

Charles Johnson Interview (Transcription):

September 28, 2021 @ 10:09 am PST

Katherine Klapperich: Alright, uh, it is September 28th at 10:09 am in the year 2021, and my name is Katherine Klapperich, and I am a master's student at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California and I have the honor today of speaking with Mr. Charles Johnson who is a survivor of Peoples Temple and I wanted to go over a few of the guidelines before we begin, as we discussed already, that you understand that this interview and all the questions are subject to your discretion and I have your permission to give this interview and at any time, if you feel uncomfortable, you may either refuse to answer or you may also end or terminate or withdrawal at this...from this interview at any time. Is this agreeable?

Charles Johnson: Uh...yes, it is.

Katherine Klapperich: And we are doing a phone interview and it is oh, it is...I have your permission to record this interview. Is that correct?

Charles Johnson: Yes, you do.

Katherine Klapperich: And you are...you do not need me to have you remain anonymous, and I may also post this interview on a website that...so that others may learn from your experiences. Is this correct?

Charles Johnson: Yes, that's correct.

Katherine Klapperich: Alright. So (*rustling of papers*) got that out of the way...So, for the record; what is your name and when were you born? (*slight talking over*) **Charles Johnson:** I...**Katherine**

Klapperich: Where were you born?

Charles Johnson: Okay (*clears throat*) Uh...Charles William Johnson. I was born August 12th, 1955, and what used to be General Hospital Los Angeles, California. They've changed the name since I was born, I don't know what it is now.

Katherine Klapperich: Alright. And when did you become part of Peoples Temple?

Charles Johnson: Uh, it's hard to say. Uh, my Mother was going to...uh...Peoples Temple Church when I was in junior high school. And I never went with her. And, uh, I remember when I became a senior in high school, she finally said the magic words to have me come and, and uh, to the church, and just look around 'cause she said, "There's plenty of girls there." So, when she said that, I said, "Okay, I...I'll come Mom and check it out." So that's when I did, I don't know if I ever officially became a member. I can't remember if they had an actual official membership drive, or something you signed of whatever, but...uh...I did become, uh, a member. Uh...not right then and there. I actually would go to certain services so with my Mom, but I didn't become a member right away. It took awhile.

Katherine Klapperich: What was your impression of the Peoples Temple philosophy?

Charles Johnson: Well, I wasn't really much into religion. The thing that...uh...got my attention was...uh...their...uh...advocacy of...uh...socialism. Ya' know for some reason I've always been an advocate of that. Of...uh...equal sharing and...uh...people helping people and...and uh...ya' know doing the best you can to further...uh...mankind, so that was the hook that got me interested in Peoples Temple. I really wasn't...uh...a religious person at that time.

Katherine Klapperich: So, did you understand this to be a socialist or--or communist community more—more than a religious community?

Charles Johnson: Yeah. That's how, that's how I looked at it but, obviously...um...the majority of the people involved looked at it as...uh...uh...as a--as a religious awakening. Uh, so to speak. But...uh...I didn't look at it all. I kind uh ignored that part and just focused on what he was talkin' about...uh socialism. Uh (*clears throat*), I remember one time he (*Jim Jones*) had told the congregation that he was the reincarnation of Vladimir Lenin. So...um...(clears throat) Ya' know whether you believe that or not, I did believe in the socialistic...uh...philosophy...uh...at that time up 'til this day.

Katherine Klapperich: Okay. So, did you feel that your participation, when you were interacting with the community was as valued as everyone else's? That you were on equal footing with everyone else within the organization?

Charles Johnson: Um...well with the people that I worked with that I knew personally, 'cause there was a different tier of people. Ya' know, obviously, there was Jim Jones, and the people close to him. And then there was two or three tiers of people underneath him that...uh... that you knew but you know they were busy, ya' know...uh...doin' this work or that work. They used to call him "Father". Ya' know we're doin' this work for Father or doin' that work for Father. And—and so, ya' know they were a little bit above...uh...what you want to call the rank-and...rank-and-file members. Uh...but, you know I was like...uh...me and my wife were like rank-and-file members. Ya' know we...uh...she cooked in the kitchen we did security work. We--we did a number of things around—around the church.

Katherine Klapperich: Now, you were--were you married in the church? Did this—is that where you met your wife?

Charles Johnson: Uh no. Actually, I had gone to the church for awhile and really didn't connect with any of the...uh...the members there. Uh...because they were just too much into the religious part as far as Jim Jones was concerned. And actually (*muffled*) calling him "God". And so, it was kinda hard to get past that. You know 'cause I was—you know (*muffled*) I was 17, 18, 19, and—and realistically, ya' know I was looking to try and bed down as many women as I could. Ya' know I wasn't really into that religious part, and I wasn't a member yet. So, I would meet people—meet different young ladies and they were just so into it that, ya' know, it—it was hard to break through that and I was thinkin' to myself, ya' know, "Why work this hard? Ya' know there's plenty of girls outside this church that...uh...that would be easier to get to." So, I stopped going. So...uh...no I didn't...uh...meet my wife in the church. Uh, I met here outside of the church.

Katherine Klapperich: So, when did you—when did you and your wife get married?

Charles Johnson: Um...we married in 1975. It was a double wedding with another couple in the neighborhood that I had actually grown up with. And I had no intention of...uh...going back to Peoples Temple. Ya' know I had a young beautiful wife, and I was trying to make a go of it, but my Mother invited my wife to the church and, she loved it. She...uh...joined right away and that pulled me back in. Now the strange thing about...uh...my wife and this is--this is really strange; I was delivering furniture, I worked for this furniture company, I was deliverin' furniture in the building, and she was a few stories up and she kept lookin' down through this screen, and finally I looked up at her and I said, "Would you like to go to dinner? I'll come pick you up when I get off." And I did. And when my Mother met her, now when my wife was from Cleveland, Ohio. My Mother grew up in Seattle, Washington. And we found out that my Mother used to date my wife's father before he married her mother.

Katherine Klapperich: Oh, my!

Charles Johnson: Yes, and...uh...actually in...uh...Seattle Washington. So...

Katherine Klapperich: Well, that's a small world...

Charles Johnson: My wife's father and my Mother dated.

Katherine Klapperich: That—that--that's funny. (*laughs*)

Charles Johnson: (*muffled*). That was---that was strange.

Katherine Klapperich: I'll bet! It's a small world.

Charles Johnson: Yes. And here we are in Los Angeles, California. And—and so...um...uh...anyway, when my...uh...when we wanted to get married...actually my Mother said we had to go and speak to...uh...uh...somebody at the church. It was like a group of people. And they put me and my wife in the middle and they had us surrounded. We were in a circle and...uh...all these---it was men and women, but all these women were askin' me questions and--I mean they were, they were kind of vicious and antagonistic towards me. Wanted to know why I wanted to marry---I mean ya' know it was something that really upset me.

Katherine Klapperich: Yeah, and that was at—at---at Peoples Temple? At the church?

Charles Johnson: (*muffled*) was at Peoples Temple. The one in...uh...Los Angeles. I believe it was on Alvarado. And...uh...ya' know they just kept badgerin' me and...uh...I ya' know I don't know if I answered the questions to their...uh...satisfaction or not, but shortly after that me and wife did get married.

Katherine Klapperich: Alright. So, how long was it after you were married that your daughter came along?

Charles Johnson: Uh (*clears throat*) my daughter came along...um...a little over a year later. She was born on...uh...June 5th, 1976, and, strangely enough, um...later on in life I have...uh...three sons now, and three more daughters. But my middle son was born on June 5th, 1993.

Katherine Klapperich: Wow.

Charles Johnson: And—and---in fact, my current wife has a daughter who was born on June 5th also.

Katherine Klapperich: Wow. So, where, if I might ask, where were you on November 18th, 1978?

Charles Johnson: I was working---at the time I was working at...uh...Jack Lalanne's health club, and...uh...Inglewood, California on Century Boulevard and didn't know anything about it. But...uh...a friend of mine had...uh...come up and...uh...sh--she came in and said, "Did you hear the news?" And I said, "No. What news?" She said there was some shooting at the...uh...at the...uh...where the plane was taking off over in Guyana. And I said, "Really?" and she said, "Yeah. You didn't hear about it?" And I said, "No." So...uh...that's when I heard about it then...uh...when I went home from work that day, ya' know the news reports were comin' out. Ya' know this was before cable and 24-hour news cycles, so you had to wait for the news, but every now and then they had special reports.

Katherine Klapperich: It's my understanding that your wife and daughter were in Guyana at the Agricultural Project?

Charles Johnson: Uh...Yes, they were.

Katherine Klapperich: What brought them down there?

Charles Johnson: Uh...we had...we had had an agreement we were gonna separate for awhile.

And she went to stay with an...uh...uncle of hers who worked at some hospital. He...uh...he lived in the LA area. So, her and my daughter were stayin' with her uncle. And, at the time, we...uh...had an apartment, but I had moved back home at that---at that period of time.

And...um...according to the---that's the way I understood it the...uh...passport that my daughter had that she was not able to leave the country without my signature. But...um...ya' know that obviously they got around that and...um...I got a letter. And this had to be in the summer of...uh...'78. Maybe June or July. And I got a letter 'cause I didn't know she was gone. From...uh...my wife sayin' that she was over there. And we had always had this---this thing where we were gonna put a code in a letter and we said, "If there's ever anything wrong, that code was gonna be in the letter." And she wrote me the letter 'cause...uh...we---we didn't know what happened, but 'ya know we found out later that letters---letters were...uh...read before they were sent out. And ya' know, her letter was basic stuff, 'ya know---how 'ya doin'? Here everything's great. But then the last line of that letter she put that phrase in there, and I knew somethin' was wrong.

Katherine Klapperich: Alright, and when you found out that something was wrong, how did you react to that?

Charles Johnson: Well at the time, I wanted to get...uh...the money---I---I wanted to get...uh...the money together and go over there. Uh...but you know...uh...raised in South Central LA...uh...23 years old---it's---it's kinda hard to come up with airfare to fly out of the country. And ya' know, I'd talked to some of my friends, and they were tryin' ta---they were tryin' to...uh...help me raise money, but I just couldn't do it. I'd also gotten my passport, but my

Mom had said, “Well, just let the church have your passport.” So, actually, Peoples Temple’s had my passport, so at the time I wasn’t even in possession of it. So, I wasn’t able...uh...to get over there. I was in the process of tryin’ to get the money together. Then, of course...uh...ya’ know what happened on November 18th and it wasn’t necessary anymore.

Katherine Klapperich: Now it’s also my understanding that your mother was not in Guyana at the time. She was still in LA. Is that correct?

Charles Johnson: That is correct. Uh...my Mother’s...uh...best friend, and her best friend’s name was “Mary”, I do not remember her last name, but we know that she perished over in...uh...Jonestown. But, yes, my Mother had her...uh...footlocker packed with all the stuff that the church had told her to...uh...to get---to get together and she had that, and she was ready to go. Now...uh...my stepdad...uh...he was not a member of...uh...Peoples Temple and he didn’t--of course he didn’t believe in...uh...in anything Jim Jones...uh...was sayin’ and I can’t ever remember him goin’ to a service. Ya’ know, he---he may have gone to one, but to the best of my memory I don’t ever remember him...uh...ever goin’ to a service.

Katherine Klapperich: Alright. You also said that—that when you were finding out, over the news, that potentially your wife and daughter may have come to harm, that your mother had told you that they were still alive? Yes?

Charles Johnson: Oh, yes. Yes. This was a few months after...uh...what happened. Uh...I would say this is probably...uh...maybe February or March of ’79. My Mother said they were at some house. And I believe it was in Santa Clara? I—I don’t remember exactly where it was, but somewhere---some little city in the Bay Area and my Mom actually had an address.

And...um...I---I remember I was supposed to start a new job on a Monday. And that Saturday I

was playin' at a baseball game, and I had...uh...slid into home and twisted my ankle real bad.

So, I was on crutches, and I went up to...uh...this address, on my crutches, and people answered the door and they said they didn't know what I was talkin' about. They didn't know the people I was askin' for. I mean they were very nice considering the fact that, ya' know, I'm comin' in asking for somebody that doesn't live there. But I was convinced that...uh...the information that my Mom had was not correct and they were not there.

Katherine Klapperich: Alright. Did you ask your mom about that?

Charles Johnson: I--you know what? I don't remember if I asked my Mom about that at all. It was very difficult to talk to my Mom about Jim Jones and...uh...because she was a big believer in Jim Jones. She had claimed to have seen him drivin' a car, behind her, months after what happened in...uh...Jonestown. She said she saw him in the rearview mirror, he put his finger up to his lips, like for her to be quiet, and that he was still alive. And at that point I knew that any discussion about Peoples Temple and Jim Jones would have been...uh...difficult...uh...to talk to with my Mother because...uh...a—at that time I just don't think she was thinkin' right or in her right mind.

Katherine Klapperich: Alright. So, as you were finding out information, as its trickling over the airwaves...uh...to you, was there any kind of--of help that was being made to those people who were still survivors of Peoples Temple to get information, or to find out what's going on with their loved ones? How---how were you treated?

Charles Johnson: There was no information at all. I just remembered...um...I was stayin' with a friend of mine and the house was surrounded by FBI agents, and they came in and asked me a bunch of questions. And with me being, ya' know, basically part of the rank-and-file, somebody

on the outside who wasn't in "the know" as far as what was goin' on, there was nothin' I could tell 'em. Ya' know, it was just...uh...uh...uh...impossible for me to give them any information. I'm sure at that point that they knew more than I did. But they weren't givin' up any information either. They were just askin' questions. Uh...the only person who really reached out a hand to help me was...uh...Elaine Brown who was the head of the Black Panther Party at that time. Uh...some kind of way either I got in touch with her, or--or she with me, I don't remember how it came about. But she was...uh...very sympathetic she...uh...invited me up to Oakland to stay in a safe house just to get away from the news. Uh...she sent down a bunch of...uh...the Black Panther newspapers that the time...uh...'cause, ya' know, they were---they were strapped for money also and told me, ya' know, just to...uh...sell 'em and keep the money and---and hopefully that would help get me through a difficult time. But ya' know, that was---that was really nice of her. That was...uh...uh...unexpected. But other than that, there was no help...uh...from anybody a---at---at...uh...anytime. Unless...um...uh...when I finally went back to work, I met the actor Philip Michael Thomas, and he took one look at me and knew there was somethin' wrong. And he...uh...eventually I opened to him. He took me to lunch, and kept in touch with me, and he was very sympathetic and---and very helpful getting me through that time. But other than these two people...uh...there was no kind of help. Ya' know either official or unofficial.

Katherine Klapperich: You had also said that you were also part of the "rank and file". As part of the rank and file, how did you participate? I---I do believe, in one of our earlier conversations that you had mentioned taking buses up to San Francisco?

Charles Johnson: Uh...yeah. Uh...it did seem like every other week buses would come down from San Francisco for service in Los Angeles and then, the alternate week, buses from Los

Angeles would go up to San Francisco. Uh...now the thing about that...uh...my wife at the time had a brother who lived in San Francisco. And so what we would do...uh...with...uh...with our baby, baby girl, we would catch the bus up there, and we would get off of the bus at the San Francisco temple, we would go catch the city bus to her brother's house, spend the weekend sightseein' an--and hangin' out with her brother, and get back to the buses just in time to get on and come back to LA and nobody ever missed us.

Katherine Klapperich: (*chuckles*) So—so you were also telling me about a ping-pong game.

Charles Johnson: Uh...yes. This was...uh...they were...uh...they were expecting a visit from Angela Davis. And this was at the San Francisco temple. And I guess this was one of the times that me and my wife...uh...didn't go an' see her brother. And me and...uh...Jim Jones' son (*Stephan*) were playin' ping-pong, and somethin' happened, and we got into a argument, and it almost came to blows. People had to pull us apart. Now we're there waiting for Angela Davis to come and it woulda looked pretty bad if she walks in there an--and...uh...somebody i--is fightin' one of Jim Joneses' sons. So, they—they pulled us apart, cooler heads prevailed and—and...uh...Miss Davis did come through and everything worked out, but, ya know, that—that was—I look back on it and I'm sure whatever we were...uh...arguing about was silly. But at the time, ya' know, when you're--you're teenagers and there's...uh...people around watching you—you don't want to take a step back, so, ya' know, we almost came to blows. But that...uh...that I just...a—a memory that I have of...uh...that period of time because when...uh...Angela Davis came through she was very nice and—and talked to everybody and she seemed to be...uh...impressed with the things she saw. Because, I mean, they had fake things goin' on. They had it like...uh...there was people in there on drugs and we were helpin' 'em, ya' know, which wasn't true at that time. I'm not sayin' they never helped anybody get off of drugs, but

that day they were fakin' it. They had members actin' like they were strung out on drugs and other members there...uh...helpin' 'em.

Katherine Klapperich: That's—that's quite interesting. So, what other stories do you remember?

Charles Johnson: Umm...I do remember, and I think this is when...uh...now that I think about it, it's this—well I think I did go up and join the church. And I remember walkin' back and, then maybe I was--maybe I was 21—22, this...uh...older—older guy, he...uh...put somethin' in my hand, when I'm walkin'—shakin' peoples' hands, he said, “Don't look at it now.” And so, ya' know, I didn't look at it now so...uh...I think it was at the end of service, so I walk outside, and he has a piece of paper balled-up. And I open it, and it's just a blank sheet of paper. And I'm thinkin', “Okay. Did he just want me to throw away his trash?” But he must have been watching me because he walked over to me, and he whispered in my ear, and he said, “Everything is not as it appears.” And I never forget he told me that.

Katherine Klapperich: Do you remember who that was?

Charles Johnson: No. I don't remember who it was. I—I don't know if he was one of the...uh...people who were close to Jim Jones or just a regular member. But...uh..., ya' know, if I—I should have heeded the words he said and...uh...paid more attention. But I didn't and I lost, ya' know, two people that were very dear to me.

Katherine Klapperich: Are you a part of a religious organization now?

Charles Johnson: Uh...well now I've...uh...I'm...uh...Sunni Muslim. I decided to...uh...uh...uh...look into different religions and...uh...I read the Bible and then I read the Qur'an and...uh...the Qur'an touched me...uh...in a way that I...uh...became a Muslim. Now wh-- what's funny about when I became a Muslim, most Black Americans in America...uh...I

don't know if it's true now, but a certain period of time, your introduced...uh...to Islam through The Nation of Islam. And I had joined The Nation of Islam back in...uh...it was '95. And what struck me with them is that every service I went to they were readin' from the Bible. They weren't reading from the Qur'an. They sold you a Qur'an, but I never saw them use the...um...Qur'an. And when they sold me the Qur'an, I read it and I saw the difference between Nation of Islam and—and the Islam that's...uh...practiced in--over in Arabia and that's when I switched and became a Sunni Muslim.

Katherine Klapperich: Did you ever ask, “Why?”

Charles Johnson: Oh, no, I didn't ask why they...uh...(coughs) uh...didn't...uh...read from the Qur'an. I think one of the reasons they read from the Bible is they were always bringin' in Christians and tryin' to convert them but usin' the Bible instead of the Qur'an (*slight stammer*) ya' know that's just somethin' I—just my opinion. I don't know if that's true or not but that's what I kind of gathered from it.

Katherine Klapperich: So, what else would you like to share as far as your memories of Peoples Temple? Were they overall happy memories, e-e-except for the “incident”? Or...?

Charles Johnson: Uh...yeah. When...uh...we lived there was an apartment building next to the...uh...church in Los Angeles and it was...uh...uh...ya' know a—a coop-a coop really, ya' know we...uh...we—were livin'...uh...uh...we were livin' there and it was a commune. And what I—what I liked about it at the time was that I was workin' somewhere makin' minimum wage...uh...my wife was...uh...uh...getting a county check for we weren't making a lot of money at all. We were way below the poverty line, but we were able to survive by living there. Ya' know, all of our needs were met. Uh...the rent...uh...food, clothing e-everything

that...uh...that we needed was met and, in turn, ya' know we did work around the...uh...the church when it was our turn to do it. Whether it was security or--or cooking or...uh...cleaning the buses out, whatever it was. Though and the people that I worked with, th--the other rank and file members who were into that lifestyle really made it...uh...fun. Those are the memories that you have of the people that were there with you. And ya' know, that was—that was a fun time for...uh...for me and my wife. We...uh...we enjoyed that time immensely.

Katherine Klapperich: Are you still friends with anybody from Peoples Temple?

Charles Johnson: That's th—that's the thing...uh...when that happened nobody trusted anybody. In fact, that—I think that's was...uh...when I look back on it one of the things that drove a wedge between my wife and I was that I saw some things that weren't kosher as far as...uh...Peoples Temple was concerned over the years and...uh...she wasn't listening. Ya' know, she wasn't having it. Like he would do these healings, and, over a period of years, he healed just about everybody in that church from somethin' that either would have...uh...debilitated them or caused them death. And I remember one time sayin' to my Mom, I said, "Mom you can't believe in this. Cause' if your gonna tell me if it wasn't for Jim Jones all these four hundred people in here would have been dead by now?" I said, "Mom that doesn't make sense." But ya' know, she—she...uh...she didn't want to hear it either. Ya know, and that's when my wife and my Mom became close because they both believed in the same thing. Cause they had told Jim Jones...uh...Jim Jones had told them that they needed to put some—something some kind of prayer cloth under my pillow to stop some kind of accident I was gonna have, but they couldn't tell me. And so, at the time, me and my wife were...uh...we had just got married and were living with my Mother and my stepdad. And they—they attempted to do it, but I discovered what they were doin'. And they said," Well look, well we gotta put this under there

or else you--you're gonna have a bad accident or somethin'..." I said, "Mom, no." Ya' know, well I told 'em, "No. This is—this is not real. That you have to believe, ya' know, that everybody in this church would have been dead by now if it wasn't for Jim Jones. You can't possibly believe that." But they were believers, they but they believed it wholeheartedly. Ya' know, it was (*clears throat*) it was...uh...ya' know, they were really—they were really into it. And I think that was the start of the split that I had with me and my wife.

Katherine Klapperich: When you---when you separated from your wife and she left for Guyana, you said that you did not know that she had gone. Were there—until they were already there. Were there any—did you have regular correspondence her, aside from the one letter?

Charles Johnson: No. The one letter is the only--only letter I got. The only (*clears throat*) c-correspondence and it was...uh...like I said when she put that little phrase in there, I knew somethin' was wrong. And I had told my Mom and my Mom was close to a couple of people at the church, but they...uh...ya' know th--they—they calmed her down and said nothin's wrong unbeknownst to us at the time that the people who were back here, his ministers, they still had family members over in Guyana. So, they had to be careful of what they said because that would have put their family members over there in danger. And so, they couldn't tell us anything was wrong even if they knew somethin' was wrong because they didn't want anything to happen to their family members. (*clears throat*) Ya' know I—I ya' know I heard about those...uh...(*clears throat*) uh...um...I don't know what they called 'em--I'll just say "Black Nights" where they drank the fake poison to say that people come after us this is somethin' that (*clears throat*) excuse me, this is something that we have to do. Ya' know, he...uh...I think he...uh...called it "revolutionary suicide". If I remember, Huey Newton wrote a book called *Revolutionary Suicide*. In fact...um...I was told later on that they had a recording of Huey Newton sayin' what a good

job that Jim Jones was doing and that people should believe in him. Ya' know, but (*clears throat*) since I wasn't there, I don't know what the recording said. I don't know how many times it played. But...uh...that's the—that's the message that I got later on.

Katherine Klapperich: Alright. You also...uh...said that your daughter and wife were interred at Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland?

Charles Johnson: Right. Uh...yes...uh...uh...I've seen pictures of their names there, but I haven't...uh...uh...visited that...uh...the--the cemetery yet...(*slight talking over*) **Katherine**

Klapperich: Is that—is that hard? **Charles Johnson:** It's a hard thing to do...

Katherine Klapperich: Is that too hard for you?

Charles Johnson: Yeah, it--it's kind of a hard thing to do. Ya' know (*clears throat*) another thing, I couldn't look at any movies about it. Any documentaries. I couldn't look at the pictures. Ya' know, 'cause when you look at the pictures, ya' know, you--you're looking—I'm looking for my wife and, ya' know, it just became too hard. And especially afterwards when...uh...I couldn't talk to my Mom about it. 'Cause at that time, I really couldn't talk to anybody because nobody could know how you could feel. Ya' know, nobody knew how you felt and the people that I was closest to...uh...um... my Mom or stepdad...uh...ya' know, I—I couldn't have those conversations with 'em. So, (*clears throat*) it-it-it was hard. In fact, I remember going to...uh...uh...speak to...uh...a psychologist and...uh...after the first meeting that didn't work out too good and...uh...I--I left there upset so...uh...I never went back.

Katherine Klapperich: Why-why were you upset after the meeting if you can share?

Charles Johnson: Uh...because ya' know it--it takes awhile for you to pour your heart out. It's still new. It's still fresh. You don't want to believe it, but it's—i--it's believable and I remember

I was at—at a time when I was pouring my heart out and there was a knock—it was a--a female psychologist--a knock on the door she goes and asks and comes back and says, “Well my lunch date is here. We’ll have to continue this later.” And that was it. And so, I said, “Okay, I’m through with her.”

Katherine Klapperich: If there was anything you wish would have been made available to you, what would that have been?

Charles Johnson: Um...you know at the time, I wou---obviously I wish that...uh...things had turned out different and they weren’t there at all. But, also, I wish that...um...there would have been somebody to talk to who could calm his—calm---calm me down and—and...uh...ya’ know just tell me about the future or try and make things—try to make things better. There was--there was none of that. I mean there was—there was nothing like that. And ya’ know, I ha—I had also felt guilty about another young teenager who...uh...they sent over there. And...uh...it was because we were doin’ guard duty and some kinda way me and this...uh...ya’ know I’m about 23 and he’s about 15-16, this teenager...uh...we got in a fight. And they just sent him right over to Jonestown and I’m pretty sure he didn’t survive. And I felt guilty about that also that, ya’ know, his death was on my hands.

Katherine Klapperich: Wow

Charles Johnson: Ya’ know guilt--guilt can be a—a terrible thing to...uh...to--to experience. Ya’ know ‘cause there was like I said there was signs that I saw that things weren’t right and I just couldn’t convince my wife to l—l—to leave and let it go. I just couldn’t convince her. Ya’ know, plus I had my Mom on the other side tellin’ her what a wonderful man Jim Jones was. And it was just hard to overcome that. I--It was—it was really difficult. So that, ya’ know, I wish there

would have been somebody who would have been able to talk to me. But like I said...uh...the actor from Miami Vice, Philip Michael Thomas, and that was way before Miami Vice, ya' know he was talkin' to me---he was there for me, but i--it wasn't the same and I, ya' know, I appreciate it, ya' know, and he probably has no idea how much it meant to me at the time. But it was, ya' know, that was something that---that...uh...I---I needed more of. Ya' know 'cause one of the things people were lookin' at you like you were crazy. At that time, if you told 'em that you were associated with...uh...Jim Jones, they looked at you in a different way. 'Cause they're thinkin' how can people do this? How can he get people to follow him to...uh...uh...t---to kill themselves? And, actually, they had guns on 'em, ya' know? It was either---it was either...uh...drink that or, ya' know, be shot down. A---and ya' know speaking of that that's another thing that just irritates me to no end. Now ya' hear people always use the term "drinkin' the Kool-Aid" and it just really bothers me because you had...uh...these mo--mostly Black but all poor people who died that way. And I'm thinkin', "Okay, what if we started using the term: 'I'm not walkin' into that oven'?" Referring to the Jews who died in...uh...in Nazi, Germany. People would lose their frickin' mind. So, it's okay to disparage and--and have a cliché about poor Black people, but you can't do that with other people. And that really bothers me to this day.

Katherine Klapperich: Well, I can understand why it might. Or why it should. So (*talking over*)

Charles Johnson: Yeah, go--go ahead. **Katherine Klapperich:** So, do you still carry some of that guilt with you?

Charles Johnson: Every minute of every day.

Katherine Klapperich: Do you think that this could happen again?

Charles Johnson: I think it could happen again...um...ya' know to be honest with you, I'm just shocked. When I see some of these...uh...evangelical preachers on TV. The uh...uh...the Kenneth Copeland's. The...uh...um...Graham Franklin's. The way they control their flocks. The way they've become so political. It just astounds me. I don't ever think people will get to the point where they will be in a position to take their lives. But I do think that people are being controlled way too much by these a--a—and you know th--these are just, I call 'em "jack leg preachers". Ya' know money is all they want. They can—they can tell you how to vote. They can tell you how to live. They can tell you somethin' that's not true and you will believe it. Ya' know, truth doesn't matter in America anymore. This is madness.

Katherine Klapperich: Would you say, in a comparison, that Peoples Temple actually offered more than these other evangelical groups you've mentioned?

Charles Johnson: Well one of the things that Peoples Temple did...uh...and I know...uh...instances where somebody was losin' their house...uh...the church would step in and make the back payments and keep 'em from losin' their house. If you had somebody in—in jail...uh...nine times out of ten they could get 'em out. They were doin' things for people 'cause, I don't know if...uh...most people don't know that...uh...Jim Jones was the Housing Commissioner in the City of San Francisco. And, when you have a church with that many people in it, and you have local elections, you can wield a lot of power. You have the power t—to sway an election. And so a lot of politicians played up to him to get...uh...his members to vote. Vote...uh...their way. And ya' know he did do some things for people, it's just that, in the end, ya' know hi--his craziness—I don't know if it was craziness. I don't know if it was drugs. I don't know if it—if it was arrogance. But he just...uh...you know went down the wrong path and took all these people with him. But he did do some good things...uh...i--in the beginning. And ya'

know...um...like I said I wasn't into the...uh...religious part, but I was—I was into the socialism. Ya' know 'cause I saw him do some things I'll never forget in a service and I had to be sittin' about twenty, thirty rows back. He threw a Bible and it landed right next to this woman sittin' on the end and he said that she was—there was a spy and—and this whole bit. I mean i--it was crazy. It was crazy, but they were doin' some things. I--I remember spending some—a---a week up in, I think it was Ukiah, California when they were clearin' some land or somethin' and we were up there choppin' down...uh...trees. Uh...I know now why they call the "Mighty Oak"—the "Mighty Oak" because you try to chop that down...uh...it bounces off of it like its rubber. But...uh...you know...uh...we were fro—me and my wife we were involved. W—we believed. I believed in the socialistic part, and she believed in the religious part and when...uh...when we couldn't agree on something that's when we started to...uh...to...uh...separate. And you know...um...I--I like it's like I told you earlier I feel guilty about that every day. Because ya' know you look back on it and think there are so many different things you could have done. Ya' know so many different ways I could have handled things and, ya' know, they would've...uh...survived. I even thought if I had been there, I could have saved them. But you know that's—that's...uh...not the right thinkin' because you know...uh...there was no way to fight that. The people who got out were just lucky an--an ya' know either snuck out or got overlooked. But you know nobody...uh...just grabbed a gun and walked out of there. Not—not to my knowledge, anyway. So, yeah, there's a I—I see a lot of parallel in what's goin' on now. Ya' know you have...uh...uh...just people believin' in—in—in stuff that's not real and I don't understand it. You know you can have, ya' know now—now people think that voting is not right. Ya' know th-that's there's somethin' wrong with the voting based on one lie by one man. How can one man have that much power? Where he can make what...uh...47% or 40% of

the people in America think there's somethin' wrong with the votes when he doesn't win? Nobody's questioned it before, except maybe in 2000. When just in one...uh...state Florida. But now you've got people even when a recount, a recount says he lost he'll get up the next day and said, "The recount proves that I won. They need to decertify it." This is madness. And I've seen this play before with Jim Jones. I've seen this before. So, I don't know how people can fall into this. This doesn't make sense to me.

Katherine Klapperich: I have a question that you don't have to answer if you don't want, and it goes back to feeling guilty every single day of your life for your daughter and your wife. Is there something that you could say now that would help, going forward, to other people that might—that can't ever alleviate the guilt but certainly might potentially help others from going down the path? Som—some word of advice?

Charles Johnson: Uh...yes, communication. Ya' know I was young. My wife was young. We didn't communicate that much with each other. We let other people come in and tell us things that maybe weren't right and things we shouldn't have listened to, but you gotta communicate with the person closest to you. You have to y—you--you have to discuss things. You have both of you have to express your feelings and you gotta have some common ground. And I didn't have t-the communication skills at 23 that I have now at 66 or tha-that I--I had at 33 or 43 or 53. Ya' know communication is the main thing and not having anybody tell you somethin' that you know is not right. Because so many times you'll suffer. Ya' know and I--I'll give you a quick example: and this is—when I was in the fifth grade, we moved from Compton to LA and we had a math test. And I knew the answers to the math test. But the students there were tellin' me that i—its...uh...that's not the right way it's done a different way. And I listened to them, and I failed right along with them even though I knew it was different. And I look back on that and

thinkin', "Math doesn't change. The truth doesn't change." But people can convince you that things change when you're "weak minded" and you're not educated. So, I would tell people first of all, communication but get educated. Read. You don't spend all day watchin' TV, read. In my lifetime I've read over 400 books. You know I try to read an—and--and try to be as knowledgeable as I can. But I do see dark days ahead for America because I'm--I'm currently readin' a book about...uh...uh...John Brown? Who was...uh...ya' know died freein' the slaves, and the same things that were going on before the Civil War I see happening today. And people can't turn to the church. You look at these evangelicals and it gets crazy. They'll say well, for instance, "God put Trump in charge." Okay. If God put Trump in charge, then He put Biden in charge. And Obama in charge. And Bush in charge. But they don't wanna hear that. People don't wanna hear the truth. And, if I had listened more about the truth, and been able to express that to my wife more, maybe I could have saved her. But I didn't.

Katherine Klapperich: Are there any, for lack of any better word, signs that you would have people specifically look to, or look at, when participating within an organization that you would consider warning signs?

Charles Johnson: Uh...yeah...ther...uh...one (*unintelligible*). Truth. 'Cause, ya' know it...um...Okay you'll have stories in the Bible where Jesus told a man to, ya' know, a man asked him to follow him. And he said, "What do I need to follow you?" And Jesus said, "Sell all you have." But he didn't stop there. He said, "Sell all you have. Give it to the poor, and then follow me." He didn't say, "Sell all you have. Give it to the rich." Give it to the poor. And still we have these—these mega pastors flyin' around in...uh...in private jets. I—I'll never forget...uh...this was afterwards, girlfriend of mine, she was goin' to...uh...um...a church in...uh...in Los Angeles and I—I'll just say it was...uh...Fred Prices' church and the congregation was buyin'

him a Rolls Royce. And he said, “Well, Jesus rode on a camel and, or a donkey, and that was the Rolls Royce of the time.” I’m thinkin’, ya’ know (*stammers*)...uh...girlfriend, ex, I said, “No it’s not.” I said, “There’s a lot of things between a Rolls Royce and walkin’. There’s a Chevy (*chuckles*). There’s a bicycle. There’s a motorcycle. But there ain’t too many things between a donkey and walkin’.” I mean either you walk or you gotta a donkey there’s nothin’ in between that--that I know of. But people went along with that. And I’m thinkin’, “People have to be smarter than that. People gotta think for themselves. And stop lettin’ other people tell them somethin’ that is outrageous.” And I’ll never forget the last time I—I stepped in Fred Prices’ church, is—ya’ know ‘cause he was always arrogant to me, he said that...uh..., “the People who died in Jonestown got what they deserved.” And my girlfriend at the time couldn’t understand why I didn’t go back. She said, “I should forgive him for that.” And that’s unforgivable. How are you gonna tell me my 2-year-old daughter got what she deserved? So, ya’ know, people get hooked-up in this religion game. And they--they let people tell them stuff that’s not in the Bible. One of the reasons I—I—I came to Islam ‘cause there is no main Islam leader or group tellin’ you things. They stress read the Qur’an. Follow the Qur’an. And that’s what I try to do daily. And I really wish that I had found...uh... Sunni Islam when I was 12 years old an--and been steeped in it then ‘cause then I would have lived a better life. But you know I am where I am now. But people need to read and--and not let somebody lie to them, especially when they know they’re lyin’. Ya’ know I just ca—I just can’t understand, ya’ know wh-...uh...like I said I have three sons and when I raised my sons I used to tell ‘em, you know, 60% of the people you run across are gonna be stupid. And now my sons are out in the world, and they said, “Dad, your estimate wasn’t right (*muffled*). It’s way higher than 60%” (*laughs*) But ya’ know that’s somethin’ that...uh...you know we--we gotta live with.

Katherine Klapperich: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Charles Johnson: Um...No I—I—I know this was a long time ago and I don't wanna see anybody else go through this and—and live with this. Ya' know 'cause guilt, survivors' guilt, can be a terrible thing to live with and I—I—I wish people would--would hold their loved ones closer to 'em and—and enjoy them while they're here 'cause you never know when they're gonna be snatched away. Y-ya' never know it. And that I just want people to educate themselves...uh...seek the truth and--and keep your loved ones close.

Katherine Klapperich: Thank you.

Charles Johnson: Uh...your welcome.

Katherine Klapperich: Thank you for this interview and we are going off-record at 11:04 am.

Thank you, very much.