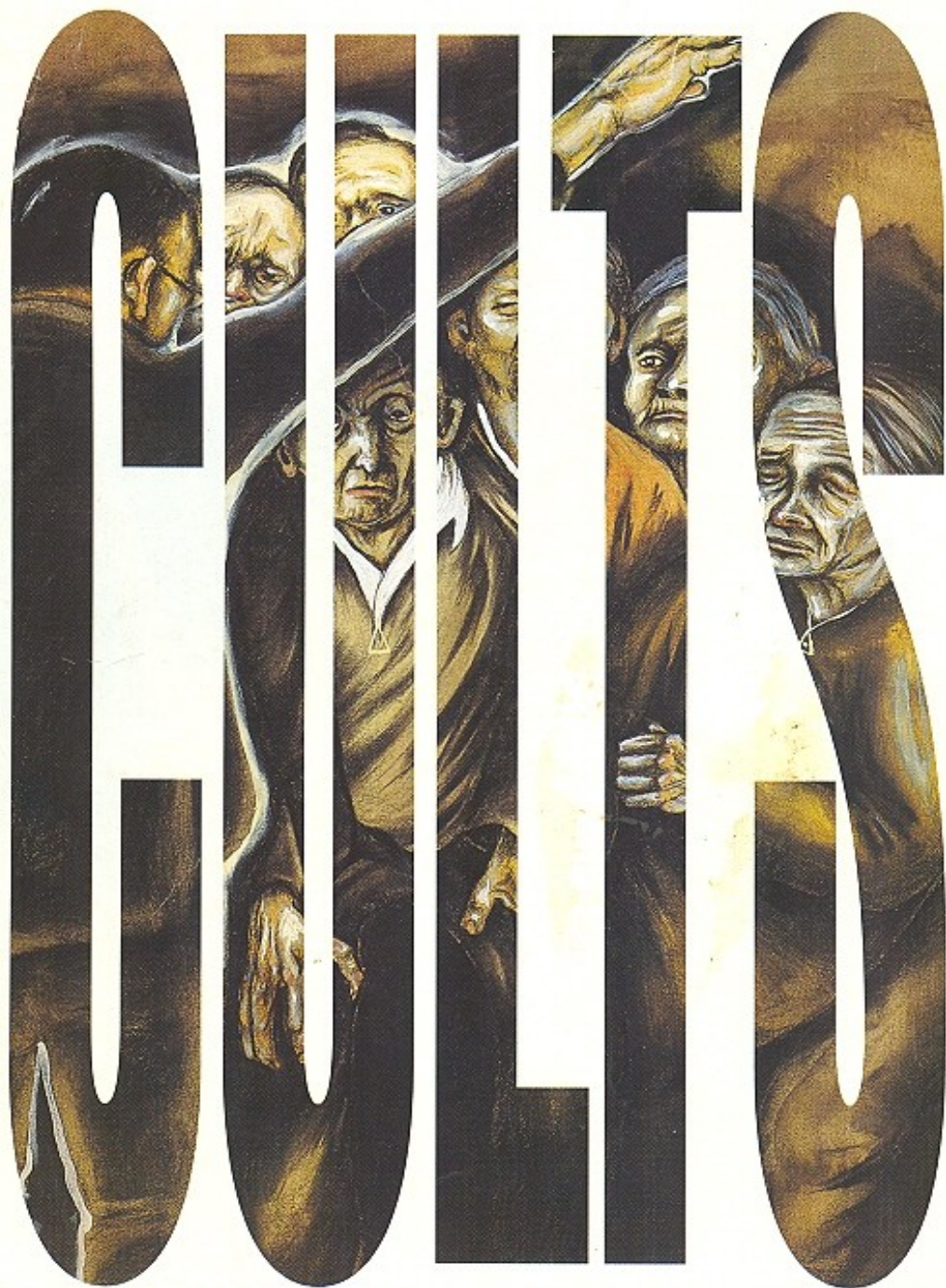




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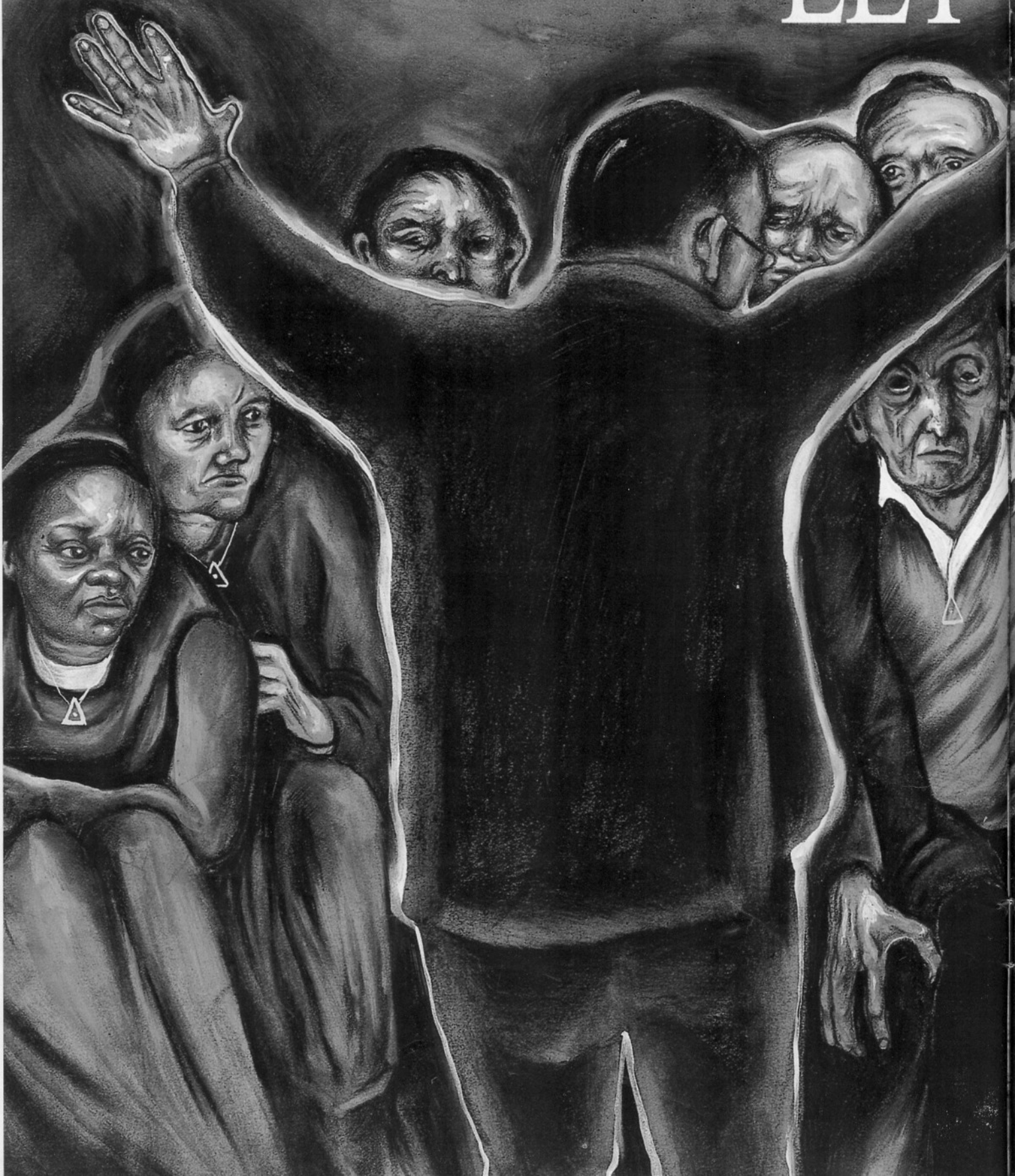
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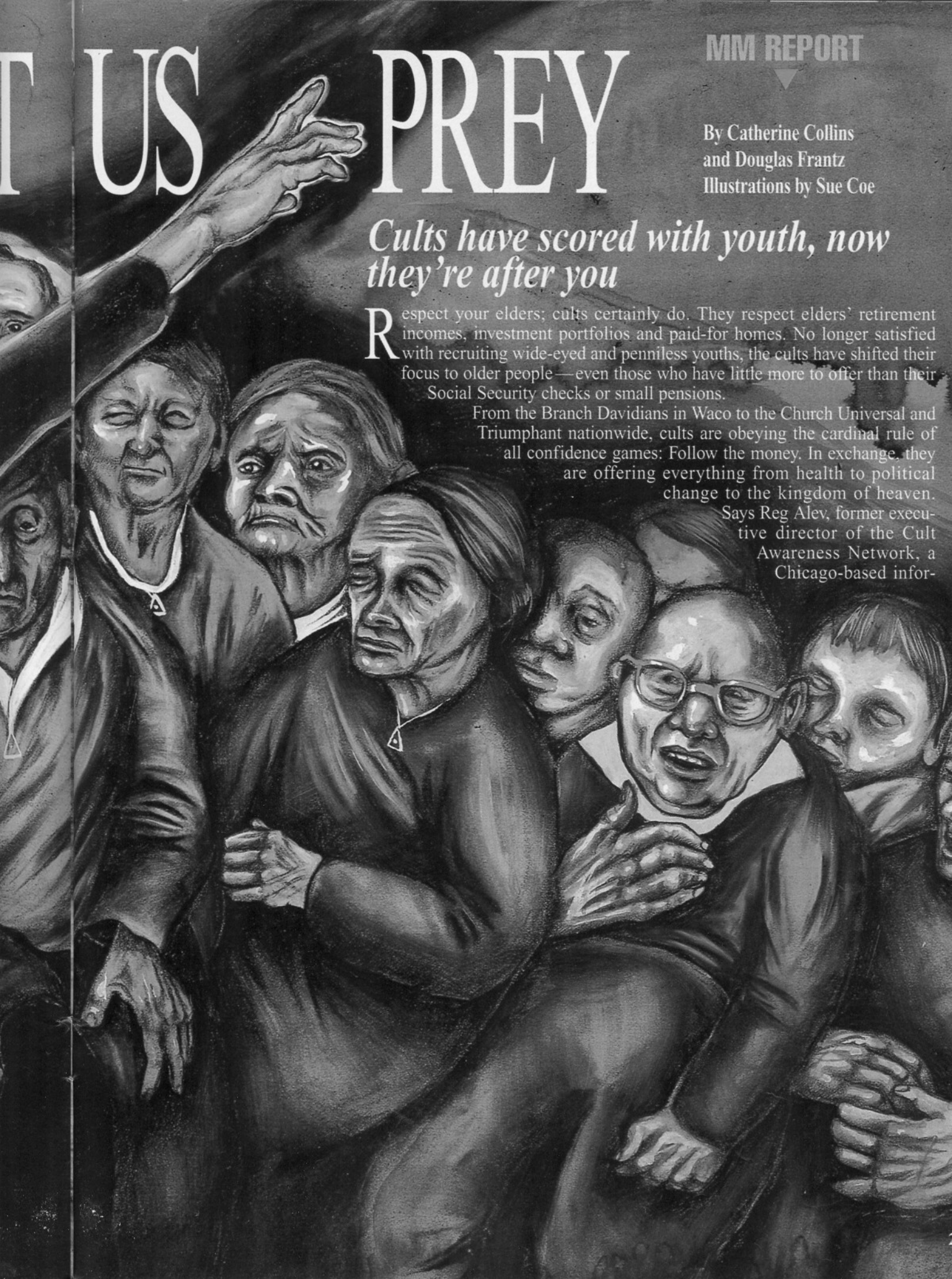


Forget kids. Now they're after you.

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MM REPORT

By Catherine Collins
and Douglas Frantz
Illustrations by Sue Coe

Cults have scored with youth, now they're after you

Respect your elders; cults certainly do. They respect elders' retirement incomes, investment portfolios and paid-for homes. No longer satisfied with recruiting wide-eyed and penniless youths, the cults have shifted their focus to older people—even those who have little more to offer than their Social Security checks or small pensions.

From the Branch Davidians in Waco to the Church Universal and Triumphant nationwide, cults are obeying the cardinal rule of all confidence games: Follow the money. In exchange, they are offering everything from health to political change to the kingdom of heaven.

Says Reg Alev, former executive director of the Cult Awareness Network, a Chicago-based infor-

mation and referral group: "As a compass points to the North Pole, cults point toward the money." And one cult deprogrammer adds, "The elderly are a cult's bread and butter."

Experts across the U.S. support those charges. So do the numbers.

Catherine Collins and Douglas Frantz have both won numerous journalism prizes; last year Frantz received Harvard University's Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting, and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for national reporting. The wife-husband team co-authored Selling Out (Contemporary Books, 1989), an account of Japanese investment in the U.S., and Teachers: Talking Out of School (Little, Brown, 1993), about the crisis in education.

● As many as a million current cult members are over 50, estimates Marcia Rudin, director of the International Cult Education Program of the American Family Foundation, a national organization founded to educate the public about destructive cults. In 1982 Rudin unearthed a document from a major cult that declared its intent to target older people. It urged individuals over 50 to join and "set the example for youth." It went on: "We are especially proud of our octogenarians and septuagenarians, but we have many in the golden years of the 50s and 60s who come aglow with the rapture of the ascended masters shining in their faces and the Holy Spirit in their hearts."

● At least five people age 50 and over were among David Koresh's followers who perished in the fire at the Branch Davidian compound in Texas last year. The number would have been much higher had not many of the older individuals left in the weeks before the showdown. (See our story about two of them, "Tales From the Cult," below.)

● In the Bible-oriented mind-control groups that embrace entire families, it's not uncommon for up to 50 percent of the membership to be over 50, according to David Clark, an exit counselor and court-certified cult expert based in the Philadelphia area.

● Approximately 40 percent of all those involved in cult-like New Age groups are over 50, says Kevin Garvey, a Connecticut-based expert who specializes in helping businesses deal with the impact of cults.

● There are 2,000 to 5,000 cults in the U.S. today with 3 to 5 million full-fledged members, according to University of California at Berkeley adjunct psychology professor emeritus Margaret Singer, Ph.D., who has studied cults for 25 years and treated more than 3,000 former members. Add the 10 to 20 million Americans who have had some involvement with cults at one time or another, she notes, and you have some idea of the

His mother no longer lived with her husband; she was a 'wife of god'—that god was David Koresh

Tales from

Why did you do it?" his mother asked him. "Because I love you," he replied. She said nothing.

If Robert had not rescued his parents from David Koresh and the Branch Davidians when he did, they most probably would have perished with 75 other people that fateful day last year. Like many cults, Koresh's group counted a number of older people among its members.

That's why the story of Robert and his family, who asked that their real names not be used, is a cautionary tale for both the elderly and those who love them.

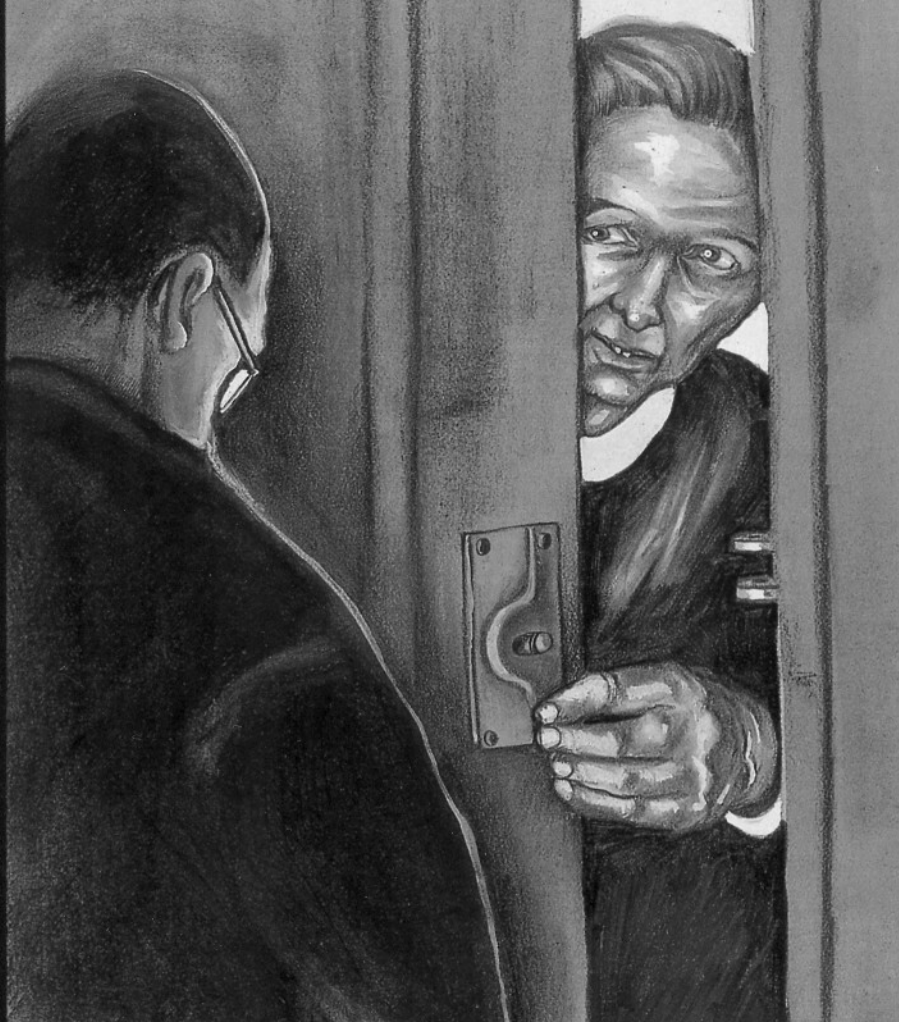
magnitude of the cult movement. (See "A Cult or Not a Cult," page 32, for a discussion of the term.)

Going for the gold

It's the accumulation of wealth that brought America's older population into the sights of America's cults. The financial stakes can be enormous for anyone, but most especially for those who have little hope of rebuilding their life's savings once they give all they have to some group.

Peter Georgiades, a Pittsburgh attorney who has represented dozens of families in efforts to recover funds given to cults, has seen firsthand the destruction such bodies can cause seniors. "I get two to six calls a week from people who have lost anywhere from a few hundred dollars to hundreds of thousands of dollars. When the claims are small I tell them to get a local attorney and settle for what they can get," says Georgiades, who rarely takes a case under \$100,000.

"I know of a number of cases in which people have impoverished themselves," says Herbert Rosedale, a New York lawyer who has handled



the cult

It began eight years ago. Robert's parents, both retired civil servants, were at loose ends. Their children were grown and they were in the throes of coming to terms with their old age. After one son divorced they offered to take in their grandchildren. When social workers told them they were too old, it was a crushing blow. They became very stressed, recalls Leslie, Robert's wife. "And that's what cults look for."

Robert's parents had long been members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Hawaii when David Koresh visited there in 1986. "My mother-in-law told me Koresh

had the answers to all their questions," Leslie recalls. "I remember looking at their Bibles. Every single passage was underlined in red. There were notes everywhere, on every page. It looked to me like Koresh had rewritten the Bible—for his own purposes."

In 1988 Robert's parents decided to follow Koresh to Texas. Robert knew nothing about the move until he learned his parents had sold their home. The proceeds—more than half a million dollars—went to Koresh in accordance with his teaching that all worldly goods be turned over to the prophet. The older couple stopped in California and tried to convince Robert to follow them to Texas and to salvation.

"We were alarmed, but at that point we knew nothing about David Koresh and the Branch Davidians," Robert says. "One of my brothers said something about religious freedom. We knew we couldn't stop them."

The family's concern grew as their parents became more and more isolated. Phone calls were not returned for months on end. When a family member did talk to the parents, they had little to say. Finally, about a year after they moved into the Waco compound the couple were allowed to leave and visit Robert. It was then the younger

numerous cult cases. "It runs the gamut from people who were solicited to make six-figure donations to those who have nothing but their Social Security checks to give." Bottom line, according to Rosedale: "It's devastating—both to individuals and to their families."

One example Rosedale cites involved a very successful older businessman who took part in a seemingly innocuous management discussion group. "As it turned out," Rosedale says, "it was a front for a very aggressive cult. And before he knew it the man had turned over all of his retirement savings in exchange for a series of business courses. He was so ashamed. He couldn't tell his adult children. In fact he wouldn't, under



any circumstances, let us tell his children or elicit their help in recovering his funds. He was literally terrified that they would find out and he would lose their respect."

Opening the door

That a number of older people are being recruited into cults is no accident, but the result of a sophisticated strategy many of the major groups are carrying out on a nationwide scale. They may contact subjects through nursing homes, hospitals, senior cen-

ters, and even go into the homes of sick, lonely, and other extremely vulnerable individuals. There are cases in which health-care professionals have recruited older people into cults, says Barbara Martin, assistant director of the Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center in Albany, Ohio—the only rehabilitation center in the U.S. for former cult members.

Members also come from such

**As they
were about
to leave, Koresh
stepped from a door**

man realized the real consequences of his parents' association with the cult.

They were extremely thin, Robert remembers. They refused to eat a special dinner the family had prepared. They had unconventional diet restrictions they adhered to unflaggingly: Bananas and oranges were all right, for instance, but they couldn't eat apples because the thin skin allowed poisons to enter the fruit; and vegetables had to be cut into perfect cubes.

Further, the older couple's clothes were unwashed, their hair long, and Robert's father suffered from constant colds and a terrible rash.

During the visit Robert and Leslie managed to find out more details of day-to-day life in the Waco compound. The parents had no heat in their shack and were not allowed to keep or cook their own food. They had learned to shoot M16 rifles. And they had sold their van when they got to Texas and used the money to buy a red Camaro

because Koresh had told them God ordered it.

Robert also found out that his mother no longer lived with her husband, but instead stayed with the other women of the compound as a "wife of god." That god, of course, was David Koresh.

After this harrowing visit Robert and Leslie searched for information about the Branch Davidians, but they were able to learn next to nothing. It was almost by accident that they discovered what they were dealing with. Leslie's employer happened to sit next to a cult deprogrammer on a flight between New York and San Francisco and when he returned to the office he relayed to Leslie what he'd learned about cults.

That's the first time the word cult was used. And that's when Robert knew he and his family had to get his parents away from Waco.

It wasn't until 1991 that they got their chance.

One of Robert's brothers, who lived in Hawaii, fell off a roof and was seriously injured. Robert called their parents and asked them to go to the brother. They said they had to get Koresh's permission, and it was several weeks before he would allow them to leave the compound.

Once the brother was no longer in danger, the parents

Cults prey on people trying to come to terms with life changes

extremely unlikely settings as stress-reduction, meditation and health-rehabilitation classes. Lawyer Rosedale knows of a case where a couple got involved by joining a local little theater group. "It's classic bait and switch," says Martin.

The fact is that cults prey on older people who are looking for answers, trying to come to terms with a series of major life changes—the loss of a

spouse, children leaving home, long-term illness, even their own mortality. "I know of cases where cults found vulnerable widows, widowers and other grieving individuals by reading the obituary pages," says Martin.

The institutional connection

Hospitals and nursing homes can be recruiting spots for cults. These institutions seldom screen or monitor individuals who visit patients. Jews for Jesus (a multimillion-dollar fundamentalist Christian missionary organization) may not meet all definitions of a cult, but its recruiting practices are indicative of tactics cults, or cult-like organizations, use.

According to Ellen Kamentsky, a former member of and recruiter for the group, elders are perfect targets because they are "easy to influence,

often home, plentiful, and lonely."

In her book, *Hawking God* (Sapphire Press, 1992), Kamentsky tells how she would wander through nursing homes unchallenged. "No one ever stopped me. The authorities probably thought I was someone's granddaughter; they were happy to have someone visit." She would address patients by their names, which she would get off the doors to their rooms, and ask if they'd like some company. They usually accepted. "On the first visit they did most of the talking," says Kamentsky, who admits she worked "like a skilled talk-show host," all the while just waiting to "unleash my true agenda."

Because of actions like these some nursing homes have now instituted safeguards to protect residents from such exploitation. Manor HealthCare Corp., a company based in Silver Spring, Maryland, that operates more than 160 nursing homes nationwide,

went to California to visit their other sons. Robert decided the time had come to make the break.

The parents stayed with Robert and Leslie. Each day Robert found some excuse to delay the older couple's departure, and they were never left alone. Robert began showing them counter-cult videotapes. His brothers sent pictures and videos of their children. Robert talked to his parents endlessly to make sure they understood what they were seeing. And he hid their Bibles.

Despite all this, it wasn't until another couple, who had once belonged to a cult themselves, talked to the parents that they agreed to leave the Branch Davidians.

First, however, they wanted to return to Waco and pick up their belongings.

Fearing he'd lose his parents again if both of them went back to the compound, Robert insisted that his mother stay in San Francisco and he, his father, and a friend drove to the Texas compound. They arrived at dawn in their rented truck. Several of the other older members—including David Koresh's stepfather, Roy Haldeman—came out to help and wish them well.

As Robert, his father, and the friend were about to drive away, Koresh himself stepped out of a doorway. Robert's father bolted from the truck and ran over to him. Robert watched as his father talked to the skinny young man

dressed in blue jeans and a black T-shirt. Finally, the older man returned to the truck—in tears.

The hold David Koresh had on his followers is hard to understand unless one has had first-hand experience. Marc Breault, one of Koresh's early lieutenants and co-author of *Inside the Cult* (NAL/Dutton, 1993) describes his former leader's power:

"Vernon [Koresh's real name] used the Bible to accomplish one thing. . . . He used it to convince us that he was a prophet. . . . Once a person thought he [Koresh] was a prophet, he had them. Once a person thought he [Koresh] was a God, there was no turning back. . . . The Bible is full of stories about people leaving their homes and loved ones to follow God."

Today, Robert's parents are back in Hawaii living quietly. They are recovering, however slowly. It was a year before they even began to contact old friends. His mother only recently started to attend church again. They still fear for their lives. And, most unfortunately, their relationship with Robert remains strained.

Robert's only concern is that his parents are safe. He believes they will eventually understand the danger they were in. "I find that society in general knows so little about cults," he says. "We forgot Jim Jones very quickly. I hope we don't forget David Koresh." —C.C. and D.F.

employs professional clergy at many of its locations. In addition to meeting the spiritual needs of residents who ask for that service, these people also function as gatekeepers to ward off approaches like the one Kamentzky describes.

Older people are at a very sensitive place in their lives, explains the Reverend Daniel Kratz, director of chaplains for Manor. "They are trying to make sense of it all, to arrive at life's meaning, to see what they have accomplished." It becomes a "religious issue. It is even a religious issue for atheists."

Ripe for the picking

Cults and cult-like organizations are also designing claims and benefits that attract older people. Says Well-spring's Martin: "For example, lead-

ers of the Eternal Flame, now called CBJ, based in Scottsdale, Arizona, teach that people are programmed for death and that they need a 'cellular awakening' to be physically immortal. 'Cellular intercourse' with other 'immortals' is required and that involves lots of hugging, hand-holding and personal affirmation of one another in group contacts."

Arnold Markowitz, director of a New York-based cult hotline and clinic operated by the Jewish Board of Family & Children's Services, recalls the case of an older woman who became involved with "one of those self-help, Eastern meditation groups to help her high blood pressure" after she saw a flyer publicizing a free lecture on meditation and yoga and went to the group's center. Eventually she

gave the group all her money. After that "they came to her apartment and took her furnishings—rugs, antiques, artwork—to sell." Then they started to harass her. When her niece finally realized what was happening, she found the older woman malnourished and hiding out because she was terrified of running into cult members on the street.

"In the end the woman had to go into a nursing home because she had nothing left," says Markowitz. "Even her health was gone."

The following stories illustrate some other popular ploys.

Margaret Dodd became involved with Transcendental Meditation in her late 40s because it promised to help her control her dangerously high blood pressure and cholesterol. The retired teacher stayed with TM for ten

Beware false prophets

We interviewed dozens of cult experts, law-enforcement authorities, ministers and psychologists across the nation and asked them for tips on how to deal with cults and similar organizations. Here are some of their best recommendations:

- "If someone promises you everything you need to find the meaning of life, take another look."

—*John Michalec, police detective and director of Ritualistic Crime Specialists, Inc., Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

- "Be very careful of people who befriend you or invite you to events or group meetings. If someone tells you something about a group or a person that seems too good to be true, it probably is."

—*Margaret Singer, Berkeley, California, psychologist*

- "Never sign anything, including a check, without knowing what you're signing or how the money is going to be spent. Consult your friends first, your children, gov-

ernment agencies, the Better Business Bureau, or organizations like the American Family Foundation or Cult Awareness Network. Don't believe anyone who promises radical changes."

—*Reg Alev, former executive director of Cult Awareness Network in Chicago*

- "When someone you love joins what you believe to be a cult, the best thing you can do is keep the lines of communication open."

—*Kenneth Lanning, supervisory special agent, Behavioral Science Services Unit at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia*

- "Everybody's religious faith should be a source of health and happiness. Rely on your own faith, not someone else's."

—*The Reverend Daniel Kratz, director of chaplains for Manor HealthCare Corp.*

years. Initially, she felt her health benefited from it—but there were other unsettling consequences.

"I became spacey, disconnected. I could see that what they were doing was very similar to Asian forms of mind control that dictate what you eat, when you sleep, and who you talk to." The financial costs to Dodd were not overwhelming because, she says, she did not have that much to begin with. But she had even less when she left. She quit her job to pursue TM studies. She sold her house and used her savings to pay tuition. "I knew others," she adds, "who went to

Europe to study and came back \$50,000 in debt. There were a lot of well-off people recruited into the TM movement."

Lucille Dannon* had a 20-year on-and-off association with a cult; she even moved her family to be near its Connecticut headquarters after her husband retired. "They started a prayer group at our church," Dannon recalls of her introduction to the group. "It was all so innocent. How could any harm come from prayer?"

But by the time the church hierarchy discovered the cult's true agenda and denounced it "the harm was done," Dannon says.

"We built a home in Connecticut and our whole life centered around that group. We were completely

involved, as were our older children," she continues. "I look back on it now with horror. There's just no way to convey the irreparable harm our family suffered. We will never be the same emotionally or financially. One of our daughters has had several nervous breakdowns and has tried to kill herself. I blame all of this on what went on in the cult."

Dannon began the process of separating from the group when she learned the leaders were engaging members in sexual practices they called "divine intimacy." "I was shocked out of my mind. All I could do was be thankful that I still had enough strength to pull away. Believe

*Not subject's real name.

A cult or not a cult?

Cult. It is the word itself combined with the age-old issue of religious freedom—that most fundamental and hallowed of American rights—that causes so much controversy when one tries to convey its meaning. Although the media and the anti-cult groups use the word pejoratively, the organizations in question argue that centuries ago, Christianity was considered a cult.

Webster's New World Dictionary gives as a first definition for cult "a system of religious worship or ritual." According to Margaret Singer, Ph.D., a Berkeley, California, psychologist, the actuality is a bit more complicated. "The word describes a power structure," she says. What really sets a cult apart is that "one person has proclaimed himself to have some special knowledge. And if he can convince others to let him be in charge, he will share that knowledge." Actually there are hundreds of cults, she explains, many of which revolve around entirely secular pursuits: psychology, martial arts, even flying saucers.

Peter D. Ross, an attorney and member of the Unification Church in New York, contends that the current connotation is "inflammatory"—and there are academics and even mainstream religious leaders who agree there is, at times, some overreaction. "Some anti-cult groups are not simply against cults, but against religion of any sort," says

Larry D. Shinn, Ph.D., a Bucknell University professor of religion. "You must make the distinction with cults you make with drugs. I take aspirin, but I don't take heroin."

The emergence of so-called cults is not a new phenomenon, says Elizabeth C. Nordbeck, Ph.D., dean of the faculty and vice president for academic affairs at Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts. As she wrote in the September 1992 issue of *USA Today* magazine, "Historically, new and unfamiliar religious movements (including Christianity) . . . always have generated fear and antagonism disproportionate to their real threat."

Who, then, decides if an organization is a cult? Or indeed if it's dangerous? That depends, says Kenneth Lanning, a supervisory special agent with the FBI, on who's setting the rules. "As a law-enforcement officer I'm interested only when it's involved in criminal activity."

Marcia Rudin of the American Family Foundation's International Cult Education Program says these groups interfere with members' ability to think freely and critically. A "cult," she says, uses deception and unethical manipulative techniques of persuasion and control "to advance the goals of the group to the detriment of the individual members, their families and the community."

The debate goes on.

—C.C. and D.F.

me, it wasn't easy. Even though we were no longer involved, five years passed before we could afford to leave Connecticut."

Dannon adamantly insists that *anyone* can fall prey to a cult. "I used to think only weak-minded and ignorant people could be taken in by these groups. I felt so sorry for the Moonies and Hare Krishnas—never thinking it was happening to me."

She says cult leaders are so cunning it's hard to imagine what lengths they'll go to in giving themselves the edge. "My group leader and his son had had a picture taken with Pope Paul VI. If any group members began to doubt the leader he would point to the photograph to imply approval for the 'important work' he was doing, and send the doubter off to seek greater understanding."

Harriet Reed* was 65 when her

brother introduced her to a Bible-study group whose leader she eventually learned used hypnosis to keep his followers in line. "My husband had just passed away," Reed says, "and these people were so attentive, cordial and supportive."

Reed's daughter adds that the manipulation and deception didn't happen overnight. "It was a long, slow, insidious process."

Reed was involved for 14 years. At one time another of her children, and a grandchild, were in the cult at the same time as she. "Can you imagine that they could get into your mind and destroy everything?" she asks. She described the feeling as being paralyzed, unable to move *either* mentally or physically.

"When the leader started to berate

*Mother's love
was replaced
with complete
devotion to the
cult leader*



Leaving a cult is extremely difficult

and humiliate the cult members publicly, you dreaded having to listen but you were hooked as though you were frozen in place."

She gave significant amounts of cash to the cult. "We don't even know how much," says her daughter. "Mother even sold the family home without telling us"—and moved closer to the cult's headquarters. "What really devastated us was the complete personality change. Without explanation Mother's love for everything and everyone was replaced with a glassy-eyed look and automatic devotion to the cult leader. Affection and warmth were all gone." Only after years of patience and careful contact was the family able to arrange a successful encounter between Reed and exit counselors.

The entire family has tried to put those 14 years in the past, says Reed's daughter, yet "they will always be an indelible part of our lives."

Reed later began participating in a cult-awareness group. Ultimately, however, she found it impossible to keep reliving her experience and left the association. "I simply had to separate myself from the nightmare once and for all."

Escaping the cults

No matter where recruitment takes place, or how long involvement lasts, once a person becomes involved with a cult-like group, leaving can be extremely hard—sometimes impossible. It can be even more difficult for older individuals because time is critical to the recovery process. And time is what many older people don't have a lot of.

"When someone leaves a cult, his problems are just beginning," says

Rudin of the American Family Foundation. "It can leave a very big hole in a person's life. You've cut yourself off from other people. And to recover you must rebuild those bridges. You have to rebuild your self-esteem and deal with the rage and the shame. And sometimes you have to take care of the practical things: jobs, credit, bank accounts, a place to live, health care, etc."

Caroline Marshall* knows all that. "My life was undergoing radical change. The Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) company I worked for was in Chapter 11 and I was losing my job. A personal relationship was breaking up and my children were all away and busy with their own lives." Marshall drifted toward Ramtha, a New Age cult based on the teachings of J. Z. Knight, a Washington state housewife who claims to be the entity through which a 35,000-year-old warrior spirit speaks. "Before I knew it, I was caught up. It's far easier than people think," she says.

Thus at the age of 58, Marshall left the East and moved to Washington to pursue her studies of Ramtha. It was a decision that cost her two years and approximately \$30,000 in savings.

As Marshall's involvement increased, she became more and more concerned. The warnings of impending natural and economic disasters were extremely intense and included talk about a race of underground space aliens conspiring with the United States government and feeding on human beings.

Finally, Marshall's sons helped her make a break.

Anna Hoover* didn't leave her cult as willingly. For seven years she was a member of the Church Universal and Triumphant. "One day my husband asked me to come home to pick up a package," she says. When she got to the house her entire family, plus three deprogrammers, were waiting. "I was angry. I felt betrayed. It took several days of talking before I

could simmer down and start to listen. Even though I was grateful to my family, it took a long time to get over that anger."

Hoover calls her cult experience "a rape—a spiritual and psychological rape. It almost destroyed me."

Martin points out another often-forgotten segment of the older population who, although not directly involved with cults, are nonetheless their victims: those who are forced to live a life of total estrangement from their children, and sometimes their grandchildren, who are cult members. "I've seen people suffer unbelievable pain because they cannot have contact with their loved ones during a time of life when that contact is practically essential," says Martin. "They feel that loss every moment of every day for the rest of their lives."

Another burning issue for former cult members is regaining some kind of spiritual orientation in their lives, according to Michael Langone, Ph.D., editor of *Recovery From Cults* (Norton, 1993). He did a study in which 87 percent of the respondents said they had some religious affiliation before joining a cult, while 54 percent said they had none at all after leaving the cult.

"People become gun-shy," Langone says. "If you're young you have time to work through this—but for an older person, to be alienated from religion is, I believe, a sad thing."

A long, dark process

It's virtually impossible to anticipate the physical and emotional trauma cult association can unleash. It can also lead to irreparable economic devastation, particularly for older people. And that's just the beginning of the long, dark process.

The seduction starts out caring and comfortable. Eventually, it becomes cruel and castrating. By the time a victim realizes what has happened—if he or she ever does—it's often too late. Worse, the destruction can never be fully undone. ■