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Acrylic on Canvas

My research into cults, why people join them, and what makes them so harmful was inspired by my experience growing up in Waldorf Education, a place with a strong sense of community, where we built fairy houses on class camping trips and dressed in all white for May Day. The idea of cults or similar intentional communities, in concept has many appeals: companionship, security, purpose, joy, to name a few. So in my research, I wanted to explore what sets destructive cults apart, and what makes them so harmful. The main defining characteristic of these types of organizations is their abuse of power. They use strong manipulation techniques to recruit and keep members, they become individuals' sole support system, and they shape people's bodies and minds through chanting, worshipping, sleep deprivation, and starvation.

My painting aims to portray this loss of power through its imagery of missing limbs and heads. I worked with acrylics, on a 4' by 5' piece of canvas I stretched, and later added fabric that I created with a tufting gun. My color palette took inspiration from Van Gogh's blue period. The people are portrayed in a way that removes a level of their humanity and autonomy. Without legs they can not walk, without hands they can not pick things up, and without heads they can not think for themselves. The view of the people nude, in a vulnerable state, contrasts with the lack of individuality in the multitude of people depicted. It is both personal and almost invasive, but also the individuals remain indistinguishable from another. The piece is meant to be uncomfortable, but not quite gory to look at.

Cults: NXIVM, Walford School, and Why People Join Them



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The defining feature of a cult is that it is an intentional group of individuals all connected

by a shared belief in an ideology or person. They are a place with a strong sense of community, shared values, and often, socially deemed “strange” practices. Cults are often regarded as frightening places that change people, ruin lives, and ensnare people permanently once they join. With power centralized in one worshipped person, this is often the case. Cults can easily have this effect; they can take over, control the way one interacts with the world, and remove an individual’s agency in their own life. If this is the case, why would someone ever choose to join a cult? What about human nature makes people so inclined to join cults?

Growing up in Waldorf education, I have always found myself a little bit too drawn to the idea of being in a cult. My Waldorf elementary school in many ways was like a cult. It was a warm place that smelled of beeswax and where we believed in fairies and gnomes. As a young child, the environment filled with block crayons, silks, organic soup, and values of nature and art was incredibly nurturing and inspiring. It fostered a strong sense of community and a love for the world around me. However, Waldorf was more than a school: it was a philosophy and a lifestyle.

At Waldorf you were expected to follow its teachings inside and outside of the classroom. Rule number one of Waldorf was: no technology. This meant no computer time, no television at home, and most importantly, no speaking about it. Parents who did not follow this rule with their children at home were shamed by the community. Rule number two was about food. All food should be organic and mostly consist of ingredients that grow on trees or bushes. If it did not check both of these boxes, it should at least be purchased from Trader Joe’s or Whole Foods. Appropriate activities to do on the weekends included camping, crocheting, and going to the farmers’ market.

Along with Waldorf being a way of life, it also had many cult-like rituals. Once a year we had the spiral walk where the lights were turned off and a spiral was formed out of leaves and

pine trees. Each of us would walk through the spiral carrying a candle and gently place it in the center. May first was May Day. We were required to dress in all white and spend our day singing and making flower crowns. As the main event of the day we would all gather on a large field with a May Pole with long ribbons attached in the center. Each grade would go up and the teachers would hand everyone a ribbon so the class could dance around the pole. These activities were expected to be unquestioned, and while enjoyable, few other options were acceptable.

While it was flawed in its need to control all aspects of your life, Waldorf was in many ways a beautiful way to grow up. I felt so incredibly loved, safe, and supported. Never in my life have I felt as comfortable and simultaneously disconnected from the real world as I did there. So it comes as no surprise that as I grew up and left my Waldorf home behind, a part of me still missed having this type of community. The idea of being in a commune, maybe a lesbian one, has lived in the forefront of my brain for quite a while now. A place where I could live with other women and sapphics and enjoy slightly odd, but very wholesome activities. A place where I could distance myself from everything I hate about our world, pretending it does not exist, pretending the entire world is just my loving and supportive community of non-men and the land we live on. This has made me wonder, am I the perfect candidate for cult recruitment? Am I the perfect combination of fed-up with the world and looking for a better way of life to be vulnerable to the lure of a cult? Is this how people end up elbow-deep in abusive communities with terrifying rituals and no way out? And if so, when did it go from a happy little commune of friends to a mind-altering, life-destroying organization?

According to evolutionary psychology, this draw to cults is very understandable. Historically, men who received more attention and status were more likely to reproduce and women who received this were more likely to have their offspring survive. Due to this, humans

have what is known as an Action-Attention-Reward (AAR) system where the brain releases dopamine and other reward chemicals as a response to attention in order to increase chances of survival and reproduction. In a world far more socially complex than people have evolved to, the AAR system is triggered by many things, some of the more dangerous ones being: drugs, gambling, and, of course, cults. Drugs and gambling are able to shortcut the brain's AAR system by invoking the release of the same reward chemicals without increasing the person's chances of survival. Similarly, cults provide love and attention that fire these same pathways. In an environment where people are distanced from their regular social circles and receive intense love-bombing from inside the cult, the brain's feedback system can easily become reliant on the cult. Cults shortcut the brain's reward system in the same way that drugs do, causing the groups to be addictive and lead to destructive behavior such as, spending too much money or distancing oneself from their relationships.

Cults also rely on people's Capture Bonding Response, a response that evolved when individuals would be captured by another tribe and need to evolve quickly in order to survive in their new environment. Now, in high stress situations with large social pressure and isolation, people have the ability to quickly change their mindset, as well as their loyalties. The mind is able to let go of old attachments and bond with new ones in order to survive in a new setting.

Other contexts this is seen in include: the resulting closeness that develops after fraternity hazing, many military techniques, as well as the closeness that can develop between someone and their abuser. Similarly, with Stockholm Syndrome, people can develop close bonds with and develop positive emotions towards their kidnapper or captor. Cults, as well as many religions, often use this psychology to their advantage by isolating, abusing, and instilling fear in members, causing them to form this bond with each other, as well as the leaders of the group.

Cults use psychological manipulation in order to recruit and effectively brainwash new members. According to psychiatry professor, John G. Clark Jr., "Many cult groups have developed basically similar and quite compelling conversion techniques for exploiting the vulnerabilities of potential converts." Cults look for vulnerable individuals who are often going through a loss or large life transition, like moving out of home, job changes, or separations with romantic partners. These targets are often looking for companionship, financial security, and sex, among other things that cults can provide. A typical target for cult recruitment is young, intellectual yet sheltered, striving for perfection, and has struggled with intimacy and internal conflict. In addition, cult joiners often have previous experience with a religion they have rejected and blame others for their failure. Cult recruiters prey on these people by going to college campuses, train stations, and other locations where people exist in transit to try to present their organization as a solution to these individual's qualms. Recruiters try to put people in a state of emotional distress in order to offer themselves as the fix.

During the recruitment process, as well as long after a member has joined the cult, individuals often take part in repetitive activities and chants, and are kept underslept, malnourished, and overworked in order to alter their brain function making them more susceptible to being controlled. According to Dr. Clark, "The unending personalized attention given to recruits during the conversion experience works to overload the prospect's information-processing capacity. This has another important function: the induction of trancelike states. Cult proselytizers then exploit the recruit's suggestibility."

These are the exact tactics that Keith Reniere used when recruiting individuals to join his pyramid schemes and eventually his cult, NXIVM (NEX-ee-UM). He manipulated individuals' living conditions and took advantage of their vulnerability and need to be seen in order to grow

his movement and further his own personal agenda. Kieth grew up labeled “gifted,” and would hold this above his peers as a child. He believed he was better than most people and used his exceptionally high IQ to convince others of this. Keith's relationships with women had also always been toxic. He lied to many girls in highschool, trying to make them feel special, and in his mid 20's dated and raped a 15 year old and later a 12 year old. Eventually, he started involving women he was with in his businesses. He started dating a woman by the name of Tony while she was in a financially unstable place and had just ended an emotionally taxing relationship. He used these vulnerabilities to get her to move her life across the country to be with him. Kieth offered her financial stability, a job, confidence, and the feeling that she was special, she was needed, she was wanted. Eventually, Kieth moved on to his next target, Nancy Salzman, who would go on to play a large role in the founding of NXIVM. Together, they started a self-help multi-level marketing company. This time, he preyed on emotionally insecure individuals, vulnerable because they were willing to do anything to improve themselves. He promised them self-improvement through a series of courses he offered, in return, he got money, control, and the validation that he was superior to others and could help them. He required individuals to recruit other members in order to move up ranks, and taught them that they had the power to be what he called producers: self-driven, successful, independent individuals. These tactics made individuals feel empowered, but left Keith with the ability to take this feeling away from them. As NXIVM grew from a pyramid scheme into a full-fledged cult with its founding in 1998, Keith started to recruit celebrities and implement more terrifying practices. Artists are often more susceptible to joining cults and Hollywood is full of desperate artists who want support and to feel validated in an industry that comes with many rejections. NXIVM had several celebrity members, including actor Alison Mack. In addition to the support it provided, NXIVM, like many cults, had a large

young creative community to be a part of. With his ever-growing membership, Kieth tried to take control in new ways. In the event “Vanguard Week” (V Week) which he created in 2006, members participated in many rituals such as dancing and drumming in tribute to Keith. These rituals had an exposure effect, the more individuals saw Kieth being worshipped in this way, the more they started to see him as some sort of deity. In this time period of the early 2000’s Kieth also rotated between 15 to 20 different female sexual partners, while claiming to be celibate. He worked to indoctrinate female NXIVM members through classes titled Jness. In these classes he taught that women are lowly, flighty beings who were more submissive and prone to monogamy, while men were more dominant and inclined to polyamory. Being that many women had joined NXIVM and attended Jness classes in need of and search for self-empowerment they were more vulnerable to the sexist notions Kieth was teaching. In the early 2010’s Keith started to receive backlash and lose some of his power over NXIVM. Nine women confronted Kieth about his sexual abuse, stealing of members’ money, and evasion of taxes. In response, he told them he had had people killed for their beliefs. Despite the threat, all of the women proceeded to leave NXIVM. Keith's abuse toward women increased. He had been dating a woman named Danille, along with her two sisters. He had previously tried to get them to have a threesome with him, and impregnated all three of them on separate occasions, and forced them all to get abortions. Danille developed feelings for another man and in response, Keith locked her in a room with no contact to the outside world for two years. In the following couple years, several articles were published exposing Keith and NXIVM, and multiple rape lawsuits were filled against him. Kieth responded with a common cult tactic of demonizing the press. In a final loss of power, Kristan, who had been a part of NXIVM from the very beginning and was Keith's girlfriend and the mother of his child, left the cult, taking their

son with her. Their son had been a part of the RCG childcare program where five nannies taught the children in five different languages that was suspected to be grooming the kids to have sex with adults. Upon fleeing, Kristan claimed that she had long realized that Kieth was trying to enslave people, not help them.

After feeling his grip on his followers loosen, Kieth grappled to regain power with the creation of D.O.S. D.O.S., an abbreviation for a latin phrase, Dominus Obsequious Sororium, translating to: “master over the slave women,” was a secret society of female sex slaves. Seven initial slaves started recruiting new members promoting D.O.S. as an all-female, invite-only empowerment organization. Upon entrance to the group, individuals were required to submit some form of collateral- often sexually explicit videos- that would later be used to blackmail them into staying silent or staying in the group. Slaves had to respond to their masters within 60 seconds all hours of the day, meet with and take nude pictures with their masters, follow strict rules to maintain their appearance (including restricting themselves to 500 calories a day) and remain celibate. The lack of food and sleep, and high stress not only satisfied Keith's desires, but also kept members in the mind manipulated state commonly used by cult leaders to control their members. Punishments for disobedience included whippings and cold showers. In addition to manipulation and collateral, in a time and culture that regularly promoted ideas like, “no pain no gain,” it was easier for women to justify putting themselves through these extreme measures in the name of self-improvement. Eventually, the women were presented with the task to seduce Keith and many were forced to engage in sexual acts with him. When they did not comply, they were humiliated, yelled at for being weak, and their collateral was threatened to be released. At its most extreme, D.O.S physically branded their members with hot metal, telling them to “feel the pain and think of their masters.”

NXIVM was a clearly abusive and destructive cult, but what sets these groups apart from less harmful religions and intentional communities? Cults are commonly described as groups of people following a singular leader or ideology with the expectation that it will benefit or enlighten them in some way. Many modern day religions were at one point deemed cults before they gained enough followers to have the public's respect. According to this definition, everything from religion to fandoms could easily be categorized as a cult, so perhaps a better way to define a cult or at least judge it by, is by the power it wields over its members, how destructive it is to peoples lives, and by its level of social acceptability. In destructive cults like NXIVM, one leader is worshiped and has almost unlimited power with no check on what they do with it. Members are coerced into joining and often exploited for money or sex. These types of cults instill a fear of the outside world, thrive on followers' insecurities, and leave no room for questioning power or "truth." So while my Waldorf elementary school at times followed one ideology and had a cult-like appearance, it lacked the unquestioned authority to cause the level of destruction that groups like NXIVM do. The fantasy of a perfect cult is ruined not by their close-net community or their most innocent practices, but by their leader's need for power and control and the group's ability to manipulate and exploit their followers.

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