

# Jonestown holocaust:

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## It could happen again

The Jonestown holocaust where more than 900 Americans died in either suicide or murder pacts has caused uneasy concern. "How did it happen?" "What caused intelligent, well-educated people to join the Peoples Temple?" "Why did hundreds of people choose suicide?" "Could a tragedy similar to Jonestown recur?"

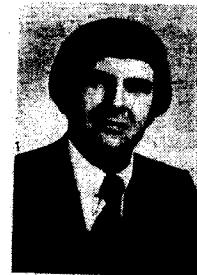
An interview with Dr. William D. Brown attempts to provide some answers to these disturbing questions. Dr. Brown, a practicing clinical psychologist, is the author of **FAMILIES UNDER STRESS** and writes a syndicated column for *The News-Post* on coping with stress.

Q — Dr. Brown, how do you account for the holocaust which occurred at Jonestown?

A — From all reports individuals were originally drawn to Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple because it served their religious needs. Jones was an ordained clergyman, whose church was at first involved in humanitarian efforts. But a shift occurred within Jones so that the

## Families Under Stress

By William D. Brown, Ph.D.



Peoples Temple ceased as a religion and became a cult.

Q — Weren't members aware of this shift?

A — Some may have been, but man is basically a follower. The group which ultimately migrated to Jonestown offered individuals a sense of belonging. At first they appealed to the significance of self-worth. As Jones became more paranoid and viewed himself as a self-appointed messiah, individuals subordinated their own interests to those of the group.

Q — So the group became more important than the individual?

A — Yes. Jones' charisma filled a vacuum for many of his followers. Their love for him was so intense that they would follow him — even into death, when he reportedly appealed, "If you love me as much as I love you, we must all die or be destroyed from the outside." Fear was a primary motivating

factor.

Q — Fear from what?

A — From the unknown, from exposure, from admitting, "I was wrong." Man has always feared what he cannot control or understand. Jones ployed his followers with fear of enemies including the FBI, the CIA, and the KKK. These were rallying points for cohesive attacks by the group.

Former members of the cult describe Jones as having become sexually intimate with cult members, both male and female. He threatened to expose them if they were disloyal to him or the group. And of course there were physical threats and reprisals to dissidents' physical well-being.

Cap this with the innate fear in most of us which prevents us from admitting we have been grossly wrong, and rationalization arises, causing cult members to "reason" their remaining loyal to the movement to the very end.

Q — Reports are being received from

former followers that family members were encouraged to turn against one another. Isn't this behavior surprising?

A — No, unfortunately it is not. If you can generate primary allegiance to the larger group, then the larger organization becomes more important than the family unit. We need only recall Nazi Germany as a comparison, where children were first loyal to the fatherland and only then to their families.

Q — What caused supposedly sane people to willfully choose death over life?

A — Hysteria. This can take many forms. When mass hysteria overcomes a group, reason and logic are replaced with the mesmerism of total allegiance to an authority figure. His wishes become the group's command, so that intellectually it seems only right to acquiesce to his desires. To do otherwise in such a setting would seem unnatural.

Also, for those who saw Jones as a messiah, they believed he had supernatural powers. They had faith in a future existence where the group would remain intact. Many undoubtedly shared the belief expressed by an elderly cult member who told a survivor just prior to taking his life, "He (Jones) will raise us tomorrow."

Q — But family ties were strong even in the face of death.

A — Yes, that is true. Pictures of whole families whose bodies are grouped together where they died clasping each other's hands attest to that. Though the family was not encouraged

as the most basic unit in Jonestown, obviously family ties had not become extinct.

Q — Does this suggest a natural family allegiance in individuals?

A — No, it does not. The Peoples Temple had not been in existence long enough to totally displace family loyalty. Had the group survived for two or three generations, they might have been successful in annihilating the family as an effective unit. One need only look at several of the young children in the compound who had been taught that their first loyalty was to Jim Jones, whom they were encouraged to call "Daddy." Apparently this displacement of natural parents by Jones was effective with many of these youngsters.

Q — But how do you account for this?

A — The answer is found in indoctrination. First comes isolation, where the individual is made to feel he is something special. Frequently this is followed by convincing the person that his past has consisted of behavior for which he should feel guilty. Some major show of commitment is finally required, such as giving all personal possessions to the group or participating in sexual intimacies seen as ultimate giving of the self. Once parents underwent such commitment, it would seem natural to accept secondary roles to the group with the latter exercising primary influence on

the young.

Q — But could this be kept up indefinitely?

A — Yes, if mass indoctrination were repeated often enough. Many cults have become highly skilled at mass indoctrination, which is a more effective program of brainwashing than those previously devised by any nation for use with prisoners of war.

Q — Still, why wouldn't some balk at the outrageous demands imposed on them by their leader and his lieutenants?

A — Because (1) it is easier to follow than to lead, and (2) most people will choose the easier course when given the option. Also, remember that the more outrageous demands evolved only slowly. What seems blatantly outrageous to the outsider would not seem all that unusual to members who had been constantly conditioned to view hideous demands within the group as both just and proper.

Q — What types of people are most easily attracted to these cults?

A — Generally people who are in a state of transition, those undergoing change in their personal lives. Included are the lonely and unhappy who don't feel loved. Where family ties are weak and there is no sense of belonging, fertile ground exists for recruiting cult members. When outside stress becomes too threatening, any source is welcomed that will assume responsibility for reducing stress and fulfilling the needs of the individual.

Q — But are their needs fulfilled?

A — Undoubtedly they are at first. Otherwise the group would disintegrate. The need to belong is one of the most basic of psychological needs. Evidently Jones offered to fill this need by convincing individuals that each enjoyed a special relationship with him. This is a technique long used by pimps in controlling their stables of prostitutes.

Q — Are there similarities between cult followers and prostitutes?

A — Emotional similarities are present in both groups. In each instance individuals feel special because they are favored by the love-object or leader. As time passes, less attention is focused on the individual, with membership in the group replacing earlier needs met by the leader or love object. It is not surprising that a primary group of Jonestown followers were the down-and-out, the emotionally orphaned, and some who had previously been involved in prostitution.

Q — But all were not prostitutes —

A — Of course not. They came from virtually every walk of life. One thing generally shared by such group participants is a sense of powerlessness, an internal emptiness, resulting in unbearable stress. When stress builds sufficiently, people turn to any source promising to deliver them from whatever is causing their stress. Evidently Jones was just such a charismatic catalyst for hundreds of people.

Q — Is stress the basic cause leading

people to willfully join a cult such as the Peoples Temple?

A — Yes. Everyone operates under stress. No life is devoid of it. Stress is frequently an ally, in that it prods us to overcome obstacles which would otherwise defeat us. But when stress becomes too great or when we are unable to cope with the stress of daily life, then we will consider even drastic means as a solution to reducing the level of stress.

Q — But surely most people occasionally encounter stress which is beyond their coping ability.

A — True, but most of us are able to turn to family members, peer groups, or

loved ones to assist us in coping with stressful situations. If a study is ever conducted on the backgrounds of the Peoples Temple cult members, I suspect a large number will be discovered to have affiliated with the group following some break with family, rejection by a significant other in their lives, or as a result of trouble arising with the victims' peer groups.

Q — In other words you believe these cult members joined the organization due to an emotional vacuum produced by stress?

A — Precisely.

Q — Do you feel such an organization as the Peoples Temple could come into existence again?

A — Absolutely! Where conditions are

ripe, such groups will repeatedly rise up. Congressional hearings have been promised in the case of the Jonestown tragedy. They will undoubtedly consider how the State Department could have failed to be aware of the potential holocaust existing in Jonestown. Perhaps these hearings will broaden to include studying other cults — the Hare Krishna, the Synanon, Children of God, Unification Church, Scientology — as they operate in or from this country. But while such an investigation is long overdue and indeed will be most welcomed, this will not bring an end to cults.

Q — How can cults be stopped?

A — I'm not certain they can be stopped. Many call themselves religions — which they are not — demanding free-

dom to worship in whatever bizarre form they choose. Secondly, as long as people are desperate to feel needed and want to belong, cults will arise to fill this need. Those who have recently undergone profound change — a break from the family, an unhappy love experience, or who have pulled away from meaningful social contacts — are likely candidates such cults will continue to pursue.

Q — Is there a way to prepare ourselves so that it is unlikely we will ever become cult candidates?

A — There are several things we can do in this regard. First, we should recognize the importance the family plays in fulfilling our emotional needs. No family is perfect and all our needs cannot be fulfilled in any family setting. But maintaining contact with your family group, refusing to let differences become divisive obstacles preventing ongoing interaction with family members will help keep you reality oriented.

Q — Reality oriented?

A — Yes, the unreal is more likely to become real when we are troubled or when we pull away from significant contact with others. This brings me to the second point: we need to avoid the temptation to withdraw unto ourselves. A cult such as that in existence at Jonestown could never survive scrutiny by outsiders. This is what Jim Jones recognized, which is why he was so violently opposed to the arrival of Congressman Ryan's party. Maintaining contact with those who are not members of your own social or interest groups, permits exter-

nal input — vital to avoiding intellectual incest.

Q — Intellectual incest?

A — Yes, and intellectual incest can become as deadly to the order within the individual's world as physical incest is to the social structure of the family. Where your only frame of reference is continually reinforced by input from the same people, thoughts and responses tend to breed incestuously. Obviously this condition is not desirable. Input from a variety of sources tends to increase stability both for the individual and the group.

Q — Dr. Brown, what advice would you give parents in assisting their children to steer clear of entanglements with such cults?

A — There is no substitute for education. People don't err because they have too much knowledge, but rather because they have too little. Parents should educate their young on the tragic holocaust which occurred at Jonestown, distasteful as it is. The horrors of commitment to a cause such as that espoused in the cults should be thoroughly taught so that the young can be forewarned to the dangers inherent in these groups.

Finally, children should always understand that regardless of their errors, there will never come a time when as parents we are unwilling to sit down and work through any situation troubling them. Approaches such as these will go far in drying up the wellhead of human carnage on which so many cults have been built.