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THE TWO

The Two were Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles. They met in 1972 at a Houston hospital where Applewhite, then in his early 40s, was being treated for psychiatric problems and where Nettles, four years older, worked as a nurse. Applewhite had been a professor of music at the University of St. Thomas and later director of music at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Houston. Nettles had long been interested in the occult. Together they would embark on a strange spiritual odyssey which in three years would attract the attention of the nation.

According to sociologist Robert W. Balch (Balch, 1995), Applewhite had long sought a platonic helper who, among other things, would relieve him of the burden of a confused sexuality which had been responsible for emotional and employment difficulties. Nettles proved to be that person. Not coincidentally, the doctrine the couple would preach rejected sexuality.

Leaving Houston in 1973, they wandered through various Western states, eventually establishing themselves in a camp along Oregon's Rogue River. There Applewhite and Nettles experienced a revelation which convinced them that they were the two witnesses whose appearance on earth in its last days was prophesied in Revelation 11.

In what may have been their first attempt to reach out to the larger world, they showed up unannounced at the Oklahoma City headquarters of the International UFO Bureau and spoke to its director Hayden Hewes. Hewes had never seen or heard of them before, but Applewhite and Nettles apparently knew of him through Hewes's penchant for newspaper publicity. Hewes would recall that they introduced themselves simply as "Herff" and "Bonnie," here to give him a message of utmost importance. They gave Hewes permission to record their words. Essentially they wanted him to help them inform the world that, in Herff's words, "there are two individuals who are here to show and tell how man may make the ascension into the next evolutionary level." They said that one day they would be assassinated; three days later

they would return to life in full view of members of the news media.

Hewes noticed that they talked as if "humans were alien to them." Apparently deeming it at least possible that the strangers were indeed extraterrestrials, Hewes served them glasses of tea in a ruse to collect their fingerprints. He would write:

As the interview was ending, [Herff] gave me a simple thought-code sequence to use if I ever need to get in touch with them to know the truth.

Shortly afterward [Herff and Bonnie] said goodbye and walked out of the office toward the street. I accompanied them to the road and started to return to the office. I immediately turned around—and they were gone. There were no cars on the street, either parked or passing by. It appeared that they had simply vanished [Hewes and Steiger, 1976].

In the spring of 1975, letters attributed to Human Individual Metamorphosis (HIM) circulated through the occult and New Age community announcing that prophets from the "next kingdom" fully as important as Jesus, and with the same mission, were now on earth and about to make their presence known:

There are two individuals here now who have also come from that next kingdom, incarnate as humans, awakened, and will soon demonstrate the same proof of overcoming death. They are "sent" from that kingdom by the "Father" to bear the same truth that was Jesus'. This is like a repeat performance, except this time by two (a man and a woman), to restate the truth Jesus bore, restore its accurate meaning, and again show that any individual who seeks that kingdom will find it through the same process. The two who are the "actors" in this "theater" are in the meantime doing all they can to relate this truth as accurately as possible so that when their bodies recover from their "dead" state (resurrection) and they leave (UFOs), those left behind will have clearly understood the formula [*ibid.*].

The followers would have to abandon family, friends, and possessions and devote themselves entirely to the

metamorphosis, a “chemical and biological change” which would render their bodies indestructible. The Two claimed to be here in fulfillment of a prophetic utterance in Revelation 11:

And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and threescore days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and two candlesticks standing before the God of the Earth. And if any man will hurt them, fire proceedeth out of their mouth and devours their enemies; and if any man will hurt them, he must in this manner be killed. These have the power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy and have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often they will. And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them. And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified. . . . And after three days and a half the spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; and great fear fell upon them which saw them. And they heard a great voice from heaven saying unto them, Come up hither. And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud. . . .

Applewhite and Nettles’s first more or less public appearance was in Los Angeles in the spring of 1975, at the home of psychic Joan Culpepper. By now they called themselves Bo (Applewhite) and Peep (Nettles) and refused to speak of, or even acknowledge, prior personal histories. Their message so mesmerized 24 of their listeners that they made the decision to become the sheep of Bo and Peep. They left their families and joined the Two in their wanderings through the West. Over the next several months the Two and their entourage held other meetings in California and Colorado, bringing more faithful into the fold.

Except by those directly affected, these events were little noticed. All that would change after a meeting held at a Waldport, Oregon, hotel on September 14,

1975. When 20 of the 300 audience members disappeared in the meeting’s wake, the Oregon State Police and the Lincoln County Sheriff’s Department launched an investigation. Newspapers picked up on the story, calling the couple who had led the meeting “mysterious”—at first their true identities were unknown—and playing up the UFO angle. Reporters who interviewed other audience members learned that those who stayed behind were unsure of what they heard. The message seemed vague to them. As one said, “I guess the implication was that you might leave in a UFO.” Some listeners remembered that this departure would take place from a camp somewhere in Colorado. Confirmation of this idea came via postcard from Colorado. One of the Oregon missing informed his mother, “I am leaving this earth and will not see you anymore.”

To some in the press and law enforcement, all of this seemed sinister, perhaps evidence of a new cult which brainwashed people into following it. Some ex-followers even accused Bo and Peep of practicing “mind control.”

Six weeks after the Oregon meeting, University of Montana sociologists Robert Balch and David Taylor located Bo and Peep’s followers in Arizona and, disguising themselves as believers, joined the group. By this time Bo and Peep had disappeared, after finding that two men had infiltrated the group looking for a friend who had joined in Oregon. Fearing that they would be assassinated before they had fulfilled their mission, Bo and Peep dropped out of sight, explaining only that they wanted to “get in tune with the Father,” and cancelled a planned meeting in Chicago. The followers believed they would soon rejoin the Two and witness the “Demonstration,” in which Bo and Peep would be martyred, rise from the dead three and a half days later, and ascend to heaven on a cloud of light. A few days later UFOs would carry away the most devout followers—those who had entirely purged themselves of their attachments to human emotions and to the material world.

Before leaving the faithful, Bo and Peep—who by now had attracted 150 to 200 followers, in Balch and Taylor’s estimation—broke them up into several autonomous families, typically consisting of 12 to 14

persons, most in their early 20s and more or less equally divided between men and women. Each member was assigned a partner, if possible of the opposite sex, though sexual, romantic, and even friendly relations were forbidden; instead the two individuals, who were to be together 24 hours a day, would observe each other closely and thus come to intimate knowledge of the human qualities the other had to overcome before he or she could experience metamorphosis. Beyond communicating for necessary business, the partners were to have as little as possible to do with the others in the family.

The families went their own ways, each moving wherever it felt it was being led. They lived on the food secured through begging and camped out every night. Periodically the families would stop, hold meetings, and recruit new members even as some of the original members left for greener spiritual pastures. Balch and Taylor noted that interaction with audiences "was limited to discussing the message, and the answers given by members of the cult were often so stereotyped that they sounded like tape-recordings." Still, on one occasion they succeeded in attracting eight new members from a northern Arizona town of fewer than 500 residents. Mostly, however, "these meetings produced nothing more than catcalls and insults, or at best interested questions," according to Balch and Taylor.

During the day members were to spend virtually all of their time "tuning in"—establishing a psychic connection with the people of the next level (outer space) to which they would go once the "process" was completed. Most members were not persons snatched out of ordinary middle-class life; they had long been drawn to occultism and unorthodox religious beliefs. Others were hippies and dropouts. Few, in other words, had appeared out of nowhere. The eclectic mix of metaphysical teachings about flying saucers, reincarnation, psychic power, and the like was nothing new to them; the only novelty was the particular manner in which Bo and Peep had put them together. Among the most distinctive features of the Bo and Peep doctrine was its assertion that salvation would occur in the physical body and that UFOs would be the (literal) vehicles by which the saved would be transported to heaven.

Followers believed that the Demonstration would occur in Oakland, California, in early October. But when the Two failed to appear (the meeting was a **hoax** engineered by a newspaper), many followers became disillusioned. The attrition rate, Balch and Taylor observed, was high, but the group survived because new members continually replaced the old. Only a small minority stayed on for any length of time.

In late 1975 or early 1976 the Two resurfaced and set about to re-energize the movement. A significant development took place at a meeting in the Midwest where, after enduring the taunts of hecklers, Peep declared that "the doors to the next level are closed." In other words, the missionary work was over, even though fewer than 100 persons in the earth's entire population had been harvested. Bo and Peep took their followers to a mountain camp outside Laramie, Wyoming, where they tightened their already authoritarian hold by claiming that only the revelations that came through them were valid. Those whose faith in the Two was less than total were asked to leave. Members were given uniforms and subjected to psychic and other training to prepare them for life in space. In the fall of 1976, the group moved to Salt Lake City.

Not long afterwards two members received inheritances and turned the money over to Bo and Peep, who used it to buy houses—"crafts," the Two called them—in the Denver and Dallas-Fort Worth areas. Members lived in these "crafts" essentially isolated from the rest of the world. They operated on a strict time schedule with their every movement monitored.

In 1979 Bo and Peep sent an emissary to the outside world, Paul Groll, a 32-year-old golf caddy. Groll told *Time* that the group divided its time between camps in the Wyoming Rockies and in north Texas. Each minute of every day a beep sounded from a command tent, he said, and every 12 beeps during the daylight hours followers would check the tent to take orders for their next task. Followers were to monitor each other's activities to check for violations of Bo and Peep's "thousands of rules." Sometimes they were required to wear hoods for extended periods; they had to wear gloves at all times. The only words they were allowed to speak were "yes," "no," and "I

don't know." Otherwise all communication was by written message. Bo and Peep delivered occasional lectures, and sometimes members were directed to sit and stare at a single object for an hour. When the flying saucer arrived to pick them up—an event due imminently, according to Groll—they would be taken to a realm where they would live eternally in bodies without hair or teeth ("Flying Saucery," 1979).

The group pursued its nomadic ways, and not a great deal is known of its subsequent history. Sometime in the mid-1980s Bonnie Lu Nettles, now calling herself "Do" (to Applewhite's "Te," as in the musical tone), died or, as one follower told a reporter a decade later, "returned to that next level to resume her position there" (Webster, 1994). The group was renamed the Total Overcomers, and in the 1990s members gave occasional public testimony. They warned of the imminent destruction of earthly life and also of the schemes of evil "Luciferian" extraterrestrials (Hirsley, 1994).

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