

---

# Heaven's Gate: The UFO Cult of Bo and Peep

MARTIN GARDNER

*For there are some eunuchs, which are so born from their mother's womb; and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men; and there be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.*

—Jesus, Matthew 19:12

The nation's shocked reaction to the suicides in March of thirty-eight happy brainwashed innocents and their demented leader at Rancho Santa Fe, California, has been twofold. It has reawakened public awareness of the enormous power of charismatic gurus over the minds of cult followers, and it has focused attention on the extent to which the myth of alien spacecraft has become the dominant delusion of our times. A recent *Newsweek* poll revealed that almost half of Americans believe UFOs are for real and that our government knows it. As if a secret this monumental could be kept by our political leaders for more than a few hours!

Rumors about space aliens and their snatching of humans show no signs of abating. Harvard psychiatrist John Mack has published a book about the abductions of his patients. The rumors are magnified mightily by endless other books, lurid movies, and shameless radio and television shows. Ed Dames, who runs Psi-Tech, a psychic research center in Beverly Hills, California, was the first to proclaim that his "remote viewers" had spotted a massive spacecraft trailing Comet Hale-Bopp.

Dames's claim was "confirmed" by three psychics at The Farsight Institute in Atlanta, headed by Courtney Brown,

Dames's former pupil. Brown teaches political science at Emory University. He is as embarrassing to Emory as Mack is to Harvard, but both have tenure and can't be fired. My previous column (May/June) reviewed Brown's *Cosmic Voyage*, a crazy book telling how aliens are being shuttled to Earth to live under a mountain near Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Who was most responsible for the Rancho Santa Fe horrors? They were two neurotic, self-deluded occultists: Marshall Herff Applewhite and his platonian companion Bonnie Lu Trousedale Nettles. Their story reads like bad science fiction.

Born in Spur, Texas, in 1931, the son of a Presbyterian minister, Applewhite graduated as a philosophy major at Austin (Texas) College in 1952. He had brief stays in seminary school and in the Army Signal Corps. But gifted with good looks and a fine baritone voice, his chosen career was in singing and music. He received a master's degree in music from the University of Colorado, starting in numerous operas produced in Houston and in Boulder while pursuing his degree. Throughout his musical career, he held a number of teaching positions and conducted numerous church choirs.

For several years in the sixties Applewhite taught music at St. Thomas University, a small Catholic school in Houston. The university fired him in 1970 over an affair with a male student. Struggling to control his homosexual impulses, depressed, and hearing voices, he checked into a psychiatric hospital in 1971. He told his sister he had suffered a heart attack and had had a near-death experience.

It was in this hospital that Apple-

white's life took its fateful turn. His registered nurse, Bonnie Nettles<sup>1</sup> (she was forty-four, he forty), was a former Baptist, then deep into occultism, astrology, and reincarnation. Somehow she managed to convince Applewhite that they were aliens from a higher level of reality who had known each other in previous earthly incarnations. In the coming months and years, they would develop their bizarre religion, believing they had been sent to Earth to warn humanity that our civilization was about to collapse as foretold in Revelation, to be replaced by a new one after the battle of Armageddon and the destruction of Lucifer. They believed that Lucifer (a cut or two below Satan), aided by his "Luciferians," had long controlled our planet. It is, in fact, Lucifer's demons who have been piloting those spaceships that are abducting humans.

How can one escape the coming holocaust? Not by being "raptured," as Protestant fundamentalists teach, but by being beamed up to spacecraft operated by benign superbeings and taken to the gates of heaven. (Judging by the recent tragedy at Rancho Santa Fe, if you are male, the best way to make this journey is to cut off your testicles then kill yourself!)

Shortly after their meeting, and fired with the divine mandate to rescue as many humans as possible from the destruction of our world as we know it, Applewhite and Nettles embarked on their mission, Nettles abandoning a husband and four children in the process.

---

*Martin Gardner's latest book is *Weird Water and Fuzzy Logic (Prometheus 1996)*, a collection of sixteen recent SKEPTICAL INQUIRER columns plus thirty-three book reviews.*

(Applewhite, a father of two, was already divorced.) The pair quickly became inseparable in a strange bond that psychiatrists call the "insanity of two." It develops when two neurotic persons live together and reinforce each other's delusions.

Indeed, Applewhite and Nettles began calling themselves The Two. They came to believe they were the "two witnesses" described in chapter eleven of Revelation. Verse seven predicts that when the two witnesses "finish their testimony" they will be murdered. After three and a half days, God will resurrect them. A voice from heaven will say "Come up hither," and their enemies will see them taken to heaven by a "cloud."

"I'm not saying we are Jesus," Nettles wrote to her daughter. "It's nothing as beautiful but it is almost as big. . . . We have found out, baby, we have this mission before coming into this life. . . . It's in the Bible in Revelation."

The Two's first move was to open an occult bookstore in Houston. After it failed in 1973, they took to the road to gather converts. A group was started in Los Angeles called Guinea Pig. Applewhite was Guinea, Nettles was Pig. Soon they were calling their movement HIM (Human Individual Metamorphosis). Later it became TOA (Total Overcomers Anonymous). Because they considered themselves shepherds to a flock of sheep, Applewhite took the name of Bo, and Nettles became Peep. Over the years they liked to give themselves other whimsical names such as Him and Her, Winnie and Pooh, Tweedle and Dee, Chip and Dale, Nincom and Poop, Tiddy and Wink. Eventually they settled on the musical notes Do and Ti.

In a 1972 interview in the *Houston Post*, Nettles said her astrological work was

assisted by Brother Francis, a nineteenth-century monk. "He stands beside me," she said, "when I interpret the charts." Both Do and Ti constantly channeled voices from superbeings who lived on the Evolutionary Level Above Human, or Next Level (the Kingdom of Heaven).

It all sounds so childish and insane, yet those who attended early cult meetings, mostly on college campuses, have testified to the pair's persuasive rhetoric. Early converts were mainly young hippies, drifters, and New Agers, disenchanted with other cults, eager to be told what to believe and do.

In 1975 about twenty followers were recruited in the seaside village of Waldport, Oregon, then taken to eastern Colorado where they expected to board a flying saucer and be carried to the Next Level. It was a vague region ruled by the great EGB (Energy God Being). When the spacecraft failed to appear, it was such a blow to Bo and Peep that they plunged underground for seventeen years.

There was a period when The Two preached that the "Demonstration" foretold in Revelation 11 would occur. As I said earlier, this would be their assassination, followed by their resurrection and journey to the Heavenly Kingdom in a spacecraft that the Bible called a cloud. "The chances it won't happen,"

Applewhite told a *New York Times* reporter in 1976, "are about as great as that a rain will wash all the red dirt out of Oklahoma." The interview got him fired as choir director of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Houston.

Never sexual lovers, the peculiar pair surfaced in the mid-seventies as leaders of about fifty followers who wandered with them here and there. They camped out or lived in motels with funds donated by wealthy recruits or obtained from odd jobs and occa-

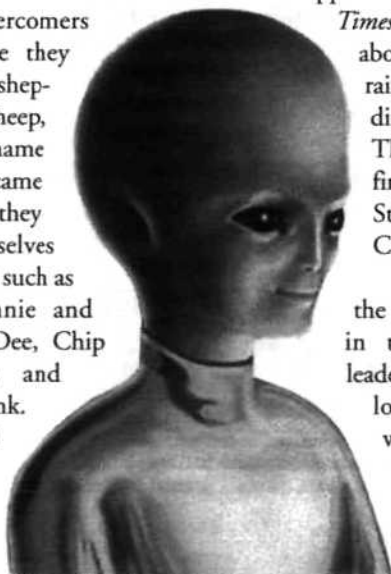
sional begging. For several years they hunkered down in a camp near Laramie, Wyoming. HIM was now a full-blown cult with members strictly regulated by what they called the Process. Recruits assumed new names. Sex, alcohol, tobacco, and pot were taboo. Ti, whom Do always considered his superior, died of cancer in 1985 after losing an eye to the disease. Until his suicide, Do said he was in constant communication with Ti, who had reached the Next Level.

Precise details about the cult's nomadic history remain obscure. Do convinced his sheep that they, too, were aliens from the Next Level, now incarnated in a body they called the soul's container, vehicle, instrument, or vessel. When the time was right, they would all be teleported to one of the spaceships operated by angels.

*Time* reported (August 27, 1979) that cult members were then wearing hoods and gloves, obeying "thousands" of rules, studying the Bible intensely, and undergoing periods in which they communicated with each other only by writing. It's not easy to believe, but the cult received so much media attention in the late seventies that a TV series called *The Mysterious Two* was planned. A pilot actually aired in 1982 featuring John Forsythe and Pricilla Pointer as The Two.

After the Internet became widely available to the public, the cult intensified its recruiting by way of a Web site called Heaven's Gate. A few followers had developed sufficient skills not only to go online, but also to run a service called Higher Source that designed Web sites for customers.

In 1996 the cult rented a sprawling, Spanish-style villa, with pool and tennis court, in Rancho Santa Fe, a few miles north of San Diego. The rent was \$7,000 a month. Members began the day with prayers at 3 A.M., ate only two meals a day, had their hair cropped short, and wore baggy clothes to make themselves look genderless and unsexy. Their lives were more regulated than the lives of soldiers. Guns were stored just in case government forces attacked them as they had done to the Branch Davidians



"How a Member of the Kingdom of Heaven might appear" (from the Heaven's Gate Web site).

in Waco. Meticulous plans were drawn for a mass suicide as soon as the higher beings gave them a "marker" in the heavens. The marker, Do decided, was the giant spacecraft that psychics had convinced him (perhaps verified by the voice of Ti) was following Comet Hale-Bopp. A lunar eclipse on March 23, 1997, may have strengthened the sign.

Haunting videotapes were made on which the smiling and happy sheep said how joyfully they were looking forward to escaping from their vehicles and from a doomed planet. "We are happily prepared to leave 'this world' and go with Ti's crew," they posted on their Web site. Evidently they believed their beloved Ti was on the Hale-Bopp spacecraft!

As everyone now knows, eighteen men and twenty-one women put themselves to sleep with phenobarbital mixed into pudding or applesauce, and washed down with vodka. Plastic bags were tied over their heads so they would suffocate in their sleep. Faces and upper bodies of the "monks," as they called themselves, were neatly covered with a square of purple cloth. All thirty-nine were dressed alike—black shirts, black pants, and black Nike running shoes. The last two to die were women with bags on their heads but unshrouded by a purple covering.

The most perplexing aspect of these ritualized deaths were the neatly packed travel bags beside their bunks, and a five dollar bill and some quarters in each of their pockets. Did they expect the super-beings to take the bags along with their souls? And what use did they suppose the money would have when they reached the spaceship?

The odor of rotting "vehicles" was so strong that the first police at the scene on March 26 suspected poison gas.

To me the saddest aspect of this insane event was the firm belief, expressed on the incredible videotapes, that cult members were killing themselves of their own free will. Nothing could have been more false. Although Do always told his robots they were free to go at any time—and hundreds had done just that—so powerful was his

control over the minds of those who stayed that they believed anything he said, obeyed every order. Autopsies showed that Do and seven of his followers had been surgically castrated.

Do said he was dying of cancer. Yet his autopsy showed no sign of cancer or any other fatal illness. The wild-eyed expression on his face, reproduced on the covers of both *Time* and *Newsweek*, was not a look of illness. It was a look of madness.

Media reports have made fun of the belief that our bodies are mere containers and that in our next life we will be given glorious new bodies. This, of course, is exactly what St. Paul taught, and what conservative Christians, Jews, Muslims, and most Eastern faiths believe. Similar mixtures of New Testament doctrine with New Age nonsense is what makes so many recent cults appealing to converts with Christian backgrounds. Members of Heaven's Gate firmly believed that Jesus was an extraterrestrial sent to Earth like Do and Ti to collect as many souls as possible and lead them upward to acquire new containers. When Jesus finished his work, he went back to heaven in a UFO.

The great adventist movements in America—Seventh-day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormonism—are flourishing today as never before despite the long delay in Jesus' Second Coming. As the year 2000 approaches, we can be sure that lesser doomsday cults will be popping up, many of them recruiting followers on the fast-growing Internet. None of the major adventist faiths recommend suicide, but will there be more suicides by other weird little cults that surely will be capturing the minds of lonely, gullible souls in the remaining years before 2000?

So pervasive is the worldwide belief in alien UFOs that a London company recently offered to insure anyone against abduction, impregnation, or attack by aliens. About four thousand people, mostly in England and the United States, bought policies. Last October Heaven's Gate paid a thousand dollars for a policy covering up to fifty members for \$1 million each. After their mass sui-

cides, the London firm decided to abandon its insurance against space aliens.

Some insight into the sort of people who were followers of Bo and Peep can be gained from a sad story distributed by the Associated Press in early April. Lorraine Webster, age seventy-eight, now living in Rollo, Missouri, abandoned her husband in 1978 to help found Heaven's Gate. She left the cult only because of a health problem. Her daughter was among those who died at Rancho Santa Fe.

Was Lorraine Webster disturbed by the suicides? Not in the least. Like all cult members, she doesn't like to call her cult a cult. It was a "movement." Do, she told the reporter, was a "kind and wonderful man." She misses her daughter but admires her for acting "like an angel." Ti frequently talks to Ms. Webster. She recently appeared at Webster's window in the form of a "chirping bird."

At the fifth annual Gulf Breeze (Florida) UFO Conference, March 21–23, Courtney Brown announced that his psychics' most recent remote viewing of Comet Hale-Bopp showed that the spacecraft was no longer there. It had moved, he said, to a spot behind the sun. Evidently this news failed to reach Do and his sheep. However, if Do was in touch with Ti on the ship, he probably would have taken her word over Brown's.

The *Village Voice*, covering the cult in its December 1, 1975, issue, included a prophetic passage: "The whole operation has lost that silvery crazy glitter. Now it seems black, dark, and a little ugly. It has the smell of ordinary death."

## Notes

1. Some sources say that Applewhite met Nettles when he was visiting a friend in the hospital. Nettles's daughter says they met at a drama school. (*New York Times*, April 28, 1997)

2. At the time I write there have been a total of five copycat suicide attempts, two of which were successful. Most notably, on Tuesday, May 6, two former Heaven's Gate cult members, Wayne Cooke and Charles Humphrey, were found in a hotel room not far from Rancho Santa Fe in an attempted double suicide. Cooke, whose wife was one of the original thirty-nine, was found dead; Humphrey was found unconscious and taken to the hospital. □