

Episode intro:

I want to bring people to their own wisdom, and I don't want to bring people to my wisdom, somebody else's wisdom or a group wisdom.

Welcome to the Art of Accomplishment, where we explore how deepening connection with ourselves and others leads to creating the life we want with enjoyment and ease.

My name is Brett Kistler. I am an adventurer, entrepreneur and a self exploration enthusiast. I am here with my co-host, Joe Hudson. Joe is a business coach who has spent decades working with some of the world's top executives and teams developing a unique model of human patterns that underpin how we operate with ourselves, each other and the world. A good entry point into this model is a mindset called VIEW, vulnerability, impartiality, empathy and wonder.

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Brett: We were talking about the vow and cults and some of the people coming back into AoA from having done ESF and other kinds of work, and there is a tongue in cheek that sometimes people joke about. I am back in the cult. This is a cult. This is not a cult. A question for you that somebody asked that was tongue in cheek was, what if you just stopped resisting that you are a cult leader.

Joe: It is funny. As soon as you say this and I know it is being recorded, I become self-conscious, and I don't even want to put that thought in anybody's mind. I don't know if it is a semantic thing. It is like when other people use the word cult, and in my mind cult means another thing. I don't know if it is even generational. But to me, the essence of a cult is where you are handing over your power to somebody else, which is the antithesis of the work that I want to do in the world.

By the way, I don't think that all cults are bad. I actually think there are things that are cults that we don't call cults. I mean I have definitely been in companies that have a very cult-like thing, where it is very hard to leave. There is only one way of thinking, and dissent is not appreciated. I've definitely seen it in places like political systems, some deep cult-like behaviors, but it is such an antithesis of what I want to be doing in the world, that I just want an association with it, which is there is something in it for me in that.

Brett: For sure. It brings me back to something you said once. When we did our one-on-one session that was recorded, there was a thing that you said when I was

feeling a lot of tension. You said if you took all of the tension out of a cell, it would die. Tension is part of the system. I am seeing this here. In any group, there is like a desire within the people of the group to start to surrender to the group. Please just solve my problems, meet all my needs, make my decisions, make life easy for me, and heal me, change me, especially in personal development type groups. There is that particular force that is kind of driving towards group cohesion and group healing. As it does that, there is some level of critique and critical thinking, or personal wants and needs can start to slowly fall to the wayside.

Then there is this other opposing force, which is I think the one that you are living in a lot whenever somebody brings up this is a cult. You are like, "Oh, I don't want to use that word, which is no, no, no, we want everybody to have their own autonomy and we want everyone to have their needs met and not sacrifice a large portion of their needs, so that the group can as a whole can get a small sliver of needs met and then completely be unhealthy in other ways." There is this tension.

Joe: I also see that, when groups subjugate themselves for the group, there is no healing that happens. As people in a group subjugate their needs, it just creates trauma. It doesn't actually create healing. I think there is a tendency for it. I think it is very similar to the same tendency that two people get into a relationship and both of them start making sacrifices to their authenticity, to make sure the other person is happy or stays happy, walking on eggshells or saying the exact right thing or doing whatever they need so the other person doesn't get upset with them or angry at them or get sad or whatever it is.

I think it is the same thing that happens, and I think it is really unhealthy in a relationship. I think it is really unhealthy in a group. At the same time, there is no judgment towards it in my system, but there is a deep dislike for that kind, dislike as in, I don't like the taste of that. Just like, I don't like cooked fish, and I want to eat fish. I will eat raw fish. There is that to it.

I think the other thing that bothers me about the cult thing, and I would love to explore this because, like I said, I know there is something in this for me. What I notice is when people get involved in these programs, they have a way of interacting with each other which is deeply fulfilling. People come and say I really miss doing the work. I really miss the groups. People who do this work together stay friends for five, six years, and they get to know each other. The community builds. There is nobody telling them what to do, no leadership in it. They just enjoy it. It feels to me that, to say this is cult behavior, it diminishes it. It is saying we can't be this way naturally. We can't just be happy naturally. We can't just be deep and intimate naturally. It is only okay because we are in this cult.

There is something about that tongue and cheekness that I think dismisses the idea that this can be your life. This is my life. This is many people I know. It is their life and they have never done this work. There is something that is like hey, don't dismiss. Don't. That only can happen in Vegas. No, it can happen any God damn place you want it to happen. This is your life. There is something in that that I get a little defensive towards. I am like hey, no.

Brett: There is this idea that can happen when you find a group and a set of tools that bring you a deeper place of self-acceptance and self-love, and your life starts changing. There is a stage where you believe that these tools and these people are either required for it, or just that you are far more likely to get it if you are with those people. It starts to create the sense that there is a boundary between us and then everybody else who is not on this page. That is a thing that just happens anywhere in any group, a sports team, fans of the Browns, anything. It is like these are our people. Those are the other people. Our religion is the ones that eat chicken. The other religion is the ones that eat pork. It starts to create this boundary.

There is something in the way that you relate to this, which is even if we are playing with the idea that this is a cult or not a cult, letting ourselves play with the idea of letting the concept of cult show up in our jokes so that we are at least self-referential and self-aware of the tendency that we might have to become insular, but there is also still this—

Joe: Hold on. I've never thought about it that way. Never thought about it that way. What you are basically saying is on some level potentially the jokes are a way to keep it in consciousness. It creates an awareness of it so it doesn't get out of hand potentially.

Brett: Yeah.

Joe: That actually makes me really appreciate it in a different way. I hadn't thought about it that way.

Brett: I think it also puts a little bit of framing around the kind of behavior that might occur. For a group of us that moved to Hawaii recently, we have a particular way of relating to each other. We have these tools, and some people would come and hang out with us. They would see us doing things differently, like go deep into emotions with these particular techniques. We actually had a couple of people be like, "Are you guys a cult?" If we were just defensive, like no, we are not a cult, then that would be maybe a red flag.

Joe: What's the answer? What do you say?

Brett: The answer is I don't know. If things got out of hand, we could let ourselves accidentally devolve into a cult, if we weren't actually careful. It is easy to recognize this group has something that I need and that I want that seems to be filling my needs more than I have found other places. Then I start getting attached to the group. Then my fear and my control mechanisms start coming in, and then somebody might start trying to control the group. Then people might sacrifice themselves for the group cohesion, because the group is so important and it feels like you aren't going to get it elsewhere, which goes back to the thing you were saying, which is buying into the story that all of life can't be the work. There is a tendency that that could just happen if you are not watching for it.

I think there is a way that being self-aware of we have a different culture developing in this group of people than is the broad culture out there. That might mean others project cult onto us, and that might also mean that we accidentally start exhibiting those behaviors.

Joe: What's interesting to me here, is that I watched the Vow thing. Some of the tools and values were similar to some of the tools that we use, and so I remember the immediate response. I watched it with Tara, my wife. Our immediate response was, mine more than hers, I just don't want to do this at all. I'll give up the business. Maybe I won't even coach. I don't want anything to do with this. I was having a hard time, and I remember watching it and I am like, "Where does the cult begin and where does the cult end?" Then I started doing the research on the cult stuff and how to control groups, and then I started seeing it everywhere.

I remember this one scene in the Vow where the Dalai Lama is talking to Keith Raniere, and the Dalai Lama has a problem with the thing, and then everyone is like this is a problem. He gets talked out of the fact that it is a problem, and then everybody goes oh. I am like wow, it is like one cult talking to another cult. Now, obviously there are huge differences between the two. I really like what one has done in the world, and I like some of what another has done in the world, and some of it I just like— but I saw it in companies, I saw it in political groups. I just saw that this behavior is almost everywhere. I remember after watching it, there was kind of this thing that happened to me, is almost like there is just no way to do this. It was kind of a giving up or something. There was something in me that was just like, "No matter what you do, humans will make it a cult." No matter what, and by humans, I mean me. I am not excluding me from them.

It was just like, "No matter what you do— This is what it devolves into or evolves, because people like to have a clear understanding of what's going on. They like to have roles. They like to have hierarchy." That was the arc of my adventure watching that, and somehow or another in there, when I started to really research, I remember 25 things that let you know you are in a high control group or a cult. I

was like, “We don’t do that, we don’t do that, we don’t do that, and we don’t do that.” All of a sudden, there is a distinction, and this is the difference. That’s the only thing that actually I think got me interested in doing the work again. It was so much not wanting. I want to bring people to their own wisdom, and I don’t want to bring people to my wisdom, somebody else’s wisdom or a group wisdom.

I sometimes don’t see my own wisdom. I see the group wisdom or someone else’s wisdom. It is something that is impossible to completely let go of. It is an interesting journey for me. I wonder how much of the word is charged. I think about the word narcissist. The words narcissist and victim, they were bad words in my head. If you are a victim or you are a narcissist, and then seeing we are all narcissists and we are all victims. There is no bad word here. I haven’t found the place where cult isn’t a bad word. In my world, I don’t see the place where giving up your will to a group is not a bad thing.

The funny thing, the thing that hits me first, is that giving up your will generally is a beautiful thing. As a matter of fact, I think that level of surrender is like one of the most enormous gifts I have ever had in my life, but it wasn’t to a guru. It wasn’t to a group of people. I think about something, Gareth, who runs this thing called Conscious Cult, and he says what happens if you are surrendering consciously with the full understanding that there is imperfection on all sides of it. Even there, I would say it is far better to surrender to the ineffable than it is to a person.

Brett: The ineffable, that’s one of the things I can imagine someone hearing and being like what the fuck does he even mean with it. You said before surrender, but the way you have this feeling about this word surrender, that is like, “I don’t like the way people use it normally, because it is like what are you surrendering to.” I’ve seen you make a distinction between surrendering to something outside of yourself that is not tapped into your wisdom and surrendering to whatever it is coming from within you and through you. That brings me into something that actually really relates this sort of unavoidable phenomenon of group cohesion into cult behavior that just exists in all humans, even if you become part of the cult of personal development gurus who doesn’t want to be a cultist, which could be its own cult.

Joe: No way out.

Brett: No way out. On some level, there is this fundamental pattern in life to self-organize into structure. Structure becomes control, becomes rigidity. That can occur on a group level, but it can also on an interpersonal level inside us. That’s actually what a lot of this work is, to recognize where in some sense we are a cult of one with our own beliefs and our own sub selves and parts that are colluding in some cult-like way to be us against the world. The work itself is to be swimming

upstream of that and finding what's underneath it and relaxing those constraints and letting a broader intelligence come through.

Joe: I have so much joy in me right now hearing that. I love that, how you have shown that the cult is a projection of the internal cult and how our internal structure is very cult-like. We have a guru that's a voice in the head, that says things and we believe it without questioning whatsoever. I just thought, the whole thing— If I want to take the principle and say if my internal world is that of abuse, then I look outside and see the external world as abuse. If my internal world is one of love and I look outside, I see the external world is one of love. I see how love acts. The question I have for myself is, if I am rejecting the cult externally, if I am rejecting the cult externally, because I am not sure if I am entirely rejecting it. But let's just assume I am.

I am definitely rejecting one of those things. Then I am rejecting that in myself. What does it mean to reject the cult in myself? Because the fact is, if there wasn't that cohesion, if there wasn't this is the worldview that I hold, then there would be like a deeper level of collapse. It would almost feel like you lose your center. Wait, hold on a second, which every major transformation has been a losing of the center or the fear of losing the center.

Brett: There is some level that each of us is afraid of losing the center for a reason, because we could just fully dissolve, and yet dissolving is exactly the direction that is most healing for most of us to go, not all of us.

Joe: The way I think about it is, I am a cult of one, and that's okay. There is a tremendous amount of joy with that statement, and there is also a nervousness. I am a cult of one, and that's okay. That's like somehow I define myself incorrectly. Somehow I define myself incorrectly as someone who can almost entirely see through my own belief patterns. It is almost like an acknowledgement and an okayness and a love of the fact that I can't see through my own. There are ways that I can't. Maybe every way I can't see through my own belief patterns. I am sitting with that. I want to see what that does.

I am going to say it again. I am a cult of one, and that's okay. What turns in me is, it is almost like there is no group of people who don't have a set of beliefs. It is like seeing humanity of cult, and it reminds me of this thing when I saw it the first time or the only time. I remember thinking to myself a couple things, like wow, they get so much goodness out of this. There is so much goodness out of this. Then the next thought was, why do you have to mess this up. What would anybody do? Then, the other thing that I saw was like, everybody is in a cult. The cult of materialism, the cult of technology, there is just major thought processes. If you

went out into society and said, I am just going to give them all technology, the society would be like what the fuck, and they would call you a cult.

They wouldn't see they are the cult as well, and so I think there's a freedom that comes with this of saying cults of one, and that's okay. No matter how I try, I will never, ever be able to see the water that I swim in.

Brett: A characteristic of the experience of being in a cult must be that there are parts of you that are aware that you are being controlled or that you are allowing yourself to be controlled, and those parts are being resistant, disassociated. I am curious in you, in this 'I am a cult of one', you have this belief that I will never be aware, or I don't see through, but what about the part of you that does see through whatever sliver of the structure you think you have.

Joe: That's how I identify. It's the destruction of that identity that is, I think, the cult, meaning I identify as somebody who can see through it. It is the death of that identity, and I agree. I mean I agree that all of us see through it, and I also agree that all of us are [unclear]. There is definitely just some stuff. We don't know what life would look like, if we didn't have eyes or we had different sensory organs. We are limited in our ability to understand by the nature of our organism if nothing else, by the colors that we see. But that's an extreme version. It is an interesting thing. Literally it is like the death of the identity.

Yeah, I can see through stuff and I can't see through stuff. There are ways in which I am open minded and ways in which I am not open minded. I can't even see the ways I am close minded in some cases. I can see the ways I am close minded sometimes and then trying to ignore them.

Brett: Which is a necessary thing to do in order to weave our experience together into any cohesive story that can have any consistent plot line at all. There has to be information that's lost and that is essentially some micro level of cult behavior inside ourselves.

Joe: Let me test it. Give me a cult joke or something like that about this work being a cult. I want to feel what happens in my system.

Brett: We are getting a bunch of shirts made with your face on it, and we are going to save the world.

Joe: You got the double duty on me, even the saving the world part of it. There is more humor in it, for sure. I can laugh at it. I couldn't laugh so easily at it recently, so that's a good sign. I had this idea that if we ever did have a center, if there was ever a place where everyone was coming together to do this work consistently, that we would have a picture of a guru on the wall in five or six places, but every month it would change. We would pick one of the people and put them in the guru picture.

Brett: At least two of them would be cartoon or something mythical, an animal. That's great.

Joe: Thank you for that.

Brett: I enjoyed it.

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