THE FAITHFU

True believers are meeting and posting pages on the

By HOWARD CHUA-EOAN

THE DAY BEFORE THE SUICIDES WERE discovered, Holly Craig in Fayetteville, Tennessee, received the floppy discs—and a letter of instruction. "Well, it's difficult to know where to start since you know quite a bit about us," it began. Indeed she did. Having done business with Heaven's Gate Web-design team, Craig had met 15 members and considered herself a "good friend" of seven of them, eventually becoming manager of their home page. The letter asked her to contact eight disciples who had left the group, as well as another who was still actively involved. She managed to reach all save one, who now lives in Romania. The disciples, she says, were "receiving messages from the 'Level Above' and Do for further instructions concerning the Website." Last week the disciples got back to her, saying "it was time to upload" the discs.

"By the time you receive this, we'll be gone," read the first of six new pages Craig posted on the Web on Thursday. Above that message blared the headline HEAVEN'S GATE 'AWAY TEAM' RETURNS TO LEVEL ABOVE HUMAN IN DISTANT SPACE, preceding three "exit statements" from team members. Meanwhile, several of the disciples contacted by Craig began holding conference calls to plan strategy, exchanging messages from the "Level Above" and guidance from the deceased founders of Heaven's Gate, Do and Ti (Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles). They said the Website established last week would be updated with documents and illustrations. Said Craig: "This will be an ongoing site for years to come."

Even as the pages were being set up, the surviving disciples were distancing themselves from the man who goes by the names Rio D'Angelo and Richard Ford, the cult member who discovered the bodies and alerted the police. They claim that Rio has taken over the cult's original Website and is out for profit, having signed a movie deal with ABC; he has ceased communicating with them. The dissension is likely to reverberate. While Applewhite led 38 followers into apparently blissful self-annihilation, his 20-year odyssey may have drawn a total of 200 to 500 adherents, many of whom remain alive, still believe to various degrees and are beginning to argue about the meaning of the adventure and the stewardship of its legacy. One early disciple, Sharon Walsh of Colorado, believes the "Away Team" was limited to 39 for numerological reasons: 3 + 9 = 12, the number of Jesus' disciples (also, 1 + 2 = 3, or the Trinity). Walsh's sister was a suicide; she says her mother and stepfather—and she assumes others—remain fervent believers and would have joined the 39 were it not for numerology.

Meanwhile, according to a former believer, Aaron Greenberg—another early recruit of Applewhite and Nettles' (who were also known as the Two)—may be trying to establish himself as a leader of the remnant. Some survivors, however, view Greenberg as an Anti-Do because he once argued that believers had to become independent of the Two to reach the "Level Above Human." According to Montana sociologist Robert Balch, when Bo and Peep, as the founders then called themselves, went into hiding amid an early crisis, a disciple named Aaron led a faction that abetted beer drinking, pot smoking and sex—all activities disapproved of by Applewhite and Nettles. Bo and Peep reappeared to scold their flock, and a large number of dissenters departed. Heaven's Gate's cyberspace rants against unspecified "Luciferians" may partly be aimed at these more worldly schismatics.

Not that Bo and Peep's doctrines were ever set in stone. In the beginning they were the two witnesses prophesied by *Revelation*, who would be assassinated only to rise again after three days. Living with such a vision of God's plan, Applewhite asked recruits in 1975, "Would you be willing to bear arms for this cause?" He explained that "we don't mean to kill; we mean to incite people to kill us. If they saw you carrying guns, then that would give them cause to bear arms against us. And it might come to that. It might take that to get us killed." With the death from cancer of Nettles in 1985, the cult moved away from fulfilling *Revelation*. But perhaps not entirely. Last week police discovered a small arms cache

BROOKS KRAFT—SYGMA FOR TIME

"Ti and Do were not some kooky New Agers. They heard voices. They were controlled."

—THEO ALTHUISZES

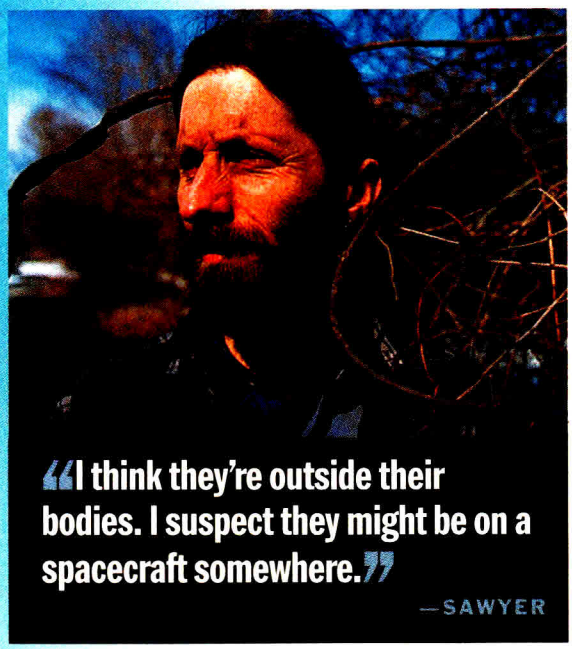
L AMONG US

Web, ensuring life after death for Heaven's Gate

at a storage facility near a former headquarters in Escondido, California.

From 1976 to about 1980 the group lived in isolation in a camp near Laramie, Wyoming, where the cult's tenets continued to evolve. The recruitment drive from California to Illinois had collected about 100 members, mostly free-associating hippies, college students and would-be mystics. By Wyoming, however, members were under stricter rules, sometimes spending upwards of 10 hours a day with tuning forks held to their ears. One ex-believer recalled, "They were being taught to send their thoughts to other people ... and while they were doing that, they were encouraged to open their minds so that Bo and Peep could go directly into them." Believers were told to "test the churches," trying the compassion of local ministers as they begged for fuel and food.

As everyone practiced disciplines that had them preparing for sudden visitations by spacecraft, Ti and Do impressed the idea of a great enterprise upon them. "People lead mediocre lives, and so these leaders exploited expectations of joining an élite," says Hank Hanegraaff, president of the Christian Research Institute. The physical deprivations—lack of sleep, excessive work, repetitive chanting and duties—all contributed to subtle thought control.



BROOKS KRAFT—SYGMA FOR TIME

"I think they're outside their bodies. I suspect they might be on a spacecraft somewhere."

—SAWYER

This control proved tenacious, even in the face of ideological stagnation and disappointment. "Do and Ti had repeated things for so long," says Sawyer (he refuses to give his real name), later a high-ranking member of the organization. "There was frustration. We had even waited for a craft to pick us up on several dates, and it didn't happen. Ti and Do both had a lot of depression over that." Then in 1985 came a reformulation of tenets. "In the early days," says Theo Althuiszes, who joined and left the cult twice, "Ti had the real control. Do looked to her for guidance." At first the group believed that when believers "advanced to the next level," they took their human bodies with them. But when Ti died, says Althuiszes, Do "had to reinvent everything." Soon there emerged the doctrine of spiritual graduation into extraterrestrial vehicles, with souls transferrable from one physical container to another. Between 1991 and 1993, Do slowly became the incarnation of Jesus. "He was very hesitant to claim that," says Sawyer. But by 1994 the group had posters proclaiming Ti the Father and Do the Son.

SYGMA

Castration was first discussed in 1987 merely as "think-tank material," a next step that Do did not plan to impose on all male members. He was fearful, says Sawyer, that "someone would leave and tell people and he'd be blamed." Eventually, Sawyer and another cultist, Steven McCarter, who died in Rancho Santa Fe, pressed Do to begin the castrations. Says Sawyer: "I wanted to do it. I was very much in favor of it. It was me and Steve. We flipped a coin to decide who would go first. He won the toss." The surgery took place in Mexico. "It was very traumatic for Do. He was not sure it was right." Coroners, however, reported that Applewhite was among eight castrated males found at Rancho Santa Fe. (Sawyer, who decided against castration and subsequently left the cult in September 1994, is now an expectant father.)

The '80s brought prosperity to the group. Two members inherited about $300,000, allowing the cult to rent houses, called "crafts," in Denver and later the Dallas–Fort Worth region. (In the Rancho Santa Fe area, the group appears to have rented two different crafts.) Thus Applewhite had enough assets to initiate the cult's last great recruitment drive, on New Year's Day 1994. An estate sale was held at the Escondido mansion, raising money to buy four vans and gear to tour the country.

By August the number of believers had doubled, to about 50—and suicide had arisen as an option. At a hotel meeting room near Worcester, Massachusetts, Do met with his disciples to reflect on the matter. Says Sawyer: "It was mentioned that we should not discount the possibility that the Next Level is not going to pick us up and we'll have to be the ones to leave our vehicles behind." He adds, "I felt a sense of life preservation. I felt like I wanted to live." The separation was swift, as it had always been when a disciple chose to leave or was expelled. Do gave Sawyer

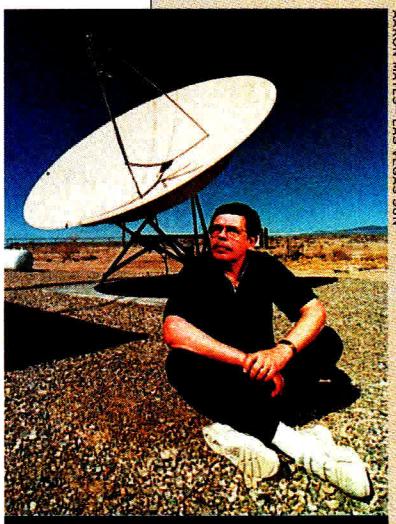
$600 and a plane ticket to Phoenix, Arizona.

Perhaps the last recruits, Yvonne McCurdy-Hill and her husband Steven, ran into the cult while online. But only after they had passed a face-to-face interview did Do ask the Cincinnati, Ohio, couple to "put their affairs in order." Says Steven Hill's mother Eartha: "They were told to get rid of all their debts, even parking tickets. Do didn't want anybody coming after them for something like that." Hill left the cult by November. Says his mother: "He just didn't buy into the grandiosity of the thing, but that's exactly what got his wife."

Yvonne was with the group as they went on what appears to have been a last fling in February and March, touring Sea World, gambling in Las Vegas (they spent $1,900 for the spree, leaving a final tally of $12,183.21 in their meticulously kept books). One of the exit statements posted on the Web last week explained that the last days of touring helped members "re-examine if there's anything that might hold any attraction for any individual ... [Those] things ... now seem such a waste of time." Soon the time was right: Hale-Bopp was in sight, and on March 20, 1997, UFO enthusiasts noted heightened activity in Arizona. The suicides began on March 22.

In the aftermath, a sense of devotion is evident even among disciples who have fallen from the faith. Says Althuiszes: "Ti and Do were not some kooky New Agers. They heard voices. They were controlled." As for Sawyer, he still believes Do and Ti's religion "makes the most sense of anything else I've heard." Of his dead compatriots, he says, "I think they're outside their bodies. I believe that 100%. I suspect they might be on a spacecraft somewhere."

There has been one copycat suicide in California, apparently by a nonmember, a sobering presage to the cult's Web invitation posted soon after: "During a brief window of time, some may wish to follow us ... If you should choose to do this, logistically, it is preferred that you make this exit somewhere in the area of the West or Southwest of the United States ... You must call on the name of Ti and Do to assist you ... We suggest that anyone serious about considering this go into their most quiet place and ask, scream, with all their being." Enough noise perhaps to wake the dead. ***—Reported by Cathy Booth/Los Angeles, James L. Graff/Cincinnati, Richard N. Ostling/Mahopac, Noah Robischon/New York and Richard Woodbury/Denver***



AARON MAYES—LAS VEGAS SUN

BELIEVE IT OR NOT Bell, in Nevada, helped link the comet to saucers

THE MAN WHO SPREAD THE MYTH

THE HEAVEN'S GATE 39 HAD BEEN AWAITING THE CUE TO BEGIN THEIR FINAL act. And last fall it apparently came, not in a heavenly vision but on *Coast to Coast AM with Art Bell*, a late-night talk-radio show that has become the nation's top meeting place of the reality challenged.

During a five-hour program that is carried on 335 stations across the U.S. every night and is heard by more than 10 million night owls, Bell is host to callers who usually relate a weird assortment of paranormal and supernatural tales. Alien abductions, poltergeists, UFO encounters, remote viewing, ESP and other unlikely phenomena are common fare.

Given that far-out environment, it seemed only natural last November when amateur astronomer Chuck Shramek called in to report he had spotted and photographed "a Saturn-like object" trailing the approaching Hale-Bopp comet. But even the most jaded Bell fans were excited when Courtney Brown, an Emory University professor, called to make a patently ludicrous announcement: his team of three psychic "remote viewers" had focused on Shramek's object and determined it was a spaceship full of aliens. Furthermore, Brown claimed, he had a photograph of the craft taken by a "Top-10-university astronomy professor," who had told him radio signals were coming from the object, indicating it was "intelligently driven."

That revelation, Bell reported on his elaborate and well-attended Website, "practically blew away my disbelieving side." It seemed to have had a similar effect on the Heaven's Gate cult members, who surmised that the spacecraft would be their vehicle for reaching "the next level."

Even after astronomers identified Shramek's "object" as an ordinary star and Bell himself exposed Brown's picture as a fake and his "Top-10" professor a no-show, the cult members were not dissuaded. When news of their suicide was reported, says Bell, "I started getting a lot of messages saying, 'Art Bell, you killed 39 people.' It's important to understand that the only person who ever said there was a spacecraft following Hale-Bopp was Courtney Brown."

Coast to Coast originates from a most unlikely spot: Bell's double-trailer module home on the outskirts of the tiny desert town of Pahrump, Nevada (pop. 7,400), about 80 km from Las Vegas. There, Bell sits at a telephone console, punching buttons to take incoming calls. Playing a mildly aggressive but avuncular host, he rarely interrogates or challenges his callers. "Instead of trying to pin them against the wall *60 Minutes*–style," he says, "I help them tell their story."

That was obvious last week, when a caller, who had earlier provided Bell's Website with a picture of Bigfoot peeking from behind a tree, reported he had seen "a big ball of light coming down" to where the creature had been standing. "So, it's UFO-involved?" asked Bell mildly. The caller thought so but was hazy on the details.

Other remarkable Bell shows have involved such subjects as a 1957 Chevrolet that "just fell out of the sky" in Long Beach, California; a farmer who threw machinery and dead cows into a hole on his property and claimed that they "never hit bottom"; and an interview with Richard Hoagland, who claims the government is suppressing news of alien structures on the Moon and Mars.

Bell brushes off critics who charge that his uncritical airing of such nonsense only promotes scientific illiteracy and, as in the case of Heaven's Gate, can actually have harmful consequences. "All we glorify really is the possibility that we as humans are more than we appear to be," he says. "I have an opportunity to push in that direction, and I do. I have an open mind. I'll listen to anybody." ***—By Leon Jaroff. Reported by James Willwerth/Pahrump***