

# Beyond Cult Controversy: The Mate Peddlers of the Twelve Tribes

11

*By Ruth Newell, March 10, 2012*

As I wound my way up to [Morning Star Ranch Farm](#) tucked back in the hills of Valley Center located adjacent to the well visited [Keys Creek Lavender Farm](#), I remembered a man from years back. He was a short bearded man with long hair tied at the base of his neck dressed comfortably in homespun peasant style clothes that ran a natural candle and soap shop in downtown Burlington, Vermont. Originally called by another name, the gentle soft spoken man was part of the often media highlighted spare-the-rod-spoil-the-child Island Pond [Twelve Tribes Commonwealth of Israel](#) commune entrenched in the Green Mountain State's secluded 'can't-get-there-from-here' Northeast Kingdom. I hadn't seen him--or people dressed like him-- in 20 years, not since moving away from the land of maple syrup and cider mill donuts. Not until, having finally forfeited the North East's frigid winters and overcast skies for the surf and sand of sunny San Diego a few years back, I spied a female from Twelve Tribes with her head wrapped and a baby on her hip selling Mate at the Oceanside Farmers Market.



The Twelve Tribes are a messianic community, an association of individuals “who love one another so greatly that they are of one heart and mind, holding all things as common property, living together...devoted to one another.” As a child of the ‘70’s and a lifetime

student of communes I can so identify. As a free spirit back to the land-er I am in total alignment with their simple social system of agrarian entrepreneurial self sufficiency and ecological responsibility. And admittedly, I am more than impressed by their expansive system of cottage industries, integrated business model and savvy strategizing that landed contracts with the likes of Estee Lauder and Sundance Catalog, (until the cosmetic company discovered that 14 year olds were alongside their parents in the production line which the State of New York ruled as illegal indentured servitude). But, that's where the attraction ends for this lass.

The father of my children at one point had tried to convince me that joining them would be good for us, as a couple, as a family. We, after all, had very similar lifestyles to them—we were half way there. They home birthed and home schooled their children, as I had done. They grew, cooked and preserved their own food as I tried to do. The women didn't wear makeup or shave as I then didn't and the men had long hair and beards as he then did. Aside from those similarities, though, I couldn't see how he could think we'd fit in. How he thought I would fit in.

It is no secret that I regard the bible as only one of history's books of truths and Christianity as but a single path to godliness. It is also no secret that I'm a feminist who supports equal opportunity for all regardless of sex, age, race or sexually inclination. Therefore, as driven as I am to serve those I love—including the man I love--I knew then that there was no way on God's green Earth that I was going to voluntarily subjugate myself to him simply because he was male, let alone to an entire community of men, a "BROTHERhood," who believed God granted them superiority by virtue of their penises. Nope. Not this emancipated gal. I knew then that our paths were leading us in different directions and from the minute he walked out my door I became the only Head of Household to ever rule my roost.



To each their own, however, and the women of the Twelve Tribes submit to the authority and judgment of not just their husbands and fathers, but to all the men in the community. Clearly following more than Yahshu (Jesus), they live by the rules and standards established by a single man, supported in turn by a colony of men. They submit to the will and doctrine of "The Apostle".

Elbert Eugene Spriggs, (known as Yoneq internally), is the Tribes' self proclaimed "anointed one", The Apostle. A former protestant, Spriggs broke from THE Church when his church opted to forfeit Sunday services in lieu of the Super Bowl. He branched off, ministering to his smitten followers, evangelizing to the throngs of "lost". He began to hold services referred to as Critical Masses in which he ranted about the flaws of the other denominations, point the arrogant finger of accusation, condemning others for not being true believers. Spriggs, himself, was well on his way to becoming what he despised; a minister who plenty might claim is as misguided as those he had been repelled by.

To this day, I remain confused as to how anyone has the conscience to ascertain, let alone dictate, the quality or validity of someone else's religious experience or spiritual relationship with God. What I am not

confused about is what a cult is. Having grown up on the dismal dregs of the many cults that formed or bloomed in the sixties and seventies, that in turned spurred an aggressive counter active anti-cult movement that swelled well into the eighties and nineties, I am hardly ignorant of the mark their apostles, their profits, their leaders left on an entire generation.

Jim Jones. November 18, 1978 is a day I will not be able to erase from my consciousness as long as I live. The sexually, politically and religiously confounded founder of the Peoples Temple directed the mass suicide of 909 members of his Rainbow Family and the murder of 200 of their children. As frustrated as I was by parental authority guised as guidance at the bucking age of 15 and as difficult as I may have made things for my mother, she did not--bless her-- lead me to the slaughter by thrusting a Dixie Cup of cyanide laced grape Kool-Aid down my throat. As much as we may not have seen eye-to-eye, I never once thought her out of her blooming mind as I can well imagine many of those my age living in fear in Jonestown must have thought of their elders. I could not comprehend the horror that was unfolding on the television day after day, for months on end. The sheer lunacy behind what would become one of the largest mass suicides in history when all the bodies had been counted was deeply scarring for someone so young, sensitive and impressionable.

The Manson Family rampage a decade earlier was duly horrific, but didn't compare to the scale and breath of Jonestown. Charles Manson, the 77 year old once scientologist wannabe, criminal-songwriter-"guru" leader of the macabre Helter Skelter Manson Family whose compositions have since been covered by Guns N' Roses, White Zombie and Marilyn Manson, remains alive and well thanks to the generous contribution of our tax dollars.

Vernon Wayne Howell, known to his Waco Branch Davidians as the "Prophet" David Koresh, was the Stud-For-God who annulled the marriages of his followers in order to enjoy sexual access to all the

women, or wives. Females 14 years and up appeared to be free game. Koresh justified molesting minors because Texas law legalizes the "marriage" of 14 year old girls whose parents have consented. He, enabled by the emasculated husbands and fathers, prompted the 1993 murder/suicide of 76 adults and 17 children when the Feds came a-knocking at the door of his Mt. Carmel harem.

Not all cults end in violence. Victor Wierwille, ultra-control monger, founded the still thriving but seriously homophobic and anti-Semitic gun-toting affiliation known as The Way that swallowed many a teenager away from their parents, including my friend Bruce. Sun Myung Moon, the egomaniac meglo zillionaire who is a self ordained reincarnation of Christ-- but federally indicted tax fraud and conspirator-- now in his 90's leads the sex-scandalized, homophobic, business empire that is the Unification Church, home to the "Moonies".

A cult differs from a congregation slightly in that it pertains to a flock of converts, (often perceived as will-less if not absolutely mindless), who become devoutly enamored and fatally subservient, (thus, the legitimacy of the previously stated commonly held perception), to a charismatic leader displaying totalitarian control, advocating controversial beliefs and/or enforcing questionable rituals.

Although members of the Twelve Tribes don't view themselves as a cult, their doctrine is based on one man's interpretation of the Old Testament and his socio-political opinions. A man—three times divorced—who was reported in [2001 by the Boston Herald](#) to have received a "vision" from God in 1971 while sunbathing on a California beach, to be specific. I would imagine that divine callings, let alone spiritual visions, were plentiful along the California coastline during that psychedelic drug infused era.



As with anyone who doesn't conform to the norm, who chooses instead a path outside the "box", communes, cults and even religious congregations can be similarly scrutinized, unjustly boycotted and illegally harassed. As would be expected, by the early '80's, The Community, as they came to call themselves, had been accused of psychological abuse, as well as child abuse and kidnapping that culminated in a nationally publicized police raid resulting in the removal of 112 minors. The children were returned that same day when the raid was declared unconstitutional. All assault charges against Spriggs' right-hand man, Charles "Eddie" Wiseman (Hakam), were eventually dropped on account of technicalities that continued to delay his right to a speedy trial.

Those technicalities, it should be noted, consisted--in part at least-- of the public defender, Jean Swantko, converting within months of her being assigned the case. She married Wiseman within the year. Swantko, who died of cancer in 1990, had since litigated on behalf of The Community in subsequent charges that eventually consisted also of child custody and labor charges. Yet, despite her stellar service to The Community, her husband allowed her to be posthumously slandered by Spriggs and others who claimed she had died (at the age of 76) in lingering agony as God's punishment for having vocalized a complaint against Spriggs ten years prior the onset of her illness.



If that isn't evidence enough to differentiate Twelve Tribes as a cult versus a religious sect, the testimony of her son Zeb Wiseman who left The Community shortly after her death offers further support to the allegation. As with The Way—and even the Amish actually, Twelve Tribes reportedly shuns dissents and defectors by promoting internal “mark and avoid” policies which instruct followers to close off all communication with individuals whose practices cause division within the collective or with those who have selected to leave the collective. All those Zeb grew up with, his siblings and even his own father, ceased all relations with him leaving him isolated to survive on his own in a foreign world. Others have since followed in his footsteps and his testimony is now but a single voice in what over the years has become a chorus.

The dirty laundry they've exposed depicts Super God Squad-er Spriggs as living high on the hog thanks to the toil and sweat of his followers. Oh, and their “tithes” as well. Upon acceptance into The Community, followers forfeit all personal property and assets to live a communal life of physical labor. The Community owns a conglomerate of incorporated enterprises, the least of which is the Common Sense Farm product line of body products. Spriggs, defectors claim, has become a reclusive globetrotting jetsetter who controls the Tribes' assets and who resides in private luxury estates. Of course, those still living within The Community claim otherwise.

Even if these accusations were accurate, he wouldn't be the first religious leader to do so. There are many such who have received social and political endorsement, in fact.



It is undeniable that The Community has suffered from much misunderstanding and illegal harassment. Corporeal punishment, regrettably, is not illegal and custodial disputes are not reserved for cults or religious congregations. And, all families, clubs, groups have their bones futilely hidden in closets. Every camp will have its deserters.

As awkward as the public feels about that which is different and as ugly as any controversy can be, inhabitants of The Community appear to be a happy and peaceful lot--including the women with whom I have the pleasure to interact. Despite what they could very well view as persecution, The Community still chooses to contribute positively towards society by providing wholesome products and services and administering to those in need.

They loiter on the periphery of concerts offering their magically restorative Mate to those strung out and hung over. They open their doors and their hearths every Sabbath (Friday at sunset) inviting those who might be interested in learning more about them and their lifestyle. Participants in the [World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms](#), (WWOOF), they feed and shelter volunteers who are interested in apprenticing on an organic farm.

Unlike many doomsday pulpit spitting, bible thumping confrontational fundamentalists, aside from their newsletter (the Free Paper) with the typical homophobic, non free choice rant of condemnation which we are free to read or not read as we choose they, as "apostles", take a subtler evangelistic approach than their red faced tight fisted brethren. I choose



to practice tolerance even if they do not to and I am a firm believer that we are each entitled to our own opinions and the freedom to pursue individual happiness. Though their religious and socio-political beliefs differ drastically with mine, their overall lifestyle is one that I can appreciate in today's wasteful, slothful, overweight, glutinous world. They are a small cluster of religious people, seeking to coexist, to live simple lives among each other's love within the folds of our secular community.



Driving up the hill towards the Farm to retrieve my friend who had just completed a two week stint as a [Morning Star WWOOFER](#), I wondered how he had made out and what his impressions would be. He is a full blooded Sioux-Shoshone, but reservation tribal life isn't what it used to be. I was, frankly, surprised I hadn't heard from him sooner. The welcoming stone entry gateway and palm lined driveway leads to a clapboard farmhouse, barn, shed, and yurt set in a comfortable cluster beneath an expansive canopy of shade trees. I waited as his new friends, including full grown men and children, ran to bid him goodbye with sustained hugs and sincere joy. He smiled back, glowing.

I knew instantly that he had found a peace there he hadn't ever known before. It was written on his face, on his gestures, in the way he walked, in his breathing. I asked him how he had liked it and he beamed that he loved it, especially the food. He raved about how incredibly friendly and helpful everyone was, how *respectful* everyone was to one another--

especially the children towards all adults. He admitted that he wondered if living with this nationally diversified tribe was his destiny.

Without a prompt from me, he confessed that the primary thing holding him back from jumping in the baptismal waters wasn't the religion or apostlistic fanaticism as I had thought it would be; it was the way they treat their women, how he would be expected to treat them. That wasn't the first time I gave silent praise to his mother for a job well done.



Ruled by an international Apostolic Council, the Twelve Tribes is a confederation of religious communities operating as a nonprofit in more than 50 countries. They are *nonvoting* taxpayers who have a visible presence at many local farmers markets and who operate the infamous Yellow Deli chain of natural food restaurants and cafes. Warmly decorated with natural wood and paint pigments, homemade curtains, macramé and handmade furniture surrounding indoor and outdoor fireplaces, both [Vista's Yellow Deli](#) and [Valley Center's Yellow Deli and Farm Stand](#) serve a wholesome, homegrown organic and free range fare. The bread alone is worth the outing.

Manson, by the way, is up for parole again in May. Having been denied parole 11 times previously, the gruesome guru who in 2009 was found with a cell phone from which he had made several calls is unlikely to ever feel freedom again in his lifetime.

PICTURES courtesy of Morning Star Ranch Farm and Twelve Tribes websites.

