

Hospitality In Peoples Temple and Synanon

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For two decades, I lived in communities that are often referred to or defined as “cults.” At age twenty-two, I became a member of Peoples Temple and lived in the group’s communities near Ukiah (California), in San Francisco and eventually in northern Guyana (at Jonestown). I was a member of Peoples Temple from 1970 until 1978.

I survived.

When I returned to the Bay Area in 1978 – after the mass murders at Jonestown -- I found another nurturing community (also often called a “cult”): Synanon. I moved in to Synanon in 1980, when I was thirty-two and stayed for about ten years, until the group dissolved after relocating to the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas, near Visalia.

I survived.

It is easy to get confused when you look at and study Peoples Temple and Synanon. Although on paper, Peoples Temple was a church, and Synanon was a drug rehabilitation facility, they were more like exclusive clubs. Each one attracted very specific types of individuals.

Peoples Temple, for example, took in many people who felt voiceless, or powerless. Most members had experienced prejudice and/or violence. Some people joined to have a louder voice against society’s ills, or to have a safe place for their families.

Syanon was initially created to help addicts get off drugs and to commit themselves to working hard to create a healthy community. Then, it expanded to include non-drug users and non-alcoholics who had a similar vision for a better world. Both groups welcomed people with a vision or who were willing to follow the vision of those already in the society. Neither group wanted to “waste time” with spectators or curious neighbors. These people were not welcome unless they first proved themselves to be committed followers of the vision of Chuck Dederich and other Synanon members.

Peoples Temple:

In Peoples Temple, there was unlimited hospitality for people who wanted to participate in the formation of a unique utopian community and who were willing to give up everything for the “cause.” People of all ages, races and backgrounds were welcomed. Once you joined, everything was provided.

Those who were simply curious, however, or who just wanted to share in the enthusiasm generated by the Temple’s different social projects, were held at arm’s length. Members of Peoples Temple, and particularly the leader Jim Jones, lived in a “we-they” world. The internal workings of the “church” were only discussed in private settings with a select “we” group. This group included only people committed to “making the world more humane,” i.e. giving up everything (social and financial) for the sake of the Peoples Temple community as a whole. Those of us who joined Peoples Temple viewed ourselves as a select group of dedicated idealists and workers. We were special because our focus was on all of humanity. We were not hospitable to those who were not fully committed to dedicate themselves to our mission.

Within Peoples Temple, residents had many benefits – free lodging, food, legal aid, nursing and medical follow-up, counseling and tutoring for children, and more. Many members in the San Francisco and Los Angeles communities thrived with this kind of support, especially those who came from backgrounds of poverty and discrimination. We developed a reputation as a “church” that took good care of its members. We were diverse, ethnically, culturally, and socio-economically. Word about us got around. Local politicians were interested in us as potential voters and were impressed by our many social programs. Publicity brought many interested people to our doors.

But getting into Peoples Temple was not as easy as it might appear. The vetting process was rigorous especially if one raised suspicion about the community’s intentions. Before individuals were allowed to attend family meetings, and even some of our regular services, “intentions” were first evaluated by long-time members.

Peoples Temple did not actively proselytize yet we took in hundreds of people every year - old and young, black, white, brown, gay, straight, affluent and poor. Once you were “in,” you were a full part of the church community. You were treated as intimately as a sibling or other family member. Hospitality began once you were in the door.

Contacts with non-members were different, relationships with outsiders always superficial. This was demanded by the community and it was expressed directly and indirectly. Even relations with non-Peoples Temple co-workers (most people had outside employment) and even with relatives, were downplayed in terms of importance. It was almost as if these people did not exist. Inside the group we became each other's adopted family members. As members we never talked about internal operations with people outside of our adopted family. Unfortunately, this situation of isolation (especially with respect to pre-Peoples Temple friends and relatives) was easily manipulated by Jim Jones. We were asked not to communicate with outsiders about any personal topic, and we were reluctant to break this emphatically-enforced rule.

So, in general, hospitality was only extended to those who were willing to make a life-long commitment to the Peoples Temple church.

Synanon:

Synanon too had an imaginary fence that surrounded it. By the time I joined, Synanon had become an extremely closed society with information about the organization spread only by word of mouth. The original purpose of Synanon, established by Charles E. Dederich in the 1950s, was to provide a residential treatment program for alcoholics and later drug addicts (called "dope fiends"). Many of the earliest members were heroin addicts who kicked their habits because of the strong sense of community in the organization.

Soon, however, Synanon evolved into a fully communal society that drew non-addict members – many from middle and upper middle class backgrounds – who were interested in experimenting with the human condition. They stayed because of the supportive lifestyle. Synanon was thus much like a Club Med experience. Once you moved in and became a resident, you certainly worked hard, but you were also provided with many amenities. There were communal vehicles, motorcycles, and at the beginning, even small planes, available to residents. There were swimming pools or swimming ponds at every California center. Members provided the various community services, including meals that were served communally. Residents served in various capacities. Classical pianist, Ken Elias, for example, was for many years one of the community's plumbers. All that was required was that one did one's job well. The Synanon schedule was the "cube" and you worked straight for seven days, and then had

seven days of “growth” to follow your fancy - travel, art, music, sculpture, and many other interests.

When drug addicts arrived at Synanon they were treated with civility but from the very first day, each person was held accountable for their actions. If a person was not paying their own way (working within or outside the community), he or she was shown the door. Synanon did have some residents who were only able to perform at “sheltered workshop” levels of employment. Many of them depended on full-time care for physical or psychological problems. When Synanon closed (in 1991), some of these people never found a replacement community. A number of former drug addicts and alcoholics moved into the Delancey Street drug rehabilitation community in San Francisco. Others connected with Alcoholics Anonymous groups. Offshoot facilities were started by former Synanon residents, including Amity House. Some members did not survive the transition back into the larger community.

At Synanon, hospitality was thus only shown to those who were committed to living in the community. It was non-existent for non-members. If you were not invited to join the Synanon family (for its innovative communal environment, or to get off drugs) you were not welcome. Within the ranks, however, we were very close. Even today, nearly 30 years after Synanon closed, many of us who were once members are close, life-long friends.

In summary, in terms of hospitality, both Peoples Temple and Synanon had deep and thoughtful relationships with fellow and sister members. The membership of each group, furthermore, was diverse, colorful, and inclusive - allowing vast economic, social and educational differences. But neither group was hospitable to outsiders. There were secrets --- in both groups - that were not shared with outsiders. Hospitality was an all-or-none phenomenon.