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Freedom and Loyalty, a Deadly Potion

The questions of how the decision to commit suicide was made and by whom have not been frequently asked about Jonestown in part because of the assumption in both popular and scholarly literature that Jim Jones was primarily, if not exclusively, behind the decision. Therefore, asking why a sick, self-centered, possibly insane man would recommend a sick, self-centered, insane act to a community within his control, is a tautology. In this chapter I link the themes of the previous chapters with a consideration of the relationship between loyalty, betrayal, and the decision to commit suicide by the inner circle at Jonestown. I also explore the increasing hopelessness that contributed to the decision to commit suicide by the leadership circle and the motivations to end their lives for the Indiana sect, new religious movement members, and urban California black church members. I argue that each group, in its own way, was attempting to salvage a piece of the dream that had originally committed them to Peoples Temple.

Loyalty as a Central Community Value

The centrality of loyalty as a community value increased as threats to the unity of the group mounted by the Concerned Relatives, Congressman Leo Ryan, and the media gained momentum during the spring and summer of 1978. At the same time, a desire for freedom from the psychic stress and physical demands of life in a community where most of the population were dependent increasingly influenced the decisions of the people in leadership at Jonestown. Two women defected during the months before November 1978, Debbie Layton

Blakey and Teri Buford. These women were white, educated, and held positions of responsibility in Peoples Temple. These two defections were pivotal in the decision to commit suicide. Threats of community suicide by Jim Jones were generally tied to the defection of members as early as 1973, and this was the case with the final “White Night” as well.¹

As discussed earlier, the desire to change the world and the attraction for Jim Jones as the embodiment of that enterprise became confused within the leadership of Peoples Temple: to love God’s justice on earth was to love Jim Jones; to be loyal to socialist values was to be loyal to Jones. Any betrayal of Jones thus became a betrayal of the community and all that it stood for. Pam Bradshaw, who was one of the new religious movement members and was twenty-two at the time of her death, wrote in response to one of the Jonestown educational questions on “Dad’s worst pain”:

I feel the most painful thing to dad is to see people who know and understand socialism, who have been highly trusted in the movement, turn back on all that is good and try to tear the cause down. Apathy, waste and unwillingness to change or to learn is painful and frustrating. Anarchy is another thing. Once when I had fucked up and gone out with Irvin, LC Davis and Michelle Wagner, I was telling Dad about it and he said, “Remember these people, it’s people like them that are killing me.” I do remember them and I also must carry my guilt for the pain I have caused him by my rebellion. I will not forget these people that have caused you pain. (CHS, FF-5-n-6/7)

In spite of this deep loyalty to Jones/Peoples Temple when the leaders’ entwined loves for the movement and Jim Jones were brought into tension through Jones’s behavior during the spring and summer of 1978, it was the movement that took precedence over Jones. Yet it was not the members of the movement who were a priority for these leaders. By November 1978 their loyalty was to the Jonestown com-

1. Although the term *White Night* has been used in most of the secondary literature as interchangeable with the *suicide drills* that preceded 18 November—so that the mass suicides are frequently referred to as the *final White Night*—it is clear from reading the California Historical Society documents that Peoples Temple actually used *White Night* to refer to any threat to the community, with revolutionary suicide being one among many options of response to that threat.

munity as a symbol and the power of the message it could send to America should it be unable to survive as a socialist community.

Weightman has suggested that “the members’ relationship to [Jones] became so completely intertwined with their relationship to the church that the two became indistinguishable” (Weightman 1983, 136). Her statement is more appropriate as a description of the California Peoples Temple than of Jonestown. Because she does not take into account the shift that had taken place with the move to Jonestown, she wrongly concludes, “When Jones saw himself as having no way out, he saw there to be no way out for the Temple—and the members of the Temple agreed.” Her schema of male agency, specifically Jones’s agency, is carried over into her conclusion that it was Jones alone who was responsible for the suicides. The only responsibility the followers had was in agreeing with him. As suggested in chapter 6, the members themselves were more loyal to one another, to the ideals of the society they were creating, and to the leaders within their groups than they were to Jim Jones himself. It took Marceline Jones, Carolyn Layton, Maria Katsaris, Harriet Tropp, Jim McElvane, and the others in positions of responsibility and influence at Jonestown to embrace the idea of suicide for the rank and file members to have been willing to drink the poison. Jones had become too ravaged by drug addiction and paranoia to have planned the suicides on his own, or to have inspired people to take their lives through his encouragement alone.

If the leaders were convinced that they had failed at modeling how a socialist community should function, perhaps they began to see the importance of Jonestown as symbolic instead. In the unpublished “Response” to the accusations of the Concerned Relatives the anonymous writer admits that abuses had taken place, such as screening incoming mail, confiscating passports, and physical punishment (Moore 1985, 255). Reading through the various administrative documents from Jonestown that outline concerns about beetles, planting, clearing ground, diet, insecticides, livestock, labor organization, and so forth, it is clear that it required hard physical and organizational labor to create the utopian community that Jones and the leadership had imagined. It is no wonder that some people, such as Tim Stoen, Debbie Blakey, and Teri Buford, all of whom had the social and financial resources to return to mainstream society, decided to leave. The minutes of the Peoples Rallies and educational submissions by members reflect an increasing level of unhappiness and disappointment

toward the end of 1977. This dissatisfaction was expressed in complaints about the food, the amount of work required, the number of meetings called, and the amount of time during the meetings devoted to disciplinary problems. The "Promised Land" was not proving to be paradise. As Chris Hatcher has pointed out: "The majority of Jonestown residents appear to have been aware of Jonestown's failure at economic self-sufficiency, the increasing failure of the medical clinic to handle tropical health problems, and Jim Jones' increasing obsession with external threats" (Hatcher 1989, 128). Perhaps, given these circumstances, the leaders began to wonder if the legacy of Peoples Temple would not be more positive if it were tragically concluded rather than slowly unraveled as a result of foundational financial, medical, and personality flaws.

Stephan Jones commented that his father gave many "orders," especially during the final months of Jonestown, which followers *knew* would be countermanded later. The community had learned to adapt to Jones's unpredictable behavior. For example, he related the story of how his father reacted when the summons was being served at Jonestown for Grace and Tim Stoen to obtain custody of John Victor in September 1977. Jim Jones gave the order that the guards, including Stephan, should "shoot to kill" anyone who came down the road to Jonestown. Stephan Jones understood, however, even at the time, that "everyone knew it was show." After some hours the order was changed from "shoot to kill" to "stop them." As Jones pointed out, this was the pattern of his father's leadership: an order would be given, then rescinded or modified. Members of Peoples Temple learned to overlook—or to interpret as a loyalty test—Jones's more histrionic statements (S. G. Jones interview, 11 Dec. 1992).

The question, therefore, is not, "Why did Jones order suicide?"—because the language of suicide and the practice for it had been going on since 1973—but "Why did the leaders choose to act on the suicide order at that time?" It is possible that the timing of the suicides had to do with a combination of the Ryan visit, which threatened the integrity of the community from the outside, and Jones's behavior, which was threatening to undermine the movement from the inside. If the destruction of the community was perceived as inevitable, perhaps the leadership decided to take advantage of Jones's remaining authority with the rank and file to make it a symbolic end, an end that would send a message to the world. For Jim Jones suicide may have been just another radical idea designed to test loyalty, a plan that

he had always before countermanded. It is possible to speculate that as the dream of equality and freedom that Jonestown represented turned nightmare, the inner circle took Jones's talk of suicide seriously as a political and revolutionary tool that would allow Peoples Temple to succeed as a symbol where it had failed as a model.

A Consideration of the Link Between Loyalty and Suicide

As mentioned, the threat of suicide within Peoples Temple and defections of members had always been linked. Jones first proposed suicide in response to the defection of eight young people in 1973. When this group of black and white youths left, they leveled charges of racism and elitism at the leadership. Jones responded by leading his inner circle in its first public exploration of mass suicide as a protest against (or, possibly, prevention of) group disintegration (Reiterman 1982, chap. 24). Starting in 1976, the first suicide drills were practiced among the ruling elite (Weightman 1983, 145; Wright 1993, 75; Chidester 1988, 31). At least one year before the suicides actually took place it was being discussed publicly at Jonestown and, according to Debbie Blakey, by March 1978 there were suicide drills involving the entire community.

The only course of action open to us was a mass suicide for the glory of socialism. We were told we would be tortured by mercenaries if we were taken alive. Everyone, including the children, was told to line up. As we passed through the line, we were given a small glass of red liquid to drink. We were told that the liquid contained poison and that we would die within 45 minutes. When the time came when we should have dropped dead, Rev. Jones explained that the poison was not real and that we had just been through a loyalty test. He warned us that the time was not far off when it would become necessary for us to die by our own hands. (Hall 1987, 246)

The defection of the "Gang of Eight" in 1973 did not have any enduring negative impact on the Temple because none of the eight held positions of responsibility within the leadership (which was part of their complaint). In fact, Jones was so skillful at villainizing Jim Cobb and the others that it had the effect of solidifying group loyalty among the remaining members. (In fact, Jones stated [wrongly] that

Jim Cobb had been murdered to large applause from the Jonestown community at the suicide meeting; see app. B). The defections of Grace Stoen in July 1976 and Timothy Oliver Stoen in June 1977 had a more enduring impact both because they left huge managerial gaps and also because it taught that even the seemingly most loyal person could defect and damage the group. From the summer of 1977 throughout 1978, a period that coincided with the large-scale relocation to Jonestown, vigilance was constant against potential “traitors” among the leaders. A high degree of self-policing may also have been at work against one’s own potential for disloyalty. The stress level within the inner circle must have been very high. By the time Debbie Layton Blakey defected in May 1978, with her subsequent accusations of suicide drills and sleep and food deprivation, the result was devastating. Teri Buford’s defection in October 1978 may have been the act of disloyalty that set the wheels for the final White Night in motion.

Debbie Layton Blakey became involved in Peoples Temple through the influence of her brother, Larry Layton, and sister-in-law, Karen Layton. (Larry Layton married Karen, a Peoples Temple member, after his marriage with Carolyn Moore ended because of her involvement with Jim Jones.) When Blakey defected on 12 May 1978, she left behind her mother, Lisa—who would die of cancer in Georgetown during the summer—and her husband, Phil Blakey. Larry Layton was summoned to join the community at Jonestown shortly after his sister had defected. She and Teri Buford were central to the Peoples Temple organization, particularly its financial branch. “Control of banking and finances fell mainly on Carolyn Layton, because Stoen was occupied with other duties. Another staff member, Teri Buford, who knew mathematics but not finances, assisted her. And in late 1976 to early 1977, Jones added two other women to the financial circle—Maria Katsaris and Debbie Layton Blakey” (Reiterman 1982, 335).² Blakey became Maria Katsaris’s assistant financial secretary. “As assistant financial secretary, Debbie Blakey knew the overseas banking system when she traveled from San Francisco to Guyana in December 1977. She was trusted and seemed to be tightly bound to the church” (403).

When Blakey defected on 12 May 1978, she was quoted as saying, “I’m leaving . . . I’m sorry. I know this comes as a shock to you, but I just can’t take any more of this.” She also wrote a letter to Jones:

2. Observe how, according to the ideological schema of the author in the passage just cited, Layton could not have earned her position by merit, but only by default.

"I have nothing vindictive against the church. . . . I'm just tired. I thought it was unfair to have a crisis when there wasn't one. People can't live on a string" (Reiterman 1982, 403). Blakey's departure was not only an emotional crisis for the community but also, potentially, a financial one. Immediately following her defection, Maria Katsaris and Teri Buford flew out of Guyana to change all the international bank accounts on which Blakey had been a signatory.

In a letter to Jim Jones after Debbie Blakey's defection Annie Moore wrote:

I can't stand the thought of you being sick as I've seen you when "trusted" people left and did such sickening things. I could never stand the thought of being responsible for causing you added pain. I just couldn't do it. I have tried to imagine myself in with the sell-out traitors like Debbie and to self-analyze this aspect, but I can't really imagine it. I don't understand them. . . . I don't want to sell out no matter what. . . . I just want to do good so maybe some kind of change in the world will take place. (CHS, e-4).

Defections are the norm, not the exception, in new religious movements (Barker 1984, 146). Barker's data show that only 4 percent of the more than one thousand people she tracked were still full-time members of Unification Church after two years. The reasons for a person leaving a new religious movement include boredom, a need for less ideological certainty, a desire for more material possessions and more free time, anger over limited access to the charismatic leader, infighting with fellow members, homesickness, a decrease in the sense of purpose and exhilaration that attracted the person in the first place; all of these add up to the cost of membership being greater than the gain. A letter written by Debbie Blakey in 1980, reflecting on her experience, expresses a typical motivation for leaving an innovative religious organization that requires high commitment: she wanted a "normal" life. "Jim's growing insanity was one of the reasons for my defection, but another was that I wanted to settle down with a husband in a house of our own and raise a family" (Yee and Layton et al. 1981, 348). Hall indicates that there were many reasons why a person may have wanted to leave Jonestown.

Some people became disgruntled early on, but not always for the reasons or with the intensity that the Concerned Relatives pro-

moted. Workers sometimes thought their skills were not used effectively. True believers lamented the decline of faith healings and religion, and they faced the disappointment of coming to terms with the less than perfect Jones as someone other than "god." Others found the work too demanding, or they longed for the light and life of the city. Whatever the complaints, Jonestown staff feared any dissatisfied person who left would be recruited by their opponents. (Hall 1987, 239)

A class dynamic is at work when predicting the likelihood of a person leaving any new religious movement and the pressure to do so by that person's relatives. It is notable that Concerned Relatives was made up of Peoples Temple family members who were overwhelmingly white and who were advocating for the defections of white, mostly educated, young people. Black urban church members were unlikely to defect, both because they did not have the financial resources and family support network to make that transition possible and because Peoples Temple, even during the more stressful Jonestown period, represented an improvement over their lives outside of the religious movement. For the California new religious movement members Peoples Temple represented a sacrifice that could be temporary. For urban church members Peoples Temple was an improvement in socioeconomic condition. There was little financial, social, or even familial incentive for leaving the group.

The affidavit that Blakey gave some five weeks after her defection, which is heavily influenced by the anticult movement ideology of the Concerned Relatives and has been widely quoted, is not nearly as insightful about what was going on in Jonestown in the spring of 1978 as is her sworn statement given at the American embassy on the day of her defection:

I, Deborah Layton Blakey, hereby swear that the following statement is true and correct to the best of my ability. I have decided to leave the Peoples Temple Organization because I am afraid that Jim Jones will carry out his threats to force all members of the Organization in Guyana to commit suicide if a decision is made in Guyana by the court here to have John Stoen returned to his mother. *I know that plans have been made to carry out this mass suicide by poison that is presently at Jonestown. I also know that plans are made to kill the members who are unwilling to voluntarily commit suicide.* I believe that this plan will be carried out. I also believe that the Organization will

physically try to prevent any attempt to remove John Stoen from the custody of the Organization. In part for the above I have decided to leave the Peoples Temple. (Hall 1987, 244; *italics added*)

Debbie Layton Blakey's defection was pivotal in constructing an organizational dynamic within the inner circle that made suicide appear the only option. Blakey's departure must have been especially difficult and enticing for the women in leadership because she had been one of them and was similar to Carolyn Layton, Maria Katsaris, and Karen Layton in race, class, and family background. By committing the heresy of defection, Blakey left in her wake an insoluble puzzle. How could a person obtain freedom from the relentless demands of Jonestown *and* remain absolutely loyal to Peoples Temple? These two desires were, at their core, contradictory. Blakey's defection represented the freedom they desired, but her demonization showed the women the cost of this freedom. Loyalty to Jones had been compromised by his drug abuse. Loyalty to the movement was only possible insofar as the leaders were able to separate Jones from Jonestown. Suicide, then, became the action that would provide the ultimate in freedom and loyalty simultaneously. Mass suicide would make these deaths and the community at Jonestown symbolically significant.

An undated handwritten letter signed by Annie Moore and recovered from Jonestown after the tragedy outlines in detail the logic behind the decision to commit suicide:

I started out for revolutionary suicide, almost switched to fighting, but stick to suicide now. One main reason is that even though we have made arrangements for the children if we fight there is no guarantee that at that last hour to destruct, it would not be so late that the enemy would not be parading amongst our buildings searching for any one [*sic*] left and find us with few of our children dead. I would like to be on the front lines and fight, for my own personal decision but I would not do it without knowing the children were O.K. It is not my decision to make. I never thought people would line up to be killed but actually think a select group would have to kill the majority of the people secretly without the people knowing it. The way—I don't know. Poisoning food or water supply I heard of [*sic*]. Exhaust fumes in a closed area (carbon monoxide) I heard was effective while people are asleep. It would be terrorizing for some people if we were to have them all in a group and start

chopping heads off or whatever—this is why it would have to be secretly.

People fight for their land and rights daily but it seems that if we did the same we would be categorized as the same—oppressed group struggling for liberty. If we killed ourselves maybe we would be categorized as lunatics but at least *we would be assured that our people could not sell out* or be tortured or taken and brainwashed (the children). The manuscript you mentioned could be sent to whomever—Russia or Cuba maybe even to the states though they would change it around. People would listen more to what we had to say because 800 people taking their lives would be quite something to read about.

They will lie on us no matter what we do anyway. If we fought it would look stupid if they changed the story that we were fascists fighting black Guyanese socialists because I believe the soldiers would be brainwashed against us—they wouldn't know who they were really fighting. From my experience in Georgetown—the Guyanese don't understand who we are anyway. I don't know what weapons we have but I think we don't have much of a chance of survival. We would be slaughtered. And then although I didn't think of it until someone mentioned it last night—they could probably add to their story that a lot of our people were cowards and ran away from them. Maybe Mike T. and Albert have a loyalty to this land since they have been here so long *but I think Americans grow up with no loyalty to anything—land or principle*. Many in the group have developed some loyalty—even new people since we have been here—*maybe they would fight to be true to you—which is why I would fight*—others to fight for the land. But what a farce it would be to be slaughtered and captured and risk our children's lives to be taken to the fascists. So I am staying here. I don't know how many would stand up to fight. *So I am basically cynical about how far you can trust our people. The main reason for suicide—to assure safety to the children and from the standpoint of history it would go down better and might stir others to become socialists or more active—such a drastic action as suicide.* It would be nice for our children to be able to grow somewhere communistically and safely but if this can't be accomplished I don't know. I don't relish the idea of participating in killing the children and I don't think anyone else does but I will do it because I think I could be as compassionate as the next person about it and I don't hate children. I know Stephan is true to you but some of the people who jump and say "fight" I don't think look at the consequences. It is an easy way out for some to just go to the front line fight and die and not have to be worried about the chil-

dren or seniors or others injured or whatever who would no doubt be left to meet the fascists—*unless our planning was so secure as to assure death to the children and seniors*. At the point when I thought we should fight was when I was accepting that life will always fuck us over that our people would have to suffer—that's just the way life is—you will always get fucked over so what did it matter—our people deserved it anyway—why are we better than anyone that we can't be tortured also. *But then you said we could plan our deaths—we didn't have to just die—we could try to have impact on the world and save our children. So I switched back to suicide*. I felt like if we fought—maybe to each one it would mean something but it almost seemed to [indecipherable] well, we're going to get fucked over by life again, because I think there is *no* guarantee on our children dying securely in the middle of a battle. *With our plan now—the way we would like to do it—it may take up to two hours*. Also I think what a slap in the face to fascists it would be to take our own lives before they could have the pleasure of it. Then again they might probably be glad they didn't have manpower or guns to waste on us. They would have to clean up the remains and would have the story we had left to remember us by. I think life is a fuck over anyhow whatever we do but maybe less with the revolutionary suicide—so I stick to it. I'll do whatever is expected of me no matter what you have me to do.—From, (signed) Annie Moore. (CHS, EE-1-M-77-80; italics added)

The contradictory desires for freedom and loyalty are projected by Moore onto the entire Jonestown community. Constructing a scenario of mass suicide/murder was a way both to liberate the whole community and to keep them loyal. Annie Moore had learned the lesson of the Stoen defections: anyone could become a traitor. Because there is no date on this letter, it is not clear if it was written before or after the Blakey and Buford defections; however, my dating of it places it in the spring of 1978 sometime before Blakey defected. Blakey's sworn statement on the day of her defection indicates that the decision about using poison and murdering those who would not cooperate in suicide had already been made. It appears to me that Annie Moore's letter was part of the discussion that would have preceded such a decision. Certainly, suicide was discussed by the leadership more seriously as an act of protest after the defections of Blakey and Buford. Especially striking in the Moore letter is her reference to "saving the children" when she is actually writing about planning for their suicide/murder. Without access to this particular letter, which proves his point pre-

cisely, Chidester argues that at Jonestown killing the infants and children was understood to be a “redemptive act,” an act that would save the children from being “brainwashed” into becoming the evil capitalist monsters who were the sworn enemies of Peoples Temple (Chidester 1991, 177–201). Death was preferable to disloyalty, according to the Peoples Temple ideology. Even the potential for disloyalty, which the children represented, was to be eradicated.³

Mike Prokes, who committed suicide in March 1979 after calling a press conference at which he read a statement in defense of the suicides at Jonestown, stated that, “Jonestown functioned on a high level of ethical behavior and human devotion you had to see and experience in order to comprehend” (Naipaul 1981, 149). Those who defected were mostly white people who were subsequently portrayed as being unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to make a socialist community like Jonestown work. For Jones and the leaders there was no legitimate reason for leaving Peoples Temple. Naipaul interprets the loyalty of Prokes as indicative of a wider philosophy of sacrifice at work in Jonestown:

The very rigors of their existence combined with the sense of external threat may have pushed them closer to each other. They who had given up everything to follow Jim Jones out to the jungles of Guyana might be brought close to despair; but despair does not inevitably lead to disloyalty. Revolutionary suicide would have made sense to many of them. (Naipaul 1981, 151)

The despair that Naipaul refers to was caused by the fact that only at great cost could one be disloyal. Thus, suicide was the only way to end the despair and to make the voluntary sacrifices of the new religious movement members appear significant to the wider world.

Teri Buford had been in Jonestown only six months when she decided to leave on 27 October 1978. She was one of the four women, along with Debbie Blakey (who had recently defected), Carolyn Layton, and Maria Katsaris, in charge of the international financial dealings of Peoples Temple. As Reiterman (1982, 463) points out, Buford “likely knew more about the complex Temple finances and bank accounts than anyone aside from Carolyn Layton.” It had taken a great

3. Jones mentions at the suicide meeting that if the children are left, “we’re going to have them butchered.” See appendix B.

deal of disillusionment for Buford, who was one of the young white people who joined in the early California years, to act disloyally toward Jones and the Temple. Stephan Jones described her as one of the intellectuals, along with Carolyn Layton, Mike Prokes, and Harriet Tropp (a twenty-eight-year-old Jewish law student who ran the radio room at Jonestown), who developed the ideology of Peoples Temple (S. G. Jones interview, 19 Dec. 1992). Buford had been one of the hardest workers for the Temple throughout the mid-1970s. Her departure was a sure sign to the rest of the leadership—particularly Layton, Prokes, and Katsaris, with whom she had worked closely—that Jonestown had failed as a socialist community. She disguised her departure as an effort to infiltrate the Concerned Relatives (Hall 1987, 259), but, apparently, it was clear to Jones and the leadership at once that she was defecting. Buford was concerned, even in the end, that she not appear disloyal.

When asked in 1993 by the *New Yorker* reporter, Lawrence Wright, whether he would have taken the poison had he been there, Stephan Jones said that he was not sure.

Loyalty to the community played a large part in the decision of the people to kill themselves, Stephan believes. . . . [He] had the opportunity to talk to two of the Temple members who had escaped into the jungle. "Everybody was under the impression that we"—the brothers—"were already out exacting revenge on the enemies of the Temple, and were giving our lives in the effort. . . . So it became a loyalty to us. . . . So there was a lot more involved than having Jim Jones standing in the pulpit saying, "O.K., we're going to die now." There was fatigue. I think everybody was defeated and tired. *They wanted relief from the constant emotional roller coaster my father put you through.* (Wright 1993, 88; italics added)

The Stoens, Blakey, and Buford were all new religious movement members whose defections hurt Peoples Temple organizationally as a whole, but who may not have had a great emotional impact on either the urban California black church members or the core group of Indiana sect members. Their symbolic importance for the rank and file members, however, was great. They became symbolic of the potential for disloyalty and treachery that lay dormant within each Peoples Temple member, especially within the white people, and that must be guarded against and repressed at all costs. Certainly, the group who

chose to leave with Congressman Ryan, including two of the core families from Indiana, proved that point. The defections of the Parks and Bogue families may have been the event that caused Marceline Jones and the others from Indiana to give up finally in despair. At the same time, it may have illustrated to the urban black church members their superiority at Jonestown in at least this one matter: few of them had defected, and those who had had damaged the movement relatively little. This steadfastness may have contributed toward a perception on the part of the black members that their loyalty to Jones and Jonestown was irrevocable. In the end, when the poison was ready to be drunk, the black members may not have wanted to be accused of being like the disloyal and cowardly whites who had left.

The Defections on the Final Day

Sixteen people in addition to Larry Layton, who feigned defection in order to participate in the conspiracy to murder Congressman Ryan, left Jonestown with Ryan on 18 November 1978.⁴ Scholars have generally numbered the defectors on the final day at fourteen or fifteen by omitting Chris O'Neill or Joyce Parks, or both (Reiterman 1982, 517–18; Hall 1987, 273–74; Moore 1985, 323–25; Chidester 1988, 153). Vernon Gosney, a twenty-five-year-old white male from California, and Monica Bagby, an eighteen-year-old black female, were the first to inform Ryan's delegation that they wanted to leave. Bagby's defection is scarcely surprising because she was sent to Jonestown against her will by her mother, an enthusiastic member, who wanted Peoples Temple to give her daughter a direction in life (Reiterman 1982, 473). She was the only black person to leave with Ryan on the final day. Gosney and Bagby were average members without leadership positions. Their defections, although painful for those who knew them well and, perhaps, damaging because they indicated to the media that some displeasure existed among residents, would not have had any discernible impact on the management of Jonestown. Nor, seemingly, would the departure of Gosney and Bagby have contributed to the sense of despair and desire for liberation already present in the lives of

4. The choice of Larry Layton as "trigger man" for the Ryan assassination demonstrates how central Debbie Blakey was in the thinking of those who orchestrated the final events. Larry Layton was not told to go to Guyana until after the people at Jonestown realized that Blakey had defected.

the Jonestown leadership. The decision to leave by the Parks and Bogue families, however, was a devastating blow for Jim and Marceline Jones and the leadership at Jonestown.

The relatively small number of people who chose to defect on 18 November and Jones's apparent overreaction to these defections have been used as further evidence of the instability of Jones's mind. How could a sane leader be unhappy with the departure of just a few when more than one thousand residents remained? The media was especially surprised by the events that followed these defections because they had been led to believe by the "concentration camp" propaganda of the Concerned Relatives that nearly the entire community would want to escape. Ironically, none of the people who left with Ryan that day were related to any of the Concerned Relatives. Journalist Charles Krause recalled: "It seemed to me that the Peoples Temple had a legitimate purpose, a noble purpose, and was more or less succeeding. The fact that 16 people, most of them members of two families, were homesick and leaving with Ryan didn't change that view" (Moore 1985, 325).

Even Peoples Temple lawyer Charles Garry, who knew the movement well, could not see any reason for Jones's reaction to the defections. "When 14 [sic] of his people decided to go out with Ryan, Jones went mad. He thought it was a repudiation of his work. I tried to tell him that 14 out of 1200 was damn good. But Jones was desolate" (Moore 1985, 324).

To understand the significance of the departure of the Parks group of eight and the Bogue group of six, one must place their defection in the context of the recent departures of Debbie Blakey and Teri Buford and the significance of the role, practical and symbolic, that these two families held at Jonestown. Both families held positions of responsibility and had dedicated their lives to the movement. Edith Parks was joined in defection by her son, Gerald, and his wife, Patty, their son, Dale, plus his wife, Joyce, and their two daughters, Tracy and Brenda, and Brenda's boyfriend, Chris O'Neill. The Parks family had been with Jim and Marceline Jones since the early days in Indiana, and at Jonestown they "practically ran the medical clinic" (Hall 1987, 274). Jim Bogue was the agricultural manager of Jonestown. His knowledge and expertise in farming had been centrally responsible for what agricultural success the community had known. His departure was cataclysmic for that reason but also because Bogue had been one of the original settlers of Jonestown and as such was seen as one of the

founders of the settlement (194). Jim Bogue and his estranged wife, Edith Bogue, left Jonestown with their three children, Tommy, Teena, and Juanita, and Edith's partner, Harold Cordell. Few knew of their unhappiness because they had not been vocal about their dissatisfaction with life in Jonestown although they had been in communication with each other and had been planning to escape along with another couple (273). On the face of it, these were among the last people one would have expected to leave. Given their centrality, it is perhaps more understandable that Jones's reaction to their departure was to declare, "I have failed" and "all is lost" (273–74).

The Parks family may have been trying to negotiate a way to leave but not be disloyal, which would account for the fact that they had engaged in no public dissent. Even after the suicides, Edith Parks, the matriarch of the family, defended Jones's healing abilities as authentic, for she claimed to have been cured of cancer by him (Hall 1987, 21). Gerald Parks, Edith's son, when speaking to Judith Weightman about the move he and his son Dale's family made to Guyana, suggested that the Parks family had a special relationship with Marceline Jones that was as central to their involvement with the movement as was their relationship with Jim Jones.

My son [Dale] who was in the church at the beginning had left. . . . He was a little more involved than we were. . . . He was in the medical field at the time, and still is. . . . And he was gone for about six months where he didn't even tell them, you know, where he was at. But they finally tracked him down. Marceline, Jim Jones' wife, talked him into going over, because they wanted him in their medical area over there. . . . "If you'll go over," she said, "we'll give you a round trip ticket, just to go look at it; you can come back." (Weightman 1983, 87–88)

Later, when the decision came whether to have the rest of the family move to Guyana, Parks once again consulted with Marceline. "So we was gonna talk it over with Marceline Jones and two or three of the others, so we did sit down and I told her how I felt . . . and Marcie said—told me the same thing she'd told my son—she says, 'If you want to go back, you can go back.' " Stephan Jones indicated that Gerald Parks was in a position, because of his longterm relationship with Jim and Marceline Jones, to know "what was really going on." Jones believes that Parks may even have assisted in unloading the

shipment of cyanide so knew that the talk of suicide had the potential of becoming action. He indicated that there had long been tension between Gerald Parks and Jim Jones because of Parks's loyalty to his family and love of sex. "He was not willing to totally subordinate himself to Jim Jones and Jonestown" (S. G. Jones interview, 11 Dec. 1992).

Certainly, the departure of the Parks and Bogue families was a blow to the Indiana sect. Importantly, the deaths of Lynetta Jones, Jim's mother and a founding member of the Indiana sect, Wings of Deliverance, in December 1977 and of Lisa Layton, mother of Larry and Debbie and mother-in-law of Carolyn and Karen, in summer 1978 may have been significant in that either one of them might have had the moral and popular authority to question the suicide decision. Neither of them are on record as having condoned such a plan. When Lynetta Jones passed away at Jonestown, the Indiana sect lost an important leader, and Marceline Jones lost an important supporter in her efforts to remind the founding Indiana group why they had chosen to follow the Jones family in the first place. Before 18 November it was primarily the new religious movement group who was filled with despair over the departure of significant members. With Ryan's visit, the Indiana sect experienced the same kind of central losses to its sector of the community. Had the Parks and Bogues *not* chosen to leave that day, it would have been difficult for the new religious movement leadership who had planned the suicides to convince the Indiana sect to participate. It took the added despair of such a great loss to make the sect members willing accomplices in their own murder.

When one listens to the audio tape made during the suicides, it is clear that Jones's primary hostility is toward the defecting members of Peoples Temple.⁵ "The criminality of people. The cruelty of people. Who walked out of here today? See all those who walked out? Mostly white people. Mostly white people walked. I'm so grateful for the ones that didn't—those who knew who they are. I just know that there's no point—there's no point to this" (see app. B). An unidentified woman responds to Jones a few moments later: "Broke my heart completely. All of this year the white people had been with us, and they're

5. Substantial excerpts from the transcript of the forty-three-minute tape can be found in J. Z. Smith 1982, app. 2; also Rose 1979, app. 21. For a complete transcript of the audible portions of the tape see appendix B.

not a part of us. So we might as well end it now because I don't see . . . [her voice becomes inaudible because of music and other voices]" (see app. B).

As suggested earlier, the emphasis on the race of the defectors may have built up the loyalty of the black members at this pivotal moment. Stanley Hauerwas has recognized the racial implications of the defections. "People's Temple did become a place where blacks and whites discovered they could be brothers [sic] once they had both discovered who was their real enemy" (Levi 1982, 157). Thus, the defections were a threat to the solidarity that had been built up in the community by firmly identifying American capitalist society as the enemy. In Jonestown, as in mainstream society, the whites held the power. It was the whites who could choose life or death for the community through their ability, socioeconomically, to defect.

The Suicides

Debbie Blakey claimed in her sworn statement given to United States government officials on the day she left Jonestown in May 1978 that the poison was already at Jonestown. If true, this means that the plan to use poison for mass suicide was already in place although the actual decision had not yet been made. This suggests that the Annie Moore letter quoted at length above was written before the acquisition of the poison because the means of suicide/murder was still being considered in the text of what she wrote. Perhaps the leadership was gambling with regard to Jim Jones's health. Would he die before the community fell to pieces? Was it possible to keep the community together if he stepped down? Was revolutionary suicide the only way to gain freedom and remain loyal?

Who prepared the actual brew of poison and calculated how much would be necessary to kill more than nine hundred people in less than two hours is not known. Without referencing her source, Weightman suggests that Dr. Larry Schacht was responsible for the formula and had calculated it "months before" (Weightman 1983, 63). Without reference also, Hall declares that the liquid was prepared "according to a recipe that already had been tested" and that the potassium cyanide had arrived in Jonestown within the previous month, "perhaps only four days earlier" (Hall 1987, 282). It is not known with absolute certainty who distributed the poison. Based on interviews with people who escaped into the jungle once the dying started, Kenneth Wooden

names Annie Moore and Joyce Touchette as the nurses in charge of the poison and adds that color-coded syringes were used for estimating dosage and magic markers for placing an X on people who had already taken the poison (Wooden 1981, 184). Reiterman mentions only Dr. Larry Schacht and “a dozen members of the Jonestown medical staff” (Reiterman 1982, 559). Hall writes that the potion was concocted and distributed by “Jones’s aides and medical staff” but then adds that the “melange of tranquilizers and sedatives—Valium, Penegram, chloral hydrate—” which were mixed with the potassium cyanide, “came from the bonded pharmacy that had always been under the lock and key control of Annie Moore” (Hall 1987, 282). What is known for certain is that an unidentified woman’s voice actually organized the people for taking the poison. It is a chilling moment in the tape of the suicides when her efficient and authoritative voice interrupts Jones’s rambling speech:

You have to move, and the people that are standing there in the aisles, go stand in the radio room yard. Everybody get behind the table and back this way, okay. There’s nothing to worry about. Everybody keep calm and try and keep your children calm. And all those children that help, let the little children in and reassure them. They’re not crying from pain. It’s just a little bitter tasting. They’re not crying out of any pain. (See app. B.)

Although Stephan Jones has chosen not to listen to the tape and so cannot verify the voice of the woman for certain, he speculates that it was Indiana-born Joyce Touchette because he was told by one of the people who escaped into the jungle that Larry Schacht and Joyce Touchette were involved in readying and distributing the poison. John Hall identifies the voice as Judy Ijames, Indiana sect member and nurse at Jonestown, based upon the testimony of eye witnesses (Hall 1987, 285). Whether it was Joyce Touchette or Judy Ijames, either one would have had authority both with the Indiana sect and the black church members: Joyce Touchette because she and her husband Charlie had been two of the original pioneers of Jonestown and Judy Ijames because she had provided health care for the elderly in the community.

When asked about the suicides and why he thinks they happened, Jones gave several reasons. He thinks that in the end his father was mentally unstable because of the drugs he was taking but that the

people around him “drove his [Jones] madness” with their “acquiescence to his bullshit” (S. G. Jones interview, 7 Dec. 1992). Because of the pressure of the number of people living at Jonestown and the amount of physical work it took to provide their daily needs, everyone was tired, physically and emotionally, at Jonestown by November 1978, and the leadership was “depressed and disillusioned,” particularly over the defections of the previous months (S. G. Jones interview, 19 Dec. 1992). The most important factor, according to Jones, was loyalty. By the end this loyalty was not focused primarily on Jim Jones but on specific beloved members of the movement. Nobody wanted to let anyone else down by admitting that they were not committed to the movement that had brought them together, even to the point of suicide. There was also an element of coercion, Jones believes, although he was not there himself to witness it. Jim Jones had told Marceline to call Stephan in Georgetown on 17 November after the Jonestown basketball team had finished their match against the Guyanese National Team to tell him to return to Jonestown. Stephan refused on the grounds that the team was “breaking barriers with the Guyanese.” The last words he said to his mother were, “You don’t have to talk for Dad” (S. G. Jones interview, 19 Dec. 1992). Jones does not believe people were afraid they would be shot but were afraid they would be thought traitorous by friends and the people in leadership, particularly Jones. Although Concerned Relatives had claimed that Jonestown was an “armed camp,” the settlement actually had only thirty weapons: ten pistols, thirteen small-caliber rifles, seven shotguns and a flare gun (Hall 1987, 293). So the coercion was emotional and psychological rather than physical (S. G. Jones interview, 7 Dec. 1992). An element of “spiritual coercion” may also have been at work as well. On several occasions Stephan Jones mentioned to me that Mike Prokes and Tim Carter (both of whom survived 18 November because they were acting as financial emissaries) had told him that the weather began behaving very strangely after Ryan’s delegation left Jonestown. The weather created the feeling of something “supernatural and ominous brewing” (S. G. Jones interview 19 Dec. 1992).

When I asked Jones what role he thought his mother might have played in the suicides, he told me that Marceline “would never have been involved in poisoning people, especially children.” He pointed out that the only person Jim Jones ever called “Mother” was Marceline; therefore, that part of the tape from the suicide meeting that has generally been interpreted as Jones attempting to calm down

mothers generally is, in fact, Jones cautioning Marceline against resisting what was about to happen (S. G. Jones interview 7 Dec. 1992). “Mother, Mother, Mother, Mother, Mother, please. Mother, please, please, please. Don’t—don’t do this. Don’t do this. Lay down your life with your child. But don’t do this” (see app. B). Stephan Jones’s views notwithstanding, it seems apparent after listening to the suicide meeting tape repeatedly that Jim Jones is speaking to the mothers of the community broadly, not to Marceline Jones alone. Later in the same conversation, Stephan Jones reluctantly suggested that if his mother did participate in the suicides, it was “out of despair” (S. G. Jones interview 19 Dec. 1992).⁶

There were two pivotal moments during the suicide meeting when it was possible for people to see an alternative to suicide: one when Jones was interrupted to organize the distribution of the cyanide-laced punch, and one earlier in the meeting that was central in dissipating any lingering doubts in the minds of the black church members. In an extended conversation between Christine Miller and Jim Jones, Miller, a sixty-year-old black woman, argues against the “arithmetic” of allowing the defection of “twenty-odd” people to cost twelve hundred people their lives. Her public challenge of Jones and his responses takes up the first half of the suicide meeting. She wonders why the Temple can’t relocate to Russia. She wonders how self-destruction constitutes a victory over their enemies. Finally, in response to Jones’s insistence that there is no way to separate one person’s fate in Peoples Temple from another’s, Miller claims, “We all have a right to our own destiny as individuals. . . . And I think I have a right to choose mine, and everybody else has a right to choose theirs” (see app. B). Jones found it difficult to respond to this. Would Christine Miller’s point have carried the day had Jim McElvane not intervened? McElvane was a black man who had arrived in Jonestown only two days earlier (Hall 1987, 279). He was among a small group of blacks whose authority was respected throughout Peoples Temple. He had served as security chief during the California years and had not moved to Jonestown with the rest because he was involved in running the stateside operation (Reiterman 1982, 322). McElvane spoke with authority and confidence when he responded to Miller (and the other silent members who she, perhaps, represented) by saying: “Christine, you’re only

6. For a suggestion about Marceline Jones’s possible participation in the suicides see app. B.

standing here because he was here in the first place. So I don't know what you're talking about, having an individual life. Your life has been extended to the day that you're standing there because of him" (see app. B).

Until McElvane "corrected" her Miller was still hoping that Peoples Temple could be the egalitarian, socialist community it was designed to be, whether in Russia or elsewhere. After McElvane spoke, there was a vociferous (although inaudible) argument between Miller and another woman. A few minutes later Miller attempts to say a few more words but is interrupted by Jones:

MILLER: People get hostile when you try to . . .

JONES: Oh, some people do—but—yes, some people do. Put it that way—I'm not hostile. You had to be honest but you've stayed, and if you wanted to run you'd have run with them 'cause anybody could've run today. What would anyone do? I know you're not a runner. And I—your life is precious to me. It's as precious as John's [John Victor Stoen]. And I don't—what I do I do with (*inaudible*) and justice and (*inaudible*). And I've weighed it against all evidence.

MILLER: That's all I've got to say. (See app. B.)

Christine Miller's voice is never heard again on the tape. A few minutes later Jones announces that he has heard that Congressman Ryan and Patty Parks have been killed, and he becomes agitated and, later, incoherent. Then the voice of the unknown woman instructs the members how to organize themselves to commit suicide.

The voices of Jim McElvane and, finally, Christine Miller, concurring with the logic of sacrifice rather than dismemberment of the community they loved, represented the final step into the abyss. A bid for symbolic success designed by the new religious movement inner circle and agreed to out of despair by the Indiana sect was finally surrendered to by the black rank and file. What, after all, was more terrible to imagine, an end to life at Jonestown or the continuation of life back in urban America without their beloved community? In the end the members of Peoples Temple answered that question by drinking the potion.