

Inside Scientology

Unlocking the complex code of America's most mysterious religion

The faded little downtown area of Clearwater, Florida, has a beauty salon, a pizza parlor and one or two run-down bars, as well as a bunch of withered bungalows and some old storefronts that look as if they haven't seen customers in years. There are few cars and almost no pedestrians. There are, however, buses -- a fleet of gleaming white and blue ones that slowly crawl through town, stopping at regular intervals to discharge a small army of tightly organized, young, almost exclusively white men and women, all clad in uniform preppy attire: khaki, black or navy-blue trousers and crisp white, blue or yellow dress shirts. Some wear pagers on their belts; others carry briefcases. The men have short hair, and the women keep theirs pulled back or tucked under headbands that match their outfits. No one crosses against the light, and everybody calls everybody else "sir" -- even when the "sir" is a woman. They move throughout the center of Clearwater in tight clusters, from corner to corner, building to building.

This regimented mass represents the "Sea Organization," the most dedicated and elite members of the Church of Scientology. For the past thirty years, Scientology has made the city of Clearwater its worldwide spiritual headquarters -- its Mecca, or its Temple Square. There are 8,300 or so Scientologists living and working in Clearwater -- more than in any other city in the world outside of Los Angeles. Scientologists own more than 200 businesses in Clearwater. Members of the church run schools and private tutoring programs, day-care centers and a drug-rehab clinic. They sit on the boards of the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce and the Boy Scouts.

In July 2004, *The St. Petersburg Times* dubbed Clearwater, a community of 108,000 people, "Scientology's Town." On the newspaper's front page was a photograph of Scientology's newest building, a vast, white, Mediterranean Revival-style edifice known within Scientology circles as the "Super Power" building. Occupying a full square block of downtown, this structure, which has been under construction since 1998, is billed as the single largest Scientology church in the world. When it is finally completed -- presumably in late 2006, at an estimated final cost of \$50 million -- it will have 889 rooms on six floors, an indoor sculpture garden and a large Scientology museum. The crowning touch will be a two-story, illuminated Scientology cross that, perched atop the building's highest tower, will shine over the city of Clearwater like a beacon.

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Scientology -- the term means "the study of truth," in the words of its founder and spiritual messiah, the late science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard -- calls itself "the world's fastest-growing religion." Born in 1954, the group now claims 10 million members in 159 countries and more than 6,000 Scientology churches, missions and outreach groups across the globe. Its holdings, which include real estate on several continents, are widely assumed to value in the billions of dollars. Its missionaries -- known as "volunteer ministers" -- take part in "cavalcades" throughout the developing world and have been found, en masse, at the site of disasters ranging from 9/11 to the Asian tsunami to Hurricane Katrina. Within the field of comparative religions, some academics see Scientology as one of the most significant new religious movements of the past century.

Scientology is also America's most controversial religion: widely derided, but little understood. It is rooted in elements of Buddhism, Hinduism and a number of Western philosophies, including aspects of Christianity. The French sociologist Regis Dericquebourg, an expert in comparative religions, explains Scientology's belief system as one of "regressive utopia," in which man seeks to return to a once-perfect state through a variety of meticulous, and rigorous, processes intended to put him in touch with his primordial spirit. These processes are highly controlled, and, at the advanced levels, highly secretive. Critics of the church point out that Scientology, unique among religions, withholds key aspects of its central theology from all but its most exalted followers. To those in the mainstream, this would be akin to the Catholic Church refusing to tell all but a select number of the faithful that Jesus Christ died for their sins.

In June of last year, I set out to discover Scientology, an undertaking that would take nearly nine months. A closed faith that has often been hostile to journalistic inquiry, the church initially offered no help on this story; most of my research was done without its assistance and involved dozens of interviews with both current and former Scientologists, as well as academic researchers who have studied the group. Ultimately, however, the church decided to cooperate and gave me unprecedented access to its officials, social programs and key religious headquarters. What I found was a faith that is at once mainstream and marginal -- a religious community known for its Hollywood members but run by a uniformed sect of believers who rarely, if ever, appear in the public eye. It is an insular society -- one that exists, to a large degree, as something of a parallel universe to the secular world, with its own nomenclature and ethical code, and, most daunting to those who break its rules, its own rigorously enforced justice system.

Scientologists, much like Mormons or Christian evangelicals, consider themselves to be on a mission. They frequently speak of "helping people," and this mission is stressed in a number of church testaments. "Scientologists see themselves as possessors of doctrines and skills that can save the world, if not the galaxy," says Stephen Kent, a professor of sociology at the University of Alberta, in Canada, who has extensively studied the group.

Church officials boast that Scientology has grown more in the past five years than in the previous fifty. Some evidence, however, suggests otherwise. In 2001, a survey conducted by the City University of New York found only 55,000 people in the United States who claimed to be Scientologists. Worldwide, some observers believe a reasonable estimate of Scientology's core practicing membership ranges between 100,000 and 200,000, mostly in the U.S., Europe, South Africa and Australia. According to the church's own course-completion lists -- many of which are available in a church publication and on the Internet -- only 6,126 people signed up for religious services at the Clearwater organization in 2004, down from a peak of 11,210 in 1989. According to Kristi Wachter, a San Francisco activist who maintains an online database devoted to Scientology's numbers, this pattern is replicated at nearly all of Scientology's key organizations and churches. To some observers, this suggests that Scientology may, in fact, be shrinking.

But discerning what is true about the Church of Scientology is no easy task. Tax-exempt since 1993 (status granted by the IRS after a long legal battle), Scientology releases no information about its membership or its finances. Nor does it welcome analysis of its writings or practices. The church has a storied reputation for squelching its critics through litigation, and according to some reports, intimidation (a trait that may explain why the creators of *South Park* jokingly attributed every credit on its November 2005 sendup of Scientology to the fictional John and Jane Smith; Paramount, reportedly under pressure, has agreed not to rerun the episode here or to air it in England). Nevertheless, Scientology's critics comprise a sizable network of ex-members (or "apostates," in church parlance), academics and independent free-speech and human-rights activists like Wachter, who have declared war on the group by posting a significant amount of previously unknown information on the Internet. This includes scans of controversial memos, photographs and legal briefs, as well as testimonials from disillusioned former members, including some high-ranking members of its Sea Organization. All paint the church in a negative, even abusive, light.

When asked what, if anything, posted by the apostates is true, Mike Rinder, the fifty-year-old director of the Church of Scientology International's legal and public-relations wing, known as the Office of Special Affairs, says bluntly, "It's all bullshit, pretty much."

But he admits that Scientology has been on a campaign to raise its public profile. More than 23 million people visited the Scientology Web site last year, says Rinder, one of the highest-ranking officials in the church. In addition, the church claims that Scientology received 289,000 minutes of radio and TV coverage in 2005, many of them devoted to the actions of Tom Cruise, the most famous Scientologist in the world, who spent much of the spring and summer of 2005 promoting Scientology and its beliefs to interviewers ranging from Oprah Winfrey to Matt Lauer.

Shortly after *Rolling Stone* decided to embark on this story, Cruise called our offices to say that he would not participate. Several weeks later, the magazine was visited by Cruise's sister, Lee Anne DeVette, an upper-level Scientologist who until recently also served as Cruise's publicist, along with Mike Rinder. Both expressed their dissatisfaction with previous coverage of Scientology by major media outlets, and they warned against what they perceived to be the unreliability of the faith's critics -- "the wackos," as Rinder described them. He then invited *Rolling Stone* to Los Angeles to show us "the real Scientology" -- a trip that took five months to set up.

A number of people who have spoken for the purposes of this article have done so for the very first time. Several, in speaking of their lives spent in the church, requested that their identities be protected through the change of names and other characteristics. Others insisted that not even a gender be attached to their comments.

There will always be schisms in any religious group, as well as people who, upon leaving their faith, decide to "purge" themselves of their experiences. This is particularly true in the case of members of so-called new religions, which often demand total commitment from their members. Scientology is one of these religions. "We're not playing some minor game in Scientology," Hubbard wrote in a policy paper titled "Keeping Scientology Working," which is required reading for every member. "The whole agonized future of this planet, every man, woman and child on it, and your own destiny for the next endless trillions of years depend on what you do here and now with and in Scientology. This is a deadly serious activity."

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It is impossible to go anywhere in downtown Clearwater without being watched by security cameras. There are about 100 of them, set up on all of Scientology's properties, which include several hotels, a former bank and a number of administrative buildings. Cameras face in, toward the buildings themselves, as well as out at the street.

While some might find this disconcerting, Natalie Walet, 17, thinks it's normal. "It's just a point of security," she says over coffee one evening at the downtown Starbucks. She notes that Scientology's buildings have been marred with graffiti and are routinely picketed, which she sees as a sign of religious bigotry. "You have a church that a lot of people don't like, and some people are assholes," she says. That said, Natalie adds, most people in Clearwater have "very high standards and morals -- they're ethical people."

A pretty girl with a long black ponytail, Natalie was born and raised in Scientology. Both of her parents and her grandmother are church members, and her involvement in Scientology centers around Clearwater. But the church has other far-flung hubs, including the organizational headquarters in Los Angeles, home to the powerful Church of Scientology International; and *Freewinds*, the 440-foot cruise ship that docks in Curacao and is used as a training facility, meeting hall and vacation destination for elite Scientologists, including Cruise and John Travolta. There is also "Gold Base," the exclusive desert compound housing the Religious Technology Center, or RTC, the financial hub of the church, located about eighty miles southeast of Los Angeles, home to David Miscavige, the charismatic forty-five-year-old who heads up the international church.

Natalie's everyday reality is one of total immersion in all things Hubbard. Scientology kids are raised in a very different manner than mainstream kids. Most of them, like Natalie, have been educated by special tutors, and enrolled, as Natalie was when she was younger, in private schools run by Scientologists that use a Hubbard-approved study technique. Most kids are also put "on course" -- enrolled in classes at the church that teach both children and adults self-control, focus and communication skills. Natalie was put on course, upon her own insistence, when she was seven or eight years old. Between school and church, life was "kind of a bubble," she says.

It is a steamy night, and Natalie is dressed in a sleeveless black Empire-waist blouse and tight jeans; her short, bitten nails are painted red. She lights a Marlboro Menthol. Smoking is Natalie's only vice. She neither drinks nor takes drugs of any sort -- "once in a grand while I'll take a Tylenol," she says. "But only if my headache is really bad." She admits this with embarrassment because Scientologists consider many illnesses to be psychosomatic and don't believe in treating them with medicine, even aspirin.

Like all Scientologists, Natalie considers her body to be simply a temporary vessel. She thinks of herself as an immortal being, or "thetan," which means that she has lived trillions of years, and will continue to be reborn, again and again. Many Eastern religions have similar beliefs, and Natalie is quick to note that Scientology is "actually a very basic religion. It has a lot of the same moral beliefs as others." What's special about Scientology, Natalie says, is that it "bears a workable applied technology that you can use in your everyday life."

"Technology," or "tech," is what Scientologists call the theories, methods and principles espoused by L. Ron Hubbard -- "LRH," as Natalie calls him. To the devout, he is part prophet, part teacher, part savior -- some Scientologists rank Hubbard's importance as greater than Christ's -- and Hubbard's word is considered *the word*. Hubbard was a prolific writer all his life; there are millions of words credited to him, roughly a quarter-million of them contained within *Dianetics*, the best-selling quasiscientific self-help book that is the most famous Scientology text.

Published in 1950, *Dianetics* maintained that the source of mental and physical illness could be traced back to psychic scars called "engrams" that were rooted in early, even prenatal, experiences, and remained locked in a person's subconscious, or "reactive mind." To rid oneself of the reactive mind, a process known as going "Clear," Dianetics, and later Scientology, preached a regressive-therapy technique called auditing, which involves re-experiencing incidents in one's past life in order to erase their engrams.

Natalie is a fan of auditing, something she's been doing since she was a small child. Most auditing is done with a device called the electropsychometer, or E-meter. Often compared to lie detectors, E-meters measure the changes in small electrical currents in the body, in response to questions posed by an auditor. Scientologists believe the meter registers thoughts of the reactive mind and can root out unconscious lies. As Natalie explains it, the E-meter is "like a guide that helps the auditor to know what questions to ask." Sometimes, she says, you might not remember certain events, and you might not know what is causing your problems. "But they'll just dig it up until you go, 'Holy shit, was *that* what was going on?'" She smiles. "And afterward, you feel so much better."

Natalie has just begun her path to Scientology enlightenment, known as the Bridge to Total Freedom. There are specific stages, or "grades," of the Bridge, and the key to progressing "upward" is auditing: hundreds, if not thousands, of sessions that Scientologists believe can not only help them resolve their problems but also fix their ethical breaches, much as Catholics might do in confessing their sins. The ultimate goal in every auditing session is to have a "win," or moment of revelation, which can take a few minutes, hours or even weeks -- Scientologists are not allowed to leave an auditing session until their auditor is satisfied.

So far, Natalie has gotten much of her auditing for free, through her parents, who have both worked for the church. But many Scientologists pay dearly for the service. Unique among religious faiths, Scientology charges for virtually all of its religious services. Auditing is purchased in 12.5-hour blocks, known as "intensives." Each intensive can cost anywhere from \$750 for introductory sessions to between \$8,000 and \$9,000 for advanced sessions. When asked about money, church officials can become defensive. "Do you want to know the real answer? If we could offer everything for free, we would do it," says Rinder. Another official offers, "We don't have 2,000 years of acquired wealth to fall back on." But Scientology isn't alone,

church leaders insist. Mormons, for example, expect members to tithe a tenth of their earnings.

Still, religious scholars note that this is an untraditional approach. "Among the things that have made this movement so controversial," says S. Scott Bartchy, director of the Center for the Study of Religion at UCLA, "are its claims that its forms of therapy are 'scientific' and that the 'truth' will only be revealed to those who have the money to purchase advancement to the various levels leading to 'being clear.' It is this unvarnished demand for money that has led many observers to opine that the entire operation looks more like a business than a religion." Clearing the stages along the Bridge to Total Freedom is a process that can take years and cost tens and often hundreds of thousands of dollars -- one veteran Scientologist told me she "donated" \$250,000 in a twenty-year period. Other Scientologists can wind up spending family inheritances and mortgaging homes to pay the fees. Many, like Natalie's parents, work for their local church so they can receive auditing and courses for free.

Both of Natalie's parents are Clear, she says. Her grandmother is what's called an "Operating Thetan," or "OT." So is Tom Cruise, who is near the top of Scientology's Bridge, at a level known as OT VII. OTs are Scientology's elite -- enlightened beings who are said to have total "control" over themselves and their environment. OTs can allegedly move inanimate objects with their minds, leave their bodies at will and telepathically communicate with, and control the behavior of, both animals and human beings. At the highest levels, they are allegedly liberated from the physical universe, to the point where they can psychically control what Scientologists call MEST: Matter, Energy, Space and Time.

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The most important, and highly anticipated, of the eight "OT levels" is OT III, also known as the Wall of Fire. It is here that Scientologists are told the secrets of the universe, and, some believe, the creation story behind the entire religion. It is knowledge so dangerous, they are told, any Scientologist learning this material before he is ready could die. When I ask Mike Rinder about this, he casts the warning in less-dire terms, explaining that, before he reached OT III -- he is now OT V -- he was told that looking at the material early was "spiritually not good for you." But Hubbard, who told followers that he discovered these secrets while on a trip to North Africa in 1967, was more dramatic. "Somehow or other I brought it off, and obtained the material and was able to live through it," he wrote. "I am very sure that I was the first one that ever did live through any attempt to attain that material."

Scientologists must be "invited" to do OT III. Beforehand, they are put through an intensive auditing process to verify that they are ready. They sign a waiver promising never to reveal the secrets of OT III, nor to hold Scientology responsible for any trauma or damage one might endure at this stage of auditing. Finally, they are given a manila folder, which they must read in a private, locked room.

These materials, which the Church of Scientology has long struggled to keep secret, were published online by a former member in 1995 and have been widely circulated in the mainstream media, ranging from *The New York Times* to last year's *South Park* episode. They assert that 75 million years ago, an evil galactic warlord named Xenu controlled seventy-six planets in this corner of the galaxy, each of which was severely overpopulated. To solve this problem, Xenu rounded up 13.5 trillion beings and then flew them to Earth, where they were dumped into volcanoes around the globe and vaporized with bombs. This scattered their radioactive souls, or thetans, until they were caught in electronic traps set up around the atmosphere and "implanted" with a number of false ideas -- including the concepts of God, Christ and organized religion. Scientologists later learn that many of these entities attached themselves to human beings, where they remain to this day, creating not just the root of all of our emotional and physical problems but the root of all problems of the modern world.

"Hubbard thought it was important to have a story about how things got going, similar to the way both Jews and Christians did in the early chapters of Genesis," says UCLA's Bartchy. "All religion lives from the sense either that something in life is terribly wrong or is profoundly missing. For the most part, Christianity has claimed that people have rebelled against God with the result that they are 'sinners' in need of restoration and that the world is a very unjust place in need of healing. What Hubbard seems to be saying is that human beings are really something else -- thetans trapped in bodies in the material world -- and that Scientology can both wake them up and save them from this bad situation."

The church considers OT III confidential material. But there are numerous science-fiction references in Scientology texts available to members of all levels. The official "Glossary for Scientology and Dianetics" includes an entry for "space opera," a sci-fi genre that the glossary says "is not fiction and concerns actual incidents." Scientology's "Technical Dictionary" makes reference to a number of extraterrestrial "invader forces," including one, the "Marcab Confederacy," explained as a vast, interplanetary civilization more than 200,000 years old that "looks almost exact duplicate [sic] but is worse off than the current U.S. civilization." Indeed, as even Rinder himself points out, Hubbard presented a rough outline of the Xenu story to his followers in a 1967 taped lecture, "RJ 67," in which he noted that 75 million years ago a cataclysmic event happened in this sector of the galaxy that has caused negative effects for everyone since. This material is available to lower-level Scientologists. But the details of the story remain secret within Scientology.

Rinder has fielded questions on Scientology's beliefs for years. When I ask him whether there is any validity to the Xenu story, he gets red-faced, almost going into a tirade. "It is not a *story*, it is an auditing level," he says, neither confirming nor denying that this theology exists. He says that OT material -- and specifically the material on OT III -- comprises "a small percent" of what Scientology is all about. But it is carefully guarded. Scientologists on the OT levels often carry their materials in locked briefcases and are told to store them in special secure locations in their homes. They are also strictly forbidden from discussing any facet of the materials, even with their families. "I'm not explaining it to you, and I *could not* explain it to you," says Rinder heatedly. "You don't have a hope of understanding it."

Those who have experienced OT III report that getting through it can be a harrowing experience. Tory Christman, a former high-ranking Scientologist who during her tenure in the faith reached the near-pinnacle of enlightenment, OT VII, says it took more than ten years before she was finally invited onto OT III. Once there, Christman was shocked. "You've jumped through all these hoops just to get to it, and then you open that packet, and the first thing you think is, '*Come on!*'" she says. "You're surrounded by all these people who're going, 'Wow, isn't it amazing, just getting the data? I can tell it's really changed you.' After a while, enough people say it and you're like, 'Wow. You know, I really feel it.'"

Natalie has a long way to go before she reaches OT III. Although virtually everything about the OT levels is available on the Internet, "I don't look at that stuff," Natalie says. She believes it is mostly "entheta," which are lies, or negative information about Scientology meant to undermine the faith. "You know, sometimes in school, kids would hear I'm a Scientologist and be like, 'No way -- are you an alien?'" Natalie says. "I don't get mad about it. I just go, 'OK, let me tell you what it really is.'"

Natalie's view of Scientology is the one church officials promote: that it is not a religion about "space aliens" but simply a set of beliefs that can help a person live a better life. And Natalie appears to be the poster child for Scientology as a formula for a well-adjusted adolescence. Articulate and poised, she is close to her family, has a wide circle of Scientologist and non-Scientologist friends and graduated from high school last spring as a straight-A student. "I'm not saying that everybody must be a Scientologist," she says. "But what I am saying is that I see it work. I've learned so much about myself. LRH says, 'What is true for you is what you observe to be true.' So I'm not here to tell you that Scientology is the way, or that these are the answers. *You* decide what is true."

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Truth is a relative concept when discussing the life of Lafayette Ronald Hubbard. He was born in 1911, and, according to his legend, lived a life of heroic acts and great scientific and spiritual accomplishment until his death, in 1986. Photos of Hubbard in robust middle age -- often wearing an ascot -- hang in every Scientology center. You can read Hubbard's official biography on the Scientology Web site, which portrays the man Scientologists call the "Founder" as a great thinker, teacher, scientist, adventurer, ethnographer, photographer, sailor and war hero.

The reality of Hubbard's life is less exhilarating but in many ways more interesting. The son of a U.S. naval officer, he was by all accounts an unremarkable youth from Tilden, Nebraska, who flunked out of George Washington University after his sophomore year and later found moderate success as a penny-a-word writer of pulp fiction, publishing hundreds of stories in fantasy magazines like *Astounding Science Fiction*. As a lieutenant

in the Navy, Hubbard served, briefly, in World War II, but never saw combat and was relieved of his command. He spent the last months of the war as an outpatient at a naval hospital in Oakland, California, where he received treatment for ulcers. Years later, Hubbard would claim to have been "crippled and blinded" in battle, and that, over a year or so of intense "scientific research," he'd cured himself using techniques that would later become part of Dianetics.

After the war, Hubbard made his way to Pasadena, California, a scientific boomtown of the 1940s, where he met John Whiteside Parsons, a society figure and a founder of CalTech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. A sci-fi buff, Parsons was also a follower of the English occultist Aleister Crowley. Parsons befriended Hubbard and invited him to move onto his estate. In one of the stranger chapters in Hubbard's life, recorded in detail by several biographers, the soon-to-be founder of Dianetics became Parsons' assistant -- helping him with a variety of black-magic and sex rituals, including one in which Parsons attempted to conjure a literal "whore of Babalon [sic]," with Hubbard serving as apprentice.

Charming and charismatic, Hubbard succeeded in wooing away Parsons' mistress, Sara Northrup, whom he would later marry. Soon afterward, he fell out with Parsons over a business venture. But having absorbed lessons learned at Parsons' "lodge," Hubbard set out to figure his next step. In his 1983 autobiography, *Over My Shoulder: Reflections on a Science Fiction Era*, the sci-fi writer Lloyd Eshbach describes meeting Hubbard in the late 1940s. "I'd like to start a religion," Eshbach recalls Hubbard saying. "That's where the money is."

Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health was published in May 1950, and it soon became a runaway hit. Written as sort of a practical pop-psychology book, *Dianetics* promised that by practicing certain techniques, some of which seemed almost hypnotic, one could be free of sickness, anxiety, aggression and anti-social tendencies, and develop perfect memory and astounding intelligence. Hailed by the newspaper columnist Walter Winchell as a "new science" that "from all indications will prove to be as revolutionary for humanity as the first caveman's discovery and utilization of fire," *Dianetics* remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for twenty-eight consecutive weeks.

But a number of factors, including condemnation from the American Psychological Association, hurt book sales. Public support for Dianetics took a downturn, and by the end of 1952, Hubbard was facing financial ruin.

Rather than admit defeat, Hubbard "improved" Dianetics and unveiled what he claimed was an even more sophisticated path to enlightenment: Scientology. This new technique was designed to restore, or enhance, the abilities of the individual, as opposed to simply getting rid of the reactive mind. In 1954, the first Church of Scientology was born, in Los Angeles. L. Ron Hubbard was now the founder of his own religion.

From there, Hubbard set about spreading Scientology around the world, opening churches in England, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. In 1955, a policy known as "Project Celebrity" was launched with the aim of recruiting stars in the arts, sports, business and government -- those dubbed "Prime Communicators" -- who could help disseminate the message. As incentive, these celebrities were given free courses; those who did outstanding work could be "awarded" an OT level, in honor of their service to the organization. Special churches -- known as "celebrity centres" -- were set up, allowing its members to practice Scientology away from the public eye. The most lavish of these is the neo-Gothic Celebrity Centre International, which is housed in a former chateau on Franklin Avenue, at the foot of the Hollywood Hills.

Among the high-profile types who dabbled in Scientology was the writer William S. Burroughs, who would later attack the organizational structure as suppressive of independent thought. But other artists were less critical. John Travolta became a Scientologist in 1975 after reading *Dianetics*. "My career immediately took off," he states in a personal "success story" published in the book *What Is Scientology?* "I landed a leading role on the TV show *Welcome Back, Kotter* and had a string of successful films." Indeed, Travolta says, "Scientology put me into the big time."

In addition to Travolta, Scientology attracted musicians Chick Corea and Isaac Hayes, actresses Mimi Rogers and Kirstie Alley, and the influential acting coach Milton Katselas, who brought in a number of others, including actresses Anne Archer and Kelly Preston, who later became Travolta's wife. And those celebrities begat others, including Tom Cruise, who was introduced by his then-wife, Rogers, and Jenna Elfman, introduced by her husband, actor Bodhi Elfman. Others, such as Juliette Lewis, Erika Christensen and Beck, were born into Scientology.

But as Scientology raised its profile, so too did it find itself under increased scrutiny by the U.S. government, which raided Scientology's offices a number of times in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1963, the Food and Drug Administration confiscated hundreds of E-meters from Scientology's Washington, D.C., offices (the FDA accused the church of making false claims about its healing powers). Soon afterward, Hubbard moved his base of operation from the U.S. to England, but continued to face condemnation from a variety of Western governments. To avoid such scrutiny, Hubbard purchased a small fleet of ships in 1967, and, dubbing himself "Commodore," headed for the high seas, which would serve as Scientology's official home and, some maintain, tax shelter until the mid-1970s.

Serving Hubbard at sea were a small group of devoted followers who comprised a private navy of sorts. They were known, collectively, as the "Sea Organization," and dressed in full naval uniforms. Mike Rinder, who joined the Sea Org when he was eighteen, served on Hubbard's lead ship, the *Apollo*, as a deckhand. He arrived in 1973, having endured years of discrimination in his native Australia (southeastern Australia banned Scientology from 1965 to 1982). "You couldn't own Scientology books," he says. "If you did, you had to hide them because if the police came and found them, they'd take them away."

On the *Apollo*, Rinder found Hubbard, a reputed recluse, to be totally accessible. He hosted weekly movie nights and often strolled across the ship talking with the crew. "What was most incredible about being with him was that he made you feel that you were important," Rinder recalls. "He didn't in any way promote himself or his own self-importance. He was very, very loving and had the widest range of knowledge and experience that you could possibly imagine -- he'd studied everything." Rinder marvels at Hubbard's abilities: He knew how to cultivate plants, fix cars, shoot movies, mix music, fly an airplane, sail ships.

At sea, Hubbard, who had officially resigned his post as the head of the Church of Scientology (leaving the day-to-day management of the church to lesser officials), worked on his writings and "discoveries." Hubbard also began to obsess over the forces he saw opposing him, including journalists, whom Hubbard long distrusted and even banned from ever becoming Scientologists. Worse still were psychiatrists, a group that, coupled with the pharmaceutical-drug industry -- in Hubbard's words, a "front group" -- operated "straight out of the terrorist textbooks," as he wrote in a 1969 essay titled "Today's Terrorism." He accused psychiatrists of kidnapping, torturing and murdering with impunity. "A psychiatrist," he wrote, "kills a young girl for sexual kicks, murders a dozen patients with an ice pick, castrates a hundred men."

To attack his enemies, Hubbard issued a policy known as "Fair Game," which maintained that all who opposed Scientology could be "tricked, sued or lied to and destroyed." This policy was enforced by Scientology's quasisecret police force, known as the Guardian's Office. By the 1970s, among its tasks was "Operation Snow White," a series of covert activities that included bugging the Justice Department and stealing documents from the IRS. (Scientology officials say Fair Game was canceled decades ago.)

The plan was discovered in FBI raids on Scientology's Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., offices in 1977, which yielded wiretap equipment, burglary tools and about 90,000 pages of documents. Eleven Scientology officials, including Hubbard's third wife, Mary Sue, went to federal prison for their role in the plot, which led to a 1982 "sweep" of the church's upper management.

By then, Hubbard, who was cited as an "unindicted co-conspirator" in Operation Snow White, had vanished from the public eye. For the next several years, rumors of his whereabouts circulated freely -- he was at sea; he was on an island. In fact, Hubbard was on his isolated ranch, Whispering Wind, near the town of Creston, in the California desert. He was attended by a small number of Scientology officials, and his physician, Dr. Eugene Denk, who treated him for a number of conditions, including chronic pancreatitis. On January 17th, 1986, Hubbard suffered a crippling stroke. A week later, he died, in a 1982 Blue Bird motor home on his property. He was seventy-four years old.

Upon Hubbard's death, his ambitious twenty-five-year-old aide, David Miscavige, who would soon succeed him as leader of the church, announced that Scientology's founder had willingly "dropped" his healthy body and moved on to another dimension. In keeping with Hubbard's wishes, his body

was cremated within twenty-four hours. There was no autopsy. But the coroner's report described the father of Scientology as in a state of decrepitude: unshaven, with long, thinning whitish-red hair and unkempt fingernails and toenails. In Hubbard's system was the anti-anxiety drug hydroxyzine (Vistaril), which several of his assistants would later attest was only one of many psychiatric and pain medications Hubbard ingested over the years.

These secrets were kept under wraps by Scientology officials. The church would later be named Hubbard's successor in accordance with his will, which had been amended and signed just a day before his death. In it, Hubbard ceded the copyrights to all of his works, as well as a significant portion of his estate, making Scientology, not Hubbard's wife and five children, his primary heir.

Today, every church or Scientology organization has an office reserved for Hubbard. Usually found on the church's ground floor, it is carefully maintained with books, desk, chair, pens, notepads, desk ornaments and other accouterments, as if the Founder might walk in at any moment.

* * * *

The imposing limestone-and-granite Church of Scientology in midtown Manhattan calls itself the "New York Org." A stately building on West 46th Street, northwest of Times Square, it is here that I come, on a hot July afternoon, to experience Scientology for myself.

The first Scientologist I meet here is a kid named Emmett: a clear-eyed and enthusiastic young man in his early twenties whose job is to be a "body-router," which means someone who brings people into the church. "Hi!" he says, accosting me as I stand near the center's entrance. "Do you have a minute?" He waves a postcard-size flier in my face. "We're showing a fifteen-minute film inside," he says. "It's about Dianetics. Ever heard of it?"

He ushers me through a set of glass doors and into the church's lobby, a glossy-marble space with the kind of lighting that bathes everything in a pinkish-golden glow. It is set up as a sort of museum, with a number of video-display panels, one of which offers an earnest testimonial by Tom Cruise. "The Aims of Scientology," a document written by Hubbard, also hangs in the lobby, and it declares Scientology's goals as "simple, but great," including "a civilization without insanity, without criminals and without war; where the able can prosper and honest beings can have rights, and where man is free to rise to greater heights."

The New York Org claims to receive more than 500 phone calls per day, and nearly as many visitors in a week. But aside from its staff, I find the place to be almost entirely empty. Seated alone in a small auditorium, I watch the film, which turns out to be an infomercial featuring a cast of "real" people talking about how Dianetics changed their lives, curing them of ailments ranging from cancer to depression. Scientology is not mentioned once in the film. Nor is Hubbard. And neither are mentioned afterward, during an hour or so conversation I have with a motherly woman in her early fifties named Laurie. She is what is known as a "greeter," and her role is to keep me in the church long enough for me to feel encouraged that, maybe, all of this is worth my time.

Self-betterment is a powerful concept to use as a sales technique, and Laurie begins her pitch in the gentlest of ways. "Tell me about yourself," she says. "What made you interested in Scientology?"

"I guess I was just curious," I tell Laurie.

"Good!" she says with a smile. "We like curious!"

In the next hour or so, Laurie asks me a number of questions: Am I married? Am I happy? What are my goals? Do I feel that I'm living up to my potential?

A failure to live up to potential is one of the things known in Scientology as one's "ruin." In trying to get at mine, Laurie is warm and nonaggressive. And, to my amazement, I begin to open up to her. While we chat, she delivers a soft sell for Scientology's "introductory package": a four-hour seminar and twelve hours of Dianetics auditing, which is done without the E-meter. The cost: just fifty dollars. "You don't have to do it," Laurie says. "It's just something I get the feeling might help you." She pats my arm, squeezes it warmly.

Then she gets down to business and presents me with the \$100 Dianetics "starter" kit, which includes a large-type copy of Hubbard's tome, a few CDs and some workbooks to practice the stuff at home. "It's really such a good thing you came in," Laurie adds reassuringly. "You'll see."

On my next visit to the church, the following day, I see Laurie again. She spots me as soon as I walk in and rushes to greet me. "You're back!" She gives me a hug. "I am so glad you decided to give this a try." She then introduces me to a preppy-looking guy in his early thirties named Rurik, who, wasting no time on small talk, leads me to the church's second floor and installs me in a room for my introductory seminar. As with the previous day's film, I'm the only one there. Rurik starts his lecture with the claim that the mind really isn't in the brain. "Close your eyes and think of a picture of a cat," he tells me. I do. "Now, open your eyes and point to where you saw that picture."

I point to my eyes.

Rurik grins. "See? When you're asked to use your mind, you don't point to the brain."

The brain, Rurik says, has absolutely no bearing on our thoughts or feelings. Nor, he adds, does the mind -- its chief function is to serve as a memory bank of all we've experienced in trillions of years of lifetimes. Indeed, Scientology holds that the entire field of neurological and mental-health research -- from Freud to the study of brain chemistry -- is pseudoscience. In Scientology's overview text, *What Is Scientology?*, psychiatry is described as a "hodgepodge of unproven theories that have never produced any result -- except an ability to make the unmanageable and mutinous more docile and quiet, and turn the troubled into apathetic souls beyond the point of caring."

Most of the dedicated Scientologists I meet echo this opinion, including Kirstie Alley, who has been a Scientologist for more than twenty years and is the international spokesperson for Narconon, the church-supported anti-drug program. In an interview with Alley several weeks later, she calls Scientology the "anti-therapy." "Therapy is based on some guy analyzing you, and what he thinks is going on with you," she says. "And when he can't quite figure it out, he makes up a disease and gets a drug for that. If that doesn't work, he shocks you. And then surgery . . ." Scientology employs a holistic detoxification program known as the "purification rundown," which involves heavy doses of vitamin supplements, primarily niacin, used in conjunction with exercise and long hours in a sauna. Though many doctors point out that none of this has ever been scientifically proven, and, indeed, might be harmful, Scientology claims that the "purif" cleanses the body of impurities. "I can get someone off heroin a hell of a lot faster than I can get somebody off a psych drug," says Alley. "The guy on heroin's not being told daily, 'This is what you need for your disease, and you're gonna have to take this the rest of your life.'"

A few days later I arrive for my free Dianetics auditing sessions. I am put in a large, glass-enclosed room with a student auditor named David, who asks me to "relive" a moment of physical pain. "Don't choose something that's *too* stressful," David suggests.

Try as I might, I cannot relive much of anything -- indeed, I can barely focus, given that I am surrounded in the room by a number of other pairs who are all being asked to do the same thing. After fifteen minutes, I give up.

Jane, the registrar who is now handling my "case," then whisks me away and, taking a look at my Oxford Capacity Analysis -- a 200-item questionnaire that I filled out on my first day -- tells me that she thinks I need something more personal. "I really want you to have a win," she

says.

What Jane recommends is called Life Repair, basic Scientology counseling that she explains will "get to the root of what's inhibiting you." It is conducted in a private room, and involves one, but most likely two, 12.5-hour auditing "intensives," using the E-meter, which will cost around \$2,000. Coupled with the purif, which is recommended to anyone starting in Scientology, the total cost will be around \$4,000. "And then you'll be on the Bridge," Jane says enthusiastically. "You'll see. It'll change your life."

At the intake level, Scientology comes across as good, practical self-help. Rather than playing on themes that might distance a potential member -- the concept that I am a "thetan," for example -- members hit on topics that have universal appeal. Instead of claiming some heightened degree of enlightenment, they come across as fellow travelers: people who smoke too much, who have had bad marriages, who have had addictions they couldn't handle but have somehow managed to land on their feet. Scientology, they explain, has been a form of "recovery." As one woman I meet puts it, "Scientology *works*."

There are, however, a few things that seem jarring. Like the cost: \$4,000 is a lot to spend for what Jane suggests are "basic" sessions. But perhaps even more alarming is the keen interest they take in my boyfriend. While Laurie inquired sympathetically about the dynamic of our relationship, Jane is suspicious, concerned with his views of the church and his attitude toward my being here. "If he's not open," she says, "that could be a problem."

And then there are Scientology's rules. A fiercely doctrinaire religion, Scientology follows Hubbard's edicts to the letter. Dissent or opposition to any of Hubbard's views isn't tolerated. Nor is debating certain church tenets -- a practice Scientologists view as "counterintentioned." Comporting oneself in any way that could be seen as contrary to church goals is considered subversive and is known as a "suppressive act." One text that sheds enlightenment on both the mind-set of the founder and the inner workings of the church is *Introduction to Scientology Ethics*, which every Scientologist owns. In this book, the list of suppressive acts is six pages long and includes crimes ranging from murder to "squirreling," or altering Hubbard's teachings.

Jane hands me a form and asks me to sign. The document absolves Scientology of liability if I am not wholly satisfied with its services, and also requires me to pledge that neither I nor my family has ever sued, attacked or publicly criticized Scientology. It also asks me to pledge that I will never sue the church myself.

For the next several months, Jane and various other registrars call my cell phone, asking me to come back to the church and have a "win." I never do.

* * * *

Somewhere in the vast California scrubland east of Los Angeles, west of Palm Springs and near the town of Hemet, is Gold Base, the heart of the Scientology empire. It has been described in some news reports as a "top-secret" facility, monitored by security cameras and protected by electric fences. Most Scientologists have never been to Gold. Within church circles, it is often spoken of in whispers: as INT Base, Scientology's management headquarters and hangout for the likes of Tom Cruise and David Miscavige.

Gold, a former resort, was purchased by the church in the mid-Eighties and sits at the foot of the San Jacinto Mountains. A simple metal gate announces its presence, behind which is a long driveway and, beyond that, a golf course. The 500-acre grounds include grassy meadows and a small lake where swans and ducks roam at will. There are no visible security cameras. But there are electric fences. "*Of course* we have fences," says Tommy Davis, a senior church official who, with Rinder, accompanies me on a tour of the compound. "We have \$60 million worth of equipment here."

Gold is the central dissemination facility for the church. It is best known as the home of Golden Era Productions, Scientology's film, video and sound facilities. Scientology produces myriad promotional and training films here, teaching parishioners everything from auditing techniques to what goes on during a marriage-counseling session. It also makes CDs, produces events and prints its own packaging. Even its E-meters are made here, in a building where Scientologists work on a sort of corporate assembly line, producing roughly 200 of the devices per week.

There is a Disney-esque quality to Gold Base. The focal point of the complex is a beige estate house, known as the Castle, which houses the film wing. The Tavern, a nearby stone carriage-house building, is used for visiting VIPs and is decorated in a King Arthur motif, complete with a sizable round table. There are winding paths and walkways made out of what appears to be fake flagstone. All of the buildings, save the Castle, are white, with blue-tiled roofs.

Breaking up the uniformity is a startling sight: a three-mast rudderless clipper ship, the *Star of California*, built into a hill overlooking the campus. Some former Scientologists say this structure was built for Hubbard -- though he'd "dropped his body" before it was finished -- but Rinder explains it as just "an idea someone had to build a ship" as a place to house restrooms and a snack bar near the pool. It has a broad wooden deck, mermaid figurines and, at its gangplank, a fishing net adorned with plastic crabs.

Despite these colorful landmarks, Gold is essentially an office park. Its buildings are furnished like a series of corporate suites, complete with bland gray or blue rugs. There's virtually no artwork save a few Scientology posters inscribed with the words of L. Ron Hubbard, and, in the sound studio, framed headshots of various Scientologist celebrities, including Tommy Davis' mother, Anne Archer.

Davis, 33, helps run the Celebrity Centre in Hollywood and is the scion of one of California's real estate dynasties. He freely admits to being a Hollywood rich kid. He dresses in Italian suits, drives a BMW and is addicted to his Blackberry. "I have enough money to never work a day in my life," he says.

But Davis, who calls L. Ron Hubbard "the coolest guy ever," works for the church as a nonuniformed member of the Sea Organization, the Church of Scientology's most powerful entity. Sea Org members staff all of the senior ecclesiastic positions in the church hierarchy, and the top members have exclusive authority over Scientology's funds. In a nod to the group's nautical beginnings, Sea Org members were required to wear naval-style uniforms, complete with epaulets for "officers," until several years ago. Today, for all but those who serve on the *Freewinds*, the epaulets have been retired. At Gold, whose entire population, save the actors and directors of Scientology films, are Sea Org members, men and women dress in the style of deckhands: short-sleeve dress shirts over dark T-shirts and chinos.

The church describes the Sea Org as a fraternal order -- not a legal entity -- requiring lifelong commitment. It is, in fact, an eternal commitment: Sea Org members sign contracts pledging 1 billion years of service to the church. Scientology's publicity materials portray the Sea Org as similar to the U.S. Marines: "The toughest, most dedicated team this planet has ever known," according to one recruiting brochure. "Against such a powerful team the opposition hasn't got a chance."

Kim Fries, who works in Gold's audiovisual editing department, has been in the Sea Org since she was fifteen. Now thirty-two, Fries says she couldn't imagine living any other way. "What else are you going to do with your life?" she says, with a flick of her dark, wavy hair.

The Sea Org has often been portrayed as isolated, almost monastic; members are rarely allowed to see films, watch TV or read mainstream magazines. "Are we devoted? Yes. Sequestered? No," says Fries, who married a fellow Sea Org member. "I go out into the world, I talk to people out in the world, I definitely live a very full life. This isn't a priesthood. I mean, if it were a priesthood, do you think I'd work here? It would just be so unhip."

Gold is seen as the place "every Sea Org member aspires to work," says Rinder. There are expansive grounds to wander, a crystal-blue pool in which to swim; the dining hall is large and features low-fat and vegetarian entrees. A tiny shop sells cigarettes, juice, soft drinks and junk food.

In my ten or so hours at Gold, I am aware of being taken on an elaborately orchestrated junket, in which every step of my day has been plotted and planned. I don't blame the group for wanting to present its best face; at least half of my conversations with Rinder and Davis pertain in one way or another to what Scientology perceives as a smear campaign on the part of the mainstream media. A chief complaint is that reporters, eager for a story, take the words of lapsed members as gospel. Davis says Scientology gets little credit for the success of its social-betterment programs, which include Narconon and also literacy and educational programs. "Look around," says Davis. "People are out here busting their butt every day to make a difference. And one guy who leaves because he wants to go to the movies gets to characterize the whole organization? That sucks."

Scientists do not look kindly on critics, particularly those who were once devout. Apostasy, which in Scientology means speaking out against the church in any public forum, is considered to be the highest form of treason. This is one of the most serious "suppressive acts," and those who apostatize are immediately branded as "Suppressive Persons," or SPs. Scientists are taught that SPs are evil -- Hitler was an SP, says Rinder. Indeed, Hubbard believed that a full 2.5 percent of the population was "suppressive." As he wrote in the *Dianetics and Scientology Technical Dictionary*, a suppressive person is someone who "goofs up or vilifies any effort to help anybody and particularly knife with violence anything calculated to make human beings more powerful or more intelligent."

Given this viewpoint, I wonder why anyone with connections to Scientology would critique them publicly. "Makes them famous," Rinder says. "They do it for their fifteen minutes."

Scientology has been extremely effective at attacking its defectors, often destroying their credibility entirely, a policy that observers call "dead agenting." Some of the church's highest-profile critics say they have been on the receiving end of this policy. In the past six years, Tory Christman claims, the church has spread lies about her on the Internet, filed suit against her for violating an injunction for picketing on church property and attempted to get her fired from her job. Rinder dismisses Christman as a "wacko" and says her allegations are "absolute bullshit."

When Christman split from the church, her husband and most of her friends -- all of them Scientists -- refused to talk to her again. Apostates are not just discredited from the church; they are also excommunicated, isolated from their loved ones who, under Scientology rules, must sever or "disconnect" from them. Scientology defines those associated with Suppressive People as "Potential Trouble Sources," or PTS.

Rinder says disconnection is a policy of last resort. "The first step is always to try to *handle* the situation," he says. A "handling" generally refers to persuading a wayward member to return to the church in order to maintain contact with his family. The parent of someone who's apostatized might call his child and ask him to "handle" a problem by essentially recanting. "They'll ask them to make some amends, show they can be trusted . . . something to make up the damage," says Davis. Those amends might range from volunteering in a literacy program to taking a public advocacy role -- campaigning against psychiatry, for example.

But some people, the officials admit, refuse to be handled. What happens to them? "Then I guess not believing in Scientology means more to them than not seeing their family," Davis says.

Excommunication is nothing new in organized religion. A number of sects have similar policies to Scientology's: the Amish, the Mormon Fundamentalists, the Jehovah's Witnesses. All have a rationale. Scientology's rationale is very simple: "We are protecting the good of the religion and all the parishioners," says Rinder.

"It's for the good of the group," says Davis.

"How are you going to judge what is and isn't the worst tenets and violations of the Church of Scientology?" Rinder asks. "You aren't a Scientist." Complaints about these policies, he adds, "come from people who aren't Scientists [anymore]. What do they give a shit for anymore? They left!"

I spend a lot of time talking about the question of apostasy with Rinder and Davis. Both feel the church has been miscast. "Somewhere there is a concept that we hold strings over all these people and control them," says Rinder. But provided you don't denounce Scientology, it's perfectly fine to leave the church, he says. "Whatever. What's true for you is true for you." Nothing will happen to those who lose their faith, he says, unless they "tell bald-faced lies to malign and libel the organization -- unless they make it seem like something it isn't."

* * * *

Paul James is not this twenty-two-year-old man's real name. He is the son of established Scientists, blond and blue-eyed, with the easy smile and chiseled good looks of a young Matt Damon. He has had no contact with the church since he was seventeen. "I honestly don't know how people can live psychotically happy all the time," Paul tells me over coffee one afternoon at his small, tidy house outside Los Angeles. "Or *thinking* that they're happy," he adds with a grin. "I'm talking about that fake-happiness thing that people make themselves believe."

Like Natalie, Paul was educated by Scientology tutors, sent to Scientist-run private schools and put "on course" at his church. Unlike her, he hated it. "I never found anything in Scientology that had to do with spiritual enlightenment," he says. "As soon as common sense started hitting me" -- around the age of ten -- "it creped me out."

Though there are a significant number of second-generation Scientists who, like Natalie, are devoted to the church, there are also kids like Paul. This, says the University of Alberta's Stephen Kent, is to be expected. One "unanticipated consequence" of the widespread conversions of young people to sects like Scientology in the 1960s and 1970s, Kent says, has been a "wave" of defections of these members' adult children.

A fundamental element of Scientology is that children are often regarded as small adults -- "big thetans in little bodies," as some parents call them. Paul's parents worked eighteen-hour days for the church, he says, and generally left him and his older brother to their own devices. "My brother was baby-sitting me by himself when he was eleven years old," Paul says. When his brother went off with his friends, "I'd get home from school and be wandering around the [apartment] complex."

Paul's school was no more structured, he says. Students were encouraged to work at their own pace on subjects of their choosing, and, according to Paul, received little guidance from teachers, who are called "supervisors." I found this to be true at the Delphi Academy in Lake View Terrace, California, part of a network of elite schools that use Hubbard's study technology. Maggie Reinhart, Delphi's director, says that this technique forces a student to take an active role in his education. A number of Scientology kids have thrived in this environment. Others, like Paul, felt lost. "I just kind of roamed from classroom to classroom and nobody cared," he says. At Delphi, I saw teachers assisting certain students, but there was no generalized "teaching," no class discussions.

Discussion, as some academics like Kent note, isn't encouraged in Scientology, nor in Scientology-oriented schools. It is seen as running counter to the teachings of Scientology, which are absolute. Thus, debate is relegated to those in the world of "Wogs" -- what Scientists call non-Scientists. Or, as Hubbard described them, "common, ordinary, run-of-the-mill, garden-variety humanoid[s]."

Paul met very few Wogs growing up, and those he did know often didn't understand him. Scientology has its own unique lexicon. "It's kind of like being a French Canadian," Paul explains. "You speak one thing out in the world and another thing at home."

Many kids who've grown up in Scientology describe it as Natalie did: "a bubble" that exists in tandem with the mainstream world. "It's impossible to understand it unless you've lived it," says Paul.

Even when you've lived it, as one young woman notes, it's hard to fully understand. This twenty-two-year-old, whom we'll call Sara, left Scientology in high school. After leaving, she and a friend who quit with her sat down with a dictionary. "We looked up all the words we used [because] we didn't know if we were speaking English or not," she says.

Hubbard created Scientology's language to be unique to its members. It includes words that are interpretations, or variations, of standard terms: "isness," for example, which Scientology's glossaries say, in essence, means "reality." But there are also words that are wholly made up, such as "obnosis," which means "observation of the obvious."

The chaotic world, as one might call it in the mainstream, is, in Scientology, "enturbulated," which means "agitated and disturbed." To correct, or solve, personal or societal problems requires the proper application of "ethics," which in Scientology refers to one's moral choices, as well as to a distinct moral system. Those who conduct themselves correctly have their ethics "in." Those who misbehave are "out-ethics." A person's harmful or negative acts are known as "overts." Covering them up is known as a "withhold."

All of these terms, and many more, are contained in a number of Scientology dictionaries, all written by Hubbard. Scientologists consider word comprehension and vocabulary skills to be essential parts of their faith.

The Hubbard Study Technology is administered in schools through an organization called "Applied Scholastics"; it emphasizes looking up any unknown or "misunderstood" word in a dictionary, and never skipping past a word you don't understand. This same study method is used in church, where adults of all ages and levels of advancement spend hours poring over dictionaries and course manuals.

One key word is "gradient," which is defined in the official Scientology and Dianetics glossary as "a gradual approach to something, taken step by step, level by level, each step or level being, of itself, easily surmountable so that, finally, quite complicated and difficult activities or high states of being can be achieved with relative ease." This principle, the glossary notes, "is applied to both Scientology processing and training."

Another key belief is "communication." One of Scientology's basic courses is "Success Through Communication," taught to young people and adults. It involves a series of drills, known as "training routines," or "TRs." One drill asks students to close their eyes and simply sit, sometimes for hours. Another asks them to stare at a partner, immobile. A third requires students to mock, joke with or otherwise verbally engage their partner. The partner must passively receive these comments without moving or saying a word.

These drills, Scientologists say, help improve what they call their "confront," which in Scientology's lexicon means "the ability to be there comfortably and perceive." A fourth drill requires students to pose a series of questions to one another, such as "Do fish swim?" Their partner may respond in any way they like, with the question being asked repeatedly until the partner answers correctly. Sara's favorite drill involved an ashtray: "You tell it to stand up, sit down, and you 'move' the ashtray for hours. You're supposed to be beaming your intention into the ashtray, and the supervisor is going to tell you if you're intent enough."

At Delphi, students take a course called "Improving Conditions." "Conditions" refers to key Hubbard principles. Charted on a scale, they relate to one's relationship to oneself and to those within one's organization, school or "group." A Scientologist's goal, it's often noted, is to "improve conditions."

From highest to lowest, the Conditions are: Power, Power Change, Affluence, Normal, Emergency, Danger, Non-Existence, Liability, Doubt, Enemy, Treason and Confusion. Together, these conditions form the spine of the practical application of Scientology "ethics," which is, many say, the true heart of the faith. "Ethics," as a Scientological term, is defined as "rationality toward the greatest good for the greatest number of dynamics," as well as "reason and the contemplation of optimum survival."

To survive, Scientology applies its philosophy, or "ethics tech," across a broad social and societal scale. They do good works -- indeed, as Rinder notes, "Scientologists are driven by a real concern for the well-being of others. They see the world around them and want to do something about it."

But the church's drug-treatment and literacy programs and anti-psychiatry campaigns do more than just evangelize through charity; in fact, they exist largely to help prepare people to become Scientologists. Once a person is drug-free, psychiatrist-free and literate, he is qualified for auditing. And auditing is the centerpiece of Scientology. "It's all about going up the Bridge," says Paul.

Paul began auditing when he was four. Rebellious by nature, he says it did very little for him. By the age of eleven or twelve, he says, "I was so out of control, my parents had no idea what to do with me."

Scientologists run a number of boarding schools around the country, including the prestigious Delphian School, in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, which counts Earthlink founder Sky Dayton among its graduates. Scientologists' kids who caused trouble, or otherwise displeased their parents, have been sent to more restrictive private boarding schools. Paul was sent to Mace-Kingsley Ranch, located on 2,000 acres in New Mexico, which was closed in 2002.

Paul arrived at Mace-Kingsley when he was thirteen, and stayed for three and a half years. As he tells it, he underwent what sounds like a typical "boot camp" experience, complete with hard labor, bad food, tough supervision -- all with a high price tag, roughly \$30,000 per year. The school enforced a rigid Scientology focus that many former students now say served as both a mechanism of control and a form of religious indoctrination.

The process began for all new students with an IQ test and the Purification Rundown, which Paul says was given to kids as young as eight or nine years old. Then they were administered the Oxford Capacity Analysis, created by Scientologists in 1953. The test was designed to find out the student's "tone," or emotional state, in preparation for auditing. Students were audited daily at the ranch. By the age of sixteen, Paul says, he'd grown so used to the process, he'd figured out how to "trick" the E-meter: By remaining calm enough for no electrical charge to register, he was often able to hide most of his inner feelings from his auditors and his "case supervisor," who oversaw his progress.

But not always. "There are things they wanted to know, and they'd just keep asking until you finally told them," he says. "They'd get me to tell them about lies, or things that were bad, right down to my thoughts -- some of which were overts." So were some of his deeds. Masturbation is an overt -- strictly forbidden in Scientology, as Hubbard believed that it can slow one's process to enlightenment. "It's not evil, just out-ethics," says Paul. "They'll dig it up in session and tell you to stop because it's slowing you down."

Another overt is homosexuality, which Hubbard believed was a form of sexual "deviance" best treated by therapy, or institutionalization. This view was espoused by many psychiatrists of Hubbard's generation. Mainstream psychiatry has changed its view since the 1950s. Scientology as an institution takes no formal position on issues like gay marriage, but homosexuality, sexual promiscuity or any other form of "perversion" ranks low on Scientology's "tone scale," a register of human behavior Hubbard described in his 1951 book *Science of Survival: Prediction of Human Behavior*.

This book, according to Mike Rinder, is perhaps the most important Scientology text after *Dianetics*. In it, Hubbard denounced virtually every sexual practice that doesn't directly relate to marriage and children. "Such people should be taken from the society as rapidly as possible . . . for here is the level of the contagion of immortality and the destruction of ethics," he wrote of homosexuals. "No social order will survive which does not remove these people from its midst."

In auditing, Scientologists are frequently asked about their sexual thoughts or practices, particularly in the special auditing sessions called "security checks." This process requires a church member to write down any break with the ethical code. Security checks are administered to every Scientologist on the Bridge, and particularly to all OTs, who must be checked every six months "to make sure they're using the tech correctly," as church officials explain. In September, I received, through a source, a faxed copy of the standard security-check sheet for adults. Its questions include "Have you ever been involved in an abortion?" "Have you ever practiced sex with animals?" "Have you ever practiced sodomy?" "Have you ever slept with a member of a race of another color?" as well as "Have you ever had any unkind thoughts about L. Ron Hubbard?"

Paul resisted his security checks -- he says he sometimes fell asleep during the sessions. But Sara, who says she went through months of "sec checks" after deciding, at age fifteen, that she didn't want to be a Scientologist any longer, says she was highly disturbed by the process. At first, she says, counselors at her church tried to "clear" her. She was forced to repeatedly look up words in the dictionary to make sure she misunderstood nothing about Scientology. Then they gave her a security check. "For months I'm going to the church every night after school, and I'm in this fucking basement for four hours a night, on the E-meter," she says. "They're asking me questions about sex -- every personal question known to man." If she tried to leave, Sara adds, the auditors would physically block her path and force her back in her chair. Officials say this forced auditing is for the subjects' own good, as it might be harmful if they were to leave a session before they were ready.

"Scientology has a plausible explanation for everything they do -- that's the genius of it," says Sara. "But make no mistakes: Scientology is brainwashing."

* * * *

Jeffrey Aylor was thirteen when he joined the sea Organization. Raised in a Scientology family in Los Angeles, he was at church one day when a Sea Org recruiter approached him. "What are you doing with your life?" he asked the teen.

Jeffrey had no idea what to say. "I'm thirteen, I'm not doing anything with my life," Jeffrey said. The recruiter asked him if he wanted to "help" people. Jeffrey said, "Sure. What kid doesn't want to help people?"

Thus began Jeffrey's immersion into the tightly wound world of the Sea Org, where he would spend the next seven years of his life. In that time, he would see fewer than ten movies, would rarely listen to music and never had sex. Though theoretically reading newspapers and magazines was allowed -- *USA Today* is sold openly on Gold Base -- in practice it was discouraged, along with surfing the Internet and watching TV. Indeed, all contact with the world at large was "entheta." "I never considered myself a Scientologist until I joined the Sea Org," Jeffrey says.

Jeffrey's indoctrination began with a boot camp known as the "Estates Project Force," or EPF. There, he learned to march, salute and perform manual labor. Physical work is a key training technique for new recruits. Jeffrey's sister, for instance, went through the EPF when she was twelve and was forced to crawl through ducts that were roach- and rat-infested. Like the TRs, this kind of work, Jeffrey explains, is meant to raise a person's "confront," enabling them to be more in control of their environment.

After the EPF, Jeffrey was given a blue shirt, blue tie and dark-blue trousers, and sent to work as a receptionist at the American Saint Hill Organization for spiritual training, on Scientology's expansive Hollywood campus. He was paid fifty dollars per week and worked an average of fifteen hours per day, including an hour or two of auditing and other training. Home was a large barracks-style room in a building where Jeffrey lived with about twenty other boys and men. In seven years, Jeffrey says, he saw his family just a handful of times. His only free time was the few hours he received on Sunday mornings to do his laundry. Hubbard believed strongly in productivity, which he saw as highly ethical behavior. "We reward production and up-statistics and penalize nonproduction and down-statistics," he wrote in *Introduction to Scientology Ethics*.

Eventually, Jeffrey found himself on "PTS watch," monitoring Sea Org members who wanted to leave the order. According to church officials, Sea Org members can leave anytime they want. But in practice, the attitude is "the only reason you'd want to leave is because you've done something wrong," says Jeffrey. This would call for a round of "sec checks," which would continue throughout the "route out" process, which can take up to a year. During that time, former Sea Org members have asserted, they are subjected to so much pressure they often decide not to leave after all.

To make sure no one would leave before their route-out was complete, Jeffrey would shadow them: "I've been assigned to go and sleep outside somebody's door -- all night, for as many nights as it takes -- on the floor, against the door, so I could feel if they opened it. If they went to the bathroom, someone would stand right outside. Someone is always there."

Some wayward members have "disappeared" for long periods of time, sent to special Scientology facilities known as the "Rehabilitation Project Force." Created by Hubbard in 1974, the RPF is described by the church as a voluntary rehabilitation program offering a "second chance" to Sea Org members who have become unproductive or have strayed from the church's codes. It involves intensive physical labor (at church facilities) and auditing and study sessions to address the individual's personal problems. The process is given a positive spin in church writings. "Personnel 'burnout' is not new to organizations," a post on Scientology's official Web site reads, in relation to the RPF, "but the concept of complete rehabilitation is."

Former Sea Org members who've been through the program charge that it is a form of re-indoctrination, in which hard physical labor and intense ideological study are used to break a subject's will. Chuck Beatty, a former Sea Org member, spent seven years in the RPF facilities in Southern California, from 1996 to 2003, after expressing a desire to speak out against the church. For this, he was accused of "disloyalty," a condition calling for rehabilitation. "My idea was to go to the RPF for six or eight months and then route out," says Beatty. "I thought that was the honorable thing to do." In the RPF he was given a "twin," or auditing partner, who was responsible for making sure he didn't escape. "It's a prison system," he says, explaining that all RPFers are watched twenty-four hours per day and prevented from having contact with the outside world. "It's a mind-bending situation where you feel like you're betraying the group if you try to leave."

Quiet and disciplined by nature, Jeffrey never minded the regimentation and order of the Sea Org. "I was wrapped up in work," he says. "And that's what I liked doing. And I thought I was helping people." But when he became ill, his perspective radically changed. For the first six years of his Sea Org service, Jeffrey had kept his asthma and other health issues in check. In the spring of 2004, he began to develop severe chest pains. By the summer, he was unable to work. By fall, he could barely get out of bed.

Scientologists believe that most illnesses are products of a person's own psychic traumas -- they are brought upon themselves. Sea Org members are promised medical care for any illness, but Jeffrey says that he received little medical attention or money with which to seek outside medical care. Instead, he was sent to Ethics counseling. When that didn't cure him, it was suggested he return to the EPF to repeat his training.

Even while bedridden, "if I wasn't there pushing somebody to take me to a doctor . . . it didn't happen," he says. Lying in bed one night, Jeffrey listened to a taped lecture given by L. Ron Hubbard, in which he made his famous statement "If it isn't true for you, it isn't true." For Jeffrey, this began a questioning process that would eventually lead to his leaving Scientology altogether. "Nobody can force Scientology upon you, but that is exactly what was happening to me," he says.

And so, one day last February, he asked for some time off to see a doctor. Then he called his mother and asked her to come get him. When she arrived the next morning, Jeffrey left his keys and his Sea Organization ID card behind on his bed. Then, taking only his clothes, he left.

Now twenty-three, Jeffrey lives in a small mountain town more than four hours from Los Angeles. Since his "escape," as he calls it, from the Sea Org, he has not returned to the church. He has never spoken out about his experiences, which he still insists "weren't all that bad." But because he left the Sea Org without permission, he has been declared suppressive. Soon, he believes, his family still in the church will have nothing more to do

with him.

The order of disconnection, called a "declare," is issued on a piece of gold-colored parchment known as a "goldenrod." This document proclaims the suppressive person's name, as well as his or her "crime." According to one friend of Jeffrey's mother who has read his declare, Jeffrey's crimes are vague, but every Scientologist who sees it will understand its point.

"This declare is a warning to Jeffrey's friends in the Sea Org," this woman, who is still a member of the church, explains. "It's saying to them, 'See this kid, he left without permission. This is what happened to him. Don't you make the same mistake.'"

* * * *

During the time I was researching this piece, I received a number of e-mails from several of the Scientologists I had interviewed. Most were still technically members of the church in good standing; privately they had grown disillusioned and have spoken about their feelings for the first time in this article. All of the young people mentioned in this story, save Natalie, are considered by the church hierarchy to be Potential Trouble Sources. But many have begun to worry they will be declared Suppressive Persons.

Their e-mails expressed their second thoughts and their fears.

"PLEASE, let me know what you will be writing in the story," wrote one young woman. "I just want to make sure that people won't be able to read it and figure out who I am. I know my mom will be reading."

"The church is a big, scary deal," wrote another. "My [initial] attitude was if this information could save just one person the money, heartache and mind-bending control, then all would be worth it. [But] I'm frightened of what could happen."

"I'm about two seconds away from losing my whole family, and if that story comes out with my stuff in it, I will," wrote a third. "I'm terrified. Please, please, please . . . if it's not too late . . . help me keep my family."

One particularly frantic e-mail arrived shortly before this story was published. It came from a young Scientologist with whom I had corresponded several times in the course of three or four months. When we first met, she spoke passionately and angrily about the impact of the church on herself and those close to her.

"Please forgive me," she wrote. "The huge majority of things I told you were lies. Perhaps I don't like Scientology. True. But what I do know is that I was born with the family I was born with, and I love them. Don't ask me to tear down the foundation of their lives." Like almost every young person mentioned in this piece, this woman was given a pseudonym to protect her identity, and her family's. But it wasn't enough, she decided. "This is my life . . . Accept what I tell you now for fact: I will not corroborate or back up a single thing I said.

"I'm so sorry," she concluded. "I hope you understand that everyone I love is terribly important to me, and I am willing to look beyond their beliefs in order to keep them around. I will explain in further detail, perhaps, some other day."

JANET REITMAN

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