“Right.”

“Now, once you get to a certain level training and you are with people who are open to coaching, then that changes, where you have the kind of conversations that went on in the focus group.”

_Cheering for Revolutionary Communication: LGAT Communication and the Values of Politics 3_

Chloe was resolute in her assertion that the communication of the focus group was atypical of the general population. We spoke at length about this subject.
Chloe says, “I really think this is in many ways revolutionary that people learn to communicate so well! You know, I wasn’t feeling very well when we viewed the videotape, but I really wanted to jump up and cheer! And in my head I really was saying, ‘Wow! People can talk like this?’ I mean, it’s incredible! It really is. I think if more people could have conversations like that, it would be incredible! A whole new world order.”

I try to contain my elation that Chloe has confirmed my hypothesis and mutter, “Mmm. Mm-hmm.”

“I really think it’s revolutionary…” she reiterates.

Her words seem so reminiscent of Politics 3, I decide to pursue that line of questioning.

I put in front of her the handout I gave to the focus group. So you have the Maslow quote and I'll ask you the same thing I did at the focus group: What relevance, if any, do the ideas expressed there have to what you observed in the focus group? Feel free to refresh your memory.”

“Refresh my memory. I remember that it was rough reading, I need a translation into English.”

I laugh at her self-deprecating humor.

“Hopefully not the bottom two paragraphs,” I joke, referring to the paragraphs I wrote.

“No, no.”

“I’m just going to read your part.” She proceeds to read the handout.

3 See Appendix D. The heading for the handout I used reads “From Abraham Maslow, Politics 3.” “My part” appears below the block quote.
After reading a little, answering her questions, and offering some clarification on its meaning, I ask, “Does that seem to link up with what you observed in the group?”

“Yes. Definitely! Yes! Definitely.”

“Great.”

“This is open, honest, reciprocal, and not to beat the dead hog, part of my quibbling with Jeff at the end was it was not reciprocal. It’s by design, but I think that is part of my M.O. I wasn’t sure about the compassionate, but yes, that’s what I saw. That’s a great description, actually. Definitely. Tada!”

Speaking into my microphone, I ask my dissertation advisor a rhetorical question, “Did you hear that, Eric?”

“Well, that’s great, and yet it’s not like, I’m not looking for validation, but on the other hand, that is pretty much like what I thought. And I came upon this Maslow piece—I guess it’s one of those serendipitous things. I wasn’t looking for it, but because I knew that Landmark was influenced by the Human Potential Movement and humanistic psychology, and I’m into politics, when I saw Maslow had this thing called Politics 3 it’s like, ‘Oh, well, what could that be about?’ So I saw it and said, ‘Wow! This sounds exactly like what is going on here!’”

“Yes.”

“You used the word ‘revolutionary.’”

“Yes!”

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4 Chloe is not originally from the U.S., so she said “hog” instead of “horse.”
My excitement can no longer be contained, and now the “pontification floodgates” are open: “If everybody on the planet could have the kinds of conversations that went on during the focus group, it’s hard to imagine how different things would be, from how they are, you know?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“In terms of war and conflict…”

“Mm-hmm.”

“…and economic disparities…”

“Mm-hmm.”

“…health disparities…”

“Mm-hmm.”

“…all that. So I was, you know—“

“I don’t think we could stand it,” Chloe says, laughing. “Well, it’s hard to, that’s why I said ‘revolutionary,’ because I can hardly imagine it. Really, I can hardly imagine it… A room of four people…”

“But imagine a whole room of 150 people,” I say, referring to the number of people in the Landmark Forum.

“Wow.”

“So the aim or what I was trying to get here is that—what I’m looking at is long-term participation in what is referred to in the psychological literature as large group awareness training, and what Landmark does is classified by these people as that. It’s not Landmark’s term, but it’s a psychology term.”

“Large group what?”
“Large group awareness training. LGAT. That would be a T-group. The training itself, that is where people get the skills. But then what Maslow is talking about is people not only get the skills, but then they create in their lives intimacy groups, or it’s not even create, they know people and they are intimate with them, and they have this kind of communication that goes on, reciprocal, honest, open, compassionate. So that’s like the news of my dissertation. It’s like, ‘Hey, do you think what this guy is saying would be a good thing?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Well here’s something that I think actually helps, would be an example of a way that you get there, or at least here is an example of the results of what he’s talking about.”

With this comment, I stumble upon the explanation Chloe had been waiting for in her previous attempts to understand the Maslow quote.

“Ah, I see. Yes, okay. There, that’s what that is. I can verify that!”

“Great. Oh, man…” I am very excited by her comments.

“Check, check, check, check,” she gestures as she speaks, as though checking off items on a list.

“So, what values would you attribute to the group?”

“Mmm. Okay. Can you say that again?”

“Yes. I figure it’s a way to focus just in that area. Like you saying what they are as opposed to me prompting you or…”

“Well, I’m struck by the ‘open, honest, reciprocal, compassionate’—are those values?”

“Sure. Openness is a value, I think. Honesty and compassion are values.”
“Honesty was big in the group. Openness, yeah reciprocal, could be, yes, yes. I was trying to think, was there anything I particularly saw? Yeah, I think those really are perfect descriptions.”

We speak some more, and as I have run out of questions, I try to wrap up the interview.

“Well, before I shut off the tape, any final thoughts? Anything you want to share, something that came up in the midst?”

“Well, just really, I think the conversation we had about therapy versus training to be a therapist and those kind of things, that you can bet I will be chewing on. I’ll be talking to my friend about that.

“Well, final thought—communication. Seems to me that if you have a training, a program, Landmark, for example, that apparently is able to radically, this is my impression, change the way people communicate, well it certainly seems like, ‘Duh!’ it seems like in Communication you’d be fascinated and be clamoring to understand it, because the applicability across all kinds of settings and institutions and so on, it seems like there would be no end to where it would be useful. Well, first of all, just in terms of description. What is it that they are doing, how is it they are able to use it, and then seeing where it can be useful.”

“Right,” I reply.

“I mean, I don’t know anything about Communications, but isn’t that kind of like a basic thing to try to figure out, to have people communicate better?”
Observation Postscript

As discussed, Maslow designated a number of qualities as belonging to Politics 3. These qualities are subdivided into two main groups: methods to promote and to reduce (see Table 9). While Chloe and I noted a significant correspondence between the communication of the focus group and Politics 3, some qualities belonging to Politics 3 did not get discussed.

Since Maslow’s goals in Politics 3 feature communication as the sine qua non of planetary transformation, I believe it is important to address the question more explicitly than that which was included in my interview with Chloe. I believe the communication of the focus group participants manifested the qualities of communication Maslow espouses beyond those discussed with Chloe. In this section, I summarize results from the focus group observation interview, and, where necessary, include observations not discussed in my interview with Chloe.

Politics 3 Communication Qualities to Promote

First, I look at qualities that promote Politics 3, then I discuss qualities to minimize in order to achieve Politics 3.

Reciprocal, Two-Way Communication

While Maslow decries “top-down” communication specifically, one may also infer by his use of the term “reciprocal,” that he also values what might be called “two-way communication.” This form of communication is marked by mutual interaction: what one gives, one gets in kind, and vice versa. It may be sharing the same kind of information or experience or gesture. This may take the
form of agreeing with someone (or not), or it may take the form of identifying with another (like compassion, but not necessarily).

It is clear from the focus group excerpts that reciprocal communication took place. Each person mutually shared their challenges, as requested—"the good, bad, and the ugly."

**Love, Friendliness, and Peace-Loving**

Love frequently showed up in the focus group: Love for family members, surely, but also a love for each other. Despite the significance of the issues discussed, and particularly, the number of challenges Amanda encountered from the other three participants, the entire conversation was conducted in a friendly, peace-loving manner, without arguments, meanness, or overt aggression.

**Openness, Authenticity, Honesty, Self-Exposure, Intimacy and Trust**

Each person shared important issues about their lives without any apparent concern over "looking bad." This was particularly the case with Amanda. Furthermore, the other participants were willing to be honest with Amanda (confronting her with her "rackets," for example). This openness to express one’s problems without concern over looking bad, in addition to the group’s willingness to challenge Amanda, demonstrated intimacy and trust in the group, which appeared a particularly striking feature.

**Understanding and Awareness**

I take "understanding" to mean understanding not just what others say, but also relating to their experience in a way that reflects insight into another’s experience. To understand another is to be able to relate to them in such a
manner as to have insight into their situation, condition, or predicament.

“Awareness,” by contrast, refers to an inner-directed form of understanding—understanding of the self and the processes that constitute who we are as people.

Each person showed understanding of each other’s stories, predicaments, and challenges, while also exhibiting self-awareness and responsibility toward themselves and the roles we each play in constructing our own realities. The participants showed they were aware of the way they framed events and relationships, took responsibility for this framing, and saw they had a choice in how they would approach these events and relationships.

Acceptance, Tolerance

I regard tolerance as a form of acceptance where considerably diverging viewpoints, perspectives, practices, differences, and values are accepted. Generically speaking, acceptance does not necessarily imply such divergence.

Different points of view expressed in the group were accepted between the participants and their family members, as well as between each other (e.g., tolerating offspring’s differences—such as Raymond’s teenage son dropping out of school, Jeff’s son’s Mohawk, loving/not loving the “roller coaster”). Even when Jeff “disagreed” with Amanda about her level of integrity, he accepted Melanie’s formulation of Amanda’s integrity status, and expressed no sign of intolerance.

Compassion and Caring Feedback

While compassion—etymologically and conventionally—designates a response to suffering, I would go beyond this association to include something
beyond “mere” empathy, that is: a capacity for experiencing our shared humanity. While certainly, compassion can denote a desire to relieve suffering, I suggest it can also reflect a desire for championing another and supporting the fulfillment of their greatness. Caring feedback in the form of coaching, for example, is offered out of a spirit of compassion in this sense.

Participants clearly demonstrated compassion toward what Amanda was going through. This did not stop at the level of compassion, however, nor did participants commiserate with Amanda. By “commiseration,” I mean an acceptance at face value of the way situations “seemed” to Amanda, and a subsequent joining in on the “presenting complaint.” No one said anything resembling, “Your husband’s a deadbeat,” or “Your son is lazy and disobedient,” or “They both need to be fixed.” Instead of commiserating, participants got to the bottom of Amanda’s perceptions and helped her distinguish where she was being inauthentic about her complaints. The coaching that took place may thus be characterized as “caring feedback.”

Qualities to Avoid or Reduce

Splitting, Separation, Feelings of Being Different, Polarization, Alienation

Each of these qualities I take to belong to the “family” of splitting. From splitting, there is separation. From separation, feelings of being different may be experienced. Feeling different can give rise to alienation. Polarization would be a more pronounced form of alienation.

The reduction of splitting (and its corresponding manifestations) was obvious in at least two ways: (1) the level of compassion and identification
participants showed toward each other’s stories, and (2) where Melanie explicitly engaged Amanda on the subject of feeling different from others, namely, that, as humans, we basically experience the same challenges and doubts:

Where you’re at is ‘no one else has that’… We all are okay and then not okay, and then okay and then not okay. And we think that we do some work, we should always be okay. And the truth is, we’re not! And then we stop and don’t go to work on getting okay again.

This identification through communication helps to bring people together and overcome feelings of being separate, different, and alienated.

_Fear, Defensiveness, Suspicion, and Paranoid Expectations_

The open sharing of the group was virtually devoid of these qualities. The one exception to this was Amanda, when she registered her concern about emotionally exposing herself to the group. Even in her case, however, and this is significant about the focus group, Amanda overcame her fear of self-exposure in the midst of the conversation and made herself open to coaching, thereby keeping her word to allow herself to be contributed to by others. Amanda both communicated and moved past her fear of self-exposure without being defensive.

_Insult, Condescension, Envy, Contempt, and Enmity_

There appeared no evidence of envy, contempt, or enmity in the group. Since insult and condescension were touched on in the observation interview, however, I’d like to make the following point because it speaks to the difference in perception that may distinguish these long-term participants from non-participants. From an outsider’s perspective, Jeff’s treatment of Amanda might be construed as pushy, intrusive, condescending, or “more transformed than thou,”
as it did with Chloe. There is an enthymemetic element operating here, and it’s something someone who has not participated in Landmark’s work would necessarily be privy to.

“Being coachable” is a much-promoted and fundamental characteristic of long-term Landmark participants. In this focus group particularly, Jeff and Melanie are highly trained program leaders in Landmark Education’s methodologies. From the perspective of long-term participants, it is a huge opportunity to be coached one-on-one by someone with their Landmark credentials. Amanda took advantage of this opportunity, and even if she experienced some resistance to the coaching, it was apparent in the conversation that whatever resistance she may have been displayed, she overcame it and was willing to move past where she had been stopped.

Conclusion

Based on my own participant observation, interviews, and focus group, I saw communication styles that resemble what Maslow (1977) describes in *Politics* 3. In the focus group observation interview, Chloe agreed with this perception. This agreement may be summarized as follows: (1) The minimal level of superficiality (chit-chat) in the focus group discussion was astonishing, and atypical of the general population. (2) It is unique that people would be so comfortable talking about major issues in their lives and that they made such conversation look easy. (3) Participants’ comfort level was promising, incredible, and revolutionary. (4) It would not be likely for people to become so adept at communicating through therapy, but they might do so by being trained as
therapists. (5) The focus group participants understood that they are responsible for the way they construct meaning out of their experience and that they have a choice in how they do this. Furthermore, it is clear that the communication of these Landmark participants stands in stark contrast to those public conversations examined in this study: Their communication is virtually devoid of the level of fear, suspicion, and paranoia that characterizes those public conversations.

In addition, I fully anticipated (and hoped) that Chloe would, at minimum, bring a fresh perspective. I also anticipated that she would question the effectiveness of Landmark’s training based on the difficulties Amanda expressed and that she would at some point comment on the coaching that took place. I did not, however, anticipate a few things in particular: (1) that she would so strongly corroborate my own perceptions about the communication of the group, and (2) I did not anticipate the level of her dislike for the coaching Amanda received in the second focus group excerpt (what she considered pushy, uninvited coaching). Chloe also noted that (3) there is potential for coaching to be exploitative (although she did not believe that was the case in the focus group), and that (4) it is possible for people to do the work of LGAT courses and not transform significant areas of their lives.

Because of these unexpected findings, Chloe’s observation of the interview proved quite valuable. The portion Chloe criticized reveals the blind spot I have as a full member of the Landmark community. For example, I assumed coaching would take place, given the following conditions: (1) If people
are honest, they will admit to experiencing a loss of power; (2) Jeff and Melanie are highly trained in Landmark’s methodology; and (3) long-term participants are generally open to uninvited coaching. Since Jeff and Melanie are committed to making a difference for people, as long as the first condition was met, coaching was virtually inevitable. Since Chloe is an “outsider,” the coaching appeared unusual, while I took it for granted. This issue may perhaps be the most difficult for non-LGAT participants to accept. (“Who do you think you are, telling me how to run my life?” might be a typical response from a non-participant.) I should add, however, that it is always appropriate (and safest) to inquire first if coaching is desired. Coaching without such an invitation is risky and can result in hurt feelings. How the person being offered coaching responds depends on a number of factors, such as their overall receptiveness and their mood at the time. Sometimes, all people want is to be heard. My experience has shown me, however, that the longer people participate in Landmark Education courses, the more open they are to coaching (and don’t require an invitation). This appeared to me to be the case with Amanda.

In addition, while I have at times had my own criticism of Landmark Education, that criticism and the tendency to be critical have softened quite a bit over time. Before I did the Landmark Forum, I would have said that anyone who “volunteered” for a corporation, was either an idiot, duped, or brainwashed.\textsuperscript{5} I would not say that now. I volunteered for three years for Landmark Education as a coach and Introduction Leader, and I had great experiences. Now, while I still

\textsuperscript{5} That may sound harsh, and I can say with confidence that my propensity for harshness was much greater before the Landmark Forum than it is now.
think it *highly unusual* for people to volunteer for a for-profit company, I see the value it provides. So, all in all, it appears to be a reciprocal exchange between Landmark and their volunteers.

Now, of course, LGAT detractors can argue, like Fenwick (1976), that Landmark Education is all about staying in business, and that its customers have been fooled into believing their experiences, outlook, and “results” are valuable. Ultimately, who gets to say if an experience is valuable? The people themselves, of course. Arguing that people are duped would require engaging them in a conversation to persuade them of this. If the kinds of conversations Landmark trains people to have benefit their lives, then one might think that it’s good for the company to find ways of sustaining itself as long as it is operating according to its own principles. After nine years of participation, I have come to know Landmark as a very unusual—even *anomalous*—capitalist enterprise. Over time, I began to see my criticisms more as a reflection of my own overly-critical tendencies and less to do with what Landmark actually does.

In the next chapter, I gather what I’ve learned thus far and attempt to generalize my observations about LGAT communication and Politics 3.
CHAPTER TEN
DISTINGUISHING PRACTICES OF LGAT COMMUNICATION: A MODEL OF POLITICS 3 INTERACTION

Having presented prominent excerpts from the focus group and focus group observation interview, I now turn to an analysis of my results. In this chapter, I recap the journey that led me here, formulate a model for LGAT communication practices, and begin to glimpse what such practices might mean for human interaction.

The Road Thus Traveled

As described in Chapter One, I had an extraordinary experience in the Landmark Forum. Most notably, I transformed my relationship with my deceased father simply by writing and reading a letter. Before the Landmark Forum, I would never have thought such a thing possible. In fact, it was utterly predictable that the rest of my life would be filled with ambivalence toward him, and this was okay with me. The Landmark Forum taught me the importance of being complete about that relationship and that more was available to me than that for which I had been settling.

As a student of communication, I was particularly impressed with the Landmark Forum’s consistent employment of communication principles and

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1 Recall that it only takes one person to transform a relationship.
practices. In particular, the course promoted the idea that communication is constitutive of our reality, and that, as goes our communication, so go our lives. That first morning of the Landmark Forum, this was for me a rather ho-hum observation: “I already know this,” I arrogantly (and prematurely) observed. At that time, I was listening for content, not for the personal consequences such ideas could have on the way I experience myself and others.

Thanks to my Friday night conversation with James, I saw that this know-it-all attitude was a result of being “in the stands”—commenting, judging, assessing\(^2\)—and therefore preventing the lessons from sinking in. My critical and intellectual nature was getting in the way of only experiencing the Landmark Forum, it was also keeping me from being present to myself and others. James helped me see this, and the rest, as they say (nine years later), is history. With James’ guidance, I started playing “on the court” (see Chapter One).

What distinguished my Landmark Forum experience from my academic studies in communication were the implications of the application of communication principles to everyday life. This training helped me recognize the constructed nature of the meaning I add to things, and gave me access to new ways of communicating authentically. These communication practices have improved the quality of my life. I see more consistently than ever before the responsibility for and freedom of being the source of my experience. I have thus continued to participate in Landmark Education courses on a continual basis for

\(^2\) It was as though I was saying, “I am impervious to the implications of your banal social constructionism!”
more than nine years after the fact. My training inspired me so, I chose to make it the basis for my research.

On the course of my journey of discovery, I was disheartened to find unflattering portrayals of Landmark’s work in various public conversations insinuating that Landmark is a cult and engages in “mind control” techniques (Balcer, et al. 2003; Faltermayer, 1998, March 16). While somewhat distressing, it was easy enough to grasp that something as complex and anomalous as Landmark Education could be represented in public conversations in ways unrecognizable to me. On the other hand, however, I was surprised that the value I saw in my transformative experiences with what psychologists call “large group awareness trainings” (LGATs) were not corroborated by research on LGATs.

“How could this be?” I asked myself. I did not regard my perception unfounded, nor did I think previous research is “wrong.” For all I know, Fisher, et al.’s (1990) study may very well be “correct” in its findings: namely, that in regard to LGAT participants’ psychological dispositions, there is more continuity than change. On the other hand, having been a participant in Landmark Education’s curriculum for nine years, I am certain that the training I’ve received has been of tremendous value to me. So, if Fisher, et al. or I are not “mistaken,” what could account for this apparent divergence between research and personal experience? Armed with this question, I set out to account for the perceived differences between participant experiences and research.
In the course of my inquiry, I encountered Maslow’s essay, *Politics 3.* As discussed above (Chapter Six), Maslow proposes a model for transforming our world by building a truly representative democracy. In order to effect such transformation, Maslow believes humans must engage regularly in open, honest, reciprocal, and compassionate communication. *Politics 3* is based on the notions that: (1) Personal growth and interpersonal relating are both necessary (and in some ways inseparable); and (2) Widespread transformation requires increasing the number of small groups of individuals engaged in open communication with each other and doing this on a large scale.

Personal experience appeared to corroborate these two assertions. First of all, my experience demonstrated that my growth occurred as a result of communication with myself and others, thus echoing Maslow’s insistence that personal growth is contingent on the conversations we have. Secondly, by training people to communicate more effectively on a global scale, Landmark is explicitly pursuing one way to advance Maslow’s goal of planetary transformation. There thus seemed a great deal of resonance between the work of Landmark Education and the vision of planetary transformation Maslow describes: Maslow’s ideas and the work of Landmark Education are similar, not merely in stated goals, but also in the idea that humanist communication is essential to transforming our world into a vibrant, peaceful, *global* community.

I consequently came to believe that what is missing from current research concerns the *lens* through which studies like Fisher’s, et al. (1990) view LGATs. Previous outcome research on LGATs, including the methodologically rigorous
study by Fisher, et al. (1991): (1) Regard LGATs as therapeutic rather than educational experiences; (2) Focus on individual cognition rather than communicative behavior; this leads to an emphasis on individuals rather than relationships. (3) Examine short instead of long-term change. (4) Do not address the importance of ongoing training as a means of maintaining practice in the application of learned communication tools. Based on these explanations, I hypothesized that studying LGAT communication is a viable approach to account for self-reported value in LGATs.

Undaunted by unflattering accounts marked by fear, suspicion, and paranoia, a lack of satisfactory research in public conversations about Landmark’s work, and given my personal interest in seeking solutions to global problems, I pursued the following question: How, in what ways, and to what extent (if at all), do Maslow’s ideas find expression and fulfillment in the communication of long-term participants in large group awareness trainings offered by Landmark Education Corporation?

To respond to this question, I explored my personal experience, interviewed long-term participants, observed focus group interaction, and sought feedback on that interaction from someone unfamiliar with Landmark. By utilizing both a focus group methodology and an independent observation of that focus group, my study is not limited to individual reports or results. A focus group is not a form of self-report: Rather, it is an instance of interaction that itself constitutes a text for study. In the focus group, participants’ communication was consistent with what I had observed in my nine years of Landmark Education experience.
Based on this research, what have I learned?

I found that each participant in the focus group demonstrated that their growth was tied directly to communication with others, that focus group members communicated in ways that do not regularly appear in ordinary conversations, and that their communication appears largely consistent with Maslow’s description of Politics 3 and diverges significantly from the public conversations examined in Part One of this study. The following discussion attempts to generalize the communication practices I observed in their interaction.

A Model for Politics 3 Interaction

Through my analysis of personal experience, a focus group, and focus group observation interview, a number of practices appear to produce the kinds of conversation Maslow describes, conversations that, if proliferated across the planet, could potentially help reverse the global predicament in which we find ourselves.

I intentionally use the word “practices” here instead of “skills.” “Skills” conveys a sense that, once learned, stay “in place” (like typing, for instance). Communication is not like typing. I regard it as a practice, not a skill. The communicative behaviors I describe here must be practiced or they will not consistently recur over time. Having learned about LGAT communication practices does not mean that “Once and for all, I am now certain to continue communicating openly and honestly because I have obtained such skills to do so.” Furthermore, communication contexts change all the time, unlike typing (which retains consistency, for example, due to the fixed nature of the keyboard).
This section shall therefore respond to the following question: What communicative practices of the focus group contribute to Politics 3 communication?

The focus group’s communication exhibited qualities Maslow attributes to Politics 3: openness, reciprocation, and compassion. While it was clear from my interviews that participants attributed these communication practices to their Landmark training, ultimately, my point in this study is not to prove that LGATs cause people to communicate in specific ways. All I am really saying is that conversations recounted in this study exhibit particular characteristics Maslow ascribes to Politics 3; the focus group shows what this communication might look like.

Various practices of effective communication are commonly ascribed to effective interpersonal relating: question asking, reflective listening, and establishing the facts of the situation. These practices are clearly in evidence in the focus group. In addition to these, however, what did the focus group’s communication reveal?

To answer this question, I construct a model of the two coaching conversations excerpted from the focus group. In these conversations (see Chapter Eight), Amanda expressed a loss of power and received coaching from the other participants. Consequently, the model I describe is based on the conversations in which this occurs. This model therefore only describes a particular type of conversation—one in which someone expresses a loss of

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3 The model below thus borrows to some extent from grounded theory (Charmaz, 1995, 1997).
power. While this is a *massively pervasive* conversation,\(^4\) the model presented here does not exhaust the possibilities of the types of conversations that would promote Maslow’s vision of Politics 3. At the same time, one could apply several aspects of this model to conversations generally. In any event, the focus group’s communication exhibits qualities of Politics 3, and it does so in particular ways.\(^5\)

In this model, there are two participants, a speaker and a listener (see Table 10). The speaker is the person experiencing a loss of power. In therapeutic language, the speaker has the “presenting complaint.” The listener is the person listening to and interacting with the speaker. Referring to the focus group, Amanda was the speaker and the other participants, the listeners.

**Table 10**

*LGAT Communication Practices*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Listener</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being self-expressed</td>
<td>Being a committed listener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being coachable</td>
<td>Refusing to commiserate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coaching to make a difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uncovering inauthenticities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inventing possibilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^4\) By this I mean that a substantial number of our conversations could be described as “disempowering.” Landmark training helps one better recognize when such conversations are occurring.

\(^5\) To be clear, I am not claiming that these practices are unique only to people trained in Landmark Education courses. Rather, the purpose of this model is to elucidate practices which stood out in the focus group discussion.
Speaker Communication Practices

In the focus group, the speaker practiced the following: (1) being self-expressed and open; and (2) being “coachable.”

Being self-expressed. Landmark courses suggest that human beings are driven by two primary impulses (both ego-driven): trying to “look good” and avoid “looking bad.” These concerns can stop us from being fully self-expressed. For example, in order to have a conversation that transforms my perception of a loss of power into one that empowers me, I must be willing to express myself and let go of my fear of “looking bad” to others. Thus, being expressed is also a form of being open, and openness is a characteristic of Politics 3 communication.

The practices of self-expression and openness are particularly evident in the conversation about Amanda’s possibility of a peaceful home. In that conversation, Amanda said, “I really had it that I have to hide something from you guys.” Despite this concern over self-exposure, Amanda articulated her predicament to the group and overcame her concern for looking bad. She followed suit in the second focus group excerpt, in which she eventually overcame her resistance to discussing the details of the situation about her marital finances, citing a confidentiality issue. To accommodate her, Jeff invited her to speak about the situation in a general way.

Being coachable. Being coachable means being willing to listen to “bad news” and to give up the position of being “right.” Coaching is a form of communicating caring feedback that is intended to make a difference for the person receiving the coaching. Being coachable may also be construed as a
form of openness. In regard to being coachable, Amanda’s conversations are particularly striking. I imagine many people would be so resentful of their spouse/partner that they would resist the observation that it is they who are responsible for the situation having gotten as far as it did without taking action. This does not diminish the impact of the original broken agreement, but since we cannot make others keep their word, we are limited in what we can do in that respect. When we let unresolved situations linger and fester to the point that we develop resentment toward others for their broken agreements (and do nothing about it), that is our responsibility. Amanda recognized this in both focus group excerpts. Her willingness to be coached provided an opening for her to transform her perception, her communication, and her relationships.

Listener Communication Practices

To engage in Politics 3 communication, listeners displayed competence in these communication practices: (1) being a committed listener; (2) refusing to commiserate; (3) coaching to make a difference; (4) uncovering inauthenticities; and (5) facilitating the speaker in inventing her own possibility.

*Being a committed listener.* A “committed listener” is someone who listens to another for what’s possible and goes beyond the speaker’s “monologue,” that is, how things “seem” to them. “Seeming” is based on an interpretation of something that happened in the past. This “seeming” limits seeing what is possible. Being a committed listener means being dedicated to another’s greatness, and relating to them as that to which they say they are committed, and not as their complaint or their “personality.” In the first focus group excerpt, it
seemed to Amanda that she was not being a “good mother.” The group helped her recognize that this “seeming” was not based on empirically verifiable facts and, once she invented the possibility of a peaceful home, this set her on the path of enrolling her family into the possibility of a peaceful home. In the second focus group excerpt, it seemed to Amanda that her husband, Andy, was not a good life partner because of the unresolved financial issue. Jeff chose to relate to Amanda as someone who accomplishes what she sets out to—in this case, to have a life partnership, as opposed to relating to her in terms of her complaint.

Being a committed listener requires a respect for self-determination. When Amanda says in the focus group, “I seem to feel uncertain of what the consequence should be,” Melanie says, “You get to make it up” and “You get to call it.” Likewise, Jeff asks Amanda what her intention is with regard to her marriage. Her answers are to have a peaceful home and to have a life partnership. The questioning continues to probe into what that means and/or entails for Amanda. Well-trained Landmark participants use this approach instead of forcing a particular answer on their interlocutors. “What are you committed to?” is a typical entrée into a conversation for what is possible.

Refusing to commiserate. Recall what Steve Zaffron, LEC Vice President of Development, says about our “good friends”:

Friends become those who are willing to agree with your persistent complaints. They don't do that for free. What do you pay them back with? You have to agree with theirs. We have these little conspiracies. You let me run my racket and I'll let you run yours. You commiserate with me and I'll commiserate with you. Those are your good friends. (Wruck and Eastley, 1997, p. 18)
In ordinary conversations, when someone complains about another, the listener participates in (i.e., “goes along with,” “receives” at face value) the complaint instead of inquiring into its basis. In ordinary conversations, assumptions behind complaints are taken for granted. Part of being a committed listener means to refrain from this tendency to commiserate with the speaker.

For example, in the first excerpt, the group does not make Amanda’s son, Ethan, “wrong” for only going to Tae Kwan Do once a week. In the second focus group excerpt, the group does not “pile on” Andy for not keeping his end of the agreement with Amanda. It would be entirely predictable that in an ordinary conversation, listeners in this instance would agree with Amanda’s complaint and call Ethan an “irresponsible teen” or Andy a “sponge,” or worse. By contrast, in both focus group excerpts, no one in the group commiserated with Amanda about her problems.

Coaching to make a difference. Communicating caring feedback directly and honestly is a key practice of these LGAT participants, and one of the practices Maslow ascribes to Politics 3. In both focus group excerpts, participants coached Amanda by empowering her to take responsibility for her complaint. As humans love to be right, this type of coaching in ordinary conversations would be predictably off-putting. Coaching provided by these Landmark veterans presented Amanda with a choice: She could either take responsibility for creating a peaceful home, or be “right” about not being a good mother; she could continue to make her husband wrong about the finances, or she could apologize for making him wrong and have an open conversation to establish an agreement.
that would support their continued partnership. As a result of these coaching conversations, Amanda “got off it,” a Landmark phrase meaning that she gave up her “racket” (see Chapter One).

_Uncovering inauthenticities._ Landmark Education’s work deals with _helping people help each other_ find ways to be authentic. In Landmark terminology, being authentic means being truthful about the areas in life where we are inauthentic. According to Landmark, whenever we experience a loss of power, freedom, or full self-expression, we are being inauthentic. All forms of inauthenticity involve being irresponsible according to this definition. When we are inauthentic, we are being “victims” or “at the effect” of life instead of being “at cause” for the results we achieve. Thus, another communicative practice engaged by the participants in this study is uncovering the speaker’s inauthentic behavior.

Landmark Education’s “inauthenticity work” uncovers inauthentic ways of being by means of a conversation that answers the following questions:

1. Where are you experiencing a loss of power?
2. What are you pretending?
3. What are you hiding?
4. What impact does this loss of power have on you and others?
5. What is missing from the current situation, the possibility of which would make a difference in this particular issue?
6. What possibility could you invent that would be a triumph over the past?
While the coaching did not explicitly engage Amanda with the questions above, the process did unfold along a similar, less formal, trajectory. Amanda was being inauthentic in both excerpts because she was experiencing a loss of power, freedom, and full self-expression with her son and husband. (The group’s coaching got her to see this.) She pretended that they were the source of her unhappiness. This hid that she was making them both wrong for their broken agreements, and that she is responsible for creating her relationship with them. It also hid that she was being a victim of her own unwillingness to address problems at home. The impact on her was suffering in the form of frustration and self-recrimination. The impact on her family (one would imagine, although it was not explicitly discussed) was a loss of affinity with Amanda. Peace, partnership, and being responsible were missing in these situations, and were also the possibility Amanda invented.

Inventing possibilities. A critical component of Landmark’s “inauthenticity work” as discussed above relates to inventing possibilities. When possibility is discussed in Landmark courses, it is discussed in terms of “invention.” The emphasis is therefore on a form of “creation” instead of “adoption,” for example. Inventing a possibility means creating a possibility for oneself as opposed to “adopting” a pre-existing possibility. While the idea of a “peaceful home” might already “exist,” the “possibility” of a peaceful home is something Amanda creates for herself in accordance with her own values, commitments, and situation. While this emphasis on invention may sound strange to outsiders, as it is a creative act, “inventing” possibilities is a more rigorous way to articulate it.
A key feature of both focus group excerpts is how the group got Amanda to invent possibilities in those situations where she was experiencing a loss of power. It was evident to the group that Amanda had not invented a possibility to live into for her family and marriage. Jeff sensed this, so he asked her point-blank: “What is your intention?” Once it was established that Amanda was not being intentional in creating the kind of relationships she wanted with her family, this gave her the opportunity to create the possibilities of a peaceful home, a life partnership, and of being happy as a matter of her word. In the absence of inventing possible ways of being, we tend to revert to familiar patterns from the past. Inventing a possibility is a way to pro-actively engage our relationships in ways consistent with the outcomes we intend to achieve.⁶

Summary

In the model described above, participants displayed certain practices associated with their specific roles in the conversation. The speaker exhibited (1) being self-expressed and open; and (2) being coachable. The listener demonstrated these communication practices: (1) being a committed listener; (2) refusing to commiserate; (3) offering caring and honest coaching; (4) uncovering inauthenticities; and (5) helping the speaker invent her own possibilities.

What a Wonderful World it Could Be…

The qualities of the focus group’s communication identified in the previous chapter may be generalized in terms of the communication practices outlined in the model offered here. These practices allow for the transformation of human

⁶ For more on “invention,” see Zander and Zander (2000).
interaction. Based on my analysis of LGAT communication practices, I conclude that such communication has the power to transform relationships and situations, and that it does so in a manner consistent with Maslow’s Politics 3, and therefore diverges significantly from the fear-based public conversations about Landmark examined in Part One.

Imagine if all people who feel disempowered were free to speak from the heart and trust their listeners will provide compassionate and empowering feedback. Picture the possibility of all people living in a culture that provides a context in which to learn and practice communicating in ways displayed by the focus group. This would indeed be, as Chloe stated, revolutionary. The potential global implications of these communication practices will be explored in the Epilogue.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

An Exploratory Study

In conducting this study, I believe I successfully obtained the empirical materials I was looking for: (1) a sample of prominent public conversations about Landmark Education and (2) large group awareness training (LGAT) interaction that provides a basis for analyzing its compatibility (or lack thereof) with communication qualities described in Maslow’s Politics 3. Based on my analysis: (1) There is a large discrepancy between the public conversations examined here and the lived experience of Landmark participants; and (2) The communication of these participants displayed qualities associated with Politics 3.

At the same time, inasmuch as this was an exploratory study, there are many limitations. Since the study’s limitations suggest future ways of examining LGATs, I touch on both limitations and future directions in this chapter.

Study Design

Numerous issues emerge regarding this study’s design that could be integrated into future studies. Here I discuss focus group facilitator and participant selection criteria.
Facilitator Selection Criteria and the Issue of Bias

I experienced something remarkable when I did the Landmark Forum. I then read what others had written and talked to others about it in depth. If I wanted to be rigorous in some marginal way, given my “full member” status, I had to ask myself the following questions: Have I been brainwashed? Am I in a cult? Am I a shill for Landmark Education? Is my entire study so tainted by my bias toward Landmark Education that my results have become a self-fulfilling prophecy?

So, then, is this report hopelessly biased? Short answer: not hopelessly. Being a “full member” in Landmark Education, there is no escaping my favorable bias toward its work. It would be very odd indeed if, after nine years of participation, I did not perceive value in the experience. The perception of value in and of itself constitutes bias. This report is therefore completely biased. It is completely biased by my own point of view as someone who has continued to participate in Landmark’s programs since 1997.

Being aware of this, I have attempted to “temper” the bias in various ways. For example, (1) I have been open to considering unfavorable perspectives on Landmark Education; (2) I have attempted to be systematic in my approach to collecting and analyzing the empirical materials; and (3) perhaps most notably, I employed a focus group observer explicitly to provide an outsider’s perspective.

Bias cuts different ways, however. Without my role as a Landmark “insider,” that is, without being familiar with the courses Landmark offers, I would not be able to report what the experience is like or give helpful background on
various issues. So bias in this context also entails familiarity, which one might alternately consider being “informed.” The bottom line is, I’ve seen things, I think they’re interesting, and I want people to know that what Maslow wrote about is not just possible for humanity, it is already happening.

To address the issue of bias, one could have a non-LGAT participant conduct the focus group. While it would reduce bias, it would also reduce familiarity with the subject matter: How easily would such a moderator (unfamiliar with Landmark terminology, for example) be able to follow a conversation by LGAT participants? I believe this is a question worth exploring.

Participant Selection Criteria

As remarked above (Chapter Seven), using the same people for both interviews and the focus group could be seen as controversial. My initial thinking was that interviewing participants before conducting the focus group would add to the “thickness” of the description, and having background on each person and some of their stories would allow me to intervene less in the focus group, while also serving as a backup in case the conversation stalled and I needed prompts. While interviewing participants in advance did provide good background that has been included in this report, it was not essential to the study: The focus group—as requested—took responsibility for generating the discussion. Since conducting a focus group with people previously interviewed affects the interaction of the focus group itself, one could therefore conduct a focus group without interviews.

Limiting the focus group “sample” to one metropolitan area increases the likelihood that focus group participants will know each other prior to participating
in the focus group. Since Tampa Bay is not a huge market (and does not have a Center or paid staff), familiarity with some of the same people, particularly after several years of participation, is not unusual. In this study, Jeff, Melanie, and I knew each other well, as did Amanda and Melanie. Only Jeff was familiar with Raymond. No one in the group “hangs out” together as day-to-day friends, however, and I believe that the kind of communication they exhibited is not common in the general population, even among close friends (as Chloe notes in Chapter Nine). I should reiterate that the focus group was not intended as a “controlled experiment” or a spontaneous “laboratory.” The question was not: If you take LGAT participants who are strangers to each other and put them in the same room, will they exhibit Politics 3 communication? Rather, my purpose was to provide a window into conversations of long-term LGAT participants, and that these conversations manifest the kind of communication Maslow describes. I believe I accomplished that objective.

Still, if a more “controlled” design is desired, a number of considerations come to mind. To dispense with the “familiarity” concern, one could select participants using only strangers (strangers to each other, strangers to the focus group facilitator). This might require traveling to another region and transporting people from different areas to conduct a focus group in order to eliminate the “familiarity” issue.

One could also design a study in which participants did not know they were part of a research study on LGATs. This would be an interesting experiment. It would also be interesting to see how participants interact with each
other without knowing the others had participated in LGATs. Once might also
identify participants who were registered for the Landmark Forum and conduct a
focus group using the same protocol before and after their participation. Using
this method would allow one to observe differences in their communication after
their LGAT participation.

Since this study was limited to white middle class Americans, future
research might look at more diverse populations. Landmark Education
Corporation is a global operation, and its successful expansion (51 offices, 22
countries, courses offered in seven languages) may be a sign that its
methodology can transcend cultural specificity. Multi-cultural and cross-cultural
studies would be particularly fascinating.

Other considerations for participant selection include:

- **Comparison group**: One might consider asking the same focus
group questions to a comparison group who had not participated in
LGATs. That would allow one to observe similarities and
differences between LGAT participants and non-participants. One
could also combine LGAT and non-LGAT participants in the same
focus group.

- **A “representative” sample**: Future studies could survey Landmark
participants, determine the range of participant demographics, and
select a representative sample of LGAT participants for a focus
group.

- **Compare short-term and long-term participants**: One could
establish through survey data what constitutes “long-term”
participation. One could then test my hypothesis that longer
participation in LGATs results in more adept practice of Politics 3
communication.

- **LGATs are not all the same**: This study looks only at participants in
Landmark Education courses. Since not all LGATs are the same,
another future direction for research could be to perform similar

studies with other types of LGATs, and then conduct focus groups composed of participants from different LGATs.

Conclusion

While certainly not an exhaustive inventory, the limits of the present study discussed in this chapter point to different approaches for examining LGAT communication in exciting ways that might help reveal potential communication differences between LGAT and non-LGAT participants. Hopefully, these avenues will be pursued.
EPILOGUE

SPECTACULAR CHASM, “UNSPECTACULAR” ANTIDOTE: RECUPERATION, COMMUNICATION, AND POLITICS

Given my favorable view of Landmark Education’s work, I am troubled by the pejorative and cynical public conversations like *Criminal Intent’s Con-text* (Balcer, et al., 2003) and *Time’s* article (Faltermayer, 1998, March 16). I am also intrigued by psychological studies’ inconclusive treatment of large group awareness trainings. Each of these public conversations contrasts significantly with my personal experience and/or fails to account for what I see as the potential for work like Landmark’s to transform the conversations that constitute our society, and ultimately, life on our planet. From my perspective, the symbolic distance between these public conversations and my fieldwork is so great as to form a chasm.

In the remainder of this report, I articulate the dimensions of this chasm and respond to the following question: When we examine particular public discourses about unusual social phenomena, what can we learn about the relationship between these discourses and the social phenomena aimed at transforming them?

To do this, the Epilogue: (1) revisits *Criminal Intent’s Con-text* (Balcer, et al., 2003) and articulates a way of thinking about the forces that make such
public conversations possible by employing Debord’s (1983) *Society of the Spectacle*; (2) asks whether Landmark’s work has the power to transform the planet in the face of spectacular constraints, and (3) reflects on the author’s subject-position vis-à-vis the society of spectacle.

Ecce, Chasm: *Con-text, Lived Experience, and the Society of Spectacle*

The close resemblance in *Criminal Intent’s Con-text* between *Grace Note* *Powerful Living* and Landmark Education Corporation raises interesting questions: Did someone affiliated with the show do the Landmark Forum and write a TV show exploiting controversies associated with Landmark Education (i.e., Werner Erhard, *est*, and LGATs)? Being a long-term Landmark participant, it’s hard to imagine that someone would do the Landmark Forum and still want to write what is, in my opinion, an inflammatory (bordering on libelous) TV series episode. Of course, TV networks are in the business of making money, but that alone would not seem to account for *Con-text’s* stunning negativity.

The writers of *Con-text* invented a company similar to Landmark Education and sensationalized its activities. That the sensationalism goes to the extreme of theft, torture, murder, and suicide is disturbing, particularly given the nature of Landmark Education’s work. This is a *Law & Order* franchise, after all, however, so murder is standard. A *Criminal Intent* episode without a murder is rare, and while the episodes are often somewhat bizarre, I find *Con-text* to be among the creepier—morphing a company like Landmark into a homicidal money-making cult is shocking.
Even if viewers look past the murder and treachery—the manipulation, hypocrisy, and sheer weirdness of the scenario are difficult to shake off. At the very least, the show would likely plant seeds of doubt in minds of potential LGAT participants: *What if it’s a cult? What if I get hypnotized or brainwashed? Will they make me do things against my will? Are they just trying to rip me off?* The impact would appear more likely to scare anyone considering programs like Landmark’s, and leave them more inclined to regard outfits like Landmark as cults or scams than as ways of making the world a better place. Cynicism would be the *plat du jour*.

I would assert that the negative portrayal *GraceNote* gets in *Con-text* serves the function of discouraging participation in growth activities like the Landmark Forum. Fortunately for me, *Criminal Intent* had not yet aired when I took the Landmark Forum, and my experience with Landmark Education for the past nine years has been overwhelmingly positive. Generally speaking, course leaders and participants are committed to making a difference for people, and more than any other people I know, they genuinely explore themselves, communicate openly and compassionately, and listen to others for their greatness and for what’s possible. I believe Landmark Education is an organization committed to transforming the planet in ways consistent with Maslow’s Politics 3 and that this is evident in the communication of Landmark participants (see Chapters Eight and Nine). This view is so far from the *slamming* Landmark gets in *Con-text*, there appears a huge chasm between the world I
encountered in my fieldwork and the world of LGATs depicted by *Criminal Intent's Con-text*.

Despite the similarities between *GraceNote* and Landmark Education, the show’s story is obviously a work of fiction, and therefore has no pretensions to factual truth (recall the show’s disclaimer). Furthermore, people do have the capacity to distinguish reality from a work of fiction. So, of course, *Con-text* is “only” a TV show, but this does not mean it lacks the capacity to affect the “real world,” since, as a mass-mediated cultural text, it is part of our reality and forms part of the public conversation about growth programs like Landmark’s.

The similarities between *GraceNote Powerful Living* and Landmark Education are so striking, however, the lines between fiction and reality are blurred, making it likely viewers would make the connection if exposed to both. This blurring of reality also serves a social function. If one hypothesizes (as did Chloe in Chapter Nine) that Landmark’s work has potential for significant planetary transformation by promoting Politics 3, this work threatens the current system of social and economic relations. It does so in part by emphasizing open, compassionate, and reciprocal communication. So, while there are doubtless specific circumstances and a politics behind the creation of this episode, I believe the source of the chasm lies in resistance to change on a system level.

To articulate the dimensions of the chasm I perceive between *Criminal Intent’s* representation of self-improvement and lived experience, I invoke Debord’s (1983) *Society of the Spectacle*. The society of spectacle is a (now global) system of domination held in place by mass-mediated communication
and characterized by separation and spectatorship. Debord’s spectacle helps illuminate the social, economic, and political conditions operating in the production of such public conversations as *Con-text* and the *Time Magazine* article, and therefore teaches us something about the relationship between public conversations and the unusual social phenomena they describe.

In the remainder of this report, I make the following points: (1) Debord’s spectacle exhibits qualities opposed to Maslow’s Politics 3; (2) Landmark Education’s work, because it promotes Politics 3, threatens the spectacle and therefore constitutes an “unspectacular” antidote to the separation intrinsic to the spectacle; (3) The spectacle neutralizes such threats by means of recuperation (a form of systems-level “damage control”); (4) *Con-text*, a mass mediated public conversation (or “spectacle”), is an instance of recuperation that discourages participation in the kind of growth work offered by Landmark Education, and thereby helps maintain the status quo; (5) The ability of the spectacle to recuperate imposes a massive constraint on the possibility of a transformed civilization; (6) Depending on one’s perspective, LGAT communication practices may or may not be sufficient to produce massive global transformation quickly enough to reverse tremendous global problems; and (7) My work as a researcher is complicit with the spectacle’s surveillance on everyday life.

*Society of the Spectacle*

Debord (1983) describes ours as the "society of the spectacle." The era of the “spectacle” emerged in the wake of the Great Depression, two World Wars, television, advertising and public relations firms, and conspicuous consumption.
Debord’s “spectacle” designates the social and economic arrangement (under capitalism) that marks our mass-mediated era, a social order dominated by images: "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (¶1).¹,²

Spectacles appear primarily by means of visual communication media—television, films, magazines, computerized images, photographs, and billboard advertising. These visual claims on our attention bombard us so, ours may be called a "visual society." Our visual society, however, is not merely constituted by images, but also by the economic and social processes that make possible and govern the production of those spectacles. This is in part why Debord declares, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (1983, ¶4, italics added).

This social relation includes forces of production that create images and myths holding the spectacle in place. Debord calls the power to create and maintain this system of representation and domination "spectacular power."

"Spectacular power" is similar to Foucault's (1984) concept of "administrative

¹ Note: This edition of Debord’s book is organized by numbered paragraphs and contains no page numbers.
² The phrase "directly lived" is certainly a contestable notion and requires clarification. Since experience is mediated by language, this complicates any conception of "direct experience." As Derrida (1974) writes, we never experience the “thing-in-itself,” for the thing-in-itself is already a sign: "From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs" (p. 50). Thus, the phrase "directly lived" should here be understood as belonging to a time before the advent of instantaneous telecommunication. At that time, life was still mediated, but not mediated electronically. Prior to the advent of mass society in the twentieth century, lived reality was experienced "directly," to use Debord’s term; that is, without the mediation of spectacles. Law states it this way: “Reality is now something we look at and think about, not something we experience” (2001, p. 2).
power," but is more historically specific: It is not only the power to name, move, and control physical bodies, but also the power to represent itself as spectacle, a power made possible by the proliferation of mass-mediated images: “The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as instrument of unification” (Debord, 1983, ¶3).

These images hold rampant consumer capitalism together, another feature of the spectacle. A consumer-driven economy produces what Debord calls pseudo-needs:

When economic necessity is replaced by the necessity for boundless economic development, the satisfaction of primary human needs is replaced by an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs which are reduced to the single pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. (¶51) \(^3\)

According to this argument, the maintenance of a consumer economy becomes an end in itself, and pseudo-needs are constantly “invented” to sustain this economic system.

Pseudo-needs show up in endless ways. Some pseudo-needs may appear completely arbitrary, like fashion, luxury cars, or Glade Plug-ins. Others may appear “necessary”: mobile phones, laptop computers, BlackBerry’s, PDAs—products that at one time did not exist, but, once invented, become imperatives to function in today’s world. The economy thus produces endless “new and improved” conveniences through a strategy of planned obsolescence. This keeps the engine of capitalism humming.

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\(^3\) See also Marcuse (1964, pp. 4-8).
The importance of maintaining the autonomous economy as an end in itself is particularly obvious during the Christmas shopping season, when news reports focus on concerns over the level of consumer sales and how they compare to previous years. The message gets communicated that it is our duty to spend more money in order to "strengthen the economy" (a phrase that speaks to both its status as an autonomous entity and the spectacle’s power to represent itself).

According to Debord, “The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life” (¶42). A society centered on commodities and visual entertainment creates a superficial culture. As a result, it becomes easier to talk about the next gadget we’re going to buy, the characters from the latest hit sitcom, or the score from the latest sporting event, than it is to be intimate with people and share what’s going on in our lives—that is, having a “real conversation” and making an intimate connection through open, reciprocal, and compassionate communication.

The Spectacle versus the Village

It was not always like this. To illustrate the contrast between the pre-spectacle era and today, consider the world of "the village" Berger (1985) describes. In the pre-mass media village, everyone knows each other and relates to each other primarily through face-to-face verbal communication. In the village, people tell stories to each other and these stories help form the village’s sense of itself. Berger writes that the village is a "living portrait of itself" (p. 16) because stories derived from those interpersonal relationships form the village’s collective
identity. In the village, a direct and tangible connection exists between people in
dialogue with each other.

According to Debord, the spectacle is the opposite of dialogue (¶18). Life
in the society of the spectacle differs from that of the village in at least two ways:
(1) In the village, people are in direct contact with each other, while the spectacle
encourages separation (in part) through the use of electronically-mediated
communication technologies; and (2) unlike the villagers, whose frame of
reference is more or less defined by their immediate geography and pre-
industrial economy, most of our knowledge of the world comes from outside our
immediate, geographical, and cultural milieu. Even the knowledge of our local
milieu is permeated by spectacles—peppered with bits of movies, news
broadcasts, documentaries, TV shows, and commercial jingles.

*Technologies Facilitate and Naturalize Separation*

While communication in the village promotes togetherness through face-
to-face interaction, the spectacle, by contrast, encourages separation. According
to Debord (1983), "Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle" (¶25).
Though this refers to capitalism’s increasing specialization and division of labor,
separation in the society of the spectacle is also experienced in a literal and lived
sense as alienation: “The spectacle within society corresponds to a concrete
manufacture of alienation” (¶32). This is clearly demonstrated by the emergence
of the internet, where people communicate via email even when sitting only a few
feet apart. It is also demonstrated by technologies that have replaced services
once performed by humans—ATMs, self-service gas pumps and retail
checkouts, voice-recognition automated telephone assistance, and virtual online computer technical support, among others. With the advent of mobile phones that play video (as with the Walkman before them), thanks to these technological “breakthroughs,” it’s even easier for people to avoid interacting with each other face-to-face. Human interaction is disembodied via the tools of the spectacle to the point where people actually lose touch with their own physical surroundings, as evidenced by pedestrian deaths caused by listening to iPods and talking on mobile phones when crossing the street.

Separated from our direct experience by mass mediated communication, we more and more resemble the “pods” humans had become in The Matrix (Wachowski, et al., 1999). In the film, the “matrix” is a computer-driven virtual reality program that substitutes for and distracts humans from the true nature of their material existence, an existence reduced to serving as mere “batteries” that keep the machines running, machines that have taken over the planet. The matrix may thus be seen as a symbol for the society of spectacle.

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I am not ignoring the value, efficiency, joy, and potential for advanced communication technologies to make our lives “easier” or to bring together people from distant lands. The effect of separation is obvious, however. As these technologies bring people who are geographically inaccessible “closer” together, they by contrast impose a physical and conversational distance from people in close proximity. Law (2001) makes a similar point with regard to mass transit: “A curious effect of the development of mass transit systems is that as the distance between communities closes, the distance between individuals within those communities widens” (p. 20). Furthermore, I fully acknowledge that the internet has the power to facilitate the formation of political movements and that this is a noteworthy development. Recall the “Meet-ups” from the 2004 Presidential election and the emergence of online political activist groups like MoveOn. As with any complex social phenomenon, there are tensions and contradictions.

See Virtanen (2007, February 7): NY law would ban iPod listening, phone calls when crossing street.

It is no coincidence that a book by Debord’s Situationist compatriot, Jean Baudrillard, makes an appearance near the beginning of the film: Neo pulls a hollowed out book from his shelf—Simulacra and Simulation (1994). The concept of “simulation” is in some ways analogous to Debord’s “spectacle.”
Fostering Spectatorship: The World of the Spectacle

In the village, social spheres of influence and knowledge of the world are limited to a small geographical range. Villagers’ knowledge of the world comes almost exclusively from their interactions with each other and stories from the past. Villagers sustain themselves by managing their own survival and civic affairs without reliance upon entities operating outside the village (utility companies and factories producing consumer items, for example).

Since the emergence of the society of spectacle, however, it is virtually impossible to consider any issue of import that does not come to us through spectacles. Much of what we call "knowledge" has been presented to us through mass media in one form or another (e.g., TV and radio news, documentaries, published works, the internet)—information about economics, politics, violence, crime, education, science, health, sexuality, ecology, and technology. In fact, commonplace phenomena such as "the planet," "society," "the economy," "culture," and "the environment" are made possible by means of the spectacles of mass society. These phenomena, previously inconceivable in their current forms before mass communication, have become taken-for-granted abstractions that now appear to be “real” rather than symbolic constructions. As with the pods caught up in the matrix, we also show the tendency to relate to spectacles as if they are real. We have “seen” so many things we think we “know,” and consider real, but in fact have never directly experienced, and in many cases, never will.
The inability to discern phenomena that are not infiltrated by the spectacle speaks to its power.  

The proliferation of spectacles, entertainment, distractions, infotainment, and “infoganda,” particularly as it relates to "the economy" and "politics," is presented as coming from "outside" ourselves, and therefore beyond our control. The spectacle thus organizes social, economic, and interpersonal relationships by constructing images and concepts of reality that encourage spectatorship—a passive stance toward world events. This results in alienation:

The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere. (¶30)

Spectacles make us all "spectators" to postmodern life. Thus, spectatorship is separation in action. By encouraging separation and spectatorship, and discouraging connection and participation, the spectacle exhibits Maslow’s (1977) “methods to reduce”—those opposed to Politics 3:

Any method is good that fosters communication, understanding, intimacy, trust, openness, honesty, self-exposure, feedback, awareness, compassion, tolerance, acceptance, friendliness, love, and that reduces suspicion, paranoid expectations, fear, feelings of being different, enmity, defensiveness, envy, contempt, insult, condescension, polarization, splitting, alienation, and separation. (p. 16)

Spectatorship is no clearer (or no more poignant) than in the ways political reality is experienced undemocratically on a mass scale. For the most part, people relate to politics as spectators, not participants. Making matters worse, politics, like religion, is verboten in conversation, and when the subject is

7 This point is particularly germane to the discussion of media and cults (Chapter Four, above). While few people may have had any contact with "cults," everybody "knows" they are "bad."
broached, it is often accompanied by resignation: “I can’t do anything about it, anyway—so why talk about it? It’s too upsetting.” Spectatorship is fatal to democracy because it discourages participation, democracy’s driving force.

“Unspectacular” Antidote: LGAT Communication Training

If the world of the spectacle creates separation, it stands to reason that Landmark’s work could have devastating effects. Landmark’s work goes against the grain of the spectacle as it also goes against the grain of the human tendency to hide ourselves from others. By emphasizing what is possible and promoting individual responsibility, interpersonal connection, openness, reciprocity, and compassion, Landmark’s work undermines the hegemony of superficiality, cynicism, resignation, suspicion, and fear that pervades our culture. One could therefore say Landmark Education is an “unspectacular” antidote to the society of the spectacle in that it transforms separation enforced by the spectacle into direct experience and connectedness. Enacted globally, these processes would have the potential to overcome separation and spectatorship, and ultimately transform the spectacle into something in line with Politics 3.

The potential transformation of Earth—into a place where people live in peace, nature flourishes, and everyone gets a chance to express their potential—would put several important industries or segments of industries in severe jeopardy (namely, weapons manufacturers and oil companies). For those industries, the stakes are very high. It should therefore be no surprise that resistance shows up in the form of internet chatter, TV dramas, and newsmagazines.
Recuperating Threats

To maintain itself as the dominant system of social relations and representation, and to continue its endless production of pseudo-needs in the form of ever-emerging consumer goods, the society of spectacle must prevent radical change: “Wherever there is independent representation, the spectacle reconstitutes itself” (¶18). Thus, the spectacle resists transformation. When cultural forms appear to threaten its social control, the spectacle must recover from such perceived threats, counteract them, and regain its former condition. The spectacle achieves this through recuperation: “To survive, the spectacle must have social control. It can recuperate a potentially threatening situation by shifting ground, creating dazzling alternatives—or by embracing the threat, making it safe and then selling it back to us” (Law, 2001, p. 13). Thus, recuperation takes two forms: distracting from threats or incorporating and neutralizing them.

Con-text takes the first form of recuperation (see below). In the latter form, "radical" ideas, images, and movements are commoditized and incorporated within mainstream society, as was punk rock style (Hebdige, 1979), where signifiers of rebellion against the status quo became fashion statements (e.g., designer safety pins, pre-torn blue jeans, and spiky hair).

Landmark Education poses a threat to the social, economic, and industrial forces that produce and sustain the serious dangers to our planet (discussed in Chapter Six). Because of this, the spectacle must recuperate (from) this threat to
survive. The spectacle, as a context in which we find ourselves, resists the global transformation that is possible in work like that of Landmark Education.

**Discouraging Participation, Recuperating Con-Text**

I suggest that *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*’s Con-text is an instance of recuperation in the society of spectacle. That is, the spectacle takes something with potential to disrupt the system of domination and, through the production of a mass-mediated spectacle, provides a dazzling alternative that neutralizes the disruption and helps maintain the status quo. Thus, Con-text is a product of the society of the spectacle.

Con-text, in ways consistent with Law’s (2001) definition of recuperation, shifts the ground of Landmark’s transformative work and replaces its potentially positive effects with a dazzling “story” involving a money-making cult, replete with deceit, brainwashing, torture, murder, and suicide. *Criminal Intent,* by breeding fear, suspicion, and paranoia—those very things that work against Politics 3—fosters separation, and keeps people from pursuing ways that bring them closer together. Thanks to Con-context, people don’t need to directly experience the Landmark Forum—they can watch a TV show about it instead, thereby saving them the trouble from being ripped off, brainwashed, and murdered.

Recall the discussion above (in Chapter Three) that there appears to be resistance to and criticism of the one-to-one connection between people used to market Landmark’s work (i.e., “sharing” and “enrollment”), and that this is viewed strangely as suspicious, while mass mediated advertising and marketing methods are somehow more acceptable. This is one example of how the
mechanisms of the spectacle have become “natural” while pre-spectacle methods are now strange.

From my perspective, the world created by Con-text is *topsy turvy*. Debord writes, “In a world which *really is topsy turvy*, the true is a moment of the false” (¶9), which is to say that the society of spectacle is a society of contradictions. *Con-text* is one of those contradictions. Through *Con-text*, Landmark Education’s work, including its apparent impact on participants’ communication (the ground upon which it functions), is shifted, and in its place, the spectacle substitutes a “shiny object,” a flashy alternative to Landmark’s work. *Con-Text* may itself be seen as a spectacular “text” that cons people into associating groups who promote Politics 3 methods with murderous, money-grubbing cults. *Con-Text* is therefore one way the spectacle distracts people from methods that promote Politics 3. “The spectacle,” writes Debord, “obliterates the boundaries between true and false by driving all lived truth below the real presence of fraud ensured by the organization of appearance” (¶219).

**Spectacular Constraints: A Drag on Transformation and Possibility**

When separation, pseudo-needs, spectacles, and spectatorship dominate, transformation is effectively contained. These forces oppose Politics 3 by engendering fear, suspicion, alienation, and separation. The public conversations I have examined in this study, as products of the society of spectacle, constitute a *drag* on global transformation. “‘What is possible,’” Law (2001) writes, “has come to mean ‘what is possible within the society of the Spectacle’” (p. 5).
Con-text exploits and reproduces the vulnerabilities of contemporary culture. The popularity of all three Law & Order franchises is indicative of a mass mediated culture obsessed with violence and treachery. The gap between the spectacular representation of LGATs and lived experience constitutes a tremendous constraint on the possibility for implementing LGAT communication practices by discouraging participation in growth experiences like those offered by Landmark Education. The spectacle’s power to recuperate threats further magnifies the scope of this constraint. Con-text thus reveals a challenge facing Politics 3: The very qualities of Politics 3 communication—reciprocal, compassionate, open—are the very ones the spectacle impedes, and will go to great lengths to neutralize. Thus, the relationship between public conversations about unusual social phenomena (like Landmark Education) and the social phenomena aimed at transforming them is one of resistance and recuperation: Con-text, a mass mediated public conversation (spectacle), embodies this relationship. The spectacular chasm between Con-text and lived experience functions to prevent potentially radical alterations in the societal structures that make such public conversations possible.

Transformation in Time?

In the face of the constraints the spectacle imposes, does Politics 3 communication, as manifested by long-term LGAT participants in courses offered by Landmark Education, have the power to transform the planet before it is too late? In this section, I try to answer this question and consider the outlook for
LGAT communication practices solving deep-rooted global problems while there is still time.

It’s All Good (in the Long Run)

It is clear from my fieldwork that LGAT training can and does make a significant contribution to the lives of individuals and their families: a father forgives his eighteen year-old son for dropping out of high school and embraces him as an adult; a thirty-five year-old man becomes closer to his family; a husband and wife with children work things out in their marriage; a daughter lets go of a ten-year grudge she had with her father. It is not hard to imagine that when people forgive each other, get along better, love each other more, and treat each other with greater kindness and respect, such results can impact children and therefore future generations. This may reduce violence, increase cooperation, and promote shared problem-solving. Following this logic, such training has the power to produce a culture marked by openness, reciprocation, and compassion, a culture future generations can grow into. Once achieved, these practices form part of the culture and can become second-nature.8

Applied globally, Landmark’s work could have the following effect: Transformed interpersonal relations could lead to a greater sense of interdependence. This in turn could produce a heightened awareness of the urgent needs facing civilization, resulting in increased civic activity. People would no longer be spectators, but rather become full participants in the political process. Non-elites would have more influence in managing their own affairs and

8 It was this desire for a transformed culture that Jeff and Melanie expressed in my interviews with them (see Chapter Eight).
the needs of their communities. Our system of governance would become more transparent. Real human needs could be met instead of pseudo-needs. Once such false needs are exposed, people might focus on what’s truly important.

If enough people are trained to employ the communication practices of these long-term Landmark participants, we can transform the problems that plague our planet and reverse our destructive path. This is particularly possible given that the revolution in communication technology has enabled increasingly larger groups of people to communicate with each other in real time. LGAT training would therefore be a contribution to the kind of global transformation Maslow describes.

*Is There a Long Run? (Two Moods)*

Even if this is the case, how does this long-term strategy square with the reality of our contemporary situation? Is a long-term strategy of cultural transformation (such as that exemplified by the work of Landmark Education and expressed by Maslow in *Politics 3*) sufficient to bring about the kind of change that will assure the survival of our way of life and prevent needless widespread suffering? As I close this study, I am experiencing an alternation of two moods: pessimism and possibility.

*Mood One: “Don’t Rock the Boat”*

In a 1948 address to the Dominican monks of Latour-Maubourg, Camus said he was optimistic about human nature, but pessimistic about human destiny (1972, p. 73). I remember reading this in high school and it rang true then as now. Given the global headlong drive toward resource depletion and material
acquisition at the expense of our environment and human development, compounded by a seemingly totalizing spectacle that distracts us from solving these problems, it’s looking like continued survival of civilization as we know it may not be in the cards. Being pessimistic may therefore appear justified.

If the past is any teacher, there’s not much hope. History is filled with people who gave their lives pursuing a transformed world. Cultural hierarchies equilibrate in the face of disturbances by weeding out or neutralizing threats to the prevailing order. The spectacle does this through recuperation. Particularly in light of the assassinations of the 1960s (Jack and Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X), I believe this “lesson” has had a huge impact on quashing dissent toward those institutions and practices that have produced our seemingly intractable global problems. Thanks to contemporary communication technologies, however, murder is not even required to ruin champions of freedom and transformation. These days, people can be smeared with the greatest of ease. Con-text is an example of this kind of smear.⁹

Making matters worse, escalating attacks on constitutional rights, increasingly sophisticated surveillance techniques (and a greater latitude to use them), the suspension of habeas corpus, and the refusal of federal courts to hear

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⁹ Another example may be found in the 2004 presidential candidacy of Howard Dean. Dean, hardly a “radical” politician, was once thought to be headed for the Democratic nomination. His chances were obliterated, however, by his Iowa concession speech known as “the scream,” which was played on television an estimated 633 times in the four days following the Iowa caucuses. What was not widely known at that time (and would have been too late once revealed to make a difference) was that the news clip’s audio used the sound from Dean’s unidirectional microphone, which filtered out the crowd noise and made it sound like he was shouting unnecessarily. Also, the news video framed out the raucous, screaming crowd. On the other hand, video taken from the audience revealed that Dean could barely be heard in the auditorium. The overplaying of this "scream" may be thought of as a form of “death by spectacle.”
complaints of human rights abuses over concerns about revealing “state secrets,” among others, are all justified in the “war on terror” (today’s version of the Cold War). 10 This new “war” exploits fear and thereby helps maintain the dominance of the military-industrial complex. The message is, “Don’t rock the boat,” and it’s coming in loud and clear.

It seems that if people are unwilling to give their lives, sacrifice their freedom, or risk their livelihood to make a difference in today’s troubled world (like Martin Luther King did, for example)—without at the same time trying to kill other people—it’s a bleak picture for a culture that must save humanity from itself. When I first began my “Landmark journey” nine years ago, I was optimistic, but the more I have explored the subject, and, as contemporary events unfold, I have serious doubts about the potential for LGATs to “do the job.” 11

I believe Landmark communication training allows people to create a space where possibilities—like peace, love, and intimacy—can grow. Landmark’s training also promotes personal responsibility for creating these outcomes. It does not, however, explicitly advocate a political agenda or “officially” identify particular issues of planetary transformation, nor does its training necessarily translate into social or political activism in terms of electoral or civic participation. 12

On the other hand, I have taken numerous Landmark courses in which the course leader suggested examples of planet-altering goals, like ending war, 10 Consider, e.g., the USA Patriot Act, Military Commissions Act, and El-Masri v. U.S. (2007).
11 At the time of this writing, the U.S. was entering the fifth year of its war on Iraq and appeared poised to attack Iran.
12 Note that none of the participants in this study described themselves as activists.
starvation, poverty, disease, and pollution for all time. Indeed, I have anecdotally learned of numerous projects by Landmark participants that have contributed to a more peaceful and loving planet. These do not always lead to increased electoral participation, however. Without such activism, I am not sure that improving interpersonal communication in the ways practiced by an increasing number of LGAT participants in and of itself is enough to transform our predicament in the next, say, 50 years, for example.  

(This is not to say, however, that it is impossible.)

There are those in a better position to impact the global problems of energy shortages, violence, pandemic disease, starvation, and environmental degradation now destroying our planet and civilization. Unless elite decision-makers solve these problems themselves, however, we are headed down a disastrous path.

In an ideal world—or at least one with fewer disturbing problems—perhaps the work of Landmark Education and the building of intimacy groups would be sufficient to transform the planet before it becomes uninhabitable. After all, Maslow believed that, given the choice, self-actualized individuals would choose active participation in social life consistent with the commitments of a democratic society. It seems to me, however, that the urgency of our crisis requires more direct and active participation to stem the tide of immanent apocalypse than a grassroots transformation of interpersonal relationships, even if this is indeed a global effort.

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13 Corresponding to the point when petroleum reserves may run out. See also, e.g., Diamond (2005).
Recall that Maslow suggested organizing society hierarchically using T-groups on a global scale (see Chapter Six). This would appear a missing piece in the puzzle that Landmark’s training does not provide. Unfortunately, therefore, without this global re-organization via T-groups, given that irreversible environmental destruction has already taken place, I do not believe that Politics 3 communication in the form of LGAT communication practices alone is sufficient to transform the planet before conditions make it unlivable.

I would conclude, then, that while increased practice in the kind of communication behaviors displayed by Landmark participants described here can contribute to a long-term cultural and global transformation, it is not sufficient to solve the urgent problems of global destruction we now face. In addition to LGAT communication, our problems require social and political activism, combined with a progressive re-organization of society that enables small groups to govern themselves.

*Mood Two: Pessimism is Counterrevolutionary*

The problems facing our planet are so vast, it can be overwhelming for people to dwell on them. It is no surprise that people get resigned and cynical (myself included). But resigning from the situation is a *decision*, and therefore based in the past: “Such things haven’t happened in the past, so they won’t happen in the future.” This is a dead end. Recall the emphasis Chloe noted in the focus group about choice and options (Chapter Nine). As someone trained in Landmark’s methods, I know I have a choice: I can be pessimistic or I can invent a possibility.
Since I cannot prove the answer to my impossible question—Is LGAT communication enough?—I am impelled to declare an opinion. Even if my opinion is reasoned and persuasive, it literally makes no difference. Pessimism is useless. Declaring that LGAT communication is insufficient would contribute nothing to global transformation and cannot produce the desired result if global transformation is the goal.

My pessimism, regardless of its "validity," or "reasonableness," is born out of a particular context from which humans typically approach problems. We tend to view problems in the following way: "This shouldn’t be," which is another way to say, "There is something wrong here." As such, it is an opinion, and not a possibility. Furthermore, a complaint is not a constructive engagement or pursuit of possible solutions.

“Something’s wrong” can easily result in cynicism and resignation (as it has in the above section). When the context of the “problem” (global destruction) is transformed from “This shouldn’t be” to “In life there are problems” (as is suggested in the Landmark Forum), a shift in mood results. Rather than concluding, “It’s too late,” one is free to move on to “What’s missing?” or “What’s next?” In other words, taking the “wrong” out of these massive problems can produce a constructive attitude that considers steps necessary to achieve the goals of planetary transformation.

I recall the first time I learned to apply Landmark’s methodology to environmental issues. Driving down Fowler Avenue in Tampa, and lamenting the wide asphalt street strewn with strip malls, the landscape appeared to me a
wasteland. This is a pretty typical scene in Florida, but it nevertheless agitated me (I guess I was in a mood): “There is definitely something wrong here—I don’t care what Landmark says!” Still, I was curious about how I could come at the issue differently, so I asked my Landmark Seminar Leader about it. She said, “Maybe instead of looking at it as ‘There is something wrong,’ you could ask ‘What is missing?’” I thought about it, and the first thing I thought was, “Trees! Trees are missing!” Of course, that’s not the only thing that’s missing, but when I saw that trees were missing, I shifted from being my complaint to seeing what could be provided that would make a difference. The result was more constructive because it took the (symbolic) “wrongness” out of my complaint. While this did not lead to taking action and planting trees on Fowler Avenue, however, it taught me that I could still retain both a critical perspective and the benefits of my Landmark training.

Forwarding the Action

In Landmark courses, leaders make a request of participants that they “forward the action,” which means being attentive to and current with the immediate conversation taking place, thinking about or answering the question asked, and moving the conversation forward. Moving past pessimism is a way of “forwarding the action."

In addition to promoting Politics 3 communication, I believe one key to forwarding the action lies in active participation of the citizenry. For example, I believe we should aim for 100% voter turnout. Having a truly representative

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14 I am reminded of a bumper sticker: “Urban Sprawl: Cut down all the trees and name streets after them.”
democracy requires participation. We each must take responsibility (not to say “blame”) for the current state of the planet. By not being part of the solution, we actively or passively contribute to Earth’s destruction. Without such participation, one cannot expect the “system” to change itself. Thorough planetary transformation requires empowered individuals taking responsibility for their own lives and for the planet we live on. Achieving an increased level of responsibility would hopefully lead people to take an active role in their own governance—a stark contrast to contemporary political practice. If anything could get people to see that we have created our predicament through particular conversations of cynicism, resignation, despair, and pessimism; that we are all in this mess together; and that we have the power to transform our conversations, it would be the training that Landmark Education provides. Regardless of the particular paths we take, in the face of fear, uncertainty, cynicism, despair, pessimism, and resignation, we must push forward and create a sustainable world of our choosing together.

Bearing Witness as Academic Practice

As I close this study, I reflect on the role I play as a researcher in the society of spectacle.

Debord writes that the function of the spectacle is to make history forgotten within culture (Debord, 1983, ¶192), to make things appear as if they had always been this way.\(^{15}\) If, according to Debord, "critical theory is the

\(^{15}\) That the question—“How did I ever survive without a cell phone?”—ever gets asked is an example of this forgotten history.
language of contradiction" (¶204), pointing out contradictions in social life can actively resist the forgetting.

In this Epilogue, I have attempted to expose some of the contradictions in the society of spectacle by comparing Criminal Intent’s Con-text to Landmark Education and lived experience. I have thus tried to show how one might dislodge power from hegemonic forces. As Foucault (1984) states,

It’s not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power), but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time. (pp. 74-75)

My purpose has been to expose contradictions, to detour and de-familiarize readers from the “default” setting of our “knowledge” base: mass mediated public conversations designed to keep things in place.

In light of all that which has preceded it, an ironic contradiction of this discussion is that Debord’s spectacle is itself a mass-mediated symbolic construction (via the publishing industry). The spectacle does not exist outside its creation through communication. It is therefore subject to the same kind of deconstruction as is our everyday experience by means of Landmark’s methodology (distinguishing “what happens” versus the story we make up about it). It is important to keep this in mind, lest we “reify” the spectacle in such a way as to produce yet another loss of power.

The current study thus embodies the contradictions of the spectacle. As I consider these ideas, I see how my work as a researcher displays its own contradictions. I feel a responsibility to examine solutions to global problems. But to what effect? The nature of such an enterprise is problematic. On one hand, as
a critical observer of culture, my own practice affirms spectacular power. On the other hand, by analyzing the communication of Landmark Education participants, and comparing this to the treatment Landmark gets in *Con-text*, I expose contradictions in the society of spectacle.

By exploring an unusual sociological phenomenon—LGATs—I perform surveillance on the spectacle so it can "keep tabs" on itself, to improve its strategies of domination. Chomsky (1989) describes academics and journalists as cultural "commissars." As academics, we ensure loyalty to the state by teaching and reproducing the ruling ideology to future elites. Stallybrass and White (1986) might suggest that my criticism is a reflection of my own middle class subject position, and I would have to agree: "Academic work reveals its discursive mirroring of the subject-formation of the middle class." Buck-Morss (1986) and Debord (1983) also acknowledge the contradictory nature of academic criticism.

The dilemma of the bourgeois intellectual in the society of spectacle is threefold. First, writing about global problems expresses a desire for their solution, but does not itself produce the solution; only political action can. As Debord writes, "It is obvious that no idea can lead beyond the existing spectacle. To effectively destroy the society of the spectacle, what is needed is men putting a practical force into action" (¶203). Secondly, the self-perpetuating, seemingly closed system of the spectacle has the power to absorb and neutralize disruptive effects from the academy through recuperation. Third, by declaring the work of Landmark Education to be a threat to the spectacle, thus exposed, I invite the
unintended consequence of further attacks on its work. Nevertheless, even though it is absolutely necessary, focusing attention on issues of contradiction also serves spectacular power by performing "surveillance"—"the specialized science of domination…watch[es] over the self-regulation of every level of the process" (¶42).

At the same time, by pointing out the chasm between public conversations about Landmark Education and lived experience, I expose the contradictions of the spectacle. Hebdige (1993) writes that observation can establish a third space between observer and observed, and that there is value simply in writing and bearing witness:

Part of the value of a term like "bearing witness" resides in the emphasis it places…on the attainable integrity of what will always be partial and imperfect individual testimony, on the importance of individuals taking responsibility for resisting (if only by recording and attending to) the multiple injustices perpetrated in temporal proximity to their lives. (p. 207)

By positioning myself between Con-text and my own experience of Landmark Education participants, I am no longer merely a spectator, and even if my testimony is reappropriated by the spectacle for its own purposes, there is value in the act of bearing witness to contradictions. While overcoming "spectatorship" is perhaps impossible as long as the current social and economic arrangement holds sway, one may nevertheless attempt to subvert its domination and undermine its authority.

I offer this study to readers, resistant to and complicit with the powers I critique. In the society of spectacle, I must live with the contradictions of my enterprise. I do so necessarily with a "leap of faith," a belief that, by forcing a
textual confrontation, something that might otherwise go unnoticed finds its way into the conversation. By writing about the contradictions of public conversations about transformational movements, I try to illuminate social and cultural forces that have become so familiar as to be unconscious; by critiquing Con-text, I provide an alternate perspective. The possibility of this critique lies in part that someone will read this and view negative portrayals of LGATs with some skepticism and think for themselves.

According to Aronowitz (1987, p. 469), “In the absence of a popular democratic movement…and offering alternatives to the dominant culture, the weight of mass audience culture on the structure of consciousness becomes ever more powerful.” This requires that the spectacle in which we are caught be deconstructed. I hope this study has contributed to such a deconstruction.
REFERENCES


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Cults, religion, and violence (pp. 42-56). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


LANDMARK EDUCATION CORPORATION
CHARTER

Landmark Education is a global enterprise whose purpose is to empower and enable people and organizations to generate and fulfill new possibilities. We create and provide programs, services, and paradigms that produce extraordinary results for our customers.

Our mission is to have the power and magic of transformation alive and real for all people.

We conduct ourselves and our enterprise from the following fundamental values that are at the heart of who we are:

The Opportunity to Make a Difference:
The profound privilege of causing and participating in one's own transformation, the transformation of others, and the transformation of life itself.

Self-Expression:
The freedom to be; giving oneself fully to all of life.

Creating From Nothing:
Generating possibilities from possibility itself, free from the constraints of the past.

Responsibility:
Responsibility begins with the willingness to be cause in the matter of one's life. Ultimately, it is a context from which one chooses to live.

Integrity:
The state of being whole and complete; honoring one's word as oneself.

We promise to be true to our purpose, to accomplish our mission, to operate consistent with our values, and to generate our enterprise in service of our customers.

This is who we are.

This is what you can count on.
APPENDIX B: LANDMARK EDUCATION CORPORATION’S “OUR VISION FOR SERVING OUR CUSTOMERS”

Figure 3. Landmark Education Corporation’s “Our Vision for Serving Our Customers”.

OUR VISION FOR SERVING OUR CUSTOMERS

People and enterprises alive-with freedom,
Operating with power,
Creating and fulfilling new worlds of opportunity.

PEOPLE producing extraordinary results and dealing powerfully with the challenges of life.

People experiencing and expressing fulfillment, well-being, and joy — in their lives, their relationships, their families, their work, and their communities.

Individuals designing and living lives that make a difference.

ENTERPRISES thriving through fulfilling their purposes, creating and realizing opportunities, and achieving new levels of performance in a world of increasing challenges.

Organizations generating unprecedented futures that inspire people to committed action, call forth their leadership, and empower them as full stakeholders.

Enterprises demonstrating new possibilities for people and organizations to work successfully together.

NEW WORLDS OF OPPORTUNITY —
being created, calling forth action, being fulfilled.

We are committed that the benefits generated for our customers in the fulfilment of this vision create a positive value for all people and for society itself.
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

1. Tell us about yourself (general background).

2. Discuss the history of your involvement with LEC. How many LEC programs have you done? Have you been involved with similar programs (est, Lifespring, et al.)? Which ones? How would you compare them to LEC courses?

3. What has happened out of your participation in LEC programs?

4. Have the programs changed you in any way?

5. What is your evidence for any change you have observed (before/after participation)?

6. Why do you continue to do these programs? Have you ever considered discontinuing your participation? Under what circumstances could you see yourself discontinue your participation?

7. To what extent does a desire for success, effectiveness, and the like motivate your choice to participate?

8. Where does LEC participation work in your life? Where does it not work?

9. Do you regard Landmark as a cult? Do you feel you have been brainwashed? Why do you think people make such claims?

10. Is there an analogous cultural form that resembles LEC? How would you compare and contrast LEC with a church or religion?

11. Do you have religious beliefs? If so, what are they? Do you practice any religion?
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT (CONTINUED)

12. What values and what vision of politics would you say your participation in LEC programs reflects?
APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTION GUIDE

Question Guide

Introduction

Thank you and welcome.

I am so incredibly grateful to each of you for being here and supporting me in this project. This project would not be possible without your participation.

For my dissertation, I am looking at long-term participation in personal development courses. You were chosen because you have more than three years of experience participating in Landmark Education programs, and I am interested in hearing about your experiences.

You will note that I am using three types of recording equipment. The audio cassette is to record the sound for the transcriber, and the video camera is used to help me better report nonverbal behaviors such as nodding of the head and also as a back-up in case something goes wrong with the audio cassette. The micro cassette recorder is the would-be “fail-safe.” I did not want to leave anything to chance!

As I informed you, all recordings will be erased and destroyed after the project is complete. Also, as I have told you, your names will not be used in the report.

Here’s a brief overview of what will happen today.

During this introductory portion, I’ll lay out some guidelines and ground rules, then we’ll start the discussion. About halfway through the discussion, we’ll take a ten minute break—and then we’ll come back to complete the discussion. Depending on the amount of time left, we can complete the afternoon with an informal discussion and answer any questions you might have.

There is paper and a pen in front of you. If you wish, you may take notes if you think of something you want to say that you might otherwise forget.

While called by many a “focus group,” I’d like you to think about what we’re doing today more as a group discussion, and you four are the group. I will ask questions, do some sharing, and attempt to gain clarity and detail, and I want you to be responsible for the discussion.

So, there are a few ground rules…

1. Please turn all phones, pagers, and PDA alarms completely off. Even if phones are on vibrate, the signal will interference with the recording.
APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTION GUIDE (CONTINUED)

2. One person speaks at a time

3. Speak up and speak clearly

4. No side conversations

5. Everyone participates with no one dominating

6. The group is responsible for generating its own conversations

7. If you feel someone is not speaking enough, feel free to ask them a question and get them involved.

8. And, in general feel free to ask each other questions in the course of the discussion.

While you are responsible for generating the conversation, I am accountable for ensuring that the discussion reflects the richness of your experience. I may therefore need to interrupt at times. Vague comments will not provide the group adequate information. So I may ask you to clarify points when necessary. There are no right or wrong answers, just different points of view. Please express yourself—even, and especially when it differs from what others have said. If you find yourself having a totally different set of experiences, or a different opinion than the rest of the group, I want to hear it.

I am here to learn from you, so it is important that everyone fully participate.

Does anyone have any questions?

INTRODUCTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Let’s start by introducing ourselves.

Please say who you are, what you do in life, how long you’ve been participating in some way with Landmark Education, and anything else you’d like to say to be present.

I'll begin.
Begin the discussion

Did anyone look at the interview transcripts?

If so, did you have any comments?

First topic

I'd like for each of you to please name an area of life that is important to you.

I'll write them down on my fancy flip chart here…

We’re only going to name four, so please take a moment to think of what’s most important to you.

[PAUSE.]

Melanie, what is an area of life that is important to you?

[List on flipchart]

Raymond, Amanda, Jeff, etc.

All right, thank you for those.

OK, for each of these four areas, I'd like each of you to share things from your lives in those areas—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Let’s speak about what your life has been like in those areas.

I’m very interested in your personal experiences and stories.

When we speak about them, I’m interested in learning about your hardships as well as your victories—like I said, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

PROBE QUESTIONS

For each item mentioned, ask:

• Could you tell me more about your emotional experience of this? How did this experience make you feel?
• Could you tell me more about your physical experience of this?
• What does your body experience in these situations?
• What was the outcome?
• How might it have been before your involvement with Landmark?

When they don’t address snags…
• Describe any bumps in the road.
• What works about that area and what doesn’t work?
• Have there been any surprises?
• Have there been any contradictory experiences?

What similarities and differences do you see between each of your stories?

In our interviews, you each told a story you said had a significant impact on you.

• Jeff: The Wells Fargo Wagon song
• Melanie: The stolen Halloween candy
• Amanda: Your mother passed away when you were 3 years old
• Raymond: You told a story about your son leaving high school

Would you each share your story?

How would you describe the shift between the before and after (you took action in) these situations? [SPEND SOME TIME ON THIS]

Second topic

Let’s talk about identity for a little while.

Who started last time?

1. What does identity mean to you?
2. What role does identity play in your life?
3. When you describe lessons learned, would you say that your identity has been transformed out of the process? If not, why not?

Third topic

I would like to read something to you, get your response to it, and have a conversation about it.
From Abraham Maslow, *Politics 3:*

For grass roots psycho-political organization, our suggestion is that the most basic module (beyond the individual himself) of social organization would be the equivalent of [a small intimacy group, also called a T-group for “training group”], that is a face-to-face, moving toward intimacy and candor, self-exposing and feedback group. This of course might, in various situations, be the extended...blood family. Perhaps one day it will be both; i.e., one day the accepted cement of knitting together a family will be via the T-group techniques and goals. When that is so, there also will have to be these same stresses on honesty, intimacy, authenticity, self-exposure, feedback, as much trust as realistically warranted, and so forth, in all other social organizations in which the individual participates.

In *Politics 3,* Abraham Maslow (1977) proposes a model for transforming our society and our world. In order to effect such transformation, Maslow believes humans must engage regularly in open, honest, reciprocal, and compassionate communication. *Politics 3* is based on the notions that:

1. personal growth and interpersonal relating are both necessary (and in some ways inseparable); and

2. widespread transformation requires increasing the number of small groups engaged in open communication with each other and doing this on a large scale.

According to Maslow, such transformation could be achieved through the progressive organization of society using what he terms small intimacy groups, or T-groups (“training groups”). Through the group process defined by the particular training, T-groups assist participants in becoming self-aware, giving them opportunities to examine how they think about themselves and how they relate to others through their communication. Participants are *trained* to communicate...
APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTION GUIDE (CONTINUED)

experiences without fear, thereby learning how they relate to other people in the process. By doing so, they may obtain insights into their lives, their relationships, and their selves. Maslow suggests that by transforming individuals to be communicative, self-actualized, peace-loving, and compassionate, the entire planet can be transformed.

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First of all, does anyone have any questions about this?

[ANSWER QUESTIONS AND EXPLAIN MASLOW’S THEORY OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATION BASED ON T-GROUPS.]

What relevance, if any, do these ideas have to what we’ve spoken about today?

Probe:
If we extended what you’ve spoken about here today to a global level, what would that be like?

Conclusion

[Last five to ten minutes of the discussion]

Why do you continue to participate after all this time?

If you would, please summarize your thinking on our discussion today.

Is there anything you want to share to be complete?

[The observer may want to ask a question or may want to use this time to check that her notes are correct.]

Time allowing: Discuss Lifton’s “thought reform”

Robert Lifton describes in detail eight methods which he says are used to change people’s minds without their agreement:
APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTION GUIDE (CONTINUED)

- milieu control (controlled relations with the outer world)
- mystic manipulation (the group has a higher purpose than the rest)
- confession (confess past and present sins)
APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP OBSERVATION INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

1. What knowledge, if any, did you have about Landmark Education before you viewed the videotape? What did you know about that? How did you come to know that?

2. What would you like to share about it?

3. Are you curious about anything in particular?

4. How would you characterize the communication of the group?

5. Did you see any contradictions?

6. Did you see any inconsistencies?

7. Do these people appear to be:
   - brainwashed?
   - victims of thought reform? That is, does it appear their minds have been changed without their agreement?

Robert Lifton describes in detail eight methods which he says are used to change people’s minds without their agreement:

   - milieu control (controlled relations with the outer world)
   - mystic manipulation (the group has a higher purpose than the rest)
   - confession (confess past and present sins)
   - self-sanctification through purity (pushing the individual towards a not-attainable perfection)
   - aura of sacred science (beliefs of the group are sacrosanct and perfect)
   - loaded language (new meanings to words, encouraging black-white thinking)
   - doctrine over person (the group is more important than the individual)
   - dispensed existence (insiders are saved, outsiders are doomed)

   - members of a cult?
   - under the undue influence of some authority?

8. You read the Maslow quote. (Review?) I’ll ask you the same thing: What relevance, if any, do these ideas have to what you observed about the focus group?
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An Oklahoma native, Patrick studied intellectual history at the University of Chicago, where he earned his Bachelor of Arts (with honors). He earned his Master’s Degree in Communication from the University of Arkansas. He has presented several papers at professional conferences, and has received various awards for his scholarship. His teaching experience includes public speaking, film criticism, persuasion, communication studies, and family communication. As a graduate student, he founded the University of South Florida’s Graduate and Professional Student Council.

Patrick’s research positions have examined children with Serious Emotional Disturbances, including cultural competency in systems of care practices, case studies of service delivery, and team meeting observations. He is currently Coordinator of Research Programs and Services at the Lawton and Rhea Chiles Center for Healthy Mothers and Babies at the University of South Florida, where he works to promote and improve the state children’s health insurance program.