

An Open Letter about Youth and Helpers

by Sandra Rimkeit

Introduction:

I grew up in Subud and was opened when I was seventeen years old. I wrote the letter below about three years ago in order to express my feelings about difficult situations mainly between helpers and Subud youth but also between helpers and older members. Although I felt angry when I wrote this letter, my intention was not to offend or hurt others. I attempted to get this letter published in the Subud USA newsletter, and was told that it would be, but it never appeared. I know Subud is suffering and I know there are those who are trying to improve the situation. Many people leave Subud because of situations similar to the ones I talk about. I have basically left Subud myself because even though I know the core of Subud is truly the latihan, it's difficult for me to believe in going to latihan on a regular basis when I have seen many long-time Subud members behaving badly.

Dear Subud Family,

I am writing to you all about a personal matter that others just might be experiencing too. I used to be, and still kind of am 'a youth' in Subud, as I am approaching thirty years old. I love latihan, and am thankful for Subud members and helpers who have accepted and loved me, and helped me over the years with various deep problems I was enduring. I relish the experience of going to latihan and feeling so close to God.

But there is something that has been troubling me for a long time, and I have been afraid to put it out there. I was afraid because often in the past when I talked about it, I felt that people did not really listen, did not take me very seriously, or did not take any action. The other reason why I was timid about speaking up is because honestly I don't want people to feel as if I am attacking or criticizing others. I am sharing my feelings because I am worried, because I care about and love people, and because I really want us as a group to become more active in coming to some concrete solutions.

I feel sad because over the years I had some pretty terrible experiences with a few helpers. Yes, this subject, again. But it is so important, because helpers have a major role in the growth and nurturance of a group. My experiences were that some helpers talk down to you, make you feel like you don't count, and think that because you don't have their 'experience' in the latihan that you can't possibly know about many things. I know this issue has been brought up before, but it is still a painful, regular occurrence in Subud.

I remember when Ibu Rahayu came to Los Angeles some years ago, around 1998. She said that Subud needed more young helpers, helpers that were from the youth age group. I felt inspired, like Yes, I feel what she is talking about! Then when I went to my group to test I felt that I was put under scrutiny, told that I didn't have certain qualifications, and turned away. How can a young person become a helper when there are those that take helper guidelines to a black-and-white, strict, test-like level? If you don't meet them, you don't qualify. I'm not saying that it was right for me to be a helper,

but it was the way the entire experience was handled that was hurtful. I know the guidelines are there for a reason, but where are we headed if we treat them like rules?

Another time I was at a congress and the youth were invited to a helpers meeting with the intention that we share our ideas about how relationships between youth and helpers could be improved so youth could participate more. When it was time to talk about different ideas or what our perspectives were, a helper said that it wasn't the time to talk about this so we should table it — even though part of the meeting was *supposed* to focus on the issue! She wasn't exactly nice about the way she said it. Also, there was never any other meeting created to address the issue. Another note about this experience was that I had never been to a helpers meeting before and I was shocked at how rude and sometimes mean some of the helpers were to one another. It was ugly and sad. I left feeling heavy and sick inside. From listening to people's comments in different circumstances in Subud, I know that this type of behavior is not an isolated incident. It seems that sometimes we are mean to each other and put our egos first. We forget what our true purpose is.

From that meeting and other experiences I felt as if someone put on the helper application as qualifications: 'You must be rigid, overbearing, critical, and consider yourself the keeper of the gate.' I am not being sarcastic but describing a real attitude that I have run into that causes serious damage. It pushes people away, and I know it is one of the reasons our groups don't grow. I know we all have faults, including me. However, I don't feel comfortable with helpers regularly bopping people over the head with their faults. I am not asking for perfection, just reflection, and taking real steps to stop this. There are helpers who often take things personally as if it is a personal insult to them that you are asking them to change. They don't seem open to listening. I wonder if we are truly surrendering our faults to God, and saying, Yes, I see this as a problem, and I am willing to give it up because I know how truly wounding it is.

I love latihan, and parts of Subud. It is painful to feel this way and to know there has not been sufficient action taken to remedy the situation. When people become helpers they test for ability, capacity, and willingness. Some of the people that 'pass' have the biggest axes to grind (insert your local problem here). I have noticed this increase when the person becomes a regional, national, or international helper. They think they can push members around using Subud terms and guidelines, telling them what they are doing right or wrong, or coming down on them in a condescending manner.

I am not saying necessarily that these folks shouldn't be helpers, but there seems to be a silent code in Subud not to openly draw attention to the reality of what is happening right in front of us. I am asking for these issues to be talked and tested about in a respectful, loving manner, so that we can grow as a group. I am asking us to reflect on what it does to us as people individually, and as a Subud group as a whole, when these attitudes are allowed to prevail. I ask for us to take action, and not just test and discuss but come up with a plan that involves us all in order to change these caustic situations that cause people to leave Subud even if they love the latihan. I know there are discussions about why people are leaving. Well, this letter is part of your answer.

Love,

Sandra Rimkeit