

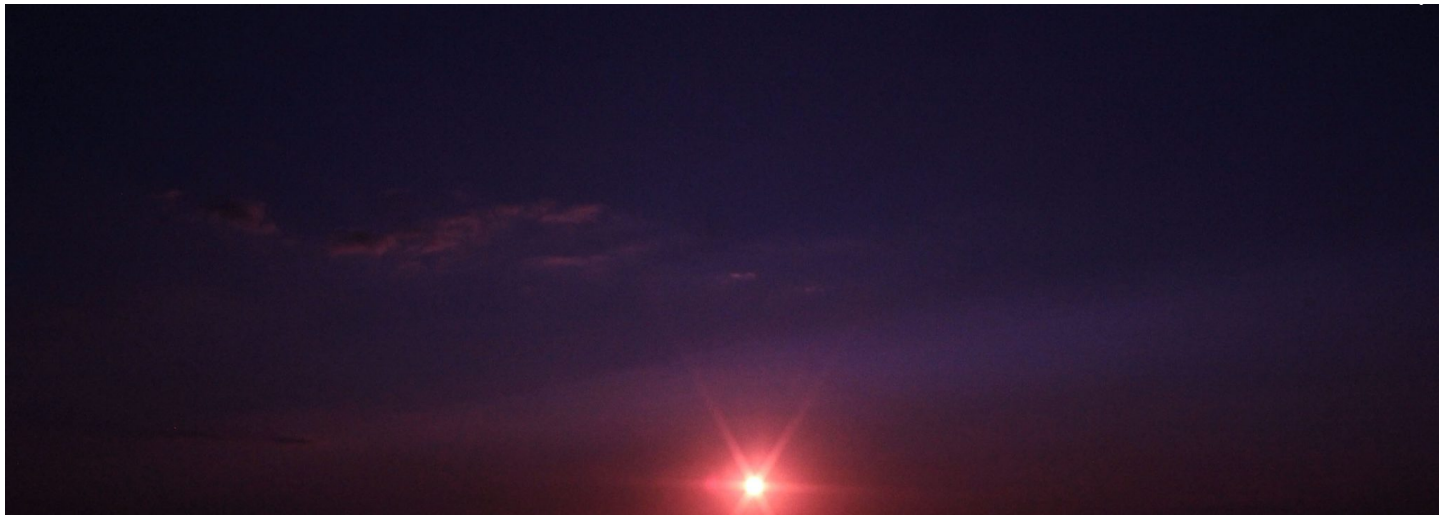


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Remembering: The Heaven's Gate cult

✍ Jack Peat 🕒 March 30, 2017

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By Nigel Watson

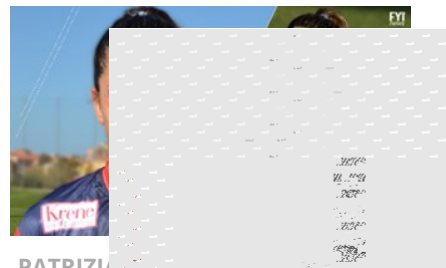
Twenty years ago the belief that a UFO would take them away to a better life led 39 members of the Heaven's Gate cult to commit mass suicide on Wednesday, 26 March 1997. The 18 women and 21 men, ranging in age from 26 to 72, killed themselves along with their charismatic leader Marshall Herff Applewhite.

Calling themselves the 'Away Team', they believed that they would return to the Kingdom of Heaven, which they called the Next Level. Applewhite revealed that he took on his human form in the 1970s who 'offers a graduation class, offers life, out of this evolutionary level into that Next Evolutionary Level, and we are at the end of one of those times.'

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66-year-old Applewhite had been involved with running UFO salvation cults since the 1970s. Under the name 'Bo', he had worked with Bonnie Lu Truesdale Nettles aka 'Peep' to collect supporters. Bo and Peep were also known as 'Guinea and Pig', 'The Two' or 'Ti' and 'Do'. Bonnie died in 1985 of liver cancer leaving Applewhite to carry on their mission.

Ben Zeller, author of *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion* notes that:

The two founders, were spiritual seekers living in Houston, Texas. Nettles was an astrologer and theosophist, and engaged in "channelling," a New Age practice involving spiritual communication. Applewhite was raised Presbyterian and briefly considered becoming a Christian minister, but had become interested in alternative religions and spirituality. Both were avid astrology believers.

They met and decided that the stars had determined that they had a mission together. Over several years they came to believe that they were part of the end-time story foretold in Revelation. They developed a belief system focused on interpreting Christian biblical end-time prophecy combined with belief in space aliens and UFOs. Basically, they agreed with Erich von Daniken and some other popular 1970s authors that the Bible and other ancient religions actually are describing space aliens, who were mistakingly called Gods by the ancients.

Heaven's Gate Cult Initiation Tape Part 1



Today the Heaven's Gate website is run by one or two anonymous followers. They call themselves 'The Telah Foundation' and explain that:

The Group ended in 1997 and there has been nothing to join since that time. There are no members.

'We were in the Group for 12 years and they asked us to assist them in several things, like the website and emails, after they departed.'

When asked by email, 'How should we regard their actions looking back on the matter, were they right?', their reply was:

'We are still running the website to inform the world of the existence of the Next Level.

'Yes, they were right.'

When asked if they will join them when they die, they replied:

'We will not join join them when we die. No one joins them upon death. You have to enter in a live body.'

Although they had used several aliases, their ideology remained basically the same. Jacques Vallee in his book *Messengers of Deception: UFO Contacts and Cults* (And/Or Press, 1979) notes that in 1975 they ran the Human Individual Metamorphosis (H.I.M.) group. In announcements for a series of meetings, they said they would "physically leave the planet within months." It was also claimed that their bodies had undergone a physical metamorphosis that had changed them "physically, chemically, biologically." They also said that they would demonstrate in public the overcoming of death after a period of three days.

These predicted events never happened, but 22 years later the arrival of comet Hale-Bopp, indicated to them that a spaceship was finally coming from the Kingdom of Heaven. Applewhite, along with his followers were now prepared to go to what they literally regarded as heaven.

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Living in their rented mansion at Rancho Santa Fe, San Diego County, California, the cult had survived by providing website development services. They denied themselves material goods and sexual activity; indeed six male members of the cult were even castrated to maintain their celibacy.

Their cult activities borrowed heavily from Christian religion, and Applewhite was often regarded as a Jesus figure. Other inspirations were the contactees of the 1950s, the counter-culture of the 1960s and Theosophy. A more obscure source of inspiration was a story by Mark Twain entitled, 'Extract from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven'. In this, Captain Stormfield tells of his death and riding a comet to Heaven and is told about three great poets, Saa, Bo and Soof.

Lynn Picknett author and expert on UFOs and the paranormal says:

'They seem to provide an up-to-date sort of pseudo mysticism – in the form of an ecstatic death cult – that took the place of conventional religion for its followers. It rather cleverly adapted a belief in an afterlife to the world of the UFO.'

Steve Dewey author of 'In Alien Heat' agrees that:

'There's a god shaped hole in humans, and when you take away one filler, another rushes in...

'Ufology and religion are close bedfellows, and that the secularisation of the West has allowed alternative religions to flourish. It took on trappings of religion while thinking it was something else, or something more, but was just another proto-religion.'

Most UFO groups and beliefs are harmless but as Swedish UFO researcher Clas Svahn says they can have tragic consequences:

'UFO beliefs can be very dangerous when held by a charismatic leader.

'Here in Sweden I have met several people hearing voices from "aliens" that have told them to do things that no sane man or woman would do. One of them, a friend of mine, was told by his voice to go out in the woods in the middle of the Winter. He was later found dead their due to low temperatures.'

In her essay 'Heaven's Gate: The End?' Wendy Gale Robinson notes that cyber culture was held to blame for the suicides, because, 'there is something inherently dangerous about cyborgs, bodily liberation, and multiple online identities for some people who lack a secure sense of self. Perhaps the Heaven's Gate cult members would've been better off if they hadn't been exposed to the Net and those of us on the Net would've been better off if we hadn't been exposed to their memes.'

She leans towards the notion that the combination of the arrival of the comet, the forthcoming millennium, their UFO beliefs and popular culture offer a better explanation for their behaviour.

Ben Zeller underlines the importance of the internet:

'Whether such a group is possible today is a definite yes. But far more likely today people would simply read about these ideas in books and on websites and not join an actual group. There are no doubt a few small groups scattered here and there. There was a group based out of Roswell, New Mexico, that had similar beliefs about UFOs and aliens being in league with the devil, but last I checked they had only a few members. But overall there are fewer such groups. Now that we have the internet people don't need to join a group to find kindred spirits, they can find them online!'

As for them being just a US phenomenon he says:

'UFO religions are not particular to US culture. The Raelian movement based out of France is an active UFO group. Though to be clear, they do not teach suicide. There are some Russian UFO-oriented groups too. The Aetherius Society is one of the oldest UFO religions, and it is UK based. Again, nothing violent or suicidal about that group. But generally new religions do reflect where they emerge, and the religious and cultural concerns of the members in terms of their specific locales.'

George Chrysalides who runs the 'Religion in the 21st Century website (www.religion21.com) says:

'I wouldn't like to speculate as to whether a similar organisation (as scholars, we try to avoid the term "cult", which is somewhat pejorative) is possible 20 years on. I'd guess that it is not so likely, for several reasons. Numerous religious groups, including HG, associated a final event with the millennium. It's possible that Applewhite regarded the year 1997 as being 2000 years on from the birth of Jesus. Twenty years on, there can be no such rationale.

'People have also moved on since 1997. Full-time commitment to a millennial group is probably not such a live option for many people, and there are certainly not so many "intentional communities" (people who come together through choice rather than geographical location) these days.

'It's not uniquely American, in the sense that there have been suicide groups in other countries – notably the Order of the Solar Temple, which had branches in Switzerland, France, and Canada. There have also been quite a number of UFO-religions in Japan.

'You ask what lessons we can learn. When the news of Heaven's Gate broke, few scholars had heard of it, and most of us had to do quite a bit of research to find out who they were and what might have happened. By contrast, the anti-cult movement was quick to jump in, despite having little information, to tell us that "this is a typical cult". One lesson we might learn is the danger of scaremongering, while at the same time acknowledging that those who followed Applewhite were by no means unintelligent – or particularly young, either.

'Given a conducive environment, groups can espouse beliefs that would be overwhelmingly rejected by people living in a more conventional social environment. One feature of the so-called "suicide cults" is

that they largely lived apart from mainstream society, and therefore lacked the touchstone of normal conventional ways of looking at the world.'

Robert Scheaffer a UFO sceptic and author of numerous books on this topic, comments that:

'I think that Heavens Gate was like so many New Age and religious cults, not specifically UFOs. It had its guru, who was followed blindly by the cult members. There are many people desperately seeking 'otherworldly wisdom,' and someone who boldly claims to have it will attract many followers. How it will end up depends largely on the personality of the leader. Some just seek adulation and riches, others have a more sinister side. Jim Jones and Applewhite were obviously among them.'

Robert encountered Bo and Peep back in 1976, when they held a recruiting meeting advertised around the University of Maryland in College Park. He says:

'Arriving early, I recognized Applewhite and Nettles standing around and chatting with the cult members. I said nothing. During the meeting, Applewhite and Nettles sat incognito among the audience while the cult members at the speakers' table talked glowingly about the coming "harvest." Those who were ready to be "harvested" would be taken up to the "next level" by the UFOs, where they would live a better life. Bo and Peep are the only two people now on earth representing that higher level. The cultists on the panel obviously believed every word of this nonsense. When asked the whereabouts of their leaders, the cultists claimed to not know where they were: "We believe they are in the Midwest somewhere." They were lying. The Two were seated in the audience, although amazingly nobody seemed to realize this. Some of the audience members were quite angry, presumably having had friends or relatives disappear into the cult – probably this is why Bo and Peep chose to remain incognito. When I had a chance to ask a question, I raised the issue of The Two's previous brushes with the law – news reports had mentioned several – and I asked if these were the kind of persons whose word they would trust so completely. As I was speaking, Applewhite rose up from his chair on the other side of the aisle, stood full up and glared at me, from about fifteen feet away. He was a large man, and he had an air of being dangerous. It would have been easy to blow apart the charade by confronting him right there, but I did not. I have always regretted my failure to act in that moment, most especially in light of what ultimately happened.'

M.J. Baniyas, UFO researcher and critic, sums up the situation in these words:

'As far as UFO religions go, Heaven's Gate began with a pretty typical ideology; that humanity is destined for something greater, and that our souls truly belonged among the stars, free from the confusion, pain, and illusions of everyday life. UFO religions, mystics and believers today still tell this same story, and push this same message. Ancient astronaut theories, achieving higher 'vibration' states, or the belief that certain humans are genetically chosen by ET, are all part of UFO discourse and the UFO narrative.'

'Undoubtedly, for the UFO subculture, the Heaven's Gate mass suicide was a symbol of theological UFO belief going awry. However, the core of the Heaven's Gate mythology, the seed which dug deep roots into the minds of its followers, is very much still present today. Twenty years ago, the men and women who made up Heaven's Gate sadly perished, but their religious ideologies are very much alive and well.'

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SHARES



JACK PEAT

Jack is a business and economics journalist and the founder of The London Economic (TLE). He has contributed articles to The Sunday Telegraph, BBC News and writes for The Big Issue on a weekly basis. Jack read History at the University of Wales, Bangor and has a Masters in Journalism from the University of

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