

My Experience of Jonestown

One of the first things I noticed when I entered Jonestown was my reception. I received hundreds of hugs; it was an overwhelming experience. Now I have been in Jonestown for two weeks and have noticed many things. First of all, one is startled by the colors you see, the greens are so green, even the earth has bright colors of rust and orange. The sky looks uncluttered by buildings and you can become absorbed into nature. I was riding a bumpy tractor one day to Pathews Ridge and at first I was concentrated on the bumps, but then as I looked around, I saw a vista of natural beauty that almost made me fall from my seat. Brightly colored butterflies, with many types of leaves and all varieties of ferns. Being from a capitalist background, I immediately computed in my mind how one of those lush ferns alone in the US would cost as much as \$25 when sold as a houseplant. I was surprised by the emotional experience of space, as if never in my life, I had looked out and seen a land that wasn't marred by a garish advertisement of deoderant or razor blades. I felt as if the more I looked, the more my hectic anxious mind became lulled into a harmony with the natural scene.

In Jonestown itself, the city dweller begins to make many adjustments. One is used to many so-called necessities that one quickly finds are the addictions that enslave you to the American system, making many people sell out their principles for plastic wrapped chemicalized and non-nutritive nothings. Here, you start to notice even your body functioning differently. You start to sweat out impurities, and people's bodies as well as their minds begin to change. The Jonestownians characterize the newcomers as pulpy swollen-looking people, who actually look bloated. As people eat natural foods, breath fresh air, and live a more calm life involved with honest useful work, their bodies begin to firm up; their skins become tan or darker. They even stand more erect and look more resolved. I couldn't even recognize familiar people because they looked so different at first to me. Even though I wasn't overweight, or not that much, people said I looked fat because my face was puffy at first.

I was surprised pleasantly by many of the changes in people that I had known. Some of these people I thought would have had great difficulty adjusting to the so-called simple life of Jonestown. Jan O'Riordan was one of the first of this type person I talked to. She, as many of you know, was an elitist person who had studied in the United States and she had fantasies of herself as being a revolutionary in the most romanticized sense. She vicariously lived through other revolutionaries like Johnny Spain of the Black Panther Party and in no way had made peace with being a proletarian. She was extremely positive about her experiences since she came to Jonestown. Initially for several weeks worked all day in the fields and this was the first time in her life she had the opportunity to know first hand what it was to be a worker doing something useful, feeling cooperatively involved in putting food on the table of the people. Now that our high school has started, she and I and Nike Prokes team teach an Advanced Language Arts Course, and she also teaches a Basic English course, which Shirley Robinson and I help her with. She still works in the fields in the afternoons.

Another person who I met as I rode in the back of the truck up the

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long road into the "village" of Jonestown was Laren Harmes. In the United States Laren was an anarchist who couldn't stand any form of authority. She broke up a marriage of a black woman and a white man and the black woman had a lot of problems with this white young woman who seemed to have no concern for her life or her pain. He would spend hours counselling Laren about her lazy patterns or her lack of involvement in the political commitments of the church.

The first thing Laren told me about her experiences in Jonestown was that she loved it here; she never wanted to go back to the United States. For the first time in her life she felt she could change and she didn't have to have a negative image of herself. She enjoyed working in the fields and she didn't want to mess up. I was incredulous at first, but she appeared very happy and her conversation was relaxed and easy-going. She was proud that she had stood up firm in the crisis and she was very moved that Jim had come around to every person on the line many times, expressing his love to them, warmly touching each face. She told me that he had been in tears, saying to each one that he had not brought them here for this. She said seeing Jim Jones' love for each one and his dedication to fighting rather than let even one of his people be taken really had an impact on her. She said that each step of the way he explained everything that was happening to the people and got each one of their feelings about each decision that was made.

Strangely in this atmosphere that seems like a pioneer village the most sophisticated things are happening in human development. And yet not so strange because I remember getting lost in the complexity of life in the United States. Everything seemed gary to me, the buildings were gray, the streets and the sky were gray--the faces of people on the buses and walking the street began to look cold, impersonal and de-humanized, afraid to care about anyone. Here, when one gets used to sharing one's home with others, eating together, working together and having common entertainments, one begins to work on inner qualities that one used to ignore as luxuries previously. For example, in both our grammar and high school programs, we are finding that very few young people have been helped to think analytically and solve problems of reason. Young people that have appeared indifferent or blaise to education, choosing instead a teeny-bopper existence when you talk to them have never felt that they had the capacity to approach ideas analytically. We now have many people working on these problems, teaching young people of all ages how to think, and how not to be afraid to express their viewpoints. I find that many feel that others have better ideas or that their ideas are wrong. The atmosphere here is creating a freedom to think and have dialogues which is most conducive to learning. All kinds of seminars are cropping up. We have a socialist enlightenment class with teachers of all backgrounds, labor leaders, college-educated people, workers. We get together before each class to plan what we will teach and Jan Wilsey and I are resource people to assist teachers.

Since pregnant women will be having their babies here in Jonestown, there is a Lamaze Natural Childbirth Class to prepare them for childbirth. Each woman has a "coach" who will help her during labor and she is instructed and prepared so she will know what to expect at each stage and will know how to cope with it.

Our doctor Larry Schacht is finding many surprising phenomena. He is picking up in people conditions that were never treated in the United States; conditions that could have easily been detected by alert doctors. Vaginal infections for instance that have plagued

women for years he has discovered from the lab work he does with Pecky Flowers, our professional lab technician, and these conditions can be simply treated. A complex operation was performed by Larry with the help of an emergency radio station that gave him instructions. A piece of steel lodged in Paul McCann's eye, and Larry was able to extricate it with no injury to the eye.

Amazing miracles have happened here. Bobby Stroud's hand was dismembered until it was connected onto his hand by only a small portion of skin. He had to hold his hand together as he came in from the fields but thanks to Jim Jones he is doing fine and has not suffered any nerve damage. A young man Walter Williams was hit in the head by the beam of a crane and his whole body became immediately paralyzed. Jim touched him and told him to clench his hand which at first he could not do. Jim kept telling him he would be alright. He concentrated on Jim's words and clenched his hands and now he is ^{working} around fully restored to his prior functioning.

I find amazing things happening here. People I used to get into conflicts with, I find I enjoy their company here. Perhaps the Capitalist competitive system by its very nature sets you one against the other, and only in a totally different environment where you directly see that you are all working together for the common good, can you lay aside the tendency to destroy each other.

Perhaps one reason also is that there is much more equalization of physical tasks and the glorification of work removes the feeling of being slaves to an uncaring system as is true in the United States. It was somewhat understandable in Peoples Temple in the US that a division of tasks needed to be made as there were so many functions to be accomplished that it would have been inefficient to do otherwise, but there is no such need to be so specialized here. Also energies that were diverted in the US to work at an "outside" job, are now mobilized to work for the community of Jonestown.

Even the government of the village is more equitable. This is because of the same reason mentioned about the division of work. People who had leadership often in the US often had specialized tasks related to paper work, but here anyone who wants to assume leadership in the field, or in the garden, or in the kitchen or in the schools or wherever can become one of the representatives of the Central Committee. Any person or child can sit in on the Central Committee Meetings, but only members can vote. Just because you served as a leader in the United States doesn't mean automatically you will be in this position here where people's patterns are far more observable.

Jan Wilsey is a good example of a leader who has emerged from the position of a worker into a fine supervisor of a field work crew and into a leader governing the people and helping them solve problems. Jan used to live with me in Ukiah when she was a teenager. She was a local Indian young woman who had no sense of self-worth as Ukiah regarded Indians as Naer-do-wells who had no intelligence or capacity to assume any kind of education or leadership. She was passive and fearful of people. She drifted around, often on opium, and she could not even assert herself when she was confronted by people. She was usually depressed, moody and felt hopeless of any meaningful future. She also was obese and her face looked unexpressive. Jan has lived in Jonestown for several years now and her first experience of her

capacities here were two-fold. She worked in a clinic to help the native Guyanese and she also worked with our citrus crops here. She has become an expert in citrus. She also learned to supervise people in the fields, often people with more education than her but who had less skills than she had acquired here. She is now a beautiful person. She co-chairs the whole Central Committee Meetings and often leads the meetings as the chairpersons trade off in leading the meetings. She is firm when she takes a stand but is good at facilitating discussions. She is very realistic and can cut right through a lot of bull-shit. She is expressive and laughs warmly. She is highly respected and many people look to her as an example of strength and commitment. The competitive system of the United States almost destroyed Jan and would never have helped her discover her potential. Jim and Marcie made many efforts to encourage her in the United States which helped her a lot. They even arranged for her to go to college on a pass, no-fail basis which was especially arranged for her at Santa Rosa Jr. College. At first she had been terrorized by the competition of a college environment because competition was not considered a noble characteristic in her cultural background. She gained some awareness that she had potential but she still looked around her at a racist society where others appeared to have much more confidence in coping with a dog-eat-dog world and she was continually depressed. Now I never see her depressed and I feel like I have much to learn from her strengths.

It is also interesting how people become far more appreciative here of discoveries that would have become blotted out by the supermarket approach to life in the United States. In the United States one is bombarded with a supermarket of escapist experiences, you just take your pick and you never have to face yourself or the implications of your life. Here, reading for instance, is appreciated deeply. People discover that through reading you can open up new worlds. Work projects research their various areas and learn to overcome obstacles hindering their production. People read books that they wouldn't have read if they had the quickie experiences of TV available to pull them into mindless addiction. My son Martin is reading on an adult level. He read the Odessa file and explained it patiently to adults who hadn't read it, this nine year old explaining about the storm-troopers and how many of them had escaped after Nazi Germany collapsed and how a man had researched the whole process of their escape and the files that emerged from this research.

The youth group has been meeting to see how they can be a positive help to Jonestown. They call themselves the Jonestown Youth Socialist Committee. They are thinking of all kinds of projects where they can present socialist dramas, debates, where they can be big brothers and big sisters to young people who have suffered more than others in the US.

Many new structures and types of communal developments are emerging. The nursery is a beautiful communal project. Babies have cribs where they can see each other and communicate. The cribs are made out of wood and are beautiful. They even have nicely varnished little chairs their own size to sit in and are getting a table to match that they will be able to reach to eat on. The mothers and workers that are assigned to work in the nursery give them a great deal of individual love and attention and all the children have their needs met with no exception. Stimulating toys and mobiles are made for them so that they live a very happy life.

I don't want to underestimate the adjustment it takes to move from the United States to Jonestown, Guyana. You should not take the step if you feel you have to have the bourgeois accouterments to survive. You should have no illusions that it is all easy and that it doesn't take time to get used to the changes here. You don't have pepsi machines or icecream parlours. You can't run to the corner movie or to a shopping center. But if you value living in a socialist society, under a leader who strives every day and night to preserve your freedom, and if you are so hateful of the American Fascist system where the solution to the oppression is for the fascists to imprison thousands and thousands of innocent people in prisons and mental hospitals and buildings called school where they are taught they are worthless and subtly as well as directly taught they should give up any hope of participating in society. If this has been your experience, you will see Jonestown as an opportunity to pioneer a new society.

But you will have to change your cosmetologized image of yourself. Women who have been taught to be cute souless pretty beings have a new role here. Cosmetics are irrelevant and don't even feel right on your face. Clothes are not a badge of status as the hard-working field worker in clothes decorated with honest dirt is the status symbol. Expensive creams aren't necessary and one's face gets a healthy look because of the natural environment. A person stands out here only for their character development.

HEROIC BEHAVIOR DURING OUR CRISIS

Some of the children showed such maturity and heroic actions during the crisis that I thought you might be interested in hearing about them.

James Baisey and James Ford took all care and responsibility of Henry Cannon (who is retarded) throughout the entire crisis. This was for 3 days and 3 nights. They saw he was fed and helped him when people had to run somewhere. They not once neglected him or left him.

DeShawn who is 4 years old, in the midst of the crisis when all the children were lying flat in an enclosure, reached out to a crying 2 year old, Raymond McKnight. He patted Raymond on the back and gently said, "Don't cry, it will be alright."

Tobiana and Jaimie Cordell did the same kind of comforting of other children. Jaimie is about 3 yrs. old.

Jim Arthur Jones, age 13, picked up Mary Motherspoon, age 7, and ran with her so she wouldn't be left behind.

Frances Buckley, age 13, helped little children run faster and helped usher them to where they were going. She organized the whole Junior Security for the children. Even when the organizing of this was difficult she stayed with it as the children needed a worker to be aware and watching over them at all times.

Shabaker, age 13, tied Treatise Arteberry, about age 7, to his back so she could keep up.

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Angela, age 11, and Sophia Cassanova, age 10, both carried babies.

Larry Tupper and Kelly Grubbs were especially helpful. Larry watched over Alvin Simon to make sure he ate. Danny Beck helped younger children. Tommy Rice, age 11, carried Carl Smith, who is about 9 and who has an artificial leg.

Four to five young men: Darin Janero, age 13, Kelly Grubbs, 13, Chris Buckley, 11, James Ford, age 10, Edward Ford, 11, and Joel Cobb age 12 all went to the front line with cutlasses because they were so responsible. Billy Bush would have gone but they ran out of cutlasses. All in all there were about 25 instances of heroism among the young people.

We have a youth counsel here three times a week where the youth solve their own problems. Some of the teachers and myself coordinate the counsel and the young children are amazing. They get into heavy issues like sexism and being fair in games instead of being competitive. Other children seem to listen more to their own peers and there is no discipline given. We give them a chance to respond to this type of counselling and often clap for the "Defendants" when they show character in honesty when confronted or in a willingness to make changes in their behavior.