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Breaking the spell: Goodbye, Hare Krishna

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Eddie Shapiro is his "own man" again, and nobody is going to tell him what to do, not even the Hare Krishnas, he says, as long as what he does won't hurt anyone.

Almost 10 years after the 26-year-old son of Dr. Eli Shapiro of Newton first fell under the spell of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, he has broken away.

He did it on his own, he says, with some help from Hare Krishna actions he didn't like.

The breaking point, he says, came several weeks ago.

"Near the end of November," he said, "I began establishing a candle factory for the Hare Krishnas in South Boston. I worked 16 hours a day through December and January to get it going. A Hare Krishna friend joined me some time after I started.

"He had a beautiful girlfriend. She was also in the movement, and she was a big collector. She brought in a lot of money by soliciting from the general public.

"One day the Hare Krishna temple here kicked him out of the factory. They said he was agitating the mind of his girlfriend. They didn't want anything or anyone to interfere with her collections.

"About the same time they told me they were going to put somebody over me in the factory. I told them my friend wasn't a bad person just because he smoked a few cigarettes and had a couple of drinks now and then. I was smoking then, too, and I took a drink now and then."

So Eddie Shapiro, whose father and stepmother, Barbara, had done everything they could to retrieve him from the Hare Krishnas, even to having him unsuccessfully deprogrammed by Ted Patrick, left the movement's Boston temple.



Staff Photo by Ray Luskier

Eddie Shapiro: "I don't care whether they think I'm a demon."

But the South Boston incident was only the last in a series of events that slowly disillusioned him.

Another Hare Krishna friend, who had been in and out of the temple over a period of 10 years, went "crazy," Shapiro said.

"Once he threw himself out a window and broke a leg," he said. "Instead of helping him, the temple threw him out. He was going crazy because he felt he wanted to get out of the movement, but he was afraid if he did that, he'd become a demon. That's what the movement teaches.

"One day we needed some money, so we bought some flowers at the flower market and sold them on the street. I had to do an errand, so I gave him the \$40 I had made and went away. The police found him banging his head against the street and took him to the temple. The temple refused to do anything for him, so the police took him to a mental institution, but before they left with him, he gave my \$40 to someone in the temple.

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Why he split from Krishna

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"Nobody in the temple said anything to me about the money. I had to ask for it. They finally gave it to me. They knew I had caught them being dishonest."

"I don't care whether they think I'm a demon because I left the temple. I remember them telling me over and over again when I first went into the movement that my father and mother were demons."

For a long time Shapiro believed it, but then he thought about the Old Testament's commandment to "honor thy father and thy mother," and now he says:

"If anybody ever cared for a son, my father certainly did. He and my mother did everything they could to try to help me and see me happy. They were never against my belief in Krishna. They were never against the religion. They were concerned because I'm a diabetic and they were afraid I wouldn't get the proper treatment."

"I want them to know that at a certain point in my life I didn't understand or appreciate the help they wanted to give me. At this point I can appreciate that they care about me and love me."

The elder Shapiros exhausted every possibility and all but exhausted their resources in their efforts to wean their son away from the Hare Krishnas. Because they feared he might not be mentally stable, they had him confined to McLean Hospital in Belmont until such time as a judge ruled on the basis of psychiatric evidence that Eddie Shapiro was competent to make his own decisions.

The father also tried, vainly, to persuade a court to appoint him permanent guardian of his son. In that capacity, the doctor would have been able to keep young Shapiro away from the Hare Krishnas.

Eddie Shapiro says now, "I would like to help the parents of a lot of kids who are in the same position I was. The parents care about the kids, but it seems as if the kids go away and don't want to have anything to do with them."

The Hare Krishnas gave him the name Basu Gopal and married him off to a devotee named Sumarti.

"We had two children, who are with her either at the Krishna farm in West Virginia or in the Cleveland temple, but she didn't even like me from the very beginning," he said. "She wasn't the least bit nice to me, and that didn't seem to me to be observing the Krishna teachings. But the Krishna superiors did nothing about it. They sided with her because she was making a lot of money for the movement."

"She actually deserted me. They encouraged her to do it. She was a very big collector for them. She brought in \$2000 every week."

"I got the feeling they considered the amount of money made for them was more important than her relationship with me as my wife, and I didn't consider that religious. Wouldn't it bother you if someone else had control over your wife?"

The impression is that he doesn't want to attack the movement unreservedly. He hasn't cut all his ties with the Hare Krishnas. He visits the Boston temple, but his reason for doing so is now ironic. Ten years ago, he went to the Hare Krishnas to be taught what he thought then was "the idealism of a perfect faith."

"I go back to the temple now," he says, "because I'd like to help them out. I try to set them straight. I think they have a misconception of their own religion. If they really want to help people and change the world for the better, they have to come up with some practical approach that people can understand."

Ideally, he says, Hare Krishna should be encouraging people to practice the principles and philosophy of their own religion.

The day finally came, he said, when he realized "you didn't have to follow their rules to love God and help other people."

The rules included injunctions against eating meat, fish or eggs, against smoking and drinking, against gambling and "frivolous sports" such as playing baseball or a pinball machine or even watching television; and against more than one sex act per month and then only for procreational purposes.



Eddie Shapiro with Sumarti.

Staff Photo by Gene Dixon

And each Hare Krishna is expected to spend at least two hours a day saying a short prayer to Lord Krishna 16 times for each of 108 beads on a string — a total of 1728 times.

"I can't follow those rules now," Eddie Shapiro said. "It's not my lifestyle. It's too separate from the world."

"I seek truth, and my feeling is that truth is in any religion that teaches goodness," he says. "I'm glad I went through it all. It helped me in my search for truth."