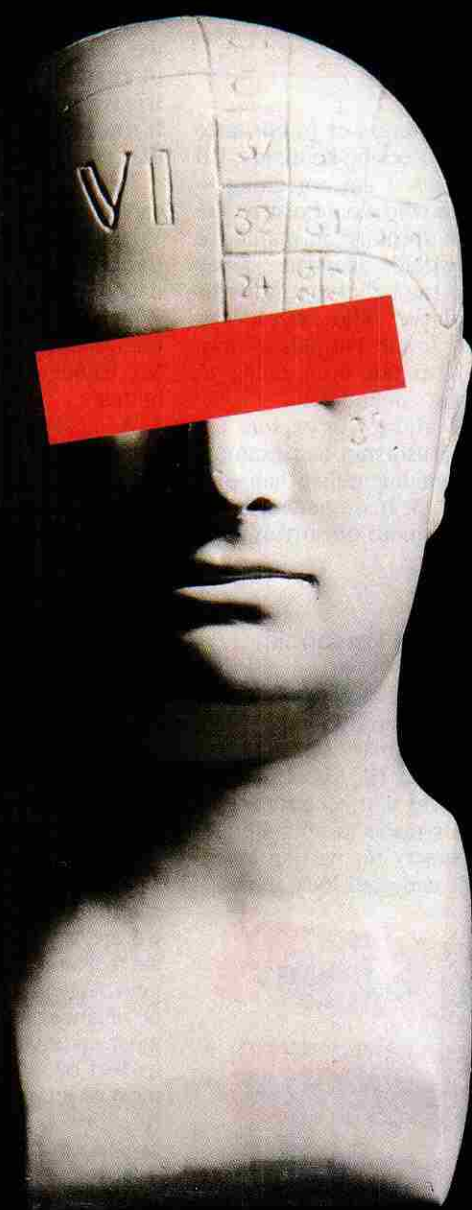


How the Mind of a Censor Works

The Psychology of Censorship



By Dr. Sara Fine

Whether on the Right or the Left, censors share a complex psychological profile.

Like most things in our contentious society, censorship is complicated. We cannot seem to solve it, no matter what we do. The minute we think we have it defined and contained, it slips away from us and we are back to agonizing, arguing, confronting, or sliding away from facing it. It keeps showing up in different disguises or it attacks from unexpected sources; but there it is, staring us in the face again.

Oddly enough, there is little effort to understand the psychological nature of censorship. Where does it come from, and what does it mean? How does it work to keep us feeling safe and sane? Why do some of us "have it" while others don't? We must at least ask these questions or we won't know what we're dealing with.

We need to start with the awareness that censorship is a *behavior* in our psychological repertoire that affects not only our professional lives as librarians, but our personal lives as well. Most of us learned about censorship the hard way—in our families where it is more often than not a way of life. We've all heard it and probably said it: "Don't tell Daddy," or "You're too young to understand,"—or even "Grandma's too

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WAVE A MAGIC WAND

Behind each attempt to remove a book or video, or block an Internet connection is the magic wand belief: if the item is eliminated, the thought is gone.

A friend of mine told me the following story. He was a medical social worker in the army, working with a schizophrenic patient. The patient was doing very well. He had regained some sense of self-esteem, his depression was under control, and he was making plans for the time when he would be released from the hospital.

Then he got a letter from his father. The letter told him what a rotten son he had always been, how he always disappointed his father, how he had never been able to do anything right, how selfish, inadequate, inferior he was—a treatise on everything that was wrong with him. The patient was devastated, and he regressed into his former suicidal state.

At that moment someone came to the door and told the social worker he had an urgent phone call. When the social worker came back he saw that the patient was relaxed and in control, smiling, in fact, as though by some miracle he had regained his well-being. The social worker said, "You seem better. What happened?" "Oh," said the patient, "I tore up the letter and so I'm not all those bad things any more."

So it is with the censor—remove the book and the thought no longer exists.

old to understand." Our families taught us about censorship in the belief that it would keep us healthy, safe, and moral. And they were right. A Censor lives in each of us, keeping our darker impulses under cover. Without it we would run wild, screaming obscenities, committing murder and mayhem, performing private acts in public. We would be arrested or committed—or both. The Censor inside keeps us civilized—and even moral.

The problem is that sometimes the Censor inside turns outward and tries to control not only ourselves, but others as well—preferably *all* others; better yet, it tries to patrol and control its environment. Sometimes the Censor within bursts out and oversteps its mission—loudly, aggressively, relentlessly trying to make its whole universe a safe place, free from threat.

I'd like to tell you what I'm *not* going to write about. I'm not going to write about the legal or moral issues involved in censorship. I'm not going to discuss its effects on our democratic way of life and what will happen if we pass—or don't pass—certain legislation in ALA

Council or in Congress or in our state government. I'll describe no trends; I'll quote no statistics. I am not going to argue with those who would restrict the neo-Nazis from speaking in public, or those who would legislate away pornography in the belief that it harms women, or those who would—or wouldn't—ban Louis Farrakhan from the platform. I'm not even going to mention the First Amendment.

Instead, this article will explore the personality of censorship and examine it as a human dynamic rather than simply as a social evil. If we better understand it, we can more effectively deal with it.

The Authoritarian Personality

Is the Censor born that way? To begin to answer the question I'd like to introduce you to an imaginary Mr. Jefferson Hamilton Righteous III. Mr. Righteous may be familiar to you because of the many visits he's made to your library. He has a propensity for writing letters to your trustees and your local newspa-

per condemning a book on your shelves, a program you've planned, or a policy you've proposed. Mr. Righteous is now in his mid-40s, married to his childhood sweetheart, and father of four children. He is considered a "good family man" and is strongly vocal against sex or AIDS education in school. In fact, when it was pointed out to him that 13 percent of girls in the local high school are pregnant and a full 60 percent are sexually active, Mr. Righteous's response was, "Well, why would we want to interest the other 40 percent of our teenagers in sex?"

Personality theory and social psychology research suggest that Mr. Righteous is the classic "authoritarian personality." Although he doesn't really exist in this extreme form—what follows is merely a fictitious composite—there is a little of Mr. Righteous in every censor.

When we encounter someone whose arguments are dogmatic and simplistic, we are probably dealing with an authoritarian personality, even if the person is simplistically *against* censorship. It's not the politics that tells the tale. It's the *style*.

From his reactions and attitudes, we can assume he is afraid of something. Whether his fear is based on a real threat, an exaggeration of some actual danger, or an unconscious reaction to some deep and hidden black impulse is not important. What is important is that Mr. Righteous is reacting to something he fears.

A most basic premise about human behavior is that each human being, like everything in our natural environment, is primarily concerned with *homeostasis*, with balance. Anything out of balance in the physical world will try to right itself and regain its balance, just as water will seek its own level. Whether we are dealing with physics or biology or human behavior, a human being must maintain balance or regain it if it's lost. When you're dizzy you don't eat; when the earth seems to be spinning you don't think about being thirsty. Before our basic drives, before our struggle to survive, our bodies automatically adjust themselves for balance.

This phenomenon is true psychologically as well as physiologically. When we are psychologically out of balance, we feel anxiety, fear, panic, anger—even guilt. When we are psychologically out of balance, the human psyche has the most creative mechanisms for making us feel okay again. While we think of most of these as negative, they are really efforts to keep ourselves in balance: resistance, defensiveness, rationalization, aggression, censorship—all are defense mechanisms against some threat.

**A Censor lives in each of us,
keeping our darker impulses
under cover.**

Authoritarians tend to see threats everywhere,

from dirt to disease

to armed conspiracy.

While we may be aware of this dynamic *intellectually*, it is very hard for us to deal with it in real life.

It's All About Control

Let's try looking a little deeper. Assume that the real issue is not about values and beliefs or free speech and intellectual freedom. Maybe it's all about power. Stephen King, no stranger to the censor, wrote, "I think that censorship is always a power trip. What is at the bottom is about who's on top."

Now, back to Mr. Righteous. The authoritarian has a great need to control; that's obvious. But, it's not that simple. The authoritarian personality also has a flip side. While authoritarians have a strong desire to exert power, they have an equally strong need to *submit* to power. The classic example of the authoritarian personality is the stereotypical Nazi who is both authoritarian *and* profoundly submissive to authority, who with deep conviction justifies his acts of brutal power as "only doing what he was commanded to do."

There are two other dynamics at play with authoritarians: resentment of weakness and fear of ambiguous situations.

The authoritarian deeply resents his own feelings of weakness, an emotion that often comes out in hostility and aggressiveness toward people he sees as deviants, inferiors, or weaklings. He also tends to view ambiguous situations—things that are not black or white, good or evil, clean or dirty, legal or illegal—as threatening.

Then there is his morbid fascination with sex. Mr. Righteous would never admit it but if he fits the profile, he has a very active imagination. He fantasizes about explicit sexual activity, usually among the despised deviant groups. By projecting his own erotic fantasies onto other people, he can safely enjoy sexual fantasies while at the same time moralizing about them. It is a brilliant psychological ploy for having his cake and eating it, too—for keeping his human needs in balance with the imperatives of his personality.

To regain balance in any of these situations, the authoritarian adopts a set of attitudes and beliefs that act as a kind of mental handrail. These attitudes, which are often malevolent and socially destructive, come out as prejudices, including racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, militarism, and anti-Semitism. The social price for authoritarianism is very high.

But the personal price for Mr. Righteous himself is also very high. Anyone who has trouble dealing with ambiguity, who needs a dogma to follow, who tries to structure the present and be certain of the future, is a brittle stick that will break with life's winds. When the authoritarian personality breaks down, it's not a pretty sight.

It probably comes as no surprise that studies of censorship—as well as studies of authoritarianism, rigidity, and dogmatism—have consistently shown a strong relationship between churchgoing and authoritarianism. I am not suggesting a *causal* relationship. Being religious does not *make* one dogmatic. But dogmatics and authoritarians look for solid dogma and a higher authority, which they often find through religion. Sometimes authoritarians will follow a mortal leader, but they often elevate and cloak him in an aura of divinity. After all, belief in a divine authority reduces the ambiguity of life; now there are serious rules and a morally inspired path to follow.

The "In" Group

There are other ways Mr. Righteous can control his world. Since authoritarians need to yield to strong authority, they are likely to be vested in an "in" group. Often the group is family or community, a social or political group, a fraternal association or the church. Did you ever wonder why the Censor is so often committed to a Leave-It-to-Beaver mentality? The need that authoritarians have to belong to a group may explain why there is such an emphasis on traditional family ideology—those are the values of one's most intimate "in" group. But, along with this ideology,

which in itself is certainly not destructive, is a strong conviction that to be an outsider or to deviate from family tradition is to be morally inferior.

There is a strong streak of moralism in Mr. Righteous's personality. The nature of his morality is often traditional and middle-class. Cleanliness and hard work, honesty and devout respectability are all considered virtues. Harvard social psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, who has studied moral development, would call Mr. Righteous's morality "conventional": it puts minor rules and social respectability above such higher principles as equality, freedom of expression, or human rights. Rather than struggling to develop his own principles, he generally defers to what his group views as moral.

Mr. Righteous's group may be invisible to us when we are face to face with him. Nevertheless, it is there, strong and powerful. This is why we need to be aware of the dynamics of authoritarian groups. The social psychologist Irving Janis gave us a powerful description of those dynamics in his work on the "Groupthink Hypothesis."

First, the group believes it is invulnerable. "If we stick to our guns, if we stick together, nothing bad can happen to us." We see this illusion operating in all kinds of groups, from street gangs to gangster governments. The group will take risks and do deeds that none of the members would dare do on their own. The camaraderie and *esprit de corps* that permeate some of the most authoritarian groups, goose-stepping in unison, help convince members that the group cannot be damaged or destroyed. It is a fortress.

The second illusion. You hear it in the group's language: "Those blacks," "those deviates," those Jews," "those atheists." Individual members bring their own stereotypes into the group which then merge and grow into common stereotypes that are accepted wholesale by the group. In the process, the group develops strong "we/they" feelings. "We are good in here; out there live the demons." Then the group develops shared rationalizations as they explain themselves to each other—over and over again.

What happens when a member challenges the group? Well, it does not happen very often; members tend to censor their own thoughts and censor their thinking *about* their own thoughts. Self-censorship is a powerful, invisible force in authoritarian groups, and for good reason. The authoritarian group deals harshly with dissenters. So don't even

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think original thoughts, much less speak them, if you want to remain part of the group.

To maintain the harmony of the group—and we all know that harmony feels better than dissension—members also learn quickly to act as “mindguards.” Just as bodyguards would protect the group from physical harm, mindguards protect the group by keeping out information that is contrary to the group’s beliefs, stereotypes, and rationalizations. Perhaps that is exactly what the Censor is doing—acting as a mindguard for his group.

The most dangerous illusion of all is the group’s belief in its own morality. “If we all agree, it can’t be wrong. If we all agree, it must be moral.”

Poor Mr. Righteous. Life isn’t easy for him. He must be constantly on guard. He must protect himself *and* his family *and* his group *and* his beliefs. So he engages in personal self-censorship, blocking out fearful fantasies and unacceptable ideas, keeping subversive thoughts below the level of consciousness. That’s how he stays sane and safe.

Mr. Righteous has one more personality characteristic that I’m sure you’ll recognize. Authoritarians tend to see threats everywhere, from dirt to disease to armed conspiracy. Some are real dangers exaggerated; others are imagined. In Mr. Righteous’s eyes, the world is a truly dangerous place.

Mrs. Righteous

What about Mrs. Righteous? Oh yes, she shares many of these psychological dynamics with her husband; otherwise she would have left him years ago. But, there is one basic difference having to do with power. With authoritarian women, power needs are different; they are often muted and disguised. Remember that because the authoritarian per-

sonality is crazy-glued to traditional values, authoritarian women may express their power urges more by sweet submission to authority and by identifying themselves with power rather than by overt aggression. In other words, they *marry* power. The result is that authoritarian women may hold strong resentments and hatred that do not easily find a target. When safe—or “moral”—avenues for those feelings do surface, their hatreds can be released with volcanic fury.

Their fury is often about defending the traditional female role and family values, or safeguarding their children’s minds and morals. It is then safe and permissible to gather and stage protests, wage campaigns and carry posters, harass and vilify the enemy. If we look at censorship not as a conflict of values but as a way to assert power, then censorship, particularly when it comes to our children, is *not* about their moral development; it is about the fear of losing control over them. Authoritarian parents are often more outraged by books that portray young people defying their parents’ values than by the language the book contains—even though it is the language that will be the focus of the protest. Dirty language is still cleaner—and easier to control—than rebellion.

The amazing thing is that authoritarian personalities produce family systems that *work*, where all the parts fit together and sustain the whole. Problems don’t arise until one of the members rebels or some crisis forces change or change brings crisis.

Maybe the reason that some of us “contract” censorship and some of us don’t has to do with how our parents raise us. They give us not only values and morals, but their own “truths” about life to guide us. To the extent that parents’ beliefs are healthy, children learn positive ways to relate to the world. Unhealthy parenting often pro-

duces damaged adults who, compelled to turn the damage outward, become the next generation of censors.

Listening to the Censor, Part I

So now we come to the hard part. How on earth are we going to deal with Mr. and Mrs. Righteous? We have ways to contain the damage for the moment—but the Censor waits us out, ready to make the next move. Perhaps the crucial lesson is that most of the things we do *don’t work*. Have you ever noticed that when something we do doesn’t work, we simply do it *harder*. If the kids don’t come when we yell, we yell louder—and they *still* don’t come.

There are no pat answers, no recipes, no guarantees. There is only understanding and the attempt to base our reactions on how people *really* are, not on how we’d like them to be. Therein lies the secret.

You’ll find that reasoning, arguing, and debating don’t work. Lecturing, intellectualizing, moralizing, standing behind regulations and procedures—they don’t work either. When someone storms in enraged at something that a child brought home—“I can’t believe the library let my child bring this filth home. This library is corrupting the minds of innocent children”—how do you answer? The easiest thing to do is what *doesn’t* work: lecturing, moralizing, intellectualizing, or citing regulations and procedures. We’re only adding gasoline to the fire of the other’s anger—and to our own. All we have in the end is an angry, red-faced customer and an angry, stone-faced librarian—both feeling frustrated and impotent.

Listening works. I don’t mean that listening will change minds; listening opens up dialogue. It is important to hear a person’s needs, to listen to the music rather than to respond to the words. When someone says, “I can’t believe you have this smut in your library where my kids can find it,” if only we could ignore the words and speak to the music: “You must care a lot about your kids.” Notice that something magical is about to happen. What will the person say? The person will say “Yes!” and as if by magic, something has changed. “Yes” is the magic word. Confrontation has been replaced by dialogue.

There’s another reason listening works. The theory of cognitive dissonance tells us that when you have to choose between two different ideas or values or acts, the one you choose is the one you will defend most strongly. In other words, you have to take dissonance out of the equation. Here’s why. Cognitive dissonance makes us feel anxious. It

keeps us awake at night. It feels heavy in the stomach. The theory tells us that the harder the decision is to make, that is, the more anxiety we feel and the more information we have that contradicts the decision we've made, the harder we will work to defend the decision.

For example, a woman is buying food for her family. If the food she wants is expensive, two opposing forces come into play. One force is away from spending so much money on food, the other is the attractiveness of the food. Let's say she decides to buy the expensive cut of meat. Now she will be strongly impelled to defend her action. After all, her family deserves it. After all, this meat has less fat and less cholesterol. After all, she's doing the right thing. Here is cognitive dissonance at work—you can see how hard it would be to convince this woman that she made the wrong decision. Every instinct to defend herself from feeling she made a mistake would come into play. The harder she found it to make the decision, the stronger her need to defend it.

Listening to the Censor, Part II

The implication here is that the more rational the argument you make to change the Censor's attitude, the more strongly that person will defend his position. Dissonance occurs because there is more than one positive value at stake. The preservation of my family's morals—or society's morals—is seen as a positive value; freedom of speech may also be seen as a positive value. I choose the former, and because I see the value in the one I didn't choose, I will defend the one I *did* choose to the death.

A very effective technique for dealing with dissonance is to ask the person to take the other side—and really argue it. Studies have shown that people will modify their views if they take the opposite point of view. And sometimes attitudes do change—but not through reasoning. But before any interactive process can take place, you must first create a relationship with the Censor, and you can only do that by listening.

Don't be afraid that by listening you are complying. Not so. Remember that when we ignore secret needs and secret fears, they come out in the most extraordinary ways—more subtle, and ultimately more destructive. Better to listen to them, no matter how painful it is to suppress the urge to argue. The reward is deeper understanding and enhanced possibility for meaningful and mutual exchange—even between enemies. If our organizations could respond by listening, we would have a

PURE CENSORSHIP

The most powerful censorship is the simplest: denial. Denial, like its psychological cousin *passive resistance*, is as contagious as a virulent disease. Nowhere was I more aware of this than during the six months I spent in and out of China in 1992. Never had I actually experienced self-censorship as a kind of mass hysteria, where a billion people can create and believe their own mythology by denying their feelings, their anger, and their reason.

We were often bewildered by the Chinese, particularly by their ability to deny anything that contradicted what they already believed. I had always thought that assassination was the purest form of censorship. Not so. The purest form of censorship is the kind we impose on ourselves, where we deny reality and silence the voice of outrage inside ourselves. The purest form of censorship comes from within, not from without.

An English colleague told us a story that captures it perfectly. It goes like this: During the time when China was enamored of the Soviets, Mao Zedong visited Moscow and stayed at Krushchev's dacha. Krushchev invited Mao to go bear hunting with him. Once they had shot a bear, Krushchev said he would go back to the dacha to bring help to move the carcass. Mao agreed to wait.

When Krushchev came back with some workers, Mao was waiting—but there was no bear.

"Where's the bear?" asked Krushchev, puzzled.

"What bear?" said Mao.

"We did shoot a bear," said Krushchev. "Right?"

"Right," answered Mao.

"And I did leave you here with the bear while I went back to get help. Right?" asked Krushchev.

"Right."

"So where's the bear?" asked Krushchev.

"What bear?" asked Mao.

This is censorship in its purest form.

much better chance of effecting change. If we could say to our community adversaries, "You must care a lot about your children," we might be able to find a positive way to reach them.

In dealing with censorship, it is important that we think before we act, that we sit together in council and plan a strategy based on understanding. Remember that you can't defeat them; you must get to them.

A brief recap: the authoritarian needs power. Perhaps you could give him some. The authoritarian needs to belong, to have influence, to be liked and respected—and to submit. Maybe we can offer him another kind group where he can fulfill those needs.

On the other hand, the authoritarian is a patsy for authority. Use power. Surround yourself with it. Act as if you have it. Remember that the authoritarian both asserts and respects power, so

don't ever back down.

Remember, too, that the authoritarian is probably deeply religious. We can use that knowledge if we remember George Bernard Shaw's advice: "Religion is a great force—the only real motive force in the world; but what you fellows don't understand is that you must get at a man through his own religion and not through yours."

Control the confrontation. Learn the art of persuasion. Persuasion means that you don't make the person defend himself. Perhaps the hardest step in the art of persuasion is to learn to stop before reacting, to allow a pause for reflecting on what the other person is really saying, on the value he is defending, or on the threat he is feeling. We could even tell him, "I need to think about what you've said. I am trying to understand." Can we not feel his anger dissipating? Now that's *real* power. □

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