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'Explaining' Jonestown to the Children

How do we explain to our children the horror in Guyana? Early last week, I ran out of words. The familiar terms —tragedy, madness, violence—that serve well enough in transient seizures of mayhem like the Berkowitz murders or Attica suddenly reveal the limits of language.

Jonestown was too grisly a death rite, and too deep into a mass séance of evil, for even profound explanations of deviant behavior to offer guidance. If we look for analogies from the past, none can be found. At best, we have bits and pieces taken from ancient history and current events: the 964 Jews of Masada who took their own lives in A.D. 73 when Roman soldiers pressed in, the power of a Charles Manson to con his followers into thinking he had paranormal powers.

But the defiant mystery about Jonestown remains: How could so large a number of Americans simultaneously let go of so strong an instinct as personal autonomy? The final death rite of drinking Kool-Aid and cyanide may not have been a totally free-will act for everyone—the camp was guarded by armed goons—but mass suicide had been discussed often. The liturgy itself had been rehearsed several times. Discussions between fathers and mothers had to have been held on the methods of infanticide. "They started with the babies," said a survivor.

The martyrologies run back through the centuries with accounts of true believers accepting death for their convictions. But the Jonestown suicides were anything but martyrs in the traditions of, say, Thomas More allowing his own beheading or St. Stephen not resisting his fatal stoning. The purity and idealism that first prompted those two, as well as all the martyrs, to accept death was as firm at the end of their commitment as in the beginning.

This was lacking in Jonestown. The cult of the Peoples Temple is said to have begun well. Feelings of love and brotherhood that mark the usual first hug-in fervor of communes were present. But then the feet of the charismatic Jones were seen to be made of the coarsest clay. Whatever idealism may have pervaded the Peoples Temple in the San Francisco of the late 1960s, it had vanished in Guyana.

We will never know the subconscious obsessions and derangements that changed Jones from a respected pastor and influential political power broker into a sadist, fanatic and violent monster. But it is known that he concocted a list of enemies who, he told his followers, were ever lurking "out there"—sometimes in the jungle just beyond the fences of Jonestown or in federal interference from Washington. This character deformity is nothing new in tyrants. It was well-described by theologian Paul Tillich: "The weakness of the fanatic is that those whom he fights have a secret hold upon him; and to this weakness he and his group finally succumb."

What has come out of Guyana to date is a torrent of questions, but only a trickle of answers. My children, of grade-school age, have been talking with their classmates about the stacks of bodies, the guns, the dead congressman and the jungle escapes. We have talked at home about it, too. I would like to think that the strong solvent of their youth can dilute the impact of so heinous a denial of life. As an adult, I know that it is too much to think about for too long.

Distractions will soon enough float by —the football games, passage into Christmas and Hanuka, worries about inflation. If our children see that we are helpless to explain the events in Guyana, then perhaps that awareness is one of the rites of initiation into adulthood.

If we are not hesitant to push our children into churches and synagogues to confront the mysteries of faith, then we can expose the young also to the mysteries of human behavior—even if they are coarse beyond imagining. This is a time to confess: "I can't explain it."