

# **‘The Next Level’**

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EXCEPT FOR THE STINK OF DEATH, everything was neat and tidy. Police found no sign of struggle or even discomfort among the 39 corpses. Each member of the cult followed the written instructions to “lay back and relax” after swallowing the phenobarbital-laced pudding chased with vodka. The cultists had apparently died in waves, 15 the first day, at least 15 the second and the survivors the third. Only the last two to go, a pair of women, still wore plastic bags over their heads. The rest lay quietly in their new black sneakers, under diamond-shaped purple shrouds.

There was an oddly theatrical aspect to the mass suicide near San Diego, Calif. The departed all packed overnight bags containing clothes, spiral notebooks and, for some reason, lip balm. Each of them left the earth with a five-dollar bill in their pockets, plus quarters—for what? Celestial pinball? Each wore a new pair of Nike running shoes—a play on the Nike slogan, “Just Do It”? Casual friends, who had found the cultists to be not grim but rather chipper and self-deprecating, wondered if the dead were slyly ridiculing the media storm that was sure to follow.

But only the demented mock their own demise. Quiet agonies of repression were hinted at by the coroner’s finding that at least a half dozen of the men had been surgically castrated, included the cult’s founder, Marshall Herff Applewhite. The members of the sect called Heaven’s Gate had been taught to put aside lust and other earthly appetites and prepare for a Higher Kingdom. The men and women wore their hair close-cropped and their clothes loose and baggy, lest they show their sexuality. Their bodies were mere “containers” or “vehicles,” and their occupants recoiled at the human touch. These were lost souls literally uncomfortable in their own skin, searching desperately for a home they could never find. Some had been gone so long that their families hardly missed them.

Suicide is normally the loneliest act, the ultimate alienation. There have been worse mass suicides, but probably not in America, and at Jonestown in Guyana in 1978, those who refused to drink the Kool-Aid were shot. What possessed this self-described “Next Level Crew” of 21 women and 18 men, ranging in age from 26 to 72, to go not only willingly, but apparently cheerfully? Judging from the abundant evidence—videotapes left behind, numerous written tracts and postings on the Internet—the followers of Heaven’s Gate seem to have drunk from a delusional cocktail of just about every religious tradition and New Age escapist fantasy. They avidly watched old “Star Trek” episodes and “The X-Files” while cruising cyberspace looking for UFO sightings. It was from the Internet that the cult learned that a UFO was following in the slipstream of Comet Hale-Bopp. The comet’s approach “is the ‘marker’ we’ve been waiting for—the time for the arrival of the space craft from the Level Above Human to take us home to ‘Their World’,” the cult warned in a “Red Alert” message on its World Wide Web home page.

In other ways, their chilling exit was timeless. Some experts compared Heaven’s Gate to the Gnostics, early religious fanatics who felt imprisoned in their earthbound bodies. Anticipating the End Times predicted in the Book of Revelation, millennial groups have been trying to beat the rush to St. Peter’s Gate for centuries. In the 16<sup>th</sup>

century, whole villages of Christian “saints” self-immolated, hoping for salvation before the Fire. As the true millennium approaches in the year 2000, there will almost surely be more, and possibly more threatening, millennialists. Heaven’s Gate baked luscious bourbon pound cakes and rum cakes (which they could not themselves indulge in) for their friends in the outside world. Neo-Nazis and Freemen, meanwhile, are stockpiling weapons.

The most important cause of death may have been the cult’s guru. His personality has been compared to Mr. Rogers, but Herff Applewhite was a master manipulator. Indeed, the mass suicide itself may have been a bit of a con. Applewhite told his followers that he was very sick, that his body was “disintegrating,” and there were rumors that he had only six months to live. Though news reports speculated that Applewhite was suffering from cancer, investigators told NEWSWEEK that the autopsy shows no sign of a fatal disease.

Applewhite was driven by sexual demons. The son of a Presbyterian minister who wandered around Texas, Applewhite had been blessed with good looks and a powerful singing voice. As a music professor at the University of Alabama in the 1960s, he helped cut an album of the Crimson Tide fight song and seemed to enjoy life as a family man, with a wife and two kids. But the marriage broke up, and Applewhite left Alabama amid whispers of a homosexual affair. In that place and in that time, a homosexual would feel alienated indeed. He got a job teaching music in the late ‘60s at the University of St. Thomas, a small Roman Catholic school in Houston, where he produced upbeat musicals, including “Little Mary Sunshine.” But college records show that Applewhite left in 1970 for “health problems of an emotional nature.” Suffering from depression and shame, hearing “voices,” he checked into a hospital, asking to be “cured” of his homosexual desires. He told his sister he had suffered a “near-death experience” after a heart attack, but he may actually have suffered from a drug overdose, according to Ray Hill, a radio-show host in Texas who knew Applewhite at the time. “He was kind of a Timothy Leary type,” said Hill.

It was during this anguished time that he met his true life’s companion, Bonnie Lu Trusdale Nettles, a nurse who dabbled in astrology and far-out religious movements. Bonnie left her husband and four children and headed for the hills with Applewhite. The relationship was apparently platonic; the two wished to shed all base desires. They had discovered that they had been infused with higher, heavenly spirits. “I’m not saying we are ‘a Jesus,’ it is not that beautiful, but it is almost as big,” Nettles wrote her daughter, Terrie, then 20, in a letter examined by NEWSWEEK. “I’m not kidding, baby, this is for real.”

The pair gave each other silly nicknames—Tiddly and Wink, Guinea and Pig, Nincom and Poop, Tweedle and Dee, finally Do and Ti (mere notes in the celestial symphony)—to show that names mean nothing. But they also portentously called themselves The Two—after the two witnesses in the Book of Revelation who are slain by a beast from the depths before rising to heaven. Like Jesus Christ, Do and Ti believed they would be assassinated on earth and rise to heaven after three days in a cloud of light—a UFO.

In 1975, Do and Ti went by another set of nicknames: Bo and Peep. There were lost sheep in their flock, an assortment of hippies and dreamers and drifters who had shed their work and families to follow The Two, hoping to leave this mortal coil on a spaceship. Do was an appealing recruiter. “He had great enthusiasm, a total childlike innocence in his eyes and his bearing,” said Albert Volpe, a Dallas handyman and artist who was in the cult in 1975. “Everything was very laid back. We were always in groups of two; this is how Jesus and his disciples worked.” The cult members believed he was the One, a modern-day Christ.

Do asked his followers if they were ready to “walk out the door” of their lives and join him on an intergalactic voyage to a Higher Place. When the celestial transportation failed to arrive, most of his recruits slunk away, some bitterly accusing The Two of mind-control games. A raft of derisive publicity drove Do and Ti farther into the wilderness. Wandering from woodsy camps to suburban homes (sustained in part by the trust funds of wealthy followers), the small cult of fewer than 50 members who called themselves HIM (for Human Individual Metamorphosis) or the Total Overcomers Anonymous took re-education “classes” from Do and Ti. Anyone who wanted to leave was free to go. But those who stayed on at camp (called “Central”) were subjected to a strict regimen. Pot and sex were outlawed. Followers had to check in with the leader every 12 minutes and sometimes wear hoods as they worked. Significantly, everyone was given a “check partner”-to guard against backsliding and independent thought. Doubters were sent to a “decontamination zone.” Families were to be long forgotten.

When the trust-fund money ran out, cult members supported themselves with odd jobs and begging. Living conditions were often rustic and harsh. Tensions between cultists sometimes ran high. Applewhite had not yet resorted to castration to tame his urges. Instead, says Volpe, he had to create a “crucible effect” to stay celibate. “Bo and Peep wanted us to use our sexual tension to create the purifying heart that is necessary for spiritual enlightenment.”

In 1985, Ti, who was then 57, “left her human vehicle,” as Do later wrote. “To all human appearances, it was due to a form of liver cancer.” Do was bereft; he realized that Ti “was definitely a more advanced [older] member of the Next Level.” He wanted to join her-but perhaps not right away. In 1993, his cult reemerged, now known as Heaven’s Gate. It is not clear why Applewhite decided to go public. Possibly, he saw the Internet as a new vehicle that would allow him to spread the word. But he announced his return in an old-fashioned newspaper ad in USA Today that declared “UFO Cult Resurfaces with Final Offer.” It was, the ad beckoned, “the last chance to advance beyond human.” The cult talked of its philosophical bonds with other millennial groups and self-appointed messiahs, including the Branch Davidians, the Unabomber, the Freeman and the Solar Temple—a group that has conducted three mass suicides since 1994 in Europe and Canada for a death toll of 70. Heaven’s Gate did not condone the methods of these groups, but Do’s cult agreed on the common enemy—a corrupt world whose institutions and religions had been seized by Lucifer, or “Lucy,” as Do sometimes called Satan.

Heaven's Gate was more comfortable in the cyberworld. Having mastered the Internet on its searches for UFOs and other signs of Higher Life, cult members had developed considerable computer expertise. In about 1996, Heaven's Gate started a business called Higher Source Contract Enterprises to design Web pages. With cheap rates (as low as one quarter the going rate) and up-to-date, if not terribly creative, design, Higher Source attracted clients ranging from the San Diego Polo Club to a specialty car-parts dealer called The British Masters and Keep the Faith, a Web site about Christian music. The group was given a lot of work by InterAct Entertainment Group in Los Angeles. "They were faster and more efficient than most designers," said Greg Hohertz, formerly of InterAct. The designers all went by one-name aliases-June, Steel, Nick, Rio-but "there are a lot of people with one name in Hollywood," said David Sams, owner of Keep the Faith. "We live in a land of Chers and Madonnas. Everyone in Hollywood is running around with short hair just like George Clooney. But they were very polite, and that should have tipped me off because no one in Hollywood is polite."

Heaven's Gate put on a sunny face. Al Ignato, the owner of the Rancho Car Wash at the Union 76 Station in Del Mar, washed their new-make cars for free. "They did not impress you like a Hare Krishna. They weren't on any crusade. They weren't like young Mormons," said Ignato. "There was none of that." The "nuns and sisters," as Ignato called them, even brought him a "fabulous bourbon pound cake 10 inches high."

Heaven's Gate earned enough from its business to live in a \$7,000-a-month mansion rented from a down-on-his-luck Iranian businessman. The villa came with an elevator, Jacuzzi and putting green. But it was sparsely furnished from Kmart and decorated with drawings of aliens. Neighbors in ritzy Rancho Santa Fe noticed that the "monks" were all pale, in a world where a tan is part of the uniform. Heaven's Gate was also extremely secretive. The group insisted on keeping the phone in the name of the landlord and paying the rent and utilities with cash. No banks, no Social Security numbers-no contact at all with the government.

The group would rise every morning before 4 to gaze into the night sky, looking for their true home in the heavens. A simple group meal, typically of pasta, would follow. For the rest of the day, the cultists would subsist on fruit and lemonade, although several became Diet Coke addicts for the caffeine buzz they got when they worked all night designing Web pages. Clever marketer that he was, Do sent messages entitled "Time to Die for God?" to Internet news-groups that focus on suicide (alt.suicide), depression (alt.support.depression) and substance abuse (alt.abuse.recovery). Do decreed that his new and old crew members were actually heaven-sent souls who had arrived to fight the Luciferians in "staged" spaceship crashes.

The recruiting "doubled" the size of his cult, Do wrote. But the cult was unable to sell a movie treatment about its story to Hollywood. The members became increasingly paranoid about an attack by the government. The indifference of the public at large to the cult "was the signal to us to begin our preparations to return home," said a cult communique on the Internet. "The weeds of humanity" had taken over earth's "garden."

It was time to go to “the level above”-or “what humans call dead.” Learning of a UFO “four times the size of earth” in the wake of Hale-Bopp, Heaven’s Gate decided that their beloved Ti must be coming earthward to collect them. As the comet brightened in the sky in mid-March, as Holy Week approached, the cultists got ready to shed their “earthly containers.” They celebrated with a last supper of chicken pot pie and cheesecake.

The “crew” member known as Rio had a different plan. About six months ago, Rio DiAngelo, 42, left the cult to work full time for InterAct. It now appears that Rio may have been selected for a special task-to carry the group’s message to the public after their suicide. Last Tuesday, DiAngelo received a Federal Express package at work. He put it aside. That night he opened the package and found two videotapes and a set of instructions.

The next morning, a shaken Rio told his boss, Nick Matzorkis, that he believed all the members from Higher Source were dead. Rio had not watched the videotape- he said he felt he knew what was on it-but he wanted to go to the house to see for himself. Matzorkis at first brushed it off, figuring that the group had “died”-and gone to Europe. But his sense of dread grew as they drove to the house, or “temple,” in the hills outside San Diego. Rio went into the house; when he returned 20 minutes later, he was “white as a sheet,” according to Matzorkis. “They did it,” said Rio. “Did it smell?” asked Matzorkis. Rio assured him that it did. On the drive down, Rio tried to regain his composure. He remarked, “I’m surprised how well this vehicle [his body] is dealing with this.” But at Matzorkis’s insistence, he called the police.

Authorities believe that the entire cult has now perished, and that no one else was involved in their deaths. But they want to reserve judgment until they have a chance to download the 20 or so computers found in the house (one with a picture of Hale-Bopp shining on its screen). Late last week a science-fiction writer named Lee Shargel, who was recently befriended by Applewhite and his crew, told NEWSWEEK that he had received messages saying that 13 surviving members of the cult-a “ground crew”-were traveling to some Indian ruins in the Southwestern desert to reunite with a reincarnated Applewhite, who would fly down from space to pick them up. It is impossible to know if the messages came from pranksters, real cult members-or self-appointed recruits drawn to the publicity.

Some of the Rancho Santa Fe victims died from overdoses of phenobarbital, but a fatal dose-some 50 to 100 pills-is a lot to be mushed up with applesauce. For most, the cause of death was apparently suffocation-from plastic bags strapped over their heads as they lay doped out by the drugs and booze. Police found about 20 white garbage bags with elastic straps carefully stacked in the trash. The killing probably began late Saturday and went on for three more days.

Police think Applewhite expired toward the end of this slow ritual, either in the second wave of 15 or the final group who died sometime Tuesday. In the videotapes, some of the cultists seem giddy. “We’re looking forward to this,” chirps one woman. “Beam me up!” sings another. Applewhite is more serious. “You can follow us,” he

intones, “but you cannot stay here and follow us.” It is a measure of Applewhite’s personal power, the pull of millennialism through the ages and the unsettled age we live in, that so many so readily followed.

**A LAST STOP BEFORE HEAVEN** The suicides took place in a plush mansion seemingly at odds with the cult’s asceticism and self-denial. Isolated in a usually clubby community, the cult members came and went in groups of up to 15 people, going to appointments in vans. When it came time to shed their “containers,” they traveled the same way, dying in waves over three days with meticulous precision.

### **THE CULT’S END: A CHRONOLOGY**

1. May 1994. Sam Koutchesfahani buys Rancho Santa Fe mansion for \$1.3 million.
2. October 1996. “Brother Logan” rents the house. About 20 members of Heaven’s Gate move in, some of them coming from houses nearby.
3. January 1997. Talking about going on a trip, the group begins to curtail its Web business. In following weeks, they send clients e-mail about Hale-Bopp.
4. 4 a.m. Saturday, March 22. Hale-Bopp’s arc brings it to its closest proximity to Earth.
5. Saturday or Sunday, March 23. The first group of 15 swallow applesauce or pudding laced with phenobarbital, washing it down with vodka. Some cover their head with plastic bags secured with elastic bands. Other members clean up and cover the dead with purple shrouds.
6. Monday, March 24. Fifteen more die and are covered with shrouds.
7. Tuesday, March 25. The remaining cultists kill themselves, the last two disposing of the others’ plastic bags.
8. Tuesday morning. Rio DiAngelo, a cult member until six months ago, receives a FedEx package at work, containing a letter and two videotapes. Meant to arrive on Wednesday, the package is a day early, but DiAngelo doesn’t open it until that night.
9. Wednesday, March 26, 10a.m. Though he hasn’t watched the tape, DiAngelo tells his boss, Nick Matzorkis, that he thinks the group is dead. Matzorkis drives him to the house, and DiAngelo comes out 20 minutes later.
10. 1:30 p.m. Matzorkis and DiAngelo call the police anonymously to tell them to check the house.

11. 3:30 p.m. Deputy Robert Brunk of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department arrives. Opening a side door, Brunk smells a pungent odor and calls for backup. When Deputy Laura Gacek arrives, the two officers don surgical masks and go in. After counting 10 bodies, they radio their findings to the homicide unit.

### **HOW THEY WERE FOUND**

Grouping: Bodies lay on bunk beds, cots and mattresses, some covered with blankets, arms at their sides or folded serenely.

Garments: Dressed in black with an arm patch reading HEAVEN'S GATE AWAY TEAM. The last two to die wore no shrouds, but had plastic bags over their heads, secured with elastic bands.

Possessions: Suitcases found at their feet. Pockets contained identification, spiral notebooks, quarters, a \$5 bill and lip balm.

The Ted K Archive

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