

When it comes to illustrations of the strength of social proof, there is one that is far and away my favorite. Several features account for its appeal: It offers a superb example of the much underused method of participant observation, in which a scientist studies a process by becoming immersed in its natural occurrence; it provides information of interest to such diverse groups as historians, psychologists, and theologians; and, most important, it shows how social evidence can be used on us—not by others, but by ourselves—to assure us that what we prefer to be true will seem to be true.

The story is an old one, requiring an examination of ancient data, for the past is dotted with millennial religious movements. Various

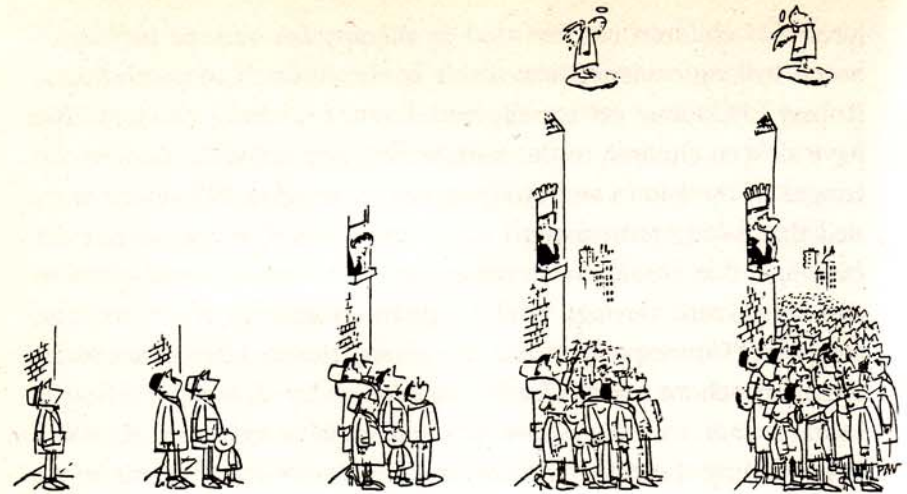


FIGURE 4-1

Looking for Higher (and Higher) Meaning

The draw of the crowd can be devilishly strong.

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sects and cults have prophesied that on one or another particular date there would arrive a period of redemption and great happiness for those who believed in the group's teachings. In each instance it has been predicted that the beginning of the time of salvation would be marked by an important and undeniable event, usually the cataclysmic end of the world. Of course, these predictions have invariably proved false. To the acute dismay of the members of such groups, the end has never appeared as scheduled.

But immediately following the obvious failure of the prophecy, history records an enigmatic pattern. Rather than disbanding in disillusion, the cultists often become strengthened in their convictions. Risking the ridicule of the populace, they take to the streets, publicly asserting their dogma and seeking converts with a fervor that is intensified, not diminished, by the clear disconfirmation of a central belief. So it was with the Montanists of second-century Turkey, with the Anabaptists of sixteenth-century Holland, with the Sabbataists of seventeenth-century Izmir, with the Millerites of nineteenth-century America. And, thought a trio of interested social scientists, so it might

be with a doomsday cult based in modern-day Chicago. The scientists—Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter—who were then colleagues at the University of Minnesota, heard about the Chicago group and felt it worthy of close study. Their decision to investigate by joining the group, incognito, as new believers and by placing additional paid observers among its ranks resulted in a remarkably rich firsthand account of the goings-on before and after the day of predicted catastrophe.⁵

The cult of believers was small, never numbering more than thirty members. Its leaders were a middle-aged man and woman, whom the researchers renamed, for purposes of publication, Dr. Thomas Armstrong and Mrs. Marian Keech. Dr. Armstrong, a physician on the staff of a college student health service, had a long-held interest in mysticism, the occult, and flying saucers; as such he served as a respected authority on these subjects for the group. Mrs. Keech, though, was the center of attention and activity. Earlier in the year she had begun to receive messages from spiritual beings, whom she called the Guardians, located on other planets. It was these messages, flowing through Marian Keech's hand via the device of "automatic writing," that were to form the bulk of the cult's religious belief system. The teachings of the Guardians were loosely linked to traditional Christian thought. No wonder that one of the Guardians, Sananda, eventually "revealed" himself as the current embodiment of Jesus.

The transmissions from the Guardians, always the subjects of much discussion and interpretation among the group, gained new significance when they began to foretell a great impending disaster—a flood that would begin in the Western Hemisphere and eventually engulf the world. Although the cultists were understandably alarmed at first, further messages assured them that they and all those who believed in the Lessons sent through Mrs. Keech would survive. Before the calamity, spacemen were to arrive and carry off the believers in flying saucers to a place of safety, presumably on another planet. Very little detail was provided about the rescue except that the believers were to make themselves ready for pickup by rehearsing certain passwords to be exchanged ("I left my

hat at home." "What is your question?" "I am my own porter.") and by removing all metal from their clothes—because the wearing or carrying of metal made saucer travel "extremely dangerous."

As Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter observed the preparations during the weeks prior to the flood date, they noted with special interest two significant aspects of the members' behavior. First, the level of commitment to the cult's belief system was very high. In anticipation of their departure from doomed Earth, irrevocable steps were taken by the group members. Most had incurred the opposition of family and friends to their beliefs but had persisted nonetheless in their convictions, often when it meant losing the affections of these others. In fact, several of the members were threatened by neighbors or family with legal actions designed to have them declared insane. In Dr. Armstrong's case, a motion was filed by his sister to have his two younger children taken away. Many believers quit their jobs or neglected their studies to devote full time to the movement. Some even gave or threw away their personal belongings, expecting them shortly to be of no use. These were people whose certainty that they had the truth allowed them to withstand enormous social, economic, and legal pressures and whose commitment to their dogma grew as each pressure was resisted.

The second significant aspect of the believers' preflood actions was a curious form of inaction. For individuals so clearly convinced of the validity of their creed, they did surprisingly little to spread the word. Although they did initially make public the news of the coming disaster, there was no attempt to seek converts, to proselyte actively. They were willing to sound the alarm and to counsel those who voluntarily responded to it, but that was all.

The group's distaste for recruitment efforts was evident in various ways besides the lack of personal persuasion attempts. Secrecy was maintained in many matters—extra copies of the Lessons were burned, passwords and secret signs were instituted, the contents of certain private tape recordings were not to be discussed with outsiders (so secret were the tapes that even longtime believers were prohibited from taking notes of them). Publicity was avoided. As

the day of disaster approached, increasing numbers of newspaper, television, and radio reporters converged on the group's headquarters in the Keech house. For the most part, these people were turned away or ignored. The most frequent answer to their questions was, "No comment." Although discouraged for a time, the media representatives returned with a vengeance when Dr. Armstrong's religious activities caused him to be fired from his post on the college health service staff; one especially persistent newsman had to be threatened with a lawsuit. A similar siege was repelled on the eve of the flood when a swarm of reporters pushed and pestered the believers for information. Afterward, the researchers summarized the group's preflood stance on public exposure and recruitment in respectful tones: "Exposed to a tremendous burst of publicity, they had made every attempt to dodge fame; given dozens of opportunities to proselyte, they had remained evasive and secretive and behaved with an almost superior indifference."

Eventually, when all the reporters and would-be converts had been cleared from the house, the believers began making their final preparations for the arrival of the spaceship scheduled for midnight that night. The scene, as viewed by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, must have seemed like absurdist theater. Otherwise ordinary people—housewives, college students, a high-school boy, a publisher, an M.D., a hardware-store clerk and his mother—were participating earnestly in tragic comedy. They took direction from a pair of members who were periodically in touch with the Guardians; Marian Keech's written messages from Sananda were being supplemented that evening by "the Bertha," a former beautician through whose tongue the "Creator" gave instruction. They rehearsed their lines diligently, calling out in chorus the responses to be made before entering the rescue saucer, "I am my own porter." "I am my own pointer." They discussed seriously whether the message from a caller identifying himself as Captain Video—a TV space character of the time—was properly interpreted as a prank or a coded communication from their rescuers. And they performed in costume. In keeping with the admonition to carry nothing metallic aboard the saucer, the believers wore clothing that had been cut

open to allow the metal pieces to be torn out. The metal eyelets in their shoes had been ripped away. The women were braless or wore brassieres whose metal stays had been removed. The men had yanked the zippers out of their pants, which were supported by lengths of rope in place of belts.

The group's fanaticism concerning the removal of all metal was vividly experienced by one of the researchers who remarked, twenty-five minutes before midnight, that he had forgotten to extract the zipper from his trousers. As the observers tell it, "this knowledge produced a near panic reaction. He was rushed into the bedroom where Dr. Armstrong, his hands trembling and his eyes darting to the clock every few seconds, slashed out the zipper with a razor blade and wrenched its clasps free with wire-cutters." The hurried operation finished, the researcher was returned to the living room a slightly less metallic but, one supposes, much paler man.

As the time appointed for their departure grew very close, the believers settled into a lull of soundless anticipation. With trained scientists on site, we are afforded a detailed account of the events that transpired during this momentous period in the life of the group:

The last ten minutes were tense ones for the group in the living room. They had nothing to do but sit and wait, their coats in their laps. In the tense silence two clocks ticked loudly, one about ten minutes faster than the other. When the faster of the two pointed to twelve-five, one of the observers remarked aloud on the fact. A chorus of people replied that midnight had not yet come. Bob Eastman affirmed that the slower clock was correct; he had set it himself only that afternoon. It showed only four minutes before midnight.

These four minutes passed in complete silence except for a single utterance. When the [slower] clock on the mantel showed only one minute remaining before the guide to the saucer was due, Marian exclaimed in a strained, high-pitched voice: "And not a plan has gone astray!" The clock chimed twelve, each stroke painfully clear in the expectant hush. The believers sat motionless.

One might have expected some visible reaction. Midnight had passed and nothing had happened. The cataclysm itself was less than seven hours away. But there was little to see in the reactions of the people in that room. There was no talking, no sound. People sat stock-still, their faces seemingly frozen and expressionless. Mark Post was the only person who even moved. He lay down on the sofa and closed his eyes but did not sleep. Later, when spoken to, he answered monosyllabically but otherwise lay immobile. The others showed nothing on the surface, although it became clear later that they had been hit hard.

Gradually, painfully, an atmosphere of despair and confusion settled over the group. They reexamined the prediction and the accompanying messages. Dr. Armstrong and Mrs. Keech reiterated their faith. The believers mulled over their predicament and discarded explanation after explanation as unsatisfactory. At one point, toward 4 A.M., Mrs. Keech broke down and cried bitterly. She knew, she sobbed, that there were some who were beginning to doubt but that the group must beam light to those who needed it most and that the group must hold together. The rest of the believers were losing their composure, too. They were all visibly shaken and many were close to tears. It was now almost 4:30 A.M. and still no way of handling the disconfirmation had been found. By now, too, most of the group were talking openly about the failure of the escort to come at midnight. The group seemed near dissolution.

In the midst of this gathering doubt, as cracks crawled through the believers' confidence, the researchers witnessed a pair of remarkable incidents, one after another. The first occurred at about 4:45 A.M., when Marian Keech's hand suddenly leapt to the task of transcribing through "automatic writing" the text of a holy message from above. When read aloud, the communication proved to be an elegant explanation for the events of that night. "The little group, sitting alone all night long, had spread so much light that God had saved the world from destruction." Although neat and efficient, this explanation was not wholly satisfying by itself; for example, after hearing it, one member simply rose, put on his hat and coat, and left.

Something additional was needed to restore the believers to their previous levels of faith.

It was at this point that the second notable incident occurred to meet that need. Once again, the words of those who were present offer a vivid description:

The atmosphere in the group changed abruptly and so did their behavior. Within minutes after she had read the message explaining the disconfirmation, Mrs. Keech received another message instructing her to publicize the explanation. She reached for the telephone and began dialing the number of a newspaper. While she was waiting to be connected, someone asked: "Marian, is this the first time you have called the newspaper yourself?" Her reply was immediate: "Oh, yes, this is the first time I have ever called them. I have never had anything to tell them before, but now I feel it is urgent." The whole group could have echoed her feelings, for they all felt a sense of urgency. As soon as Marian had finished her call, the other members took turns telephoning newspapers, wire services, radio stations, and national magazines to spread the explanation of the failure of the flood. In their desire to spread the word quickly and resoundingly, the believers now opened for public attention matters that had been thus far utterly secret. Where only hours earlier they had shunned newspaper reporters and felt that the attention they were getting in the press was painful, they now became avid seekers for publicity.

Not only had the long-standing policies concerning secrecy and publicity done an about-face, so, too, had the group's attitude toward potential converts. Whereas likely recruits who previously visited the house had been mostly ignored, turned away, or treated with casual attention, the day following the disconfirmation saw a different story. All callers were admitted, all questions were answered, attempts were made to proselyte all such visitors. The members' unprecedented willingness to accommodate possible new recruits was perhaps best demonstrated when nine high-school students arrived on the following night to speak with Mrs. Keech.

They found her at the telephone deep in a discussion of flying saucers with a caller whom, it later turned out, she believed to be a spaceman. Eager to continue talking to him and at the same time anxious to keep her new guests, Marian simply included them in the conversation and, for more than an hour, chatted alternately with her guests in the living room and the "spaceman" on the other end of the telephone. So intent was she on proselyting that she seemed unable to let any opportunity go by.

To what can we attribute the believers' radical turnabout? In the space of a few hours, they went from clannish and taciturn hoarders of the Word to expansive and eager disseminators of it. And what could have possessed them to choose such an ill-timed instant—when the failure of the flood was likely to cause nonbelievers to view the group and its dogma as laughable?

The crucial event occurred sometime during "the night of the flood," when it became increasingly clear that the prophecy would not be fulfilled. Oddly, it was not their prior certainty that drove the members to propagate the faith; it was an encroaching sense of uncertainty. It was the dawning realization that if the spaceship and flood predictions were wrong, so might be the entire belief system on which they rested. For those huddled in the Keech living room, that growing possibility must have seemed hideous.

The group members had gone too far, given up too much for their beliefs to see them destroyed; the shame, the economic cost, the mockery would be too great to bear. The overarching need of the cultists to cling to those beliefs seeps poignantly from their own words: From a young woman with a three-year-old child:

I have to believe the flood is coming on the twenty-first because I've spent all my money. I quit my job, I quit computer school. . . . I have to believe.

And from Dr. Armstrong to one of the researchers four hours after the failure of the saucer men to arrive:

I've had to go a long way. I've given up just about everything. I've cut every tie. I've burned every bridge. I've turned my back on the world. I can't afford to doubt. I have to believe. And there isn't any other truth.

Imagine the corner in which Dr. Armstrong and his followers found themselves as morning approached. So massive was the commitment to their beliefs that no other truth was tolerable. Yet that set of beliefs had just taken a merciless pounding from physical reality: No saucer had landed, no spacemen had knocked, no flood had come, nothing had happened as prophesied. Since the only acceptable form of truth had been undercut by physical proof, there was but one way out of the corner for the group. They had to establish another type of proof for the validity of their beliefs: social proof.

This, then, explains their sudden shift from secretive conspirators to zealous missionaries. And it explains the curious timing of the shift—precisely when a direct disconfirmation of their beliefs had rendered them least convincing to outsiders. It was necessary to risk the scorn and derision of the nonbelievers because publicity and recruitment efforts provided the only remaining hope. If they could spread the Word, if they could inform the uninformed, if they could persuade the skeptics, and if, by so doing, they could win new converts, their threatened but treasured beliefs would become *true*. The principle of social proof says so: The greater the number of people who find any idea correct, the more the idea will be correct. The group's assignment was clear; since the physical evidence could not be changed, the social evidence had to be. Convince and ye shall be convinced!⁶

