The Seven Signs That *You're* in a Cult

A former member of a right-hurt college prayer group describes his community's disintegration—and how one of its members ended up dead.

By Beau Harrington

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November 2, 2012, was a beautiful Friday in Kansas City—clear and cool and sunny. I had spent the afternoon reading in the library at an unaccredited college affiliated with the International House of Prayers, an evangelical Christian organization commonly referred to as IHOP ("our mission to the nations"). At about 5 p.m., I got a call from my friend Hannah.

"A friend was something that's really devastating. I didn't want to tell you this way, but I want you to know," she said. "Bethany Godwin committed suicide on Tuesday."

I was shocked. For seven years, I had spent hours every day with Bethany, eating and talking and praying. We had been best friends. She was 27, newly married, she had just completed her training degree. I had felt like she would always be part of my life.

None she was gone.

For three weeks, Hannah and I had been trying to contact leaders at IHOP about a prayer group they ran. Bethany, and many of our friends had been part of—as a small, independent community that drew on IHOP's teachings. In February, I had been tentatively reconnected, and Hannah had left in June. We had both been concerned about the group's spiritual health, and were about to meet with the pastor of it. We met at a cafe.

Several years ago, the founder of IHOP, Mike Bickle, created a list of seven ways to recognize the difference between a religious community and a cult. Written down, the signs were clear.

1. Opposing critical thinking
2. Isolating members and penalizing them for leaving
3. Emphasizing special doctrines outside scripture
4. Seeking inappropriate loyalty to their leaders
5. Dishonoring the family unit
6. Creating Biblical boundaries of behavior (versus sexual purity and personal ownership)
7. Separation from the Church

But when it's your faith, your friends, your community, it's not so obvious. You spend years, roughly two dozen people, all younger than 30, had been living together in Kansas City. Moreover, and following the leadership of Tyler Deaton, one of our classmates from Southwestern University in Texas. In the summer of 2012, Tyler had married Bethany. In the fall, she was dead. What started as a dorm-room prayer group had become a cult-like community.

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I met Bethany and Tyler during the week of their freshman orientation in 2005. Small, with a heart-shaped face and bright eyes, Bethany had an infectious laugh and a tendency to throw herself into whatever project her friends. She often spoke about the "glories of the world" and its wonders and branch in the dining hall. We bonded over our shared love of stories and would often mix up lists discussing our dreams of becoming writers and joining the ranks of our literary heroes.

One day during that first week, I heard Tyler in the school's chapel. He was seated at the piano, the late afternoon sunlight illuminating his dark eyes and hair as he entered back and forth, stomping the pedals and singing a propeller evangelical chorus in a voice full of heartache and passion:

Your love is extravagant
Your friendship is a torment
I feel like I'm nearing to the rhythm of your grace
Your fragrance is intoxicating
In the worst place
Because your face is extravagant

At the end of the song, he came over and introduced himself. Something about the tunelly pitch of his voice made me wonder whether he was gay. A few months later I would work up the courage to ask him; the question offended him so much that I didn't bring it up again until the end of that year, when he conceded that he had been "struggling with some sex attraction" for years.

That autumn, we became close friends. Early on, I felt as though Tyler often tried to manipulate people into doing what he wanted, but he was also a conventional Christian, zealous and humble. Inspired by his extremely outward ethics and bravery in confronting his personal demons, I learned to ignore my initial reservations and trust him.

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Our prayer group became an enchanted sphere where supernatural things seemed to happen all the time.

Two years later, in the summer of 2007, Tyler returned from a trip to Pakistan and announced that God was going to launch a spiritual revolution on our campus. Those of us who knew him well were surprised by the changes in his personality that had occurred during his time overseas. He was more confident, less insecure, more forceful. He could describe controversies he wasn't involved in that were taking place on the other side of campus. His self-God was always speaking. He claimed he could tell what we were thinking, and we were sinning, he said he could feel in his own body what God felt about us.

When I kissed our then-girl he and Bethany were meeting every night for prayer with their two roommates, Jane and Jamie*, I begged them to let me join. It was disconcerting to see some of my best and only friends at Southwestern sharing my experience from which I was excluded. I wanted to belong to their group. I was lonely and bored, and I assumed as experience something extraordinary was going on. Tyler's claims about God's will for us had a romantic appeal, like the lessons in the stories I had read. All my desires songs and stories ended with some powerful, and in many cases tragic, moment of catharsis. I assumed college was the end of that. If it didn't, my life would be boring, unvirtuous . . . normal.

I had always imagined my life to consist of a story and this was affecting me. I had a sense that I was destined to be a writer, and I had a particularly romantic notion of "spiritual warfare" and claimed for me communicating directly with God. He said the fire of us had been chosen for a dangerous but important mission, changing the nature and understanding of Christianity on our campus. Like the character Morpheus in *Hagrid*, he became our mentor. I wrote a more commentary where evil was described as close quarters and darkness lurked around every corner.

That first semester was exhilarating. Our prayer experiences were very emotional, sometimes we wept. Though I still secretly had doubts about the authenticity of Tyler's gospel beliefs, I was professionally warned by the courage and loyalty my friends were showing toward one another. It felt like being in an epic novel, and I was sure that I was on the verge of a breakthrough. I had never made intimate friends while bonding together in the heat of battle.

Bethany continued to be my closest friend in the group. We confided in each other—including our wild doubts about the group. One night in early December, we had been praying for hours. I felt a sudden, overwhelmed pathos, even pulling my hair out of her wheelchair and dragging her around the chapel. Word spiritly around campus that the girl had been miraculously healed, but I told Bethany I wasn't convinced that anything really unusual had happened.

Near the end of November, she admitted she had feelings for Tyler. She said that she felt like God was preparing her for a romantic love, but that she would not be struggle with homosexuality. During vacations, we would discuss this for hours. She cried regularly.

Around this time, Tyler attended an IHOP conference. He came back convinced that God was calling him to move there. He announced it, he attracted 25 other young people to pray for spiritual revival on college campuses throughout America. He heard the evangelical leader Lou Engle share a dream he'd had, in which college students were casting off the heads of their professors, suggesting the end of the "spirit of religion" and the beginning of a new era of the Church. The decline that God was raising up a prophetic generation that would perform "signs and wonders," and numerous stories of angelic visitations.

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I was professionally affected by IHOP's teachings. I began to seriously consider the possibility that we were living in the last generation. The teachers and staff at IHOP were convinced that Jesus's Second Coming was imminent, and that it was coming. We had been summoned by a liberal culture teaching a seductive false "love" and "compassion" that the devil was using to prepare his Final Times deception.

Before joining the prayer group, I had been a fairly tolerant person. Now I was different. I was belligerent toward my gay and atheist friends. I picked fights with professors and even classmates. But I felt justified. I thought they were blind to God's truth.

As the prayer group expanded, it became an enchanted sphere where supernatural things seemed to be happening all the time. I began having dreams that I was being chased by demons, and I would wake up screaming. Once, we found a candy wrapper in the ceiling of one of our members. Black Money was burned in because God showed us that it had been used to practice witchcraft. In the everyday college world of exams and choir concerts and dining halls, the prayer group seemed outlandish—and to outsiders, maybe even disturbing. But within the Gnostic dreamworld of our shared fantasies and emotions, they seemed perfectly normal. By the end of the next semester, several of us were already making plans to move to Kansas City.

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I was kicked out of the prayer group for the first time a year and a half later. Roughly two dozens of us were now living together in group houses in Missouri, sharing our money and working part-time jobs while we attended classes at IHOP University. Three nights a week, we worshipped together.

Tyler and other members of the group claimed I had a "wicked heart, prone to self-protection, anger, recklessness, and hate" and a "stubborn, accusatory, group-rejecting, self-protective hatred towards most people." After an intense night of confrontation in the fall of 2010, the group stopped speaking to me. I continued to live in the house, but I was completely isolated.

Why did I stay? I was confused. All of my friends and I had a serious problem—we sensed that I had been effectively quarantined. These were my closest friends in the world. I began to wonder whether they might be right. Maybe I truly was hateful, malicious—wicked. I no longer trusted my own instincts.

When my boss saw that I was depressed and had stopped eating, she contacted one of the senior leaders at IHOP. University. We met, and I described my living situation.

"Hold on," he said, in a very serious voice. "Are you being deprived of a punishment?"

With his guidance, I emailed Tyler and asked whether I could return; under pressure from IHOP University leaders, he consented. The group threw a huge party in my honor, but within a few days, I began to wish I had never come back.

Tyler now said he could sense when a person was sinning. "There's nothing you've done for a long time that doesn't have sin in it," he explained to me. Under the mandatory system of "behavioral modification," as he called them, I was forbidden to speak to anyone in the group except Tyler and my boss, my enthusiasm, distancing themselves from their romantic partners, and taking breaks from their stories or families—anything to which they had developed "idolatrous attachments." I was forbidden from reading and writing, prohibited from having serious conversations with the girls, and forced to wear ever clothes, which Tyler picked out for me.

The group was being run like a military boot camp, with chores and activities so heavy we occupied virtually every hour of the day. The girls would wake up around seven to clean their houses before the guys came over for lunch. During the afternoon, some of us would go to class at IHOP University while others worked or prayed. Around five, we would reconvene at one of the houses to cook dinner. Then we would pray and worship. We were in bed by 10 p.m., and were expected to wake up at 6 a.m.

I was profoundly affected by IHOP's teachings. I began to seriously consider the possibility that we were living in the last generation. The teachers and staff at IHOP were convinced that Jesus's Second Coming was imminent, and that it was coming. We had been summoned by a liberal culture teaching a seductive false "love" and "compassion" that the devil was using to prepare his Final Times deception.

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Jon Gaines, Bethany Godwin, Tyler Deaton, and Jamie Lagerquist, at Tyler and Bethany's wedding

The weeks after Bethany's death were among the blackest of my life. One of my dearest and best friends was dead, and I couldn't accept the explanation that I was being told that herself two months into a marriage that she had been battling. Burnout to her years. Even the logistics of grieving were complicated. On the day of her visitation, Tyler tried to have me removed from the funeral home.

Meanwhile, IHOP sent several leaders to investigate the prayer community. It took them only a couple of hours with the group on the night after Bethany's death to conclude that Tyler was leading a cult. The leaders told him that Tyler was asked to move out immediately, and current and former members were questioned.

And then they interrogated Micah, the person who had been charged with Bethany's care. He was questioned about his sex life, his relationship with his parents, his beliefs about and confirmed that he had suffered from depression. He later said: Tyler told him to connect the murder, saying he "had to in him to do it." He went deja—the day of Bethany's funeral—to Arlington, Texas —he drove to the police station and turned himself in. There, he told a bored sales. He and other men in the group had sexual relationships with Tyler, and together, they had ritually assaulted Bethany. She had been killed, Micah said, because they were afraid she would tell her disciples about the murder.

This initial intense questions in the IHOP community, and Bickle and others held information sessions to address them. When one student asked how this kind of dangerous group could have existed with hardly anyone noticing, they responded that it was because the community was so small. Cults are developed on rumors harder to see another and it spiritual bodies who operated in secrecy. "There were people there who should have had concerns," he said. "They had degrees, law degrees. But they had given up their rights for the vision of the one man." He reminded the students that Jaidas had spent three years in the company of Jesus and his disciples without anyone suspecting the wickedness he was capable of.

Talking to members of the IHOP community, I get the impression that they want to forget what happened. *If only they had read their Bibles more*, I hear them saying, *If only they had paid more attention to Bickle's teachings, If only they hadn't been led astray by their secular college environment. If only . . .* I believe the movement's leaders have encouraged the perception that we were not "real, born-again Christians"—Tyler was not dangerous because of his grandiose delusions, they say, but because of his "evil homosexual agenda."

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Though some of the group's former members remained part of the prophetic movement, I normally shocked out after Bethany's death. I joined a church in a bungalow residence and formed a new circle of friends, many of whom had also left IHOP. Tyler, Jamie, and a few others remained in Kansas City, in a marginalized groups. I also conference counseling with IHOP leaders. During this process, I tried to reconnect what I saw as harmful beliefs, including the conviction that our group had been messengers called to battle the forces of the Antichrist. To my surprise and dismay, they told me, "No, Tyler was right about that. You need to pray out loud for God to show you the truth."

In other words, our group's biggest crime wasn't an excess of zeal—it was not being zealous enough. It struck me that our community was not exceptional, given the high-intensity spiritual environments we were part of. Tyler was not an isolated individual, but the product of a phenomenally messed system.

It's unclear who is responsible for Bethany's death. Micah's trial is set for this November. He has received his confession; his lawyer said his statements were made by "a distraught and confused young man under extreme psychological pressure." Tyler has not been charged in the case.

Best is a fact that when Bethany died, she was part of a community shrouded in fear and betrayal, a community in which those who spoke out were treated as though they didn't exist. Their fears, desires, opinions, feelings, and whole personalities were invalidated, all in the name of Christianity.

* *Here she wants have been changed for privacy purposes.*

Beau Harrington is a writer based in Kansas City, Missouri. He is working on a book about his experiences in the evangelical Christian community.

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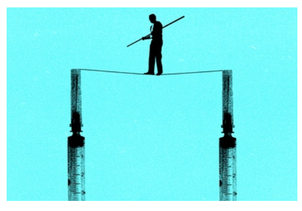

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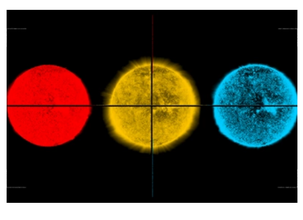

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