

Overviews of *The Guru Papers*

by Diana Alstad & Joel Kramer

DIANA: *The Guru Papers* affects people personally and also has far-reaching social implications. Although its major thesis is straightforward, it is also multi-faceted with ramifications that spread far and wide. Though it has a continuity and rationale that builds from start to finish, it is also constructed so readers can follow their thread of interest by dipping into whatever parts draw them, creating their own order. The book is in two parts, comprised of papers that can each to some extent stand alone. Basic themes are approached and examined from different angles, with each paper focusing on a different topic.

Part One examines the most extreme example of one person giving up their power to another—the guru/disciple relationship—as it reveals both extreme and less obvious occurrences of control. “Guru” is used here as a metaphor and archetype for demanding unquestioning obedience while being closed to feedback—meaning, no possible reasoning or evidence will bring any change. This includes anyone who manipulates others under the guise of “knowing what’s best” for them, whether leaders, parents, or lovers.

Since many of our core problems, both personal and global, are tied to authoritarian assumptions so embedded that they are taken for granted, Part Two decodes the authoritarian control concealed in contemporary values and beliefs, including our highest ideals and in such areas as relationships, cults, religion, and morality. Chapters on addiction and love show the insidious nature of authoritarian values and ideologies in the most intimate corners of life, offering new approaches for understanding and overcoming addiction and conflicts within intimacy.

Rooting out authoritarianism in oneself and society is a creative frontier that offers new grounds for hope. Beneath the visible authoritarianism in politics, social structures, and personalities is a far more pervasive, covert authoritarianism hidden in culture, values, and daily life. An “inner authoritarian” is deeply embedded in most people’s minds, in the way

they think, and hiding in the very morality they try to live by. It is transmitted from generation to generation to maintain power through generating fear, inadequacy, and self-mistrust. When people do not trust themselves, they are susceptible to easy manipulation and taking on outrageous and absurd beliefs as they look to others for answers, meaning, and even salvation.

A democracy—and the planet—can only be as democratic as the minds of its people. Many people have become cynical about the potential and even continuance of democracy through seeing its seemingly inherent corruption, misuses and abuses of power. But actually, not only is modern democracy still in its historic infancy with much undeveloped potential, it has been operating from the beginning with a severe handicap: it is still in the thrall of old authoritarian belief systems and worldviews. These mindsets and mentalities have been a insidious and disguised impediment inhibiting democracy’s flowering and needed evolution.

With the concept of hidden authoritarianism as a social virus, *The Guru Papers* unmask and sheds new light on a dangerous blind spot that exists in all cultures. This social virus has handicapped not only current democracies, but much of the world where democracy is at best a vague aspiration. For democracy to take hold and evolve, it is urgent to confront this age-old, self-perpetuating authoritarian social virus at the core of religion, morality and much of civilization. Upon understanding its nature, one begins to see evidence of it in the nooks and crannies of what maintains power and privilege. Authoritarian conditioning lives in mindsets around such core aspects of identity as gender, ethnicity, and religion. Unconsciousness of this social virus helps keep it alive in oneself and others, while awareness of it opens new options and possibilities. When people begin to see the many forms it takes in themselves and society, and begin to glimpse how this builds cages that limit, control and sabotage them, a seed is planted and a process begins that opens up greater degrees of freedom.

JOEL: The purpose of *The Guru Papers* is to help free people's minds and hearts and to instill self-trust, making people less susceptible to those whose main agenda is power over others. The book is considered by many a point of reference as the deepest description of mental and cultural authoritarianism. Its major thesis is that authoritarianism has historically been the glue holding civilizations, societies and families together, and is now the greatest hindrance to viable problem-solving in a world of accelerated change and is a key factor in social disintegration. The book focuses on what it calls the hidden authoritarianism that lies in ideologies, worldviews, unexamined roles, and even in some of the loftiest sounding ideals of prevalent moralities. It distinguishes the difference between legitimate authority and authoritarianism—the latter being simply defined as a feedback-proof person or ideology that claims to know what's best for others.

The Guru Papers sheds light on arenas of power that are not ordinarily examined, both on a personal and societal level. The book's careful arguments show why authoritarianism can no longer hold the world together and is instead breaking it apart. It exposes the inner authoritarian that people use to control themselves and others, and shows why people give up their power and how others get and maintain power. It predicted the rise of fundamentalism worldwide with the ensuing

global morality wars that are polarizing the world: the forces backing tradition (which is fundamentally authoritarian) are blocking those seeking new modes of interacting using creative, critical intelligence. This escalating worldwide battle for people's minds is over basic values. It essentially involves "Who has the right to determine what's right—and on what basis?" That is, what gives anyone the right to do so? The term "morality wars" is not a mere metaphor as they often and increasingly escalate into extreme violence. Their outcome will either free or block the human intelligence necessary to resolve the global crises that our technological cleverness has wrought.

Following unchallengeable authorities or ideologies, including what is often considered "sacred," has generated our current dysfunctional morality. Thus our basic problems are not the inevitable outcome of "human nature," but rather stem from deep authoritarian implants. This means that people are not the problem; the problem lies in our "operating system"—our morality. This is a basis for at least some optimism. Unmasking and decoding hidden authoritarianism can disempower it and increase the range of freedom and possibility. Doing so is essential for our very survival. When people take back the authority that has been unknowingly invested in others, this can unleash the intelligence and care needed to meet the challenges of the times.