

A moderate amount of counseling, like a moderate amount of psychoanalysis, is a good thing; but overuse is dangerous, former members said. "A lot of auditing (counseling) is finding the things in life you didn't feel good about," said Lyons. "Think about them enough and you start thinking you're really bad."

And they did. But that was not new. Former members say they lost confidence in their own decision-making at the center. Reason: Palmer's "belief" system.

"The belief was that behind all upsets was a negative belief on your part," said Steve Caulkins, a former staff member. In other words, he said: "If I had an argument with you, it wasn't because of something you said or did. It was because of something negative that I did."

Even when Raine asked about her outstanding \$25,000, she was told to think about what she had done wrong that caused her to complain. "It seems stupid," she said, in retrospect, "like a guy beats his wife and she thinks: What's wrong with me?"

Hoffman called it "a violation of human nature." Still, she was one of the most persistent believers. Many members left the center over the summer, and Hoffman kept working on into the fall.

By October, Hoffman was still promoting Avatar on the West Coast, while urging Palmer to pay back the money. She even came around again to his point of view — for a while.

"He told me I caused the upset in Elmira," Hoffman said. And, there was a bit of truth to that. Hoffman had been a model believer who inspired others. But two months earlier — for the first time

thought, My God, look what I did to this great spiritual leader."

But she was too angry, and disappointed, to support him any longer. The next day, Hoffman telephoned her friend and co-worker, Linda Rosin, in Elmira. "It's all over," she said. "I'm coming home." In two weeks, she would quit.

Shortly after, Palmer called "a meeting for the disgruntled." He announced there was no money left to pay them back. Helsing later asked if she could see the financial records. "He said they were all destroyed."

But Palmer offered to pay back half the money to some of the members. He said they should share in the loss of legal expenses paid during the court battle. Some took him up on it. "They took what they could and got out," said Helsing. Others are still planning lawsuits.

Hoffman does not have any financial claims against Palmer. But she has reclaimed part of herself. She has grown a little less trusting of others, though she has not become a cynic. "I'll always be open, ready for some adventure. I'll just be a little more skeptical first."

In the Sunday Star-Gazette:  
Harry Palmer's story.

