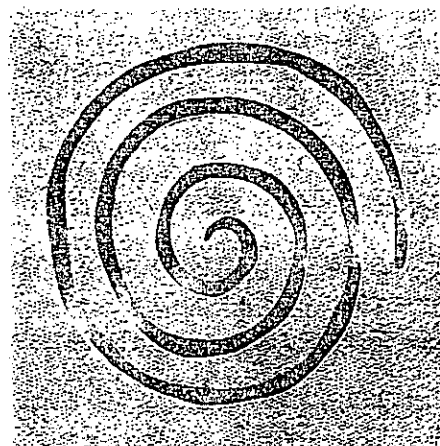


What were some of the ways that the Heaven's Gate cult removed people's individuality and encouraged them to become one with the group? Why do you think the cult was so appealing to Rio DiAngelo?



Secrets of the Cult

Rio DiAngelo tells inside story of Heaven's Gate cult

He stayed behind to bear witness. Rio DiAngelo is the last insider, the survivor who knows what really happened in the weird world of Heaven's Gate. The exclusive, untold story of the suicide sect.

Mark Miller

Abstract: *DiAngelo left Heaven's Gate two months before the mass suicide in March 1997. He considers himself still a member, and kept in contact with the "Class," as he refers to the cult. He does not call it mass suicide, but explains that no one wanted to be left behind when their leader Do shed his "vehicle."*

For Rio DiAngelo, the first premonition came last November. The members of Heaven's Gate had learned not to take their leader's predictions too literally, and their guru, Marshall Herff Applewhite, better known to his followers as "Do" was usually careful to hedge. But this time he seemed quite specific. The arrival of the comet Hale-Bopp was the sign they had been waiting for. The Earth would be "spaded

over." The chariot would swing low in late March, when the comet burned brightest. Deliverance was near.

Along about January, Rio began to get a "disturbing feeling." DiAngelo, whose real name is Richard Ford, was a relative neophyte. Many members had been with Do since the 1970s; DiAngelo had arrived only three years before. He decided that he had to leave "the class" as he calls the group, because he "had a task to do." Perhaps sensing the end was near, he took a job at a Web-page design firm in the real world. He insists there was no plan for mass suicide. Still, he knew there was a "procedure" that would allow true believers to shed their "containers." He also knew that some members had gone to Mexico to buy phenobarbital, a barbiturate fatal in large doses.

DiAngelo was the last to leave before the others left for good. In eight hours of exclusive interviews with *Newsweek*, DiAngelo described his mind-bending three-year odyssey inside a cult obsessed with castration and the cosmos—and how he found the rotting bodies in a ritzy suburb of San Diego, DiAngelo, who considers himself a soul in an earth-bound body ("my vehicle"), regards himself as a member, not an "ex-member," of Heaven's Gate, which he describes as "an advanced class for higher education," not a cult. "I lost 39 of my closest brothers and sisters, my friends," says DiAngelo. "And even though I'm trying to have control of this vehicle, it still disturbs me." DiAngelo hopes to join his brothers and sisters one day, though suicide, he hastens to add, "is not part of my plan."

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First comes his moment of fame. DiAngelo is a living witness—to the repression and subtle mind control that permeated the suicide cult. His tale helps explain the eerie culture of Heaven's Gate, the lethal mix of New Age dreaming, extraordinary self-denial and sci-fi soaked paranoia that led to the mass self-annihilation in Rancho Santa Fe. Last week DiAngelo sold the made-for-TV-movie rights to ABC (he won't say for how much) and this week he will be interviewed on "Prime Time Live" by Diane Sawyer. He says he does not feel like a celebrity but rather "an instrument of clarification." He believes that his departed comrades would be "proud" of all the media hoopla. "They are laughing," says DiAngelo. "They really wanted the whole world to know this information but couldn't get it out. No one would listen. I think they would be happy."

Still, DiAngelo himself seems a little ambivalent about his own role. Returning to the world, he says, "was a slap in the face." On the other hand, he seemed to be enjoying himself as he ordered a big dinner (including wine) at a luxury hotel suite. What DiAngelo says is sometimes out of this world, but his manner is usually cool and self-contained. He learned from a master manipulator; he was molded by a regimen that made virtually every choice for its members, from their highest aspirations to their tastes in pop culture. Members of Heaven's Gate were allowed to watch TV—but they sat in assigned seats and were offered an odd blend of low- and highbrow fare. They loved "Star Trek." A PBS documentary on Thomas Jefferson was on the approved list; "GoldenEye," with Pierce Brosnan as Agent 007, was a no-

no. If an actor or actress evoked sensuous feelings in a member of the "class," the class member was supposed to turn away.

Rio DiAngelo, or "Neody," as he was known within the group, is a seeker and a survivor. He drifted into the cult for the usual depressing reasons—broken family, bad relationships, a fascination with UFOs. But he escaped its final solution because he kept a sense of detachment and an instinct for self-preservation. He may be Do's "messenger," but he was never completely his pawn.

There is a story DiAngelo tells about his wretched childhood that is unintentionally revealing. He recalls his mother, whom he describes as violent and unstable, coming to hit him as a little boy. "You want to have this wonderful image of your mom, and all of a sudden, Mom turns into this rage. It's just like this doesn't look like Mom, this is somebody else." Most little boys would have cringed in horror. DiAngelo says he just laughed, or, as he put it, "the little vehicle would make her even angrier, and she'd scream, 'Don't laugh at me!'"

DiAngelo refers to his childhood in southern California in the 1950s and '60s as "boot camp." His father walked out when he was 3, and he bounced back and forth between his grandmother's and his mother's care, if it can be called that. He was sent to various churches and schools, but never stayed long in any particular one. He became, not surprisingly, a searcher. He tried to be a hippie, a musician, an artist. He experimented with Eastern religion and read books on UFOs. He got married and had a child. Nothing filled the emptiness. Divorced, he drifted back home to live with his mother and her latest husband. He took strange pleasure in pho-

tographing their ashtrays, stacked high with old butts.

Then in January 1994, Rio, who had just turned 40, went to a hotel in Marina Del Rey to hear about a "last chance to advance beyond human." He listened as nine androgynous figures in loose clothes and short haircuts described the Earth as a "garden to grow souls to prepare them to advance to a higher level." Rio felt "an overwhelming desire, a compulsion to be part of this." He believed his true soul had matched with and entered his earthbound "vehicle." It was "like, OK, Monty, door number two, bam," recalled DiAngelo.

The only catch was that the cult wasn't taking new members. "They tried to talk me out of it," said DiAngelo. Two of the cult "overseers," "Srrrody" and "Jwnody," told him the rules: no drinking, smoking or sex. Every member was "homeless by choice." Still, DiAngelo pleaded to be accepted. In the real world, as he put it, "I had nothing."

He did have an apartment in L.A. and a girlfriend but he gave those up, along with his credit cards. There wasn't much of a bank account to worry about; business as a freelance scene painter was poor. Saying goodbye to his 11-year-old son, whom he had every other weekend, was harder. He explained that he was going off to learn how to get into heaven. "I think he understood," recalled DiAngelo, his eyes misting.

DiAngelo cut off his ponytail and shucked his name. Cult members are known by a three-letter prefix followed by "doti" or "ody" (a play on the founders, Do and Ti). DiAngelo picked "Neody" because "I felt new." Different names are chosen to deal with the outside world. Richard Ford became Rio DiAngelo—the

river of angels. Neody hit the road with Srodry and Jwnody and the crew. "We went coast to coast. If it wasn't every state, it sure felt like it." Rising before dawn, handing out literature to skeptical earthlings, foraging for food, DiAngelo lost all sense of time. He finally found himself living in a warehouse in San Clemente on the California coast. For about three months the group drank nothing but "master cleanser"—a concoction of lemonade, cayenne pepper and maple syrup—to rinse out their "vehicles" bloated by fast food. Then it was off to a Utah ski resort—bartering cooking and cleaning for room and board. Money was tight—funneled into the commune from odd jobs and the occasional trust-fund check.

DiAngelo heard "wonderful stories" about Do, their leader, but he did not actually see the sainted one until he had been in the cult for a month. One night, while they were camping in the desert outside Phoenix, Ariz., Do suddenly appeared in the light of the campfire, flanked by two disciples. "He was very security-minded," said DiAngelo. "With a lot of new students he had to be very careful." It was only a year after the Branch Davidians had died in the Waco conflagration, and Do feared that he was a target of the FBI. The leader often lived apart from his followers, though usually close by. DiAngelo was told that Do did not like the "vibrations" of new members who were "still trying to control their anger and the lusts."

"Getting control of the vehicle" was the goal of the class. At the Next Level, there is no gender. Thus it was necessary to "reprogram." The problem as DiAngelo explains it, was that "the vehicle has a mind of its own." Sensuality "is the strongest addiction there

is. It doesn't matter if it's male-female, female-female, male to male, female to dog. You think about it and it changes your whole vibration." Sexual partners weren't even necessary. "You can do it yourself, and you can do it for free."

DiAngelo says he gradually tamed his own sensual addiction, though "dreams are tough to control." But for others sexual temptation was too much. Before DiAngelo joined up, two members had quietly gone to Mexico to be castrated. The others increasingly talked about getting "neutered." Finally, about a year ago, Do himself decided to lead the way. "He did it to his own vehicle just to make sure. He protected us in every way," says DiAngelo. Do had trouble finding a doctor willing to perform the operation, however; most wanted him to see a psychiatrist. The one he got "goofed," as DiAngelo put it. Do healed very slowly. Still, five others eagerly followed. "They couldn't stop smiling and giggling," says DiAngelo. "They were excited about it."

DiAngelo chose not to follow his master's example. "Everything is freedom of choice," he explained. "It's very rights-oriented." Under the strict regimen of the cult, however, members did not have many choices to make. Most decisions were made by the cult's hierarchy. At the top—in heaven—there was Ti, the former nurse and astrologer Bonnie Nettles, who had run off with Do in the 1970s and ascended to a Higher Level in 1985 after her vehicle was broken by liver cancer: Cult members believe her mind was so powerful it "short-circuited her vehicle." Do would have celestial conversations with Ti, about everything from the daily chores to the

group's ultimate destination. Do in turn would pass messages on to the "overseers"—a cadre of longtime cult members—who would instruct the class. Members did nothing alone; each had a "check partner" to guard against backsliding.

There were "procedures" for everything, meticulously recorded in longhand in a three-ring binder. "If you needed something," DiAngelo said, "you wouldn't go to the store. You'd write the Individual Needs Department." To guard against overweening pride and self-confidence, members were taught to be conditional in their language. The proper way to approach the "overseer" for "individual needs" was: "I may be wrong, but it seems that my deodorant is running out."

By the time DiAngelo arrived, Do had abandoned his cruder mind-control games. Followers were no longer required to report to headquarters every 12 minutes around the clock or to wear helmets (exhaustion set in, and the headgear was too hot). Still, there was always a "sense of urgency" about becoming "non-human" because there was no telling when the spaceship would arrive to take them all away. "You can't be thinking like a human, you can't be thinking are you going to have sex or you've got to shave or you have angry thoughts or raging hormones. You've got to be ready."

But ready for what, exactly? The precise method of departure was the source of some confusion. It was clear that Earth was becoming increasingly inhospitable. The messages posted by Heaven's Gate on the Internet were being greeted by scorn and derision. Do was fearful that the Feds might attack at any moment. For a time, he seemed to welcome a final

showdown. On the video shelf next to "The Sound of Music" were conspiracy-theory videos about Waco and the IRS. In 1995, the cult built a fortress with cement and old tires in the New Mexico desert and bought weapons—at least five handguns and two rifles with sniper scopes. A few members who knew how to handle guns tried to teach the others how to shoot, but the enthusiasm for gunplay, and perhaps the skill level, was low among Do's gentle flock. Do himself finally received a message from Ti indicating that a shootout with the Luciferians was not the right Last Exit.

How then to reach the Higher Level? There was always the promise and hope of the spaceship's swooping down from heaven. From time to time, the group would go out into the middle of the desert and stay until dark, "just kind of hoping and praying that Ti would know we were here, and come and get us," says DiAngelo. Some would be disappointed when the heavens stared back blankly, but for most, the seances were "fun," says DiAngelo.

Sex may have been forbidden, but fun was not. "We loved having a good time and would have a good time as often as possible." Heaven's Gate was full of "fun-loving people, very flexible and open-minded." There were expeditions to UFO museums and the movies—carefully chosen by Do, of course—and, from time to time, feasts. While sex wasn't essential to the vehicle, eating ("consuming") was. So why not enjoy a little cake and ice cream? (San Diego police found seven quarts of Starbuck's Java Chip ice cream in the refrigerator of the so-called Mansion of Death.)

As Hale-Bopp drew closer last winter, the class seemed to have more and more time. By now the group had settled into the villa in Rancho Santa Fe and begun to earn good money from cyberspace as Web-page designers. In late February, the entire class traveled to Las Vegas and stayed in the Stratosphere Hotel. They went to Cirque du Soleil and carefully recorded their winnings at the slot machines and gaming tables (\$58.91), as well as the money spent on water (\$2.28) and on tickets for rides, including a free-fall contraption called the Big Shot (\$123). In the weeks to come, there would be trips to Sea World and to see "Star Wars."

But by then, DiAngelo's "disturbing feeling" had prodded him to directly approach Do, something he had never done before. Members could communicate with Do only in writing; DiAngelo asked for a private meeting. "I told him I felt I had something to do outside the class, like a task." He told Do that he "didn't want to leave the class at all," but that he had been offered a fulltime job on the outside working for InterAct Entertainment, a company that often used Higher Source, the cult's Web-page design outfit. After reflection, Do summoned DiAngelo. "He told me that he had talked to Ti just now, and he felt like it might be part of a plan, and that I didn't understand and that he didn't understand." There was an inkling, however. DiAngelo had been chosen earlier to write a film script about the group's story. He had been volunteered by his partner, Otis Paceman (a play on "Oti Spaceman"), because of his experience in "the film industry" (which was limited mostly to building props for a theme park).

Later, DiAngelo would realize that he had been sent forth to tell the story of Heaven's Gate.

DiAngelo insists he had no real foreboding of mass suicide. Do talked of his followers' "leaving their vehicles"—but only by their own choice. Do himself would never give the order. Naturally, said DiAngelo, no one wanted to be left behind if Do himself exited. "It's like you didn't want to go anyplace without your dad," he said.

Out on his own, DiAngelo stayed in touch with the group by e-mail. But on the Monday after Palm Sunday, his messages vanished into a void, which he found "odd." Then, on Tuesday, he received a FedEx package at work. He says he knew instantly who the package was from—and what had happened. Curiously, he didn't open the package until he had returned home that evening. One glance at the letter within confirmed his suspicions: "By the time you read this, we will have exited our vehicles," it read.

In the morning he matter-of-factly announced to his boss, Nick Matzorkis, that the cult members were dead. Not quite believing him, Matzorkis drove DiAngelo to the house in Rancho Santa Fe. DiAngelo had come prepared. He took out a bottle of cologne, splashed it on a shirt, and held it over his nose. Still, "the smell could knock you over," he said. There were his "brothers and sisters," or at least their abandoned vehicles, lying peacefully in their Nikes beneath the purple shrouds. Their bags were packed with clothes and other essentials, including lip balm, and their pockets were filled with 85 bills and rolls of quarters. Ever since a member of the cult had been hassled by police for vagrancy, the "monks," as they called them-

selves to outsiders, carried money and IDs. "It was spooky and weird," says DiAngelo, who had brought a video camera "to keep the facts accurate."

Their deaths were "not suicide," says DiAngelo, because their souls live on at the Next Level. He has "no doubt" that everyone went "on their own." As for him, "I don't think I'm ready to make that leap right now. I would like to go to the Next Level but quite frankly I don't think I'm ready yet." Had he stayed in the "class," he says he would have declined to "exit his vehicle."

Though he is the last insider, Rio DiAngelo is not the only survivor. A man who goes by the name of "Rkk" told *Newsweek* that he, too, had received a FedEx package containing master tapes of Do's farewell message and the goodbyes of his former "crew mates." Rkk describes himself as the cult's prodigal son. For more than 20 years, he floated in and out of the class, leaving when he could not master his sexual urges. He quit at the end of last year ("I didn't get the control of my vehicle that was required to stay") but stayed in touch via e-mail. Rkk says he would have gone through with the suicide "in a microsecond. I'm tired of this stupid planet. I don't know how my exit's going to happen, but I hope it happens soon."

DiAngelo has more temporal desires. In addition to "demystifying" the cult for the media, he says he and InterAct have been "entrusted" with the Higher Source Web-site company. He wants to "preserve the dignity and quality that they had always provided." He added that he would "welcome new clients." He has long since lost touch with his mother and his siblings; his ex-wife, he says, reminded him of his

mother. His son is a different matter. At the beginning of last week, DiAngelo told a friend that he didn't plan to see his son, who was the child of his "vehicle," not him. But by midweek in his interview with *Newsweek*, he seemed to be wavering, and by Friday, after talking to his lawyer, he said that he did plan to "see the child of the vehicle."

Then there is DiAngelo's old girlfriend. Desperate after his 1988 divorce, DiAngelo had tried a "very-high-class dating service." He met someone with "style, class and beauty." He was "kind of thrown by this feeling, like, 'Gee, is this really the one?'" The two had problems, but, says DiAngelo, "the vehicle is still in love with this woman today." Will he call? He "hopes to talk to her," he said. There are many roads to heaven's gate.

On the Road with the Lost Tribe

Richard Ford, a.k.a. Rio DiAngelo, the last to leave Heaven's Gate, traveled across the United States after he joined in 1994. Highlights from his strange odyssey to Rancho Santa Fe:

1. Seeing a January 1994 story in *L.A. Weekly*—Last chance to advance beyond human—Ford goes to hear the group's message at a Marina del Rey, Calif. hotel. Later, his effort to join the group is rebuffed.
2. Ford persists and meets the group at an Anaheim, Calif. hotel. The conditions for joining the group are spelled out: no sex or drugs. And new members must bid a final farewell to family, friends and possessions.
3. Ford meets the cult's leader, Do, while camping with the

group near Phoenix. Ford is captivated by him. The initiate takes the names Neody, for use inside the group, and Rio DiAngelo, for use with outsiders.

4. Traveling across the United States, staying in each place only briefly to hold meetings, the group heads to Maine.
5. Back in California in late 1994, the group stays for three months in a warehouse in San Clemente. Drinking a cayenne, lemonade and maple-syrup brew called "master cleanser," they try to purge their "vehicles" of the junk food they had consumed on the road.
6. In late spring 1995, Rio and the group stay at ski lodge in Utah, trading cleaning and cooking for free rooms.
7. Sometime in 1996, Rio and the cult members come to the end of the trail in the house in Rancho Santa Fe.

The Rules They Lived By

Life was rigorous inside Heaven's Gate. To maintain the purity of their "vehicles"—or bodies—true believers learned to be strikingly self-effacing, denying their own desires and deferring to their comrades.

Major Offenses

- Deceit: (a) Doing an act "on the sly." (b) Lying to my teachers or any of my classmates. (c) Keeping an offense to myself, not exposing it the same day.
- Sensuality—permitting arousal in thought or in action (not nipping it in the bud).
- Breaking any instruction or procedure knowingly.

Lesser Offenses [a selection]

- Taking any action without using my check partner.
- Trusting my own judgment—or using my own mind.
- Responding defensively to my classmates or teachers.
- Criticizing or finding fault with my classmates or teachers.
- Staying in my own head, having private thoughts.
- Putting myself first, wanting my own way, rebelliousness-selfishness.
- Inappropriately offering suggestions, second-guessing, or jumping ahead of my teachers.
- Exaggerating vehicular symptoms.
- Picking or choosing certain tasks.
- Having likes or dislikes.
- Permitting lack of control over emotions to the point that it interferes with my work or rest or is a distraction to others.
- Desiring attention or approval—wanting to be seen as good.
- Engaging in familiarity, casualness, gossip, lack of restraint with others.
- Being too aggressive or pushy.
- Exercising poor control of thoughts running through my head, being easily distracted.
- Being vain about my appearance, vibrating

femininity or masculinity in any way.

- Having inappropriate curiosity.

Source: Heaven's Gate Web site.

One Last Spree Before the End

In their final months, cult members indulged in some very earthly pleasures. Entries from their detailed ledgers:

Jan. 17, 1997 Some members of the cult attend a UFO conference in Laughlin, Nev. While there, they shell out \$740.06 on hotels, books, tapes and UFO magazines.

Feb. 24 After buying a \$1,100 motor home, the entire group of 59 travels to the Stratosphere Hotel amusement park in Las Vegas. They ride the Big Shot (a free-fall ride) and the High Roller roller coaster. They also win \$58.91 gambling. Later they attend the Cirque du Soleil, charging \$2,661 worth of tickets.

March 5 Cult members go to a theater to see "Star Wars." They later watch the sequels, too.

March 5–8 Some followers embark on a bus trip to Santa Rosa, Calif., and to Gold Beach, Ore., the place where Applewhite first found his calling in the wilderness. They continue on to Ashland, Ore., and Sacramento, Calif., running up more than \$2,000 in hotel bills. Later in the month several members take a road trip to

Tijuana. (Mexico is where the phenobarbital was bought.)

March 11 The cult takes a trip to the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Members spend \$8 to feed the animals and \$81.94 on ice cream. Tickets total \$664.95.

March 12 Do's followers set out on another outing, this time to Sea World to see Shamu the whale. The price of admission: \$1,092.

March 13 Time for another flick, at a total cost of \$258 for tickets.

March 19 After taping their farewell suicide messages, everybody goes out to a pizza joint, ringing up \$417 worth of pie. Then they take in another movie, "Secrets & Lies," spending \$146 for tickets and \$75 on soda.

March 20 Followers dig in at the Red Oak Steak House. The tab comes to \$549.90.

March 21 The last lunch. The entire cult dines at a favorite haunt, Marie Callender's restaurant in Carlsbad, Calif. Every member orders a chicken pot pie and a slice of cheesecake, for a bill of \$351. On the same day, two cult members report finding six cents. It is the last ledger entry.

March 22 The first suicides apparently begin as the cult serves up poisoned pudding and applesauce.



Article Review
Form at end of
book.