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### Excuse Me, I Joined a What?

She didn't understand. I witnessed a storm of confusion cross over her face and into her eyes as I confided in her with what I had done and asked for her support. With a questioning eye and fluster dancing on her brow, my mother asked, "You're joking, right?"

My confession: I had joined a cult and I'd been living with the other members for the past few weeks. Of course, Mother realized this was a lie, laughed it off, and in her country accent explained: "Man, I didn't know what to think! I didn't want you gettin' into some Jim Jones shit! But, for a second I was thinkin', I don't want you to be in the KKK, either. But, I'd rather you be passionate about race supremacy than bein' brainwashed by a lunatic that might convince you to kill yourself." I was stunned. Did my mother really just say she'd prefer that I was a white supremacist rather than a member of a religious sect? During my "confession" to her I didn't put any detail into what "my cult's" beliefs were or even why I'd joined it, because I knew I wouldn't need to. When she heard the words, "I joined a cult," it represented and detailed itself to her with bright, burning crosses, crisp, white sheets, and Jim Jones's face.

My mother isn't the only person to view the word 'cult' in a negative way. I walked around my college campus and asked 30 random people to say the first four words they thought of when I said the word 'cult'. Nineteen out of those 30 associated 'scary' as one of the first adjectives they thought of. And I must confess that until recently I didn't exactly have what one might call an optimistic view of the term either. Yet, a prominent national dictionary

characterizes a cult as, “a system of religious beliefs and its body of adherents” (“cult,” *Merriam-Webster*). It doesn’t really evoke visions of people committing mass suicide, does it? Dictionary.com defines the word as “a group or sect bound together by veneration of the same thing, person, idea, etc.” (“cult,” *Merriam-Webster*). This somewhat narrower definition describes any group that has a common bond, from a church, to soldiers in an army, to alumna and associates of a college staying true to their alma mater. Yet, still, it is evident that the general consensus--my own (previous) thoughts included—is that the term ‘cult’ mainly has negative connotations associated with it. However, after recently learning about a number of extremist groups that we generally associate with the word such as the People’s Temple and the Branch Davidians, I was surprised to see how similar they are with my own “cult,” my sorority. I never thought that I’d join a cult, but after comparing how these groups interact with their members, it’s evident that I’m loving something that I said I’d never be a part of.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> day of March in 1997 Rancho Santa Fe police found 39 members of the Heaven’s Gate group neatly laid to rest in their beds, all dressed in black sweat suits. Cause of death: suicide. This group followed a charismatic leader named Marshall Applewhite who convinced his followers that he was a messenger from the heavens, and if they followed him, they would receive Christ. He told them the reason they were attracted to him was due to an alien spirit that had impregnated itself into them (The Unexplained). It seems that Applewhite told his followers these outrageous things in hope of persuading them to believe that they were the chosen ones, strong enough to withhold complete dedication to the promises he held for them. So, why commit suicide? Applewhite related what he ‘knew,’ which was that behind the upcoming sighting of the Hale-Bopp comet was going to be a spaceship that was carrying Christ

All Mighty himself, and that their souls could hitch a ride to heaven – with Jesus – in this holy space mobile (The Unexplained).

The members of this group wholeheartedly believed in what Applewhite said, so they gave their lives to him because of his promises of an unknown, but promising, future. This was their cult, their group that was dedicated to one another because of their common belief. They did everything together: they lived together, ate together, worked together, they were always with each other and influencing one another. Several residents of Rancho Santa Fe, where the group lived, recalled that they all looked alike, and how “there was an oddness in the uniformly buzz-type haircuts, for men and women, the loose-fitting clothing, [and] the frighteningly pale complexions” (Sterngold). They were a cult. This group had made its own community where they conformed to each other (to make them seem equal), and fed off of the others’ ideas and passions to help keep them all strong in their faith. One of the few reasons they even associated with those outside of their membership was because of work. The members of Heaven’s Gate constructed web pages for companies and used the money to help aid the cult. Heather Chronert, who worked for one of Heaven’s Gate’s clients, recalled “that the normally congenial members had seemed unusually agitated . . . discussing something she had never heard of, the expected arrival . . . of the Hale-Bopp comet” (qtd. in Sterngold). It was the only time she remembered them showing any emotion, she said, as they spoke of how much they were looking forward to the event (Sterngold). This is the indicator of how dedicated these people were to their religion; they were excited and ready to take their own lives so that their souls could hop onto a spaceship with Christ. By any definition, I think that all signs here point to a cult.

I currently live in a house with 43 of my sorority sisters. We share almost every aspect of our lives with each other; we eat together, brush our teeth together, we wake up and fall asleep to

the sound of each other's voices. We are there for each other if one of us can't sleep; we're study partners and personal counselors for one other. I can say that these women challenge and inspire me towards the betterment of myself. Their influence is changing me from a young lady into the woman that I want to be. I'm most always with one of my sisters, and I'm positive that most, if not all, would concur. Comparing these actions and considering the depth that these women impact me to our dictionary definitions, I am in a cult. Also, in comparing my life to the lifestyle of the members of Heaven's Gate, one can see they're remarkably similar. Granted, Greek Life isn't generally known for preparing us for the day we decide to kill ourselves, but one must look at the definitions and consider how the characteristics of any group, positive or negative, match up so well together.

The main reason I feel that fraternities and sororities cannot be excluded from the term cult, is simply because Greek Life has many of the same qualities that our society associates with extremist cults, those being camaraderie, shared beliefs, exclusiveness, and recruiting. With both groups, whether it's a whole sorority wearing their letters on the same day or cult members wearing the same hair cut, it still exemplifies group unity. Cult members seclude themselves from others so that they can develop deeper connections to their purposes and to each other, and with that, they can help their own stay strong and confident in what they believe. We can see this not only in the complete seclusion of the Heaven's Gate group, but also in Jonestown in Guyana, and in Waco, Texas in the compound where the Branch Davidians lived, worshiped, and eventually died for their beliefs. These groups--these cults--stuck with their members, just like I stick with my sisters.

I've only lived in my sorority house for three months, and I've already fallen in love with these people. Like I mentioned before, being around these women that I share a common bond

with every day has changed me so much. Before, my mother and my cousin were the only two people I had confidence in, but now my mind has been opened to whole new ideas of what true friendship is. The reason I gave Greek Life a chance was because most all of my previous friends weren't being friends at all. Maybe I just expected too much, but I feel that a best friend should be there for you when you're in need, not when it's convenient for their schedule. I am a strong believer in selflessness, and if I care for you, and you need me, I'll take on some of your pain and I'll try my best to make it better. No one except my mom and cousin had ever offered that to me, but, now, I am absolutely confident those closest to me from my sorority will be there in any situation I could need them for and I'll be there for them. I know that they're going to be my life long friends because they feel the exact same way I do, they actually understand.

It's evident that if one joins a group or cause, it's because they want to be involved. Whether it's a book club where one can share their insights, a political or religious cause, or a sorority so that they can make friends in a new place, people join groups so that they can be a part of something. Some people just need another to listen and understand. Some need love. Others need to feel like they're doing something with their lives. And then there are those that just need to be with others. After studying these extreme sects, it was like a slap in the face when I realized how easy it would be for someone to have joined Heaven's Gate or is considering become a member of a street gang. Many have the same needs that led me to join a sorority. I had said that I'd never join a cult because they're "scary and demented," but now I can empathize. Our groups are places that give us what we need; they fill up a hollow part of our soul and help us to feel complete. When this first dawned on me, it was eerie to think that I could empathize with 'those' people. This is when I understood that cults are like personalities. There's such a wide variety of personality types: there are some that are completely opposite,

there are jealous ones, sweet ones, mean ones, etc., but the thing is – it's still a personality. I'll probably never be able to comprehend why one would take their life because a man told them to, or believe that they're going to board a space ship with Jesus, or it's the only way they and their children will have peace from now on. But, still, a cult is bound by their belief(s) like I'm bound to my sorority because of mine.

All Greek organizations have purposes and beliefs that members are obliged to demonstrate from day to day. My sorority's founders made our group based on girls that shared common personality traits and that would follow the group's purposes through. Our purposes are to make ourselves and each other better, more well-rounded women, making us even more apt to inspire the world around us through our actions. One can see that Greek Life can be placed under the definition of cult because we join together, emotionally move each other, and try to spread the good we know. David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians, took every opportune moment to spread the word of Jesus Christ when the FBI was trying to arrest him. My sorority's purpose may not be to spread the word of a god, but, it's to show the purest form of ourselves. We're to use our personalities because they're our core, and exemplify kindness and compassion in our own personal way to those around us in most all situations. We're letting others know that the world is good and that kind people are still here; it's suppose to cause an inspiring ripple effect. Comparing what my sorority is told we're suppose to spread through our actions to how Jim Jones told his People's Temple to be dedicated to his church, is the another reality check of how Greek Life is comparable to these extreme cults.

I read an article revised by cult expert Rick Ross informing the world that, "People don't join cults, they're recruited to cults ... people who become cult members don't know that their recruiters have a hidden agenda. If they did initially know the actual intentions of the group--it is

more likely they would resist their persuasion” (Stacey). My initial thought: Is there an agenda behind my sorority?

Jim Jones didn't move his People's Temple from Indiana to California in pursuit of milder winters. He went to gain greater freedom to develop the cult in a more radical direction (Bainbridge, Doyle, and Stark). Jones had created a church that was blind during the time of segregation. His church was made up of Caucasians and African Americans, who fed off of each other's differences and grew strong in the Christian faith. He moved his church to the beautiful Redwood Valley of California, cut off from any mainstream neighborhood or town. Here the group worked, worshiped, and grew together as The People's Temple. Jones had given them a place where they could worship their Christ without the hypocrisy of the day of “love thy neighbor, except the colored ones.” He captivated them and provided a God-based plan for their lives--they were hooked, and they looked to him as a provider and leader, that's why many followed him to Guyana. In Guyana, Jones had set up the perfect little society, Jonestown, where they were surrounded by those who were as equally committed to his church. But, there was a dark side behind his plan.

Seeing as to how Jones was shunned as a child, it's clear that the idea of people following him had to be euphoria in his eyes. He had set up a speaker system so that Jonestown citizens heard his voice twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It was supposed to be their heaven on Earth. However, the members began suppressing their emotions because Jones soon became overbearing and twisted. He scared them by saying that they were constantly being tested. He told them that there would be people who were going to tell them they wanted to leave, and if they didn't report this to Jones, they would be punished. Children ratted out their mothers, and brothers turned against each other. The accused were accosted, threatened and often times

disciplined by Jones. Deep inside he never cared about making the perfect community for Christians; he only cared about making the perfect community for himself.

This is where I have to stop and think about what I'm really doing. My sorority is supposed to be a community for women that are going to change the world. But, is there an underlying, dark side? I don't feel as if I've been brainwashed in any way, but most of those in Jonestown didn't either. I've considered this from many angles, and the only thing I can come up with is the money factor. We pay to be in our sorority and that ensures the future of Alpha Gamma Delta at my university. The money pays for where we sleep, what we eat, what we do, where we go, how we get there, a lot of what we wear; we pay so we can be here experiencing it. I personally feel that every moment has been worth each dollar spent times ten.

The only truly scary thing happens when one decides to leave the sorority; after one is initiated, if they decide to leave they can never be in it or any other sect of Greek Life again. If one has paid the initiation fees and is a part of the group, I don't understand why they can't come back if they want to. There is a huge process to dropping a sorority, too. Kelsey King, my sorority sister that dropped earlier this fall explained,

It was miserable! There was a ton a paperwork that I had to fill out, signing that I would keep the pacts that I had made as a pledge and initiate. They wanted to make sure that I wouldn't tell any of our secrets. I had to go before Standards and explain why I wanted to drop. It was a disgusting feeling walking in because the older girls were just looking at me like I was a disgrace. Jessica (our president) told me a good ten times that I needed to understand the consequences of leaving. She said that I wouldn't ever be able to come back, and that I needed to consider this, and make sure it's what I really wanted, because, once again, I wouldn't be

able to come back. You could cut the awkwardness with a knife it was so bad! I don't think I've ever felt more relieved than when I walked out of the room and the door was closed behind me (King).

I proceeded to tell Kelsey about Jim Jones and how the People's Temple had to deal with him whenever they wanted to leave. She laughed, but, she was freaked out when I compared her leaving story to the Branch Davidians. I told her of how David Koresh seemed rational when a member of his group wanted to leave the compound they lived in, and how he nonchalantly told them that if they left there was no way they could return and it also meant they were turning their backs to God, thus they were damned to hell. I asked her if she thought it compared, her mouth dropped and "Yes. That's really creepy...oh my god, that's exactly how I felt," rolled off of her tongue (King).

Looking at these situations, it's also evident how exclusive these groups are. After you've been welcomed and accepted – it's as if one isn't suppose to ever turn back again. A part of my sorority's national purpose, that we're to know before being initiated, does state: '...to cultivate acquaintances with many whom I met. To cherish friendships but with a chosen few and to study the perfecting of those friendships...' (alphagammadelta.org). All sororities and fraternities treat being apart of the Greek community as if it's some life long commitment, and those who drop are looked down on. It may not be verbalized, but when others speak of those that have gotten out you can hear a bitter tone in their voice. Kelsey said that Standards (leaders of a sorority that are voted to ranking positions by the members) begged her to stay and at least do recruitment. She told them that she didn't want to and if they made her she would tell the girls going though to not to join one. I don't think that if I was considering dropping I would sabotage recruitment, but, maybe Kelsey saw something that I don't. I've explored how the actions and in

some cases, the feelings of being in a sorority compare to that of being in an extremist cult. But, I haven't yet explored the similarities in the recruiting process. We know that those who join groups are in need of something. How are these voids filled? Edward M. Levine provides an answer:

What further more distinguishes them [cults] is that they intentionally seek to recruit white, middle (and upper-middle) class, single, young people—particularly college students—and virtually never attempt to proselytize families.

In addition these cults seek individuals with dependency needs of varying degrees of intensity, needs which are more psychological than social, needs such individuals have been unable to resolve because of the inadequacies of their upbringing and their values (which are characteristic of middle class nuclear families (Levine).

Upon reading this I felt that Levine was writing specifically about sorority recruitment. I was on the other side of recruitment this year, the one doing the recruiting, and what we were told to do was be to be ourselves. The 'recruited' would feel whether they fit in our group or not, but the main thing was to keep them interested in Greek Life and to tell them how it could change and benefit their lives. Marshall Applewhite, the main recruiter for Heaven's Gate, made promises for their futures and told them of how positive their lives would be if they had Jesus in them. His one mechanism of recruiting was the bold statements he would make, like he was Jesus reincarnate, and the reason people were attracted to him was because an alien has impregnated its spirit in them, meaning they were the chosen ones. Now, if a person just happened to have a wilder imagination and felt a connection with this man, one can see where they could question or believe that Applewhite was telling the truth. He didn't aim for young

college students but it was like he was trying to touch those that needed someone. Jim Jones' aim wasn't at young college students either, but he still used a weakness to his advantage, discrimination. For once our society could see good things coming from a group that had blacks and whites working together in it. One can see that the People's Temple served as a place where one could join the cause of ending discrimination and where they would feel accepted and not judged among others.

If one can take themselves "out of the box" and look at their group and these "evil cults" from an unbiased standpoint, they'll see the various similarities and direct correlations to each other. How I feel about my sorority and what I have gained from it directly relates to why people join cults. When studying extremist groups, it is evident that those who join are looking for something that gives them security, people that understand their mindset, and/or they're looking for something to fill a void in their life. I joined my cult --my sorority-- because I was looking for true friendship. Looking at Heaven's Gate one can see their members had found what they were looking for in each other and their leader. But, there is a point of exclusiveness that comes with being in a cult. I think this is where our society's negative connotations come into play because they assume that evil deeds are being formed behind the seclusion. The issue here is that negative information will most always be considered before looking deeper for positive attributes. I'm not saying that all 'cults' are good; I'm just arguing that not all are bad. Now, after considering the not all cults are evil, are you thinking about going through recruitment next year?

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