

[while writing her new book]

Daniella: So, I was staring at this definition of a cult. I did this talk where I put up the question *what is a cult?* And I put up a definition with a listicle and I have the picture of our guru surrounded by his harem, essentially, our prophet, and then I will say again, *what is a cult?* And I'll put up a picture of Hugh Hefner and his harem, and basically everything matches. This was in the prologue of my forthcoming book. But I was staring at the definition and I was thinking about the army and I was like, "Oh, you know, I've been trying to explain this for 10 years or longer... that when you're in the army, but you're home, it's kind of normal, but as soon as you go away to training or go away to war, it's a cultic situation, 100%."

So, everyone's told me that there's obvious differences between a sex cult in the US army but when I, a scholar of this, actually try to define it in precise scholarly language, there's not that much difference and it gets very complicated which leads me to give you this setup of: maybe there're socially nonacceptable cults, and socially acceptable cults and this is why people say to me all the time, "the army can't be a cult because we need it."

Well... you're not saying that [the army] is not [a cult], you're just saying that it's necessary and useful, right? And so, if we started to look at that experience, you're going to go through a cultic experience and actually deal with that, right? It's all about how nobody wants to call something a cult and everyone wants to think they're not in a cult.

And so, in this next book I'm giving you these 12 different facets of group behavior that *cults* use. And it's kind of like, well if they do it in the cults and they do it in the army (socially acceptable cult), then I know it's either about programming and influence or power and control. So, I'm going to show you that, and then show you other places in the world where we see this; all groups are a little bit cult-y.

Consider what we say about individuals: we're all 99% the same, but it's that one percent that causes all the difference and hardships in the world. I think that's the same thing for groups, which means no matter how amazing Tiny Spoon is as an organization, you're also just one percent away from being a sex cult that traffics children.

Tiny Spoon: Well, let's hope not.

Daniella: [laughing] Yeah, so where do you find that? How do you spot the toxic patterns before they get your group? Because it's not sex cult *or* wonderful organization, which is how people try to put the divide in my story. And that was the whole reason I wrote this book; people would say to me, "Oh, well, the sex cult is *obviously* evil." Well, nothing is *obviously* evil when you're in it and second of all, like, "The US Army is a wonderful organization." And I would say, "Well, the US Army is 1.3 million humans trained to kill other humans... and obviously my experience was not wonderful, being in the military, but we have such a mindset about it in the US and I have a sub-chapter in the next book that's called the deification of the military and the cult of the veteran—because we have exalted the military, and it's been really ramped up since 2001, right? What I've heard called, & I like the term, *toxic patriotism*. You can't question the military, even when they get on the outside as veterans; you can question the system, you can question the country, you can question everything except that veteran.

There're so many things that we think of that's like, "Oh cults do that; that that's not me." And obviously, it's just human behaviors. It's just one of the most extreme forms of human behavior. And of course, that's the idea I play with a lot in *UNCULTURED*, where you have these soldiers, American soldiers, willing to die for an idea, but you have the terrorists out there who also were willing to die for their idea that they believe is valid... and one of my favorite quotes about this comes, from General Stanley McChrystal, who was the commander of all the forces in Afghanistan before he was fired for criticizing the commander-in-chief—there was that Rolling

Stone article, where he criticized President Obama. But anyways, his one of his quotes is essentially, you know, paraphrasing, “Soldiers, if we're honest with ourselves, we don't know what side of history we're fighting on.” So, to take this idea of if we're going to define ‘extremism’ as someone willing to die for an idea, then soldiers...

I've found by studying organizational behavior that people do not consider cults, and terrorist groups, and gangs, and these kinds of extremely bad groups to be successful organizations. So, very comically, I was doing my degree at Harvard and I was in organizational psychology, which is where the good guys go to study the good groups, right? If you want to study the bad guys, you're over in sociology and never the two shall meet.

And so, I petition them if I can add [a class]; they have a class called psychology of cults, and it was literally looking at Johnstown, Heaven's Gate, Children of God; what worked and where we see that in society. So, it was the academic version of this book. I have this book coming out. I asked, “Please let me add this as one of my electives to my program,” and they do this all the time, it's a new program. I personally know 15 students that have done it and they just were like, “No sorry, it's not enough about groups.” That was the response. And there's a couple layers there; I've already made myself known as the girl who compares everything to cults. The woman who compares everyone to cults and nobody likes that for their organization.

I thought: Oh, you don't think of cults as successful groups, but I can stand in front of a business group and talk about how this multinational organization with 10,000 members has people going all over the world; highly motivated, tend to stay with the company for life, doing all kinds of risky operations around the world and bringing in millions of dollars. And most people would say that's a successful organization until I tell you, like I'm talking about the Taliban or the Children of God.

So, I want to look at those things in tandem without this *good* or *bad* [classification], figure out what works. That's the only way to answer the question of why people join cults and why people stay in cults.

TS: I can imagine being at, or affiliated with, Harvard talking about cults and them saying “Yeah. Well. But *this* isn't a cult.” But in regard to academia, it *is*— it is a cult; the cult-ification of this world; we live in America, after all.

D: The white supremacist patriarchy kind of is the *biggest* cult.

In the Epilogue of my book, I touch on how I don't even necessarily consider myself a cult *survivor*; I was their prisoner for 15 years. But now, when I look at it backwards, I think: *Oh, I joined the army for every reason that my grandfather probably joined the Children of God*, but also in the 60s and 70s, if you wanted to isolate an American, you had to take someone away to your compound in Texas, or Brazil. But these days, when you can vote on what ad you want to see on your social media platform of choice, we don't all share the same reality anymore; the polarization has just been increasing.

TS: Thank you for giving us an in-depth teaser to your next book, which I personally am super excited for! It seems like the next one is going to be more prescriptive. It's going to be distilling it down to a formula, right? Those of us that look at the world around us and with a critical eye, with a discerning eye, we can understand that, in a certain sense, history is written by the victor. So, there's a reason that the Taliban [for example] are, you know, thumbs down—a bad group, a cult. Whereas the United States military, or academia, or ‘Western hegemony’ as a more nebulous term, is thumbs up—it's the drawing of lines and distinctions. The prescriptive nature of: What is a cult? How does it work? Is what I think that you hint at it in multiple spots throughout [your book].

D: I like to think that all of my academic theory is tucked into that. And you know, in the process of writing it, I actually had the last final chapter called ‘The Cults Among Us’ and it was basically my graduate thesis; I had citations and everything! And my editor was like, “No, you can't.” But you’ll see! And it turned into this beautiful epilogue that tells the story and ties up all the loose ends. I took all of those ideas and all of those thoughts and spread those sentences throughout the book.

Story is the best way to move ideas. So [the question was] how do we take these concrete ideas that matter to everyone, and tuck them into the story?

TS: What I noticed was the way that you crafted a narrative—the way that you write—how effectively you're able to get your voice into this book. I've read a lot of memoirs, but this is not just a memoir. This is a precursor, it seems like, to something that's going to delve more into theory and I wanted to ask you a little more about this— what I see right now is there's this hyperfocus on American exceptionalism, individualism; there's a hyper focus on the individual, and there's a hyper focus on identity. What it seems to me is that by putting people into different groups, be it, you know, self-proclaimed or otherwise, saying, “Well, I'm *this* and I'm *unique* and I'm *special*...” And of course, we're all special. Don't think for a minute I don't believe that. But to say, I'm *different* than you and I fit in with *this* group of people and this is *my* clan and these are *my* people—it gives way to political extremism of all sorts. And there's something subversive about it, there's something that infiltrates the media that we consume. You mentioned the digital world that we all occupy... I mean, take for instance Tiny Spoon; we started this out in Colorado years ago and then COVID hit & we're all in different states now. But, you know, we've published folks from all over the world and we have meetings every week, and it's not a bad thing to have this invisible world that surrounds and connects all of us, but I feel like I'm

looking at the world around me, waiting for an impact. When I first read this book and I felt viscerally angry; there's a feeling of helplessness, like *this is the world we live in*.

In the epilogue, you write, “The first rule of cults is we are never a cult. It's always them, not us. There's always someone else to blame; the others, the outsiders, the unchosen, and as this belief builds in its followers, the less likely we are to question, the easier it is to hate, harm, even kill because we are the good guys, we are right. No matter how many signs point in a different direction or how that direction shifts with the course of the wind” and what I'm worried about is, looking at the world around us, the question of: “Is it is a too late? Are we too far gone? Is everybody stuck into their own spheres and identities and inside our own heads to a point that There isn't a real meta way of pulling ourselves back from the brink, from this abyss, or are we in freefall? And is it a matter of waiting for that impact?”

Of course, I believe it's never too late, you can't give up; the reason that we're sitting down like this, the reason that we started Tiny Spoon, the reason that I do what I do, is to try and play to my strengths to fight back against this feeling. But it's a creeping feeling of despair that I think is shared by most Americans. If not global citizens everywhere.

D: Yes. So, a couple of the things— America by far has the most cults, by far, and I think that American individualism plays into that. One thing we know about people that tend to join cults is that they don't usually come from very strong cultures, and they're seeking something that's missing. So, the other part of that is that we see a lot of cults in times of social turmoil and that is because social systems are being pulled down and people are searching for meaning; nobody ends up in a cult on accident; they're searching for something.

Right now, I think we are living through the end of the American experiment. You hear people say we're in ‘end stage capitalism’, right? The democracy that Founding Fathers dreamed up, it

was great at the time, and it has held for 250 years, but I think we're in the end of that... part of this goes back to the individualism; I like to describe American exceptionalism as the little girl whose Daddy told her she was the prettiest girl in the room, and now she's grown up and she still believes it, and nobody else likes her! So, because we were so individualized... well, you know, it takes a village to raise children, but then we all went and built these mansions where we raise our children by ourselves.

So, one of the things I am dealing with right now, and I think one of the hard things with deconstruction, or any time you've had a belief, and this goes also to your political parties or whatever, it's mourning the *idea* of 'what could have been.' I don't think the Children of God did free love right, did nudity right; clearly, they abused us. Clearly, they did all of these things wrong. But what they were trying to do was right, and I don't think America treats nudity and sex and has children interact with that and learn about that [stuff in the right way] either.

So, there was this *idea*—because people in America, we don't have these super strong cultures or, so many of us don't, and this is also why I think more white people join cults than people of color, because we're not coming from these strong communal cultures and so it's easy— “Oh the individual, *she's* doing that, *he's* whatever— you know, let her do it.” The strongest thing that'll get you out of a cult is a friend being like, “No, that's crazy.” right? That came from a white nationalist recruiter. Like that's the thing that stops people—and we have this 'live and let live' attitude in America, with the individualism, and I think like that is a big part of it.

My analogy for the next book: I started the prologue by saying “I'm the Cassandra of groups and systems.” I see it before it goes wrong. And in the epilogue, I tell you: “the hard thing is Cassandra still dies in the end,” right? We sometimes only realize that something like wheat cultivation was far worse for humanity, but we only realized that once we're dependent on wheat. The internet. When I was in intelligence school, the worst disaster in the world was the internet

going down; millions and millions of people started to die; we saw that in Puerto Rico on a mini scale. And so, it's like we have created all of these things that we need to survive, and now we're realizing it's not the better way.

We understood that we needed to live in groups to dominate everything else alive on the planet and that groups and systems are stronger than individuals. Now, we are realizing that most of those groups and systems are messed up! I think all millennials are going through their crack-in-the-brainwashing moment; leaving their cults and being like, *oh, all of this was messed up*— all of this stuff that you taught us— ‘Spare the rod spoil the child’ is a horrible chapter, the way we were disciplined was horrible, but most millennials have been beaten by their parents growing up, so it's like we're all realizing that we're all doing things with these new models. And so, I'm with you where I think it's all coming down, no I don't think it's ‘the end of the world,’ I think it's very America-centric for us to think that it will be the end of everything— I think it is the end of the American experiment; we are living through the Armageddon *of* the American experiment, and something else is going to rise out of the ashes, and it's going to be different. I think most of the world is figuring out that a responsible kind of socialism is the next evolution of democracy. And I even feel like it's really conceited of us to think that we are the end-all-be-all; no empire has ever lasted longer than 250-300 years. [Eventually they all create] this triangle where you spread out so much that you then cannot maintain your superiority and no one's ever beat that before, but we think it's going to be us, just like no one's ever won an insurgency before. But we spent 20 years trying to pretend like it was going to be us.

You talked about how accessible the writing was, so, first of all, I had one person tell me, “I don't think your stories have a market, because I don't think that a good girl from Milwaukee who's never had anything bad happened to her can understand growing up in a sex cult or being a woman in military.” And I responded, well, I would check the concept; that there was a nice girl from Milwaukee that never had *anything* bad happened to her? All women can think of a time

when they were a little girl and they wished they had a fairy godmother to take them away and bring them to a better world. All women and girls have had trauma, that's why Disney is a billion-dollar industry. Then on the flip side, I had a psychiatrist to tell me, "Your stories have value because we study the extremes to understand everyone else." And what I really tried to do here was sort of that Jane Austen 'every woman' thing; you're reading my story but you're inside the eyes of that child [in the story] and you're experiencing all of it. So, you can picture how those things about group behavior impacted you in your world, even though you never went through a cult. For me, it's been [a process of] realizing there's a giant ex-religious community that I never thought much of, because I just ditched all the religion. I never thought much about the religious trauma, that aspect of it, and how deeply that connects.

I honestly feel lucky that the Children of God is called a cult, because I have friends from Southern Baptist Convention who grew up in many ways so much worse than I did, but society doesn't give them necessarily the validation of that religious trauma. I think these topics touch everyone; what I experienced in the cult, and then military, and then even since then...

I always say: there's three steps, or three phases, to leaving a cult. You have to 1. wake up (the crack in the brain-washing) and actually leave. This is where I think [culturally] a lot of millennials are right now. And then I think it takes about a decade, but you have to 2. understand why you were in a cult, and then what impacts it had on you. For me, I was born in one, so that took me to understanding systems and how we're handed down generational trauma. Just because I didn't choose it, it's still having lifelong impacts on me, even though I rejected it, that's part of the journey. Here was me thinking, *oh I walked away from that. I can just run as fast as I can, work hard, you know, one day I'll hit enough success* and when you're Captain in the Army and it's not enough and you're still broken. You're like, *okay, I need to start dealing with this*. And then the third phase: 3. once you've got everything deconstructed and put in place, then you have to figure out how you move forward with no models.

I think those last two phases often happen simultaneously. For me, writing this book, studying what they call ‘social identity theory’, basically how we identify in our groups, that was what led me to realize literally two years ago that one of my issues is that I never got to develop a personal identity—because that's what we're doing between the ages of one and six; we're understanding that we are separate from our mothers and we're developing that personal identity, and then a little bit more as a teenager, with pushing the boundaries—I never got to do any of that, so I have to start doing that now.

I'm a big knitter, crocheter, and I've decided that I'm going to teach myself to sew. I love thrift stores and I've starting pulling things apart and blending them because that's the only way— I was born in Asia, I grew up in Latin America, and the only way for me to figure out who I really am is to blend a bunch of things together and experiment; I'm going to wear whatever I want, read what I want, whatever it is— you have to figure out who you are individually without the system that you grew up in telling you who you are. And I think a lot of millennials are figuring this out.

But then also, when you reject the system that you came from, you have to figure out everything on your own. There's no question in our house that we could ever answer about raising a human that we could ever answer with, “Well, this is the way I did it” or, Tom comes with a pretty toxic family as well. So, we just don't *have* good models, so we have to learn everything on our own, which is hard. But it also forces you to live really intentionally; I think that is something we're all getting out of it.

TS: Well, let me just say that your daughter is very, very, very, very lucky to have you and Tom as parents.

D: She's turning seven. She's decided, she's not a fan of having the weird mom.

TS: Weird mom?! Harvard educated, best-selling author...

D: Harvard educated, best-selling author... who shows up to pick her up from school in a floor-length rainbow-crocheted beaded gown!

TS: Hey, there ain't nothing wrong with that! So, I wanted to circle back, and then I promise we'll get to the Tiny Spoon questions. I just find it all so interesting. As I was reading *UNCULTURED*, I had my own... trip. About this emphasis on identity and finding your place in the world and how that can mold us, and how this emphasis on the individual can be used by groups to kind of... 'amoeba' out, and suck folks in.

D: Absolutely, so if you have or haven't read *Sapiens*, he has a follow-on book called *Homo Deus*, Yuval Noah Harari, and it's all about how all of human history has been conquering death, war, and plague— and we've kind of almost done that now. And so next we're trying to turn ourselves into Gods. But he goes into this whole [analysis of] how religions moved... and then individualism, liberalism, all of this came up... and it's Nazism, it's democracy, it's fascism. It's all of these 'isms'... which are about the individual, and essentially, we've replaced God with the individual. So, one of the things I say a lot: in cults and in any kind of coercive control, from one person to another, you're going to have these thought-stopping cliches, So, "trust the prophet," "we keep sweet," "boys will be boys." These are all thought-stopping cliches. And when people ask, "Okay, well, are all our religions cults?" No, but all religions have a point on which logic doesn't explain it and you must therefore go on faith. So, all religions have thought-stopping cliches baked in, which means they have the potential to be manipulated by people for coercive control.

That's why we see trends; religions become cults, gyms, non-profits... that's sort of what you're saying, right? Like if someone says, "Oh it's just me, you can't question me, I'm doing this for myself in my own health, we kind of take that up, right? [Take for example] when our culture was advocating an eating disorder, right now, as healthy eating— and [this trend is] going around. We have in many ways made the *individual* bad and we don't question God. So, we don't question the individual.

TS: And that's different than the ancient Gnostic tradition of saying, "Well, no, it's not that the individual *is* God, but God is *within* all of us.

D: That all human life matters.

TS: Right!

D: And that's different than elevating *just* the individual. And then the other thing that you said, so, I believe that any idea can become its own cult, or can be used to radicalize people. So, if you don't know about the pipeline from crunchy-liberal to alt-right, that pipeline exists, which seems crazy to people. So, I have seven now, my next book will have ten, the ten commandments for good groups that aren't cults. And my number one is... don't rape the children and people kind of laughed and said, "Oh that will be obvious," but we can all think of cases where we've forgiven individuals or groups for doing that, and it exemplifies 'ends justify the means' theory.

So, rule number one: don't rape the children. I 100% agree that that is a good rule. However, 'Pizzagate' was an example of *don't rape the children* being used to radicalize people, right? Because everybody agrees that there shouldn't be sex trafficking, right? It's kind of like communism, like when we had the Red Scare in the US. So, everyone can get behind [the fact that] we don't want sex trafficking, and so not only did [Pizzagate] lead to that direct violence,

but I watched my friends from the sex cult get radicalized into QAnon by this. [The propaganda] was really, really powerful. I'm going to look at addiction science for this in the next book, but I think that anything can be a cult, and it doesn't mean that the thing is bad, right?

So, [take for example] running, a great thing for humans. [But] the way I participated in running... I was in the cult of running. And Brene Brown? Love her. One of my favorite people. However, if you tell me that all you do is read Brene Brown books, listen to Brene Brown's podcast, watch Brene Brown's Netflix shows, and other than work, that's what you *do*: I think you're in the cult of Brene Brown.

One thing that people miss is that a cult takes all the right pieces... and then the logic breaks down. So, the logic doesn't always break down just like a charismatic, leader isn't always a malignant narcissist, right? I tried to show this [in the book] with Scott Halter and then Johnny Maxwell; you can have, in a cultic situation, a charismatic leader who's not a malignant narcissist and we had a good experience, a transformational experience. I still realized now that I fell way too much into a sort of cult-leader-in-love-with-him, well, not *in love* but, you know what I mean.

I was joking about it, saying, you know, readers say that I like Scott Halter way too much for what he actually did for me. And yeah, we went through all this hard stuff together, blah blah blah, I already believed in him, already this, already that; good thing we didn't go away together and live on a compound where we couldn't leave and he was unquestionably in charge... oh no wait, we did that for nine months... that is literally what a deployment is! And I think we all have that [quality]— we can have that same sort of connection to our leaders that weren't malignant narcissists and we love them. Then when they are malignant narcissists, which is just the other side of the charismatic leader coin, this goes really wrong. So, I think people miss out on that a lot; most strong groups have the potential to go toxic, for logic to break down.

There's no way to describe the rise and fall of WeWork without using the term 'cult'. Most groups have the potential to do that but everything has to be right. It's kind of like a successful terrorist attack: everything has to go right in order for 9/11 to happen. Usually it's thwarted, usually people see that the leader pushes the line too far and then people wake up and walk away, but everyone assumes that they will and I'm from the 10,000 people that didn't.

TS: It seems like a self-perpetuating cycle, where if you have the overemphasis on the individual as a God, you have all of us sequestering ourselves into our identities... (and we all do it, I'm no different; "Oh, I'm a writer. Oh, I'm a musician...") and we give ourselves these labels. We say *this is who I am* because it feels safe. It feels good to say *this is where I belong and these are my people*.

D: One of the human drives is defining yourself and your community—we need an *us* and we need a *them*. To get that high of community, you need this polarization. I don't think the groups that are soulless corporations are on the way to becoming cults, they're just soulless corporations; they're their own bad thing. It's the groups that are 'people-first' that are the ones on their ways to becoming cults. One of my analogies is: in the military, we have operations and we have intelligence, and these two are partners—we used to joke "We're married!" but you're set in opposition to each other. So, if you're operations and your job is going to take that village, I'm security and my job is bring everyone home alive. Well, the best way for me to bring home everyone home alive is to not let them go anywhere near the village, but that's a really terrible way for you to take the village; that's not going to be an effective way, right? So, it's this tug and pull.

When I used to give CEOs, these talks about culture, [I would tell them] I can ask everyone that owns a business: "Can I see your business plan? Or, can you tell me about your financials?" And you're going to be able to do something, but then if I ask you, "Hey does Tiny Spoon have a

culture plan?" Well then, I've got people staring at me like I've purple spots on my face, but everyone will see that culture is the most important thing. So, it's like... how do you *do* that? And this is the kind of career I feel like I'm carving out for myself; everyone in the space of culture and group development focuses on the good stuff. [But my question is:] who's keeping an eye on the bad guy?

The security officer in the army is always resented. We're told that from the beginning, like you're seen as the bad guy— you're seen as the person that's always bringing up the negative. And so, I get it; nobody wants to do that in operations. And I feel like in every company, if you have two people, one of you should be in charge of operations—usually companies have that— then the other person is in charge of culture; everything that you do: how's this going to affect your people? And then you don't know, so you have to forecast out, understand what you expect to see, build some checkpoints in, and see if you're doing that. And if not, you re-adjust.

So, [I think that] all of these things are almost easy and obvious, but because it's negative, because it's dangerous, because nobody wants to think that they're going to become manipulative, or that they're going to build a group that has toxic power over people, people don't look at this stuff.

In the military, every brief has a place for the security officer: What's going to happen to us? Even if we're driving from here to Louisiana; what's going to happen to us? What is the danger? It's not *if* it's *when*. When things go wrong, what are we going to do? So, my favorite example of this was maybe back in 2012, the Department of Homeland Security made 'Prepare for the Zombie Apocalypse' posters. Because they thought, well, Americans won't care about preparing for a tornado, but if we say prepare for the zombie apocalypse people will think that's cool, and then they'll be more prepared for the tornado. That's what intelligence is in the military; [I remember] I couldn't get my soldiers excited to do a country brief about Afghanistan, so I let

them do it in World of Warcraft instead! You tell me you're going to go do X mission and I'm thinking, *what am I going to do?* I do this in leadership seminars with paint, and they're all painting their canvas... and halfway through I come by and I throw black paint on their canvas! Or, sometimes I just make everyone switch canvases.

TS: That is profound... so, I think we agree that we are living through the end of the American experiment, and the question is: What happens next? Well, we don't know exactly. But we know that it'll be different... and that it'll be a lot more of the same in a lot of ways—the power dynamics that come out of class, race, and social strata... these things offer a certain degree of protection for certain folks, maybe not so much for others, but as we navigate the changing of Empire, I think that there's an inclination to not look at the negatives, to not talk about things honestly, and I think that where you're making a difference is that you're rejecting that ethos and saying, no, in fact, we need to have books like *UNCULTURED*, and the next one. What we need to do is be able to talk about the less-than-savory aspects of the way politics works—the way that any of this works.

D: Yeah! And to understand that our propensity is to love the group we're in and to justify the group that we're in. We have one of the rules, Tom came up with this one: anytime you're chanting your own last name, you're in a cult. There's organizational science behind this—they've done studies with middle schoolers where you divide them all up into groups and they have to work together as a group to get the grade, and everybody thinks they just got the best group ever—everybody thinks that—every group will go on and on about how their group is the best ever. Usually when this is done in business, at a conference or whatever, you only do one, right? You break up into groups, one group, your group is the best blah blah blah etc. So, with this study, they keep putting them in different groups and by the time you get to the third or fourth group, you start to realize that all the groups are awesome! Human beings interacting with each other is awesome, human beings working together does more than an individual can do, but

it's just to say: anytime you think your group is awesome, just because it's your group, it's for politics. Anytime you're chanting your own last name, it's a cult. One of my other rules is that you need to ask yourself all the time: is this a cult? If you asked your other members of Tiny Spoon "Is this a cult?" What would be the first reaction?

TS: Probably laughter.

D: Bingo! If you can't laugh about it, you were already on the downslope. [For example] my dad is a literal comic artist. He's a funny, funny man, my stepfather, but if you called The Family a cult... he's not funny anymore. If you say to a Mormon that Mormonism is a little bit cult-y, they do not like that joke, they will not laugh! So, I think that's your sign; in a healthy organization, you should be able to ask yourself: where does this go toxic? So, you should be able to joke, and say, "this is a little bit cult-y... but here's what we do" right?

TS: Yeah, this is how we know: we're not a cult.

D: Yeah, like every organizational conference? Cult. I'm probably going to go do an MFA next, and I'm really excited because every semester I get to go out and do a 10-day residency in a literary cult world at [someplace] like Tahoe; that's going to be amazing. The difference is you go home after those ten days. If you stayed living there you would start to become a cult and if things got toxic, if the logic broke down, (where humans tend to trend towards wanting power), then you become a toxic cult.

TS: I can confirm that MFA-world is absolutely a cult, not to say that people shouldn't do it— I don't regret it, but you have to know that going in; I didn't realize that until about halfway through my MFA program.

D: Part of the reason that I decided not to do a PhD is that I just don't want to live through a third cult, and I think I'm really good at taking other people's research and applying it to areas they've never gone before, just like mix-and-matching clothes. So, then for the MFA, I want to do it just because I want to learn to write better. I'm an okay writer; I had a lot of help for this book, but I want to learn that for myself. However, like I've already been warned that because I have a successful book in the popular press, I will be a writer... with an asterisk; this book needed to be published by an independent university press for me to be taken seriously as an MFA student.

TS: People can get envious... if anyone is successful in any field—more successful than other folks in that field—they'll look at you with a higher degree of criticism.

D: I always say about this book: when I set out to write a book about groups, I knew I needed the right group to help me do it. One of the things my co-writer told me was that “publishing is the most collaborative art form!” This book is so good because like a hundred different people worked on it!

When I started on this journey of what I call ‘turning my brain into money’ I was having some lunch conversation with someone at this networking thing, and they asked “Do you have fascinating conversations, like this *all* the time?” and... yes, I do! and when I worked in security, I did not. And now I'm very popular on TikTok because I have learned [a process where] all I'm doing every day is reading a whole bunch, thinking of stuff, and then writing my next book. So, I thought, *y'know what? TikTok will find this fascinating.* So, 50,000 people watch me read a clip about ADHD and then start talking about rape culture from there. Anyways, I got 20,000 followers pretty quickly. I'm just the girl with the degree from Harvard that has a bona fide cult background but also wants to apply it to the world all around you. One day I'll say, “Let's talk about chanting and cults, how it puts us into a suggestible state, and then where do we see chanting? Political rallies, sports, the pledge of allegiance, etc.

TS: It's clear to me that you've had so many experiences, experiences where not every person makes it through to the other side, especially with this zest for life. Obviously, you want to change the world, you want to make things better for other people; in the in the simplest way possible: you want to make a difference.

D: Which also puts you at risk for joining cults!

TS: Really?!

D: So, the one thing that scholars have identified that makes you want to join a cult is... just being a seeker; being overly idealistic and being a seeker. So, people tend to think it's that people [who join cults] are dumb or they need money, and so you know, my favorite example is that a Harvard-educated lawyer died at the Branch Davidian standoff in Waco. So, it's not stupid people, it's good people. In my next book I have a chapter called, "There Were Good People in the Sex Cult Too" and there *were* good people that were trying to make a difference, and now I love my idealism, but it's also one of the things I've worked on in therapy.

I've just been invited to an international conference of the English-speaking nations that are all failing at their [military] recruiting because of rape culture, essentially, and the opinion that Gen Z has a military. I've been invited to do both a lecture and a panel on this and I'm thinking, *okay this can't become your mission!* I have passion about this. I will definitely do some work on this, but my mission in life is not fixing the rape culture in the military, it is talking about culture, writing books, doing the things I wanted to do *because* of my personality, *because* I'm so idealistic, *because* I have so much zest, *because* I've always had a mission; first I was a missionary kid winning the world for God, then I was in the military, and then I was writing this

book! So, it's one of those things I identify that is not bad, but it puts me at a risk of joining a cult.

TS: Certainly! That personally resonates with me, as I consider myself a bit of an idealist, and it's something that I work on too. I'm critical of myself enough to do the metacognition to notice what I notice about the way I think and about the way I act. And also, to notice what I noticed about the world around me.

D: It's the same with charismatic people. There's a really great book called "Influence by Robert Cialdini, an old 80s textbook on the science of influence, and it talks about people that have charisma, this quality of charisma, that people are always trying to define because it can be so great, but also so harmful, and I have my last chapter [of the new book]; "The Rise of Charismatic Leaders in Tech and Politics." – neither Barack Obama nor Donald Trump were in any way qualified to be the President of America; they both won largely off of their charisma.

So, the problem is: charisma is different than likeability... but that's kind of how it presents, right? Which means the only way to protect yourself against charismatic people is to spend your life avoiding likeable people... but, you're not going to do that, so, what can you do? And the answer is: you can notice. So, when I'm doing my talk for the corporation, I say, "So when you walk out of here tonight and you feel this *glow* because I have been shining my charisma on you for the past hour and a half, you feel like you love me, you would love to hang out with me, be your best friend, all of these things, you *know*, that you're operating under the charisma, right?"

It's the same way we expect people when they fall in love right away, or jump really fast into relationship, we want them to be extra critical because we know like when you're *that* in love, you don't see things, [red flags], so it's basically that. It's like, if you think you're in love at first sight... and this happens to people all the time with business partners! The average business lasts

seven years, which is longer than the average marriage (average marriage is five years and the average business is seven years). But we tend to jump into bed with business partners much more quickly than we would opt in with a romantic partner, because again it's that excitement. You meet someone else that has the same vision as you and it's like: let's go.

All that to say, there isn't necessarily an answer to a lot of these things. Human dynamics and group dynamics have inarguably changed in all of human history. And so that's why I think, we need to talk about cults; we need this stuff because it is kind of the ultimate [mechanism] in human control, but that same control factor is everywhere. It is the ultimate in 'us versus them' and dehumanizing, but human beings always stack rank and always kill the ones at the bottom.

It is really weird walking around in the world as a cult survivor, which honestly, one of the things I wanted this book to show was that we bring something else to the table other than just how to survive trauma. [For instance,] you probably started learning how to get along with your manager in an organizational capacity when you were between the ages of 18 to 22, and I knew how to do that when I was two years old—we understand group dynamics in a fundamental way and because something happens in a certain bad group, that doesn't make it a bad thing, like actually that can make it something human beings really, really desire. Some of the things cults really do right are... community, motivation, purpose. And you can ask any [military] veteran to tell you about their service and it will be horror story, horror story, horror story, but I made the best friends ever, and I had the time on my life, and it's the same with us cult babies—which is the term we've come up with for ourselves—Children of God coined it.

Even someone like me who ran away as fast as I could from that environment, I spend the rest of my life looking for that connection, that feeling of when you meet someone and you have so much in common with them—the first time you meet you're talking for five hours—that is an amazing feeling, and I rarely had that outside of the cult world except as a veteran. So, one of the

things that drew me into the army is that I kind of failed at socializing in the outside world, which is what drives a lot of people into cults. And then I was handed a uniform, and an immediate group, and jokes that everyone understood... and all you have to do is essentially sell out your individuality for that higher community.

And I would say, from the literary perspective, from the book standpoint, it's hard to find cult books that aren't just the trauma narrative. Which is just... "and then she survived," and I really didn't want to write that. I really wanted this to be a page-turning story, which I think it is. Also, [I wanted it to contain] the ideas that matter to everyone.

TS: Absolutely. And there's this through line, this idea that the runs through *UNCULTURED* where you clearly are making parallels between Children of God and the US military all while fitting your experience and perspective into it, as so aptly put at the end of the book when your colleague in the military says, "You need to write about this, you need to write all this down."

D: Let me tell you the story of how we did that. So, there's a book called "Educated" [by Tara Westover] that came out in 2018 that cleaned up the memoir market. It's about [Tara's experience as] a girl that came from Mormon isolationists who didn't let her go to school and then she got a PhD, and it's the example of one idea: Education is our guard against extremism. So, I thought, *I need to do my book, I need to get help* and so I got Brandi Larsen, who is this former publishing executive at Penguin Random House and I just hired her as a consultant, thinking there's a million ways to tell story, I need help to plan this one. So, I wanted to come away with an outline, and the things she said to me were so powerful, like you said, there's this through line, and for example, I think [this through line] is missing in Prince Harry's book. So, she said, "You're not famous, which means nobody's going to care who you are, so your book needs to be about one idea— what's that idea?" Oh, easy! The group psychology concept that humans will do almost anything to fit into their voluntary groups, and how there's all these ways

you learn to demonstrate that as a facilitator for group-related things, right? And so, I think I can show you that.

I expected the cult-military parallels because Children of God was washed out of the military, so it was militaristic in fashion and I think the only reason we didn't stockpile guns was because we went international. But what I didn't expect was the rape culture parallels, and for like the sexual violence to be just as bad as what I experienced in the military. And I get this statement all the time, people say, "Well, you don't seem like a cult survivor." And I got a lot of rejections on [pitching] *UNCULTURED* [to publishers]; "Oh, we don't do Children of God it's too awful," and then by same token, "Oh, you don't look like a veteran." And by the publishing industry; "Oh we don't do books by military women because they don't sell," and there's this parallel; we think we know what cults are, we think we know what happens to the daughters of America when they disappear behind the high commune walls of the Department of Defense, but we really don't. And that was my realization; that someone just needs to talk about it all. It's stood out to me that every generation of woman veteran has reached out to me to basically say, "I thought it got better after my time, I thought it got better." And then I have the men, you know I say partially I wrote this book to really show [my husband] Tom Young that when you're not a six foot two, white, helicopter pilot, your career is different, it's harder. And it was a big wake up call for a lot of the men that worked with me, to say, "I just thought you were so professional, and your whole career was easy..." So, for them to realize it— that's the only way we make change, talking about it. Nothing made me special, I just put it in a book. I was the first one to write it down. The fact that we've all gone through this, and no one says anything, and no one questions anything, is what makes it culty.

TS: And that's part of the design too, right? Because the atomization of the individual, and the overemphasis on the individual, again, works in that self-completing cycle.

D: And it's in our culture too, and it's the individualism, and it's also the 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' mentality. But when sitting in a Harvard class going over this case of Carla Ann Harris, who's a pretty much [one of] the highest-ranking Black woman to ever be in the industry, watching these white dudes discuss how cool it is that she never had to confront racism because it's not discussed in the business case that she deals with... and I'm just like... oh my sweet summer children... of course when minorities of any kind get to the top usually the last thing they want to talk about is all the obstacles, they had along the way and then, I think, once more too, is how much you have to buy into the toxic system to be successful, you know? I had so much internalized misogyny when I was thinking that I could 'beat the boys of their own game' by proving them wrong. I was just proving that the other 99% couldn't do it, according to their standards. So, I wanted to show—and I really saw that in a lot of the narratives that do get published about women veterans—it's either: she was the first is something, she was super badass, she broke some sort of glass ceiling... and the book sounds like it was written by the Pentagon— including what she discusses her assaults. Or it's that 'burn it all down' book, goes and gets an MFA; really has something to say, but the military is very easily able to say, "Oh well, she was nothing. She was a bad soldier. She was X, she was Y." And yeah, sometimes... well, I definitely don't want to call this a movement— I mean, I hope it starts a movement, but I did have that realization for sure. Like, well, sometimes we need the perfect victim to start a movement, right? And maybe I'm that person! Because you get to see me going out on the patrols alone with 25 men, and I'm so proud of what we did there. But also, being pulled aside, and being told to watch my back; we need to talk about all of this.

One of my ten points that I'm giving to this military commission is: you need to tell our stories [everywhere], not just over here in the military women's museum, it needs to be told [in all the museums]; we need to be able to talk about all of it, because this is the only way [to change things for the better]. What you have is all these men at the top trying to fix something that they

know is a horrible problem, but the men at the top are either the predators or they're the good guys, so they can't see it—one or the other.

TS: I could assume that the men at the top, if they're not the predators, then they are at least complicit in that [predatory behavior] because to get to that level—and it could be in the military, could be at a company, it could be at a school—you become part of the problem by your acquiescence to the issue.

D: I make this point a little bit at the end [of the book] where I'm talking about my mom and the Children of God, and then Scott Halter in the army where it's like, they were good people, they loved me, they tried to help me, but ultimately, what can they do in these groups that they're sort of complicit in? When I started writing this book, I did not know it was going to be as critical as it turned out. And I think part of why it's so hard for us to deconstruct any group experience, is because then you can't be proud of it anymore. You know, as soon as I started saying, no, Children of God was really a cult, then I couldn't just casually be like, oh yeah, I grew up in Brazil because my parents were missionaries! And same thing, as soon as I write a whole book about how sexist the army was, it's really hard for me to have that 'proud woman veteran' thing, you know? And I think that's what it asked us to do, to pull those experiences apart.

One of the moments I had was realizing that this woman who came to the unit after me, as I was a Captain and she was a young Lieutenant, she's five three and a bit too round... the army is not going to like that. And it didn't matter though, what woman you were; two or three women showed up, each new officers, "You're competing against Captain Daniella Mestyaneck; you are not going to win." They are using—this misogynistic system—is using my success to make it worse and harder for the other women. And only do we find out later that the guy that was harassing me was harassing her; we were all going through this stuff the whole time and that was never a parallel that really stood out— we were all going through the same abuses, but the

number one rule is “You don't talk about it, you do *not* talk about it, you do not (I think in our case when we were young) even have the language to talk about it.

TS: I think that pointing to these contradictions saying, “Yes, I suffered abuse but I am *proud* of my service,” the two things exist in tandem— right and left, black and white; it's one thing. To point to these contradictions in the way that you have, and to use your observations of your own experience, it takes, of course, discernment, and also courage— and in doing so you'll never know how many people exactly you've helped with this book, or the next. What you're doing is making a tangible difference in this world and serving as that opposite side. You're completing the contradiction as it stands. To write this book, and to write the next, and to make this your pursuit, your mission, your career, whatever you want to call it— this is the way. This is the way that things change, and how things could get marginally better.

D: One of the things you said earlier was so beautiful, and I think about this a lot: usually the victors are the ones that get to write down the story. And so, I didn't set out to write a book; I set out [interested in] cult culture, [thinking] I want to spend the rest of my life talking about culture—this actually started when I was pregnant, and everyone has a different version of “if you do this, you screw up your baby” and I thought, *no, I have to research everything for myself*. So, I decided that I wanted to talk about culture, and one of the things I realized on both the Children of God side and the Army side was that I was not finding what to me felt like a complete representation of the culture of what I went through. I didn't write the first Children of God book, I definitely didn't write the first military woman book, but if I had found a book that I thought [represented my experiences and the parallels between them] well, I wouldn't have written mine.

I did have a really belated realization after writing a book called *UNCULTURED* that was, “Oh, I am part of defining the culture for women.” —you can no longer say that you fully understand

the Children of God, or the experience of being a woman in the army, if you haven't read this book, because you're not getting the whole picture. And especially for people that want to change the world, it's like, well, writing a book makes you immortal in some ways, doesn't it? Actually, one of my signs of success, of keeping count: 12 people have told me that they've gotten their therapists to read this book. And so, that's like you said; it's making a difference, and religious traumas are still really just being defined, and people are giving my book to their therapist so that they can understand them. That was the mission... and I lost my little sister, she won't talk to me anymore because I wrote a book, and the only thing I could tell her was, "Look, I am not religious. I struggle with meaning, a lot of meaning in my life, in order for me to choose to stay alive, and this is a way that I can see to do that— to help other people." That's the whole point of memoir, right?

[An interest in memoir] took me reading a book by the woman [Julia Scheeres] who wrote *Jesus Land*. So she gets sent to Mike Pence's prison camp for teenagers out in the Dominican Republic— teenage reform school— which is like a religious prison camp, and my experience listening to her book was, "Oh my god, this is like the cult, and, oh, my god, this is like basic training." Which again, as soon as our kids are 17 or 18, we're fine with sending them off to basic training, but you read about 12- to 16-year old's, 17-year old's, going through this in the name of religion, and it's horrifying. And I always describe that the worst thing about growing up [in the Children of God cult] is that there were no spontaneous moments of joy. And a lot of my peers have a really hard time understanding why they are so messed up, and so I put the term 'religious prison camps' in my book to give a gift to fellow Children of God survivors, because when I said that term to my sisters and my friends, they start to understanding completely differently. Or the concept of like, "Oh, well, my parents were the good guys!" Maybe. but they all read the Davidito book and didn't walk away. They all saw the 14-year-old get pregnant from the Prophet's lieutenant, who stayed in the leadership until his death, and they were okay with it.

“Oh, that one, that one had an exception, they were allowed.” So, you can get an exception for raping the children?

TS: I think that across the across the board, many people will make excuses for silence, especially after the fact. And I think that in a lot of different fields, hindsight is 20/20, where when after the atrocity is said and done, you're able to look back and then you could say “Okay, well... this is what this was... that was really messed up,” but when you're in it...

D: And then also people will say, “Oh, you know, the rape in the military is almost the same rate as the population, we can't control it.” Like when the bad thing does happen, when someone does rape the children, when there's just a bad apple, get rid of the bad apple! Because that is what almost never happens. And that is what comes from the deification of the military— we can't criticize. Every time I say: “Look how basic training is just programming, they learned it from psychologists who studied abusive relationships, that is what they did.” People go, “Well, yeah, we need it!” Maybe we need it, but we need to be talking about it. We need to be understanding it. Like if you know that an army unit going off on deployment is going to go through a year-long cultic experience, that's not something to ignore. That's something to pay attention to, and make sure the right leaders are going into the right places, and make sure the followers understand the science of the logic breaking down. So, just like I did an anti-terrorism briefing for them, I probably should have been doing an anti-cult briefing for them too. It's just sitting with a discomfort, and again, this is another thing about cults— why people love cults is: clarity. When the world is confusing, being surrounded by other people that look just like you, think just like you, and confirm that your mission in life is the right one—that feels really, really good. This is why when veterans leave the military and they're struggling with suicide, I tell them to go find a nonprofit; go find a veteran non-profit because it's really hard once you've had all the hype of the military to feel like anything you do after that is going to be useful. Tom is studying plant science and global poverty, so he can go try to solve world hunger; he was not just going to go

be a Southwest pilot, that wasn't enough for him. And it's interesting to know there's that high of community, and it's great! It's one of the driving forces of human beings. And I essentially spent 10 years alone and then almost un-lived myself because I just can't take it. But, like any high, there's the danger of community... [and many of us veterans use medical cannabis for treatment]; it helps us for PTSD, it helps us for whatever, but we need to be conscious that we're doing it.

So, one of my final things up for groups is always that values are gray—we act like love is good, and money is bad, and I grew up in a world where love was weaponized. So, values, nothing's obvious—and the hardest thing is to just get comfortable living in the gray and to understand that clarity is not coming; we live in a complicated world. Nobody's ever going to give you the handshake [and say] “Great job, you made the right choice for your life.”

TS: So, as the material conditions of the world around us continues to slowly degrade, people are struggling, and I think there's an emphasis on finding community and feeling to be a part of something that, as you've said, is innately human that we all—doesn't matter who you are—we all strive for a way to find a community to combat (either the internal or the external) stressors of life, this way seems to be education; reading, writing, and through that some kind of mental—and in your case, physical—liberation from oppression or oppressors.

D: Yes, so one thing I think about education and cult leaders that most people don't think of, is obviously, I think we all know that when people are trying to limit what you're reading, that's a bad sign, and in my next book, I'm going to have a “How Culty Is Your Organization” survey at the end, and one of the question trees will be about: Do they tell you what to read? Do they control what you read? So that's super important; you just need to have a reading list that nobody controls, even you. Just think *oh that looks interesting*, pick it up, read it, because you never know what things are going to speak to your experience or simulate ideas for you. But I think the thing about participating in actual formal education is that you understand that experts always

have a limit to their expertise; nobody knows everything. So, if you have been doing a lot of self-education and an adult learning, you probably weren't going to fall for Keith Raniere, because he said he knew everything; cult leaders always know everything. On TikTok one of the things I do is that I have the rules for interacting in my space, and they are pinned to my profile, and cult leaders don't do that, because they want to keep you on your toes, they want to keep you always jumping. And again, I think the real difference between an expert and someone who's kind of in pop psychology just giving you bullshit, or someone that's actually trying to manipulate you, is that a real expert will always point to the defined lines of their expertise. So even me, I know I'm making up a theory, but if you're trying to build a good group from scratch, I'm not your expert. I'm the one you want to bring in after you have the basics of your group to talk about the dangers; if you hired me right now to come in and change Cisco [for example], the first thing I would do would be to go find an organizational psychologist who concentrates on the positive side to help me. These are the lines of my expertise, but a cult leader would not do that. A toxic leader is not going to do that, men generally, a lot of men, don't do that! There's that whole thing of how women won't apply for a position unless they're 80% qualified, and men will apply when they're 20% qualified. That's a little bit of that cult leader dynamic that you all have been taught a little bit. There was a great line on the WeWork show [WeCrashed] which was something like "you tell 25-year-old men that they are gods and they are inclined to believe you." That's also, true of the military!

I just sent my second proposal for "Culting of America" to my agent, and I thought *this is brilliant* and he responded with "maybe get some of your co-writers back for this next part," And I feel like this is also him telling me that this is the way big market publishing works. Even when I got criticized, some people say "Oh [UNCULTURED] was ghost-written," and the response is, "No, it was co-written, but also how many multi-million-dollar deals have you worked on lately by yourself?" I'd have been scared out of my mind if I didn't have a team.

TS: What role do you feel education, agency, and liberation play in today's society? And/or why is education, reading, and being critically engaged in the world so important?

D: So, from the perspective of things I talk about: it helps you realize your own programming. So, for instance, education and agency; I really do not enjoy talking to people who are religious by default, whereas I'm fascinated by talking to people who, as adults, have chosen their religion— could be the same one as their parents, but they've actually investigated it, they've actually figured out why they are the religion that they are. So, Steven Wilson, in my book, the lieutenant, who supports me at the end he was an uber-Catholic, virgin-till-25-marriage-Catholic, but he really did that, he really investigated his own religion and I still think most of his assumptions were bonkers, but I appreciate that agency. Getting educated, taking agency over your own life, and really understanding what are the things that you do, and why? Because every time you're thinking, "That's the way we've always done it, it's the way my parents have done it, this is in the Army..." I call this 'shut up and sit down lieutenant'— you're more at risk of just going along with the group, whatever it might be. And of course, yeah, I think hate speech is horrible. I think Nazism is one of the worst things that has happened, but I don't think *Mein Kampf* should be banned, right? I think hate speech is horrible, and I'm about to delve into a bunch of it for my next book, so anytime I think, as a grown up, someone is trying to control what you read, who you sleep with—there's a couple other physical things—hair and underwear being two of the big ones, it's no bueno. It's almost always going to lead to toxic behavior and to you being manipulated. This is why my seven-year-old has green streaks in her hair... my child is me, just not in a cult, nobody has ever told her what to do! She asks, "Can we get the sewing machine out?" and I say, "Well, we can try, but if you think you know how to sew, the sewing machines going away, you're going to have to let me lead." And she is very unconvinced. Constantly when Tom and I are exasperated, I think, *just imagine this in a cult—that was me!* As controlling and awful as Children of God was to everyone, people who knew me as a child will

tell me, “Oh yeah, this is all I remember about you: you always on a mission and you were always in trouble!”

TS: Ah that's great! What I've been told is that I was full of questions, and that I would have made a great lawyer (decided not to go do all that).

D: So that's exactly what I was told at six years old, probably by the older kids in the cult, “Oh my god, you should be a lawyer!” which is not what anyone was told, instead you were all to grow up and be missionaries for God, And I think that was part of it, thinking *I'm going to be a lawyer, I'm going to be a lawyer so I have to go to high school, so I have to get out of here.*

And this plays into— so, the point of the book was that human beings will do anything in those [cultic] situations, well halfway through the book we ended up with two writers and they both, in a meeting said, “...but not you. Not you.” —there's a show you would love on Netflix, *How to Become a Tyrant* and so, there's this picture out of 1939, Poland, everybody's hailing Hitler, and one guy is like this [not doing the salute, arms crossed], the spotlight's on him, and the message is *be this guy*, everyone thinks they would be this guy, and I think as we know now people say, “I don't understand the Nazis,” I think we're all starting to understand—most of us, and sociologists into documentary, they say that most of us would have supported Hitler, by far and large. I comfort myself with the fact that I wouldn't probably have, you probably wouldn't have, the people that are always criticizing and always standing out... but my husband probably would have, that's not a flaw, generally when you're good at going along with groups your life's going to be easier, you're going to have much more friends, all of stuff—you're just also broadly more at risk for toxic control, and being a part of toxic systems too, which I think it's worse.

TS: Yeah, and you know you can't blame folks *too* much for following the path of least resistance. The pragmatist in me understands that, but that is also where the disjunct occurs

between what makes the most sense in the short term, and what makes better sense in the long term, which is to be true to yourself, to your values, your beliefs.

D: I think it's a balance of both, right? So, my little sister, love her to death, but she, and with my mom it's very much the same, their personalities are they want to be liked, they want to be liked, they want to fit in, not necessarily in a bad way, but they like to be a part of the group, and I don't like to be a part of the group. So of course, my challenge is then that I always feel alone and isolated, and like nobody likes me, but their experience in the cult really *was* better, and really was less toxic than mine, and really was less abusive than mine, because 'go along to get along' is in their personality. So, another thing of the book that I really wanted to pull out was: anytime you're in a system that is not made for you, it's traumatic. Tom's experience in the military was not traumatic, there's a lot of moral injury stuff that he's dealing with now, but just being systematized as a human can be traumatic, you can go to prison, and go to hospital, you can go into any kind of institution and have it be [a traumatic experience], but if the system is made for you, it's going to be much less traumatic than if the system is not made for you, and so that's a big thing I see. For me, I'm happy to be an expert on groups, but I never want to work a nine-to-five again, I never want to be in a large organization. I don't group very well. I'm always the one standing out, pointing things out, and so I've kind of learned that I have to make my own group instead of trying to fit into pre-existing groups.

TS: Well, speaking as someone who feels very, very similarly, who is working a nine-to-five, who is aware of the identity that I inhabit and how that has affected the way that I've moved through my life, I think that all of us needs to recognize ourselves and it's again this contradiction of being able to say, "Okay, *this is who I am* not because I so much choose to be, but because of the choices that I have made" This is who I am, this is how I move through the world, and this is maybe what my purpose is. A little background about me; what brought me to Colorado [and Tiny Spoon]— back in 2017 I took a really hard fall; I was nonresponsive for a

week; I came out of it with a TBI. I should not be alive. None of the doctors could figure it out. And I decided to take some advice and to go out and get the MFA into really dive into education and it totally shook up my life. And I have no idea where I'm headed or what's going to happen, but it's just this feeling of *well I got a second chance*, so now I just need to pay attention, and the path will be illuminated, like in a video game; *look where the light shines*.

D: So, to add something similar: I was working at Microsoft, I was making six figures, but it was stupid— locked locks, physical security, just a stupid job, the most boring part of what I did in the Army— and I was raising my daughter in Brazilian Portuguese, which was hard for me, because it wasn't my first language— until she was five, we got her trilingual; Portuguese, Spanish, English— and so one day I'm locked in my office bawling my eyes out because it's *so hard* for me to raise my daughter in another language, and I'm doing so much work, and I'm giving myself this pep talk: *you're doing this so that she can be whoever she wants, so that she can have all the opportunities*, and then I just stopped and I was like, wait a minute, that was fucking supposed to be me! I am the one that left the cult and put my life together, and I was at this dead-end, well-paying job and the attitude of all the people around you is, “Well, you should be able to hang by your thumbs forever at a hundred-thousand dollar job.” And it was that moment [of realization]. Shortly after that, I came home and told my husband, “I’m not looking for another job. I'm going to make money from my brain.” And took me four years, but I finally did. And even with the MFA I'm considering, I was too scared in college to do any sort of creative writing, or creative art, because I needed those A's, and perfectionism is a big part of the status quo and groups, and all that stuff. And now I'm so excited to just have the opportunity to go develop— go be totally honest about how bad I am at writing and figure out all my stuff and see what comes out of it.

It sounds kind of spiritual and frou-frou what you were saying, how it'll be illuminated, and that was kind of what Scott Halter told me; everyone was telling me, “Don't write about the cult, just

write about the army, nobody will take you seriously,” and he was the only one [who told me] don’t just write about the cult and the army, write about being a mom, write about running, just write! Every time I’d write something and send it to him, I’d be so proud, and he would respond with “Ok! Keep writing.” And after four years, I finally realized it, and it’s fascinating— I think once you finally find your thing, you look back and you see how everything was connected all along, because again, we don’t fundamentally change. I was always fascinated by group behavior, in basic training I would get yelled at because I would just be watching the drill sergeants, doing their game of breaking us down and training us, I thought *this is fascinating*. So of course, once you find it, once everything comes together, when you find your thread, you find your thing, you think, *oh yeah, this has been me all along*, and I can find the parts that connect, but really, without taking the time, taking the risk, to do it, you just stay in what you were programmed to do, or [who] you were. Almost everyone, I feel like, has these great stories of things they’ve created or, people that have changed the world— they always have this moment where they had to take their time to figure out what their value was and then do things that were outside of norm, if that makes sense.

TS: On a personal level, I really appreciate [you saying] that, because the last couple of years have been a real crossroads for me, and I’m trying to figure out how do I maneuver and where do I go, what am I going to do? And how do I live my best life? Whatever that is.

D: Yeah, you should get a beer with Tom sometime, he has this whole concept called ‘intentionalism’ for a while we talked about making it a book, but now I think, *you can’t be a straight white man and write a book about how you made your life so great through intentionalism*; that would never go over well, but the concept is legit; it’s what you’re talking about, it’s what we did.

TS: Well, I would love to!

D: There's this great exercise: close your eyes, get a writing pad, and imagine that you're 80 and then just go through all of your senses— What are you seeing? What are you hearing? What are you smelling? What are you feeling like? What do you want your life to be? And then backwards plan from there. I really like that one.

TS: I like that one, too. So, another question: if readers took at least one moral, value, or insight away from your book, what do you hope it might be? And, without putting words in your mouth, it seems that taking that risk, intentionalism, is this is that insight?

D: I think it's question everything. And that is going to bleed back into the intentionalism. There's this exercise: Ask yourself *Why?* five times— *Why you want to write a book Daniella?* Well, XYZ. *Why? Why? Why? Why? Why this coaching thing?* And when you finally get through all of your BS answers, you realize what you want to do. When veterans are getting out of the military, I've identified that those first two years out are where there's the real risky part, because you're jonesing for the group, for the mission; you've lost all of these things and you've got to find your purpose— ask yourself, “What you want to be when you grow up?” and ask yourself, “Why?” Over and over and over again. The government thinks that as long as they've got you a job on the outside then you are successful, and then they scratch their heads at 22 of us a day killing ourselves. I'm going to bring you back to the social identity theory versus personal identity, that from birth we are being taught to fit into groups, and we are being taught not to question ourselves, and we are being thrown thought-stopping cliches about the culture and why it is the way it is. Just question everything. What I want people to take away from this book, specific thought, is: *wow, I never thought of the parallels between a sex cult and the US army* and now I'm going to question all of my groups. I want this to change the way that you look at group behavior for the rest of your life. And it comes back down to that. It's so easy to not question when everyone else is doing something, and there's no way to just put a 'good' or 'bad'

label on that; everything's context, everything's culture, everything makes sense the time. So, you really have to just question, just question everything that seems to be obvious; Why do I do this? Why do we do this? And if you don't know? As parents, this translates to: we do not say the words 'because I said so' in my house, those words are absolutely not allowed. Four-year-old's supposedly ask the question, "why?" 437 times a day, and it goes up from there, [my daughter] is in her lawyering phase now, and it's hard for us, but it also teaches us... so much of parenting is just controlling your child for society, or it's just for your whims— when I go home today, we're either going to sew or we're not going to sew based on whether I desire to, and that's hard for her, so if she just asks, "Why not?" if I said, 'because I said so' that's not a good enough answer; I need to give her [something]; it might be, "No, because I drink too much coffee and I'm hyped up," or whatever. But it has to be a legit answer. And I feel like you can do that with yourself—you can go through your life and just [ask yourself], Why do I do this? Why do I brush my teeth before I get in the shower? Or whatever it is; that's intentionalism. One of the greatest gifts of my life is that I lost everything I knew, and believed in, or not believed in, but everything I knew when I was 15. And so, I have had to be intentional about what things are in my life.

TS: No disrespect to my parents, but I got hit with the 'because I said so' a *lot* as a child, I was very inquisitive, and I've carried this this habit with me into adulthood, but what I notice in my own head is that I'll ask, "why?" about *some* things, but then there's other things, maybe about myself and habits that I notice, where I'll think: I think I know why I do that... I think know why I choose certain people to spend time with, or why I spent years of my life drinking, or why I got these tattoos. Why, why, why— I can follow that to a certain point. And I'm happy to ask why— why does the political system work the way that it does? Why is it just different flavors of Kool-Aid? Why is it all set up like a sports match? Why, why, why? But then the second that it becomes a little more pointed, a little more personal, maybe that's when I shy away from asking these 'why' questions— it's a lot to think about!

D: What I have found is that all Americans seem to be able to very easily understand that I was brainwashed, nobody understands what brainwashing is or isn't, but this concept of you grew up in a cult, you were taught bad, wrong, things, and you had to relearn yourself and understand different things. But what Americans don't seem to realize is that they also were programmed. If you were born in China, to different parents, you would probably have very different beliefs about why, and how, to do things. And that just goes back to a good definition of culture, which is "just the way we do things around here" and so if you think anything is wrong with the culture of America, then you need to start asking 'why' about everything, because all of it is so deeply baked in to that. Even your look right now; how you *are* the 'white man', right? But you don't have the typical Straight White Man Look—you have a little bit of *different* about you and you have probably thought about that message, and what it says, and what it puts out, you know? But we all carry these *things* that are just the world we were slotted into—the game we were programmed to play. [For instance,] did you know that 'Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Moe' is a really racist song, it used to not be 'tiger'...

TS: Oh... that's no good. I did not know that.

D: Right? I just learned that recently, and so now we try to get [my daughter] to use 'Bubblegum, Bubblegum, in a Dish' not that one, right? But those are the things— those are the things we don't realize and we don't think about. We were taught in the Children of God, that black people were cursed, they were the 'sons of Sam', this is really old, 1800s idea. And I rejected everything the Children of God taught me, but it wasn't until I was a grown up talking to someone about this, and I thought, *oh, that's really racist and messed up*, you know? And now I really need to start questioning [everything].

TS: What advice might you have for other writers that want their story heard? Other than ‘Just Do It’, just write, write, write—other than that.

D: So, that first answer is: *why* do you want to write a book— why are you doing it? And what's the idea? I started writing a book when I was 24 years old, before [*UNCULTURED*]; the best thing I ever did was not try to write an actual book until I was ready. But also asked yourself, what is that one idea? I wrote a book that could be very easily sensationalized in a lot of ways and I think that I have almost completely been able to maintain control of that narrative. I got to write exactly what I wanted to write. The first hard thing I had with my publisher was the cover, which turned out great, but they let me write exactly what I wanted to write, and I think that is because I so strongly knew *why* I was doing it for me, which also meant I needed to go to this high level— *why* you're doing it is going to indicate what level you're trying to get into the game.

But also, *what* is that one idea? My book is about group behavior, about how humans will do almost anything to fit in with their groups, and I'm going to show you that through this parallel of cult and army, rather than asking you a question. Because I know that elevator pitch. I could have been proud of this book in a lot of different formats. People can have their own agenda for why they want to read this book or talk to me about it. But I'm still going to get my message across, and I think that's what is going to allow you to [feel good about your own final product], especially if you're writing about your own personal trauma, your sex life, like the thing in there about me sleeping with a married guy, right? You have to put in things that make you look bad and feel bad, but I knew exactly what it was all going to. Every chapter in *UNCULTURED*, I like to say, could be an essay about, you know, Chapter One: Corporal Punishment, Chapter Two: Split Personalities and Groups Versus Individuals, Chapter Three: Medical Neglect, you know? So, another good [bit of] advice along those lines I heard is: treat every chapter of your book like it could be its own Ted Talk, so we had this one idea for *UNCULTURED*, even though it's a memoir, we built it almost like an academic paper. So [we had] one idea and then it was the

really detailed outline about everything, which is also really helpful because when you're doing the creative part of writing and you need to get in the mood and put yourself in a trance and lose yourself in the writing, it's just like salsa dancing. [When] you know your back step, you can do a whole bunch of crazy spins and still find your back step and you're fine. So having that *why*, having that elevator pitch, and then having a strong outline— that is going to help you write a best-selling book in six months.

TS: And honesty, right? Being honest with the yourself, also, for the sake of being honest for the reader at which ties into the questions of *why*.

D: Let me tell you about that. So, there were two places that I did not want to be honest, and the story just didn't work. So, first was I didn't want to talk about Jeff, the ex-husband, at all, right? So, until I found out about the white supremacy at the end, honestly, it didn't make sense to me. So, I didn't know how to write about it. So, my revenge was I'd just written him out of the story of my life, and when I decided to write about him because of the new information, that was the hardest chapter to write; the nothing chapter where I'm in college? That was the hardest chapter to write. Because it was me admitting to myself and to the world that I joined the army in part because of my relationship with this toxic guy. And so, it wasn't even the *oh I married a white supremacist* that was the most embarrassing part for me, it was the *I now have to be honest about why I joined*, and that's not the story I've been telling myself or anyone else for the past decade. And the other [place in the book where I at first didn't want to be honest] was the story at the end about Parker and how she kind of blows up my career. I wanted to write it without talking about how she got in trouble because I felt like she was demonized by the same system that demonized me, right? And so, similarly, in the beginning, I wrote a lot more about the bullying of each other in the Children of God, but then I cut back because I don't want any other child that grew up in this group to look like the villain. So that was kind of the same thing— the way I felt about Parker, and it turned out in the end, they were like, “Look, if you don't come right out, if you

don't tell the story, it leaves the reader wondering why she lashed out, which kind of makes them think maybe you were toxic.” And so it was that moment. So, in Chapter 17 writing about Jeff, it literally felt like death, and I had to just tell myself like I'm going to make a decision right now: I'm going to put it all in the page or I'm not. And I eventually did and I thought, *it'll be a better book*, writing about the toxic relationship, writing about the affair at war, these are all things that could really blow up for me, and I just have to trust that, if I'm honest, the reader's going to come through this journey with me. It's just one of those things; if you're creating any art, some people are going to hate it. So, that's the other part— it's like they say, “learn to ignore the trolls” and trust me, it takes a long time. I think you actually have to go *viral* before you learn to ignore them. Once it just becomes too much then you're like, *oh yeah, it doesn't matter what you say*. I can just ignore you.

TS: You have to turn off the ‘comments’ section!

D: Yeah, I've had military veterans come for me really hard on Twitter for about two years now, and it's sucky every time, and the flip side of being honest (and it ties back into that *why* are you doing it) because you're going to lose family, you're going to lose friends—not everyone's going to go on this journey with you, and part of that is because the people that were closest to on that journey are not ready to go there themselves yet, and so you can't pull someone else through their own internal work.... is what I've learned. It's why I have 25 siblings and very few of them speak with me.

TS: Well, I think I speak for anybody and everybody to say: I'm really grateful for you, for going on, and for recounting this journey that you have been on, for having the courage to write it down, and to write it down in a way that is as accessible and personable and as *heart-wrenching* as it is.

D: So, I did the audiobook, and also when you talk about how the winners usually get to write the narrative: And so, one of the things about Children of God, was when they stopped being religious prostitutes, then they just became childhood entertainment, [in the] eighties and nineties [they made] movies and videos and sold them all around. I was like a little ‘Lindsay Lohan of the apocalypse’ growing up, a world child star, and so, when I went to a record my own audiobook, I thought, *well, is it this kind of cool...* even the cover, I [initially] did not want that picture to be used. I thought, *that is a picture of me being exploited and trafficked and I don't like that*, but in the end what I realized was that by doing this, writing these stories down that I couldn't control, I can control them now. That picture, I couldn't control it then, but now I use it, and I'm going to make [money] off of it, right? I was not a bad voice actress and the New York Times recommended the audio, actually, the audio sells faster than the hardcover! And I thought, *well, yeah, I am a trained actress since I was a child*. And now I'm going to *use* this, you know, or [take for instance when I was] making balloon animals in college. I'd make \$250-\$300 an hour making balloon animals (I do it now for kids' birthday parties sometimes) and people always ask, “How do you know how to do that?” ...I was a teenage carnival clown in Mexico, you know?

And I guess to leave it on a happy note, one of the things we go through when we write our memoirs, when we do any kind of internal work, is learning how to live in one space—how to not be all fractured— which is what the culture does to us, what trauma does to us, and all of these things... before I wrote this book, not only did I not have a good idea of who I was, but I also didn't know how to explain it. How do I explain where I'm from? It's very, very difficult, but once you put it all out there, now I can say, “I'm American. I was born in the Philippines, but I'm also from Brazil, and if that is confusing for you, good news. Here's the best-selling book I wrote about it.”

I think part of why making our own clothes is so fascinating for me and my daughter is because, it's really hard to explain all of these things, but I can take an American-Japanese jacket, rip it up, put some Japanese scarves as a liner, crochet some fringes on the edge, and do it in Brazil colors and say, "This is me. And you don't have to understand it. That's okay. I know who I am."

TS: And there's the metaphor: taking the discarded, the tattered, the torn, and fixing that back together into something really beautiful, something meaningful, and something that has clearly had an effect on the culture. It's going to lead to a second book, which again, I cannot wait to read.

D: The first thing I tried to call this book was 'Beautifully Broken'— and that's true for everyone. We could control most of our lives— most of what happens— most of whatever, maybe just being on this planet at all is just random and we're all trying to infuse meaning, but humans are no more random than ants, or whatever. But you know, we can find ways to make it meaningful for us. When you do start to speak out, when you try to tell your own stories, when you're trying to explore your trauma, when you're trying to figure out your neuro-diversity, whatever it is, when you start to question the structure, you're going to have a lot of people try to shut you up, and a lot of the times, that's the people [that are] the closest to you. One of the phrases people use a lot with me is, "Well I just don't talk about those topics— it's just too complicated." So, my response, and where Tom and I live these days, is, *no, we don't do off-limits topics*. So, if you're the kind of person that has off-limits topics, you should know I write books about cults and nasty stuff, and you probably just don't want me in your life. Easy! Again, we need the *them* as much as we need the *us*, right? So, finding yourself, defining who you are is also defining who you're not. That part hurts. I don't know that I've ever said that out loud.

TS: I think that is that's the perfect place to close it up.

D: And sign your book!

TS: Thank you so much Daniella, we really appreciate it.