

Devastation in Guyana

It was an autumn evening after a fun-filled day of second-grade classes. While I impatiently waited for supper, my mom walked into the living room to turn the volume up on the television as she often did while preparing for mealtime. She gasped as she approached the TV set. Although I didn't really pay much attention to the news at that age, I recognized that gasp and realized something terrible had happened. We sat in silence, listening in horror to the newscaster as he explained what would become known as the Jonestown Massacre. This would be an enormous lesson to the nation and my family alike on just how strong the power of persuasion can be.

The world waited and listened in shock and disbelief as the gruesome events that took place on November 18, 1978, began to unfold. People everywhere wondered how over 900 people could be convinced that taking their own lives and the lives of their children was the only solution. One survivor remembered cult leader Reverend Jim Jones' coaxing words while watching his followers drink cyanide-laced Kool-Aid, using phrases like "We didn't commit suicide, we committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world" (Klineman, Butler and Conn 370). Although this idea sounds incomprehensible to most people, as another former cult member explained, people don't intentionally become cult members. In the process of looking to be a part of something important, they join support groups, organized religion or any other variety of community groups. Somehow during this course, certain "naïve" people can end up "entrapped" (Layton 299). For whatever reason, this Guyana-based group known as The Peoples Temple Agricultural Project was looking for a greater purpose in life and became victims of an egocentric man who wanted nothing more than to feel powerful and worshiped.

During the days and weeks following the mass suicide, my family remained watchful of the news, looking for some explanation as to why or how this could have happened. "I wondered what this man had going for him that would make parents kill their own children," my mother explained when recalling the incident (Anderson). The tragedy stirred something within my mother, a need to turn the negative event into an important life lesson. She wanted to make it clear to me that I should never let someone make me feel inferior, that I should feel in control of the situation at hand at all times and that I should never give into pressures from others, especially from peers in a group setting (Anderson). As a young child, I didn't understand why she was telling me those things, knowing I would never be like any of those people that had died. As I approached adolescence, however, I began to understand what she had meant, and as an adult, it has become a liberating quality that I'm thankful was instilled in me at an early age.

Although it has been nearly 25 years now since that fateful day in November and the mass suicide that occurred in Jonestown, it still serves as a potent reminder to federal investigators that even seemingly peaceful groups can get out of hand in a hurry. With good reason, more groups are governmentally monitored for their activities. Although there regrettably have been mass suicides since, they have never reached this scale, and more precautions are taken by authorities and parents alike to try to prevent anything like this from happening again. On a personal level, the lesson of self-worth I took away from this tragedy is a valuable one and one that I will continue to pass on to future generations.

Works Cited

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