

A life coach convinced me that my family were paedophiles

First there were the unusual 'healing' methods, then I was isolated from everyone I knew
– this is the story of my decade of turmoil

Victoria Cayzer - 30 June 2024



'It was many years before I could find the words to describe what I'd experienced'

Six years ago The Telegraph published a report into Anne Craig, a life coach accused of encouraging false memories of abuse and tearing families apart. Now, one of her former clients is ready to speak out and share her experience.

Several years ago, when my cousin left his elite boarding school, he was warned that he and his fellow pupils – heavily institutionalised, intelligent young adults – were exceptionally susceptible to the sort of psychological coercion that draws people into cults.

But my own experience tells me that such tactics of manipulation are more likely to thrive within the world of unregulated therapy and self-appointed 'life coaches', often with calamitous consequences. I know this because it happened to me.

For seven years, I was entangled with a self-styled 'personal development' coach. Within months of meeting her, I became enslaved to what I now see are warped methods and a sinister perception of the world.

After I finally broke away, it was many years before I could find the words to describe what I'd experienced. I also had to confront the shame that came from allowing someone to dominate my life – with brutal results for myself and those closest to me.

With hindsight, I can now see that at 20 years old I was fertile ground for an abuse of power framed as 'therapy'.



Cayzer with her mother, the Countess of Caledon, at an exhibition opening in 2008

To the outside world, I seemed to have it all. Born into a privileged family and educated at prestigious private schools, I was well on my way to achieving a first class degree in English literature as I completed my second year at the University of Leeds. Yet I was besieged by self-loathing, which had become the very fabric of my existence.

The manifestation of this internal distress was an eating disorder that had been plaguing me since I was 16. At 20, I looked outwardly healthy, but my mind was at its worst. Desperate for help, I'd reached a dead end after exploring countless avenues of support, including Twelve Step programmes, psychotherapy, antidepressants and alternative treatments such as acupuncture, reflexology and homoeopathy.

Nothing worked. But in summer 2010, I heard about Anne Craig, a personal development coach highly recommended by a friend who confided in me that she had sought counselling with Anne and had uncovered suppressed memories from her childhood that lay at the root of her physical and emotional issues. Memories of sexual abuse.

My friend asked me not to share this information with anyone since it remained a secret from her family. But she was adamant that Anne could help me, and told me that many of her friends were also benefiting from Anne's unique methodology of dream and energy work.

My first meeting with Anne took place in the guest room of her family home. She sat before me, artfully arranged in her chair, dressed in a beige twinset, ankles crossed and hands folded neatly in her lap. She was not what I expected.

I watched her habitually smooth her polished bob with a hand disproportionately large in relation to the rest of her small frame. She reminded me of a bird, all beak and wing. A small drawing hung behind her head, of a tower stormed by black birds spiralling at its peak in a swarm of darkness. 'It symbolises the "healing journey" I take my clients on,' Anne told me.

Born in Ireland, Anne Craig worked as a nurse and then as flight crew and training manager for an airline, before going on to set up a training and development department for the employees and directors of a large agricultural producer.

Over the years, she gained a certificate in counselling skills in the development of learning, and was a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. She later set up on her own, practising "personal development" and advertising her services as "a holistic approach using healing energies" in "a safe, secure and private environment".

As we talked, she assured me confidently that she could cure my eating disorder within three years. It was what I wanted to hear. So when she explained that her work would take me into my darkest depths, I was undeterred.

With her help, she promised, I would discover my 'gifts' as a writer, which could play a vital role in the movement she was spearheading – in which women rose up to reclaim their power. This tapped into my low self-esteem and my hunger to belong.

In our first meeting, Anne suggested that perhaps I was too young for such a demanding inward journey. I would be her youngest client; I should take time to seriously consider if I had the capacity for what was involved. With this challenge set, I was eager to be crowned with the title of 'Anne's youngest client'.

Leaving that meeting, for the first time in years I had hope. She was the lighthouse beaming out from the darkness; little did I know I was being guided on to the rocks.

Starting in 2008, Craig began to see a number of young women as clients, who had approached her in search of help for a range of emotional problems.

All were privately educated and mixed in the same social circles, and had been recommended to her by word of mouth by one or other friend or social acquaintance.

Anne's unconventional methods were of her own invention and demanded a huge commitment, taking over her clients' lives until she became their main priority. They centred on dream analysis and 'energy healing'. These sessions were consolidated by the practice of writing and drawing with the left hand. According to Anne, the left hand connected you to the 'heart' rather than the 'head'. Unknown to me, her methods meddled with the subconscious mind, and she lacked the training and expertise required for such delicate work.

The process was rigorous. Following her instructions, every morning I wrote down my dreams, analysed them, and emailed the results to Anne. She then sent back her own analysis for me to work on further, writing with my left hand, elaborating on her prompts.

Writing left-handed was destabilising, bringing me back to a childlike state. This laborious process took hours. I felt an overwhelming pressure to find the 'right' answers, often calling Anne for help. It was a process that made me increasingly dependent on her.



Anne Craig, pictured in 2016

She imposed a rigid code of dream analysis that extended into my relationships and my everyday encounters. She trained me to look for 'signs' charged with specific meanings. Of course, 'signs' were everywhere – on number plates, in advertisements on buses, in passing comments from strangers.

Life became fraught with meaning, and I became increasingly reliant on Anne's affirmation that I had found the 'right' answer. It was the perfect trap for a people-pleasing perfectionist like me.

At £100, Anne's in-person sessions were cheap, considering that they were three to four hours long (therapy sessions usually last no longer than an hour). They began with a ritualistic cup of camomile tea, then she would home in on something from my dreams or a topic that 'spirit' – as she put it – had provided her with.

At the beginning, she claimed that an apparition of a Yes or a No appeared above my head when I answered a question. What she saw, she said, was the 'real' answer; the answer from the heart and not the head. This was always the aim, to answer from the heart. This practice suggested that Anne knew me better than I knew myself.

After talking, I would draw or write with my left hand, always governed by Anne's questions, digging ever deeper into my past or my relationships. Anne's interpretation of these events dictated how I should feel about my life. I often felt frozen, afraid to displease her with the 'wrong' answer.



Victoria Cayzer at the time she was seeing Craig

In this way, a divide was created between myself and those not doing 'Anne's work'. I began to see others as inferior and untrustworthy. She insisted that I should not share what came up in the sessions or dreams, especially not with my family. She used her own life as an example for this, claiming to have remembered her father abusing her. When she confronted her parents, they refused to believe her, and her family turned against her.

This sense of secrecy was intensified by her insistence that we should burn all the writings and drawings connected to our work. In this way the negative energy contained in them would be released and cleared.

Burning became an important part of Anne's work, extending to gifts from friends and family, which she believed were often given to manipulate me. Presents lovingly handmade by friends were fed one by one into the flames, as their 'malevolent intentions' were exposed, alongside expensive clothes from my mother, in order to release the financial power that Anne insisted she had over me. Photographs were also destroyed. They were now reminders of the despicable lie I had been living.

I would near the end of Anne's sessions exhausted and ready to receive her 'energy healing', in which she claimed to move blocked energy caused by unprocessed emotions or experiences. She likened the technique to reiki, but it was of her own devising. As I lay on the massage bed, Anne would hold her hands over my head. I often experienced a ripping sensation as Anne shuddered and breathed heavily. I left the sessions feeling raw and unbearably sad, as if an outer layer of skin had been stripped away.

Through all this, the eating disorder was worsening, but Anne explained that her work broke people down and then put them back together. Once I had gone through this storm, she promised, I would be rid of the eating disorder, but first I had to get to the root of all my problems. This meant 'clearing' anything that was blocking me, including lifestyle choices, relationships and repressed memories.

False memory syndrome (FMS) is not recognised as a psychiatric condition, but Prof Chris French, the head of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London, and a member of the scientific and professional advisory board of the British False Memory Society, says he is in no doubt that the phenomenon of false memory is genuine. "Therapy," he says, "is almost the perfect environment for generating false memories."

A therapist who is predisposed to look for evidence of sexual abuse, for example, might easily influence their subject to "remember" it. And once the client has accepted the possibility of repressed memories of abuse lying at the heart of their problems – and they have developed what Prof French calls a "shared understanding" with the therapist that "recovering" those memories is part of the therapeutic process – it is easy for false memories to appear.

Prof Elizabeth Loftus, an American cognitive psychologist and one of the world's leading authorities on the malleability of human memory, has written of how dream analysis in therapy can be especially problematic in the hands of a therapist who discusses sexual abuse during the day, causing sexual material to appear in the patient's dreams at night. The therapist then uses those dreams as a "resource" to reconstruct supposed childhood sexual abuse. "The danger that these questionable activities might lead a patient to a false belief and memory that sexual abuse actually occurred is more than a passing risk."

Anne repeatedly reassured me that she had gone through something similar, working tirelessly on herself with her own mentor for many years. She had completed her journey and now it was her goal to help others do the same.

It was only much later that I learnt her mentor, a homeopathic healer, had died from gangrene caused by a bacterial infection, after injuring his foot treading on an electric plug. An inquest was told he had refused to have conventional medical treatment after his 'inner being' had told him not to.

After I had been seeing Anne for about six months, she told me I had been sexually abused by a close family member; she interpreted the incident from a dream. By this time, I relied on her implicitly.

I was taken aback, yet it seemed to explain the relentless self-loathing and shame; the hatred and disgust I felt for my body; and the dislocation I felt from family and friends. Traumatic sexual encounters I had experienced as a teenager, she claimed, could be traced back to the initial abuse in my childhood. It was the ultimate explanation, and in some ways the discovery was a relief. Now I had the perfect excuse to disengage from all I'd known, and reject my family and friends for good.

I was aware that many of Anne's clients were working on the same themes of sexual abuse within their families. She divulged these intimate details to me, creating the sense that I was joining an elite club. We were the chosen ones, selected to do this difficult and exhausting work. Anne painted herself as a messianic figure, sacrificing her life to seek out sexual abuse wherever she could find it; bringing it to light for the betterment of humanity. We, her clients, were her disciples.

Once the initial seed of sexual abuse had taken root, Anne went deeper still. Since many of her clients were from the same social circle, she suggested that there was a larger story at play: our individual experiences of abuse pointed to a paedophile ring that our parents were involved in – a paedophile ring that operated in the highest echelons of society.

My parents and extended family were an integral part of this sinister organisation, she suggested. Trusting them became impossible. According to Anne, they were all implicated in this business of child prostitution, and the younger generation were being primed to take over. My own brother, and the cousins I was once close to, were all tarred by the same brush.

We were continually uncovering sordid secrets: murders were revealed, infidelities; unethical and illegal financial dealings. It appeared that literally everyone I was close to was hiding some sick secret and wanted to cause me harm. Their love was a lie, a pretence, so they could use me in some immoral way. Every relationship became toxic.

After a year of working with Anne, my life pivoted around her. We now spoke five times a day, and my sessions had increased to twice a week. I could barely make a decision without deferring to her judgment.

My father had paid for the first year of sessions with Anne, but once I'd left university and started work, I took over the payments. My parents had been suspicious from the beginning, and by this time family and friends knew something disturbing was taking place, but I was out of reach.

I made endless excuses to avoid meeting and intentionally distanced myself, moving into a new flat and opting for a job in private tutoring. This allowed me to dedicate all my time to Anne's work as she pushed me ever deeper to summon up details that were increasingly violent and absurd.

The more perverted and sordid things became, the more kind and empathetic she appeared. And, if I ever challenged or doubted these memories, she would say, 'You don't want to face the truth.'

These exhaustive sessions would finish only when Anne was satisfied we had enough 'pieces'. But there were never enough. There was always another memory to be exhumed, with the promise that if I faced this endless annihilation of sexual abuse I would at last be free of the eating disorder.

I felt more estranged and alienated than ever before. I hated everyone and everything. I diligently followed Anne's instructions, spending hours screaming into pillows and hitting them with rolling pins, imagining family and friends. But all this hatred and fear, Anne insisted, was 'part of the journey'.

Our relationship had long since ceased to be professional. We met regularly outside sessions. We took our dogs for walks, or drove to the beach, and she cooked meals for me and shared details of her personal life. The lack of boundaries made me feel trusted, important, even loved, and she'd often imply I was her favourite client.

Yet by 2012, one by one, Anne's other clients were leaving, distrusting her and resenting the control she exerted over their lives.

Anne tore at them, weaponising their most intimate details. The women she had once praised were now 'dark'. They'd rejected their journey. They were too weak for this work; they didn't want to face the truth. I listened – afraid, but determined to complete my journey, no matter the cost.

'It's only you and me left now, Tauri,' she'd say. 'And I'm so glad it's you'. Together we would 'break' the paedophile ring and 'bring the darkness to light'. The more I suffered, the more I was praised. My diminishing life was a necessary sacrifice.

When I expressed doubts about the extremity of the abuse I was supposed to have suffered, they were countered. Of course I doubted, of course I couldn't remember. That is the very nature of sexual trauma. You repress, you force yourself to forget, because no one wants you to remember. One day I would be able to remember – if I did the work and followed her instructions.

I kept going, trapped in a cycle of confusion, my mind a storm of voices, all telling me different things. I did not fully believe the prolific and perverted 'memories' that Anne was insisting were real, but it was also speaking to some wounded part of myself that I didn't understand. It didn't matter what others said or what evidence they offered. Only Anne's opinion mattered.

By 2013, I had severed all ties to my past, cutting contact with family and friends. I made the decision to disappear, certain I'd never see any of these people again.

With my dog Taro I moved again, changing my phone number and email. My parents panicked and employed private detectives to find me and to investigate Anne. The next 12 months were chaos – with police and lawyers, and the story splashed across newspapers. In the midst of it all, I disinherited myself, intentionally burning all bridges to my past so I could never go back.

And then Anne was unexpectedly wrenched away. By 2014, she was under police investigation and was prohibited contact with any of her clients. It was terrifying and disorientating to be without her from one day to the next. Yet, in this empty space, an inner strength began to shine through. With no one to answer to but myself, my life took a different turn.

In June 2014, anonymous leaflets were posted through the letter boxes of Craig, her neighbours and her daughter, with the warning: “Holistic healer Anne Craig has moved into your street! Your daughters are in grave danger!” It included Craig’s address. Seeing it as a death threat, Craig reported it to the police, who investigated, but were unable to determine who had posted the leaflets.

In August, having discovered where Victoria was living, her mother posted a birthday card through her daughter’s letter box and left a tiny bunch of flowers on her doorstep. A few weeks later, she posted a book on the risk of psychological abuse in therapy, along with a letter warning her about Craig, through Victoria’s door.

The next day, acting on an allegation of harassment from Victoria, seven police officers, in two cars and a van, arrived at Lady Caledon’s home and placed her under arrest. She was taken to a police station but immediately released when the custody sergeant decided it was a case of wrongful arrest. But the incident led the police to look more closely at the background to these events, with the result that their investigation now took a 180-degree turn – and focused on Anne Craig.

In October 2014, following statements given to the police by four other women who had been clients of Craig, she was arrested and booked on three charges: fraud, administering a noxious substance and occasioning psychological actual bodily harm. The noxious substance charge arose from two women claiming to have felt drowsy after being given a drink by Craig. That charge, and the psychological ABH charge were dropped. But Craig was bailed on the third charge of fraud for six months. Under her bail conditions she was prohibited from seeing or communicating with any of her clients. In April 2015, the Crown Prosecution Service decided not to prosecute Anne Craig, and the charge of fraud was dropped.

For four months I squatted in an old dye factory in south London, frequented by two men and a cat. It was rat-infested and freezing; we cooked our food over fires, and with no running water or electricity it was a brutal choice for winter and a stark and enlightening contrast to my conservative upbringing.

When spring came, Taro and I moved to Grow Heathrow, an anarchist squat protesting the expansion of Heathrow Airport. It was a rubbish dump converted into a labyrinth of tree houses and vegetable patches. There was music and merriment, addiction and destitution, endless arguments. But for a while it felt good; a liberating adventure.

And then, after a six-month hiatus, Anne called. The police investigation had been dropped. Yet the conflict between her and my family continued to escalate. Anne insisted that I had veered off track without her influence, and harnessed by a sense of responsibility to Anne, I re-engaged with her work.

The coercion increased, Anne’s threats became more hysterical. If I did not report my family for sexual abuse, she said, she would abandon me. Once again, I was trapped into believing that without her I had no prospect of finally freeing myself from the eating disorder and moving on with my life.



Cayzer in Bali, where she now lives

So I did what she demanded, making outlandish claims to the police. With no evidence, there were no charges. I hit a wall. I no longer wanted to live. Anne drove to Grow Heathrow and we sat in her car. I told her calmly that the problems I came to her with were no better. They were worse. For seven years I had done everything she had asked. I had nothing left to give. None of her promises had come to fruition. Now I knew they never would.

I was careful to separate from Anne on good terms, but I knew I had to leave England if I were to move on with my life.

I chose New Zealand, or perhaps it chose me. I had listened to the tales of my fellow squatters about hitchhiking around Europe. Why couldn't I hitchhike to New Zealand? So, with £900 in my pocket saved from my tutoring job, Taro at my heels and all my possessions hoisted on to my back, I hitchhiked halfway around the world, the adventure unfolding in ways I could never have imagined.

In the Canary Islands I joined the Ship of Fools, a boat full of clowns funding their travels by their performances. At Cape Verde I joined a solitary yachtsman also travelling with a dog, and sailed to Brazil. From there I hitched through South America. In Ecuador I met a group of Hare Krishnas on a pilgrimage to India and sailed on their floating temple for a month to Nuku Hiva, in French Polynesia. Here Raul, a Peruvian captain, stepped into focus, and together we sailed the rest of the Pacific.

After three years I finally reached New Zealand, feeling more myself and more alive than ever before. Through adventure and immersing myself in nature, I had found meaning in life. Although the eating disorder hadn't entirely disappeared, it was easier to live with.

Slowly, I softened to the idea of connecting with family and friends. It was a painful return, peeling away the layer of lies fossilised during my time with Anne.

I was 23 when I cut off contact and 33 when we finally faced one another again. During this time my family tried to track me, but for long periods they knew nothing of my whereabouts. My father feared he would never see me again, but my mother always knew I would eventually come home.

As for Anne, we had exchanged a few emails. I still felt a responsibility towards her. Now I understand that the more traumatised I was by her methods, the more psychologically and emotionally attached I became, which is known as 'trauma bonding'. By the time I arrived in New Zealand, our communication had naturally ceased.

Talking to Anne's other clients was key to processing the impact of her methods. I've come to understand that many of the fabrications started with a grain of truth: an authentic feeling, which became perverted and distorted until it was unrecognisable. The added layers of lies built up subtly over time made it easier for me to believe that these were memories so traumatic I was unable to recall them.

Recognising the signs of coercion would have been my saving grace – because no matter what evidence or warnings I was offered,

I had to come to this realisation by myself.

Finding my feet after Anne has not been a linear process, but I've been immensely grateful for the loving support of family and friends. As they've welcomed me back into their lives, I am excited and hopeful about the happier, healthier version of myself that continues to unfold.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/family/life/victoria-cayzer-anne-craig-life-coach-false-memories/>