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DEAR MCSWEENEY'S,
 I am concerned that I have been a bad friend. I rarely call or text my friends on the West Coast, except perhaps to give them a "like" or send a heart emoji on an Insta-

gram post or respond "Whoa—so fun!" to a story. I'm always earnest (their lives do look fun, after all), though the monotony of my responses has turned me into an autoresponding friendship bot. But I worry, mostly, that I've been a bad friend to a particular friend. I'll call her Jamie.

I first met Jamie when she sat next to me at book club. She had just moved to New York City from Los Angeles and was so eager to make girlfriends and belong to a group that she showed up even though the friend who'd invited her had canceled. It's hard making friends in adulthood so I appreciated the effort.

Book club was more of a social event than a book club. There was an email chain with thirty or so women in our network, and each week we'd meet at a different person's apartment. Many of the women hadn't read the books or hadn't finished them and would complain that they didn't want spoilers during the question-and-answer segment, so most book club evenings became about the wine and cheese and socializing. We'd eventually end up talking about dating in New York and there'd be some phone going around with photos of some guy someone had just been matched with.

Jamie and I connected because we both read the books, so she suggested meeting up for a glass of wine an hour before the next book club so that we could actually talk about the book, *Eight Hundred Grapes*.

Four months later, the book club chose Emma Cline's *The Girls*, inspired by the Charles Manson murders, about a young girl who gets caught up in a cult. That book choice now feels like some freakish foreshadowing, and it's a shame I can't remember what Jamie thought of it. It was also just a popular book.

I guess this is a good time for me to mention that Jamie joined a

cult shortly after moving to New York.

Questions I'd like you to keep in mind as you read the rest of my letter:

If a friend who is in a cult doesn't tell you they are in a cult, are you really friends?

If a friend tries to get you to join the cult by pretending it is not a cult, are you really friends?

Should you be mad at a friend for trying to get you involved in a cult, or sympathetic because perhaps they were brainwashed?

Before Jamie joined the cult, our lives were on similar trajectories. I spent much of my time pitching a TV show I was working

on in various network rooms; she spent much of her time pitching herself in audition rooms as an actress. We bonded over the hustle of creative pursuits. She paid attention when you spoke, looked intently into your eyes, and would remember details about your life that others forgot. I invited her to brunches, parties, and arts-and-crafts nights with friends.

Now, looking back at our nearly three-year friendship, I have a vague idea about when she joined the cult, because she started spending more and more time going upstate to Albany for a "program" that she rather vaguely said was an "intensive acting workshop."

It did strike me as fairly odd that though she lived in New York City, with access to some of the best acting schools and classes in the world, she would need to travel to Albany for any sort of program. But then again, I was used to having friends escape to artist residencies in the forest, so perhaps seclusion was this program's thing.

It was later revealed that Albany was the headquarters of a cult that posed as a self-help organization promising enlightenment while luring young women into becoming "sex slaves" and conning others into spending thousands of dollars for classes devised by a faux guru. And out of all of our friends,

she thought that I would be a good fit for the cult.

Now, I don't consider myself a gullible person, but people *have* joked in the past that they wouldn't be surprised if I joined a cult.

"I can actually see you joining a cult," one of my friends texted me after I told him the story about Jamie. "You're so enthusiastic about things. Plus you tend to see the best in people. You'd eventually get out a whiteboard and write 'AM I IN A CULT?' at the top and then list all the things that make it seem like it's definitely a fucking cult and then all the things that make it seem

like it's just a bunch of super enthusiastic, like-minded pals."

He might have been joking (I hope?), but there *was* something about my personality that Jamie picked up on that made me a good target. On the surface, there are two qualities we shared:

A desire to belong. Perhaps my recent concern about being a bad friend is due to the fact that I've been known to do something I've dubbed "friendshipping hard." Just-because gifts, handwritten thank-you notes, texts, calls, and hosting multiple parties a year are all things I did to bring friends into my orbit.

Overcommitment. Perhaps,

like Jamie, I've searched for some sort of depth/enlightenment/deeper knowledge. I self-deprecatingly refer to myself as a "class-a-holic," having taken over twenty-five classes and workshops around the city over the years.

Perhaps it is because of these two shared attributes that Jamie began inviting me, along with my husband, a painter and actor, to recruitment events, posing them as wine-and-cheese nights with like-minded artists and creatives to talk about "life, authenticity, and the awesome human potential."

"Hey, lovebug! Are you around next Monday night??" her first text

read. "We're hosting a little actors/artists get-together at my house and I would love for you to come! A dear friend and great actress is coming to talk about the program I've been working with. But it's also just about a bunch of artists getting together to have appetizers and talk art."

A Paperless Post invite noted that we were invited because we were "the type of person who questions things, challenges convention, and aims to be a deep, authentic artist and or person."

My ego was flattered. I was someone people thought of as *deep*. I was *authentic*. I was an *and or person*.

We arrived to find twenty or so people packed into the small two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn that Jamie shared with a roommate. Before we had stepped inside, we were handed a flyer for a program called The Source. My husband raised his brow. He possesses two qualities I do not have: an aversion to anything remotely self-help-y and an aversion to belonging to any sort of organized group. I shrugged and stuffed the flyer into my bag.

“I’m a certified mentor,” said one guy we had begun making small talk with. He paused, as if we were supposed to be impressed. This interaction repeated itself

with other attendees. I would later find out that “certified mentor” indicated status within the cult. About thirty minutes later, we were asked to gather around the living room for a presentation. I put a handful of cheese and crackers on my plate, realizing it was my last chance at the gouda.

A woman who looked strangely similar to Jamie—young, beautiful, notably thin, dark-haired, and fairylike—stood at the front of the room. She began talking about the program, how much it had helped her, saved her, made her feel connected with life. Her speech had all the self-help keywords like *mindfulness* and

creativity without the substance. It felt like one of those time-share presentations I’d attended with my parents as a child to get free dinners on vacation.

“What value would you put on authenticity?” she said. “Could you put a price on it? You would pay anything, wouldn’t you? To be your most authentic self?”

She revealed that the price of this nebulous self-help program started at ten thousand dollars.

Ugh, I thought. Why couldn’t this just have been one of those New York City nights where you have interesting conversations with people you’ll never talk to again and drink shitty wine?

Jamie offered to walk back to the subway with us after her friend finished stumbling through her cult pitch.

“She just didn’t explain it well!” Jamie said, appearing distraught when she realized our lack of enthusiasm for joining. “The person who explained it the last time couldn’t come; she did a much better job.”

“That is definitely a cult,” said my husband, as soon as Jamie left.

“Aren’t a lot of programs kind of cultish?” I replied to my husband defensively. I have a bit of a “whatever works for you” attitude about woo-woo things in general.

After all, he and I had both participated in classes that we admitted had borderline cultish tendencies. At both the Peoples Improv Theater and the Upright Citizens Brigade, achieving “group mind” is a coveted goal, and theater gurus like Del Close and Sanford Meisner take on a godlike status. To warm up before improv sets, we’d crawl on the ground pretending to be animals.

The problem is that the definition of *cult* itself is up for debate. Wikipedia, for example, says a cult “usually refers to a social group defined by its religious, spiritual, or philosophical beliefs, or its common interest in a particular

personality, object or goal.” Many organized religions, workplaces, and dedicated acting classes toed this line. The definition of *cult* is blurry for a reason. It’s kind of complicated.

But what makes a cult dangerous? I’d say it’s the exploitation of people’s safety, their money, or their bodies.

In late March 2019, my newsfeed filled with headlines about an FBI investigation into a sex-slave cult that included famous actresses. The cult leader had escaped to Mexico, only to be discovered and arrested. But it wasn’t until a friend told me that Jamie had mentioned talking to

the FBI that I put two and two together. The “program” Jamie was in, which was called The Source, was actually Nxivm, the cult that was dominating the news cycle. I went down a wormhole of research.

Court documents and articles would report that women were forced to perform sexual acts for the cult leader, out of fear that Nxivm would release their “collateral”—including explicit naked photos they had taken. One woman had reportedly been forced to strip down and was then blindfolded and driven to a place where she was tied to a table while a stranger performed oral sex on

her. Women were branded like cattle. At some point Jamie had defected and agreed to work with the FBI to investigate the cult.

I had two very different feelings about the revelation. On the one hand, I felt betrayed by someone whom I’d thought I could trust but who was living an alternate, dangerous life that she had tried to recruit me and others into. On the other hand, shouldn’t I be consoling a friend who’d been manipulated by a powerful creep? Was she at fault, or was she a victim?

Why had I missed the red flags and initially defended the program to my husband? I was also confused

about why she had tried to recruit my husband and me, a married couple, into what was being dubbed in the media as a sex cult. I wasn't some drifter who could be swayed into becoming a sex slave. But then again, not everyone in the cult was a sex slave. Cults also need your everyday followers who pay the bills and attend those "self-help enlightenment" classes. Was she using me for money? This thought disgusted me. Or maybe she actually believed in the cult so much that she genuinely thought I would benefit from it.

Shortly after I put the pieces together, she texted me asking to get vegan pizza.

You can't just try to get my husband and me to join your creepy sex cult and then ask me to get vegan pizza like nothing happened! I wanted to text back. But I figured it probably wasn't best to confront her about the cult over text or over vegan pizza. Was there a right way to confront a friend about being a cult member?

I declined our vegan pizza date and finally decided to call her.

"Yes," she said, when after a few vague cordialities I asked her if she was part of the cult. "I was wondering if you were going to ask."

She told me about working with the FBI ("They aren't too

pushy") and confirmed everything I'd learned in my research.

"It was never presented as collateral," she said almost defensively when I asked about the naked photos. "That word was never used. That's just what the media calls it. It was about trusting each other."

She sounded sentimental. I listened and tried to empathize, but she never apologized. And I never asked her to. I mentioned the piece the *New York Times* had published about the cult.

"I still haven't read it yet, but I heard it was optioned by HBO. How can they option this story? They're going to get it wrong. It's

my life." She was frustrated. When we'd first met, she hadn't been able to get cast in her dream role, and now someone else might be cast to play her.

I haven't seen Jamie since I found out she was in a cult. I have, however, continued to "like" her posts on Instagram and commented "Whoa—looks so fun!" on her stories here and there. And this brings me back to my earlier questions.

Were we ever really friends? If so, am I a bad friend for avoiding her?

I realize, McSweeney's, that you are not Dear Abby, and so you cannot tell me if I've been

LETTERS

a bad friend or not. You can
simply listen, which, honestly, is
sometimes all you need a friend
to do.

Love from your non-cult
member friend (for now),

LAURA LANE
BROOKLYN, NY

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