

# Cult of Heroes

Or Why MKP And The NWTa Are A Lousy Cult

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It is said that “mankind resists and fears change.” There is much truth in this statement. Fear of change is natural and expected. Fear at its best provides heightened situational awareness and at its worst creates a distorted reality devoid of logic and clear thinking. Of course, no one will argue against the need for positive change in the world today. There are many brave organizations with that same goal, create a better more compassionate world. It is somewhat paradoxical that those organizations who choose to take on such honorable missions are often some of the most misunderstood.

One such visionary movement is a men’s organization called The ManKind Project (MKP) whose mission is to “to change the world one man at a time.” What exactly is the change MKP is working toward? If you look at the MKP website (<http://mankindproject.org>), it is abundantly clear and has been consistently stated that “We are a men’s organization that believes the world is better served by men who are accountable for their actions, emotionally mature, and live a mission of service.” MKP invites men into a life of accountability, authenticity, compassion, generosity, integrity, leadership, multicultural awareness, and respect. Not a bad goal in light of recent events.



## Getting In

The gateway into MKP is the New Warrior Adventure Training (NWTa). The NWTa is a weekend event held around the globe for men who want to explore their intention and place in today’s world. Make no mistake, the weekend is intense, thought provoking, fun, and adventurous. For many men the weekend takes the form of a healthy initiation that supports their journey into manhood. It is said that the weekend “changes men.” Because at some level we all fear change, questioning the NWTa is normal and welcome.

Each man’s experience on an NWTa weekend is different. There have been over 40,000 men who have attended the the NWTa weekend over the last 25 years. Many have said it had a profound effect on their life and continue on a path of personal growth within MKP. Others welcomed the insights they gained and then continued on their own path. There are even some men that did not like the experience. All men are welcome and there are no requirements after the NWTa weekend has been completed.

If one were to search the Internet, there are many second and third hand reports that do not support a positive experience on the NWTa. As hard as it is

to hear, negative feedback can be helpful and MKP has always been open to input from anyone. There is a difference, however, between constructive feedback and innuendo, rumor, and speculation. Perhaps most disturbing is the “cult” label that has been given to MKP. Viewed in one light this accusation is rather serious, in the light of truth it is actually rather funny.

## As A Cult We Suck

As mentioned, if you search the Internet about the NWTAs, you will no doubt find the comments and sites that consider MKP to be some kind of cult. While I don’t wish that you judge the MKP based on hearsay and second (and third) hand gossip, I do invite you to explore for yourself while I’m not around. Go ahead, I’ll wait until you get back. Let’s continue.

The truth of the matter is **as a cult, MKP sucks**. I wish we could morph the minds of men in a single weekend and send out “supermen” to help make the world a better place. Well, actually I don’t have this wish. What I wish for is exactly what happens for many men on the weekend. They get in touch with who they really are and often find a peace and safety long forgotten in their life. Some men dive into this process while others are more comfortable just sticking in their big toe. Each man is invited to proceed at his own pace.

In reality, the NWTAs are a single weekend in a man’s life. We can’t seem to create cult members in just one weekend. Some men attend the weekend and walk away. We never hear from them again. Others attend and continue on as part of a local men’s support group. Still others, get more involved and stay with MKP living and evolving their mission of service. If we have any secret it might be the small local support groups MKP fosters and supports for men who have successfully completed the NWTAs. No one profits monetarily from these groups. They are largely autonomous and they provide a private place for local men to support other local men in a variety of ways. This support includes helping men navigate crisis and challenge in their lives. It also includes celebrating and honoring forgotten touchstones in a man’s life. If there is any lasting effect on men, and the world, it would be these voluntary support groups.

The weekend is not designed to indoctrinate men. What I have experienced is a training weekend that says “we challenge you to be all that you are.” There is no religion, no doctrine, no extended financial commitment, and no secret meetings. You can walk away during the weekend and never do anything associated with MKP again. If you complete the weekend, you can come back anytime, help staff weekends, join a men’s support group, attend other trainings, leave again, come back again, or just complain. All those initiated on the NWTAs are welcome.



We don’t offer any secrets to life. We have no magic formula or short-track to Nirvana. For me the path to becoming a better partner, father, son, brother, friend has taken hard work on a personal level. I don’t blame. MKP has helped make a safe space for this work to happen. We don’t even have a fearless leader that is willing to part with the right secrets for the right fee. We have many leaders (some of whom I thought were real assholes, but that is really about me) who exemplify what it is to be an authentic caring man. Collectively, we have men from all walks of life. And, in case you have not figured it out, we don’t do women’s trainings, so if we were creating a cult, we forgot half the population. We do work with other women’s organizations and our community includes men, women, and children. There is no NWTAs for boys, you must be 18 or older to attend. I suppose if we were a better cult we would correct a few of these problems, but then that is not our mission.

## Why I Stayed

In case you have not noticed, I have participated in the NWTAs and I am currently the Director of the local Philadelphia MKP Center. As a local center, we have a yearly agreement with the national MKP organization that basically allows us to offer MKP trainings (including the NWTAs) and participate in the governance of the national organization. I attended the NWTAs in July of 1992. Initially, I was very involved in the fledgling Philadelphia community and I enjoyed my “new way of being” with

other men. For the first time, I started to trust men. My daughter was born in 1993, and for about six months I struggled with finding the time to stay involved with the Philadelphia community and tend to my family's needs. One of the community leaders told me "raising a child is enough right now, we'll be here when you want to return." Not the best advice to give potential cult members, by the way. I did manage to help start a small support group of "New Warriors" in my area in 1996. We still have meetings every two weeks. These meetings helped me navigate many of the challenges I encountered in my life. The group continues today and has had over fifty men come and go through the years. Currently, we have sixteen active men.



As far as my "indoctrination" weekend goes, I don't remember a whole lot of details. I recall the parts where I was invited to push myself further than I ever thought I could. Thinking back, I can only remember maybe one or two names of the staff men on that weekend. It was held somewhere outside of Washington DC, but I cannot recall where exactly. I was never contacted by the Washington DC community after the weekend. I even had to make a few phone calls to find other New Warrior brothers in the Philadelphia area. Poor follow-up is not the best way to start a cult.

In the mid 90's I attended a follow-on training weekend. One of the leaders <sup>1</sup> said the following, "If you want to honor me, don't believe me." That was odd, I thought at the time. Here I am trying to learn about becoming more involved in this men's organization and this guy is telling me not to believe him. I thought about this statement for a long time. It makes sense to me now because I have discovered that the only true "MKP doctrine" is what is inside the heart of each man. The MKP network

<sup>1</sup>Bruce "Wolf" Boehlen

has always offered the tools and structure to help me remember or find my "truth." Nothing more. There is a nice paradoxical appeal to that idea. The way to your truth is not through my truth, don't believe me, find your own path. As I have experienced, there are many men who will assist in this journey. If I were starting a cult I don't think I would have leaders making such statements. Then again, I don't have much interest in promoting single-mindedness.

## What Is Wrong with Privacy

For many men, privacy is needed to feel safe. Often times privacy is confused with secretive behavior. I am not going to tell you specifically what happens on an NWTA weekend because I respect the privacy of other men. If a man needs a "container of privacy" to look into himself, I will help create and protect it. In this voyeuristic age, many men find that privacy is important. The lazy conclusion is to assume that the need for privacy is a sure sign of a secretive cult. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, at any time, my local support group, as do many others in the Philadelphia area, invite men who have not done the NWTA to attend our meeting as a guest. At each meeting, we ask that everyone sitting in our circle respect the privacy of the other men and not discuss the night's events with others outside the circle. This requirement helps create safety and builds trust. In my group, we do invite members and guests to talk about *their own experience* with others. The guests who attend the meetings are under no obligation to attend the NWTA, although if we can find one, we give them a brochure.

There are many other private institutions including businesses and service organizations that have similar goals and practices, yet they are not labeled as cults. For example, there are private and secret aspects to college fraternities, the Masons, and even the Boy Scouts. Yes, the Boy Scouts. Growing up in the late sixties and early seventies I was member of my local Boy Scout troop. Within the Boy Scouts there was an organization called "Order of the Arrow" or OA that provided an "initiation" experience for boys. As I recall, you had to be invited to join OA. Joining meant that you would attend an "initiation" weekend, and if successful, you would become a member of OA. (You got this cool white sash with

an arrow on it to wear over your uniform.) The initiation was not easy and even has some similar themes to the NWTa. The weekend started on Friday night with a native American flare where warriors in native American dress stood on a cliff with torches warning us about what was to follow. Then the journey began as guides slowly lead us one by one alone into the darkness. As I understand it, the goal was to provide boys with a healthy initiation experience that allows them to prove themselves through service and sacrifice. OA was a “secret” and private organization, we were not allowed to tell anyone about what we did on the weekend so as to not spoil the experience for others. Plus, it was a badge of honor to have completed the weekend. I certainly did not want to cheapen my accomplishment by not keeping my word. The similarities to the NWTa are striking.

## Cult of Heroes

Men choose to stay involved with MKP at various levels. There are a few paid administrative positions at the national and international level. Some centers have paid staff members. The whole organization is registered as a not for profit entity, which is a good thing because no one is getting rich from MKP. As a cult, we are a financial flop. In Philadelphia, we can only afford to pay a part-time administrative book keeper. As Center Director of MKP Philadelphia, I do not get paid. We also have local Board members, co-coordinators, and pointmen who also donate their time and energy to the community. That thing about living missions of service – it is true.

There are countless other men who stay connected to the local Philadelphia MKP community through trainings and other social events. If I could find any behavior that looked like a cult this would be it. I have seen men give, and give, and give more to help make the world a better place to live.

They give of themselves volunteering (and even paying) to help staff NWTa weekends, organizing events, encouraging younger men, and much more. They attend countless meetings, leave their families and friends for days at a time and focus exclusively on helping other men become “better.” In addition, they give of their hearts by sharing “what it is about for them” when things don’t go their way. Braver men I have never known. I am amazed how these

men change the world. They start with themselves and what they do seems to grow outward into their families, communities, and the world. If you are wondering where to find heroes in today’s world, look no further. They are a cult alright, a cult of heroes.



## Please Don’t Believe Me

If you still want to believe in the cult idea, then I have one final suggestion. Talk with men who have done the NWTa weekend. Ask them this question “What did *you* learn about *you* on the weekend?” A good follow up question might be “Where else do you think you might have found this truth about you?” The answer may be rather enlightening. You can also find good first hand information at <http://mankindproject.org> where you will see this at the bottom of each page:

*The ManKind Project is a global not for profit organization [501 (c)(3)] that conducts challenging and highly rewarding trainings for men at every stage of life. We help men through any transition, men at all levels of success, men facing almost any challenge. Our flagship training, described by many as the most powerful men’s training available, is the New Warrior Training Adventure. The ManKind Project (MKP) is not affiliated with any religious practice or political party. Your beliefs are welcome.*

That statement is a pretty sorry description of a cult. We don’t promise enlightenment, wealth, or a cure for baldness. Basically, we are just not that good at the cult thing. If you look closely and talk with us directly you will find we are very good at one thing, changing the world one man at a time. I apologize if you were looking for something less noble. It is not here.

Still not convinced? I believe that MKP and the NWTa are not for everybody. If you do not feel safe seeking personal growth through adventure, I

understand and support you. MKP does not hold a patent on personal growth and there is no interest in creating an “us” and “them” world. There are many other organizations and groups that encourage positive change. If you don’t like the way the world is working for you, seek them out. We are all in this together. Your journey and path are important and I respect and honor your choices. And, please, if you have read this to the end, don’t believe a word I have said, the world will be a better place for it. Positive change invites the courage in all of us. We can do this. Namaste.

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