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Heaven's Gate: The Sequel. Ten years after the 39 suicides, the sole survivor is back – and he has something urgent to tell us. LA Weekly/March 29, 2007

By Joshua Bearman

We are imprisoned in the body, like an oyster in his shell. —The Socrates of Plato, Phaedrus

Rio DiAngelo has a message he wants to share with the world. It's an important message, one that begins in space. That's where he came from, and where he will one day return, following in the footsteps of his 39 friends. Bearers of the same message, those 39 friends received their culminating cosmic transmission 12 years ago, when amateur astronomer Alan Hale stood in his driveway one summer evening around midnight, pointed his telescope low and due south and saw something that wasn't there before. Five hundred miles away, Thomas Bopp's telescope revealed the same object, burning with a 10.5 magnitude near the globular cluster M70, just outside Sagittarius' bow, near the Archer's heart. It was a comet, 25 miles wide, a titanic piece of ice plunging through space at up to 90,000 mph. When the Central Bureau for Astronomical Telegrams confirmed the object, C/1995 01 officially became known as Hale-Bopp. Something that big comes through our solar system only occasionally. Trailing multiple sputtering yellow and blue tails of dust, ion gases and sodium atoms 20 million miles long, Hale-Bopp would become the brightest celestial visitor to our solar system in a millennium.

Rio's friends knew what to do. A secretive, itinerant group of self-described monks following the teachings of their leader, who was known simply as DO, they'd recently moved into a 9,000-square-foot mansion in Rancho Santa Fe, which they called "the Monastery" and "the Craft," and was paid for by members doing Web design and other technical services. The group had many names over the years but by that time had settled on Heaven's Gate. They'd waited patiently for a sign, and DO thought the sky was now speaking. When another amateur astronomer announced on Art Bell's conspiracy-minded radio show that he'd taken a picture of Hale-Bopp showing an elongated fuzzy brightness lurking in the tail, word quickly spread in UFO circles that there was an alien spacecraft accompanying the comet. Remote-sensing practitioner Courtney Brown collected clairvoyant "data" that also suggested an extraterrestrial presence. DO's followers went out and bought a telescope. They couldn't see the ship themselves, but that wasn't important. When Hale-Bopp passed too close to Jupiter, and the giant planet's gravitational pull altered the comet's orbit so that it would return every 2,000 years, DO became certain: This was their long-awaited "indicator," perhaps even the star Wormwood described in The Revelation. The group updated its Web site. "RED ALERT" flashed across the top; below came the announcement "HALE-BOPP BRINGS CLOSURE TO HEAVEN'S GATE."

For years, they'd been hoping to return to the Kingdom of Heaven, which they called "Evolutionary Level Above Human," or the "Next Level." Day in, day out, the group — which they always said was not a cult but a "classroom for growing a soul" — had learned to transcend human existence through rigorous discipline. In preparation for the final step of leaving their human bodies, or "exiting their vehicles," the group assembled uniforms: matching black Nikes and homemade black pants and shirts, each adorned with a custom-made triangular patch that said "HEAVEN'S GATE AWAY TEAM." Rio, an artist in his human incarnation, designed the infamous patch, which was embroidered with the constellation Orion in the triangle's apex. This, DO explained, was their destination. Each morning, the house's 40 inhabitants took turns with the telescope, watching the indicator, and taking glimpses at their home world, Sirius, the faithful hound at the feet of Orion the hunter, nine light-years away from San Diego. They couldn't have been more excited about the trip some members took to Mexico to purchase enough phenobarbital to kill them all several times over.

On March 22, 1997, Hale-Bopp made its closest approach to Earth, at 122 million miles. DO and his followers meticulously cleaned the house, took out the garbage, polished the silver and packed their things. The sign was above; the time was now. Outside, the bougainvillea were in full bloom as the group began executing "The Routine," a document they'd created that precisely choreographed how teams would help each other to wash down phenobarbital-laced helpings of applesauce and pudding with vodka, a lethal combination that did its work painlessly. "Lie back and rest quietly," the ritual instructed, which they did, covered in purple shrouds, a \$5 bill tucked in their wallets, waiting for the "elixir of life" to cause drowsiness, then a coma, and finally a circulatory-system collapse. No one knows the exact timeline, but within three days, all the members of Heaven's Gate were dead.

Except Rio. Most people remember the bizarre unfolding of details surrounding the largest mass suicide in U.S. history, but few recall the sole survivor. Rio had been fitted with his departure uniform, and was prepared to "graduate with the rest of the class." Then, one day in February, as the exit plans were coming together, Rio woke up and felt he had some unnamed thing yet to do here on Earth. He had followed his instincts before, when he abandoned his life to join the group, and now the directive coming into his awareness was telling him to leave the mansion. Rio was confused, and had an emotional meeting with DO, who telepathically consulted the Next Level. Word came back that Rio should stay behind; that it was all part of the plan. Rio was given a camera, a computer, \$1,000 for living expenses and \$12.50 for train fare back to Los Angeles.

Four weeks later, on March 27, Rio received a FedEx package at the office of InterActive Entertainment Group in Beverly Hills, where he was doing HTML work. Inside was a letter addressed to Rio, a press release, two videotapes on which were recorded DO's and the students' "Exit Videos," and a map to the house indicating which door they'd left unlocked. Rio knew what he would find there. Lacking a car, he asked his boss, Nick Matzorkis, for a ride to San Diego, where Rio donned gloves, doused his shirt with cologne and used his camera to film the neatly arranged bodies, by then in various stages of decomposition.

As soon as he informed police, Rio and his footage were at the center of one of the biggest news stories of the decade. Three of his fellow followers, those who "dropped out" before graduation, killed themselves in subsequent weeks and months so as to not miss out on their one brief opportunity to pass through Heaven's Gate. But Rio stayed with us. As tabloids offered lots of money, Rio chose few press contacts. Everyone wanted the insider's perspective, which is what Diane Sawyer eventually got when Rio appeared on Prime Time Live and patiently explained to her that his colleagues had moved on to the Next Level. By the time Princess Diana was killed that summer, Heaven's Gate was old news. The tale of the suicidal cult was eclipsed by the next shocking tragedy. Rio disappeared.

Until he contacted the L.A. Weekly a few weeks ago. With the 10th anniversary of the Exit coming up on March 27, Rio e-mailed our managing editor and offered to do his first interview since writing a self-published book, *Beyond Human Mind: The Soul Evolution of Heaven's Gate*, an account of his experience that will "clarify the truth about the group and their amazing agenda." A few days later, Rio dropped off an elaborate press kit at our offices, with full-color copies of previous interviews, various statements, a sample Q&A and a cover sheet marked with a personalized embossed seal that said, "Official Rio Document." Throughout the pages appears the recurring slogan "Glad to be alive and planning to stay that way!" Among the clips was a short bio of Rio in the 1997 edition of *People* magazine's 25 Most Intriguing People of the year, alongside Drew Carey and John F. Kennedy Jr. At the bottom of the cover letter, Rio left his phone number.

I called right away. I'd heard about Rio before and thought about trying to track him down. When I pointed this out to Rio the first time we met, he quickly chalked it up to cosmic significance. "It's pretty coincidental that you contacted us," I said. "Oh, I don't know about that," he said, smiling and looking me right in the eye. "I think you're going to find that it wasn't very coincidental at all."

Cosmic, coincidental or cosmically coincidental, it turns out that 13 years ago, Rio first learned about Heaven's Gate from the L.A. Weekly. A short item in 1994 described the Total Overcomers, as they were then known, and their informational meeting, which instantly changed Rio's life. After the suicides, Rio felt burned by the sensationalism of the media frenzy, which he felt never told the real story of Heaven's Gate, but since the L.A. Weekly had guided him to the truth before, he returned to the publication to help him tell the story "that is so hot mainstream media won't touch it."

When I'd read about Rio, I'd always assumed that he'd survived because he came to his senses and realized the flaw in Heaven's Gate's suicide pact. In fact, Rio remains a true believer, one for whom a divine mission has crystallized. He began our first interview by asking me to be sure to include his prepared declaration, part of which reads:

"I am alive not because I rejected anything about Heaven's Gate.

"I am alive because I have discovered something so extraordinarily important to the world that it needs to pass on to you in its most true and accurate form from ME."

We were at Rio's apartment in Westwood, sitting at his dining-room table as he watched me read the whole thing. (See Rio's statement.) On the wall was a plasma screen, around the room Eastern-themed art, including a reclining Buddha — all belonging to Rio's roommate. "Since my time in the Monastery," he explained, "I don't keep attachments to many material things." Rio is bald, neatly bearded, tall and thin. It is an unfair comparison, but with his strangely perfect posture, he seems like a prim and cheerful Anton LaVey — if Anton LaVey had wound up running a crystal shop in Sedona. Rio's countenance is exactly what I expected from a Heaven's Gate adept: calm, friendly, measured, sincere. All too sincere when it comes to the fact that he believes he has been granted a special knowledge about the makings of all life in the universe.

When I asked about the dropouts who later killed themselves, Rio was impassive. "People ask: 'Why would they do that?' " he said. For him, their copycat suicides only further proved the point. "It doesn't make sense to give up everything. Unless... you know. Unless you know what they knew. And what I know." Which is? "That DO was the second coming of Jesus Christ. That's what I'm here to help people understand." Part 2: Revelation on the Rogue River

And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy. —The Revelation 11:3

How does one come to understand their messianic blessings? For DO, that journey began in a Houston psychiatric hospital in 1972. Marshall Herff Applewhite, or Herff, as the charismatic son of an itinerant Presbyterian minister was then called by his friends, had been a talented musician, well-liked teacher, choir director, and singer with the Houston Grand Opera. But those days were over. He'd left his wife and children after a tryst with a male student led to his

requested resignation from a university position. Herff was adrift, torn by his sexual desires, and shaken by voices in his head.

In the hospital, Herff met Bonnie Lu Trousdale Nettles, a registered nurse whose investigations into astrology and theosophy were guided by communications with a 19th-century monk named "Brother Francis." Bonnie became instant friends with Herff, giving him a crash course in metaphysics. In the folie à deux that ensued, Bonnie and Herff decided they had known each other in previous lives, and hit the road to discover their joint purpose. They camped, ran out on motel bills, got arrested. They wrote a manuscript called "I Can't Believe That — But You Must," in which Bonnie framed Herff's visions in messianic terms. Destined to illuminate humanity, they began signing their letters the "Two Lampstands" or the "Two Candlesticks." Then, one summer, on the banks of the Rogue River in Oregon, among the wildflowers and sugar pines, Bonnie and Herff were struck by a "vibration like thunder," a simultaneous disclosure that they were the two witnesses foretold in the Bible's vision of Apocalypse.

This is what they told a group of 80 people assembled at Joan Culpepper's house in Studio City in 1975. By then, they had abandoned their given names, instead calling themselves "The Two," "Guinea and Pig" and "Bo and Peep." After 30 minutes, they concluded by saying, "If you follow us, you must obey everything we say. That includes giving up your possessions, your family and yourself." Culpepper, a local psychic guru, whose motto was "Weird turns me on," thought Bo and Peep were too weird. But many of her guests were awestruck. Nearly a third of the audience — people from all walks of life — left with their new leaders shortly thereafter, traveling the highways looking for more recruits. "There are lot of advanced souls in Southern California," Bo and Peep later remarked about their newfound flock.

There was no name for the movement then. Mostly they talked about "the Group." Others referred to HIM, for "Human Individual Metamorphosis," the title of the mimeograph they'd hand out at meetings. In 1975, the group made a big stir at a motel in the seaside town of Waldport, Oregon, when 20 new disciples abandoned their possessions, bid loved ones final farewells and vanished. On the CBS Evening News, Walter Cronkite reported: "A score of persons... have disappeared. It's a mystery whether they've been taken on a so-called trip to eternity — or simply been taken."

The group went underground. Bo and Peep rechristened themselves as DO and TI, harmonic bookends of the musical scale vibrating in the ether. Their travels were bankrolled by a \$300,000 trust fund belonging to a member, but DO and TI sent out their followers in groups of two as ascetic nomads. They slept in tents, begged for food, and suffered instructional hardships to "clarify the butter," as TI put it, separating the pure from the polluted. They covered a vast territory: Spokane, San Diego, Newport, Denver, Atlanta, Boston, Houston, Amarillo, Tulsa. They constantly uprooted themselves to avoid detection by members' families.

"Jesus said it wouldn't be easy," the flock was instructed. "He asked for a total commitment, and that means walking away from everything, including your families."

Severing all ties fit their belief system, in which DO and TI had come to see themselves as extraterrestrial representatives from the Evolutionary Level Above Human. DO, they'd decided, was the very same alien spirit that had inhabited Jesus, and TI was his Heavenly Father. Updating esoteric, early Christianity by way of science fiction, their millennial paradise could be found only by renouncing terrestrial attachments and shedding one's "container" or "vehicle" to ascend into space and live eternally with the Chief of Chiefs, or God. Like DO and TI, the followers took new names; the choices ranged from biblical to whimsical: Peter, David, Joshua, Wink, Window, Marty, Moneybags, Fanta. In early interviews, DO refused to talk about his wife and children, referring to them as relatives of "his vehicle." His devotees followed suit. As new spiritual entities temporarily residing in physical bodies, they were no longer the same people, unrelated in their minds to their former families.

Nancie Brown was one mother who never stopped looking for her son. David had joined at the beginning, and after the Jonestown tragedy in 1978, she got worried and started trying to track him down. She checked at DMVs and Salvation Army offices across the country, ran his Social Security number with police — nothing. Eventually she found a sociologist named Robert Balch who had spent time inside the group early on and had written some academic articles about his experience. Several other parents had made the same discovery, and Balch had their numbers. Nancie assembled names and addresses, put together a newsletter, and pieced together an information network. She became a detective, one step behind her son as he traveled with the group through dozens of places over nearly two decades. DO and TI saw her as an agent of "Luciferian forces," also biblically predicted, and her efforts drove them deeper into hiding.

Part 3: A Sci-Fi/Action/Adventure/Comedy

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple. — Luke 14:26

Nancie Brown's son David was one of the eight followers who walked into the office of the L.A. Weekly unannounced in 1994. TI had died of liver cancer in 1985, and DO had led the group, with continuing astral guidance from TI, who had now told him to gather a "second wave" of recruits as "crew" for the craft. They resurfaced for another round of cross-country recruitment, taking out ads in USA Today and publicizing their free public meetings with radio, TV and

newspaper interviews like the one that got started in the Weekly's conference room.

Dave Gardetta's article appeared in the January 21, 1994, issue, a few days after the Northridge earthquake shook Los Angeles. To Rio, the earthquake was both literal and metaphorical, an omen that made perfect sense when he picked up the paper with "Remains of the Day" on the cover and the mysterious visitors on the last page.

"I was looking for answers," Rio recalled at his apartment. "I was gathering information. I had read a lot about Atlantis, UFOs and government cover-ups. When I saw this L.A. Weekly article, I thought, 'Well, let's see if these people are who they say they are.' "

Fifty or so people showed up that Sunday at the Marina International Hotel in Marina del Rey. During the two-hour presentation, Rio felt a shock of recognition. I asked him to describe it. "Something just changed," he said, after a long pause. "I could feel it physically," he said, again looking me square in the eye. "My mind started to awaken, as if I was remembering things I'd always known."

He wanted to join instantly. Rio had been married — he and his ex-wife were both musicians — but had divorced in 1986. They had a son, and shared visitation. After one custodial weekend, Rio, who at that time was still called by his birth name, Richard Ford, dropped his son off at his wife's parents' house, along with his guitar, art portfolio, photo albums, books and extra clothes. There was no explanation, no warning. And then Richard Ford was gone.

When questioned about his family, Rio told me, "They're not important to this story." I'd read and watched several interviews Rio did in the immediate aftermath of the suicides, and noticed that he used the Heaven's Gate language to refer to himself in the third person, describing his son, for example, as "the child of my vehicle." When I met him, that usage had mostly abated, but I did find it surprising when Rio told me that after the suicides, he didn't contact his mother for a year, even when she could see that he was alive from watching him on TV with Diane Sawyer in 1997. He didn't reconnect with his son for another four years after that.

I asked Rio if I could talk to his family; he said no. The media had hounded them, he explained, and he wants to protect them. Fair enough. But another reason Rio didn't want to talk about his family was his extreme sensitivity to the many (false, in his view) Freudian analyses of his motivations that peppered stories about him 10 years ago, which went something like: missing father + abusive, pious mother + unhappy marriage = fertile mind for cult indoctrination.

I'd also like to resist pop psychology as much as possible, but Rio's own book begins with his father disappearing when Rio was 3 years old and his "unhappy, angry and abusive" mother constantly in and out of work, marriages and new towns. Rio's closest attachment was to his grandmother, and when she died in 1988, according to Rio's ex-wife, he was "emotionally devastated." I had to take notice when Rio cried while describing how his first meeting with DO at a campground in Arizona was "like finally meeting my father." His voice broke at the very thought of it, years later. This was the first of many tearful moments when Rio talked about his "new family."

He changed the subject to his book. "That's what we need to get out there," he said. "We need to talk about what happens after the Second Coming."

Rio's a very nice guy. He digs healthful food, does odd jobs in art and design, and doesn't like Bush, making him not that different from anyone else in West L.A. — except for his celestial predestination to reveal secret knowledge to the world. When he finds out I don't believe that the Grays — the big-headed, almond-eyed aliens — are abducting humans for genetic sampling to save their species, he looks surprised, as if such knowledge is axiomatic, and says, "Well, you'll get there eventually."

Among the suggested interview topics in Rio's cover letter to the L.A. Weekly are "Truth and Clarification." One of the fundamental truths Rio hopes to get across, I learned, is that the Heaven's Gate crew did not actually commit suicide, a semantic argument made by redefining suicide from "disengaging from the body or vehicle" to failing to learn the teachings of DO (in which case one must note that nearly everyone on the planet besides Rio is suicidal). And clarification is difficult to come by when the subjects for clarification are (1) the Earth as a heavenly garden for "growing souls"; (2) the special "pocket" in the body in which aliens deposit said souls; (3) how our galaxy is designed in a platterlike shape for ease of soul harvesting; and (4) the 2,000-year spirit-reincarnation cycle in which Moses, Jesus, and DO and TI came as extraterrestrial garden tenders — none of which, according to Rio, is religion or theology, but rather a series of teachings meant as a tool for receiving what DO called Next Level Mind.

This was a very frustrating conversation. I wanted to do justice to Rio's ideas, because he really means them. It was difficult, though, when I realized he was literally suggesting that alien craft insert intangible essences in select human beings. So I asked a lot of detailed questions, which was equally frustrating for Rio, since many of them amounted to a challenge. "I don't expect you to believe me," Rio said at one point. "I wouldn't believe me. But this works."

"What works?"

"This system for growing a soul that DO brought back to Earth."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know. I can feel it. It's something I experienced."

It's hard to argue with fundamental subjectivity. I'm guessing that Rio has not followed much of the 20th-century debate about epistemology, since the proof for Rio — the bedrock upon which rests the undeniable, immutable, universal truth of DO's teachings — is a dream he had regularly as a kid. He would find himself in a vast, dark room, as big as an oil tanker, isolated and alone. He could never feel the walls. When he joined the discipline of Heaven's Gate, the dreams returned, but the room started shrinking. Eventually, he felt the walls and could see out. "I asked DO about it," Rio recounted, his voice again straining with emotion. "And he said, 'Your soul is evolving.'"

When I asked Rio why he's come out of the woodwork only now, he seemed slightly annoyed. "Haven't you read my book yet?" he asked. I admitted I hadn't gotten all the way through. "I talk about all that in there." After I ask several more questions he felt he'd already answered in his manuscript, we agreed to break until I'd read the whole thing.

And that's when he showed me his screenplay.

"This is something we started writing in the group," he said. "We'd shown it to some producers, who gave us notes, and did a few revisions. I just recently totally reworked it. Got it down to a tight 96 pages. Maybe you should read this too." The title was SIRUS FROM SIRIUS, a SCI/FI-ACTION-ADVENTURE-COMEDY. I flipped the script open at random and saw:

INT. PYRAMID DOME-CYDONIA REGION-MARS . . .

REPTILIAN LIEUTENANT ZOR

Your orders have been carried out, Admiral. We stand ready for your command. Part 4: Castration as the Path to Heaven?

There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake — Happy they!
—Matthew 9:12

Beyond Human Mind is a fairly plodding autobiographical narrative interspersed with bullet-point guides to DO's teachings. It is nevertheless fascinating as a window into a very strange realm. Over several days, I took in Rio's book, the screenplay, DO's and the students' Exit Videos, many hours of DO's teachings, including a tape called "Last Chance to Leave Earth Before It's Recycled," the last three of which I discovered at the Los Angeles Public Library. The videos — a 12-tape lesson plan, along with the entire collection of the Heaven's Gate suicide videography — which Rio believes were censored by the media, can in fact be checked out from the social-science stacks downtown. When I asked the reference librarian how these materials got on the shelves, he looked them up in the computer and said, "Someone from the public ordered them. You would be surprised the requests we get." Later, I walked by another librarian as he got a call from someone looking for reference materials on comparative alien digestive tracts. "We don't have information like that," he explained with admirable composure. "No one on Earth does."

The Exit Videos are so important to Rio that he includes full transcripts in his book. The videos are short; each of the 38 statements (one member chose to say nothing) is less than five minutes long. I watched them all. Instantly noticeable was how similar everyone looks. In preparation for their future lives as immortal, androgynous beings in space, the men and women of Heaven's Gate were all required to wear matching bowl cuts and baggy, unflattering jump suits.

Equally striking is their uniform serenity. Seated outside, with San Diego's pleasant spring dawning in the background, every single member calmly explained their enthusiasm for the wondrous existence awaiting them: "I've been looking forward to this for so long"; "I couldn't have made a better choice"; "Thirty-nine to beam up!" Thomas Nichols, who had been a member since 1976 (and was the brother of Nichelle Nichols, who played Lieutenant Uhura on Star Trek), said: "I'm the happiest person in the world."

There is none of the malevolence seen in the martyrdom videos of suicide bombers; these people were not political pawns and would never have hurt anyone. The only crime they ever committed was against themselves, and that's not how they saw it. To a person, they seem remarkably ordinary. Everyone who ever dealt with them said they were smart, capable and caring. Days before dying, they do not seem afraid, coerced or disturbed. Even DO, whose delusional rambling goes on at some length, is not the same raving sociopath one sees in Jim Jones. And, in general, Heaven's Gate was not Jonestown, where armed guards enforced suicide drills. Anyone could leave Heaven's Gate at any time, and many did. But it is a testament to the reach of DO's psychological grip that those who left the group were often conflicted, not doubting DO but feeling they had somehow failed to learn "The Process."

That was the system for "becoming nonhuman" in order to "learn the ways of space" and nurture Next Level Mind. Rio's

book describes how the Process was conceived as a physical transformation that made one eligible to leave Earth. All psychological ties that bind you to this planet must be cut. In light of this, the "away" in the AWAY TEAM patch they wore on their Exit uniforms referred not to Orion but to Earth, and they were simply returning home.

More than anything else, sex held back the Process. It was prohibited, along with anything having the potential for arousal. That included jeans, jewelry, dresses, Little House on the Prairie. No hugging was tolerated: It tricked the vehicle into unwelcome sensuality. Members would provide updates on their progress by writing notes to DO, which were called CSRs, or Control Status Reports. I saw one of Rio's CSRs, in which he said he was successfully quieting the sensual yearnings of his vehicle, to which DO had responded in red ink, "You make me very happy. You a good kiddie."

Many people remember from the news reports in 1997 that several male members of Heaven's Gate were surgically castrated. These unfortunates, according to Rio's book, "had trouble controlling the vehicle's sensuality and chose neutering as a solution." Afterward, they were "extremely happy and even more silly." Contrary to news reports, the book claims it was not DO who suggested castration, but some of the students, although DO later tried it himself to make sure it fit The Process. (Rio himself was not castrated.)

The Heaven's Gate regimen extended beyond sexuality. A thick Procedures Book, spiral-bound and handwritten, regulated every facet of life. Bathing lasted six minutes and used 1 gallon of water. The Procedures Book designated what television shows could be watched, what books could be read and where the students could sit, and laid out detailed schedules with precise times, such as vitamin intake at 7:22 p.m. It specified the circumference of pancakes. DO constantly consulted TI, who micromanaged the group's daily existence from the Next Level, even providing guidance for planning meals. And the recipes for those meals were exactly measured. When members prepared coffee, not to drink, but for their enemas, it too was precisely rationed.

What wasn't prescribed in the Procedures Book was recorded in the Ledger. There, every transaction made by the group was meticulously documented with receipts. A bus trip to Oregon showed the fare, a stop at Burger King, the tip for the driver and a \$2 gift to a homeless man. Before the Exit, the group made a last-hurrah trip to Las Vegas, where they stayed at Treasure Island, saw Cirque du Soleil's Mystere (\$2,661), won on the slots (\$58.91), took some rides on the Big Shot and the High Roller (\$123), and found some change (\$2.28). On Friday, March 21, the night before Hale-Bopp's closest approach, the Ledger showed that the group all went to the Marie Callender's in Carlsbad for a final meal, ordering 39 chicken potpies, 39 salads and 39 pieces of cheesecake.

Rio and the others submitted to this intense routine to prepare for the accuracy required of a crew on a spacecraft. That's how they thought of their house, or "craft." There were special names for everything, in fact, an entirely new vocabulary created by DO and reproduced in part in Rio's book:

- Job Out-of-craft task
- Kitchen Nutri-lab
- Recipes Formulas
- Office Compulab
- Bra Sling shot
- Breakfast 1st Experiment
- Lunch 2nd Experiment
- Dinner 3rd Experiment
- Dessert Snack
- Money Sticks
- Spirits Influences/boogers

Last time I heard dessert called "snack" was in Montessori preschool, but Beyond Human Mind explains that this kind of terminology was vital to achieving nonhuman consciousness. As were the members' assumed names. Rio DiAngelo — "river of angels" — was actually the out-of-craft alias for his Next Level self, which was called NEODY. Everyone had names like this: OLLODY, JWNODY, RKKODY — multi-letter designations followed by -ODY, a suffix shorthand for DOTI that forever imprinted the spiritual leaders' presence onto their followers' identities.

Weird, yes, but how much weirder than other things we've come to accept? Like, say, partaking in the body and blood of Christ every Sunday? We all know that Jesus, one of many schismatic religious peddlers in biblical Judea, was scorned for his beliefs. When dealing with extreme behavior like collective suicide, it's a natural response to look for an easy explanation, such as "These people are nut jobs." Some cult watchers point out that DO was so megalomaniacal that he essentially used his followers to clone himself, to such an extent that even in death they had no individual identity. An interesting point, but one should also acknowledge the psychological bargain the group offered in exchange. I talked to one former member who counts his 13 years with DO as a tragic mistake but still pointed out that there was something comforting about being inside. "We didn't have to worry about family, taxes, bills," he said. "We were protected. We didn't like the rules of the world, so we created our own. It was a utopia." DO had always likened it to a cocoon. They were all caterpillars, and they needed the safe haven of the chrysalis to become butterflies. In a way, this is a very beautiful

image.

That they killed themselves for it seems bizarre only because it happened in San Diego, with five Jamba Juices and a Green Burrito nearby. At the turn of the previous millennium, Christian Europe was full of apocalyptic sects prepared for blood. And many medieval Christian monks castrated themselves for the sake of purity. In Diane Sawyer's interview, she is shocked by how many children DO's followers left behind, but our monotheistic religious tradition began when Abraham prepared to kill his own son. When you get down to it, just how much of human history is filled with willing martyrs for heaven or some other abstract cause? Two hundred thousand Englishmen were slaughtered for queen and country at the Somme. Does that make any more sense than what happened in Rancho Santa Fe?

The answer may be that this is the wrong question, because none of it makes sense. Dying for the patrie is just as arbitrary as dying for duty or glory or Marshall Herff Applewhite. Part 5: X-Files Meets Touched by an Angel

We have come out of the wilderness and know what our mission is. It is definitely a "Big One." I am not kidding, baby, this is for real. —Bonnie Lu Trousdale Nettles (a.k.a. TI), 1973

By the time I finished *Beyond Human Mind*, it was clear that Rio's book is a gospel, a testimonial about his time with DO and the call to transmit his wisdom — along with the "updates" he's now receiving. If DO and TI had ushered in a new, alien apostolic age, then it is Rio who hopes to emerge as Heaven's Gate's John the Baptist, taking the word to the people. This was the reason he felt the urge to leave the mansion in March 1997. He was meant to tell the story. He now realizes that's been his job since DO came up with the idea of writing a screenplay in 1996.

The script incorporates the Heaven's Gate cosmogony. Humans are bit players in a vast galactic drama, including at least one alien summit on Mars. The protagonist is a telepathic man-dog descended from the Atlanteans who has a crystal embedded in his forehead and journeys to Earth to grow a soul. Rio and OLLODY started the first version when the group lived in Pleasant Valley, Arizona, and DO decided that a screenplay would be a ticket to the masses. The first draft was several hundred pages long, and featured concept art for all the different alien races and ships. NBC, Rio said, was interested.

All of this checked out when I tracked down Alex Pappas and Rick Singer, the producers who shopped the script around in 1996 and 1997. They ran a company called Way Out Pictures with Mark Bakshi, son of animator Ralph Bakshi and current president of Paramount Production. They were introduced to Heaven's Gate when the group rented a house from Pappas. DO found out about Pappas' ties to Hollywood and set up a meeting. "It was pretty wild shit," Pappas said. "Good, but unwieldy. Needed rhythm." When Pappas suggested cutting half of the story, especially the elaborate extraneous alien races and planets that only added confusion, DO and Rio were reluctant. "I asked, 'Why?' " Pappas recalled. "And they said, 'You don't understand. This is all true.' " Pappas and Singer brought in writer Alan Haft to help pitch a take on the project around town. "NBC had *Dark Skies* then," Singer said. "So they were getting into sci-fi, and there was some traction there."

This whetted Heaven's Gate's appetite for the wider proselytizing possibilities offered by Hollywood. They were tremendous fans of *X-Files*, *Star Trek* and *E.T.*, which they viewed as a religious metaphor — visitor with healing powers and message of peace comes to Earth, dies at the hands of persecutors, is resurrected, and ascends back to heaven in a cloud of light — one that had been seen by nearly half the planet. (When the group came out of 20 years of hiding, their recruitment message was "'95 Statement by an E.T. Presently Incarnate.")

Since Rio was from Los Angeles and had done some effects work, he became the point man for Heaven's Gate's industry efforts. When they found out the networks were looking for a series along the lines of "X-Files meets *Touched by an Angel*," the group developed a treatment about their monastic wanderings and called it *Angels in Training*. They also spent a lot of time filming a documentary about their "second wave" membership drive.

But none of it had panned out by the time Hale-Bopp passed Earth and DO used his key to unlock Heaven's Gate for his disciples. In the immediate aftermath of the suicides, Rio used his newfound infamy to try to jump-start their Hollywood efforts. In their farewell letter to Rio, the group signed off with "Thanks for your help. Maybe the script will sell now."

Nick Matzorkis, Rio's boss, with whom he drove to San Diego and discovered the bodies, had similar thoughts. A successful, press-savvy entrepreneur, he counseled Rio to go into hiding and started acting as Rio's agent, making the arrangements for Rio to appear on *Prime Time Live* and the cover of *Newsweek*, and simultaneously sell a TV movie about his life to ABC. It was a heady time: Rio sold his footage of the bodies to the BBC and got enough money to give his ex-wife \$10,000 for child support. Part of Matzorkis' ABC deal secured Rio a spot in the Peninsula Hotel in Beverly Hills for several weeks. There, Rio was dodging the press, many of whom were staying in the hotel. At night, Rio would retreat alone to his room and consult DO in the Next Level, looking for guidance on terms with ABC and whoever else came knocking. During the day, Rio and Matzorkis would take meetings at the restaurant on the roof.

Rio spent nearly a week with screenwriter Phil Penningroth, who had previously scripted a TV movie about *Waco*. Penningroth turned in a draft in about a month, but when the network executives' notes came back asking for "more

maniac," he balked. Penningroth had produced a sensationalized version of David Koresh that he wasn't proud of, and he didn't want to do it again. He quit the project, and it died not long after.

When the limelight faded, Rio slowly reactivated his life. He opened a bank account and found a permanent apartment with a roommate. A friend who was good with accounting and taxes helped Rio fix his credit. He transitioned from Web work with Matzorkis to freelance art jobs: packaging, trade-show booths, sculpting dolphins from wax. Rio stopped hearing from DO and TI. He lived quietly.

In 2000, DO and TI's silence ended. Rio started hearing from them and getting ideas again. He picked up the screenplay. Two years later, he started the book. Whereas he had once been confused about his survival, it had all come into focus. He was meant to bear witness. Part 6: The End is Nigh

Look for chaos — fires, shortages, excesses, earthquakes, destruction of all kinds. —Marshall Herff Applewhite (a.k.a. DO), 1974

We were at a Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf on Beverly Glen when Rio told me that some time soon, the Earth will shift its axis and many people will die. I had just sat down with a chocolate-covered graham cracker, and the sun was setting. Information of this kind, he said, arrives in his mind like a ticker tape, providing constant updates in thought form. "I can't yet say when the axis will shift," he added with his usual conviction. "But hopefully that will come soon." When I asked if this ticker tape is coming straight from DO, he said, "I think so."

I should point out that Rio is not technically the sole survivor of Heaven's Gate. There have been other apostles, like RKKODY, a.k.a. Chuck Humphrey, who believed he had to actively gather souls for DO, until he killed himself in a tent in the Arizona desert in 1998. SWYODY, a.k.a. Steve Havel, recently decided that he too will write a definitive memoir "that proves DO and TI were the Second Coming." Rio bills himself as the sole (or "soul") survivor by making the distinction that although many "dropouts" came and went, he was the only student who learned all the lessons DO's classroom had to offer.

There's an element of hucksterism in all religion, so I suppose it's not surprising that every single person I talked to who knew Rio asked, "What's his angle?" Nancie Brown, Alex Pappas, Rio's ex-wife — they all wanted to know what Rio's selling these days. Besides a book and a screenplay, that's a good question.

Rio's ex-wife, who is bitter about his lack of child support over the years (she says she calls once a year to remind him that he owes her \$100,000), said that Rio "never has a penny but is always looking to get rich." Rio did once mention to me that one of his three life goals is to make a lot of money, although he claimed that the purpose would be to help clean the oceans.

It does seem strange to turn any kind of profit off the deaths of 39 of your friends, but Rio's not just a charlatan. He definitely believes in something, although it's hard to tell what exactly that something is. In a nutshell, the message is "Buy the book." Beyond that, I'm not exactly sure. The Next Level seems to have chosen some elliptical emissaries. Following in DO's footsteps, Rio speaks very precisely about impossibly vague things. What is a soul again? "Let's get it straight: Spirit and soul are different. Spirit reincarnates here, learning Earth's lessons, while the soul is 'you' choosing to evolve a new creature that has the nonhuman requirements for the Next Level." How does that happen? "The Representative becomes your teacher." Then what? "You will not be reincarnated again!" None of the language of Heaven's Gate has any external foundation; the more I tried to understand it, the more it became a wash of intangible words — words Rio's asking us to believe just because he had some dreams that he was in a giant dark room that felt like an oil tanker.

I asked Rio to boil it all down to three sentences. This proved impossible. After a long pause, I got more "finishing school for Earth lessons" and "the Exit was a time of passage and is over" and "the Flood was the beginning of the cycle." Then his girlfriend called.

By now, the internal contradictions were somewhat maddening. Rio insists that the rigorous monastic control was necessary to achieve spiritual perfection, but he now does what he wants, watches movies, is romantically engaged and offers a spiritual "shortcut" to anyone who wants to preorder *Beyond Human Mind* on Amazon.com. It sounds like a suspiciously convenient adaptation of the original philosophy, but then again, Rio's divine ticker tape also told him to not commit suicide, write a book and dust off that old screenplay. In his interview with Diane Sawyer, Rio talked about how the Procedure was supposed to erase one's confidence. Every statement was tentative, including household requests from the "Individual Needs Department," which would have been phrased, "I may be mistaken, but I think my deodorant is empty and I need more." And yet Rio is 100 percent confident that DO was an extraterrestrial messiah who still communicates with Rio from the stars. Recent memoranda received by Rio exhort us to "embrace love, creativity and goodness," but he also assures me that we're in the Tribulation period and there will soon be widespread disaster. I'm always skeptical of someone who believes that death is a trifle and nonchalantly predicts vast human suffering while indulging in a mint Coco Jo and Iced Blended. Even the apocalyptic math is off: Rio's cycle has Noah's Flood, Moses, Jesus, and DO and TI in 2,000-year intervals, completing a 6,000-year recycling process that's about to cataclysmically

reset the counter, but when I pointed out that biblical archaeologists date Moses' time to 1250 B.C., he said, "Really? Hmm. Well, you know."

The next time we met was on the Santa Monica Pier. That was where, in 1994, Nancie Brown's son David and his fellow Overcomers asked to have their picture taken for the L.A. Weekly article. At the time, the group had thoughts of a UFO rendezvous on the water. This was when DO still thought the Next Level would come to the surface and pick them up, before he decided that the Exit would entail leaving the vehicle.

I asked Rio again about the axis shift. "It might be six to 10 years," he offered. "And it will be due to some kind of jolt."

"What will you do then?" I ask.

"Try to help with the information that I have. I'm altruistic, a caregiver."

"I mean, what will you actually do when the shit hits the fan? I mean, you're talking famines, wars, Road Warrior stuff. You're not going to be sitting at the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf talking about being a caregiver."

"I see what you mean," he said with a strange, knowing smile. "I'll be moving inland," he said, making his usual direct eye contact. "But the key thing is that I will have no fear."

His matter-of-factness reminded me of the Exit Videos, and their unflinching embrace of death. I couldn't figure out if that preternatural calm was admirable or dangerous or simply sad — the disastrous result of anguished lives searching for meaning. These were emotionally vulnerable people looking for answers. I know the feeling. I want answers too. I wish I could be cheerful about death and certain about my cosmic purpose. I'd love to have the serenity I saw in those videos. I just couldn't bear for that serenity to stem from believing that The X-Files might be nonfiction. These people were so alienated they literally believed there are aliens. If that's what absolute tranquillity requires, it's a psychological Rubicon I'm not willing to cross. For those who did, I don't want to judge them other than to say that there was likely another answer for them, one that didn't entail 39 grieving families.

Later, I called Nancie Brown. She wanted to know Rio's phone number so she could ask him some questions about David. Nancie is a Quaker, forgiving and loving, and seems like an all-around delightful woman. I can't begin to understand what DO provided that Nancie couldn't. I gave her the number. I asked her what David was like, and she said it was sometimes hard to remember, but he gave the greatest hugs. Then she told me about the call she received from the San Diego County coroner. It was the worst day of her life. The coroner was tactful. He said David had a peaceful look on his face. She wasn't sure if it was true, but it left her with a nice image. When she hung up the phone, she was startled by a loud, shuddering scream. Then she realized it was coming from her.

O.K., brace yourself...Our Father... requires of us what any "sane" earthly person would deem impossible. —Marshall Herff Applewhite (a.k.a. DO) and Bonnie Lu Truesdale (a.k.a. TI), 1975

David and the others were first seen by the outside world in the police video shown by the media. It was composed as a clinical document of a suspected crime scene, whereas Rio says the video he shot before the police arrived was an attempt to tell "the real story." I was surprised to discover how short it is, around two minutes long, making it the most unfamiliar two minutes of home video I've ever seen. The sound is off — Rio said he was calling out to make sure there were no survivors who needed help — and editing makes the camera jump from room to room. We fade in on the Compulab, or office, where there's a bulletin board, a map of the world, some flowers on the table. In the adjoining hall are the first bodies, resting on a fold-up table and mattress on the floor. The black Nikes are there, along with the purple shrouds diagonally stretched over the head and torso. Seven more rooms reveal the rest of the departed crew. Rio lingers at times on details — a pair of glasses neatly folded next to a hand, a thick trail of coughed-up blood soaking through one of the purple shrouds. Finally, we enter the master bedroom, where DO is alone, face-up on a queen-size bed with his shroud fully extended like a purple manta ray. Rio pans to the fireplace, revealing a drawing of an alien on the mantel. "It just kind of happened, that artist's rendering of the Next Level sitting there," Rio had told me. "I thought it was a nice touch." Then the camera zooms in on the figure. There's a pause, just long enough to see the expressionless alien gazing into a field of stars. And the screen goes black. Post-script : Comets (and reactions to them) through the ages

The first recorded comet apparition was in 240 B.C., when Chinese astronomers reported a "broom star" that "appeared in the east and then was seen in the north" in a text called Shih chi. Since then, the historical record is full of people appealing to the heavens for signs and finding them in roving balls of ice. And can you blame them? Go back and look at pictures of Hale-Bopp. It's awe-inspiring, this unexpected dazzling thing rising and setting with the night sky, burning brightly and then fading away. If there were supernatural guardian angels, that's where I'd look for them.

Halley's visit in 12 B.C., for example, is thought by some astronomers to be the celestial phenomenon behind the Star of Bethlehem. But since there have been so many arbitrary miseries befalling people through the ages, the meaning of comet sightings was often divined as an ill omen. Comets have been blamed for the fall of Jerusalem (66; advance

warning); Vesuvius' eruption and subsequent burial of Pompeii and Herculaneum (79); the Turks' success in conquering Constantinople (1453); and, of course, the "Great Dying," or plague outbreak in London (1665). The Middle Ages took a characteristically fearful and pessimistic view of comets, interpreting them mostly as angry salvos aimed at sinners by a vengeful God. The Great Comet of 1680 inspired a handbill bearing a warning that "Herewith is represented the fearful celestial phenomenon and other events... by which Almighty God terrified dear Hungary, and at the same time admonished Christendom to penance..."

As late as the 19th century, comets were blamed for the fall of the Alamo, a fire in New York City and a series of very terrestrially inspired wars in Latin America. Halley's comet's roundabout through the solar system in 1910 sparked mass hysteria and a fertile market for "comet pills," sold to counter the widely dreaded effects of the tail's poisonous gas.

Then there is the most natural reading: Apocalypse. Almost all comet sightings since antiquity have spelled the end of the world in someone's eyes. Popularizing the idea in America was an Adventist millenarian offshoot called the Millerites, who had decided that the Second Coming would be heralded by a comet arriving no later than March 22, 1844, exactly 153 years before Hale-Bopp's visit. One night in October, Millerites all over the country famously awaited their comet on hills and rooftops, only to discover their calculations were off. They called it the "Great Disappointment." After a dry spell, a modern revival of doomsday comets began when Kohoutek's 75,000-year orbit made a close approach in 1973. Since then, West, Hyakutake, Hale-Bopp and, just last January, McNaught, the brightest in 40 years, all inspired eschatological predictions by various religious groups and readers of Nostradamus worldwide. If only the Millerites were around today.