Why do People join Cults?

Are cults just for weak-minded losers? Why would "normal" people join a cult? The answer is that one of the greatest strengths of humanity is also one of our greatest weaknesses. What makes humanity dominant on this planet is our ability to share knowledge. Because we can communicate, information learned by one individual is passed on to others. We have organized into societies that are so complex that only a fraction of the information that we rely on is actually stored in our own brains. The up side is that it allows us to benefit from the tremendous wealth of combined knowledge of the human race. The down side is that it is a serious security hole in the human computer. If the information we rely on is flawed, then we can end up living a life of illusion and deception.

Examples of groups that have some cult properties include religions, nations, political parties, corporations, nonprofit organizations, sport team fans, neighborhood associations, bridge clubs, softball teams, online discussion boards, Macintosh users, bike clubs, and vegans. Not to say that you should quit all these groups but that all of them will be to some extent at least benignly cultish.

Technically, any group that you are a member of has cult like properties. Most cults in this context are harmless. The very nature of a group is that you trust other people. You rely on them and they rely on you. The group creates a social order where leaders lead and followers follow. It might be democratic or hierarchical. But you trust them and they trust you. The group becomes it's own entity. Almost like it has a life force of it's own.

In a healthy group, people are ethical and responsible with each other. The relationships are based on a sane and productive system and the focus of the group is something worthwhile. People are trusted because they are trustworthy. People have faith in each other and the group because people have earned faith through being responsible. This keeps the down side to groups to a minimum. Even in the best of circumstances there are mistakes made and it takes hard work to keep things on course.

The human need to be part of a group is far stronger than logic. Most people will sacrifice logic for social acceptance.

People survive through groups. We need to connect to society. We need to become a productive member of the community to feel good about ourselves. This is a built-in instinctive need and it is very strong. Logic isn't as strong as our need to be accepted in a community. And because it is a strong need, people who are unethical can exploit that and enslave you in a cult.

A cult is a group gone bad. It is a group that uses what would otherwise be a normal group process for the purpose of exploiting and enslaving the members for some unethical purpose, generally involving money and power. People who have a need to belong to something are suckered in and allow themselves to be reprogrammed by the group mind. They are required to accept a lot of bad information on faith and once they accept that then they see reality relative to the bad information they are working with. Groups can start out good but degenerate into a cult because of a takeover of some unethical person who exploits the group for personal gain.

So the reason people join cults is that people need to organize as groups for a normal healthy society. But there are good groups and bad groups and a lot of groups that are somewhere in between. When people become part of the group they put their faith and trust in the group and the group information becomes part of who they are and what they believe. The individual starts seeing reality through the lens of the group and if the group is based on fiction, then the group members will see the world relative to the fiction.