

“Be prepared to revise your understanding of civil rights. . . . *Ready for Revolution* [allows] Carmichael to tell his story and finally take his rightful place in history.”

—CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

READY FOR REVOLUTION

THE LIFE AND STRUGGLES OF
STOKELY CARMICHAEL
{ KWAME TURE }

STOKELY CARMICHAEL
WITH EKWUEME MICHAEL THELWELL

INTRODUCTION BY JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN

Praise for *Ready for Revolution*

“Reading the book, in fact, is like sitting down with the last of the ‘grand old men’ of the movement and having him give you the back-story as to what was going on. . . . It is passionate about politics and struggle . . . [and] dead-up hilarious in describing the twists and turns on the road to revolution.”

—*The Nation*

“[T]he essential, posthumous autobiography of the brilliant militant who popularized the term ‘black power.’ It should become a standard text in American history courses.”

—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“[T]old largely in Carmichael’s own stylish, often thunderous, first-person words, [this is] a compelling portrait of a radical thinker who radiated charisma and practiced revolution to the end.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

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—William Julius Wilson, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geysler
University Professor, Harvard University

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—Mary King, former SNCC worker and author of *Freedom Song*

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—Manisha Sinha, author of *The Counterrevolution of Slavery*



ALSO BY STOKELY CARMICHAEL (KWAME TURE)

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READY FOR REVOLUTION

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STOKELY CARMICHAEL
(KWAME TURE)

STOKELY CARMICHAEL
with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO

*My mother, May Charles, and Bocar Biro, my son.
My people who everywhere suffer, struggle, and endure.*

*Those brave and selfless sisters and brothers who,
without thought of personal gain or even survival,
continue the struggle to liberate and uplift humanity
with undying love and gratitude.*

“When you have chosen your part, abide by it and do not weakly try to reconcile yourself to the world. The heroic cannot be the common, nor the common heroic. Congratulate yourself if you have done something strange and extravagant, and broken the monotony of a decorous age.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *On Heroism*

“Men make history, but only so much history as it is possible for them to make.”

—C. L. R. James

“A man is worked on by what he works on. He may carve out his circumstances, but his circumstances will carve him out as well.”

—Frederick Douglass

“Mask no difficulties, tell no lies. Claim no easy victories and hide nothing from the masses of the people.”

—Amilcar Cabral, *Instructions to His Cadres*

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COLLABORATOR'S NOTE

It does seem only reasonable that a few words may well be necessary to explain the genesis and provenance of any autobiography making its first appearance on the fifth anniversary of its author's death. So here goes.

Of course, such a work has to be the result of collaboration. But it is not a biography. It is Kwame Ture's (peace be unto him) account of his life and political career. It is his story. That portion of his personal, political and intellectual life which he wished to share with posterity. Hence an autobiography: a man's vision of the events, decisions, and meaning of his public life, by his account, in his language and in accordance with his wishes and instruction. All public figures are entitled to such an account. Indeed, in rare cases such as this one, history would even seem to demand it. After which, as was the case with Malcolm, the tribe of pedants, closet scholars, nitpickers, and hair splitters can come scratch around the life on their revisionist missions. But this is the man's account of his life and intentions.

The brother was particularly fond of the wisdom in a Yoruba proverb which says, "When an elephant is killed, and the village comes to share the meat, you will see all sizes and shapes of cutting tools brought to the task." Each villager will carve out and carry off what they need, want, or whatever they are able to. We expect that. It was ever thus.

THE NATURE OF THE COLLABORATION

In the formal legalese of the collaboration agreement Kwame is referred to as "the Author" and I as "the Writer." Thoroughly serviceable, cut and dried language which, while convenient enough, is, at least in my case, not as accurate as it would appear. It misrepresents, perhaps even inflates, a role which, while more than editor, is somewhat less than writer in the usual sense of that term. The formulation which seems to me most accurate comes from music: Kwame being the composer and I the arranger.

READY FOR REVOLUTION

GENESIS

In December of 1996, Kwame was diagnosed with terminal cancer. A few months later (Spring 1997), I agreed to work with him on this project and we began. Some eighteen months later (November 15, 1998), he died. Before our brother danced and went to join the ancestors, having read, edited, and approved only six chapters, he left me with a great many hours of taped narrative; clear, detailed, and complete instructions and the disingenuous observation, "Well, Thelwell, looks like you going have to finish the book."

That this book exists at all is due entirely to the uncommon discipline and single-minded determination which, over those very hectic eighteen months, our brother was able to devote to the task of leaving us the oral record out of which this book could be constructed. Give praise and thanks.

PROVENANCE

I take responsibility only for technical aspects: the literary presentation of Kwame's material. For the logic of the organization of the material into chapters. For the sequences of these chapters and their internal composition, i.e., the placement of various stories and events within the chapters, so to say, for the overall shape of the book. In these purely editorial matters I was greatly comforted by the professional advice of the excellent Sarah McGrath of Scribner, but the final responsibility is mine alone.

However, the version, which is to say the perspective: the politics, insights, emphases, values and judgements—whether of people or events—and, of course, the conclusions are entirely those of our brother. Also, I am confident that anyone privileged to have known the brother will readily recognize that the inimitable voice and personality informing this narrative, the pervasive, overarching spirit of the book, are Kwame's alone.

There were on the tapes a few places where he would say, "Thelwell, this part is very rough. You will have to fix the language here. That's your job." I've done that job, one hopes very judiciously. At times in our conversations, when pressed for greater detail, he'd explode somewhat impatiently, "Thelwell, I'm giving you the overall meaning here. That's my job. There's no time for details. If you need details, go talk to so-and-so." Or else, "go read such and such a document. I'm not doing your job for you." When it proved necessary to consult such sources, these interventions are marked in the text by a clear break in the narrative, set off in brackets with the source and speaker clearly identified.

Similarly, at other points where clarity, context, or continuity seemed to require it, I've intervened in my own editorial voice. These interventions are few in number, only when necessary, as brief as possible, and clearly identified.

The greatest regret is, of course, that the author is not with us to read over the completed text. To subject his words and thoughts, as represented here, to final review, in order to rethink, revise, refine, retract, expand, or fine-tune them as he felt necessary. Once, when we were doing precisely that to an early chapter, he questioned a passage. I pointed out that those were his exact words. He was unfazed. "I know. So, I changed my mind. We're going to change our minds many times in these pages before they're finished, you know that." Well, except for those early chapters and the final two, he never had the opportunity, as all writers do, to change his mind one last time. So what you are about to read is, in effect, his first draft.

Now as the process nears its end, I'm more than ever convinced that we—all of us—have excellent reason to be grateful for our brother's gritty, clenched-teeth tenacity over those terminal eighteen months. "Thelwell, I can't go to sleep now. I got to finish this work." Give praise and thanks. I am proud and deeply honored to have been associated with this work.

Ekwueme Michael Thelwell
Pelham, Massachusetts
April 2, 2003

P.S. The final word of explanation should be the brother's. The very first tape he handed me began with a caveat. Those are the words and the spirit in which he began this account. That is where you too should begin.

Caveat

What we are writing here is history. Or at least the personal account of an eyewitness to history. Our brother, Jimmy Baldwin (peace be unto him), used to constantly tell us in SNCC that "you all have to bear witness."

That is all we are doing here, bearing witness to what we have done and seen in the hope, God willing, that it will prove instructive to those who follow us. And it was President Ahmad Sékou Touré (peace be unto his fighting spirit) who unfailingly reminded us that "only the people make history. It is not individual heroes, not individual geniuses but only the people who make history."

I have never forgotten his teaching. So you should understand that,

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more than anything else, this is an account of my people. My remarkable, heroic, struggling people who have supported, inspired, and protected me in all my years of strife.

It is for this reason that I am embarrassed by the relentless repetitions of the first person singular, the omnipresent and egotistic I, I, I, which is so inappropriate to an account of this kind. But we are stuck with it. My literary friend and brother assures me it is merely a "convention of the form" which I am stuck with because when all is said and done that is what I am, an eyewitness to history. Hence the omnipresence of the dreary "first person confessional." It is purely formal not egotistic, but I fear we cannot escape it. You have been duly warned. Get used to it.

With undying love for our people,
Kwame Ture
Conakry, Guinea
December 1997

INTRODUCTION

A MEDITATION ON A LIFE

They say that freedom . . .
is a constant sorrow
—SNCC freedom song

To be alive. To arrive here and leave here. Why? What's it mean? Maybe it's about freedom. That place, that land we will never reach, only visit, but dream of, always. Where we would be at our best. A land that would treat us as if we are its children and it is our mother. Motherland birthing us into a vale of tears, then caring for us. Motherland humming and whispering into our ear while she rocks us on her bosom. Everything is possible. You are possible my daughter, my son, the best inside you is something you can achieve because you are loved and all things are possible—the song we hear when we hear freedom. Our bodies, our minds, cradled by the memory, the promise of what we might become, yes, and surely will become, if given half of a chance.

Freedom so much larger than we are. Enlarging us. Glimpse of a new day. A great getting-up morning when everything in creation finds its voice and we dance to the music, music alive in our hands and feet and minds, music teaching us to overcome enemies within and outside ourselves, not a morning when war's over and won but the peace of freedom declaring itself, declaring that after all is said and done, the race wars, religious wars, wars over things and who owns what, the deepest goal, surest reward for the self and the people equally, is to sing and dance in community, each of us, his or her way, a step at a time for a sweet time, celebrating, resting, gathering new strength for the next struggle that might be a better struggle than these conflicts that destroyed so many, so many lost and gone to bring us dancing through a victory gate.

So freedom embraces life. It's love. Dancing together to Bob Marley songs. Joyous songs or anthems of our troubles when we're wrong or wronged and wishing for better. Freedom is what Stokely Carmichael was

talking about, hollering about, demanding. The goal for which he staked his life daily in Mississippi in the sixties, what he sought in newly decolonized Africa, what he preached returning to the States *persona non grata*, spokesperson for impossible dreams of the dispossessed, or rather, seemingly impossible because, like the Motherland, a place we've never been and probably won't get to, dreams are no less valuable, no less real, for that reason, driving us to push for the unattainable, the best of ourselves we may choose if we dare, if we commit ourselves to struggling for freedom.

A vexed and vexing idea, freedom, if you really think about it. Who's free? Who's not? Why? Who says so? For sure, no one can give you freedom. Mr. Lincoln with an Emancipation Proclamation changed the legal status of some slaves in America in 1863, but he didn't give freedom to one person unless, in his heart, Lincoln had seen the light and truly, truly freed himself from the error, the terror, the self-destructive burden of believing one human being could or should own another. And no one's been given freedom by America's bloody wars—from the Revolution and the Civil War to the present crusades in Afghanistan or Iraq. If you confer upon someone else the power to free you, you are also granting them the power to enslave. How can freedom reside in a piece of paper or in someone else's decision to define you as property or not, to feed and clothe you, provide shelter, allow you to live or die. And even if someone could give the gift of freedom, wouldn't such an enormous, overwhelming gift establish permanent inequality, a permanent sense of dependency, indebtedness, unfulfillable obligation?

The freedom that matters most is how we feel inside about ourselves. Prisons, ghettos, concentration camps, barrios, favelas, colonies, can restrict mind and body, kill both, but until the spirit is extinguished, the possibility of freedom lives. Freedom's about choice. The self-grounded, self-motivated decision to imagine (create) a range of choices and the resolve to choose among them. This internal work orients us to our surroundings not magically but with a force literally transcendent since it's nonmaterial, beyond any external measure of verification. Even in the most extreme circumstances, freedom exists—the African who jumped from a slave ship into the roiling Atlantic Ocean. The philosopher who defies torture, asking for more weight, rather than abjure his understanding of truth.

Freedom is an attitude, a principle that operates perhaps most visibly in spite of resistance. Without resistance, without the restraint of physical or metaphysical shackles, without the tyranny of our passions, without the necessity of unwavering discipline to negotiate difficult tasks, without the body's decay, the mind's fallibility, how would any of us discover our capacities, our freedom, in spite of those obstacles, in spite of slavery, colonialism, the social pressure to conform? Not that freedom

springs only from adversity—consider the choice to love, for instance—but how would we understand the value of an internal landscape where each of us strives to be the final arbiter and arranger of meaning, the giver of meaning to a life, if we did not confront the forces always clamoring to seize this inner territory from our grasp? To be known and performed, the dance of freedom—as pleasure needs pain and light needs dark—depends on creative tension, reciprocity, dialectic. Performed because freedom’s impermanent, mutable, embodied, and framed in rhythmic counterpoint with its opposite. Performed because each dancer must be responsive to shifting circumstances, must be prepared to spontaneously improvise. Chimerical as dreams, and bearing, like dreams, immense weight, responsibility, and emotional necessity. How you gon keep them down on the farm after they see Paree? Freedom’s a bit like that, a fabled city, unforgettable once glimpsed, a myth, a destination no less real because it’s unreachable. To experience freedom even citizens of Paree must dream a Paree.

An elusive concept, perhaps always more apparent in its absence than presence—who better to keep alive the idea of freedom than a prisoner. However, a clear danger follows from an either/or notion of freedom: the unfreedom of some defines the freedom of others. Certain social orders—capitalism, for example—are based on division, depend on a permanent underclass of have-nots. The prisoner’s perspective on freedom emphasizes opposition, loses sight of process and the necessity of continuing negotiation. Workers are not slaves, but the logic and dynamics of the plantation condition the lives and choices of a laboring underclass. Rigid categories of free and not-free lead backward to shortsighted dependence on a Great Emancipator, put freedom in someone else’s hands.

Art is a particular case of freedom as action. When asked what it means to be a writer, novelist Chester Himes replied, “A fighter fights, a writer writes.” I amen his clarity, his emphasis on process, on doing. No matter how many books I publish, the day I stop writing, I’ll no longer be a writer. Other people might call me a writer, but that won’t transform my inactivity into writing. Stokely Carmichael understood this principle. In these pages he tells us what he learned early in Mississippi jails: We are not what we think or say we are, not what we hope, not what we pretend we are. We are simply what we do.

In America, the idea of being free has been rigidified, materialized, turned into a onetime, one-stop shopping affair. We’re born free, aren’t we, by virtue of being Americans. Freedom’s protected, isn’t it, by the checks and balances of our political system. As one state’s license plates declare, we Americans are determined to “live free or die.” Strangely, ominously, even the frontal assault on our civil rights after 9/11 hasn’t disturbed our confidence (or should I say sleep?).

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether we still possess them or not, leaving aside also the possibility our leaders have duped us into believing fear and conformity rather than eternal vigilance protect our civil liberties, ask instead a simpler question: How are we practicing freedom? Are we writing it?

Unfortunately, the exercise of freedom has become synonymous with the power to buy, the privilege to display and consume what we purchase. This materialized version of the rewards of freedom and democracy has supplanted the idealized American Dream, once so attractive to the rest of the world. Because of the *thingness* of our culture, because money first and last determines value, because everything's for sale, from the presidency to prisons, economic power is the only power, the sole incentive. Getting paid is the bottom line. And what's wrong with that? We all like nice things, don't we? And nice things cost money. But what's the cost of a paycheck? Aren't there other, more crucial forms of compensation? If we don't exercise our freedom to create and to demand a wide range of life-enhancing returns for our labor, we're captives of a system with no center—moral, ethical, aesthetic—except production of wealth.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explained that for marginalized black people the first step away from oppression must be obtaining basic necessities—food, shelter, work, health, security—but without the next step—an emergent critique of self and society—the old order of exploitation that breeds the “wretched of the earth” will remain in force. Even if a large number of Americans could liberate themselves from handicaps imposed by racial, gender, and class inequities, these inequities wouldn't disappear. Neither inside the minds of individuals who pull themselves up by their bootstraps nor in the material circumstances of other Americans who don't make it up the economic ladder nor in the global economy where marginalized people will be recruited to fill the underclass necessary to maintain luxury for a few, here and abroad. In the absence of the new vision Fanon calls for, oppression simply migrates or creates a class of perpetual migrants, stateless, without rights, doing every nation's dirty work. In this situation, the psychological and moral landscape of each of us, haves or have-nots, deteriorates. Greed, fear, hate, cynicism, desperation proliferate.

Enter Stokely Carmichael/Kwame Ture. Carmichael's call for Black Power was a dream, an enabling, positive call for change, as much a dream as the one enunciated by Martin Luther King in Washington, D.C., in 1963. A dream because a blueprint or blackprint-in-progress for a revolutionary, never-seen-before way of being in the world. Kwame beseeches us, compels us, to put our best foot forward, step out, step away from a stalled, yet hopelessly self-congratulatory society, a powerful, complacent society, full of contradictions and lies, that allows great evil

to be perpetrated in its name, in the name of promoting worldwide democracy and freedom when neither democracy nor freedom rule at home.

Kwame Ture's dreaming was visionary, a countervision, counterreality, to the reigning myths. He shouted, *The emperor is naked*. Pointed at the emperor with a finger attached to a black hand, stepped forward, stepped away with a black foot. *Black* not because of their color, but because Stokely Carmichael was an African-descended man, and, yes, it's his voice, his finger-pointing, his foot, so they're *black* and thus negative in the eyes of lots of folks, then here comes Stokely challenging the obscene spectacle of Empire, uh-uh; and call his anger, his critique, his truth, *black* if you want to, in fact he's also calling it *black*, but with a difference—*black* equals pride, fierce militancy, a determination to pursue the dream of freedom on his terms, *black* terms if you please, but really a new dream replacing an old one, so try to wrap your mind and heart around that too, recognize the legitimacy of his vision not its color, acknowledge its applicability, the seeds of clarity, its promise to seek change, to move all willing Americans to a more equitable, fulfilling social order, more freedom for so-called *whites* and so-called *blacks* than Stokely found when he arrived here.

Black Power was more than a dream of course. It was a call to action, a call for organization, for consciousness raising. Its concreteness was expressed by dangerous, grassroots campaigns for voting rights in the South, countless meetings, memos, study groups, alliances erected and dismantled, its growth and change, the business of raising and spending money, jail time, street time, hospital time, friendships formed and shattered, press releases and world tours, its birthing of SNCC, the bodies and minds sacrificed, sanctified, the songs, poems, narratives, and fashions it generated, its failures and successes that radically transformed the lives of so many.

All that and much more is the story Michael Thelwell tells. A freedom story grounded in Kwame Ture's recorded words. A story timely beyond words. More than timely, absolutely urgent. How many lives like Ture's are available for young people to study? His career wasn't engineered to catapult him to Hollywood or the NBA nor Wall Street, nor convert him to a beige Great White Hope. His *career* was service. Preparing himself through study and activism to participate in humankind's progressive emancipation. Learning to look for trouble, to agitate for change and mandate solutions. For him success meant a life situated in conflict, in sync with people's aspirations to do better, free themselves from an outmoded social and political order. He aligned and identified himself with Africa, a continent, an idea, a people bearing a horrific heritage of exploitation. His work revealed to oppressed people everywhere the power within their supposed

weakness, exposed the weakness of unjust power. Ture demanded payment for his labors far beyond the reductive notion of monetary wages and demonstrated till the end of his life a willingness to pay back, to squeeze down to the last precious drop, the gift of life given to him, sharing that vital energy, distilling it so it became supportive of other human beings.

The struggle never ends. Across the globe young people are standing up, shouting, demanding more from their societies, more from their lives.

Reading Michael Thelwell's scrupulous, engaged, respectful rendering of Stokely Carmichael's life will remind protesters and marchers and street fighters, guerrillas in the hills, voters at the ballot box, reformers in tenements or legislatures, revolutionaries young and old, they are not alone, never have been, never will be.

John Edgar Wideman
Spring 2003, New York

Oriki: Ancestors and Roots

ORIKI

Among many of the West African peoples from among whom our ancestors were seized, whenever a child is born, a birth poem or praise song is composed in its honor. Among the Yoruba this birth poem is called oriki.

Some days later at the naming ceremony by which the infant is ushered formally into its place in human society, the child's oriki is recited publicly, first into the ear of the child and then to the assembled community of family and neighbors. The first language a child will be required to commit to memory, the oriki imprints the child with its complex historical, spiritual, and social identities.

I have called the oriki a praise song and birth poem, and so it is, but its functions are many more than those terms might imply. It is at once prayer, thanksgiving, celebration, and prophecy. It is a meditation on the meaning and significance of the new human's name. It is an evocation of the strong deeds, character, and praise names of the infant's ancestors, and, perhaps most important, it is an optimistic attempt to project (and define) in desirable ways the child's future personality and life prospects.

By evoking lineage, the oriki is ultimately about spiritual inheritance: that eternal life force that has many names (Ase among the Yoruba, Magara among the Dogon, Ike among the Igbo), which we receive from our ancestors. A vital force of which we, in each generation, are only the contemporary incarnations. And which in turn we pass on to our children and they to theirs, so that the lineage never dies.

So, as we have seen, oriki, while memory and history, is also character, at once both individual and collective. Individual because each human being has his or her own particular and unique oriki. Collective because being anchored in lineage, it is fundamentally about group identity. We Africans know that each individual one of us is ultimately the sum of that long line of ancestors—spiritual forces and moral arbiters—who have gone before to produce us. The psychic forces out of which we all come.

In this sense oriki is a salute to family. It is also an inheritance one acquires

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at birth. No one composes his or her own. But although in the changed circumstance of our diaspora I have myself written this section, it is in its way a kind of oriki, a salute to roots, origins, and family.

Kwame Ture

January 1998, Conakry

[We stumbled onto this earlier Makeba letter sometime after Kwame had drafted his remarks on the oriki concept. He had not known of Miriam's letter to Time magazine, but felt it to be a charming description of the Xhosa version of the same concept and quite a coincidence. "That's definitely her. She loved her culture. Let's put it in." —EMT]

Dear Editor,

Feb. 29, 1960

There was a slight error, which I do not think you will mind my calling attention to. It concerns my African name. I would like to spell it correctly for you:

Zenzile Makeba Qgwashu Nguvama Yiketheli Nxgowa Bantana Balomzi Xa Ufun Ubajabulisa Ubaphekeli, Mbiza Yotshwala Sithi Xa Saku Qgiba Ukutja Sithathe Izitsha Sizi Khabe Singama Lawu Singama Qgwashu Singama Nqamla Nqgithi.

The reason for its length is that every child takes the first name of all his male ancestors. Often following the first name is a descriptive word or two, telling about the character of the person, making a true African name somewhat like a story.

Miriam Makeba

ORIKI: ANCESTORS AND ROOTS

I was born in the house my father built for his family at 54 Oxford Street at the bottom of the forty-two steps in the city of Port of Spain, Trinidad. This is in the Belmont section of the city—at that time a centrally located, working-class African neighborhood where the land rose sharply upward. To traverse this steep incline, the government built the large concrete steps that became something of a popular landmark. "Meet me at the top of the forty-two steps at nine o'clock, eh?"

At the bottom of those steps my father built his dream house, "for," as my mother thought she understood clearly, "his new bride." Later, for me and my cousin Austin, the location would prove ideal. It was in easy walking distance to the Savannah—a kind of Central Park-like open space—and the Botanical Gardens, truly a place of spectacular, exotic, almost magical natural beauty where small boys could explore and dream.

Among his varied talents, the late Adolphus Carmichael was by pro-

profession a master carpenter. As was his close friend Mr. Frank Wilson, while their other friend Mr. Serapio was a stone mason. So that the house my father lovingly designed and the trio painstakingly erected was much larger and more elegantly finished than any my father could have afforded to buy. After which the three friends pooled their labor to build Mr. Serapio's equally impressive home, and then a house for Mr. Wilson. But of the three, our house appeared to have been, by virtue of its unusual design, the real novelty.

So much so, in fact, that the consensus in the communities of Belmont and neighboring East Dry River was that "Mr. Carmichael had built his family a mighty grand house, *oui*." Most astonishing to visitors was a system of movable walls that, when rolled back, created a single large room. The space thus created was greatly in demand as a venue for weddings, birthdays, and similar celebrations by friends, family, and neighbors. Consequently, music, dancing, and joyous gatherings of all kinds, good fellowship, and *fêtes*, as Trinidad's Africans called them, were common in the home where I was born. They were an integral part of the ambience of my early childhood. Which may be why, to this day, like any good African, "Ah jes' loves to party"—that is, when possible and appropriate.

Something else in the neighborhood almost certainly contributed strongly to that aspect of my personality. At the top of the forty-two steps was a "pan yard," which is the local term for the home base of a steel band. Our resident band was called Casa Blanca, traditional rivals at carnival of the crosstown power who called themselves Invaders.

In those days, and almost certainly true today, no African neighborhood in Port of Spain could even think of holding its head up without a steel band to call its own. Casa Blanca was ours. Win or lose, we supported them at carnival. Two of our cousins even "beat pan" with Casa Blanca. "Two *distant* cousins," Tante Elaine might sniff, not entirely sure she approved of the raffish, combative, not at all respectable elements—"the vagabonds and Bad-Johns"—who were attracted to the steel bands. These were the same urban youth, the Trinidad equivalent of the "rude *bvavai* posses," who would later create reggae in Jamaica.

But nonetheless, the one year in my memory that Casa Blanca took first prize in the carnival "panorama," an annual battle of the steel bands, the entire neighborhood erupted in leaping, dancing paroxysms of pride and celebration. One "big *fête*" for true, boy! Even the most obdurate, grimly "respectable" elements of the community were drawn into the spontaneous exuberance. For the moment, the pan men were magically and instantly transformed from "bad-Johns and vagabonds" to local heroes. And their best musician, a brother called Patsy Haines, became a neighborhood celebrity even before the announcement that he had been elevated to the most elite possible level of panmanship: The news that he

had been selected to “beat” first pan in the Trinidad All Steel Percussion Orchestra, or TASPO. Then, in the awestruck eyes of me and my cousin Austin, Patsy walked the world in seven-league boots.

“Oh, God, boy,” we exulted, “Patsy gone clear, *oui?*”

Those pan men were serious musicians and driven by more than dreams of carnival glory; they practiced just about every night of the year except for Sundays and the forty days of Lent. So that almost any night of my life, from the day I was born until the age of twelve when I left the island, I drifted into sleep to the beat of steel band music on the night wind. Nightly, I floated off on a wave of distant rhythms from the top of the forty-two steps, Casa Blanca’s booming base lines pounding in my head and throbbing in my blood. “*Oh, God, boy!*”

I cannot imagine that this constant, distant, almost subliminal music and the frequent communal festivity inside the house can have failed to imprint themselves on my developing consciousness in important ways.

The Igbo man Oludah Equiano, the African who first addressed the world in written English, began his 1789 masterpiece talking about his Igbo homeland with the words, “We are mostly a nation of poets, musicians, and dancers.” He could have been talking about the Trinidad of my youthful memories.

Diaspora means survival. Like most African families of the diaspora, my family is a collection of people who are ordinary in extraordinary ways. I claim no special distinction for us. Like all our neighbors and friends in the surrounding communities—whether in Trinidad, the Bronx, or Mississippi—we are simply the survivors of dispersal.

Although I was born in Trinidad, in a real sense it would be inaccurate—actually *incomplete* would be a better word—to call me Trinidadian. Ultimately our roots are in Africa, but in a more immediate and recent sense they truly are pan-Caribbean. Consider.

My mother’s mother was born in Montserrat to an Irish planter and his wife, an African woman, said to have been his former slave. But my mother was born in the U.S. Canal Zone in Panama, from whence as a child she returned to the care of maternal relations in “the Emerald Isle,” as Montserrat is known, while her parents and older siblings left for New York. (I think there was a problem with her birth certificate.)

Later, as a young woman, my mother went to the U.S. consulate in Trinidad seeking to reunite with her parents in America. Again, that fateful, missing birth certificate delayed her long enough for young Adolphus Carmichael to meet, court, and marry her. This naturally delayed the reunion with her parents in New York for some years.

My mother’s father, Mr. Joshua Charles, was born in Antigua. A colonial policeman, he had been posted to Montserrat, where he met my

grandmother. He was then posted to Nevis, where, like thousands of Caribbean black men, he was forced by economic conditions to work in the building of the Panama Canal. Unlike most though, Grandfather Charles brought along his young bride, which is how my mother and all her siblings came to be born in the Canal Zone. After which, as I've said, the couple with their older children emigrated to New York, sending my mom to her grandparents in Montserrat. This little island of my grandmother's birth has an interesting history. It is called the Emerald Isle for two reasons, the lush greenery of its forested mountains being only the obvious one. The real reason is that its European population was overwhelmingly Irish Catholics, in headlong flight before Oliver Cromwell's victorious Puritans. Anyone who watched television reports of the destruction wrought by the Soufrière volcano in 1997 will have noticed a succession of African faces answering to names like Houlihan, O'Reilly, and O'Connell. Another of the ironies of colonialism.

On the paternal side—the Carmichaels—the story constitutes no less of an odyssey. Cecilia Harris, my paternal grandmother, the first important influence on my life, was born in Tobago in 1877 and is believed to have had Carib* blood. Her husband, Mr. Joseph Carmichael, was a tailor from Barbados, but I believe the couple met and married in Trinidad.

I never knew Grandpa Carmichael, according to family lore a stern, circumspect, and exacting man, very black, very dignified. He was said to be a man of few words with a well-developed High Victorian sense of propriety and rectitude. A typical "Bajun" of the old school in that regard.

Having established my own Barbadian connection, I think I can afford to "lime" on them a little bit. Among Caribbean people, the popular, slightly ironic name for Barbados is "Little Britain," a title that, however mocking in its inspiration, was accepted by the Bajans with no little pride.

It could be apocryphal, but the oft-told story is that upon the advent of World War II, the Barbadian legislature responded to news of Britain's entry into the war with a famous telegram to Whitehall (or was it to the monarch himself?): "Forward, Great Britain! Little Britain is fully behind you." The kind of loyal colonial action of which, I suspect, Grandpa Carmichael might have heartily approved.

Once you start the "ol' lime" it's hard to stop. I can't resist this one: I once encountered a local historical explanation of the Barbadian national character vis-à-vis the rest of the Caribbean that goes as follows.

Because Barbados is the easternmost of the Caribbean islands, it became the first landfall for slave ships from Africa. When they landed for freshwater and provisions, the Barbadian planters got first pick over the cargoes. Wisely, they selected the "calmer, more civilized, cerebral, and

*Carib—the original inhabitants for whom the Caribbean is named.

peaceable” of the Africans. (You must remember this is a “Bajan” version. The Jamaican adjectives are “meek, passive, and enslavable,” but we shan’t fan those particular nationalist fires here.)

As the story goes, the intellectuals, craftsmen, and skilled Africans collected in Barbados. Hence the relative courtliness, restraint, and civility of which the culture so pridefully boasts. Among the Africans, the most boisterous physical types—warriors, hunters, desperadoes of all kinds, the rough and rebellious elements—ended up in places like Jamaica, Haiti, and Cuba, which, according to my Bajan informant, is supposed to explain their histories of bloody insurrection and the relative “coarseness” of these cultures and societies even today. I still can’t decide whether the brother was serious or merely “sending me wide,” as they say in cricket. He cannot really have been entirely serious because this version is belied by history. The three major and bloody African insurrections Barbados experienced during slavery are eloquent testimony to the total failure of Barbadian slaveowners’ carefully calculated selection process.

Once I teased a Jamaican-born African about this version of history. To my great surprise, he conceded at least a possibility. “Something much like that could well be true,” he mused. “When I was a kid, I thought all Barbadians were stiff, close-cropped, very black men who always wore the classic colonial expatriate attire—khaki short pants, khaki knee socks, and sandals—taught Latin and Greek, and rarely smiled. Why? Because our classics masters at school seemed invariably to be Bajan and to fit that description.

“The first, Mr. Jackman, was such an exacting taskmaster and stern disciplinarian that we christened him Tarquinius Superbus—Tarquin the Tyrant—after the wicked Roman despot. The next Latin master, Mr. Crick, was worse—‘Boy, are you laughing *with* me, *for* me, or *at* me?’—so we called him Tarquinius Superbus Secundem.”

From all family accounts, Grandfather Carmichael was firmly in that tradition. The two youngest of his eight children—my father and his sister Olga—were serious dancers. They just loved to dance and, as they got older and bolder, apparently began to sneak out to dances sans parental permission. But Grandpa Carmichael nipped that in the bud. One night Tante Olga, then a young lady, was out dancing up a storm when the hooked end of a walking stick snaked out onto the dance floor, ensnared her neck, and escorted her captive out of the dance and all the way home, the old gentleman uttering nary a word.

So there you have it: Montserrat, Grenada, Barbados, Antigua, Nevis, Tobago, Panama, Trinidad, New York. We truly are African people of the diaspora, which, of course, means people of dispersal. Which is exactly the word for what went on in the eastern Caribbean. If you know the eastern

English-speaking Caribbean, you will understand why a family of such disparate origins as ours could come together in Trinidad and be in no way unusual.

The eastern Caribbean is an archipelago of small islands of mostly volcanic formation with limited natural resources except for its people, which today are mostly African. In those days, Trinidad, the largest, was a kind of commercial and administrative hub. Also, with its pitch lake, nascent petroleum industry, and the American military base at Chaguaramas, Trinidad was something of an economic magnet for people from the smaller territories. So much so that two of Trinidad's national heroes—Uriah Butler and Elnora Frances, militant leaders in the labor and independence movements, which were in full flood at the time of my birth—had both been born in Grenada.

Which is how in this small, bustling city of Port of Spain, across the Gulf of Paria from Venezuela on what was once called the Spanish Main, my family, a truly pan-Caribbean aggregation—in whose veins were mingled African, Irish, Carib, and so it is rumored, Sephardic blood—came together.

In this heritage I assert for my family no particular distinction. The story remains, even as I speak, a common one in the eastern Caribbean—displacement and dispersal. Poor African people in constant motion always in search of economic survival and a fair deal. Plucked out of Mother Africa and transplanted into alien territories where they controlled neither land, nor wealth, nor ruling institutions of government. A people of dispersal, of course. But dispersal only begins the process, it does not end it. There is another key word—*survival*. A people of dispersal and survival. *Let the church say "Amen."* Survivors—of the slave coffles and slave dungeons, of the unspeakable horrors of the Middle Passage; of slavery, whether of house or field, cotton or sugarcane; of colonialism; and in our time, of the unending struggle for independence and full civil and human rights. This journey is in itself no mean accomplishment. But more than that, we survived intact, or at least far, far more intact than is generally understood and conceded.

So . . . our people of diaspora and survival. Our people, whose only resource was themselves, their labor, and their intelligence: the skills of their hands and of the cunning of their minds. Carrying deep within themselves a dynamic inheritance from Africa—a deep reverence for the creator; an abiding, unshakable respect for self and kindred; a culture generous in spirit, rich in music, dance, the power of sacred poetry and eloquence; and the love of language for its own sake and beauty. Naked and chained we may have come, but we surely did not come defenseless. *We did not come defenseless!*

So, I claim no special distinction for my immediate family, for in

these things we were neither different from nor better than the neighbors and friends in the surrounding communities in which my early years were passed.

In 1936, Mabel Florence Charles, an adventurous young woman of fifteen years, left Montserrat for Trinidad to pick up the U.S. visa that would reunite her with her parents in the Bronx. That fateful, lost birth certificate would once again intervene to interrupt the journey and delay the reunion for another eight years, a marriage, and three children.

One day in 1937 she dutifully accompanied a girlfriend on a church task, a visit to a respected church member, Ms. Cecilia, who had been unwell. There she met my grandmother's three daughters, Elaine, Olga, and Louise, and caught her first glimpse of the family's only surviving son. That was scarcely an auspicious beginning because my mother professes to have been exceedingly unimpressed by that initial sighting. Why?

She had caught the young man in what, in her eyes, was a profoundly unmanly activity. In fact, she could hardly credit her eyes. This was unheard of: not only was the young man *ironing* (a skill he had no doubt picked up in his late father's tailor shop—he of the hooked cane), but the garment being ironed was unmistakably a *woman's* dress!

(Quite obviously my father was a liberated male, evolved way beyond that time and culture.) But in my mother's experience, men *never* did women's work. They never ironed and only in the direst emergency ever cooked—that is, *if* they even *knew* how to do so.

"My Lord, did you see that?" she giggled to her friend. "He was *ironing* his sister's *dress*, the sissy."

"I like her," my father pointed her out to his friend Frank Wilson a few days later. The young men were on their way home from their work on a house. "That's the woman I'm gonna marry."

"Better you chose you a different one," Wilson counseled. "She well pretty but she look stuck-up, *oui*? You know how these light skin ones are. Best you choose you a darker one."

"You think so? Look, you see these dirty work clothes I got on? Well, one day, that same light-skin, stuck-up one going wash them and like it too." My father promised with the confidence that was always part of the personality I came to know.

The ill-started couple next met at a dance some weeks later, "and he was ever so nice," my mom discovered to her great surprise. It probably didn't hurt that he could really dance too. That night, my father walked her home "and we held hands all the way."

In a relatively short time, the "dream" house being completed, and the marriage celebrated, my parents set up housekeeping on October 8, 1939.

But the house at the forty-two steps—at least in the living arrangements—was proving less the honeymoon cottage of a young bride's dream than it was the compound of an extended family, and a rather close-knit extended family at that. The house came fully encumbered. For, when the young couple began married life it was with the groom's entire family in residence—my grandmother Cecilia; my father's three sisters, Elaine, Olga, and Louise; and Elaine's young son, my cousin Austin.

One can readily see how my moms might be forgiven if she felt somewhat outnumbered among all these formidable women of the Carmichael clan. And from my mother's perspective, my aunts were probably ill disposed to share their only brother with another woman. And certainly, they were not about to be replaced in his affections by any "small island girl" who clearly was not good enough (as only a veritable paragon of womanhood could possibly have been) for their only brother!

It was, from the get-go, an arrangement fraught with tension and the inevitability of competition and conflict. Especially since my diminutive mother has never been disposed to avoid confrontation, particularly when right was on her side. (And from her perspective, it invariably was.) And even though my father was indeed *their* brother, was he or was he not indeed *her* husband? There was an obvious need for clarification here.

The oldest of the sisters, Tante Elaine Letren, was a divorced schoolteacher, a firm disciplinarian, and the undisputed leader—or at least *primus inter pares**—among the Carmichael women. Tante Elaine had the proverbial will of iron and a strong sense of family prerogatives.

So, as I have come really to understand only after two marriages of my own, the lines were drawn, with my poor father torn between equally compelling loyalties and affections embodied by these two equally strong-willed women. I've always assumed that the presence of Grandma Cecilia, a gentle, devout lady, served to hold off the final confrontation, a crisis that, in hindsight, though clearly inevitable, was further postponed by the arrival, in fairly rapid succession, of the children. Three in number: first my sister Umilta, then in June of 1941 myself, like my father before me destined to be the family's lone boy child, and then my little sister Lynette.

As was our people's habit, the infant boy was elaborately, even portentously, named, in my case Stokely Standiford Churchill Carmichael. Help him, Jesus. The Churchill speaks for itself. It being the depths of the war, there must be literally thousands of African Caribbean men of my age who answer to one or the other of the names of the "indomitable British Bulldog." (Some poor devils even go through life encumbered with both, as in Winston Churchill Jones.)

*First among equals.

The Stokely is another matter. I've never met anyone else who shared the name by which I was known for the first half of my life. The christening at Trinity Anglican was unusual only in one important regard. The godfather and the presiding clergyman were one and the same—the Reverend Winston Lamont. He contributed the Stokely, the name of a legendary and dedicated teacher at Queens Royal College who had greatly influenced the reverend when he was a student there. I have no idea whether Stokely was his first or last name, or whether the schoolmaster was native or expatriate British. But it is not impossible, however ironic, that I could originally have been named for not one but two British gentlemen!

My cousin Austin keeps insisting—my aunts tend to corroborate—that as a small boy I found it necessary to further embellish what was already an overgenerous portion of names. But, claims Austin, whenever my name(s) were mentioned, I would invariably correct the speaker by chirping, “Stokely Standiford Churchill ‘Great Man’ Carmichael.” Of course, I have no recollection of this. But it seems obvious that the little boy was merely properly identifying the original owner of the name Churchill and not necessarily claiming “greatness” for his little self.

However, by the time Lynette was properly weaned, the domestic tension and rivalry had apparently again become insupportable. As if on cue, the errant birth certificate materialized. It had been hiding all along among official government records in the U.S. Canal Zone. All this time my mother had been a citizen of the United States. At the next confrontation—so to say, the straw that broke the camel's back—my mother felt newly empowered to lay down her ultimatum.

“It's me or them. Who you love? Make up your mind for you are going to have to choose.”

“Hey, remember now, they are my sisters and my mother.”

“So I have a mother and sister too. You know. They are in the Bronx. I can run to my family too, y'know.”

“Then what about the children . . . and, what about me?”

“All of you are Carmichaels. I'm *May Charles*. You all can keep the children for the time being. I'll send for them . . . or *you* can bring them when you come.”

“When I come? Where I going, eh? I told you that I want to leave Trinidad?”

“Well, you will have to choose . . . 'cause I'm going.”

So in October of 1944, leaving husband, young children, and the ultimatum “You will have to choose,” behind her, Mabel Florence Charles Carmichael, aged twenty-three and looking much younger, set out for God's Country. Not in search of a “better” life or the American Dream, but in impulsive flight and as a personal declaration of inde-

pendence from domineering in-laws. This was no mean journey during wartime. Covering two days, it entailed first a seaplane to Puerto Rico, then another to Miami, and over much of the next day, a propeller-driven flight to La Guardia.

At a casual glance, the odds were not in her favor. In fact, the closer one looked, the more heavily weighted against her the wager appeared. My father, he who was enjoined "to choose," was an extremely family-oriented man, and his mother, sisters, and his children remained in Trinidad in the home he had built with his two hands. As did his two partners in the modest but growing house-building business, and also his church. This was important, for my father remains one of the most deeply and sincerely religious men I had ever met before I encountered the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

Then too my father was an inordinately social being. Although he never drank, he loved to dance, he lived for carnival and "*big fête*." He loved his culture. His economic place in the society, if modest, was at least secure. It was, all in all, a great deal to walk away from . . . all for the love of *one* woman.

And if that were not enough, there were also the practical, not to say legal, difficulties involved. Then as now, U.S. consulates in the black world see their central mission as preventing too many working people of color from getting visas to the United States. If he were to follow his wife legally, a visa could easily mean a wait of some five years or more. Or, he would have to take uncharacteristic risks—evading the law and becoming in effect a criminal. He, up until then the most lawful and conventionally respectable of men? Small chance. But that was the gamble my impetuous mother made. And won.

My father toughed it out for over a year and a half. Then, like the Prince of Wales before him (a simile that came naturally to the lips of Carmichael family historians), he would abdicate and give it all up to follow his heart and "the woman I love." There, however, the comparison breaks down: of the two men, my father gave up much more of value but certainly got a far, far better return as wives go than did the feckless British nobleman, he of allegedly fascist sympathies. Not even close. Hands down, my mother was the better woman.

So in June of 1946, the otherwise utterly law-abiding Adolphus Carmichael signed on as an able seaman on a northbound freighter, jumped ship in New York harbor, and reunited with his wife. My sister was four, I almost five, and Lynette an infant. We were not to see either parent again until I was almost eleven.

The House at the Forty-Two Steps

The house of my childhood memories was a lively, well-ordered place filled with women and children. In my memory, it is bright, airy, and spacious, its many rooms being cooled by sea breezes off the Gulf of Paria. I fully understand that an adult return to the places of childhood is often disappointing, the passage of time and adult perceptions rudely dissolving at once the scale, the wonder, and the magic of our childish remembrances. Mercifully, I have returned to that house only once and then briefly so the magic of childhood memory has remained with me unspoiled.

Although my father's labor of love was ostensibly built for his bride, neither he nor my mother, who left for America when I was three, is present in my earliest recollections of that household. It is my paternal grandmother, Mrs. Cecilia Harris Carmichael, who was the adult center and anchor of my early years. As were her three daughters, Tante Elaine, Tante Louise, and Mummy Olga, who was vivacious and pretty but unlucky with husbands, since she was twice widowed and childless. So the children of the household called her Mummy. And "Mummy Olga" she became to us children and "Mummy Olga" she remains to this day.

The interior was organized around a large, central dining and living room, off from which lay the bedrooms. How many, I'm not sure. But I have no recollection of our ever feeling crowded. I do remember that "the boys," Cousin Austin and I, had our own room. I imagine the little girls did also, or perhaps shared a large room with my grandmother.

From the outside, the approach from the front was the most imposing. In its unconventional design my father must clearly have intended it to make a statement, and he seems to have succeeded.

From the front, one entered the house by a wide flight of steps leading up to the *galerie*—a porchlike area that in other parts of the English-speaking Caribbean is called the veranda. In the American South it is the *porch*. The *galerie* itself, as well as the roof that sheltered it, was built on five levels. Why? That's how my father wanted it.

The *galerie* was a cool, fragrant place alternating between sun and shadow. This impression was created by the many potted palms, ferns drooping from tall clay stands, and hanging baskets of broad-leafed, flowering plants that must have been orchids of different kinds. These were the province of Tante Louise, the sister with the green thumb. She was also the force behind the beds of colorful tropical flowers and assorted herbs for bush medicines that adorned the front yard.

This, then, was the family of my childhood, my grandma, her three adult daughters, and the four children. George Lamming, the distinguished Barbadian novelist, has a celebrated line in his classic Caribbean coming-of-age novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*. The line speaks to the so-called matriarchal nature of Afro-Caribbean societies. In introducing his mother, Lamming had famously written, "My mother who fathered me." As young children we were "mothered" and "fathered" by these four women equally, as we thought, without differentiation. In retrospect, I can see a natural and unspoken division of roles and responsibilities among them according to personality and inclination. From each according to his ability . . . ?

Recently I listened to the report of a Caribbean brother's first trip to the continent. In Kenya he befriended a local youth who invited him home "because, my brother, I want you to meet my four mothers." The visitor was bemused by the quaint locution. "And the thing is," he exclaimed, "he said it so naturally, 'my four mothers.'" I merely smiled because that "African" formulation described with complete accuracy the emotional reality of the household of my early memories.

All the aunts worked while Grandma was responsible for the children during the day. Tante Elaine, Austin's mom, was a teacher at Mr. Young's private school. She brought to the household a rigorous attention to order, detail, and duty. She also brought home her reverence for education and the strict administration of discipline, which were projections of the classroom persona of all colonial schoolteachers of the time. Mummy Olga, more fun-loving and easygoing, worked in a department store, where dealing with the public was an occupation well suited to her outgoing, friendly nature.

Tante Louise also worked out of the house but I cannot remember where. Her presence in the house does not loom as large, perhaps because she at some point got married and moved to the country. But the weekend family excursions to visit Tante Louise at Point Fortin loom large in my memory. We passed through the unbroken green mass of sugarcane fields, caught glimpses of the bright blue Caribbean, its breakers foaming white against rocky shores, and drove over narrow mountain roads lined by lush tropical forests, where flocks of birds, an occasional band of monkeys, or a small deer could be glimpsed.

Richly colorful as that landscape was, it paled to insignificance beside the embellishments of my small boy's imagination. The twenty-mile trip became an adventure in African exploration, triggered by Austin's adventure books, which I had read. My eyes scanned the surrounding foliage for the bands of "natives" and the lions, tigers, great apes, and elephants that just had to be lurking there. That none of the above ever appeared did little to diminish the excitement of my searching eyes each time we took the trip.

During the days while the aunts worked, we were Grandma Carmichael's and she totally ours. Mine in particular. I got a great deal of care, a lot of attention, and also a lot of medicine from my grandmother. As a small child, indeed from birth, I had been so asthmatic that my very survival had been in doubt. My Grandma, along with my mother, as soon after delivery as she was able, had nursed, coaxed, prayed, and medicated me out of danger. Those two women watched me like hawks, noting every slightest change in my breathing, every sign of a weakening condition, literally forbidding by sheer force of personality, will, faith, and traditional medicine the early death that seemed to be stalking me. My mother vividly recalls to this day a succession of sleepless nights pacing the floor with me wheezing in her arms, laboring for every breath.

Despite her delicacy of feature and diminutive size, there was nothing *fragile* about Grandma Carmichael. She was a woman as strong and resolute in her faith as in her determination. As a child, most of my time, from my first awareness of things, was spent with her. From her nurturing spirit I took for granted unconditional love, protection, and care. She administered the constant and endless succession of bush medicines that in all likelihood saved my life. A great variety of medicinal herbs grew in Tante Louise's garden, all apparently for the purpose of making me strong. Some were bitter. Others vile-tasting in other ways. I believe Grandma, being of the old school, linked bitterness with potency. For her, the more bitter the medicine the better it was.

Thanks to her, I developed an early taste tolerance; thus I have always been able to eat almost anything and to swallow almost any medicine. My grandma's combination of love, attention, care, and medicine shored up my health, so that all my life since I've been exceedingly healthy until the recent advent of cancer, but more of that later.

Grandma Cecilia was the major influence on my young personality, the adult with whom I spent most of my time and with whom I was closest. She was a devout woman. A pillar of Trinity Anglican Church, close friend and adviser to the parish parson, she was entrusted with the baking of the communal wafers each week. My earliest and most enduring ethical instruction came from her.

"Don't ever lie, always speak the truth. Think of others always. Remem-

ber the less fortunate. Never waste food. Never waste anything that someone else might need. Waste not, want not." And so forth. And the "memory gems" so much a part of any respectable colonial child's training:

If you in the morning throw minutes away,
You can't pick them up the course of the day.

and

Whatsoever you set your hand to do,
do it with all your might.

My early encounter with the ethical and moral aspects of life, I trace squarely to my paternal grandmother. And of course, it was her death in January of 1952, and the child-care vacuum it created in the household, that made it inevitable that my sisters and I would accompany my aunt to New York.

If grandmother "mothered" me, then it was the strict and exacting Tante Elaine who, first, in the patriarchal sense of that word, "fathered" me. Like all colonial pedagogues, Tante Elaine believed in discipline, fully convinced that sparing the rod meant certain ruination for the child. She was also the "competent authority," the central force in deciding and directing the affairs of the household, in making sure that everything was properly maintained and that everyone met his or her responsibilities. From a young age even the children had their appropriate responsibility. I cannot remember exactly at what age it first fell to me, but my duty was to clean the chicken coop each week. And those chickens were prolific in more than eggs, which is why later, whenever I've heard anyone derogatively described as a "chicken s—" so-and-so, I've fully understood precisely the severity and the grossness of that particular abuse.

Tante Elaine was the arbiter of order, not only the maintenance of proper standards but of the *appearance* of the same. She also administered whatever whippings Austin and I earned, and we earned ourselves quite a few. While she was very, very strict with me, that was nothing compared to her strictness with Austin, who was, after all, her son. Poor Austin. It was unthinkable to her that a teacher's son, especially hers, could be anything less than brilliant in school and impeccable in behavior and deportment. Put that way, what chance did he have? I can remember thinking, "Poor Austin, I sorry for he, *oui*." Today Austin is a dedicated and effective teacher in the Miami schools. I see that as entirely due to his mother's influence.

But Tante Elaine was fair. She was a hard woman, but fair. And I never for a moment doubted that her punishments were anything other than an

expression of her love and her wanting only the best for and of us. On such occasions her method was unvarying. First came the summons. Once present, you would be secured and immobilized by her firm, pinching grip on your earlobe. Then the charge would be announced, telling you in explicit detail just what your offense had been. For Tante Elaine, justice had not only to be done, it had to be *seen* and *understood* to have been done. Then, after the indictment came the question, a kind of ritual incantation, really.

"How *could* you have done this? You have been taught better! What *on earth* could have possessed you to do it? Well, I don't know *what* got into you, I'm going to get it *out* today. I promise you that. I'll bet you, when I'm finished with you, you will not even *think* of doing it again. I bet you."

Not a bet to take 'cause that was one Tante Elaine would invariably win. But after the whipping, Tante Elaine was finished with it. With her "Now, let this be a lesson to you!" the matter was ended and the incident behind you both. The record was expunged. You didn't carry a juvenile record into the future.

Not so Mummy Olga, who never, ever beat us. But would she scold! *Lord ha' mercy*. And those scoldings were almost worse than a beating. They were very, very effective, being predicated on convincing you of your betrayal of confidence and trust. Of your causing *pain* and *shame* to someone who loved you, to wit, herself. By the time Mummy Olga got through telling you how ashamed you had made her and the entire Carmichael family, you really felt so bad that a beating from Tante Elaine seemed a bargain in comparison.

When you looked at the shame and sadness dramatically etched into her face, the hurt in her gentle eyes as she told you, "How ashamed you make she. And here she thinking she have such a big, lovely, responsible son, an' look you come shame she so? How could you? An' look she can't even hold up her face before people now," the intensity of the remorse that flooded over you was certainly more lasting than any whipping.

The blessed Tante Louise tended her garden and neither scolded nor whipped, as I recall. But she may well have moved to the country before I was old enough to have merited either from her.

So the formative presences for me in the beginning were women, and that has continued true. In my life, I've always been surrounded by women, educated and protected by them.

Just recently I even heard my mother on the telephone with a journalist who must have asked her something about the effect of my present illness on her. I'm not sure just what the question was or how intrusive it might have been, but I was proud of the clarity and grace of her answer. And the strength:

“No, it doesn’t scare me. Why should it? Look, when he was born, they said he wouldn’t live. We thought we might lose him then. And see, I’ve had my son with me for over fifty wonderful years. And he is here with me right now, so, my dear, what do I have to complain about?”

Even my first year at school was defined by a woman, though I could have been no more than three, for my mother was still at home. (And even had I not remembered this, my mother made certain that I and the rest of the family would never forget the story.) This was Ms. Stafford’s infant school, a small private school that Ms. Stafford ran out of her house. We started school early—it probably was more like kindergarten—but we learned the alphabet, did simple sums, and played a lot. And by age four or so we could read simple children’s books and write our names.

It’s my first week of school. There I meet a little girl who evidently must have made quite an impression, big time. Because after school nothing would do but that she accompany me home to be presented to my mother. She was willing enough. But to “make assurance doubly sure,” I found it prudent to grasp her firmly by the hand and off we went. Or perhaps she grasped mine. Or else it was mutual. There is always such ambiguity about matters of the heart, but what is certain is that we proceeded hand in hand. And this holding of hands must have distracted or occupied me fully. Because, when I proudly presented my new friend to my mother, she could scarcely suppress her mirth. There I was, holding her hand and announcing proudly, “I’m walking little Eva Walton home,” with my pants, socks, and shoes sodden with pee. It has always come back to haunt me: “Boy, remember that before you could even hold your water, you were holding women’s hands.”

The next time I got myself in trouble over a woman—a fatally seductive “older woman”—I was nine. *Auntie Kaye’s Children’s Hour* was a popular radio program. Much to the pride of the aunts I was selected to recite a poem on the air. I think that I was one of the youngest to be selected, and this may have contributed a great deal to the aunts’ pride. It was an event. Friends and family were duly alerted to listen for “Stokely on the radio, chile. Ah tell you.” So much of an occasion in fact that the proud parents in the Bronx were duly informed. My parents went out and bought a shortwave radio, guaranteed, as they thought, “to pick up anywhere in the world,” and spent an entire Saturday morning vainly trying to tune in Trinidad. Tante Elaine escorted me to the station and left me in a room with the other children. And of course, I was *clean*, bow tie, suit, mature and sophisticated. (More of that suit later.) The only vacant seat was next to a charming young lady. We looked each other over. She smiled, asked my name, then revealed, much to my distress, that she was

ten. And how old was I? What could I do? I told her calmly that I was eleven. Her smile grew warmer.

When my turn at the microphone came, Auntie Kaye asked my name and age. The little girl was looking admiringly at me. So naturally I gave my age over the air as eleven.

A Rasta elder I know who is fond of commenting on the scandals of the day says, "Thus are the minds of men made foolish by the gleaming smiles of women." Let the church say "Ahmen." Talk about snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. I absolutely cannot remember what poem I recited that day. But I also know I shall never forget the look on Tante Elaine's face when she came to fetch me home. (Apart from lying I had foolishly blown the aunts' bragging rights of being the youngest to have been selected.)

"Young man, I *promise you*, you will *never* tell a lie again. And certainly not publicly over the radio!"

The offending orifice, my lying mouth, was thereupon thoroughly washed out with soap. A high price to pay for an older woman's smile. But it appears to have worked. Since then I can honestly say I've never wittingly told any kind of lie over the radio or any other public medium. Not even for a woman's favor.

I was born at a time of bustling change and a sudden if superficial wartime prosperity in Port of Spain. Numbers of folk were crowding into the city in search of the work that could not be found in the cane fields or the countryside.

The streets were filled with Yankee soldiers and airmen from the U.S. base at Chaguaramas. Also large numbers of Allied sailors from the British, Canadian, and American merchant ships that congested the harbor while they awaited destroyer escorts to convoy them across the Atlantic. I can remember dramatic blackouts when the entire city was kept completely dark as a precaution against Axis air raids, which mercifully never came.

A calypso, popular at the time, commented wryly on the easy-money, boomtown, wartime atmosphere that prevailed in the nightlife of the town. Calypsonians are the Trinidadian descendants of the African troubadours who enjoyed license to comment sharply in song on any political misdeeds by the rulers, or on any domestic scandals or gossip within the community.

This calypso was called "Rum & Coca-Cola" after the drink of choice of the foreign troops and the refrain lamented:

Both mother and daughtah
working for the Yankee dollar.

We children had no idea what the words meant, but the tune was catchy and we never quite understood why we were forbidden to sing the song.

Naturally all this bustle of displacement and transition stimulated the organization of the masses of the workers. And the undisputed leader of this resistance was a diminutive black man called Tubal Uriah "Rab" Butler, who seemed always to be organizing and making what I now understand to be incendiary speeches against economic exploitation and the "wickedness" of the colonial government and subsequently being jailed for these "seditious utterances."

Of course I could not then have *understood* any or all of this, and certainly not in the way I've just summarized it. But it certainly was in the air of the times. It was on the radio and it was the subject of the adult conversation at dinner. I have a strong impression that Tante Elaine was either involved with or supportive of the trades-union, worker's-rights movement.

Then, as now, economic conditions were harsh, especially for the growing numbers of unemployed or marginally employed who were flocking into the city. Many people around us *were* real poor, as I came to recognize early on. But our household was insulated from that grinding poverty for a number of reasons.

All the aunts were industrious and always fully employed. And all the aunts baked cakes and pastries for sale so the house was always full of baked delicacies. I am sure that the per capita income of the family would appear pathetic in the dollar terms of the economic calculus so dear to the U.S. media. In U.S. dollars, the income of a Trinidad teacher or salesclerk would undoubtedly seem puny indeed.

But *collectively* the household had three incomes and we owned our home, so the Carmichaels did quite well, thank you very much. Then too we had the added purchasing power in the local economy of the U.S. dollars remitted regularly from New York by our parents.

As children, therefore, we knew no material hardship. We ate regularly and well and, again courtesy of the parents, were probably the most elegantly dressed children in church or school. The periodic clothes packages—and once shipping resumed after the war they were as regular as clockwork—ensured that, attired in their Yankee finery, the Carmichaels turned heads en route to church. Which made me very fond of Sundays. In our family, Sunday meant church, and I was very taken by the passionate singing, eloquent preaching, and solemn ritual. No small part of my attraction was the elaborate dressing up, which was the first step in it all.

In the Caribbean, at least in our circles, the standard and accepted church uniform for adolescent boys was a white "dress" shirt, a tie, and

short pants. For all my cousins and friends, that was formal Sunday attire.

The American extravagance—not to mention the outrageous precocity—of dressing a little kid in an *adult*-styled suit was unheard of. So on Sundays when the family set out, Austin and I were *clean*, Jack. I, in my little blue suit with *long* pants, bow tie, with a stylish handkerchief showing from the breast pocket. I am a little embarrassed now to confess how much I enjoyed the public sensation we created. (Austin was similarly outfitted, but being older and bigger, the effect was not so nearly startling as with my pint-size, six-year-old self.) It never failed. As soon as I appeared, someone was sure to do a double take, point, and exclaim with genuine surprise, “*Waaai*, look at that little man!” This had nothing to do with my character being “mannish,” though it could have been. But that is literally and exactly what I must have seemed in local eyes, a miniature man. The name took and for a while I was known as Little Man. It probably was the suit that got me in trouble with the “older woman” at the radio station too.

When the adults in our family said, “Sunday is the Lord’s day,” it was no hollow cliché. Talk about ecumenical, we covered all bases. A typical Sunday would find the Carmichaels at Hanover Methodist for morning service from nine to ten-thirty. Eleven o’clock would find us at Gray Friars Presbyterian, where the children had Sunday school till noon. Then a break for lunch, and while Grandma was alive, it was her beloved Trinity Anglican for evening worship.

Sometimes later on a Sunday, perhaps once a month, there would be spiritual activity of a more exotic sort at the home of a Ms. Baines. Then, as I seem to remember, Austin and I would hide ourselves behind thick curtains to secretly observe what I remember as a vaguely “African” religious observance. Austin, who is older, says it was “like but not quite a Shango ceremony since there was neither drumming nor sacrifice.” But it had aspects of a secret society. It was quiet, private, almost secretive, which is why we hid to observe it. Spirits would be evoked and consulted. The participants were possessed by “saints,” so clearly it was a derivative of the *orisha* worship, which to this day survives in Trinidad from ancestral Africa. It was all deliciously mysterious and exciting, a feeling no doubt highlighted by the secrecy of our concealment.

At about seven years of age I started school at Eastern Boys School, a public government school some distance from our home. One did not have to be very old to quickly see the real differences among the boys. No one there was rich, but some were obviously poor. They had poor clothes, usually no shoes, and inadequate food. Even a kid as young as I could see that. It puzzled me. I did not understand it and I remember only that it seemed unfair to me. It made me sad.

In June of 1996, I was invited to Trinidad by the Emancipation Committee and so returned to my native land for the first time in thirty years. The reception was really most extraordinary, especially for someone who had officially been banned from the country for most of his adult life. Moving as the public occasions were, the best part was the opportunity to visit with Tante Elaine and Mummy Olga on the childhood turf. One day, a visiting journalist got Tante Elaine to dig deep into her store of family history. The *Trinidad Guardian* reported the next day:

“The boy Stokely was always different,” Tante Elaine said. “He used to always hide food in a butter can to take to a classmate who only ate crackers at lunchtime. On another occasion,” she recalled, “a friend of his grandmother’s admonished him one Sunday after church for keeping company with some barefoot, scruffy little boys.”

As Tante Elaine tells it, little Stokely looked solemnly at the woman.

“Miss Annie, I go to Sunday school. There we sing a hymn that God loves all the little children of the world. An’ now you say I shouldn’t play with them just because they poor and haven’t got? I’m sorry, Ms. Annie, I can’t listen to you. I have to do what the Bible say.”

That one I did not remember. But a number of things struck me when I read it. I was touched that the aunt I remembered as so strict and unyielding had carried that story in her head for half a century. But I was even more struck by the kid’s reply. Because in those days, it was absolutely unheard of for any kid to successfully contradict *any* adult. And if it were to be done, almost certainly the only way one could even hope to get away with it was to base your defiance on a higher morality, on specific and irrefutable biblical authority. But what I do not know is whether that was guileless, simple faith on the boy’s part, or whether it was a clever strategic maneuver, using her professed Christianity to score points as I would deliberately do later in life, especially when organizing in the Bible Belt South. I think it was conscious. Another case of the child being father of the man?

I also wished there was some record of old Ms. Annie’s response.

In that community, any adult could and would correct or discipline your public behavior whether he or she knew your family or not. And you expected no less and were expected to meekly accept the correction.

This next incident I do absolutely remember, but it would hardly have been cherished and preserved among Tante Elaine’s repertoire of stories to be brought out before strangers on appropriate occasions.

I was coming home from school with two friends. Even if they were the proverbial “bad company,” which is every parent’s excuse for the mis-

deeds of his or her little darlings, they were certainly not “barefoot and scruffy.” But we were singing some vulgar rhymes and singing them loud too. The kind universally irresistible to small boys wanting to be daring and “rude.” This song not only had forbidden words, but the unnatural action being described was even worse. I don’t even know that I fully understood the meaning. But it was “rude.” There we were bellowing out at the top of our voices:

I know a boy with a big, roun’ head
 He [unmentionable] he mother on top the bed.

Out of nowhere, an elderly lady (Ms. Annie?) loomed. We certainly had had no idea she was around. She was glaring at us, but spoke only to me. My friends fled.

“Listen to you. And you are a Carmichael too. And this is what you out here doing? Well, young man, you will soon see . . .”

And mouth pursed ominously, she stalked off. I knew trouble was ahead. My friends asked, “You know she?”

“No, I don’t know she.”

“But, if you don’t know she . . . t’ain’t no problem,” they said dismissively.

“No, but she knows me, *that’s* the problem.”

Actually, had I known the woman, she would probably have administered a serious whupping on the spot. All adults were automatically to be respected. And later that evening when Tante Elaine came home, it was immediately clear that she already knew. Let us just say swift and summary justice was administered.

But that would not have been the kind of story with which she would have entertained a visitor.

One that she did tell often is in that ambiguous category where you can’t quite decide whether you remember the event or only the story. It reemerged from Tante Elaine’s storehouse during the sixties after I had begun to work on voter registration in Mississippi. Mr. Butler was much in the news at the time of the story—demonstrations, marches, detention. Also, it must have been about that time that Tante Elaine left the classroom for a clerical position at Gwendolyn’s Department Store. There she became deeply involved with the trade union struggle. She was first elected shop steward, then, for many years, a vice president of the Clerical Workers Union. I did not really understand it all then, beyond a vague conviction that Mr. Butler was “brave” and firmly on “our” side against “them,” whoever they might be. I certainly had not made any conscious connection between Mr. Butler’s mass demonstrations and my barefoot, hungry schoolmates.

[Tante Elaine:

"When he was seven, we had an election. The child started nagging and worrying me about going to vote. I kept telling him that I wasn't going to meddle in politics, what with all the noise and contention. But would he stop?"

"Tante Elaine," he asked, 'isn't it true that Mr. Butler went to jail for us?'

"I told him it was so.

"Well, then, you have to vote for him. If he went to jail for us, now he can do even more for us.' He pleaded and pleaded.

"On election day, what you suppose the boy did? He dressed himself up in the suit with the big lapels that his parents had sent him from New York. When he went to church in that suit with his bow tie and pocket handkerchief, people used to call him Little Man.

"Then, he marched his little self right down to the polling station. It wasn't far, right on the corner of Belmont Road and Observatory Street, and declared to the returning officer:

"I come to vote.'

"You have to wait until you are twenty-one," the man told him.

"He raced home in tears. 'Oh, Tante Elaine, that's fourteen more years. Is so long.' And would he stop complaining and harassing me? Until finally I had to get dressed and he followed me while I went down to vote."]

Tante Elaine maintains that this made her the first voter I ever registered, for, as the paper reported, "she could get no rest from her nephew with the hooded, brooding eyes and concerns that seemed too weighty for a child of seven."

School was great fun actually. Especially the journey back and forth, as one could dawdle, explore, meander, or, as we have seen, sing vulgar verses. And if one had a few coppers, there was no end to the delicacies on which one could feast. The entire business of some adult vendors, people with families, was based on the passing-schoolchildren market. I shudder to think what their profit margin must have been.

But, depending on the season, one could buy fresh tamarind or sugared tamarind balls, mangoes or poncete, a fruit known elsewhere in the English-speaking Caribbean as the June plum. There were big, red, delicately fleshed pomerakes (Otaheite apples), tangy, succulent cashew fruits (not the nuts, which required roasting and extraction), and the boiled and salted seeds of the chatine, also called breadnuts. It was advisable to limit your consumption of these. Their popular name—if no censorious adult were present—was "farting pills," because of the flatulence they were certain to induce. Or one might have tolum, a confection of grated coconut stirred with sugar and spices, or perhaps a sugar cake washed down by the milk of a young coconut. Or you could chew on sugarcane, suck on the ubiquitous mango, the list is endless. . . .

Then too you could play in the Savannah's open green spaces or walk through the Botanical Gardens. There in the gardens I seem to remember steamy greenhouses filled with orchids and ornate lily ponds where exotic, brightly hued fish darted around the lily roots. I think these immaculately maintained botanical gardens, established by royal charter all over the British Caribbean, are perhaps the only completely unambiguous good produced by colonialism.

Within these enclaves, established under the direction of the Royal Botanical Society, were gathered just about every exotic species of tropical plant to be found within the far-flung borders of the "empire on which the sun never sets."

They started with the more picturesque of native species, then ranged through what must have been hundreds of spectacular "exotics." These all bore little identifying plaques: Latin name, common name, and provenance, i.e., native to equatorial Africa, the Kenyan highlands, Egypt, Polynesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Australia, Central America, ad infinitum. The selection seemed to cover the known tropical world. Those sonorous names of faraway places would have stimulated great flights of the imagination in even the most pedestrian of minds. To a small, inquisitive boy, they were magic.

Traces of our specifically West African origins also surfaced, though they were not identified in that way. But I now realize that the stubby palms with massive clusters of orange-colored fruit were oil nut palms from West Africa, and the little trees called *bizi* were the kola nut, which is so central in traditional African cultural practice.

Let the record show that I've attributed at least one unconditional good result to colonialism. Speak the truth and shame the devil.

Eastern Boys was a government school and so charged no fees. The physical plant was not elaborate, so as many as four different classes could be meeting in the same large space, differentiated from each other only by their own blackboards and a narrow aisle. This was not ideal, but our teachers made "of necessity a virtue."

Upon our teacher's entrance, each class would rise.

"Good mornin', teacha."

"Good morning, pupils. Please be seated."

After which there was not—could not have been without serious disruption to other classes—the slightest sound or fidgeting. Order and discipline were paramount. In that enveloping silence in which you could neither whisper nor fidget, you had to pay attention. It was the path of least resistance. If the teacher's eloquence and skill were not sufficient incentive, then sheer boredom—the absence of anything else to do—would compel attention to the lesson at hand. So whether you wanted to or not, you learned, even if only in self-defense to have the time pass more quickly.

Once we'd meandered and munched our way home, we'd change out of our school clothes and play football, cricket, or some other game with the boys in the neighborhood. This was usually in the street outside my house's gate. One by one the aunts would return from their jobs. When Tante Louise came in, we greeted her and continued playing. When Mummy Olga came, the same thing. But, soon as Tante Elaine broached the corner, *whoosh*, we'd fly up to the porch and be bent over our homework before she reached the gate. That evening after supper she'd check our homework. Austin and I had no choice. We were regularly expected to place within the top three of our class, and for the most part, we did.

I'd give British colonialism a good mark for the educational system except for one thing. I can now see the extent to which it was colonial: the Eurocentricism, the cultural chauvinism, the undisguised, brazen "civilizing" mission of converting we heathen if not into English gentlemen, then at least into dutiful colonial subjects. To this end the reading books we were issued were a sho-nuff trip. Poems about *daffodils*, *skylarks*, *deserted villages*, *wintry landscapes*, flora and fauna never dreamt of in the tropics.

More blatant was the omnipresence of patriotic, heroic, vaguely martial odes celebrating the glories of empire-building.

"The boy stood on the burning deck" or that curious celebration of military ineptitude and collective suicide, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," viz:

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them . . .
Rode the six hundred.

Or "The Burial of Sir John Moore at Coronna":

Slowly and sadly we laid him down,
From the field of his fame fresh and gory.

Or, of course, that classic of colonial fidelity, "Gunga Din." Gimme an ever-loving break. But at least our histories did not begin like the one issued to young Africans in Guinea and Senegal: "Our ancestors, the Gauls . . ." At least we learned discipline and good study habits.

Actually, the colonialism was so all-enveloping and pervasive that as a child one did not notice it. At the lower levels of the civil service, the only ones we were likely to encounter, the functionaries—policemen, teachers, nurses, bus drivers, sanitary inspectors—were all local folk. The expatriate community—the governor, High Court magistrates, commanders of secu-

rity forces, and various technical managers and executives—were quite remote. So too the relatively small population of local whites, the descendants of landed gentry, slaveowners, and their agents. So these people were not really a presence in our lives. One might say we moved in somewhat different circles. In fact, I can remember but three instances when the white presence made any impression on my conscious experience.

Once when I was very small, Mummy Olga took me to play in the Savannah. Under the protective eye of my gentle, kindhearted aunt I was playing on the lawn. A policeman ordered me rather roughly off the grass. I think I was just about setting my face to cry when my sweet-natured aunt turned tigress. She flew in the cop's face, arms akimbo.

"You don't see that li'l white boy over there on the grass? Why you don't go chase him? Or is it only black people's children you got strength for? Why ain't you go chase that one, eh?"

The cop quailed and beat as dignified a retreat as he was able. I hadn't even noticed the other little boy before my aunt's outburst. I never forgot that incident.

Later, when I went to Tranquillity Boys' Intermediate School, I found a scattering of expatriate boys. They kind of knew their place, though, because the school leaders, the best athletes and the best students, seemed always to be Trinidadian—African, East Indian, or Chinese.

One day, however, we were reading and there was a reference to snow. Our teacher, who was local African, began to explain and describe it when he was interrupted by an English boy, who stopped him and explained exactly what snow was. Interrupting *and* correcting a teacher was unheard of. After class there was an excited discussion among us. Some boys were saying that our teacher had been exposed in his stupidity. My position was that it was not a question of our teacher being stupid. He, never having been to England, should not be expected to know as much about snow as someone born there. What was so special about snow that our teacher should be expected to know it? What could we in Trinidad be expected to know about snow anyway? Why was it even in our book? Do English schoolbooks teach about Trinidad? I remember taking this position rather fiercely, largely because in some vague, unarticulated way I felt the humiliation of our teacher as an insult to us all.

Apart from those two incidents, the annual obligatory Empire Day observances, and one visit by a member of the "royal" family, Princess Margaret, colonialism in Trinidad was everywhere present but rarely obvious to a kid.

Empire Day was a head trip. This judgment is by no means retrospective; even then we found it a little odd, kind of *artificial*, and pointless.

Once annually, what seemed like all the schoolchildren of the city would be assembled on the Savannah, there to sing "Rule Britannia,"

"The British Grenadiers," "God Save the Queen," and other such uplifting compositions of Anglophiliac excess. After which we were addressed briefly and perfunctorily by the governor or some other British dignitary. An utter nonevent so far as I and my friends were concerned.

Now the visit of Her Royal Highness Princess Margaret was a different story. I was about ten, and for weeks that was all you could hear, in school, in church, on the radio, in the newspapers, and in the marketplace. "Princess Margaret is coming. Royal visit! A national honor. Historic event. The country must put its best foot forward."

So of course I was prepared, if I could figure out which one it was, to put my "best foot" forward too. And from all the hype one could not avoid a growing anticipation. We children—alas, the crimes against the young—were again enlisted. We were each given a tiny Union Jack and attired as though for church. We lined the route, where we were promised a good look at the "princess." So, of course, the noble wench is late. We children stood for some four hours in the hot sun. At first it was sun hot, but then came a tropical deluge that drenched us thoroughly. No princess. After which the sun pops out and dries us out again. No Princess. After about another hour, the long-awaited moment. A couple of police outriders with some kind of flags streaming above their motorbikes. A ripple of whispered excitement, "Princess coming, princess coming," moves along the line of kids. We start waving the small Union Jacks. We all perk up. At last a look at this royal paragon. Maybe she'll smile at us and wave. Finally this weird covered carriage with drawn curtains rolls on by. That was it.

The response was unanimous: "What were we standing there for if we didn't even get to see her?" And obviously *she* did not want even to look at *us*.

As I said, the European presence was, at least for me, distant and remote.

Not so the East Indian community though. They were very much a presence in my youth. After the abolition of slavery in the Empire in 1838, the sugar planters in the West Indies and South Africa were hardest hit. In both places the importation of labor from the Indian subcontinent to replace the Africans in the cane fields began in earnest.

In Trinidad, the recruitment of these indentured workers, whom the planters referred to as "coolie" labor (a term we were forbidden to use in our house), continued until the numbers of Africans and Indians reached parity. My impression is that, with the exception of a few demagogic bigots on both sides (V. S. and Shiva Naipaul come to mind), the relationship between these two very different peoples was reasonably civil and tolerant.

At about seven or eight I was playing with a group of boys in the street. An old, bearded, and turbaned Indian man passed by.

"Look at that ol' coolie man," someone shouted, and we laughed.

"Shame on you, boys." Glowering down on us was a large, disapproving African woman. "Don't call them coolies. You know they don't like that."

"Then what we to call them, ma'am?" someone asked, genuinely perplexed.

"They are East Indians. That is what they call themselves. And when you see an old man like him, say, '*Salaam babu.*' That's how his people call him." I could hardly wait to see another elderly Indian to test this novel salutation.

The Indians made a profound impression on me. At this time, being the more recent arrivals, they frequently wore their national dress, spoke their national languages, and maintained their religious faith and practice. Periodically, they would have colorful religious festivals and processions. I think in addition to the Hindus, some were Moslem, because one such festival seems to have been the Shiite festival of Hussein and Hassan.

I used to look at their colorful dress and say, "Wow. India must really be beautiful because all the people in India must be dressed like this." I thought we Africans suffered in comparison. Since we wore only Western clothes, were mostly Christian, and spoke only English, I for a long time considered slavery and the ruthlessness of oppression and imperialism to have seriously trampled on, even stamped out, our original culture. Indeed, I can remember once answering a question about African culture in Trinidad to the effect that the only element I'd experienced was those meetings at Ms. Baines's, which I thought "vaguely African."

Of course now I know better. I now understand how thoroughly "African" the base of Trinidadian popular culture is. And the extent to which, instead of dissipating away, African culture has informed, indeed to an extent colonized, the European and Indian cultures in Trinidad.

In the late sixties, on a visit to England, I can remember once meeting Sam Selvon (peace be unto him), the distinguished Trinidadian comic novelist of Indian descent. An African brother born in Jamaica greeted him:

"Aha, a writer, huh? So you must be one of that Naipaul gang, eh?"

"Oh, God, boy," he wailed. "I don' business with them boys, eh? I *creolize*, boy. I completely *creolize*. No, man, doan say that."

We just laughed and hugged him.

"We just yanking your chain, bro. We know your work and we know you."

"Yeah, man. But don't make them kina joke, *oui*? I don't know what wrong with those two, eh?"

Selvon's comic masterpiece, *The Lonely Londoners*, chronicles the misadventures of the Pan-African emigrant community in postwar London. It is a true classic of the Pan-African spirit. Its rich cast includes working-class characters from Trinidad, Jamaica, Guyana, all parts of the Caribbean, the countries of British colonial Africa, and the Indian subcontinent all thrown together in close alliance in the alien culture and climate of London. Bro Selvon, ostensibly a "Trinidadian Indian," displays in his work not only comic genius but a remarkable spirit of Pan-African brotherhood.

Ironically enough, my experience of Africa and the American South has enabled me to recognize the extent to which the Trinidad of my youth was very much one of those deceptive creolized cultures in which "Europe rules but Africa governs." And certainly in the tonalities and styles of speech, our music, the cuisine, the style and sensibility of popular culture, and the rhythms of daily family and community life, it was Africa that governed there. Or at least did when I was a child.

My mistake as a youth with regard to the culture is easy to understand. In school, we learned about snow, daffodils, and skylarks. I had no references by which to properly understand, identify, or analyze the culture that was all around me. So much all around us, in fact, that we never recognized it as culture. (The distinctive Indian dress was *culture*.) What we were looking at all around us was simply what folks did naturally. We took it for granted. Carnival and the steel band phenomenon is an excellent case in point.

As I said, the Casa Blanca steel band was a natural and constant part of my earliest environment, like the moon or the sun. Some things are simply accepted and never really examined. And of course, it was not a fit subject for discussion in school.

It took me, therefore, a long time to realize just how unique an act of creative genius *and* what an aggressive and subversive act of African cultural resistance those steel bands actually represented.

It is quite a story. Sometime in the late 1930s, the government in another of its persistent and futile attempts to suppress African cultural survivals, decided that the colony would more easily be governable if drums and other traditional musical instruments were outlawed. The colonials must have sensed, and correctly, the importance of music in the cultural independence and political resistance of the African masses. I would, of course, encounter this phenomenon again in the American South. But at least the George Wallaces and Ross Barnetts of that world never tried to outlaw our spirituals and freedom songs. Though I'm sure they must often have wished that they could have.

So in Trinidad by legislative fiat an African could be jailed for possession of drums and other musical instruments? Not a gun, not a grenade,

or some dynamite, but a *drum*? I have often tried, and failed, to visualize the campaign to enforce that law. In implementation of this policy, did armed police and soldiers—the governor's minions—surround African communities and conduct house-to-house searches? And for what, those threats to public order, drums, tambourines, maracas, and marimbas? Did they kick down the doors to shacks with guns drawn: "Freeze. You're under arrest. Seize that drum!"

So, suddenly deprived of their traditional instruments of musical expression, Africans resorted to their creativity and whatever materials lay to hand. In this case, the fifty-five-gallon steel drums used to store oil at the refinery.

These they took and cut to varying depths. Say nine inches down for an alto pan, two feet deep for a tenor pan, and twice that for a bass. Then on the top they would heat and pound out a number of raised areas, each of which when struck would produce a precise musical note of a certain pitch. Over the years the brothers experimented with ways to refine the basic instruments and to create others. The result is what is today known the world over as the Trinidad steel band: an ensemble of musical instruments of great range and flexibility, capable of playing not only calypso and other forms of local popular music, but the most complex and demanding of jazz compositions or any form from the European classical tradition you care to name. A sound immediately recognizable in the distinctive, liquid purity of tones and the fluency of its melodic lines.

Hey, as you may have noticed, I can't pretend to be an ethnomusicologist. I'm a revolutionary. But that description should give you a fairly accurate sense of the accomplishment represented by the creation of the steel bands. And remember, this unique innovation and the musical tradition it evolved into came directly out of the determined and indomitable will of Trinidad's Africans to resist colonization and to maintain their culture.

The music of the steel bands became an integral part of carnival and Trinidad's popular music. Carnival proper takes place over the four days immediately preceding Ash Wednesday, which begins the forty austere days of Lent. This explosion of music, spectacle, and fervent celebration before the dour solemnity of Lent is common to many Catholic cultures, especially the Latin ones.

It comes the Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday before Lent, but the bands will have been rehearsing and composing all year. The masquerade troupes will have started constructing their elaborate and fantastical costumes from the day after Christmas. But many a poor worker will have been saving pennies all year for carnival costume in which to "play Mas'."

The origins of this giant communal *fête* are interesting. It followed

pretty much the same pattern in those “creolized” societies where powerful currents from Europe and Africa mingled and combined—New Orleans, Brazil, and Trinidad. In all these places during slavery, elements of European Catholic ritual and spectacle merged with similar aspects of African religious cultures. Specifically, these were the colorful and spectacular rituals of the saint’s day parades of Latin Catholic culture, the frenzied pre-Lenten or spring festivals of pagan Europe merging with the masked ancestral dances or masquerades of West African cultures, to evolve into carnival in Rio or in the New Orleans Mardi Gras. The quality of the music, the dance, and the elaborate, colorful masked dancers are clearly African in origin: “Europe ruled but Africa governed.”

As I recall, the excitement and anticipation began to build in January with the launching of the Mas’ camps. In these camps the construction of the floats and costumes for the Grande Marche took place. As the time approached, people—our family included—would stroll from camp to camp previewing the models and drawings of the costumes under construction. We would argue over our favorites to win the grand prize. Then the bands would begin to refine and rehearse their musical routines composed for the contest called Panorama. Today, so I’m told, the steel bands come lavishly attired and equipped courtesy of their multinational corporate sponsors, the marriages of capitalism and local culture. The Shell Oil Invaders and Mobil Corp’s Casa Blanca? Somehow it doesn’t ring quite right, given the militant history out of which the bands evolved. All motion is not necessarily progress.

Around mid-February, the calypso tents would go up at different venues around the city. In those days some really were giant circus tents. In the tents in nightly concerts, aspiring calypsonians would show off and test out their repertoires for the big contest. Calypsonians are not merely performers. They are poets, satirists, social critics, musical composers, as well as singers. Very much in the tradition of the African griot and tale-teller. In fact, one important category of carnival competition is extemporaneous composition. Each contestant is given a subject or theme around which to compose a calypso. On the spot, he is expected to create the words and music and to sing his instantly created calypso before a very critical audience.

This was Tante Elaine’s favorite part of carnival. But we children never got to go to the calypso tents because the scandalous, irreverent, antiestablishment tradition of the form was very much still in evidence at that time.

One year, the governor had repeatedly threatened to cancel carnival or, as the people called it, Mas’. This naturally provoked everyone, especially the calypsonians. One night, a singer strode to the front of the tent and put up a detailed—anatomically correct—picture of a large jackass behind the

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stage. The picture of the animal excited considerable interest. What in Hades was a *donkey* doing in the calypso tent? Without explanation the brother launched into a rollicking song, the chorus of which went:

De governor say no Mas'?
Tell de governor he moddah's . . .

And he pointed to the animal as the audience shouted out the obvious rhyme. And:

De governor say no Mas'?
Tell de governor to haul he . . .

And he pointed at the animal and the audience, laughing, completed the line.

I have no idea whether that song won that year, but it certainly is the performance that all Port of Spain was laughing about and singing that week. No more was heard from that particular representative of the queen about banning Mas'.

Carnival proper began on the Saturday with Panorama, the daylong shoot-out, so to say, the mother of all steel band battles. The contest determined the year's champion and, I think, the order of march in the big parade, or Grande Marche.

Dimanche Gras, or "Big Sunday," saw the judging of the costumes of the troupes of dancing masqueraders and the crowning of the calypso king, as I recall.

Before sunup on Monday was *J'Ouvert* (day opening), the beginning of masquerade activity. This was the time reserved for Ol' Mas', the rowdy, raunchy, orgiastic element of carnival (as distinct from Pretty Mas'). The audience would be chased, daubed with mud in Mud Mas', and all kinds of madness and excess would take place. Ol' Mas' was not at all respectable. It was the time when revelers who'd been up all the previous night drinking would blow off steam. It's bacchanal, *oui*, bacchanal. Being as young as I was, I know *J'Ouvert* only from the shocked descriptions of my elders' conversations.

But the finale, or Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday), was the family's. We would take benches and chairs to our friend Mrs. Brito's house. She conveniently lived on Charlotte Street, opposite the Rosary Catholic School, near to the entrance where the Grande Marche entered the Savannah. It was a perfect vantage point from which to view, comment on, and judge the entire parade. Almost daylong, with the steel bands, spectacular masquerade troupes, the calypsonians, and with masked individuals and groups of supporters dancing behind them.

We were too young to “play Mas’,” and as the aunts pointed out, by not being in the parade we got to see everything much better anyway.

Unfortunately, I left Trinidad before I could assimilate and process all this. I’ve placed it all here in much more of a context than I had at the time. For what I had while I was there were simply experiences—impressions and sensations—which I’d been absorbing through my senses and by osmosis. I left at the age where I was just beginning to understand it all, but my impressions are indelible.

Trinidad was beautiful to me. It was love, it was security, it was community and protection. And my recollection of my childhood there is happy. Good times, secure times, in which I was totally at ease. I was free even as a young boy to roam the neighborhood with no restraints. We could walk around the Botanical Gardens, we could go to the Savannah. At night, when the moon was bright, all the lights would be turned out and we children would play in the moonlit garden. There was music, there was vibrancy, there was color, there was dynamism. I can honestly say that, as a young boy in Trinidad, I do not think I ever felt conscious of lacking anything.

Because I didn’t know, or didn’t at least really understand, the impact of belonging to a colonial subject people, I would not have changed Trinidad at all. I would have left it just the way it was.

A Tale of Two Cities

The letters are large, carefully rounded, a child's hand: *On January 16, 1952, my grandmother Mrs. Cecilia Harris Carmichael died. She was a blessed soul.*

The sentences are from a document my cousin Austin has sent to help anchor my memories to precise dates. It is a "family history" that his ten-year-old daughter, Petagay, compiled for a sixth-grade assignment. (Now an attractive and vivacious young woman, Petagay is a formidably dreaded, beginning literature teacher whose cheery visits to her ailing uncle never fail to make me smile. She bounces in full of laughter, high spirits, ideas, and excited talk of James Baldwin, William Shakespeare, Walter Rodney, and Toni Morrison. Petagay's upbeat presence and bubbling intellectual excitement are always a pleasure.)

She was a blessed soul, the little girl had written. That phrase leaps out in its childlike directness and simplicity. Also because the rest of the text is straight narrative, the milestones of family: names, places, dates, marriages, births, and deaths. That is the only editorial judgment to be found: *She was a blessed soul*. Why, I wonder, or how had our young historian been so taken with that language? Having been too young to have known her grandmother, she could only have picked it up from the oral tradition of her elders.

In any event Austin's purpose is served. The child Peta has given me the precise date of my departure for America—June 1952—six months after my grandmother's death.

The death was not nearly as traumatic for us children as it might have been. It was indeed our first encounter with the death of someone real close. However, we took our cue from the adults around us, who seemed to accept it with a stoic fatalism. She was old, much loved, and had led an exemplary life. Now she had gone peaceably to her Savior. His will be done.

Perhaps we were too young for the finality of it all to really dawn on us. Perhaps also we were distracted at the excitement of again actually seeing our father, who was coming home to bury his mother.

But even that reunion was not as dramatic—in the event it was quite

anticlimactic—as it might have been. True, my father had left when I was five and had been gone six years, but I can remember no separation anxiety on our part. For one thing, the household in which we were left had been very nurturing. For another, my father had never been truly absent. We had pictures so we knew what he looked like. And even the house, the very walls around us, spoke eloquently and materially of his presence. As did the oral tradition: the neighbors' inquiries and recollections; the grandmother's and aunts' stories. And too there were our parents' letters filled with messages and admonitions, and the regular shipments of clothes, toys, books, and exotic "American" candies. All of which now contributed to our heightened anticipation and growing excitement for my father's return.

One by one the days went by. Finally, though, the funeral had to be held without him. Then it was said our father would be home the following day. Dutifully we fought off sleep deep into the night. When we could no longer keep our eyes open, we were sent off to bed. And when we awoke the next morning, our father was in the house. It seemed so natural, and he so familiar, it was simply as though he had never been gone from among us.

By the time his visit was over, it had all been settled. At the end of the school year, Mummy Olga would bring Umilta, me, and baby Lynette—at six years old, she was no baby—to our parents in New York. Of course, it would be an abrupt change from everything we had known, but we would have six months to get accustomed to the idea.

The ostensible reason for this momentous change—the one given to us anyway—was that Grandma's death had left a vacuum in child care and proper supervision in the household.

On reflection, though, I am not entirely certain that this was the only or even the main reason. I think it entirely more likely that our parents—and particularly my mother—wanted the family united, all her children around her. Of course, we were children and were not consulted on our preferences.

How did I really feel about so abruptly leaving the home, school, friends, community, in fact everything that I had known? There had to have been ambivalence, but I can honestly say that I remember no great anxiety. In any case, it was a *fait accompli*. We were going. To America and our parents, and particularly to my mother, who, for some reason, had not been as much of a presence in the aunts' daily conversation as had been my father. So I had, of course, a greater curiosity there. What would living with my real mother be like? I was, of course, not then familiar with the term *nuclear family*. The whole concept as defined in the West would have been contrary to the reality of the African extended family that I'd experienced at home or observed in the community. But that is what we Carmichaels were going to be now, a nuclear family.

I'm sure we must have heard in the general discussion a constant refrain about what a big, rich, "modern" country America was. How *lucky* we children were to be going there. Then too there was the considerable excitement of actually getting to fly in a real airplane.

"Boy, Stokely, you be lucky, *oui!*" was the verdict of my school friends, tinged, I realized, with no little envy. So naturally, I felt lucky. Lucky except for one thing, the wrenching prospect of being parted from Austin. Austin had been part of everything I had known from the time I first knew myself: big brother, playmate, mentor, playground protector, everything. We talked earnestly about our pending separation. Of course, we would miss each other. But, we consoled ourselves that it would not, indeed could not, be anything permanent. He'd come to New York and I'd return to Trinidad regularly. Hah!

On summer vacations we'd be together again. Nothing would change. Part of the time in New York, the rest in Trinidad. Summers would be perfect. That, however, was not in the cards or the family finances, and it would be many, many years before we were to meet again. But, neither geography, distance, or the prohibitive cost of travel could erode that initial closeness. Today, Austin remains not only a most trusted friend and confidant, but my brother in the truest sense of that word.

But what, I wondered, was America really like? The country I'd seen in the movies seemed very different from Trinidad. For one thing, with the exception of the occasional and doomed "redskins" in the westerns, all American people seemed to be white. And, as my father would occasionally later grumble after yet another provocation from the natives, "Boy, back home, if you went only by the movies, you'd believe this country didn't have no ugly people in it at all."

Much effort was expended in persuading us of our good fortune: America, in this account, was bigger, better, richer. It had *opportunity*, better schools, better houses, better clothes, better everything. Which was, of course, difficult to actually imagine. Finally, I concluded that America was exactly like Trinidad only much, much larger. Bigger and therefore better everything: cars, rivers, beaches, botanical gardens, carnivals, schools, everything. Everything just like Trinidad, only in the American version, new and improved. And you must remember since I had had absolutely no complaints about the original, the grander version must be heaven, straight?

Finally the big day. A rapid blur of memories. I remember most distinctly how surprisingly quickly the excitement of actually flying dissipated. The anticipation had built almost unendurably before we finally boarded the aircraft. Flying through the air had to be the most unimaginably beautiful feeling. I tried to imagine how thrilling the sensation: the height, the lift, the thrust, the soaring in the clouds, the speed, the

incredible freedom of movement. A nervous anticipation spiced by a little fear.

Then we were all strapped in and I could hear the sound of the motors and feel the plane moving, first slowly, even ponderously, then faster and faster. The roar turned into a howl and the landscape outside the window rushed by. That was exciting.

"We flying now, Mummy Olga? Mummy Olga?" But Mummy Olga had her eyes tightly closed and might have been praying.

Then the engine's howl settled into a comfortable drone and suddenly all sensation of speed and even motion disappeared. Only a constant slight vibration from the propellers, an occasional side-to-side rocking, or a sudden lift or dip of the cabin told us that we were in motion. Soon my sisters were asleep. That did not seem right. I fought it. "Boy, you flyin'. You ain't be wasting it with no sleep." But the cabin was cramped. The journey seemed interminable. There was little to do. Sleep had its way. I think we changed planes once, perhaps twice. And we slept some more. Ho hum. How easily we humans become jaded.

They announce that we are landing at La Guardia Airport. I can see rows of yellow lights on the ground. In the distance, shimmering lights outline the New York skyline at night. Magical. Fantastic. Like carnival. Wow. New York. A new life. Our parents. Our mother will be waiting. Everyone is suddenly wide, tingly awake.

It really was true. New York was big. It was a cavernous building brightly lit even at three o'clock in the morning. A long, endless corridor stretched ahead of us. The line of people walked fast. After we got our luggage—from another huge room—we were in an even bigger one. At one end was a line of tall desks from which ropes extended forming corridors along which people carrying luggage formed lines.

Mummy Olga reached the desk, answered questions, showed documents. The white man smiled at the children. "Welcome to New York!"

Laden with luggage, we walked into another room, and thus began my American journey.

"Look for them now," Mummy Olga said. "Look for your parents. They be here to meet we, yes."

A small mass of people were lined up along the gate toward which we were headed. My eyes searched the huddle.

"Oh, Lawd, look see. See Dolphus and dem over dey."

Mummy Olga pointed toward an area of the crowd that seemed to be moving. A small group were waving handkerchiefs and seemed to be bouncing up and down. As we drew closer, I could see that most of the jumping was being done by a smartly dressed, stylishly pretty lady in a blue suit and two little girls. I recognized my sisters born in America; they had visited us in Trinidad. Soon my mother was hugging all three of us at

the same time, with little Janeth and Judith squeezing in just a-squealing and a-hugging whatever they could reach, knees, bellies, whatever. There was laughing, crying, hugging, and everyone talking at the same time. Kisses flew around the group indiscriminately. Passing travelers turned their heads and smiled indulgently as they went by. Those Africans certainly are an expressive people.

The drive home seemed almost as long as the plane ride. Up close, the city seemed less magical. The streets all seemed indistinguishable. The buildings, all brick or stone, seemed drab and undifferentiated. One could easily get lost. It all looked the same and it went on and on and on.

One image was unforgettable. We must have been somewhere in Queens, on a long overpass over a thruway. In Trinidad, in my experience, cars rarely exceeded forty miles per hour. Suddenly, we were on this overpass and I looked down at a line of headlights just hurtling along out of the darkness. I mean they were just flying toward us. One behind the other and dangerously close for the incredibly high, reckless speed at which they were moving. It was amazing, unreal. These bright lights came zooming toward the overpass and disappeared underneath us with a sound like zap, zap, zap, marking their furious passage. It was more than a little frightening.

It seemed demented, suicidal, as if they were rushing to their doom. Wow. Did *all* cars in New York always go so fast? Were they racing cars? At this time of night? During our brief moment on the overpass, Umilta had seen it too. We exchanged a long, wordless glance, our eyes wide with wonder.

After a long ride, the car turns into a wide street, deserted at that hour. It stops before a towering building of brick or concrete.

"Well, this is it," my father says. "This where we living."

I look at 861 Stebbins Avenue in the South Bronx. This huge building is our home. Wow. America *really* must be rich. But something didn't quite add up. Something about it didn't look like a *home*. A place where people really lived.

"You mean," I ask him, "that this *whole* big house is for us?" The adults find that funny.

"No, Son," my mother explains. "Lots of families live here. We just have an apartment."

Well, that will be nice, I think. An *apart ment*. That sounds impressive, modern. Big as the building is, a *part* should be more than enough for us. All right!

When we got to the third floor, I could not believe it. There was one bedroom. This *apart ment* . . . three rooms in all.

"What," I thought, "you mean all of us going to live in this one little place?" But I kept my peace. Three rooms for eight of us. The four from

Trinidad, my parents, and my two sisters Janeth and Judith, who had been born in America. In Trinidad, Austin and I had our own little room up front. Now I would be sleeping on a couch in the living room. And, of course, it seemed even more cramped and disappointing after the grand expectations of American scale and wealth that had been conjured up by all the talk.

By the next morning, my curiosity and a measure of optimism had returned. From the break of day or even earlier, I had been awakened by street sounds—metallic urban sounds—car horns, engines of buses, trucks, the banging of forklifts, garbage cans, and what have you, such as were never heard in the Belmont I had left. By the time the household was stirring, I was dressed and eager to explore my new world. I asked my mother.

“Say what *explore*? Stokely, now this ain’t Belmont, y’ know. This the Bronx, New York. You can’t go down there by yourself. You be so lost, boy. You can go with me when I go to the store. So you can learn the neighborhood.”

Of all the early American impressions, of all the new information to be assimilated, by far the most important discoveries concerned my mother. As I’ve said, she was, in my mind, much more of a mystery than my father. So I was naturally filled with an excited curiosity about this smallish lady I was now meeting. She was pretty, petite, stylish in dress, and warmly and spontaneously affectionate in spirit, but with a no-nonsense decisiveness in her manner. I discovered right quick that she was also fiercely passionate in her convictions (even if not always right), with a determined, can-do optimism.

Mabel Charles Carmichael would become—and remain—a major influence in the lives of me and my sisters. This little dynamo of a woman was the stable moral presence, the fixed center around which the domestic life of this migrant African family revolved.

My father would have to work outside the home, and on occasion, outside the country, to support us. My mother worked at home to nurture, develop, and direct us. She was always there to praise or scold, admonish or encourage, or to fearlessly defend as the occasion demanded. We children quickly learned to see her as tireless, omnipresent, and all-seeing, the ever vigilant enforcer of order and family standards, whose displeasure was to be avoided at all costs. With Mother, the rules were always clear, expectations understood, her voice unquestioned, and justice impartial and swift.

Also it was my mother, if you remember, who was the American connection. Was it not she whom my father had followed here? And because she was largely responsible for our presence here, she had a strong personal investment in ensuring that the move be a success. So she was at

some pains always to see only the best in things American, in a word, to wrap herself in conventional immigrant optimism. This was her impulse, save when it came to any kind of racist provocation touching her husband or her children. Then May Charles tolerated no illusions nor made any allowances. Then my mother would not only accept confrontation, she would seek it out. Hunt it down. Yes, she would.

"Neighborhood," indeed. For us children, the neighborhood consisted effectively of a few square yards of concrete sidewalk outside the building, for many clear limits were in force. We were told in no uncertain terms what these limits were. We could not play beyond the width of our building. We could not cross the street. On no account were we even to venture *into* the street.

Now I can see how carefully my parents had planned the timing of our move. But apparently there had been one contingency they either had not anticipated or could do nothing about.

See, Grandma Cecilia had died in January, the middle of the Trinidad school year and the New York winter. It was logical to wait until June to move us, when school would be over and the New York weather would have warmed up. Also, that way we children would have a summer to adjust to life in the new environment before braving the vicissitudes of the American school system.

But it also meant that, after the relative freedom of our Belmont neighborhood, we faced a long New York summer in a cramped, stuffy apartment where there was no "outside" in any real sense of that word. And the sidewalks of the South Bronx, though not as dangerous in 1952 as they would subsequently become, were also not as friendly and forgiving as the community ambience to which I was accustomed.

Now, in all the newness and strangeness of America, my first truly poignant, even disorienting discovery was unexpected. It had to do with, of all things, the moon. No kidding now, the moon.

As young children in Trinidad, we had looked forward to the full moon. We took it for granted, but I was soon to recognize how much it had meant. Under the brightness of our big tropical moon we had played gleefully in the transformed landscape of the garden and neighborhood streets. On Stebbins Avenue, where we now lived, I discovered that you could not see the moon. No moon at all. Imagine, no moon at all. That was inconceivable, most shocking and distressing. To me, this messed with the fundamental nature of the universe, the very heart and texture of reality itself. No moon? And along with that absence went the loss of the distant pulsings of Casa Blanca's rhythms on the night wind.

Whoi yoi, whoi yoi, whoi yoi. "How can you sing King Alpha's song in a strange land . . . ?"

Our restricted movement was another real shock. *Trauma* might not be

too heavy a word, after the near complete freedom and security I had enjoyed on the island. The freedom to roam the community, to walk in the gardens and the Savannah, confident in the protection of every adult, a surrogate parent. Not to say that there was no sense of community in the Bronx, but it was a different kind of community. It had a different style and feel.

That first summer I spent as much time as I could "outside," which is to say, hanging out on my little square of sidewalk bounded on one side by the front of 861, on the other by the street, and at its ends by the sides of our building. Of course, little "playing" was possible there, so I mostly just hung out. I stood, looked, listened, and saw and heard a great deal. If Muhammad cannot go to the mountain . . . the mountain sure nuff came. . . . I saw fights, raucous squabbles and arguments, and even some petty crime. People seemed to have lots of indiscipline and what is now called attitude. But I heard no gunshots nor saw any gunplay. Those, mercifully, were still far in the future. There was great energy, but it seemed a brash, impersonal kind of undisciplined energy.

I had no language for "crowded ghetto," but that, of course, was what it was. And if I had been dismayed by the ratio of space to numbers of people in our apartment, I quickly learned that many of my parents' friends in the extended family were even more crowded than we, the classic immigrant reality. Though we Africans from the Caribbean seemed greatly outnumbered by the Africans born in America, I have come to recognize that the neighborhood was not so much a settled "community" as it was the confluence of two volatile streams of recent arrivals: the "foreigners" coming from the cane fields of the islands; the "Americans" coming from the cotton fields and small holdings of the rural South. Nearly all of them were first-generation immigrants valiantly trying to come to terms with a concrete urban vastness equally alien to both.

It was not as if the two groups were at each other's throats. Far from it. Beneath differences of style and accent, there indeed was a "community" of tolerance, respect, and the reality of concrete circumstances common to all. We were all black, poor, and recently arrived. There were cases of cooperation, friendship, and the kinship of shared experience. All in all, more united us than divided us. But simply, the adjustment was not easy for either group, and the overarching economic environment was not hospitable, fair, or particularly welcoming.

One morning I was looking on in astonishment as an older brother stole a crate of sodas from a delivery truck while the driver was inside servicing the machines. My expression must have reflected my amazement for I had never seen anything quite so brazen. As he ran past, the brother growled something at me. It sounded like:

"Whatcha lookin' at, fool. Want me to go upside yo nappy head?" Or

words to that effect. I couldn't understand exactly what he said. But from his tone, his meaning was unmistakable. In the interest of my health, I should mind my own cotton-pickin' business. And not even *look* at him?

So in the street . . . new attitudes, cultural styles, and rhythms, a new language, would confront me, a lot of disorder and indiscipline. These striking differences notwithstanding—they were, I sensed, differences of style and attitude, not of substance—I saw that more united than divided the two streams.

One real and effective force came from outside both emigrant African communities and was driven by a different engine, value, and vision. A new technology, instantly available if not omnipresent, was intensely fascinating. Seductive even. Television.

Now, we in Trinidad were not unfamiliar with the moving images, sounds, and counterreality of the audiovisual medium. In Trinidad we did, of course, have what our colonial mentors called “the cinema.” However, the fare, being usually of British origin, was clearly no reflection of our reality or experience. Which no doubt is why we did not tend to “identify” with the images on-screen, which in any case were almost all white. Also, going to the cinemas, going *out* to the cinemas, was very much a special treat—a very occasional Saturday-morning kind of treat—which further emphasized its exotic, alien, and fantastic nature.

Television had yet to make an appearance there, so the reality of the box as a standard household fixture was to me, if not inconceivable, at least a great novelty. And in the children-packed South Bronx apartment, the magic of television was very present. What an incredible luxury it seemed at first: our own miniature cinema at home—instantly available. Given the long summer days, the limited options, and intimidating prospect of the streets, we ended up watching it a lot. It was television and more television.

And in particular that fall there was *Superman*. I had been familiar with Batman and Robin, who, of course, did not fly. But Superman, the man of steel, was, I think, on the tube nearly every afternoon. And he, or rather his flying, fascinated and entranced me.

Now I was not really a kid. I was eleven years old and nobody had *evuh* called me stupid. So this is patently not about my suggestibility or lack of good sense. It might be about constraint, boredom, and restriction of movement, coupled with too graphic an imagination. And it certainly is about the insidious, reality-distorting power even of that infant medium. We are not talking here about any sophisticated, digital megascreen in living color and surround sound. No cyberspace virtual reality. We are talking real primitive here: a simple twelve-inch, black-and-white box with a flickering screen and uncertain reception. And of course it was free of the gratuitous, egregious, technologically enhanced, special-effect-graphic

images of violence ceaselessly pounded into the consciousness of today's youth.

If you are from working-class New York, then you know that many of these old apartment buildings are laid out on the principle of a hollow square. The front of each apartment facing out and the rear facing inward and forming with the other side of the building a kind of enclosed, square courtyard. Pulley-strung clotheslines ran across this courtyard from side to side. These were weather-frayed lengths of sash cord often worn so fragile that too wet a wash could bring them down.

One afternoon while my mother and Umilta were at the market, *Superman* came on. What I did next was certainly not from a sudden burst of inspiration. I had to have been cherishing and embellishing in my imagination for some time an image of the beautiful, perfect freedom of flight. Anyway, I draped a red bath towel around my neck, cape-style. I opened the kitchen window, climbed on the window ledge and placed my hand on the clothesline. I could see myself diving forward and gracefully gliding over to the opposite apartment propelled by the momentum of my dive as the pulley "flew" me across. I must have hesitated briefly to admire this image in my mind, because then a face appeared at the window opposite.

"Stokely, child. What you doing out there?" she cried.

"Oh, hi, Tante Jo. Wait there. I'm gonna fly over to you like Superman."

"No, Stokely," she said sharply. Then her voice became very calm. "I need you to do something for me, please, before you fly like Superman, okay, honey? Now go back in the kitchen, please."

Of course as an obedient and helpful child from the Caribbean, I immediately went back in. As soon as that lady saw that I was away from the ledge and my feet were firmly on the floor, she went off. I mean she just started to scream, Jack.

"My Lord, child. Are you crazy? But what a nearly distress on us here today, eh? You must be crazy, boy. How could you be so stupid? Best you take that silly cape off and go sit down. Wait till your mom gets back!"—etc., etc. I keep telling you, women have always been saving my life.

By the time my mother returned, I was quietly reading a book, the very picture of circumspection. For some mysterious reason, television seemed to have lost its attraction, at least for that afternoon. She calmly took me into the kitchen and yanked the clothesline, which obligingly came off in her hand, and explained how I would certainly have fallen to my death. I shouldn't be so gullible. Superman didn't exist, wasn't real, was simply a fiction on television. Human beings could not fly. Didn't I know that?

Of course I did, so why . . . ? Interestingly enough, there was one thing she didn't say: she never prohibited me from watching *Superman* again.

Since this was after our first and only Stebbins Avenue summer, I could not have been under the influence of television for more than a few

months. I was not a stupid child, and as noted, the medium was in its infancy. So this was a comparatively tiny, flickering, black-and-white image that had so totally disoriented my sense of reality. What effect can the ubiquitous, inescapable, virtual-reality, video-game, contemporary version have on young minds today? Dumb question. I withdraw it. The answer glares out at us constantly in horrific daily headlines and on eye-witness newscasts over that very same medium each evening at six.

As I would discover, my experience with the Western media was not unique. Across the black world the response of my generation, my age set, to this egregious Western presence was more than a little ironic and frequently unpredictable. Take for instance the Tarzan movies.

Once a group of us in Guinea were discussing Tarzan. I described how my youthful misimpressions of Africans had been conditioned by them.

"Oh, I know those movies," Lamin said. "We used to watch them in Ghana too."

"Really? They showed them in Africa? What did you all make of the way they presented Africa?" I asked.

"Nothing at all."

"What? You weren't offended?"

"Not in the least. Why should we have been? To us they looked nothing like any Africa we knew. So we concluded that they were about black people in America. We thought America a very strange place indeed."

Despite what should have been—and undoubtedly was—the excitement of discovering the wonders of a new country, time hung heavily during that first summer. Even the novelty of television had quickly faded. Time dragged and I found myself wishing desperately for school to start. In America, education was free and better, my parents kept repeating. And it represented opportunity, boy. The kind of boundless opportunity not present in little, backwater Trinidad. Education was *modern* in America, the system was better. I could hardly wait and the anticipation only caused time to drag more heavily. Before the school question, though, there was the matter of the coat.

By about mid-August I was facing yet another major adjustment, which had nothing to do with either culture or technology. This one was elemental, purely climatic. I had begun to feel cold. My father laughed. "But it is still summer, you can't be cold yet. Wait till winter, then you really going see cold, boy."

"But I cold now. What I going do if it get any colder?" I complained.

"Oh, we'll dress properly. I'm going to get you a winter coat." But I was cold and kept bugging my poor father. "When am I going to get my coat? I need it now. I real cold, yes!"

Thus I became the first person on the block to start wearing a winter coat. Middle of August. Even though people were laughing at me, I wore that coat. How they to tell me how I was feeling? I was chilly. But my father's problems with the coat did not end there. By the time it got to November or thereabouts and it was *really* cold to me, I came in and handed him the coat. He looks at me inquiring.

"Thank you, sir, but I don't want that coat again."

He says, "Oh, and why not?"

"Because it doan work. The wind comes through."

So he laughs. "There's no coat we can find that some wind won't come through."

"So why bother to wear a coat if the wind will always come through?"

Now my mother really laughs. "Because, Little Man, if you take off the coat in winter, you freeze to death." Which all seemed to me as a choice between the proverbial black dogs and monkeys: either perpetual cold, death by freezing, or never leaving the house from November to June. What a country, yes?

So between cold weather, wind-porous coats, no moon, restricted movement, I wanted out of this mamajamma, Jack. I couldn't wait to get back to Trinidad. But with every passing day, the saving prospect of school loomed even larger and crept mercifully, if too slowly, closer.

Finally. All right, it's September. Time for school. I was more than ready. I had been well primed by our mother, who believed without question that America was the greatest country in the world and must therefore also have the best educational system. She pumped into my head, you must do well in school. Your job is to do well in school. You have to do well in school.

The school of my first experience of American education was P.S. 39 on Longwood Avenue, the very same elementary school from which a few years earlier another young Caribbean migrant had launched his now celebrated "American journey." Unlike Colin Powell, I was not to finish the fifth grade there, but it is where in September 1952 I began my American education.

At what must have been the crack of dawn, I was combed, pressed, and fully dressed in back-to-school finery. I can't remember if it was the classic West Indian white shirt and tie. I was champing at the bit, raring to pit my small-island self against the challenges of the finest educational system of the greatest country in the world. I knew that the students would be smarter and more sophisticated, the teachers stricter and more intellectually demanding, and the lessons "hard," infinitely more advanced and challenging. But I was determined not to let my parents down.

Of course, everything *was* different. Even the building, a massive, huge, and somewhat intimidating fortress of concrete and glass. And each

class had its very own room, completely separate and discrete. I think I must have badgered my mom to escort me too early because I seem to remember sitting alone in a silent, empty classroom looking around with nervous anticipation.

Physically it was impressive. The entire wall at the front of the room was a blackboard. Facing which were neat rows of chairs, each with its own desk or writing surface attached. No long benches, chalk slates, and small blackboards set on tripods here. It seemed orderly, solid, and designed for very serious work. But no matter the degree of difficulty, I told myself, I was going to not just cope, but to excel here. I was as focused and serious as a sprinter facing the starter's gun.

Then pandemonium—literally “many demons.” First, a sudden, loud grating sound somewhere between a loud buzzer and a jarring bell. Then almost immediately the door flew open and a wave of shouting, laughing, jostling energy rushed in. Students raced to particular seats, wrestling and jostling for possession. They were swearing, throwing spitballs, erasers, laughing, yelling, and even cursing. The apparent ringleader spotted me immediately. A muscular, stocky little brother, he told me his name was Jay.

“Wha’s your name, dude?”

“Stokely.”

“*Sto-ku-lee*,” he echoed mockingly. “Boy, you sho talk funny.”

“That’s how we talk in Trinidad, boy. *You* does talk funny.”

Then a white man in a suit came in, raising his hands as if for quiet. I stood, expecting the tumult and the shouting to subside. To my complete amazement, it got louder. An eraser whizzed by fairly close to the teacher’s head. *I could not believe it.* I stood at my desk, my eyes fixed on the teacher.

“Siddown, fool.” I thought I recognized Jay’s voice from behind me. The teacher looked at me, smiled somewhat faintly, and nodded. I sank into my seat.

Talk about culture shock. This bedlam after the respectful, pristine, *echoing* silences of the schools I’d known, in which one could literally hear a pin drop on cotton. Stunned, I sank deeper into my seat, wrapped my arms around my ears, and let my head fall onto the desk in a timeless posture of withdrawal, amazement, and utter despair. “This?” I moaned. “Is this America?” Children throwing erasers at teachers? I’d never encountered children so noisy, so disrespectful, so destructive. How could one possibly concentrate in such a classroom? I don’t believe I actually wept, but in that moment of utter desolation I sure felt like it.

Naturally order, or some semblance thereof, was finally imposed on or rather cajoled out of the class. Even the teacher’s style seemed wimpy

after the absolute magisterial authority of the Caribbean counterparts I'd known.

"All right, people, all right now. Please let's settle down now, boys and girls, shall we? Can we have some order here. Let me have your attention. That's better now. Gosh darn it, *settle down*." So learning finally began.

Given my absolute confusion that first day when I had fully despaired of ever getting accustomed to the rougher ambience and dynamic of that classroom, it is remarkable how quickly my adjustment came. For one thing, the crushing academic challenge I had so feared simply failed to materialize. Quite the reverse, in fact. But before we get to the academic, check out the social.

Here my early acceptance was unwittingly brought about from an unexpected quarter, the aforementioned young master Jay, head ruffian-in-charge. On the first or second day, it became clear that we would have to fight or something much like that. The issue was my speech, about which he unfailingly made loud and unflattering remarks whenever I ventured to answer a question from the teacher. Finally, I suggested rather pointedly that he not do that. The class gasped and gave a long, gleeful *oooooh* of anticipation. Whereupon Jay promised to whup my butt after school.

In Trinidad, I'd had relatively few school-yard fights because I was a fairly popular and articulate kid and could usually talk my way out of potential trouble without loss of face to either party. But also—perhaps the real reason—everybody knew that in combat I'd go off. Sure, you might whup me, but I'd be coming at you, Jack. I might even be crying, tears streaming down my face, even screaming "like a girl," but I be coming at you, fists flying, kicking, never quitting. Kick my booty, yes, but there would be a price. For which reason I think I was generally spared the attention of school-yard bullies, who usually sought easier prey.

But what now to do about Jay? I knew enough to realize that I couldn't start out my new school life by punking out. But what could I do?

The teacher, perhaps sensing my discomfiture, let me out about ten minutes early. Which was nice of him, but hardly a solution, as Jay's whispered "You lucky, suckah. But I'ma git you" made clear as I left the room. Jay's version of what Joe Louis had said about Jersey Joe Walcott before their second epic fight: "Pappy kin run, but he cain't hide." But I had no intention of doing either.

Once outside, I placed my books on a car, leaned up against it, and waited. But for what? That I didn't see clearly, but I sensed that running home would be about the worst thing I could do, a serious mistake. What then about the next day and the rest of the term?

So I waited, without any clear plan but affecting a studied and elaborate nonchalance. "But, I wuz cool," as the song goes.

Entirely too soon, school was out and the building emptied in a rush of noise and laughter.

Out comes Jay at the center of a knot of admirers, all laughing excitedly. From the flush of triumph on his grinning face, he seemed to be accepting their adulation for having run off the skinny, funny-talking new kid. Then they saw me and pointed me out to Jay, who looked over to see me leaning on the car, doing my best to appear unperturbed. He seemed surprised and a mite uncertain.

“Hey. Din the teacher sen’ you home?”

“Yeah. But this in’t ha’ nothin’ to do with him. This between you and me, boy.”

Silence. Our eyes lock. Glares are exchanged. Silence. Game faces. We look each other up and down. Silence. Suddenly I realized that I didn’t *have* to do anything. It was purely his move. More silence. The acolytes begin to woof, “Whup his butt, etc.” But, for some reason, we don’t fight.

I suspect the advantage of surprise and the power of confrontation worked for me. Certainly it puzzled Jay, but he did recognize that he had much more to lose than just a fight. But no fight happened and I think he was every bit as relieved as I was. What did happen, in fact, is that we became the best of friends. I guess that little Jay was more of a politician than I then realized. Like LBJ, he preferred to have me “inside dumping out, than outside dumping in.” In any event, I was willingly enough drawn into his little orbit.

Now, he really was a wild little brother, and once we became good friends, I followed his lead, jumping into his little wild actions. What Tante Elaine would have called “all kinds of devilment.” Hanging out at the back of the line, making noise, hitting boys up back their heads, grabbing girls in an ungentlemanly manner, and so forth. But there would be limits to my involvement in that kind of action.

Those came from my parents’ constant injunction to do well. My biggest surprise, in that regard, was the discovery that not only could I compete academically, but that I was actually much better prepared than the American kids. In fact, I rather too smugly and hastily concluded that American kids were stupid. Yes, to my shame, I did. They didn’t know geography. They knew little in math, while I *knew* my times tables. They couldn’t write. Could barely compose or parse sentences. What? So I was just soaring through school.

In one area, though, I really needed to catch up, and my mother kept pressing me to study it: American history. I had no knowledge of it. But it was a fascinating story, and because it was my only real challenge, it became a favorite of mine. I devoured American history, which is of course to say, what passed for American history in a fifth-grade classroom circa 1952.

But I was not to finish the academic year in that remarkable classroom. So I have no idea what happened to ol' Jay. He may have become a CEO, a professional athlete, a successful criminal, a soldier, a cop, or an anonymous civil servant, now nearing retirement. Or he could more easily have been an urban casualty or a Black Panther militant. He was high-spirited, energetic, and daring. A "discipline problem" certainly, but he was neither stupid nor bad. In fact, he was quite lovable. I wish him well.

“A Better Neighborhood”

My father's announcement took us children by surprise. My mother was part of the announcing, standing next to my father, her face a study in pride and determination. Any apprehension in her expression was held firmly in check beneath the weight of the first two.

My father explained to us that even before we'd arrived from Trinidad, he had been searching everywhere for a better home for us. Now, with the help of the Lord and our good mother, he had found what he was looking for. We would be moving in about two weeks, for our parents had bought us a house.

“Praise the Lord,” Mummy Olga sighed audibly. “Praise His holy name.”

It would be a better neighborhood, my mom said. We would have more living space. The streets would be quieter, less crowded, and the children would have more freedom. It was close to a school. My mother really emphasized that we would be moving to a “good neighborhood.” I do not recall if she mentioned that it would be a white neighborhood, but it was.

The house was farther up in the Bronx, on Amethyst Street, in the Morris Park/White Plains Road area, not far from the Bronx Zoo. We would discover that the neighborhood was heavily Italian with a strong admixture of Irish. It was respectable working class, “ethnic,” and very, very Catholic. On one side it bordered Pelham Parkway, across which was a predominantly Jewish enclave.

Ours would be the first, and for much of my youth, the only African family in that immediate neighborhood.

Because we were children, it never occurred to us to wonder why or how my father had been allowed to buy into that block. Nor how, on a single income—my father's, for our parents were very clear that my mother would stay home and mother us full-time—they could have scraped together the down payment. Or from what reserves of inner will and determination these two young immigrants had summoned the optimism and courage to take this major first step in pursuit of the American Dream.

I do recall the excitement of packing for the move, my sisters' and my

gleeful anticipation of the promised space and freedom. How big would our house be? How fancy? Would we have our own rooms? This excitement lasted until we actually saw our new home.

It was a dump. I mean, it was a serious, serious dump. In fact, it was the local eyesore, and the reason—I now understand clearly—my father had been able to get the house with no visible opposition was because it was, hands down, the worst house on the block. It was so run-down, beat-up, and ill kept that no one wanted it. If that house were a horse, it would have been described as "hard rode and put up wet." A creature in dire need of a little care and nurturing. My dad was the "sucker" the owners had "seen coming" on whom to unload their white elephant. Which is one reason, I'm sure, the race question was overlooked. Who else could have been expected to buy such a wreck?

When we first saw it, we children were shocked. We looked around the house and at each other. I mean, even the cramped quarters at Stebbins looked like a mansion compared to what we were moving into. I mean, small, little, squinched-up rooms, dark, sunless interiors, filthy baseboards, a total mess and not at all inviting.

But our initial disappointment did not, of course, take into account my father—his supreme confidence in his skills and resourcefulness. He had indeed spent a long time looking for just such a house. Seeing not what was, but what could be. The neighborhood *was* quieter, and the house just three houses down from a school, and by the grace of God, sufficiently derelict and decrepit as to be available *and* affordable. Perfect. The Lord *do* move in mysterious ways.

My father had cased the joint purposefully and assured himself that the foundations were solid enough to afford him a base on which to build. He'd figured out *exactly* what he was going to do with this house.

Immediately when we moved in—my mother used to tease him fondly that he unpacked his tools before he unpacked his bed—my father set to work, even though it was January and cold. The remake took a long time, continuing in some way as long as he lived there. On those happy days when he had a construction job, my father worked on our house at night. On those all too many days when the union hiring hall failed to refer him to a job, he worked on our home day and night. Before he was through he had added rooms upstairs and down, knocked out walls to create more space, put in windows and doors. In a word, he completely transformed that wreck.

We learned later that as the neighbors looked on, amusement turned to skepticism, skepticism to wonder, and wonder to respect. They were, after all, working men and respected industry and competence. And as they watched the transformation from eyesore to one of the more attractive and well-maintained homes on the block, the neighbors recognized that

because of my father the value of their property had not, as expected, plummeted by reason of our black presence, but had instead been *enhanced*.

The school three houses away on Hamilton Avenue was P.S. 34, where I and my three hearing sisters were immediately enrolled. The eldest, Umilta, who was deaf, attended a special school downtown. Naturally, for us, there would be the necessary period of adjustment—the new-kids-on-the-block syndrome. That we were African undoubtedly contributed something to this tension at first, but I must say clearly that I can remember no instances of overt racism from the neighborhood kids.

Whatever their elders' attitudes might have been, once we were accepted in "da hood" by the other kids, that was it. Once we became familiar presences on the turf, so to say, citizens in good standing of the neighborhood, we were to be defended against any strangers from outside, whatever their color. But there would be a period of adjustment.

Our mother was always at home and overwatchful with one eye tuned in on the street. She at first tried to keep us at home as much as possible, and for a long time she was never really completely comfortable with our visiting other children's homes. For this reason, my father built a clubhouse in our backyard for my friends. Our backyard became a focus of youth activity, which made my mother happy, as most of my time was spent where she could watch my movements and make sure I was not being subjected to racist insults.

I believe my status among the boys was determined early by my mom and a stocky, muscular kid named Paulie Henry. Paulie was Italian/Irish, and most bellicose. He would, as they say, fight at the drop of a hat—and drop the hat himself. One day early on, Paulie slapped around a friend of mine called Billy. I mean, ol' Paulie, like Stack O' Lee in the blues, had laid a hurtin' on poor Billy.

According to my mom, she came out and found me crying along with Billy. I guess, sensitive kid that I was, I was comforting Billy by helping him cry. Billy explained what Paulie had done and added that Paulie had promised to come back and beat me up too. In fact, he had gone to round up his boys to help him administer said beating.

"And where's this Paulie now?" my mother asked.

"Over in the school yard," Billy sobbed.

Before the words were well out of his mouth, my mother stormed into the school yard, trailed a little hesitantly by me and Billy.

"Which one of you is Paulie?" she demanded. Whereupon she declared in a loud and carrying voice—obviously she was sending a message beyond just the school yard—that *I* was not Billy. And *she* was not Billy's mother. So everybody, I mean, *everybody*, better understand that if they laid a finger on *her son*, she would come back with her husband's ax and set to chopping.

Upon which a chastened, deeply impressed Paulie hastened to assure her that this did not involve her son at all. That they had absolutely no intention in the world of touching her son. This was purely between them and Billy.

It had been a dramatic performance on my mom's part, and *quite* convincing. It certainly convinced Paulie and his gang, and even I was not entirely sure whether my mother had been serious. Which, I suppose, is exactly what she intended.

For it sure worked. I was probably the only kid on that block Paulie never fought with. In fact, he became a friend, and later, something of an influence.

In all of P.S. 34, there was but one other African family, the Stovalls. But they lived farther down in the Bronx, on the edge of the district. The oldest Stovall was a good athlete and, by reputation, rough, a "real toughie." I suppose as only the second African boy to come through, I basked in some of his reflected valor. Strangely enough, I never became real close with the Stovalls, perhaps because they didn't live in our immediate neighborhood. A case of the dominance of geography, "turf" over race, I presume.

In my class, the fifth grade, the acknowledged baddest dude was an Italian kid named Nicky. I had not been in school two weeks when, for some reason, Nicky challenged me. Again, the teacher gets wind of it and lets me out early. This time, though, there was no uncertainty on my part. I had learned with Jay precisely how to work this one.

In the end, it was almost a total rerun of P.S. 39 and Jay, as Nicky also decided it best that we not fight. Unlike Jay, however, we never became friends. Our relationship remained cool, but correct, a kind of peaceful school-yard coexistence.

Here at P.S. 34 I would find my peers undisciplined, less so than at Stebbins, but undisciplined nonetheless. Also just as destructive, breaking pens and pencils to throw at each other, dashing their books to the ground to fight each other. Which again raised the same question for me: Why were American children so undisciplined and even self-destructive? I still have no answer for that, but as I got more and more into the neighborhood, I would get to see this self-destructiveness at close hand.

By constantly reminding us that we were going to a better neighborhood, my mother had created certain expectations. Yet I would discover that just as much stealing was occurring in the "better" neighborhood, and this would come to touch me quite poignantly.

Despite my mother's efforts to keep us at home or in the backyard, inevitably, my being a boy and older, I would eventually begin to roam the neighborhood. This was almost always in the company of my new and close friend John DiMilio. John and I were inseparable, so close that the

neighbors called us the Bobbsey Twins—one being fair and the other dark. They said, “Wherever you see one, you look for the other, he won’t be far.” We were constantly in and out of each other’s home, and before long I was deeply immersed in the ambient local Italian culture.

What little sponges children can be. I loved the food, both the taste and the sound of it, those final vowels and rolling consonants: spaghetti, macaroni, pizza, calamari, antipasto, mozzarella, and so forth. Because of Umilta’s deafness, our family had learned to sign to communicate with her. This might explain my fascination with the expressive vocabulary of gestures that was so much a part of Italian conversation. I picked up these gestures naturally, and soon I could curse fluently in Italian to the accompaniment of eloquent gestures, much to the amusement of the adults. “Yo, kid, wad-daw-yah, a wise guy? Gi-dudah-heyah!”

I must in truth have been a sight, a pint-size *paisano* in blackface. A real wise guy. Everyone knew me even if they did not know my name. The street name they gave me, because I was dark, was Sichie, short for Sicilian. (Later I would learn from Malcolm X the role of Africans in the history of that island and the extent to which the Moors had left their indelible imprint on Sicilian architecture and on the complexion of the populace.)

Naturally, I also picked up the prevalent political attitudes of the Italian community. They did not particularly trust the government, in particular the FBI and the IRS. Of the two agencies, the IRS was truly to be feared while the FBI, in vernacular translation “Forever Bugging Italians,” was bush league. My neighbors had scant respect for either that agency or its director, noting that it had consistently failed to make a single racketeering charge against Al Capone stick, while the IRS had busted him on tax evasion.

In the Harlem barbershop where my hair was cut, I would hear an African version of this conventional street wisdom. “Better you kill someone than cheat on them taxes, baby. Yo kin get away with murder easier than taxes. Mes wit his taxes an’ Uncle Sam *will* git you. Yes he *will*, swear befo’ God. Look what happened to Capone.”

I know my mother regarded my integration into the local culture with considerable ambivalence. On the one hand, she was pleased with my easy acceptance and local popularity. On the other, a caveat. Her mantra became “Remember now, you can’t be doing like these little white boys. Something happen out there in the street and you *know* who will get the blame.” And that familiar nostrum of black parents: “Your little white friends got it made. For you to make it, you will have to be three times better than them. You best remember that, now.” That, as it turned out, proved not all that accurate, failing as it did to take into account the serious consequences of class, culture, and gender.

However, my mother's misgivings were well founded, for the youth culture of that block was even then at considerable odds with the values and expectations of the parents.

When I began to hang out after sunset, she imposed a 9:00 P.M. curfew, which, of course, I stretched as much as was prudent, which did not escape her notice. There would be frequent confrontation. Whenever I pulled in at 9:20 or 9:30, I'd hear about it in no uncertain terms.

One evening, fortunately for me, nothing very interesting was going down in the street. I went home early and retired quietly upstairs to my room. I read some and fell asleep.

At nine o'clock, my mother became incensed, "I know that boy's been running the streets. Well, when he comes in tonight, I am going to catch him. And he *will* hear *me*."

Whereupon she fetches up some of my Dad's two by fours and nails and proceeds to batten down the front door as though in preparation for a hurricane. I mean it was a sho'nuff *barricade*, Jack. By about ten, she's worried. Ten thirty she's besides herself. She rouses my father. "That son of *yours* is out running the streets again. You better go find him."

"Course I'll go. But, May, you done nailed up the door," my father pointed out.

I hear my name and call down. "Did someone call me?"

"You *upstairs*?" my mother cried. "Stokely, you upstairs?"

"Yes, ma'am. Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing. Nothing at all," she cries. "Stay in your bed." But by then I'm coming downstairs, trying (without great success) to keep a straight face at the sight of the door.

"Oh, what happened to the door?" I ask innocently. "Is a hurricane coming?"

"Yes, Mr. Man. You go ahead and laugh. But the night I catch you, we'll see how you laugh then."

Did my mother have reason to worry? Absolutely. More reason to worry, in fact, than she ever suspected, even though she tried everything possible to keep me out of trouble. Everything possible. Just like John DiMilio's mother; just like Cookie Delappio's mother; just like Paulie Henry's mother. And many, many other mothers like them. They do their best to keep their children out of trouble in this society . . . and fail. They do all in their power to keep them out of jail, to keep them off drugs, away from the many dangers that are out there in America, and too often they fail.

That's why I laugh when I hear people say that it is the parents who are to blame. It's not the parents, it's the society, stupid. The society with its venal, backward, and predatory values. This is what must be changed.

So, what was it that my mother did not really know? Well . . . start with

the bellicose Paulie, he of the ax-lady incident. Among his age group on the block, Paulie was a leader, in fighting, in stealing, in breaking into neighborhood stores, and such like antisocial actions. All potentially self-destructive. A nice friend otherwise, but this was just his undisciplined streak. Something I found so rampant in America.

I knew that some of my Italian friends were breaking into the little mom-and-pop stores around the neighborhood, and that Paulie was coordinating much of this. But, I thought they weren't very bright about it. Working in groups of three, they would break into a store one night. A couple of nights later, another group would break into the same store. They would keep breaking into the same stores until the police—apparently even less bright—would finally catch a few. I knew that, but figured it wasn't my duty to be preaching at them. So I left it alone.

What follows I am not at all proud of. But in a book like this, one has an obligation to be brutally honest. Perhaps it can serve as a lesson to others about the dangers of peer pressure.

Now, I'd heard about this petty thievery and simply did not understand it. As I said, fifty-six years old and still trying to *fathom* America. I'm pretty sure none of us were in dire need of money. I certainly wasn't. And I'm sure the others weren't either, even Paulie. Because once he broke into these little stores, all he could get is the change left overnight, \$20 tops. It all seemed so stupid and risky to me, and for what? But as I told myself, it wasn't my business to be preaching to them. Possibly I didn't want to seem square.

Until that one night when I was hanging out and Paulie proposed that we rip off a store. And as he did so, he seemed to be looking straight at me. It was a test of some sort, that was clear.

I had to calculate rather quickly. I understood clearly the stupidity of this act, but there was the pressure to belong. It was very much "All right, are you down with us or not?" Very much as if, you punk out now and you won't be able to hang no more. We'll know who you are. That kind of pressure.

So I had to calculate, these are my friends, my boys . . . anyway, I calculated to do the wrong thing. But at least I was clever. I told Paulie, "No big thing. We can rip off a store. No problem. But it can't be a store around here . . . that's too close to home." So we went a little bit away down from the neighborhood. Three of us. In those days these small neighborhood stores had little side windows above the doors. Since it was a quiet neighborhood, the owners usually left these little windows open. Paulie, being relatively small and muscular, could easily boost himself up with our help and climb in the window. Which was good, for I certainly wasn't going *into* that store. Paulie didn't mind, partly, I suspect, because we had to take his word about whatever money he found. Since the money

didn't matter to me anyway, I didn't much care whether he shorted us on the take.

Anyway, Paulie went in. We stood watch outside. He got the money, which we split, and went home.

That really affected me because I had never thought I'd ever allow myself to slip to that degree.

That night I experienced what one might call a serious crisis of conscience. All the way home and before I fell asleep, all I could think was why? I certainly didn't need it. I kept thinking about my mother, seeing the pain and anger in her face. I wasn't worried about her anger, as in her beating me, 'cause as I figured it, I would be in jail where she couldn't reach me anyway. But the hurt, you know. I kept seeing her before me, all she had done, how valiantly she'd tried, how she'd worked so hard . . . and here was this huge failure I had stupidly brought upon her. The disgrace, that is what really touched me as I'm sure it touches many other youths.

That night we were successful but I told myself I would never, ever do that again. And I never did.

I often reflected on what the consequences for my life might have been had we been caught for this first criminal act, which would have been breaking and entering and petty larceny. All of us would have gone down together for sure, and it would have meant at least a juvenile record. I have no idea—forget the family crisis—where that first arrest would have led me. I know for Paulie exactly. His undisciplined streak led him to arrest after arrest after arrest.

Recently, I've been reunited with John DiMilio and he's confirmed that of that group of neighborhood friends only about two went to college and the rest have done some jail time on one charge or another. So, as it turned out, these little white, working-class boys did not have it nearly as "made" as my mother had initially thought. Course, I have been in jail, and not only in this country. But I'm thankful to be able to say that none of my arrests were on criminal charges. All were political.

Here too some say, "Well, you escaped. You made it. If you did, the others could too." No. No. No. It is not nearly so simple. I had or was lucky to find alternatives, and the movement may also have saved me. I'm convinced that the deck is so stacked that only a certain number can get through. I happened to be one of that certain number. That's all.

For one thing, I was really never as completely integrated into the neighborhood's young male culture as it might have appeared. In spite of my street "gang" activity, my fluency in Italian invective, and my popular name Sicchie, clearly I was in that culture but really not of it. We were black and the neighborhood was white. Our socializing and our identification were with an extended family of Africans, at first mostly of Caribbean origin, but growing to include Africans born in the United States. On holi-

days, on Sundays after church, we would exchange visits for elaborate Caribbean meals, music, and conversation. Or there would be picnics in one or another of the city parks where we'd enjoy our music and games of soccer. So although we lived comfortably in a Little Italy, we depended for our social life and cultural expression and renewal on an extended network of friends and family that crisscrossed African communities in three boroughs of the city: Brooklyn, Queens, and Harlem.

On these visits the young Carmichaels dressed in their Sunday best and under heavy, heavy manners (our best impress-the-relatives behavior) earned accolades for excellent deportment. Which was, in one respect, a little ironic.

Because of Umilta, all five Carmichael children had learned to sign. This ability proved heaven-sent during those long visits with Caribbean adults, some of whom were firm believers in the Victorian dictum that "children should be seen and not heard." Dutifully we sat, silent as mice, while signing outrageous comments among us. Sometimes even venturing to make fun of the unsuspecting elders at the table.

"My Lord, look at that *hat!*"

"Yeah, it looks like a crow's nest, eh?"

At some point before we left, there would be some recognition of our admirable deportment. "Oh," someone of the seen-and-not-heard persuasion would gush to the delight of the proud parents and the muted giggles of the children, "your children are so well-behaved. They were so quiet all that time, they never said a word."

Yeah, sure. That's only because you didn't hear what Umilta said about your funny ol' hat, Lady.

Another thing that distanced me somewhat from much of the petty outlawry of the neighborhood guys was that I loved to read and my parents encouraged this. These were two extremely intelligent and resourceful people, but without much formal education. They were literate enough, but hardly literary. So while they were convinced of the crucial importance of reading and encouraged me in it, they could not offer much guidance about *what* to read. My mother would buy all kinds of books that seemed to her "educational." She certainly bought a lot of encyclopedias, seduced no doubt by the salesman's line about "giving your children every educational advantage." I also spent hours in the library enduring the taunts of the neighbor kids about being "a bookworm." With Olympian impartiality, I read everything and anything.

In addition, there was the threat of punishment. My mom was the first line, the cutting edge of family discipline—my father being held in reserve for really serious offenses—and she was particularly vigilant and strict with me, the son. But as long as I stayed at or near the top of my

class, she would cut me some slack. So I contrived to stay there and pretty much did. Whatever I knew would please Mother, that I tried my best to do. Anything I knew would displease her, that I'd try to avoid. For this, she has earned my undying gratitude because, without her firm restraining presence, undoubtedly I'd have ended up in jail like so many of my neighborhood buddies. Thank you, May Charles, thank you, thank you. (In Africa, when you mean to thank someone seriously, you have to do it thrice.)

The other thing that contributed to my escape was that P.S. 34, the neighborhood school, went only to the sixth grade. For the seventh and eighth grades, we'd have to go to P.S. 83, which, while only about a fifteen-minute walk away, was something of a different world.

The year was 1954. For us, it marked the onset of puberty, the age when, as they say in the Caribbean, "A boy begin to smell him mannish." So the antisocial activity on the block became a little more ambitious, therefore potentially more serious.

Because P.S. 83 was a magnet school and a lot larger, a wider range of students would be feeding in from different elementary schools. Now there would be Jewish kids from across Pelham Parkway; more Irish and Italians from farther down Morris Park Avenue; and Africans, the same two from P.S. 34, the Stovall kid and me.

Since the school was larger, the kids from my neighborhood were split up in different classes. I imagine there must have been some kind of academic tracking in effect, for John DiMilio and I tended to find ourselves in classes with the more academically serious students from different neighborhoods. Some of the new students with whom I became friendly had rather more intellectual interests than my local circle. These new friends and I began to exchange visits, and this served to distance me somewhat from the neighborhood circle.

But in the evenings and on Saturdays we'd still hang out. The stealing continued but I steadfastly refused to participate. But that didn't mean I was completely uninvolved, because while I myself would not steal, I would hide the others' stolen goods for them. A nice distinction without a real difference, huh?

It was a contradiction and it preyed naggingly on my mind no matter how hard I tried to dismiss it. This was rendered even more troubling because my father was so scrupulously, resolutely, and unambiguously honest a man. "If you didn't work for it," he'd always say, "don't look for it. If you didn't sweat for it, don't even think of it." In all the time we lived together, I never knew him to deviate in the slightest from that principle. In fact, some of his fellow craftsmen would visit and sometimes talk about taking materials from the big construction jobs as, so they said, com-

pensation for the discrimination they endured. Paying the bosses back, they said. Why didn't my father? But he was resolute: "If I didn't work for it, I ain't looking for it."

How I would ultimately have resolved this contradiction I do not know, but two events, coming at about the same time, intervened to make the decision for me.

I am pretty sure it was Paulie who first suggested we form a gang to be called the Morris Park Dukes. Never heard of them? Neither has anyone else. The Morris Park Dukes were never to etch their name in "glory" or infamy in the violent folklore of New York youth gang culture.

On Saturday the Dukes used to go to a movie theater on Boston Road and Pelham Parkway. The main reason for our going was to fight. You'd find some guy from another neighborhood who for some reason you didn't like and you'd both go to it. Innocuous perhaps, but certainly senseless: Go and fight someone you don't even know? Actually, this too was certainly copycat behavior influenced almost entirely by Hollywood's youth-culture, "urban jungle" movies of the time—*Blackboard Jungle*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and so forth. What ever happened to Sal Mineo, who was very much a model and culture hero to my Italian friends?

Anyway, someone decided that we Dukes needed to take it to the next level. This meant making zip guns, the primitive, distant ancestors of the Glock nines, currently the weapon of choice in urban youth warfare. The manufacture of a zip was simplicity itself. First you steal the aerial from someone's car, preferably a car parked well outside your neighborhood. Then you procure a cap pistol and file its firing pin to a point. A suitable length of aerial is cut off, filed down, and inserted into the barrel of the cap pistol. Then you stretch a number of stiff rubber bands around behind the firing pin and in front of the trigger guard.

Now you position a .22-caliber bullet in the barrel under the pin. Pull the pin back and release it. If the alignment is correct—about one time in twenty—the pin will strike the detonator on the back of the shell and the gun will fire. Of course, *where* the bullet will go is anybody's guess.

So we decide to make zip guns. Why we were making them is, to this day, still not clear to me. I suppose we were to take them up to the theater on Pelham Parkway. I guess.

The next Saturday about twelve of the Morris Park Dukes went to a five-and-dime to buy the cap pistols. En route, someone was visited by insight: we the Dukes, we can't be *buying* no pistols. That's beneath us, a kid action. So just like that, we walked out of the store without paying. That evening we find cars with suitable aerals and break them off. When the owners woke up, their cars had no aerals. When the zips were made, some actually fired, most didn't. I can't now remember whether

mine did. But this was the final act in my flirtation with the destructive behavior of our wanna-be gang.

Now that we had guns that fired—at least a few did—were we really going to shoot, possibly maim or even kill, some kid we didn't even know? I am sure the Dukes never did, but I sure wasn't about to tag along to find out.

Not long after that I went to a store—not the same five-and-dime—with one of my sisters, and when we came out, she proudly showed me something she'd boosted. I was outraged, absolutely livid. My sister cannot possibly be involved in something so *stupid!* What if she is arrested? What of the embarrassment to our parents? Instinctively, without hesitation, I order her to take it back. She refuses. "Look," I warned, "if you don't take it back, I'm gonna tell Mother." Apparently she did not believe me, so I did.

My mother took my sister back to the store, either returned or paid for the merchandise, and gave her a proper beating right there in the store. I'm fairly confident none of my sisters were ever tempted to shoplift after that.

That relatively trivial incident proved the straw that busted my camel's back. It forced me to face the real implications of all I had been doing, however halfheartedly, with the guys. No further rationalization was possible. The deep and abiding sense of guilt and shame that I experienced was awful. I mean, I can't remember feeling so absolutely wretched again. The hypocrisy of turning my sister in for shoplifting when I was doing much worse seriously haunted me.

I now think that those two accomplices—guilt and shame—are probably together the most corrosively painful scourges the human spirit can experience. Precisely because they always and only stem from one's *own* failure to keep faith with one's truest self. With one's private conscience, one's most cherished and basic principles, with one's sense of honor. For me it was an important lesson too painful to ever forget. I may not have known the word *integrity*, but that is what that was about. That simple incident first taught me that no matter how private or hidden the betrayal, one cannot live with oneself without integrity. The pain is too great. My late father had a much used saying that, because it seemed so unforgiving, puzzled me greatly as a young boy. It occurs to me that this is what it was about: integrity. "You can tell the truth every day of your life," my father would say, "and if, on the day of your death, you tell a lie . . . that is what will matter."

That very day I began seriously to separate myself from the antisocial behaviors of the street.

What is curiously inverted in the macho street code of my young friends is that they would, in all likelihood, have found my action quite

natural and understandable. Not, as one might expect, an indignant "Jeez, whaad'ya say? Ol' Stokes ratted the kid out? Ged audda heah!" But an instinctive and complete understanding that considerations of family honor (and particularly that of the womenfolk) had left me no choice. For them, the women in the family, like "Caesar's wife," must be beyond reproach. Considerations of family honor that were, oddly enough, not seen to be threatened in quite the same way by our own escalating thug-gish behavior in the street.

In September of 1954—a momentous year in contemporary black history—I went to P.S. 83, and I left in June of 1956. That is, I went to P.S. 83 just a few months after the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision and left just prior to the final victory of the African community in the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott. At the time, both events could not have seemed more remote from my immediate circumstances and for that matter to each other. But they were, in fact, closely related and both would significantly determine the trajectory of my life.

My two years at P.S. 83—the seventh and eighth grades—were important formative ones. From the perspective of forty-five years it is easy to see how the streams of cultural influence that were to imprint my personality, inform my consciousness, and determine the trajectory of my life had begun to emerge during those two years.

On the one hand, this period of my youth could—without too much irony—be called my most "all-American" period. At school I was completely surrounded by whites and, as far as could be seen, appeared to have been completely accepted by them. I was placed among the high academic achievers and pretty much flourished in that environment. So much so that in the eighth grade, a friend, Donald Sweetbaum, drafted me to run for vice president of the Student Council.

I was not at all sure I wanted to do that. I was very conscious of being the lone African in the class and I wasn't entirely ready to test—at the polls—how the class *really* felt about me.

But, when we sat down to discuss it, Sweetbaum was confident. "I know you gonna win, man, everyone knows you," etc., etc. Well, how could they *not* know me, I was the proverbial fly in the buttermilk. Then he clinched the argument: "Look buddy, how can you lose? I got the winning slogan." And he produced one of the more memorable jingles in American electoral politics before the advent of the Reverend Jesse Jackson: "Okeydokey, vote for Stokey."

Sweetbaum proved to have had his finger unerringly on the pulse of the electorate—we smoked the opposition. I'm glad for his sake that we then had no idea of the grand theft dough, the obscene sums of corrupt money political consultants would command from a terminally corrupt

system today. Sweetbaum, an otherwise nice, decent kid, might have been drawn into a life of crime like the others we now see on TV.

Without question, P.S. 83 was a good, nurturing experience for me. The best proof of this would be that the school selected me among its candidates for the citywide competitive entrance exam for the Bronx High School of Science. The school's good judgment in my case was vindicated because I won a place in the "highly competitive, elite" Bronx Science. And this was 1956, a decade before any such notion as affirmative action was even contemplated. Therefore, I had earned this high academic honor purely on sheer *individual*, intellectual merit, untainted by any suggestion of demeaning "racial" preference. Well, you may believe that if you wish. (I'm sure my proud mother still does, and I got a bridge in Brooklyn I'd like to interest you in. . . .)

I was very, very clear, even at age fourteen, that my selection was heavily indebted to racial politics and the ongoing struggle and agitation of my people. Yeah, I had good grades, but I have no illusion that my being their sole African student didn't have something to do with the middle school's decision to nominate me. Or that Bronx Science did not understand clearly that they *had* to make room for at least a few Africans or risk being denounced for racism by the African community. Even in 1956, we had a word for it. We called it tokenism.

How did I know this? True, that this kind of discussion was really not a part of daily conversation at P.S. 83, given its racial composition. Actually, my nappy, nappy African hair, my "natty dreads," had saved me from that cocoon of willed "innocence" in which white America famously entombed its youth during the fifties.

See, when we first moved to Amethyst Street, we had gone to every neighborhood barbershop and failed to find a single barber who knew how to cut my hair. Or who would admit that he did. Which meant that, until I left for college, I'd have to go into Harlem every two or three weeks to have my hair cut.

At first the trips to the barbershop with my father—I believe it was on 145th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues—were a little disconcerting. I mean, simply because of the sharp difference in style, sound, feel, and *look* between Harlem barbershop culture and the Italian/Irish ambience of Amethyst Street. For one thing, everyone and everything, even to the pictures on the walls, was black, or at least not white. Then too the shop was popular, so I often had to wait my turn in the chair. This became the one time in my life that I actually enjoyed sitting around waiting for anything.

A constant stream of men came through the shop; some, from their accents, were from the Caribbean. Most though, from the soft, slow

cadences and rhythms and the “bluesy folk” images of their speech, were from somewhere close to the heart of Dixie. Some men seemed to come in simply to talk and listen, for conversation that sometimes reached the level of art. There was the woofin’, the jiving, the stylin’ and the signifying and the dozens. No, there weren’t the dozens, I mean, I ain’t going to lie on my people now. This was a respectable establishment and the real “dirty dozens” would not have been appropriate, being entirely too “low-lived.” Now, there was occasionally a slight *flavoring*, a *hint* of the dozens, at least, the form of it. But only between two very good friends. And it certainly never got down and dirty the way the nasty dozens s’posed to be: “Yo’ mamma doan wear no drawers,” etc. But there was otherwise the full range and vast repertoire of African-American colloquial discourse.

Apart from the pleasures of the style, which reflected the African pleasure in language for its own sake, the content of the discussions was the real revelation to me. On a good day, a wide range of political opinion and commentary, and community, national, and international news was to be heard and dissected. There came into the shop old Garveyites, race men, street players, black Republicans *and* Black Muslims, nationalists of all descriptions, and the rappers, poets, and wordmen who seemed to talk simply for the joy of hearing their own voices.

That barbershop became for me a necessary corrective, an early window into an African-American worldview and sensibility, a crucially important counterpoint of reference for those.

Take for example the Korean War, excuse me, the “police action.” I know that it was in the barbershop that I first heard the saga of Pork Chop Hill, that bloodiest of battles, where the white brass—MacArthur? Ridgeway? I forget who, but a white man anyway—cynically used hundreds of African-American troops, black men, as cannon fodder.

For a better example, during my two years at P.S. 83, two events would be of profound significance for African-Americans in my age set. They would not only affect race relations in the country but the psychology of an entire generation. But I can remember no organized discussion in school, in Sunday school, or any casual mention in the streets of the Bronx community of either the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision or, the next year, the lynching of young Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi.

But at the barber’s, they were the central subject of discussion and analysis, the topic of debate, the source of anger and eloquence, the catalyst for poignant reminiscences, in short, for the handing down of collective history. For me, the barbershop was a necessary emotional and cultural corrective to the hospitable, quite comfortable but essentially alien vibe of the home turf.

. . .

When we first moved to Amethyst Street, our family had no car. This meant that church became a major chore for my mother each Sunday. The church we had gone to near Stebbins Avenue was John Wesley Methodist, a small church of a few Caribbean families. My father, always a devoted man, was in his element there, spiritually *and* culturally.

But getting there was onerous, particularly for my mother, who had to rise at the crack of dawn or before, cook the Sunday dinner, then supervise the preparation of five children. We then had to ride the bus or the train down to the church and back. So my mother decided to join a Methodist congregation within reasonable walking distance of our house. Westchester Methodist on the edge of the Parkchester district must have been the closest Protestant outcropping in that ocean of Catholicism. We children went to Westchester Methodist with my mother while my father would continue to worship at John Wesley Methodist among his own.

The congregation of Westchester Methodist, like all else in the immediate vicinity, was lily-white. So we Carmichaels integrated it. We were made welcome by the pastor and received warmly by many of the members, though for some time, some heads would continue to turn when we walked in.

I said "many" members received us warmly, because I can recall nothing from those members with whom we interacted except the kind of fellowship and hospitality one would expect from fellow Christians. If any in the congregation felt otherwise, they would, naturally, have kept their distance so we would not have gotten to even meet them.

We attended the Sunday School at Westchester and I would join the Scout troop. I have always, like my father, loved music. My mother, seeing this, had enrolled me for lessons with a local piano teacher. This was a short-lived investment in my cultural development, since it soon became clear that I was not destined to be a concert pianist. (Also, piano lessons were a little awkward to explain to Paulie and the Dukes.) But my brief foray into "higher" culture was by no means a total loss. Actually, I'd quite forgotten this until reading in a national magazine recently that I "played the piano at Westchester Sunday School." Which makes it sound as if I had been the resident pianist. What happened was that *once* I performed that beloved staple of all piano teachers for their beginners, Beethoven's simple and lovely melody, *Für Elise*. Proud mothers do tend to exaggerate, even forty-five years later.

In this Sunday school, I made many new friends—Ronald Zemati, with whom I also joined the Boy Scout troop, and Bob Johnson come to mind. Bob and I became really friendly and would visit each other's house. Nothing unusual in that except that Bob lived—as did many of the church members—in Parkchester, which at that time did not allow black

residents. So when Bob and I would pass through Parkchester, there would be stares and raised eyebrows, which, naturally, we ignored.

If, however, we were with a group of young people from the Sunday school, *and* if I happened to be walking next to, or in conversation with, a girl, then heads and hackles would be raised, not just eyebrows. So, from a young age I clearly understood this aspect of American racism. Besides which my mother had, at about this time, begun to seriously caution me about white girls, and in particular that I should *never even think* about anything remotely resembling a white wife. If any such idea ever broached my consciousness, I should forget about it “like bullfrog forgot about tail” in the Caribbean proverb. The next year—after the revelation of the Till atrocity—a note of real anxiety and alarm crept into my mother’s warnings on the subject. The issue would come up only once in high school, and I’ll discuss that at the proper time.

Ron Zemati and I joined the Scout troop together, where once more I was the lone African presence. We went camping and on hikes, which provided a welcome opportunity to explore nature and the outdoors after being cooped up in the city. I learned a lot I would not otherwise have learned so I really enjoyed scouting a lot, becoming a Life Scout.

Among the merit badges that I earned was the one for religious knowledge. I was at that time, like my father, very religious and I really enjoyed reading the Bible for that badge. So religious, in fact, that I seriously contemplated a clerical vocation. Mummy Olga played quite a role in that. Still living with us, she was a religious woman. She was particularly taken with a blind radio evangelist, to whom she listened (religiously) every Sunday without fail. I cannot remember the preacher’s name, but he calculated that if one read two chapters a day, one could read the entire Bible in a year and a half. This struck my aunt as a *most* excellent undertaking, particularly if I would read with her. So every night before bed we’d read our two chapters, and on Sunday evening we’d listen together when the preacher commented learnedly on the week’s fourteen chapters. Mummy Olga would have been delighted had I fulfilled her fond predictions and gone into the pulpit. I always tease her that I came close and that she is responsible for my always quoting the Scriptures in my political speeches.

In rereading this account, my father, while a constant enough presence, seems but a vague one, hovering somewhere in the middle distance, indistinct, while my mother vibrantly commands the narrative foreground. This is true only in the obvious and limited sense that May Charles was very much, day to day, the center of our little domestic universe—while my father was out in the world securing our family’s livelihood by the sweat of his brow.

That is exactly how they both wanted it. To them, this was not just the preferred arrangement, the proper ordering of our world, but the only conceivable one. In this, they were full partners, completely content and confident in this division of responsibilities.

As an adult I now understand just how precarious that daily bread had been. With the benefit of hindsight and adult experience, I can fully understand exactly how extraordinary a couple my parents were, but we always somehow knew that they were special (aren't all parents), but not *how unique*.

As individuals they would appear to be as strikingly different in their personalities as a man and a woman could be. As a couple, though, they were splendid, a perfect complement.

For one thing, I believe that until the last moment of their life together, they were in love. More than that, they were in the fullest sense of that word helpmeets: partners whose shared respect, trust, and confidence in the other was unqualified. Their major priority being, of course, their children.

Yet they patently did not see or engage with the world in anything remotely like the same terms. In a curious way, their individual styles and personalities were as different as their *essential* values were indivisible. My mother was, and remains to this day, voluble, passionate, impulsive, and excitable. Her spirit is fiercely confrontational. But she was also pragmatic, provident, and practical. She was an excellent seamstress, sewing much of our clothes. She also sewed for a small circle of customers for cash. So that in any financial crisis when extra money was needed, we could usually depend on May Charles to produce it from somewhere.

Adolphus, my father, was in contrast a deliberate man. Not excitable, quiet, thoughtful. Not physically very large, he was wiry and strong. He seemed to have boundless energy and was certainly one of the hardest-working men I've ever known. I've tried to emulate that quality in my own life and work. His face was spare, the skin taut over a prominent forehead and cheekbones with large, deep-set eyes that were steady and quiet. A face without lines or an ounce of superfluous skin or fat.

His demeanor was serious, but without being in any way stiff. His manner always seemed calm, almost relaxed. A very social man, he loved music and was an exquisitely graceful dancer. His words were always thoughtful. He was not verbose, but we always knew that whatever our father said in his quiet voice, he truly meant. We never disobeyed him. At dinner he'd always ask each of us, "Well, what did you learn today?" If someone came up shaky, he'd shake his head. "You know, the day on which you learned nothing is a wasted day. Enough of those and what've you got? A wasted life."

My sister Janeth (now Nagib) remembers that "because he said so lit-

tle, we girls paid total attention to anything he did say." She also remembers that sometimes when they were small and had been bad, our mother would greet him with a litany of complaints about the girls' shortcomings in his absence.

"Adolphus, you've got to punish them." Sometimes he'd summon them sternly to the bedroom, take off his belt, and fetch the mattress a number of resounding whacks.

"What you all waiting for? Go ahead and cry."

What I most remember about our father is his ineffable calm, understated air of confidence. He knew his own worth and so was under no pressure to prove anything to anyone. Nothing, and in particular, no problem in carpentry or craftsmanship, ever seemed to intimidate him.

"Well, now," he'd say as he studied the problem. "There's always more'n one way to skin a cat." Sooner or later he came out with an approach—often not the conventional one—but one that would get the job done, and often more efficiently. When his fellow workmen visited, after a drink or two—my father did not drink, but he'd be hospitable—one or another of them would often get expansive: "Boy, you know your father's a great man?" And would brag about some process my father had devised to solve a problem that had stumped their foreman on the job.

But he never learned to like America. Never. Which was the greatest underlying difference between our parents. My mother was determined to make America work for us. The whole dream, for she was determined that in America we should not merely survive, but that we would triumph. In everything that America offered—hence the piano lessons, the better neighborhood, the big "white" church, and so on. We would, so far as her striving, upwardly mobile spirit was concerned, take our rightful place in the mainstream and seize whatever the American Dream had to offer that appealed to us.

My father had absolutely no argument with that. Except perhaps that he was more selective. I think somewhere in his consciousness lurked the notion that we were not only as good as anyone else, but possibly a little better. He was content with himself, with his people, his culture, and more than anything, with his principles.

For, as we children were to discover, something about him was very pure. Whatever he professed, that would he perform. Not only would he not lie, he never really expected that other people would. Again, my sister Nagib. She told me this recently, which had to have happened when she was very young:

"I will never forget the day our father discovered that white folks would lie. I heard them. He was in the bedroom talking with May Charles. It had something to do with his being able to join the union. He said, 'But, Mabel, he *lied*.' My mother said something. 'But, Mabel, the

man lied to me. The man *lied*, Mabel, flat out, he *lied*. I will never forget," my sister told me, "the disillusionment in our father's voice that day."

The story I remember came a little later, after he was a dues-paying member of the union in good standing. He had dutifully presented himself to the hiring hall for almost a month and was still waiting to be referred to a site. Our mother, ever pragmatic, suggested he give the representative "a little something." She'd heard that was how it was done. Everyone did it.

"You mean bribe him?" My father was incredulous. "That ain't right. I don't have to bribe anyone. God is my bribe."

So quietly my mother got some money together, as usual. But given my father's moral scruples, she couldn't do anything as crude as a bribe. A present, though, was another matter, a gesture of respect and goodwill. She gave the money to my uncle Albert who, as "Lord Hummingbird," a calypsonian, worked on a tour ship. This was sometime after the war when French perfume and silk stockings were at a premium but could be had from the black market at the French docks.

When my uncle brought back the contraband, she called up the union rep, saying she simply wanted to meet him and, of course, "here's a little present for your wife."

Next day, my father came home beaming. "Told you I didn't have to bribe anyone—God is my bribe." And he gathered the family together to say a prayerful word of thanks. My mom prayed as thankfully as anyone.

I don't want to give the impression that my father was sanctimonious or, as they say in the South, "plu-pious." He was nothing like that, but he saw ethical principles in religious terms, and religious terms were for him inviolate. He would, for example, say by way of rhetorical emphasis that even if his children were starving, he would never work on Good Friday. For, even as Abraham had been prepared to sacrifice his son on the mountain, so would he.

Except that we knew that the last thing he would ever tolerate was that we, his family, should be in need. My father loved his family and had a great sense of responsibility to them. He had to make sure that everything we needed was there, and he would do anything to ensure our happiness and well-being. To him, providing for us was his paramount responsibility. In capitalist, racist America, with six hungry mouths to feed, that was a feat.

Even when he had a union job, he would sometimes drive a cab at night. In the winter he'd drive the cab and also do occasional carpentry, a room here, a door or window there. After work, he went to electrician school to get a license. Sometimes in the winter he'd sign on as a carpenter or electrician on a merchant ship and ship out. He was at home only to sleep. "Why you working so hard all the time?" I asked.

“Only for you” was his simple answer. “Only for you.” I have always believed this country forced my father to work himself to an early grave. And it was “only for us.”

So, largely because of our indefatigable parents’ resourcefulness during our childhood, our family was never poor, certainly not in the grinding sense that I would encounter poverty in Mississippi, Alabama, or even in Northern cities during my life’s work.

The one time when we children would really feel the cold breath of want and hunger closing in on us was when my father fell ill and was hospitalized for some weeks. Then I discovered what it means for a family in a capitalist society to have a single wage-earner, and to have that person fall ill. Left to the rapacious forces of the market economy, the family is in *serious* trouble. You really go backward economically. That’s what happened to us, but God moves in mysterious ways. . . . This is what my sisters ruefully refer to as our “time of milk and brownies.”

As you might recall, Mummy Olga was a widow twice over. In Trinidad she’d had one particularly persistent and faithful suitor, Mr. Dowling Charles. We children knew that Uncle Dowling really wanted to marry Mummy Olga. But like in the Paul Robeson song, she always answered, “Oh, no, John, no John, no John no.”

We children thought this most unfortunate ’cause we loved Uncle Dowling and just knew that he would have been the perfect husband for Mummy Olga, because he really cared for her, and the care extended to us. But perhaps after the premature deaths of two husbands, Mummy Olga got to believing the conventional folk wisdom—that she was one of those unfortunate women who were death on husbands.

Whatever the case, when Mummy Olga brought us to America, Uncle Dowling was not far behind. His stated reason for coming was to study to be a mortician, but we all knew he was following Mummy Olga. He wanted her, once he completed his studies, to return home with him as his wife, which Mummy Olga declined to do. (Maybe his choice of occupation contributed something to her resistance, I don’t know.) But while he was studying, he supported himself by working in a little restaurant. It was such a tiny place that it bought supplies day to day, and their dessert menu consisted of one item—milk and brownies. When the restaurant closed at night, all that was usually left over was the dessert.

The restaurant was in Brooklyn, where Uncle Dowling reported for work every evening after school. During my father’s illness, every night Uncle Dowling would ride the train all the way up to the Bronx with as much milk and brownies as could be made to fit into his briefcase. Until my father recovered, we had brownies and milk for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Even today, whenever I see a brownie, I recall vividly, inside and out, their taste, their consistency, even their smell.

Uncle Dowling later returned to Trinidad. Sometime in the late seventies, I heard that our uncle was terminally ill. I was, at that time, prohibited from entry into any country of the British Commonwealth by a British ban. However, I was determined to say goodbye to this decent, caring man. And to do so in person. I'm happy to say this proved relatively simple to do on a brief "illegal" visit. It turned out that the ban decreed from "on high" was, at least in my case, very, very loosely enforced by my kinsmen below.

One winter when my father shipped out, one of the ports of call was Accra, Ghana. Independent Ghana. My father came back transfigured, almost glowing, and with many little African artifacts as presents for us. I will always remember the awe and wonder with which we looked at these beautiful and exotic objects that came from *Africa*, our motherland. Nagib recently showed me the elegant little ivory woman's head that had been her present. She's treasured her father's African present over all these years. What I've treasured are the stories about Nkrumah and his struggle for independence and my father's palpable pride and joy in the telling, and at having been among a free nation of African people. I was enthralled by these accounts and never even remotely dreamed that I might ever get to meet such a legendary figure.

One story my dad told with such dramatic description and feeling that the picture he presented etched itself indelibly in my imagination to this day.

It was the opening of Parliament in independent Ghana. Pomp and ceremony. The members are all seated. The gallery is full. World's press in attendance. An air of great expectancy. Everyone is waiting for the new government team to appear. Then they do. The Prime Minister, Mr. Nkrumah, leads his cabinet on to the floor of the hall. There's an audible gasp, surprise, outrage, pride, but mostly, astonishment. Then applause. Here my father's eyes glowed with pride and wonder and a tremor came into his voice.

To a man, the *entire* cabinet is wearing, not the British ceremonial top hat and tails, but the drab, shapeless, dehumanizing garb of British colonial convicts. The humiliating uniforms they had worn while in prison during the struggle.

"Boy, you hear me, those black men marched right out of prison and into power," my father exulted. Of course, my heart was touched by my father's obvious emotion. However, I could have had no idea then, that one day I would be able to share my father's pride in the telling of his story with the *Osageyfo* himself.

I was a sophomore at Howard when my father died. He had been a great lover of music of all kinds, particularly gospel and, of course, calypso. Often when I came in at night, he'd be sitting up in the living

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room listening to his music. "Come here, boy, listen to this!" and he'd put on something, maybe the latest Nat King Cole album. One evening I brought in a single that was the rage of Harlem, kind of a modified calypso by a young man in the Nation of Islam. "Okay, Dad, you listen to this. What you think?" He listened intently and had me play it twice. When he looked up, he had a tear in his eye.

"Bet you," he said, "they'll never play *that* on the radio."

The song was "The White Man's Heaven Is the Black Man's Hell," and the singer-composer was Louis X. You now know him as Louis Farakhan. I'll never forget how his song brought a tear to my father's eye.

Bronx Science: Young Manhood

“Yo . . . boy . . . Yeah, you. . . What you doing up here? . . .

Hey, kid. Didn't you hear me speaking to you?”

“Me, Officer? You weren't speaking to me, were you?”

“Yeah, I'm talking to you. What're you doing up here anyway?”

The youth gestures to the books under his arm. He flips back a cover to reveal a school logo.

“Coming from school, Officer, as you can see.”

“Wha'?” The policeman stares at the book covers. “Those are your books? . . . *You go to Science?*”

“Yeah, afraid so, Officer”—mimics—“*I go to Science*. Some of us actually do, y'know.”

In any culture, the growth during the period from adolescence to young adulthood is of major formative importance. As American culture is organized, this growth period corresponds almost exactly to the four years of high school, which are crucial in determining not only the adult personality but one's future.

That would certainly be my experience at the Bronx High School of Science, where in the fall of '56 I was an entering freshman. At Science, I would face a number of interesting challenges—intellectual, social, cultural, political—all of which would play a significant role in my development.

Within our family, the news of my selection to Science had been greeted with quiet satisfaction, entirely as if it were no less than had been expected of me. My parents knew that Science was an “elite” school, carefully selecting and preparing the city's brightest students for college. This fit neatly with a plan being developed by my father, who in his heart had never really left his beloved Trinidad.

My father's dream was entirely consistent with his values: a family plan for both parents, me, and whichever of my four sisters wanted to sign up. The son would study medicine while the daughters would become

nurses. While we children were completing our medical education, my parents would return to Trinidad, where my father would begin construction of the Carmichael family medical clinic, which he would personally design and build in preparation for the children's return to serve the community.

I guess for my father this would represent something of a triumphant homecoming: the family united and bringing back useful and necessary skills to his beloved community. Something of real and lasting value to justify his hard work in what was to him a long, cold exile. So, from that perspective, my admission to the elite Science school was right on time, clearly the first step. The extent to which we children had enthusiastically endorsed the plan can be seen in that, today, two of my sisters, Nagib and Judy, are nurses.

Bronx Science was an education in more ways than the school might have intended. I had known that the students were drawn from all five boroughs of polyglot New York and were said to be "very, very smart." So I expected high intelligence and academic rigor. But I hadn't expected—actually I hadn't given it much thought—the range of classes and cultures I found in the students there, once I got to know them.

Some were very affluent, the children of wealthy Park Avenue professionals and corporate executives. But the majority were just middle-class kids of college-educated parents, WASP, Jewish, Irish, Italian, and a few Africans born in America. Of some two thousand students at Science, about fifty or sixty were Africans from America. Some students were working class, or like me, first-generation immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, or Latin America. That first day, the only kid I knew in the freshman class was Lefty Faronti, who was working-class Italian from my Bronx neighborhood.

The first challenge was academic. The one thing we all had in common was the knowledge that we were all supposed to be very smart. Naturally, I was eager to see how I would match up against New York's smartest. From the first day I could see that I was not the only freshman nervously sizing up the competition, eager for a chance to show off his smarts. And in truth, competition would be the rule at Science. It didn't take me long to understand that these whites were not necessarily any smarter than me, but that they simply—many of them—had intellectual backgrounds that I lacked.

On the first day, in one of the first classes, the first question we were asked was about our summer reading. How many books and which authors? Boy, was I glad, because I'd read a lot of books. My hand just shot up. Luckily for me, the teacher went in alphabetical order, because was I in for a shock.

I read a lot, voraciously but not at all selectively. My parents had not finished high school or studied in this country, but they knew I should read and insisted on it. But they didn't know *what* I should read. As I've said, my mom brought home tons of books, any books she concluded were "good," i.e., "educational." I read everything and anything, from *Reader's Digest* to the Hardy Boys and Horatio Alger-type uplifting books.

But these kids in the class had (or claimed to have) read authors about whom I'd never heard—Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, and even names that didn't sound American. Later I would discover that they were in fact Russian and French. For instance, if memory serves, a boy sitting immediately behind me claimed to be reading *Capital* by Karl Marx. Long before they got to me, my hand was down for I was scribbling furiously, writing down all these unknown writers whom I would read as quickly as possible, for I resolved I had to know whatever my classmates knew. I ended up with quite a reading list that first day.

Obviously these kids' parents, like mine, encouraged their reading. Except that their parents, unlike mine, knew *where* and *how* to direct their children's reading. But if academic intelligence is, as I do believe, largely a matter of cultural background, I was soon to discover that I too had an advantage over most of my peers. From the regular intelligence tests that they used to give us, I came to understand that these students were no smarter than I.

I have no idea what these tests are like today. But when I was in high school, they consisted of three parts: vocabulary, reading comprehension, and math. And whenever we would take these tests, I'd whup the class. I mean, I'd whup 'em hands down. It's hard to say who was the more surprised, me or them. These were disciplined students with strong intellectual backgrounds who were *very* competitive. Yet, I was beating them?

By about my junior year I figured out the source of my advantage: my uncle Lew.

Within the family, the authority on things academic was Uncle Lew, my mother's uncle. Dr. Lewellyn Silcote was a physician educated at City College and Meharry Medical College in Nashville. Whenever he came to visit, we discussed my education and my prospects. Remember the only three avenues to economic independence thought available to African men then? Well, whenever we'd talk, I'd say, "I'm thinking of being a doctor like you." Uncle Lew would say, "In that case, study Latin. A lot of medical and anatomical terminology is based on Latin."

"What if I'm a lawyer?"

"Same thing. Just about all legal terms are in Latin."

"And if I decide to be a preacher?"

"There too, Latin again."

So I studied Latin and continued to do so all the time at Science. I studied Latin for four years. I read Cicero in Latin. I read Caesar in Latin. And of course Latin has a vast vocabulary. More important, this is the vocabulary from which much of the English vocabulary has evolved. Most of my peers at Science were studying French, which, relative to Latin and English, has a much smaller vocabulary.

So even were I a C student in Latin while you were an A student in French, if we took a vocabulary test, I should whup you, hands down. And since reading comprehension is based on vocabulary and recognition of usage and syntax, my wide if unselective reading was useful there. So I always dominated those two sections while also holding my own in math since it was logical and most times you could check your answers.

Thus I came to understand the cultural basis—or bias, if you will—of intelligence tests. Actually, I first began to understand this in the sixth grade just after my arrival in the United States. This was through spelling bees. In Trinidad, I'd always been number one in spelling. In America, even in the fifth and sixth grades I could never win. This was all cultural. Words like *neighbor* and *color*, I would invariably spell with the British *u*. Then too was pronunciation. I can still remember that I lost a spelling bee in the fifth grade over the verb *assure*. The principal who conducted the contest clearly said *ashore*. I didn't wait for the context; my hand was up and I spelled out "a-s-h-o-r-e." Then she said the context, as in "I ashore you of my good intentions." So naturally I corrected her with the proper (British) pronunciation: "No, ma'am, that's *asseur*" (as in *masseur*). Of course I lost. Funny how I've never forgotten that. I was sure I was right. But it did teach me that spelling also was less a function of intelligence than of culture.

(So much so that today I might be the world's worst speller. Living in Guinea, I now speak French. So I've been exposed to British and American spelling in English and to Guinean French. When I write in either language, I become confused among the three spellings. For example, the French *précédence* is similar in sound, but not spelling or meaning, to *presidents* or *precedents*, and so forth. Speaking, no problem; writing always requires great concentration.)

The Science experience over the next four years could not fail to have a profound effect on me in many, many ways.

Academically it was rigorous, completely a product of the Western Enlightenment: reason and the scientific method. The curriculum and approach were heavily focused on Western rationalism, scientific materialism, the physical sciences, and the scientific method, all of which I found logical and thus intellectually satisfying. This empiricism was as suited to the medical studies I then projected as to the study of social history and

revolutionary theory and practice. Now the political would touch on the academic.

Even though the stifling effects of McCarthyism were still very much present in the late fifties, at Science—outside the classroom at least—the students had a vibrant political debate with some active, well-defined left formations within the student body.

My discovery of this student left was greatly aided by three unrelated, accidental elements: the rational organization of the school, the spelling of my name, and my love of soccer.

I assume its emphasis on rational order led the school to seat the freshmen in alphabetical order in all classes. Thus in my first class the fellow sitting immediately behind me was Gene Dennis. He was the one, I recall, who was reading Steinbeck and Karl Marx. In most classes my freshman year, Dennis sat either beside or behind me, so we got to know each other early and well. I liked the kid instinctively.

He was a very interesting guy, was Gene Dennis. He was a good student, serious and smart. But he was also funny and irreverent, friendly and natural. He was comfortable and easy to be around, unlike some of my other white classmates. Our friendship was sealed the second week when they asked who in the freshman class was interested in going out for the soccer team. I volunteered immediately.

“You play soccer?” Dennis asked.

“From birth, my man.”

“Great. I play too. I’m going out for the team.”

We both made the team. Although we didn’t get much playing time that first year, we had to attend all the practices and dress for the games. So we saw even more of each other, and in our senior year we would cocaptain the team. So not only were we sitting together in class, but after school we rode the bus or train together to Van Cortlandt Park for practice and back down again.

Intelligent, humorous, and full of life, Dennis also had a thoughtful side, a depth of sensitivity and maturity whose source I only later understood.

(Only this year, 1998, did we renew contact and he sent me a book of his poems. One of these, addressed to his dad, was dated 1956, the year we first met. Here are a few verses:

I did real good
while you were gone.
Took care of Mom,
Was the man of the house,
Bought her the presents
you described in your letters,

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the ones the censors
sensed
were all right.

Stood proud by the prison gate
Heard you shiver inside.
Watched your hair
bleach ice white
In the jail house light.

I did real good,
swallowed tears
In the park when
Richie beat on me
for being the Commie's kid.
Didn't let the FBI men
ask me questions
when they'd follow
me home.
While you were gone
I grew up fast
too fast
To be so old
at the age of twelve.

I hope you can
See the difference
when you get out
Tomorrow.
After all these years
I hope you can see
Behind my grown up eyes
and know.
I need you home so
I can be a kid
again.
If it's not too late.

Discovering this poem was a revelation. I was touched when I read those lines, for he'd given no indication of that private pain in his manner or conversation when I'd met him at school.)

As our friendship grew, I invited him home because my parents insisted on meeting all our school friends. Of all those I brought home,

my parents and sisters liked Gene Dennis the best. They said he seemed the most comfortable and at ease in our home. "And," my mother added, "for an American kid, he has really good manners."

After a couple months of our sitting together in classes and soccer practice every day, Gene said, "Look here, man. I'm having a party Saturday night. Why don't you come down."

"Sure, anytime."

He wrote down the address, to which I didn't pay much attention at the time. That Saturday, though, I was sure he had made a mistake. The address was in Harlem. So I called Gene and delicately skirted the issue.

"Hey, man, is the party still on, 'cause I'm coming down, y'know."

"Course it's still on."

"Great. So . . . what time we talking about?"

"Say about seven-thirty, eight o'clock. You remember the address?" He repeated it. It was the same as I'd written, the middle of Harlem.

"You know how to get here?" he asked.

"Of course, I do." Now I really wanted to ask him how he came to be living in Harlem, but of course I did not. But I was more curious than ever.

By now I'd discovered the vast cultural difference between parties given by the white students and those given by "usses."

At that time at Science, few Africans would be at the parties given by whites. Often I'd be the only one. Usually people would be sitting around, often on cushions on the floor. Someone'd be strumming a guitar and folk songs would be sung. Sometimes classical European music would provide a soft background for conversation. Very little dance music would be played, and if it was, only a few people would dance.

It was at first a mild culture shock, but I adapted. I enjoyed the conversation and the soft music well enough. Those parties were pleasant, but they sho wasn't *fun* as in git down, big-time *fun*.

Gene Dennis's party would turn out to be very different from white parties. But had it been anyone but Gene giving the party I most likely wouldn't have gone. Why?

Because, a couple of weeks earlier this other student had invited me to his party. And he must really have wanted me to be there, because he kept checking every day, pressuring me almost. "So you are coming, aren't you?" "I am gonna see you Saturday night?" kinda thing. He seemed to really want me there. This party wasn't in Harlem, it was on Park Avenue.

There was a doorman and even the doorman was white. The elevator opened into the living room. I'd never seen *that* before. I mean it was opulent, roaring fireplace, sunken floors, high ceilings, heavy thick carpets, picture windows with a spectacular view of the New York skyline at night. I'd never seen anything like it except in movies. I was impressed. I

would have been happy simply to spend my time looking at the view and admiring the artwork. But at some point we had to meet his mother and a group of her friends.

The mother was effusive. "Oh, Stokely, I've heard so much about you. How smart you are, your sense of humor. How handsome, what features you have, etc." The way she went on was embarrassing, it was clear I was the exotic featured attraction.

When I was leaving I said my good-byes and thanked the mother. One of her friends must have said something which I didn't hear. But I distinctly heard the mother's answer before the elevator door closed. It had a certain smugness I didn't like. "Oh, yes, of course," she said. "We allow Jimmy to hang out with Negroes."

Now, when Africans gave a party, it was big fun. Nothing but dance music, calypso, rhythm and blues, soul, whatever, and evra-body be on the floor dancing, nonstop, righteously gittin' down. That was the point at African parties: to have you a good time, you just had to dance.

I had a great time at Gene Dennis's party though. It was a cultural synthesis between the two styles of party. First of all, it was indeed in Harlem, with almost as many Africans there as whites. *And*, they played good dance music and folks actually danced. But in another room, people just sat and talked. So you could dance, then get down and enjoy good conversation, a lot of it about politics. I really enjoyed myself. Far as I was concerned, it was the best party I'd been to that year. Gene and I became closer and it must have been obvious. . . .

A short time later at school an Italian classmate approached me beligerently. He demanded, in extremely vulgar language, "Why are you always hanging with that blank, blank, expletive, blank Communist Gene Dennis?"

"Gene Dennis? What you talking about, Gene Dennis ain't no Communist. Gene a blue-eyed all-American boy. Git outta here."

"See . . . that's how stupid you people are. That's just how they get you. They be nice to you and before you know it, boom, you in their power. You trapped. They got you. You duped."

I listened to this tirade in amazement. I could only stare at him while slowly backing away. It was my first, but by no means my last, encounter with that classic American formulation of Communist duplicity and cunning set against African gullibility. But of course I had to check it out.

I had a classmate called Michael O'Hare, who made a point of appearing intelligent and broadly well-informed. So much so that some considered him arrogant. I didn't think him arrogant. I just thought that O'Hare saw no reason to hide his light under a bushel: he was smart and didn't mind letting you know that he was. So I found him.

"O'Hare, what do you know about Gene Dennis?"

“Oh, only what everyone else knows, Carmichael. His father, Eugene Dennis Sr., is a high-level operative in the Communist Party U.S.A. He was jailed under the Smith Act. Your friend Gene is one of the bright hopes of the Young Communist League in America. Anything else you want to know?”

My jaw must have dropped.

“Nothing else, O’Hare.” I grinned. “I was just checking to see how much you knew.”

But it was—at least at first—a real problem.

So . . . my friend Gene was a Communist. According to my Italian classmate, a blank, blank, expletive Communist, which pretty much summed up the prevailing public opinion on the question around my neighborhood. (This was not as universal in the Harlem barbershop, where all kinds of radical opinion could be heard.) But Commie or not, Gene was my good friend. I really liked him. Instinctively I felt that there would be something vaguely dishonorable or even cowardly in turning against a friend who had done you no harm, had never offended you, purely because of the social pressure, which had nothing to do with our friendship.

But this was, after all, still the McCarthy period. Rabid anticommunism and paranoia were pervasive. I knew I would at least have to discuss this news with my parents.

Not having been born here, they had no deep understanding of the issue. Communism for them was simply something to be avoided. Americans said it was the enemy, so getting mixed up with or being associated with a Communist could do you real harm. So best to leave it alone. That would be about the extent of their attitude.

Before taking it to them, I wrestled with the problem and reached my own solution.

If he a Communist and the enemy, I figured, then they should jail him. They jailed his father, hadn’t they? But Gene ain’t in jail. He goes to Science. So that’s on them. He’s their problem, not mine. If he’s a threat and trouble to them, then they should handle it. If they ain’t put him in jail, then it sure ain’t my job to jail him. Nor even to check his attitude, nor even to be a check on him for them. It’s not my responsibility to do the state’s work.* That took care of the problem for me, and when I discussed it with my parents, that’s what I said: “If they haven’t put him in jail, then it’s not our business.”

They were of course disturbed. They were aware of the prevailing attitude and instinctively didn’t want their son to put his future at risk. They

*A few years later SNCC would face its own version of this question. Our collective decision then was not very different from my fourteen-year-old conclusion.

felt that maybe I should begin to put some distance between us. What really compounded their dismay was that they really liked Gene.

I see now that theirs was the classic dilemma: the demonization of the unknown, the abstraction at odds with the human reality. They were prepared to abhor and fear "Communism," but charming, decent Gene? It's like the kid who really hates and despises all gays and never tires of letting you know. But his music teacher? A wonderful human being and the greatest teacher he ever had.

Anyway, over the next four years, the friendship between Gene and me grew closer and my parents' initial concern shriveled away. But in one sense, I guess, my Italian classmate's prediction was accurate. I don't believe I became anyone's "dupe," but it wasn't too long before I was going to meetings of the Young Communist League, attending study groups, and eventually attending their rallies.

This association, which began in my freshman year, continued in some manner until graduation and was, for many reasons, an important element of my political education. Who was it that said, "Education is what you have left after you've forgotten everything you learned in class"?

While my association with the student left at Science did not begin my political interest, it certainly focused it in a certain direction—the tradition of European radical writing and revolutionary theory. For the first time I encountered a systematic radical analysis, a critical context and vocabulary that explained and made sense of history. It explained the inequities and injustice I'd long been conscious of in the society around me and prescribed (even predicted) revolutionary solutions.

That was wondrously exciting intellectually. Marxism offered me an approach, a coherent point of view from which to understand and engage society, in terms of the "forces of history." These people impressed on me that to bring about social change you had to study and clearly understand the forces of society. It's probably not really true that my political attitudes were formed here, but my interest in political struggle was heightened and I learned that a strong theoretical base required systematic study and that regular theoretical study is a constant political duty.

New York at that time had a whole youth culture on the left that seems no longer to exist in this country. There were many organized activities—debates, meetings, conferences, rallies, and even camps out in the countryside just as we had in the Boy Scouts. I participated in all these. I became familiar with names like Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky and other revolutionary thinkers, whom I read for the study groups. Out at camps in the New York or New Jersey woods, we'd discuss particular books, current political developments, struggles that were going on, what our attitudes ought to be, what tactics ought to be employed, and so forth.

In the evenings after the discussions, we'd have little parties. I will always remember these parties as ending with our singing "Hava Nageela" and dancing the hora.

At that time most Communist Parties followed the lead of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Stalin had given guns to Israel in their fight against the Palestinian people, so in socialist countries and Communist Parties worldwide, support for Israel was automatic; the Palestinian people clearly merited no political support at all. Therefore in my early days within the ranks of the Communist/Socialist Party, I regarded Israel as a socialist state, deserving of revolutionary support throughout the world.

At school I became identified—completely—with the left. I was always at their rallies, joining the arguments against the reactionary student groups. I participated publicly in all their activities. At demonstrations I was always forthright in defending their right to speak. So most students thought that I was a member.

But I joined neither the Young Communist League nor the youth wing of the Socialist Party, neither the Socialist Party of America nor the Socialist Workers Party. My reasons for this were interesting and not what you may think.

Of course, it was a repressive time of enforced conformity—the last half of the gray Eisenhower decade. The Smith Act was in effect. McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee were in full bay. They had already assassinated the Rosenbergs and jailed the leadership of the Communist Party. The FBI was harassing and the government was hounding one of my early heroes, Paul Robeson. Even Eisenhower would, before leaving office, warn of the sinister power of the "military-industrial complex" as the Cold War was at its chilliest. It was a time of loyalty oaths and witch-hunts. All of which constituted excellent reasons not to formally join any of these parties of the left. But those were, oddly enough, not my reasons.

You could say, I suppose, that my reasons for not joining were cultural. The longer I was around my Communist friends, the more complicated my reservations became, but at first it was simple: the religious question.

I was, like most Africans, very religious, coming as I did from a very religious family. And you know that one of my early career options was the clergy. However, most of the youth in the Young Communist League were—publicly anyway—devout atheists. They often made jokes about God, and while I appreciated these young comrades and respected them, those anti-God jokes—funny as some of them were—were initially shocking and very, very offensive to me.

However, at Bronx Science, with its scientific materialist orientation, my religious feelings gradually lessened.

And as my religious devotion waned, my scientific education and political orientation grew. But I was always clear that this religious waning was in *me*, not in the African community. I never fell victim to that confusion.

Now I can see clearly that this apparent contradiction between religious faith and science is almost entirely a Western phenomenon, but then the contradiction seemed real and insurmountable.

I instinctively understood that if my struggle was to be among my people, then any talk of atheism and the rejection of God just wasn't gonna cut it. I just knew that. My early political work in the rural South would confirm this. All our meetings were held in churches. They all began with prayer. When they approved, people would say, "Son, you doing the Lord's work." If they were ambivalent, it'd be a question: "Son, you sure that's the Lord's work?" And the preacher, fearing for the church insurance or his standing with the white folk, would say in denying us the use of his church, "Son, you know, that ain't the Lord's work now." Recruits would usually tell you, "If the Lord ain't in this movement, it ain't going nowhere," or, "... then I ain't in it."

I did not want to be alienated from my people because of Marxist atheism.

My other reservation would be more substantive, but it came more gradually but persistently as I matured personally and politically. This was the question—for want of a better term—of nationalism, of the cultural identity and revolutionary imperatives of the black world.

At first and for a long time, the encounter with all these revolutionary thinkers, theories, and rhetoric was eye-opening, intoxicating. It presented a new, comprehensive, "scientific" way of viewing the processes of history and social change. It was a worldview, a theory of History with a capital *H*. It was *universal* and all-encompassing. So far as revolution was concerned, it was the whole ball game.

So it's natural that it would not have occurred to me at first that it was really—in its worldview—quite narrowly focused.

The words *Eurocentric* and *hegemonic* were not then part of my vocabulary or consciousness. I never overtly or consciously thought about the curious fact that all these revolutionary thinkers were European or that all their theoretical models were fashioned out of European historical experience. I accepted them as "universal." At first.

As I say, this consciousness of constriction of view and of exclusion came only gradually. I consider two incidents milestones in the growth of this consciousness.

The first incident revealed a subtle, unrecognized sense of exclusion that I was feeling at the time. An exclusion not of me personally but of my people and our history from the conversations of the left. At a political

meeting, a group of us from Science were there, but I was the only African. Though I cannot remember clearly the debate, what I cannot forget is the intervention of a voice. A clear, ringing voice, a high tenor, precise in diction.

"My friends, what is at *issue* heah?" (*Issue* rhymed with *tissue*.) I turned and saw a tall, athletic-looking African pacing down the aisle toward the front of the hall, talking as he came. A handsome man, he was turned out in an elegant, eye-catching way. He may not have been wearing anything so dramatic as a cape, but in manner and gesture he *looked* as if he should have been. Part of the dramatic effect was because, as he paced deliberately and confidently to the front, that voice was marshaling his arguments with laserlike precision. Then he turned to face us and delivered an address, part admonition, part analysis, and part gentle scolding. It was eloquent and effective and displayed an easy mastery of the vocabulary, issues, and arguments of the left, all delivered in this clipped, British accent. He kept throwing out daring strategies for direct action and engagement at points where the system seemed vulnerable to pressure. Clearly this man was a radical activist, an intellectual *and a strategist* who apparently commanded the respect of the room.

I sat up. "Who the hell is *that*?" I asked Gene.

"Why," he said, "that's Bayard Rustin, the socialist."

"That's what I'm gonna be when I grow up," I whispered exultantly.

Later I would get to know and work with and ultimately disagree with Bayard. I now understand that this had been another of his patented, carefully crafted dramatic platform performances. But to me it was every bit as impressive as he had intended it to be.

I also think that this first impression was as great as I remember it because what I had been missing in these circles without necessarily being aware of it was a powerful and compelling black presence. Of course Rustin's eloquence, debating skill, analytic and strategic deftness, and practiced ease with which he captured the audience had all impressed me. But it was his *blackness* that had inspired. Of course there were African men in high positions in the hierarchy of the Communist Party, and by then I'd even met some of them at Gene's house, but it wasn't quite the same. They impressed me as stolid, dour, somehow distant, rather shadowy presences. Bayard was dramatic and obviously engaged.

Eventually I was further distracted from Communism by two literary influences from my other cultural life. Coincidentally, both were men native to Trinidad: C. L. R. James and George Padmore.

I've been describing the Bronx Science experience and my intellectual/theoretical apprenticeship in the mostly white circles of the young leftists. But that was only one stream of my cultural/intellectual growth. The

classic overly simplistic model in the popular mythology is of the young emigrant arriving in "God's Country" to be progressively "Americanized" by exposure to "American" mainstream culture—the melting pot. Maybe, had I arrived in Nebraska or somewhere like that, this description might have been accurate. But this was New York, the Big Apple, and my acculturation there was at the hands of at least four radically different cultural streams.

In the Amethyst neighborhood, the local culture was white, Catholic, ethnic, working-class New York, relieved by excursions to the Harlem barbershop and my family's social and cultural life within the Caribbean community. And at Bronx Science I was exposed to the scientific materialist, rationalist tradition.

And then there was my introduction to and immersion in the culture of Africans born in America. My real introduction to African-American experience and sensibility first came via the popular culture through my love of music.

When we moved to Amethyst Street and I had my own little room at the top of the stairs, I started using my parents' old shortwave radio. You guessed it, it was the same shortwave radio that had been purchased a few years earlier in the vain attempt to tune in *Auntie Kaye's Children's Hour* and my ill-fated performance in Trinidad.

That radio replaced Casa Blanca in my nightly routine. I would go to sleep each night to the soft strains of music coming over the radio beside my bed. The radio became "mine" and rarely left my room. This continued from seventh grade until my graduation from high school, from 1954 through 1960. At the time I began to listen seriously, African music was breaking out of the church and surging out of the South, brought along on waves of Southern emigrants. It was making its way into the national airwaves and coming to dominate the popular musical culture of the nation in different ways. This was especially true among the youth.

Now, my father was a dancer and loved all kinds of music, especially calypso. But he also loved gospel and rhythm and blues, so our home was full of these records. I listened along with him and developed a taste for these musics too.

Two men would come to dominate my bedtime listening, sometimes even into the late hours when my parents imagined me long ago asleep. One was a white deejay called Symphony Sid, who played European classical music, jazz, and some pops, which he discussed eruditely. The other was Jocko, who, I believe, was one of the first African deejays in the New York area.

This is now 1997, thirty-seven years later, yet I can repeat exactly what ol' Jocko's rap was. He'd come on beating out a rhythm on the table and proclaim: Eat the yock/This is the Jock/Back on the scene/with mah

record machine/Saying ooh bop a doo/How do ye doo/Take it off (artist's name)/Up in the air, les gooo . . .

I know Jocko meant well. But for all his influence Jocko taught us nothing. The music taught me worlds about the idiom and sensibility of black culture, but Jocko himself? Nothing at all. He might have told us to study hard, or even to shine our shoes. He might even have (God forbid) told us something political. But I imagine—it being commercial media—he was not being paid to do that.

From these two programs my knowledge of African-American music—gospel, jazz, R&B, soul—as well as European classical music would grow profoundly.

My uncle Stephen, a cousin of my mother's, was born in Montserrat, and his wife, my aunt Catherine, was born in the South. They lived in Atlantic City, where Uncle Steve had a small record store in the heart of the African community. During the summers that was where I'd spend the holidays.

At that time Atlantic City, at least for the African community, was nothing more than an outpost of the South. A way station on the northward migration. First I helped out in the store. Gradually I came to be left completely in charge. We sold the music that these folk coming out of the South were listening to. I can't remember the store carrying any white artists at all.

At first this was mainly gospel—the Five Blind Boys of Alabama kind of thing. And rhythm and blues or country bluesmen. Sam Cooke, for example, first sang with a gospel group, the Soul Stirrers, but would soon break away into soul ballads. This also was the era of Clyde McPhatter, Little Richard, the Upsides, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, Fats Domino, Lee Andrews and the Hearts, the Platters, the Inkspots, Big Joe Turner, and of course jazz—Ella Fitzgerald, Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong—and cabaret artists like Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, and Billy Eckstine. To sell the music you really had to listen to it. Boy, was I happy in that environment. The proverbial red dog in the meat wagon had nothing on me.

I even made a contribution to the store's operations by persuading Uncle Steve that he could make more money if he played the records. Particularly on Fridays and Saturdays when the streets were filled with people. Finally, he was convinced. After that, a lot of youth would gather in the evenings and we'd all just dig the music and show off the latest dance moves. That was when I received my first groundation in our culture in America. It came from that music. And from these young brothers and sisters. Many had been born in the South and passed on stories they'd gotten from their elders.

While working in the record store, I saw how technological changes in

the means of production could completely transform the culture in capitalism. A classic Marxist insight.

At first the store sold only 78s and the long-playing 33½ albums. The 78s were acetate, brittle, and fragile, and the albums were priced outside the range of children and working-class youth. This meant that the music was geared toward adults and was so marketed. Then came the 45 single. Of unbreakable plastic with a large hole in the center, these were cheap to produce and could be priced at, I think, nineteen cents, and were affordable by youth.

This would change the entire popular musical culture of America. I watched it happen. Much music that had previously been addressed to the elders and therefore incorporated adult themes, experience, and musical tastes, in short that was an adult music, would change radically. Now a significant part of the music began to be addressed to youth. A "youth market" was created and musical commodities were packaged to exploit it. Selling records in Uncle Steve's store, I could observe how the character of the music changed as the age of the customers went down.

As I said, the deejay Symphony Sid was erudite and commented in interesting ways on the music. He addressed an adult rather than a youth audience, quite unlike Jocko. So I listened carefully and learned a lot from Sid. One evening, I think I was in my junior year, I was listening to some jazz on Sid's program.

Then Sid promised us a treat: "Tonight I've got something special in store for you. A treat and a surprise. An extraordinary singer, a young woman from South Africa . . ." An African singer! I sat up in bed. At that time I'm pretty sure that I didn't know a single artist from the continent.

He went on to make it clear that although this singer was from South Africa and sang songs coming out of her African culture, much of what she sang could, musically speaking, be seen as jazz. I was hooked. It was a school night but I sat up. I refused to surrender to sleep before hearing this incredible new *African* artist.

Finally Sid announced the new singer. Her first song would be the old English folk song "Love Tastes Like Strawberries." When you listen, Sid instructed, listen to the clarity and purity of tone, the excellence of the diction, the exquisite pronunciation, and most of all, the extraordinary musical sensuousness and control. And, he instructed, try to remember that this is an *English* folk song, but listen to how she transforms it and takes it over.

"Without more ado, it is my pleasure to present from Johannesburg, South Africa, Miss Miriam Makeba."

Sid was right. If anything, his introduction had been understated. The voice, the arrangement, the effect, were just incredible. Unlike anything I'd ever heard. I was blown away. I mean *blown a way*, Jack.

But Sid and Miss Makeba were not done with the kid. Not by a long shot. The best was yet to be, because then Sid said now we'll listen to a song in her own language. Those of you who know the record will recall that she introduces the song in a soft, husky, irresistibly seductive voice: "This song, the name of which is 'Qongqothwane,' is unpronounceable by whites in my country. Because they cannot say Qongqothwane, they call it the 'Click Song.'"

Man, I went off even before the song. I went off at her gentle satire of the linguistic failings of the Afrikaners. Besides which, the song was great. I think it may have been the first African song I consciously heard. The melody working with the rhythm was infectious, at once naggingly familiar yet totally new and exotic. It made me tingle and tap my feet. Of course, I could not understand a single word, but the sounds of the language seemed hauntingly familiar. It was as though you knew the tune, and the sound of words you didn't understand at all, well enough to sing along, anticipating the end of each phrase perfectly. That was my first time with this feeling of seeming to recognize something I'd never previously experienced. But in Africa I would often encounter completely new scenes and situations that would feel in some inexplicable but strong way completely familiar.

I was gone. I mean in loove, Jack. What was her name? She's from South Africa, but what is her name, Jack? I was desperately trying to remember. Mercifully, Sid repeated "Miriam Makeba," the name of the album, and the label. I was at the local record store as soon as school was over the next day asking the clerk to order the record.

When it came, I could scarcely believe my eyes. The owner of that incredible voice was young and absolutely beautiful. Her rich, smooth brown skin seemed to glow. Her strong yet delicate features were those of a classic Xhosa beauty. And, the beauty of the African woman, she wore her hair natural. The only other female artist I knew who did not fry her hair was the magnificent Odetta, whom I had seen in the benefit concerts she frequently gave in support of the Southern struggle in Montgomery. Now here came Makeba, just young, impossibly beautiful, and natural. I was completely smitten.

I rushed home to play the record. The first person I saw was my sister Janeth, now Nagib.

"Janeth, look. This is the woman I'm gonna marry. I must marry this woman," I cried.

Of course, what I think I meant was, ideally I'd love to marry this woman. In a perfect world, this woman would be my wife. In a perfect world. In the real and imperfect world I'd have to content myself with buying every record she made and dreaming. It never occurred to me that I'd ever actually so much as meet her. And indeed when I first met her,

it was anticlimactic and deflating. It was cold. A total nonevent, but I'm getting ahead of my story.

In my introduction to African-American culture my cousin Inez was as important as the record shop or the two deejays. Inez, who lived in Harlem, was the daughter of my mother's cousin and closest friend, Tante Geraldine. Inez was popular in her neighborhood. She seemed to know everyone within a five-block radius. She and I were always together running to parties. It got so that no one would bother me within those blocks because they knew me as Inez's cousin.

During my freshman year at Science, on one of my visits to Inez, I first encountered another of my early influences—the stepladder speakers of 125th Street.

As their name suggests, these speakers would actually exhort the people from stepladders set up on strategic street corners along 125th Street. And usually they would be as dramatic in appearance as they were colorful in speech.

The stepladder would be decorated with two flags. On one side the red, green, and black—the colors of African liberation. And on the other—apparently only because the law required it and usually at least one cop would be observing—was Old Glory. Queen Mother Moore, an associate of Garvey's, was a tall, regal woman who wore spectacularly colored African robes and looked every inch the queen. Charles X Kenyatta was a bearded, erect, warrior-looking brother. He wore a ranger-style bush hat with a leopard-skin band and one side upturned, and usually a khaki safari jacket with a machete in a leopard-skin sheath on his belt. And these speakers were nationalists to the max.

Many of them were remnants or offshoots of the Garvey movement like Carlos Cook. Here Queen Mother Moore would speak to me. Here May Mallory would speak. Here Charles X Kenyatta and Porkchop Davies would speak to me. Here, somewhat later, Malcolm X would speak to me.

As soon as the weather warmed up, they would appear. They would be talking about Africa. Her history, culture, liberation struggles, and bright prospects once independent. And about our need and *duty* as children of Mother Africa to look to her. It was all exciting and different. On 125th Street you would get information and a perspective nowhere else present in the society. Certainly not in the white media. And not at school or even in the discourses of the young Communists and Socialists.

The Harlem stepladder orators had a profound effect on me. In a very real way they were the oral historians of the community, our town criers, waking up the sleeping town and bringing news of distant conflicts. Our secular prophets, they were keepers of the flame, holding aloft our heritage

as African people in exile, keeping the flame of reunion and unity alive, ceaselessly exhorting us to keep historical and revolutionary faith with our ancestors' long history of struggle and resistance. We should never forget that we come from a long line of warriors and strugglers.

They brought us regular updates on the African struggle for independence on the continent and in the Caribbean. Liberation was in the air: the remorseless motion of history, the onrush of revolution. And as they made clear, these were no mere *winds* of change, but roaring storms of revolution. It was all around us, they said, if only we would recognize and embrace it. And that meant struggle and organization, conscious and constant struggle.

I forget which one, but one speaker would always punctuate his exhortations with an anguished cry, a kind of chorus:

Mah people, Mah people,
If you only knew who you were,
You could not live the way you do.

Over the years, those words have stayed with me.

On 125th Street they extolled African revolutionaries, Jomo Kenyatta and his Kenyan Land and Liberation Army, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Sékou Touré, men who had come to vindicate us as a people.

Every African will be free, they thundered. The Caribbean is going to be free. They will run out the colonial masters. The French will be run out. They will run the British out. The Portuguese will have to go. South Africa is going to be free. The inevitable movement of history, the fulfillment of prophecy.

One could not help but be moved by such oratory. And even what little information came through the white man's news media seemed to confirm it. Africa and Africans—all over the world—were on the move. The world could never be the same. The impression on me was profound.

Remember, within this period my father's ship had made landfall in newly independent Ghana. He returned to us full of a vision of African independence and black peoples' power, with many stories to tell. How, for example, President Kwame Nkrumah, whom the people called the *Osaygefo*, the Redeemer, at the opening of the independent Parliament, had led his ministers onto the floor dressed in the humble cloth cap and coat of a convict. The man who had once worn the costume of colonial humiliation and subjugation was now the leader of the nation, my father had exulted.

The effect of the speakers on me was more than political, it was rhetorical. That is, beyond the message there was the influence of style. Important elements of my adult speaking style—the techniques of pub-

lic speaking in the dramatic African tradition of the spoken word, can be traced to these street-corner orators of Harlem. To them and the Baptist preachers of the rural South.

To be successful both had to be highly skilled in poetic and rhetorical terms, and flawless in crowd psychology. To hold, inspire, and work their audience, they had to be powerfully persuasive and quick-witted and surefooted.

Both had tough audiences. The task of the street-corner speakers was all the more formidable because their audience was neither captive nor passive. Either you captured and held their interest or they were gone. These speakers had to educate random groups of the unconscious in America about Africa. By no means an easy task. The African masses, colonized in America, were victims of racial and cultural propaganda and a near-total miseducation about Africa. The speakers had to find arguments that would render their audience receptive to a positive vision of Africa against the full weight of their social conditioning.

The Southern preacher's task was a little easier. He had on his side the weight of traditional religious language and music, an entire repertoire of techniques. Later, almost unconsciously I would take my speaking style from both traditions when talking to my own people.

These speakers also had to squelch hecklers, diffuse tension, and keep the meeting moving without its degenerating into either shouting matches or violence. (Remember the constant presence of "New York's finest.")

I'll give one example: One Saturday afternoon the sidewalks were bustling. The speaker was describing Africa's boundless potential and building an eloquent case for repatriation to a good-sized, attentive crowd.

Along comes this too slick brother, hair freshly fried, piled up in greasy waves held in place by a do-rag. He saunters up, his coat slung over his shoulder by one finger, Jackie Wilson style. He supercool. He listens for a while then snorts.

"Africa? Africa ain't s—. Africa can't even produce matches." The speaker ignores him and continues. The dude begins to really put Africa down in earnest. The crowd grows restive. You can see that some of the brothers are only inches away from going upside his greasy head.

"Brothers and sisters," the speaker appeals. "Pay no attention to this man." He makes a quick, eloquent gesture, taking in his eyes, ears, mouth, and smiles sadly. The crowd laughs and relaxes visibly. The heckler is "blind, deaf, and dumb."

Now the heckler is beside himself. He begins to spit out *every* racist cliché of American miseducation on Africa. Obviously he had learned well and forgotten nothing.

"I ain't left nothing in Africa. Sure ain't trading no Cadillac for no damn elephant."

The speaker saw what was fixing to go down. "I told you," he chided us. "You don't need to be paying any attention at all to this Negro. Did you all take a good look at him?" The speaker held out his hands palms upward. "Seems like its fixing to drizzle." He smiled. "*An' then, brother, your head be going back to Africa before your mind do.*"

His timing was perfect. The put-down, signifying at its best, was a masterpiece of cultural and verbal economy that can only be understood if you know the crinkling effect of moisture on processed African hair.

The crowd cracked up, repeating the line: "Damn, he say his hair be going back to Africa 'fo his mind do." "Sporting Life" slunk away. The building tension was neatly and expertly diffused. The cop looked disappointed.

At the same time that I was listening to the message and admiring the skill and virtuosity of the stepladder speakers, I was also doing readings and beginning to go on demonstrations with the young leftists at Bronx Science. But more and more these would begin to seem like disparate and incompatible worlds. In some ways, they *appeared* quite compatible, both being about the dynamics of political struggle and revolution, but there were fundamental/innate contradictions.

Now any Marxist will tell you that synthesis is the final achievement in the dialectic. And as Junebug Jabbo Jones, the peripatetic African-American sage would famously declare, "If you cain't understand the principle of contradiction, you sho cain't understand diddly about black folks life in these United States."

As an adult I would ultimately be able to use the theory of Pan-Africanism to synthesize the contradictions between the nationalism of 125th Street and the dialectical materialism of the Marxist study groups. But at the time I moved quite comfortably between these two worlds, thinking, learning, questioning, but joining no party, whether that of Garvey or of Marx.

What was the chief contradiction? At first it was far from obvious, more a vague feeling than a clear idea. But it was persistent, and something I could feel long before I could name it.

As I've said, my introduction to a Marxist approach during my freshman year was intellectually exciting for two reasons. As a systematic, all-encompassing, scientific theory of history and revolution it presented a way—in which everything seemed to fit neatly—to understand the political world and the "forces of history." Besides which, its language and its logic were similar in approach to the scientific materialist method we were being taught to apply to the physical world at Bronx Science. This meant that, intellectually, both the physical and the political worlds were sud-

denly logical and coherent, functioning in accordance with clear “laws” and principles that were susceptible to study and understanding. That was compelling.

This was such an eye-opening discovery that, for some considerable time, criticism was unthinkable. (The term *Eurocentric* was, of course, not then in my vocabulary.) But just as with the religion question, I could sense that something important was missing from this seamless “universal” system. Somehow it did not seem to take into serious account the rhythms and historical presence of my people.

The first simple and concrete example I had was that of trade unions and “working-class solidarity.” I could not reconcile the way my young white comrades talked about the labor movement and working-class empowerment with the discussions of my father and his friends about their treatment at the hands of the union and the white workers on their jobs and the Mafia.

On 125th Street I first discovered the missing element. And this discovery was every bit as exciting as the other. Here the speakers also talked about political struggle, liberation, and revolution, but in very different terms. This “history” not only included us, it was all about us. Africa, the African diaspora, the African world, and African revolutionaries were their subject and their concern.

At first these two worlds of mine rarely intersected, but when they did, there was a friction that threw off hot sparks. For me one of these points of friction was in deciding which political writers should be read, given attention, and studied. So far as the white leftists were concerned, no African revolutionary thinkers seemed worthy of serious regard.

On 125th Street, though, the names George Padmore and occasionally C. L. R. James were mentioned as important African writers who were revolutionary thinkers. But on the rare occasion when George Padmore’s name came up among the Young Communists, the tone was dismissive, as if he were some kind of renegade, almost as if he were a traitor who had abandoned Communism.

One of the great political and cultural resources for me at this time was Michaux’s famous African Bookstore on 125th Street, which I would visit every chance I got. Mr. Michaux saw that I liked to read about our people and took an interest in me. One day I asked Mr. Michaux about Padmore. He showed me a copy of Padmore’s *Pan-Africanism or Communism* and explained that Padmore was a great Pan-Africanist thinker who was an adviser or mentor to Kwame Nkrumah. I was fascinated. I did not have the money at the time to buy the book, but I skimmed through it eagerly. Later I would study Padmore and become one of his greatest supporters.

Even today I always refer to Padmore as a seminal Pan-Africanist and encourage all Pan-Africanists to study and learn from him.

Later I learned with interest that Padmore was born in Trinidad—he died in Africa—and that his original family name was Seymour Nurse. Nurse is a prominent name in the African community in Trinidad. I also learned that during his boyhood in Belmont (close to where my father had built his house), one of his playmates was young Cyril James.

Whenever C. L. R. James's name came up among the white leftists I knew in high school, he was more or less pigeonholed as a "Trotskyite," hence a revisionist and apostate from the "correct" line. But to the speakers on 125th Street, C. L. R. James was an African revolutionary thinker. Later when I came to read his *Black Jacobins*, I was thrilled—moved and inspired. That book is a powerful historical classic on the revolutionary struggle against slavery in Haiti, which especially emphasizes the revolutionary roles, spirit, and character of Haiti's African masses in that struggle. I was just overwhelmed. I loved it. I strongly recommend this great book to young Africans interested in their peoples' legacy of struggle.

Still later I would discover another of Harlem's great treasures, the Schomburg Collection. When Malcolm X began to become a presence in Harlem as the dynamic young minister who was organizing Mohammed's Mosque #7, a story began to circulate that established the young minister's character.

According to the story, Malcolm was driving along and saw a group of young brothers shooting craps on a sidewalk. He stopped the car and approached the game. He either seized or put his foot on the dice. Of course, the players started to get into they bad bags. Malcolm froze them with that look he had. My young brothers, you know what this building is? he asked. Yeah, I thought so. You don't know, do you? This is the Schomburg Collection. It's got damn near everything ever written by or about black people. And what you doing? Instead of being inside learning about yourself, your people, and our history, you out here in darkness shooting dice. That's what's wrong with us, why Mr. Muhammad says, "If you want to hide something from the black man, put it in a library."

Now, I was not among those crapshooters. But the story impressed on me the importance of the Schomburg and I began to spend many a profitable hour there.

During this time, my home neighborhood began to change slightly, as a few more African families moved in. A couple of these families had sons my age, and two of them, Buddy Melvin and Vinnie DeLucier, became my good friends. Buddy went to DeWitt Clinton High School, while Vin-

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nie, a devout Catholic, went to Cardinal Hayes. But on weekends we three were running buddies, walking partners, hanging out together, going to parties. We were disciplined students, but weekends we partied. Buddy was a great dancer; Vinnie was so devout a Catholic that he refused to dance the grind, it not being "right" to get that close to girls. (Perhaps Marx had a point on European religion after all.) But my man Buddy, now, he liked him a good time. My parents liked Buddy, and his parents liked me, so we spent a lot of time in and out of each other's homes. Buddy would come to play an important role in my social life at Science.

By the end of my freshman year at Science I had established the friendships that would follow me through the four years, and which pretty much established my place in the school's student community. I made some good friends based on things we had in common. Of like minds, we made common cause, so to say. These friends were smart, intellectually active guys who were serious enough, disciplined students but not overbearing about it. We tended to be more relaxed about our intelligence. Certainly, we did not buy into the teeth-clenched competitiveness and academic upmanship and posturing that obsessed so many of our peers. Also, we all were athletes in at least one varsity sport, political activists who instinctively despised injustice, street-smart, unpretentious youths who loved to party. We banded together and formed a little club called Kokista. I no longer remember where we got the name, or what, if anything, it meant. It had to have *meant* something, but all I remember is that we were Kokista.

The members were Gene Dennis, Larry Greenbush, Tony Pantorino, Kenny Stearn, and yours truly. The club had no real agenda. We just hung together, discussed life, politics, and girls in that order, organized parties, and simply had down-to-earth fun.

To a great extent, Kokista may simply have been our defense against the rigid, uptight, status-conscious atmosphere that pervaded the school. We were close, and up until today, some of us maintain contact.

Something happened sophomore year that greatly increased Kokista's visibility and prestige at school. Bronx Science moved up the Grand Concourse, literally into the "backyard" of DeWitt Clinton, Buddy Melvin's school. The two schools were right across from each other. They still are. But the student cultures of the two institutions could not have been more different. So far as the Clinton students were concerned, Science students were "intellectual, elitist, and more than a little effete."

Clinton, first of all, was a boys school. It was academically respectable, but had no pretensions to elite status, and its students liked it that way. You could say it was more "democratic." Clinton was in every way a rougher, more physical culture than Science, and the proportion of Africans there

was far, far greater. They had talented, aggressive athletic teams and fights all the time. And now they felt that the wimps from Science were invading their turf. Inevitably there was tension.

The same old neighborhood madness: just because you're from Clinton and we from Science, we have to fight. Fighting was by no means the Science students' strong suit. They were apprehensive about walking to the subway and boarding the trains after school.

Fact is, some of them were plumb terrified. Enter Kokista. We had to lead the delegations from Science into the trains to face down any challenge. Gene Dennis was built like a fullback. Larry was a muscular, strong-looking guy, and Kenny Stearn was a competitive swimmer, huge and always in shape. I was tall, rangy, not intimidated, and with a mouth on me.

And my hole card? . . . Buddy Melvin. Buddy was on the fencing team at Clinton and was a rough, tough brother and very respected over there. So I'd always drop his name.

"Why you guys want to mess with us?"

"You go to Science."

"Yeah, but I just looking for my brother. He go to Clinton."

"Whose yo brother?"

"Buddy Melvin."

"Buddy's your brother?"

"Ahuh. Ask him."

"Yo, maybe this cat's all right," and they would forgo the ass-kicking. Or else I'd get Buddy after school and he'd ride with us.

He'd say, "Hey, don't you touch him now. He mah brother."

"Yeah? And what about them?"

"They with him. They okay too."

Despite our honorable new role as tribunes of the physically and martially challenged, Kokista was still seen as a rebellious, nonconforming element among the Science students. In that rarefied atmosphere, we were something like Science's version of the teenage "rebel without a cause" syndrome, the Northern urban version of the Southern "good old boys."

Except to Mr. Beckenstein, one of our social studies teachers. He was not at all impressed with our "youthful rebellion" as he called it. He reached out to all students and liked us. We thought he was real down and liked him because he took us seriously, got to know us, challenged us intellectually, and discussed the political issues of the day with us.

Once, junior year I think, my mother came to school for a parents/teachers weekend and met my favorite teacher. A minor disaster.

During their conversation, Mr. Beckenstein demonstrated his awareness of his student's progress by throwing out: "You know Stokely says he

wants to go into medicine . . ." My mother nods and smiles, and the teacher continues, "But, you know, I think his real calling will be politics."

"Oh?" said my mother.

"Oh, yes," Mr. B. enthused, "that's where his talents lie. The thing that's in your young man's blood is politics." My mother smiled politely and said nothing.

But in the car going home, she exploded. I mean my mother went off on poor Mr. Beckenstein.

"But is that man crazy? Is he a racist or what? What is this politics trash? What can you ever do in politics? What is there for you? You see any colored people in politics in America? You see my trial now, eh?"

Of course from the perspective of the time (1958), my mom was absolutely correct. As far as she could see, there was no space nor role for Africans in politics in America. No role worthy of her son anyway. There was to her mind only Adam Clayton Powell. What was I going to do, displace him?

"Well, Mr. Beckenstein's a real nice guy," I mumbled, "and a really good teacher."

"Good teacher? Trying to stop you from being a doctor? At least we know you can be that like your uncle. But you ever heard of any colored politician? That man is steering you wrong, the ol' brute."

But I knew there was truth in what Mr. B. had said. Yeah, I was still doing science. To all intents and purposes I was still going to be a doctor. But politics . . . it was calling in my blood.

About that same time an incident happened that I've never forgotten. It taught me something that has been with me all my life.

A group of us were in front of the school talking about our classes. A couple guys from Kokista and some brothers. We were discussing math, no doubt trying to impress each other with our erudition.

This older African comes along and stops to listen. The brother looked borderline derelict: his clothes didn't fit, kinda disheveled, and his hair was matted as though he was trying to grow dreadlocks without much success. Of course, dreads were not yet in style, so the old brother simply looked untidy.

"What you young gennulmen talking 'bout?" He posed the question kinda aggressively.

"Oh, we just talking about the Pythagorean theorem, sir," we told him a little condescendingly.

"Hell, that don't even exist. That's right, there's no such thing as the Pythagorean theorem," he repeated. "See, that's ancient African knowledge. Pythagoras the Greek didn't discover that. He got it from Africans." And he walked away mumbling to himself. Of course, we were dismissive

and we Africans a little embarrassed. Who was this hobo-looking old dude to be contradicting our teacher and textbooks?

We were still talking about it a few minutes later when the brother passed back.

"So you all didn't believe me, huh? Tha's good, check *everything* out. There is no such thing as the Pythagorean theorem, that's Egyptian. Okay? You go to the library and check these books." He reeled off a string of references, which I wrote down. I must admit that I was going through the motions mostly to humor him. "Thank you, sir, you know I gotta go check these." Figured I owed him the respect of at least appearing to take him seriously.

Sometime later I was in the library and came across the references in the back of my notebook. Sure enough, they existed. Every one checked out and, in fact, supported his story.

I was shocked. I mean astonished. Well, looka this. That old dude knew *exactly* what he was talking about. What I learned from that was never, *never* to underestimate or dismiss anybody. Not even the poorest, humblest, least prepossessing person. Especially with our own people. Ain't no way to know just by their appearance what they been through or where they coming from. "Thou seest that man's fall, but thou knowest not his wrassling."

That lesson would be reinforced time and again when as a young man I was organizing sharecroppers in the rural South. Especially with our elders. Knowledge and sometimes wisdom can come from the most unlikely of sources. The stone that the builders rejected . . .

And of course, in Africa, in the villages, the same thing. A proverb I heard stayed with me: "Truth is like a goatskin bag: each man carries his own."

Howard University: Every Black Thing and Its Opposite

As I began my senior year at Science, the question of college became paramount. Not whether I was to go, but where? Within the family, that I would go to college had long been taken for granted. Whatever else happened, the son was going to college.

Now, an aspect of male chauvinism was in that. Remember my father's dream of the Carmichael family clinic in Trinidad? It was simply assumed that *I* was to be the doctor. The idea that one or more of my sisters might have been better endowed intellectually, more academically disciplined, or had a greater aptitude for the healing profession never arose. (Two of my sisters are today registered nurses.) No. It was simply assumed that the family's only son would become the physician. I guess this was our Caribbean version of what is now called the "patriarchal attitude" as expressed in the only truly wrongheaded African proverb I know: "Educating a daughter is like fertilizing your neighbor's field."

No question my mother had some traditional ideas in this regard. During my "wild" teenage roaming, she had a barnyard analogy she never tired of. "Look," she would say, "I look at it like this: I've got four pullets and one rooster. You know I'm going pen up my pullets and let my rooster run free. If anyone else wants to let *their* hens run loose, that's their business. I'm not gonna pen up my rooster."

But having said that, I must point something else out about May Charles. After my father suddenly died during my second year at university, May Charles had to go to work. I've always been convinced my father worked himself to an early grave trying to take care of the family under American capitalism while fighting the racism of the workplace. My mom took the post office examination but quickly realized she could not support the family, much less educate them, on a beginning-level, weekly take-home pay of \$59. So she shipped out as a stewardess on the SS *Argentina* so as to be able to help with our education, while Mommy Olga kept the home fires burning. Today May Charles will tell you with pride

that all her daughters save the eldest, who had a disability, went through college successfully.

But for a time the choice of a college for me was problematic. The senior class at Science was full of college talk: nothing but the pros, cons, comparative strengths, and academic prestige of various schools. But after four years at Science—enjoyable and productive years to be sure—I was not at all sure that I wanted to spend the next four at a similar or even greater remove from my people and culture.

During my junior and senior years, my political life had become more active. And to my great delight most of the action was coming from the African community. Ever since Montgomery, Dr. King and his nonviolent actions had become more of a presence in the political discussion among New York progressives.

I and my friends in Kokista respected Dr. King a great deal because he had found a tactic that put thousands of people in motion to confront racism. And in Montgomery—the cradle of the Confederacy—the organized and unified African community had won big.

To be sure, the 125th Street nationalists did not support Dr. King. They attacked nonviolence, mocked his talk of redemptive suffering, and questioned the feasibility and desirability of “integration” as a goal. They felt Dr. King was “begging white folks to accept us,” something white folks had never done in three hundred years.

I parted company with the nationalists on Dr. King. It seemed clear to me then that nonviolent mass action was an effective tactic. I supported any strategy that could move the Southern masses of our people to confront American apartheid. And any leader who could inspire them to this kind of direct action had my complete respect. In New York, at sympathy pickets and fund-raising events, supporters like Bayard Rustin would speak and artists like Harry Belafonte, Odetta, Ruby Dee, and Ossie Davis would perform. Our group from Science always attended these events. I was very, very proud that most of the political activity available to us was in support of my people’s struggles.

In 1960, when the Southern student sit-ins began, CORE would picket department chain stores that discriminated in the South. We Science activists always supported those demonstrations.

We would also go to peace rallies called by the Ban the Bomb movement. The capitalist press always tried to portray the peace movement as Communist, a Communist front, or Communist-inspired. Of course there were leftists at these rallies. But the people I met were mostly very religious, committed pacifists, or folk simply concerned with global survival with no Communist or socialist politics at all.

So I was seeing a lot of political action, much of it in Harlem. But I

never joined—formally committed to—any group, Marxist, nationalist, or religious. In my senior year, the Sharpville Massacre occurred on March 21, 1960. The South African police and military fired on a nonviolent march of unarmed Africans killing sixty-nine and wounding over three hundred. I joined a large march from Harlem to the United Nations in protest. Earlier, I helped organize students for one of Bayard Rustin’s “Youth Marches for Integrated Schools,” which were mounted in Washington. I believe that this might be where I first heard Dr. King address a large group, but I can’t really remember.

Early in my senior year the Young Communists at Science organized a bus for a demonstration against the House Un-American Activities Committee in Washington. I was on the bus. I am not sure whether I was the sole African on that bus, but if I wasn’t, we sure were not many. This would not have been unusual in left political actions at Science, so I never gave it a thought.

The demonstration was in progress (I think at the White House, but it could have been the Capitol—official Washington, anyway) when our bus pulled up. We streamed off and approached the picket line, which was of impressive size given the oppressive political climate in the country at the time. As we approached the pickets, I saw something that would profoundly affect the direction of my life.

A section of the line was black. The marchers were not only all African, but they were all about my age. Man, I jes’ rushed over.

“Hey, y’all. Who are you guys with? The Young Socialists? The Communists?”

“No, man. We’re NAG,” said a brother who introduced himself later as John Moody.

“Yeah? And what’s NAG, my man?”

“That’s the Nonviolent Action Group from Howard University. Why’nt you join us?”

I jumped in the line and the brothers and sisters told me about Howard and NAG. That they were affiliated with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). That they had been campaigning in Virginia and Maryland and in D.C., the nation’s capital. They struck me as smart, serious, political, sassy—and they were black.

All the way back to New York I was intensely excited. I was surprised at how excited I’d become to discover young Africans who were committed activists. But I was pretty certain that I’d solved the college question.

Everything I later found out about Howard confirmed the fit: Howard was a historic black school founded during Reconstruction to educate the children of “the freedmen.” It was named for its first president, General Oliver Otis Howard, a Union general and abolitionist. More to

the point, its medical school was said to have produced a majority of the doctors in the African community here and abroad.

In my mind, the choice of college had been a done deal from the conversations on that picket line at the White House. When we'd left, I'd said, "I'll see you in September." And while I would apply to and enroll at Howard University, it was NAG I was really joining.

But at first my parents weren't sure.

According to my mother, "During his last year in high school, Stokely started talking about Howard University. His father and I figured, because everyone said he was so smart, that he should go to Harvard. But every time we said 'Harvard,' he said 'Howard.' It was 'Harvard.' 'No, Howard.' Until finally we put the case to my uncle Lew, the psychiatrist, who was the family authority on all things educational."

Dr. Silcote's advice carried the day. He said that beyond a certain point the student was more important than the school. A serious student could get an excellent education at either place, as good an education at Howard as at Harvard. Besides which, he said, the friends you make in college tend to be friends for life. So Howard it was to be. Besides, it sure was a lot more affordable.

Howard University would open up vast new horizons for me. No doubt about that. Without question, I received a unique education there. And no question, it was qualitatively and substantively different from any education I could possibly have had at Harvard or anywhere else in the world.

At Howard I was educated as much by my fellow students as by the faculty; as much from the location of the school, the friends I made, and the spirit of the times as from anything to be found in the curriculum; as much from the character of the administration as from the quality of instruction; as much from the movement as from the university. But educated I was.

Because in our time—the opening four years of the 1960s—Howard University was an extraordinarily interesting place for any young African to be who was not totally brain-dead and who was concerned with his people and their struggle. And both conditions were to be found among students at Howard.

Howard presented me with every dialectic existing in the African community. At Howard, on any given day, one might meet every black thing . . . and its opposite. The place was a veritable tissue of contradiction, embodying the best and the absolute worst values of the African-American tradition. As Junebug Jabbo Jones (may his tribe increase) loved to say, "Effen yo' doan unnerstan' the principle of eternal contradiction, yo' sho ain't gonna unnerstan' diddly about Howard University. Nor about black life in these United States neither."

What's more, in every significant regard the Howard experience was the diametrical opposite to that of Bronx Science. Now, I am not putting down either school. I really enjoyed both, and I was, for good or ill, profoundly influenced by both, though in different ways. One obvious difference is age. I entered Science at fourteen and Howard at eighteen. But more than that, in terms of institutional culture, the character of the student population, the general social and intellectual ambience, it is impossible to imagine two more different schools.

Each school had a well-developed sense of its uniqueness. Each had an equally strong view of its institutional mission and constituencies. But nothing about these was even remotely similar. They could have been in different countries. Indeed on different planets. Which, if you think of it, is a reflection not on those schools, but of the country. Science had its face turned rigidly back toward Europe, while Howard, no matter how much some resisted or sought to play it down, had turned its face, however tentatively, toward Africa.

Howard's most egregious image in the African community was as an elitist enclave, a "bougie" school where fraternities and sororities, partying, shade consciousness, conspicuous consumption, status anxiety, and class and color snobbery dominated a student body content for the most part with merely "getting over" academically.

Was this true? Certainly to some extent, but while this aspect was for some reason very *visible*, it was, give thanks, by no means the whole story. Nor even close to it. There were, of course, the status-conscious, overindulged, whiskey-drinking children of affluent black professionals. But at least half the American students were from the South, and the great majority, whether from North or South, were poor, the children of black workers and strivers and most usually—as in my own case—the first in their immediate family to attend college. So, if they aspired to the attitudes, behavior, and values described above, they hardly had the means to afford them.

Adding to which a hefty percentage—greater than in any other American university—were "foreign" so-called. This meant Africans from either the English-speaking Caribbean or mostly anglophone Africa. These students tended to be slightly older, well prepared, and motivated academically, somewhat more cosmopolitan in outlook, and every bit as poor as the Africans born in America. So that when I checked into the new Men's Residence Hall in September, my roommate was Gurney Beckford, a small, dark, exceedingly earnest young man from the hills of Jamaica. Housing probably saw my place of birth as Trinidad and so stuck me in with someone else from "the islands." It was fine with both of us, we got on great. Gurney is still a good friend.

The new Men's Residence Hall was formally named Drew Hall that year. "Drew" being Dr. Charles Drew, the African (American) physician whose pioneering work in hematology isolated plasma and made blood transfusion possible. Dr. Drew had done this work while on the faculty of the Howard Medical School. According to the oral tradition on campus, Dr. Drew, whose work had saved countless American and other lives during World War II, and who had transformed the entire practice of Western medicine, bled to death after a car accident in the South where he was denied the prompt medical attention he had made possible and that might have saved his life. I'm told that this account has recently been challenged, but that is how it was told on campus when we were there.

I expect the Trinidadian birthplace was also the reason I soon received a letter summoning me to "the foreign students' orientation."

Of course I looked like, dressed like, and talked like a black New Yorker. But I could slip at will into the Trinidad idiom and accent of my parents and their friends. A first-generation immigrant kid who had not forgotten the language of the old country.

But my freshman dorm was an extraordinary place English-language-wise. There were brothers from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, every state of the old Confederacy, and areas urban and rural. There were my homeboys from Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, and brothers from Detroit, Philly, Roxbury, South Side Chicago. All Africans born in America, but what a diversity of slang and sound. Also, by the end of my first week I had beginning friendships with brothers from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, Antigua, the Bahamas, and on and on. I had also met Igbo and Yoruba men from Azikiwe's Nigeria, Fanti and Ashanti men from Nkrumah's Ghana, and Luos and Kikuyus from Kenyatta's Kenya. All three heads of state had a personal relationship with Howard.

During 1960 a wave of African nations had attained independence, as would Jamaica, Trinidad, and a host of smaller territories in the east Caribbean in the following two years. Later, the *Osageyfo*, President Nkrumah, would correctly characterize this as being mere "flag independence." But to us at Howard that fall, blithely unaware of the looming threat of neocolonialism, it was an exciting, heady moment rich in promise. All Africa would be free. You could see it happening. Free to choose judiciously from the riches of its own traditional wisdom and the best of Western achievements to give the world a new definition of modernity and a higher humanism. Africa, we were fully confident, would solve the great human problems that continued to bedevil European civilization. We were so sure then, so optimistic, that we would live to see that. Now, I think it will take longer.

It seemed like almost monthly a new African embassy would open up

with suitable dignity and fanfare. The diplomats always reached out to their nationals studying at Howard, who in turn invited their "American" friends. So we got accustomed to going with our friends to any number of annual national independence day celebrations at various African and Caribbean embassies. That time and place had a tangible, intoxicating air of Pan-African motion and internationalism. It was soul-stirring.

The administration at Howard, and to a certain extent the faculty, would reflect many aspects of the massive contradictions underlying the relationship between Africans in America and white America.

On one hand, the school pointed with justifiable pride to its historical role in the progress of the race. Not just by educating "Negro leadership" but claiming an honorable role at times in the actual struggle. For example, most of the lawyers in *Brown vs. Board of Education* were Howard Law School products. Outgoing president Mordecai Johnson had been a forthright advocate for African civil rights. President James M. Nabrit Jr., who replaced him the year after I entered, had been part of the legal team arguing *Brown*. So he came from an activist legal tradition.

The Howard Choir (in the tradition of the Fiske Jubilee Singers, which, in the 1880s, had rescued that school financially by famously touring European capitals singing the powerful music of their slave ancestors) could make you weep and exult with those same "Negro spirituals." Still, the dean of fine arts was so unreconstructed and unapologetic an Afro-Saxon that he absolutely forbid jazz in any form, not even from the elegant and musically sophisticated "Duke of E," in Crampton Auditorium . . . as long as he would be dean.

Howard was the only historically black school in the entire nation funded by the federal government. My position was, in simple justice, all black schools should have been, so that was no real cause for gratitude on our part. But that was not, could not at least publicly be, the position of the higher administration.

For some curious reason the congressional committees that controlled the university's budget seemed to attract a disproportionate number of Dixiecrat politicians. These Southern Democrats, the political beneficiaries and institutional protectors of white supremacy in the nation, were aptly described (some of them, anyway) as "the most mean-spirited, foulmouthed crackers who ever bought a fool's vote with whiskey." And they did not position themselves on those committees out of any sudden rush of goodwill toward black folk.

So annually Howard's president had to walk a narrow line drawn by the whim, caprice, or outright malice of these Dixiecrats. At budget time, a tangible mood of anxiety, high or muted, depending on the perceived mood of the Congress, seemed to emanate from our administration

building. I don't remember a student who was not aware of this reality. And I don't know one that did not resent it. It was almost always one of the first things a new student heard: "Looka here, Uncle Sam pays the bills. Best you never forget that and always present yourself accordingly."

I can now sympathize with the fundamental difficulty of our administrators in having to go hat in hand to those racists. Those black men, when all was said and done, did have the responsibility to protect and advance as best they could the school's interests. But on campus that constraint translated into a series of attitudes, rules, and injunctions calculated to prevent any activity on the part of the students that was likely to offend "powerful white folk." These filtered down to us via the Student Activities bureaucracy, with whom we were, consequently, constantly at war.

As you might well imagine, we in NAG took a slightly different position. Inasmuch as this nation had enslaved Africans and continued to discriminate against them, thereby crippling them educationally, we felt that the *least* the nation owed the African community was excellent resources by which to educate ourselves. Educationally, we felt America owed us many more than one federally supported school. As a matter of historical obligation, not charity.

So far as "upsetting powerful whites" was concerned, we felt no obligation to be "nice" or "neat, clean, honest, and polite" as the formula went, just to get the budget. We felt, especially as we grew more confident in our organizing skills, that we students could organize effective pressure inside the nation's capital, in international forums, and before the world media, to ensure that the U.S. government met its obligations to black education. We understood that the Howard administration would need to stay aloof—publicly—but at least they should not hinder us. The world was changing, wasn't it?

But this was never the position of the administration. Which is why NAG was never a recognized student organization at Howard. Every year we petitioned. Every year the Student Government and the students supported us. Every year the initiative ran into the most skillful, stubborn, and barefaced obstructionism from the Student Activities bureaucracy. Processes were arbitrarily changed, suspended, or ignored; committees dissolved or simply did not meet all year; or else meetings were summarily adjourned before a final vote could be taken.

We would be furious, roundly denouncing the "handkerchief-headed, plantation-overseer mentality" of the Division of Student Life. But you know something . . . I'm now prepared to see a certain method in their madness. As the spiritual says, "You'll understand it better by m' by."

Because, you know, no one in the Howard administration ever once told us to stop. (Though they probably knew that it wouldn't do no good no how.) They never tried to coerce or threaten us with expulsion or other

administrative sanction. Which was not the case with a lot of state-dependent Southern black schools. For example, President Felton Clarke of Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that year, to his shame, expelled *all* his student activists, nearly fifty students. Two of whom, Eddie C. Brown and his younger brother "Rap," ended up with us in NAG.

The administration knew full well who we were. But by the simple expedient of denying us recognition, they gave themselves "deniability." By disclaiming knowledge or responsibility, they did not have to move on us, and they never did. I can imagine our president, like Ellison's invisible man's grandfather, "yessing the white folk to death."

[At this point an intervention for the record by our comrade-in-arms Tim Jenkins seems appropriate:

"I would quarrel somewhat with the characterization given of the past presidents as compliant tools of the Congress. The record shows that Mordecai (Johnson) repeatedly lectured the Southern bigots he needed for funding with his jeremiads against racism. The record will also show that during his tenure he repeatedly refused to fire a single professor condemned by HUAC. Or, during the forties, to expel the Howard students who sat in, in the cafeteria of the House and Senate. In this respect the Ralph Ellison quote may be something of a disservice to their historic contributions. This is not to say that there were not a host of subordinates who would gladly have thrown civil liberties to the wolves for job security along with other uglies of bourgeois ethics."

As Carmichael said, "every black thing . . . and its opposite." The best and worst of the black tradition. —EMT]

After spending the first two days registering, I set out to find NAG, which was not to be found.

"Nonviolent Action Group? NAG? Well, there is the NAACP. . . . No? The Alphas, the Kappas, the French Club. . . . No? Sorry, I can't find any such organization on campus."

Ultimately I found someone—Dion Diamond or John Moody, I think—who'd been at the anti-HUAC demonstration and could explain that NAG met every second Sunday off campus at the Newman House.

"But Howard's got an NAACP youth group, how come?" I asked.

"Course they do. But that's only because they never *do* anything, Jack. I don't think they even ever meet."

Which is how it was that on the second Sunday after my arrival I became a functioning member of SNCC, or at least its Washington, D.C., affiliate, the elusive NAG.

It is possible in hindsight to see some element of principle, strategy, and even political cunning in at least one of the university's actions that at the time had so infuriated us. Tell the truth an' shame the devil. But a host of other matters are not susceptible to any equally honorable explanation.

These came especially from middle and lower administration members and some faculty in the form of attitudes and policies that always angered us. I mean, they messed with our minds.

I'm talking an outmoded nineteenth-century missionary approach to "Negro education." We resented the patent condescension. According to which the educational mission was to "civilize young Negroes fresh from the cotton fields." It was to render us "cultured," i.e., polite and safe in word, thought, deed, and appearance so that ultimately superior white America might in its benevolence, one blessed day, accept "the Negro." Academically and culturally then, the imperative was to promulgate, uncritically, the curricula of American (read white) higher education and the attitudes and behavior of "the better class of white people." A few administrators would actually use such language to us without any evident embarrassment.

The assumption was that America had a "Negro problem," which was us. So that the *onus* was on *us* to improve *ourselves*. If only "the Negro" were less primitive and more responsible. If only they smelled less and glistened more, were more "cultured" and less crude, more industrious and responsible *ad infinitum*, then white America would gladly accept us. (Key word there, *responsible*. The white press used to brazenly issue orders thinly disguised as friendly advice to "responsible" Negro leaders. Responsible to whom or what?) Thus it was common on campus to hear Southern students harshly ordered to "learn to speak properly. Stop sounding so country." When in my sophomore year a NAG member (and my girlfriend) started to wear her hair natural, it precipitated hysteria among the dorm mothers. She was threatened with expulsion from the dorms and the school. Happily a young dean of women, Patricia Roberts, intervened and maturity prevailed. But this backwardness was widespread and ingrained and greatly resented by every student I ever spoke to about it.

An aspect of this thinking carried over into the curriculum and instruction. Too many of the faculty bureaucrats who set curricula seemed content to accept the establishment textbook version of American reality. A dispensation in which we were either absent or present only as a lingering but peripheral *problem* in American life. The Negro as social liability. For these loyal Afro-Saxons, the only serious criticism of the mainstream was for its incomprehensible exclusion of deserving and highly evolved Negroes like themselves. Correct that single, inexplicable shortcoming by affording them their due social recognition and public acceptance, and America was perfect.

Of course, the implication of these attitudes—that we students should strive for self-improvement while accepting respectfully all the values and practices of white America—required rationalizing racist humiliation.

This was precisely the kind of psychic self-immolation that was totally unacceptable to our generation of students. Totally unacceptable, Jack.

We were young adults. The "foreign" students—Africans born elsewhere—tended to be even a little older. Many were mature men and women who had worked for years before being able to seek higher education. At the first general residents' meeting in the new Men's Hall dorm, I can remember standing next to a dignified "freshman" from Guyana who looked older than my father, and being gradually suffused with deep embarrassment and outrage at what we both were hearing.

The dorm director was extraordinarily condescending and not real smart. I listened in disbelief and growing humiliation as he spoke to us as though addressing children. The highlight of his address was a catalog of insulting "housekeeping" expectations apparently predicated on the assumption that most of us were encountering flush toilets and indoor plumbing for the first time. To the men from Africa and the Caribbean, as to us, he was their first official introduction to Howard, and for them by extension, to African-Americans. What on earth can they have thought of us?

At the foreign-student orientation I again received a shock. It was a large enough meeting. Mature and intelligent men and women from Africa and the Caribbean receiving their first orientation to the school, the city, and again the African community in America. And here was an African administrator of Howard University in effect planting the fear of "American Negroes" in our consciousness. We were not really encouraged to associate with black "Americans"—cultural differences, they said—and were warned not to venture freely into the surrounding community because of crime. It was "us and them" at its worst. Howard was in a typical black urban community, with all the problems associated with that, but whatever their intentions, the presentation from Howard representatives was heavy-handed, crudely stereotypical, and a clear effort, I thought, to continue to divide Africans. I was furious. Had it come out of a white mouth, I'd have unhesitatingly dismissed it as racist. I resolved then and there to cultivate relationships with African brothers and sisters from outside the country and to try to pull them more and more into campus life and the social fabric of the African-American community. That became NAG's policy also.

But—praise the Lord—evrah thang an' its opposite . . . Mr. Ted Chambers, a short, infinitely sweet-natured African-American gentleman was coach of Howard soccer. He looked at me with astonishment colored by just the slightest skepticism.

"Son, you from New York? You play soccer?"

"Yes, sir. Captain of my high school team in New York."

His eyes really lit up. "Captain, you say?"

"Yes, sir. Bronx Science, three-year starter."

"Oh, can we use you! Go put these on and warm up. The tryouts start in fifteen minutes."

I ran off and put on the sweats and my own soccer shoes, which Science had allowed us to keep. I'd played all summer in Van Cortlandt Park because I knew the Howard team was supposed to be good. But when I ran back, the varsity was scrimmaging. I sat on a bench watching in astonishment and waiting for the rookies to show up.

Wow. This is such a great team, I thought. I can hardly believe this is the team I'm gonna play on. Wow. These guys were amazing: quick, incredibly skilled, they looked to me like young professionals.

"What's the matter?" Coach Chambers asked. "Why you still sitting on the bench?"

"Oh, Coach. I'm just waiting for the team to get off so I can—"

"Team? That's not the varsity, son. Those are the tryouts. Git on out there."

My jaw dropped. "Those are . . . tryouts?" He said yes. I got up slowly.

He approached, looking at me with concern. "You okay, son? Are you sure you play soccer?"

"Coach, I really do . . . but if those are the tryouts . . . can I carry water for your team?"

"If you can play, you should get out there."

I really wasn't a bad soccer player . . . in New York. Fact is, in Van Cortlandt Park I was considered a serious player, a rising star. So I did all right. Maybe even better.

"You did fine, son. You can make the team," Coach Chambers assured me afterward. I figured I probably could too. But clearly, to play with those dudes I'd have to devote way more time to soccer than I was prepared to. I was, after all, a premed student. I would have to study. But I went to every game I could and even played with the team in practice when I could.

Coach kept after me to join up. I knew why. I may have been the first African from America he'd seen in a soccer uniform. All his players were from the continent or the Caribbean. And they were simply excellent. The Howard team was one of the best in the nation, and the only athletic team of any accomplishment at a school that had no athletic scholarships at all. In the "American" sports—football and basketball—the courageous but outclassed Howard teams routinely had their heads handed them by teams of the best black athletes in the country . . . all on full scholarship with many on their way to the professional ranks. Today, those guys would all be at the white athletic factories, Notre Dame, Alabama, and the like.

But our soccer players were really, really dread. Today, half of them would be offered professional contracts. But here at Howard, they had no scholarships and everyone worked nights, went to school mornings, and showed up in the afternoons to destroy any team put before them on the field. And for the most part they were successful engineering, premed, and dentistry students too. My first two years they were national champions in the NAIA.

I got to know the players and brought my American-born friends to the games. The best of the players I practiced with were regularly named all-Americans. I remember Winston Alexis (Trinidad), Junior Sanguinetti (Jamaica), Aloysius Charles (Antigua), Alexander Romeo (Bahamas), Ernest Ekpe (Nigeria), and one utterly unbelievable soccer genius from Jamaica called "Dybie" Cooke. Back home, Dybie had been a regular on the national team. At Howard he drove a cab at night, went to engineering school by day, and never seemed to practice. Then at game time this short, stocky, bowlegged fellow would appear. Regularly, about four or five times during a game, seemingly at will, Dybie would nonchalantly collect the ball in front of his goal and traverse the full length of the field at a dead run, the ball seemingly glued to his feet. Starting, stopping, darting, feinting, as he dribbled his way effortlessly through the entire opposing team. This is no exaggeration, the *entire* opposing team!

The crowd would go absolutely wild, on its feet, giving out a collective roar that might well have been heard down at the White House and should have been. One did not have to understand anything at all of the game to recognize that you had just seen something magical. Just as later you would not have to know the intricacies of basketball to recognize Michael Jordan's genius or much about boxing to recognize the uniqueness of Muhammad Ali's physical endowments and craft. That was Dybie Cooke of Spanish Town, Jamaica. I wonder whatever became of that brother.

During my freshman and sophomore years, the Howard soccer Bisons dominated the NAIA. Junior year, they moved into the NCAA to go up against the wealthy athletic factories with teams full of imported talent, all on full scholarship and carefully recruited mercenaries.

By then I was totally politically engaged, but I made certain to be on campus the day we played the defending "big college" national champions. By this time the soccer team had worked its Pan-African magic on the student body. It was a rainy, overcast day. The stands were full of Africans born in America, Africa, and the Caribbean. It was a larger crowd than the winless football team had managed to attract, except maybe at homecoming. There's an editorial from the student paper, written after the game by its very "American" sports editor, Jimmy McCannon, that captures the moment rather well:

"Soccer is all right but it's a game for foreign students" is an old, cold argument that received a severe dowsing in the rain last Saturday as Westchester (1961-62) Large College national champions met the Howard (1961-62) Small College champions at a mud-drenched Howard stadium.

The Booters' great performance against the powerful Rams was indicative of the rise in the stock of soccer and the "foreign" student. . . . Most of the "fans" who braved the inclement weather . . . knew little or nothing about soccer, but fell in love with the speed, skill, and rugged action of the game. The crowd, which was drained of every emotion during an action-packed struggle between two very well-matched teams, was one of the largest ever to witness a soccer game here.

After the winning goal, pandemonium reigned. The crowd in a burst of passion streamed en masse onto the field and lifted their gory, mud-splattered scorers—Winston Alexis and Vernon Hazlewood—onto their formerly umbrella-protected shoulders. . . . In that instant a pride and unity created by their show of supreme skill made everyone connected to Howard proud.

Just as Jackie Robinson had made race a forgotten issue to the true baseball fan, our Booters dismissed in one unforgettable afternoon the tag "foreign." They belonged to Howard in every way and their adoring fans made them know it.

The men on that field representing us were no longer simply Jamaican, Nigerian, Antiguan, Trinidadian, or "West Indian." At the end of the game there were no "foreign" students or "Americans" on that field. The unity and belonging that enveloped the ecstatic faces that had shared a great athletic experience drew Washingtonians, Mississippians, Ohioans, and New Yorkers on the field to embrace fellow Howardites.

—Howard University *Hilltop*, November 16, 1962

Evrang . . . an' its opposite.

Ahm gonna lay down my sword and shield. Whether this was by inclination of the administration, by congressional dictate, the school's missionary origins, or by all three, I do not know. But I remember only two activities that were officially compulsory for all freshmen U.S. citizens: chapel on Sunday and the Reserve Officers' Training Corps.

I had no intention of entering the U.S. armed services, but in 1960 there was as yet no popular movement against the militarization of universities. So the only way I, as an individual, could resist was to get out of the marching, which I felt was a monkey show on campus, and also to raise the obvious contradictions in the military science classes.

We had a choice: the army or the air force. Since I had no intention of marching to and fro swinging my arms, I chose the air force, thinking there would be less parading about. But there was still too much.

So, the first day when we were lined up in our uniforms to march, Cadet Carmichael fainted. The second go-round I fainted again. The third time I fainted I was excused from parade, permanently.

In the class discussions I would raise questions about the ethics of having training in the arts of massive destruction at a school allegedly educating us for the advancement of humanity. This was no mere debating ploy. I was seriously troubled by the clear contradictions, so I kept raising that and similar questions.

Our instructor was a captain, an African born in America. After a few classes he understood that (a) I was genuinely troubled by the contradictions and (b) I was not likely to shut up.

"Okay, Cadet," he said, "here's what's going to happen. Take the exams, and any grade you earn, I will award. And of course, you needn't worry too much about attending the classes." That was cool by me. I needed a grade to graduate so I read the book and took the exams.

Some students—more than a few—not only disagreed with my position but were passionate and vocal about it. These brothers felt that it was our patriotic duty to serve. Some were planning to enter the military professionally. The interesting thing is many of them were from the South. So it was easy. "Look, Jack, I'd love to be a patriot too. And just as soon as this country ends segregation, ends racial discrimination, stops the denial of legal and political rights to our people, I'll run to enlist. I be the *first* one, blood, I promise."

A distinguished historian on the faculty named Professor Rayford Logan, had written a famous dissenting history of Reconstruction called *The Betrayal of the Negro*. So naturally I hastened to take his course, in which we read his *The Negro in American Life and Thought*. Either in that book or in his lectures, we learned about a consignment of German prisoners of war being sent south to prison camps in Mississippi during World War II. Their guards were a detachment of black MPs. When the train crossed the Mason-Dixon Line, guess what? These armed African (American) soldiers, in the uniforms of their country, guarding "their" nation's enemies, were at mealtime ordered out of the air-conditioned white dining car to the Jim Crow eating cubicle at the rear of the train. The enemy prisoners, being "Aryan," were welcome to enjoy the comfort of the well-appointed white-supremacist dining car.

Truthfully, I had no idea I'd said anything aloud until Professor Logan stopped speaking. Professor Logan was very austere. No one ever interrupted him.

"Yes, did you say something?" he asked, staring at me.

"Sorry. I hadn't meant to," I muttered.

"Well, young man, what did you not mean to say?"

"I said, sir, that if it had been me, I would have blown that train to hell."

Professor Logan merely looked long at me and nodded. "Thank you," and he went on with his lecture. After that I couldn't wait to be accosted by the Southern patriots about ROTC.

Ah bin down in the Valley
For a very long time
But I ain't got weary yet.

With one important difference, those lines from a popular spiritual well describe my experience as a premed Howard freshman. Except that I got real, real weary down in that valley.

At Howard the liberal arts were taught on the upper quadrangle, the physically most elevated area of campus, the so-called Hilltop, where the Founders Library, the Art Department, Douglass Hall, Crampton Auditorium, and the Ira Aldridge Theatre were located.

Engineering, medicine, architecture and the physical sciences were taught in the lower area of the campus, hence, "in the Valley." As a premed student most of my courses, being natural sciences, were down in the Valley. Thanks to Bronx Science, these courses were not particularly demanding to me academically, many being, in effect, repeats of my senior year. The difficulties I would encounter in the Valley were of an entirely different order.

From my childhood, medicine was the career I and the family had chosen. It was one of the three—along with the law and the pulpit—said to offer a way of earning a living independent of white society's control. I had crossed off the other two in favor of medicine because it seemed to offer a clearer, essential, and more unambiguous service that was in short supply among our people. It also offered, as far as I was concerned, respect as well as a secure living, in that order.

In the Valley, with the exception of the engineers, the students all planned to become either physicians, dentists, or pharmacists, apparently in that order. A fair percentage were Africans from outside the United States. Most, but not all, of these students spoke in moving and idealistic terms of bringing modern medical care to their newly independent countries. A few, mostly from the Caribbean, seemed animated in their career choice mostly by the profit motive.

But the Africans born in America? They were, as Sterling Brown used to say, "a Negro of a different color." These guys—the clear majority—were forthright and to my mind more than a little vulgar. They bragged

openly about the luxury cars, grand houses, and large incomes they were after. Their talk of the light-skinned, “good-haired” trophy wives they intended to marry really annoyed me. A wicked rumor on campus was that bourgeois-aspiring mothers of limited means would borrow, beg, or steal to send their light-skinned, attractive daughters to Howard. “Now, girl, you go bring me back a *doctah*, hear. Don’t you dare come back without gitting you at least a *dentist*. Remember now, we can afford to send you at most for two years, so you got no time to waste.”

Almost certainly that had to be an exaggeration, not without a certain malice, probably created by darker, smarter sisters. But the status-hungry premed freshmen sure seemed to play to it big time. All science students had white lab coats, which to the uninitiated looked much like doctors’ hospital coats. These dudes—freshmen with seven years of school ahead of them, that is, if they even made it into medical school at all—would wear these coats all over campus, into the cafeteria, etc., proclaiming their matrimonial eligibility to all the aspiring doctors’ wives. Around campus these freshmen boys would pretend to be medical students, ostentatiously addressing each other as “Doctah.” An argument if I ever saw one for stringently socialized, fee-controlled medicine. Everything and its opposite.

This posturing and the shallowness of their professional motivation really got to me and a few other brothers like Al Chisholm. Finally, I just had to speak out in class. I attacked the acquisitiveness and shallow materialism. I reminded them of conditions in our communities, particularly in the rural South, and our peoples’ need for dedicated physicians there. The response?

“Well, m’man, you sho welcome to go. Ain’t nobody stopping you. Me? I wants me a practice in a large *faiine* city where I can make them large bucks, Jack.”

There was Al, me, and a small group of like minds, so I did have allies in the Valley. But others had me pegged as a troublemaker. And not only the students. A few faculty in the Valley began to single me out.

“Carmichael, are you really sure you want to be a doctor?”

“Yeah, I want to be a doctor. It’s not *medicine* I got problems with. It’s the *profession* that gives me a cotton-picking pain.” But by the second semester my involvement in the movement had increased so I was beginning to think seriously of answering, “You right. I don’t want to be a doctor.” This process would build. I don’t want to suggest it was solely the distasteful materialism that drove me out. Nor was I, I hope, such a self-righteous-sounding prig. There was more. The movement had begun to exert a strong pull independent of anything else. I remembered Mr. Beckenstein’s prediction—“it’s in his blood.” Soon I had to rethink my position seriously.

I reasoned that my attraction to medicine was mostly to serve human needs. I was seeing more and more clearly that our people's health problems were largely socially determined. Poverty, segregation, overwork, malnutrition, social deprivation of all kinds, were causing most of our people's physical illnesses.

As the idea of leaving medicine grew stronger within me, I reasoned that I wanted to treat people *before* they became ill, not after their health was fatally compromised by social evils. By the summer of freshman year when I returned from the Mississippi prison farm, my decision had been made, and that was the chief reason I gave the family.

I've made clear my feelings about the stunted and backward attitudes that prevailed among some faculty and administrators. But remember now, y'all, this is Howard. Every black thang . . . and its absolute opposite. And sho nuff, an array of excellent scholars and a tradition of black scholarship were also present as well as clear-eyed, dedicated teachers, many of them progressive. Sometimes both qualities combined beautifully in one and the same person: Sterling Brown and Harold Lewis come readily to mind. Give praise and thanks.

Because we in NAG had a slightly higher visibility as strugglers, and because we delighted in engaging all comers in intense political discussions concerning our people, we and the more intellectually progressive faculty had a natural affinity. In this, we were probably close to the last generation of Howard students to be so advantaged. Our benefactor in this, oddly enough, was American racism. Yeah, you read right, racism. The open and vulgar racist habits of American higher education. Because, before the full force of the then nascent civil rights movement made its presence felt, white universities not only rarely educated African students, they simply did not, as a rule, hire black scholars, no matter how distinguished the work or aristocratic the academic pedigree. (Look at the situation that confronted a young Du Bois, who was armed not only with a Harvard Ph.D., but also boasted advanced study at an "elite" German university.) Those practices that Dr. Du Bois had faced still prevailed in our time, but to our great profit.

For at Howard, we had the immense benefit of a number of venerable, pioneering, scholarly presences as well as brilliant young scholars and artists who today might undoubtedly be seduced by the wealth and "prestige" of the Yales and Stanfords of the academic world.

Some of these legends, although dead, lived on nonetheless in the ancestral tradition: Charles Hamilton Houston, Dean Kelly Miller, Dr. Charles Drew, and Alain Locke come to mind. Others had more recently departed for other earthly places. For example, Ralph Bunche to the United Nations and a Nobel Prize or Eric "the Little Doctor" Williams,

whose *Capitalism and Slavery* was a massively influential correction of prevailing white myths about slavery and the development of European capitalism, who had gone on to the premiership of independent Trinidad and a knighthood. But they too remained lingering presences not only in the libraries but in the memory and folklore of the campus.

But others were still present and available. E. Franklin Frazier, whose most celebrated book, *The Black Bourgeoisie*, was an excoriating critique of the bankrupt values and affectations of that class, was alive when I got there. Also the historian Rayford Logan (*The Betrayal of the Negro* and *The Negro in American Life and Thought*), whom I've already mentioned. Another sociologist, G. Franklin Edwards, consulted regularly with the United Nations on strategies of development in the African world. There was the pioneering Africanist, native Mississippian W. Leo Hansberry. (I can still remember the pride and satisfaction we felt when, in my junior year, it was announced that the School of African History at the University of Lagos had officially been named The Hansberry School of African Studies.)

I also met Chancellor Williams, whose *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, which appeared after I left, is a courageous and original piece of scholarship. I can still remember with pleasure the hours I spent in the university gallery enraptured by the first collection of African art I'd encountered. I studied those striking masks and artifacts trying to imagine the stories they contained and to visualize the people who had made them and the cultures that had produced these artists. I can still remember the pleasure and wonder I felt just respecting, tasting, those sonorous, mysterious names out of our people's origins: *Yoruba, Bakongo, Igbo, Baule, Sunufo, Mandingo, Nubian, Ashanti*. Massive and crucial.

There was also the classicist Frank Snowden (*Blacks in Antiquity*) and the irrepressible poet/dramatist Owen Dodson, director for the Ira Aldridge Theatre, who regularly produced black playwrights and liked to transpose classical Greek playwrights into African contexts, *Medea in Africa*, for example. (Medea became an African priestess while Jason was a white explorer.)

Another of my intellectual influences was Professor Eugene "Oh, I got a letter from Bertie the other day" Holmes, a brilliant, irascible materialist philosopher who was a friend of Bertrand Russell's. The campus radicals loved a story about Dr. Holmes: Dragged unceremoniously before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Professor Holmes gave his occupation thus: "I am, sir, by profession a thinker. And you?" And thereafter declined on professional grounds to further dignify the proceedings with his participation. This had been during the height of McCarthyism. Was this account accurate? Maybe or maybe not, but we in NAG loved that story.

From the English Department I remember fondly Arthur P. Davis, critic/anthologist, and of course Sterling Brown himself—poet, folklorist, critic, editor, musicologist, griot, and teacher.

Those were some of the luminaries. There are doubtlessly more whom I've neglected to name. I studied with many of the ones named. But what was quite as important as actually taking their courses was their presence among us and what they represented. That they *were* there, and therefore their work and example existed for us. If you were bold, you could seek them out for conversation, but their example was so important—the example of consciously black intellectuals of the first order, who had devoted their professional lives to properly studying the African Presence at a time when we were otherwise being ignored or disparaged by “American scholarship.” As important as any facts or methods we might learn from them in class was the reality they represented: splendid, stubborn commitment, a sense of duty and purpose. As scholars of black peoples they were custodians of tradition, keeping truth alive.

Then there were the young faculty, folks at the beginning of their careers who were closer to us in age and outlook. I can remember a number who encouraged, argued with, or counseled us as the occasion required, thereby enriching in numerous ways our intellectual development. Four young brothers especially took the time with us in this way. Elias Blake was an inordinately tall, slender, focused assistant professor of education. He was the kind of brother whom Rastas would describe as a “black-hearted man.” I understand Bro Blake became president of a small Southern school, Clark College, a most proper place for a man of his dedication and energy. Conrad Snowden, a brilliant, articulate, young philosopher, was also a political and intellectual mentor to NAG. As was a brother in English named Clyde Taylor.

My freshman English teacher I've never forgotten. She was an instructor and a challenging teacher who was really down with black literature and our people's culture. But this teacher was unusual in one other important respect: she was young, stylish, and really fine. Her name was Toni Morrison. She and her tall walking partner, another young, equally fine and elegant sister named Eleanor Traylor, would turn heads as they walked across the quadrangle.

“Wowie, who be's them two *fly* sisters, mah man?” So naturally, their sections were always overenrolled with ardent young Howard men.* Who arrived in class to discover with some dismay that the young

*“Ms. Morrison had me in a bad way, bro,” remembers Ed Brown. “I never *ever* went in for so much tutorial counseling in mah entire life. *Uh, uh, uh*. Just to be close to that woman, bro. As it say in the Bible, ‘A woman did a wicked dance and cause a man to lose his head.’” —EMT

women were also smart and very serious teachers. A combination of assets that made for interesting classes indeed.

About eight years later my teacher and I met again when she would be my editor at Random House for both *Black Power* and *Stokely Speaks*.

So it was with considerable pride some years ago that I received the news in Conakry that my instructor/editor was now a Nobel laureate in literature. I was proud, because even though that prize remains a relic of northern European pretensions to cultural hegemony, they will occasionally stumble upon a worthy African writer (like Mahfouz, the Egyptian) who is grounded in their people's culture, struggle, and experience. Ms. Toni Morrison was clearly one of the committee's more inspired choices. Brother Chuck McDew sometimes says, "Even a blind pig will pick up a fat acorn evrah now'n den." I hear that Sister Morrison is on record as remembering me as "something of a rascal in class." Perhaps, no doubt. But they say what goes round comes round. Ms. M., don't look now, but your "rascal" just called you the blind committee's "fat acorn." Only metaphorically, of course.

There's one other class I have to mention. Professor E. Franklin Frazier, author of *The Black Bourgeoisie* (praised be his name) died during my sophomore year. Fortunately, I was able to sit in his class before that sad event.

That was a great class. Professor Frazier was funny and irreverent and I liked him. But I really disagreed with him on one issue: the presence of Africa and African cultural roots within the African community in America. Professor Frazier's position was that we were totally cut off from our African roots so that there were few if any significant African survivals in black culture in America. Here Professor Frazier had a long-term argument with a famous white anthropologist, Melville Herskovits, whose book *The Myth of the Negro Past* showed the strong influence of "Africanisms" in our culture. (This was a long-standing dispute. It was rumored among us that these two distinguished scholars once actually threw down: fisticuffs at a learned scholarly conference? I could well see ol' Professor Frazier gittin' it on down, but other folks said it wasn't true.) I never agreed with Professor Frazier, and after I read *The Myth of the Negro Past*, I was 100 percent with Herskovits. That's a *very* important book. Check it out for yourselves.

The Howard community benefited another way from extreme racism abroad and right-wing excess at home. These forces combined to create a small colony of excellent white scholars at Howard. (The law of unexpected consequences again?) The European scholars were refugees from the Third Reich's march across Europe and were, I assume, either Jewish or progressive, or both. Either Howard (and other historically black

schools) afforded them a welcome that white institutions did not, or these scholars elected African schools as a gesture against the American version of the racism that had uprooted them. I recall them as gentle, civilized, and somewhat self-effacing presences. I gather that there had been many more during the war but most had retired by the time we arrived.

The white Americans, at least some of them, may have been chased to Howard by McCarthyism or, again, may have elected to serve there out of principle. (It sho wasn't Howard's salary or teaching load.) Two of this group stand out in my memory. The first, David Hammond, was an excellent botanist and a skillful and challenging teacher. The other was in fact a Frenchman, a political scientist who published the earliest clear analysis of the looming disaster being fueled by American arrogance and ignorance in Vietnam. His name was Bernard Fall.

In general my intellectual life became more balanced at Howard. Here professors would refer us to the kind of authors I had heard about only on 125th Street. Writers like Du Bois, Padmore, Richard Wright, and other Africans who were "hidden" in the curricula at Science and other white schools. One influential book had in fact been recommended by the disheveled man on the street corner. This was *Stolen Legacy* by George James. This book was particularly important to my understanding of the origins of Western thought after I moved into philosophy. Another book recommended to me by Professor Harold Lewis after my first visit to Mississippi was *Uncle Tom's Children* by Richard Wright. This is an honest and powerful book, almost scary. As I teased Professor Lewis, "It's a good thing you didn't show me this book before I went."

Professor Lewis also recruited some of us to the Little Forum, a reading and discussion group of which he was the faculty sponsor. The students participated in choosing the readings, and when a group of us from NAG entered, we wanted more serious social commentary, so the character of the reading list changed dramatically: C. Wright Mills's *Listen, Yankee* and *The Power Elite* come to mind. On his first visit to the U.N. soon after toppling the Cuban dictatorship, Castro had stayed in Harlem, where, according to street tradition, he was offered (and accepted) Malcolm X's offer of security by the Nation of Islam. Mills's fair treatment of the Cuban revolution confirmed me in my growing support, which continues to this day.

Arguably the area in which Howard affected my development most profoundly was in my direct experience of Southern black culture and the realities of life for Africans in the South. The university was in Northwest Washington on Georgia Avenue, a few blocks up from U Street and east of Fourteenth Street. At that time those two streets were the hub and axis

of D.C.'s black business community. Black Washington was in effect an "up South" town. The people, the juke joints and nightclubs, the soul food restaurants and fast foods, the churches and the music, sacred and profane, were all straight out of Dixie. And Howard was located in the heart of this community. Half the students and just about all the support staff were Deep South. The cafeteria served soul food, and the style and accents of the staff were deep Dixie.

When I arrived, D.C. was the farthest south I'd been. I was familiar with Southern music—rhythm and blues, gospel and country blues, anything out of Memphis—from having sold it in my uncle's shop. And don't forget Symphony Sid and Jocko. Naturally I had heard and read about the South, but I knew nothing of it in actual life. Howard would give me my first direct contact with the lived experience of the South. From the Southern students I'd get a clear understanding of Southern life for our people: what segregation was like, the constant humiliations, the random brutality, the economic exploitation and ever-lasting *dependence*. Having studied Marxist-Leninist theory, I understood intellectually that material conditions affected a people's thinking and behavior. Howard gave me an actual demonstration of that effect. By and large I found the Africans in the South relaxed, friendly, and courteous, not at all as hard-edged and in-your-face as in Harlem.

Yet I knew that the Africans in Harlem had earlier migrated out of the South. What in Northern urban life had affected these Southern sharecroppers? Why had they become so hard and rough with each other up in Harlem, yet were so gentle with each other, so polite and courteous, in the South? Clearly, Southern culture was seriously eroded by the Northern urban environment.

All in all, the Southern African culture—as expressed at Howard—deeply impressed me with its courtesy, almost a courtliness, its hospitality, its humanism. When I went to the rural South, I would immediately again be impressed by these same qualities. Later in my political travels I would encounter the same qualities in the Caribbean countryside and the villages of Africa. African humanism?

My experience of Southern black culture at Howard and points south during this period played a great role in confirming me in my determination to struggle with and for my people. First learning about, then witnessing at first hand, the injustices and oppression that prevailed in the South was a large factor in this decision. As was the growing realization that our oppression was not Southern at all, it was *American*. But that was and could not have been all there was to that decision. In struggle one not only fights *against* something—injustice, oppression—but one must

struggle *for* something equally real but positive. That's the other part of the equation.

In D.C. I was truly in touch for the first time with all aspects of the culture of Africans from the South. While at school I was also being exposed in a systematic and critical way to our intellectual tradition and the history of the struggle of those "many thousands gone," who as they proudly said always "lifted as they climbed." All of which could not help but have a serious effect on any young person searching for an honorable role for himself and his people in the world.

While I was sifting through all these new political and cultural experiences and impressions, trying to come to clear terms with my people's identity and cultural reality, figuring out my own relationship to it all and what it all meant, Sterling Brown (give praise and thanks) reached out to us.

I still cannot say for sure why he chose the students in NAG, but choose us he did, and I'm glad he did. Maybe, almost certainly, he understood the struggle we were engaged in better than we did. He, more than any other person, first helped me to understand the beauty of our people's language and the power of that extraordinary culture that sustained them through centuries of slavery and generations of apartheid.

Sterling Brown was a renowned poet, cultural historian, literary critic and scholar, folklorist, and jazz expert who was internationally celebrated. But just as important, he was a dedicated teacher, greatly beloved on campus because he reached out to students and the staff. "That Professor Brown, he a good-hearted man," the Southern staff would say.

He was not just another "expert on the Negro." His poetry and other writings presented the complex lives and hard-won wisdom of our people with clarity and understanding. His writing did not try to "give dignity" to the folk. He allowed their innate dignity and humanity to manifest itself in the poetry of their language and the power of their blues.

Besides which he was irreverent ("Jean-Paul Sartre ain't worth a fartre") and funny in deflating any pretentiousness that came his way. And pompousness was never in short supply at Howard. He had no tolerance at all for the inflated self-importance of the bourgeois assimilationist wanna-bes in which the place abounded. The types who lectured Southern students to "learn to speak properly." "Remember now," he'd say, "you can't trust no three-name Negro. Especially one with them *numbers* on the end of his name."

Even before we in NAG got to know him, we'd heard on the student grapevine that the Leadbelly song "Bourgeois Blues" was the singer's response to his unhappy experience with D.C.'s black bourgeoisie, hence the lines:

'Cause it's a bourgeois town,
 Ooh, it's a bourgeois town,
 Where the only decent man is
 . . . Sterling Brown.

So even before spending time with him, we knew him for an ally.

Professor Brown took a liking to "the NAG kids." He would invite a group of us—Bill Mahoney, Tom Kahn, Courtland Cox, Ed Brown, Thelwell, Butch Conn, and me to his office in the evening ostensibly "to drink some likker, an' tell some lies." Those sessions were all oral history—tall tales, folk poems, literary and music criticism rolled in one. All of it of, from, or about our people. He was griot and respected elder brother, grounding us, so to say, in our African cultural heritage in America, in which he took such an uninhibited pleasure. Professor Brown was a living archive. He knew or had met everyone. Duke Ellington, Dr. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Leadbelly . . .

Some weekends he'd invite us home, where his sweet-natured Miz Daisy would feed and pamper us. Then he could illustrate his points by playing us tapes and records or with readings from his remarkable library on black culture. He was informed, clear, and funny. You learned while you laughed.

But I'm reminded that he, by his example, taught us something else, something about struggle. See, professor had all the courtliness and charm of a Southern gentleman and an infinite sweetness and generosity of spirit, until that is, someone wrote or said something ignorant that denigrated his people or their culture. Wowie! Then that old gentleman became fierce. His weapons: superior knowledge, intelligence, and a biting wit. With him it wasn't his duty to defend our culture, it was his instinct.

["Prof was my first up-close example of how a committed black intellectual could be in this world. Here was a man with "superior" training. Degrees from Williams and Harvard. Urbane and light enough to pass. All the ingredients for the kind of intellectual "crossover" charlatans who abound today. Yet he clearly was totally content to immerse himself joyously in the study and appreciation of our people's culture and in service to we young blacks at Howard. And his unpretentiousness: he showed me that it was possible to do serious and important work without taking oneself too damn seriously or becoming self-important. "Mike," he'd say, "remember something unmentionable happens to the Negro when he begins to associate his three names with the adjective important." I've never forgotten that. —EMT]

Prof came along at exactly the right time for me (and I suspect for the rest of us). Because, although he never used these words, you could not fail to see and *feel* in everything he wrote, said, and did his undying love for our people and our culture.

In the turmoil of the struggle and the cultural confusions of official Howard, exactly what we were fighting *against* almost instinctively was always as clear as desert light. Prof helped us to see clearly at least one of the things that we really were fighting *for*: in the largest possible sense, to preserve and advance a legacy—our people's humanity as expressed in terms of their own devising. Psychic and cultural autonomy; the right to be and define ourselves without embarrassment, apology, or external constraint.

I shall always be grateful to that good man.

It must be abundantly obvious by now exactly what an interesting combination Howard and the nation's capital was then. The extent to which the Howard experiences in that remarkable historical moment were various and multiple. All things to all men? Many things to many men? Certainly many different things to many different folk. Every dialectic in the African world was there to be found. And we sure managed to find evrah last one. So your education came at you in waves from myriad and unexpected directions other than the conventional. Just about everything about that place at that time was educational, even the classrooms. It all shaped us.

NAG and the Birth of SNCC

First there was Howard and then there was NAG. There can be no question as to the importance of the Howard experience in my formative life, but by far the most important element of that experience—morally, politically, culturally, and even emotionally—was the movement. And in our time the movement at Howard was NAG.

NAG was a close-knit community of distinctively individual young people, a few of whom were not students and a few others, though students, were not at Howard. In terms of geographic origins, experience, and personalities, we were as diverse a group of youth as one could expect to encounter, even though most of us were Africans from America. We had natives of the District, of the Midwest, New York, of the South, the Deep South and the Deepest South, of California, a couple Texans, and even one solitary eccentric African born in Jamaica.

But on Howard's campus we were a solid, highly visible community united by our interest in politics and, in the spirit of the times, by a conviction that youth could change the world. That we ourselves could change at least that part of it which most oppressed our people; and that consequently, it was our duty to try. Now, we'd all arrived at this place by very different routes, but that was the common ground upon which we met, embraced, strengthened each other, and went forward.

Much has been written about the physical courage of the movement generation. But that is obvious. My brothers and sisters could not have gone the places where they went, nor have done the things they did, without considerable courage. But physical bravery is merely the ability to make oneself face the prospect of danger, pain, or bodily harm, the certainty of jail, or the possibility of death. One can do all of those, and indeed they have often been done by fanatics, for quite despicable reasons.

Other qualities my brothers and sisters shared were as important as physical courage. One was a casual selflessness of purpose and a cheerful readiness to risk the things the society had programmed our peers to value most highly: education for personal advancement, jobs, careers, security, "the future," all that we'd all come to college to secure. "*Y'awl keep that mess up, git you an arrest record, and won't neither the government nor none of*

them white folks evah hire you for nuthen, hear?” was something we heard constantly. Often from more practical fellow students.

To an upwardly mobile, aspiring nineteen-year-old, that prospect was as daunting as the physical danger, but, so far as I could tell, once in the movement few of us allowed ourselves to be held hostage by the threat to future status and material affluence. I respect my comrades as much for that as for their physical courage. For some of them have paid dearly. Being in a tiny minority with shared values we clung to, defended, and developed a loyalty and a love for each other that, as I've been reminded since my recent illness, endures to this day. Give praise and thanks.

At my first NAG meeting, at most thirty people were present and probably less, almost equally divided between men and women. The women were articulate and many were as vocal and assertive as the men, and NAG men were no shrinking violets. The “veterans” of course already knew each other and carried themselves with a confidence and *spirit* which came from shared struggles, but with so respectful and democratic a spirit that before the meeting ended we new recruits felt as though we instantly belonged. This was not accidental.

Cleve Sellers recently sent me what must be the only extant list of NAG membership during our four years at Howard. The list is certainly not complete. A number of folk must have come to a meeting or two, a demonstration or two, but left no record. But Cleve's list is certainly the core, the ones who followed through, made decisions, and did the work. It contains, over four years, a total of fifty-three names, of which twenty-one are women and eight are white. So on a campus of some eight thousand, NAG was statistically insignificant. Small wonder therefore that incoming freshmen were so warmly welcomed and accepted.

Of the eight whites on the list, four were men, three of whom, Tom Kahn, J. P. Harper and Butch Conn, studied at Howard. The other, Paul Dietrich, was older, about thirty, an intellectual, businessman, pacifist, and a socialist, quietly but openly gay. Paul owned Jazzland, a small club on Fourteenth Street within walking distance of the campus. Jazzland had visiting acts occasionally—I remember one group of big, baaad black women who wore suits, blew horns, and wore out some bebop—but the house musician was a bad brother called Lorenzo who played a mean jazz organ. Lorenzo was mildly epileptic, looked and played a little like a young Ray Charles, and when he got off in a riff, he'd become just possessed by the spirit and power of the music. So naturally NAG folks tended to drop in at Jazzland a lot after dark.

Most of the “veterans” during my first year were sophomores just a year ahead, so we'd be associated for at least the next three years. We freshmen would have four years together at Howard. A few new members

came the following year—Charlie Cobb, Rap Brown, and Cleve Sellers—with whom I'd share some serious struggle. Cleve and Rap especially would soldier on through some very, very dangerous times in the late sixties. Both would be shot, jailed, and survive intact and strong. Rap and Cleve are two brothers who went the distance and then some more . . . and paid some heavy dues. Some heavy, heavy dues. Respect, nuff respect, my brothers.

From my first meeting I thought the discussion practical, focused, and unusually politically sophisticated. It was immediately clear that the organization was struggling on at least two very different fronts: one to organize the campus, the other to end racism in the nation. Each required different strategies and different kinds of organizing. The approach to organizing on campus, to influence student attitudes and political awareness, was different from the work off campus, where the focus was both local—discrimination within the District and outright segregation in Maryland and Virginia—and national, getting the attention of the Congress and the incoming Kennedy administration.

Depending on the campaign of the moment, each target required a different strategy. This meant that NAG planning sessions embraced student politics, national issues, and Southern segregation. Because we were in the nation's capital with the proximity of the African and Caribbean diplomatic corps and with their student presences at Howard, international questions were also a part of our discussions.

We were fortunate. No other group in the student movement—say the Nashville or Atlanta movements, or the New York or Boston friends of SNCC—faced the same range of political concerns regularly. Each area provided different issues that required slightly different strategic approaches. Colonized D.C., combining Northern, Southern, and national issues, was an excellent laboratory. One could not have gotten better political training if the situation had been designed for that purpose. Of course, at the time we never thought of it in these terms. We were simply devising strategies to deal effectively with the varied array of concrete political circumstances and issues which confronted us. If this proved first-rate training for young activists, that was pure accident, the gift of history and geography. In this, D.C. served us well indeed.

One of the least understood—or at least most generally misunderstood—constants of radical political struggle is its ever-loving *unpredictability*. Anyone planning serious involvement in struggle should be prepared for one certain thing: to be constantly surprised. Always. No matter how smart or analytically prepared you imagine yourself to be, serious struggle will surprise the cockiness right out of you. The most creatively conceived, elaborately organized campaigns can and will occasionally just fizzle out

and fade away without effect or trace. I can think of many of them. While the simplest, most spontaneous, and insubstantial little tactic can take off into campaigns that affect history and your life in ways no one would have dared imagine, much less predict. That was how the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee started.

But first, one important warning. Looking back over a movement that has already become history can be misleading. It is now “history” so we *know*, or think we do, exactly what has happened. Right? No surprises. Having already happened, it takes on the appearance of inevitability. It not only happened, it *had* to happen and it *had to happen* precisely in that way. Utter nonsense.

First of all, it usually almost certainly did not happen in the way the official record says it did. Also, what that sense of “inevitability” forgets is the pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty that usually prevailed at the time. Surprises. Never being sure that results of a given action would be the result you intended. Never knowing what would, could, or *might* happen next. Complete uncertainty as to what dreadful and unanticipated development tomorrow might bring. Perhaps a lynching, a racially determined war in the streets? A presidential resignation or assassination? Or which trivial-appearing little incident would have consequences affecting your entire life. The beginning of SNCC was like that.

On January 31, 1960, four brothers, undergraduates at North Carolina A&T in Greensboro, sat down to eat lunch at the local department store. A bad lunch that the store would have been perfectly content to sell them . . . provided they ate it in the parking lot. But, those four young bloods [*Joseph McNeill, Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, and David Richmond*] sat down and changed a lot of lives.

When I first read about it, I quite understandably dismissed it. Politically inconsequential. Not serious. The black collegiate equivalent of white students stuffing twenty of themselves into a VW Bug, a telephone booth, or swallowing goldfish. John F. Kennedy, at that time, I think, hustling to steal the West Virginia primary from Hubert Humphrey, most likely did not notice the Greensboro Four either. And in the unlikely event he did, he probably saw it as I did, as inconsequential and fleeting.

But no Southerner—black or white—would have had my response. Of course, I would completely change my mind the first time I saw on TV young Africans calmly sitting at a counter while racist abuse, blows, and the contents of ketchup bottles, full ashtrays, and coffee cups were dumped on their heads. That made a believer out of me. Instantly.

But at first, I was a smart New York kid, a “serious student” of Marxist theory. So this Greensboro “stunt” seemed entirely too spontaneous.

The brothers were quoted as saying they “just wanted to see what would happen.” Say what? Much too naive and insufficiently analytical, where could it possibly go? I thought smugly.

Well . . . the brothers did see what would happen. Nothing. After a couple hours they left and went back to the dorm. But when they came back the next day, it was with twenty-three brothers from A&T and four sisters from Bennett College.

Yeah, real fleeting and inconsequential.

Before the middle of the semester over six thousand students from seventy-eight Southern campuses or communities had sat in. Over two thousand had gone to jail. The black student sit-in movement had swept through the South. Nationally, some months later, by August 1961, over seventy thousand young people, mostly black but with many whites, had staged sit-ins. Over three thousand had visited Southern jails. Nearly all of my allies in NAG had been inspired into social activism by that trivial little experiment in “student exhibitionism” in that Greensboro department store.

Well . . . even though the tactic had flashed across the Southern landscape in spontaneous flare-ups, much like a brush fire on a drought-parched California hillside, without conscious intervention it would certainly have flared up and burned itself away, just like those brush fires do.

But even just the flare-ups had been spectacular. I cannot forget sitting one afternoon with some Kokista buddies in a cafeteria at Science looking with amazement and joy at a page of the *New York Times*. Fully three-quarters of that page was covered with little two-, three-inch reports. All with datelines from college towns across the South—Atlanta, Nashville, Jacksonville, Louisville, St. Augustine, etc., etc. Every story about young Africans sitting in, being attacked, arrested, or simply ignored. But whatever the response, those lunch counters did no business while my people sat.

“Oh, my God,” I thought. “Negroes, like the spring, are breaking out all over.”

They were. The people—thousands of anonymous young Africans—broke out and acted to change history. Bourgeois historians can argue endlessly about the precise causes, the spirit of the times or the motivations, but the fact is indefinable. Those young brothers and sisters were acting on their own initiative and in their own interest. That’s how history is made, people acting for themselves, sometimes with a little help from visionary and tireless organizers.

One of the most effective political organizers this country has ever produced must have read the same news stories we had. When the students erupted, Ms. Ella Baker, an African woman who had devoted her entire

adult life to organizing grassroots African resistance to Southern apartheid, was working in an uneasy association with Dr. King and his Baptist ministers in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. With some difficulty she persuaded Dr. King's ministers that "all that youthful energy, courage, and idealism should not be left simply to dissipate." Dr. King, who had visions dancing in his head of a SCLC youth wing to compete with the NAACP's, persuaded his board to appropriate \$800 to bring the student activists together.

But Ms. Baker had a far higher vision, inspired in its boldness by her lifelong, unshakable faith in common people's, even the youth's, potential to lead themselves. She was authorized by Dr. King to call a conference at which the scattered student groups could meet each other and try to evolve a common philosophy and an organizational structure that could lend direction and continuity to this formless, spontaneous student uprising. Ms. Baker's meeting did all this . . . and considerably more.

Over the Easter weekend of April 15-17, 1960, 189 young people from over forty colleges and eleven states met at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, Ms. Baker's alma mater. There they listened to adult leaders including the Reverend Martin Luther King, the Reverend James Lawson, and Ms. Baker herself. The speeches were all good.

But, it was Ms. Baker's talk, "More Than a Hamburger," in which she invited the students to start thinking boldly about "transforming the entire social structure" of the South, that really turned the students on. Then she explained to the adult leaders present, "*The younger generation is challenging you and me. They are asking us to forget our laziness and doubt and fear and to follow our dedication to truth to the bitter end.*" She challenged them to get out of the way, "*for these students have earned the right to direct their own affairs, yes, and even to make their own mistakes.*" You can imagine how much the students would have dug that . . . because over the next few years we would do both seriously . . . our own decisions *and* our own mistakes. Certainly, certainly, *certainly*, Lord. Yes, we would.

Later we found out that during the conference Ms. Baker had walked out of a meeting with the SCLC ministers. The leaders were assigning themselves student delegations to be lobbied to get them to hook up with SCLC. Dr. King would deliver Atlanta; Wyatt T. Walker, Virginia; the Reverend Mr. Abernathy, Alabama; and so on. Ms. Baker refused to be a party to anything like that, feeling strongly that "the young people ought not be manipulated nor their energy and idealism co-opted." Those were important principles for Ms. Baker, which we never saw her compromise, *not once*, as long we knew her.

So by the time the conference ended, and almost entirely because of Ms. Baker, two important things had happened. The first thing was that the delegates had met numbers of young people like themselves. Young

people who had previously only been names, faces, or arrest statistics in newspaper or TV news accounts. Now, these names had tangible reality, were friends and allies, and the importance of this cannot be exaggerated. In the workshops, the students were feeling their power, sharing their experiences, and it was purely, flat-out inspiring. To listen to a young sister from Rock Hill, South Carolina: "Then the mayor was outraged. He complained that we had conducted *nineteen* sit-ins during January. I told him, yes, we were ashamed. It should have been thirty-one." The accomplishment and wonder of a teenaged brother from Georgia reflecting, "*I, myself desegregated a lunch counter . . . not some big man, not some powerful man, but little me. I walked the picket line. I sat in, and the walls [of segregation] came tumbling down.*"

The other and more important thing to come out of the Raleigh meeting was the creation of the skeleton of a structure, a "temporary coordinating committee," to maintain communications among and between the scattered campus movements. Ed King, a brother who'd led some bloody sit-ins in Frankfort, Kentucky, was elected chair. Later, that May 1960, just before the semester ended, the "temporary" was dropped at a meeting in Atlanta where the committee met with Mrs. Baker, the Reverend Mr. Lawson, and a militant and skillful young lawyer named Len "the Snake Doctor" Holt, who is certainly one of the great unsung heroes of our Southern struggle.

(I first met the Snake Doctor when he defended us in a Jackson, Mississippi, court during the Freedom Rides. Here was our lawyer, a young African, not much older than us, impeccably dressed, clearly better educated and more confident, articulate, and dramatic than the prosecutor, who kept turning his back whenever our lawyer spoke. At one point the Snake Doctor requested some court documents. The prosecutor, his back turned, threw them contemptuously to his feet. Bro Len silently bent down, picked up the papers, calmly made his presentation, and then—here's the part I've never forgotten. The young brother deliberately walks across that Mississippi courtroom, moves around to face the prosecutor, and *throws those papers in that cracker's face, Jack*. Len explained later, "Hey, we were never going to win in that court. But that didn't mean we had to accept any insults either." Being defended by the Snake Doctor was always an adventure and an inspiration in the South.)

That Atlanta meeting voted to remain independent as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee elected Marion Barry of Nashville to the chair, and affirmed its commitment to nonviolence.

When school started that fall, the committee met again and elected Bro Chuck McDew as first chairman. All those pioneering students, Bill Mahoney, Diane Nash, Marion Barry, John Lewis, Julian Bond, Ruby Doris Smith, and the many, many anonymous ones whose names are not

part of media records were interesting young black people. Bro Chuck McDew was one of the funniest and more interesting.

When his daddy sent him south to college from a small, industrial, midwest, rust-belt city, he was an all-state running back with simple all-American jock dreams. His intention, he said, was to “play four years, graduate, join the NFL, and live large.” But being from the Midwest he’d played with and against white boys and he didn’t reckon on the protocols of Jim Crow. He didn’t know to say “sir” to white cops. Within a matter of weeks in Dixie, he was thrice knocked cold, had his jaw and arm broken, was hospitalized three times, and was jailed twice. He had a choice, either return north because “these here crackers is crazy,” or join the fight.

He joined. Later Chuck converted to Judaism, in part because the only white religious leader to support the sit-ins in his college town had been the local rabbi. Bob Moses would famously describe Chuck as “a Negro by birth, a Jew by choice, and a revolutionary by necessity.” So, you see, SNCC folk came out in all shapes, sizes, and attitudes, yes, indeedy.

At the Atlanta meeting, Chuck, who still has a lot of preacher in him, sounded the call as SNCC’s first chairman: “Instead of accepting the leavings of a sick and decadent society, we shall seize the initiative. . .” Which we did.

Thus in about nine months, thanks to Ms. Baker, an isolated and impulsive act of defiance, a tentative gesture coming out of a dormitory-room bull session, had evolved into an organization, or at least the bare bones of one. To have called it a national organization then would have been a big stretch, but I and my new community at Howard were members of a beginning student organization that would profoundly affect this nation.

From my very first meeting at Howard it became clear that NAG’s battle was two-pronged—on the campus and in the surrounding communities. Both were instructive and each affected the other. For four years we would move between our struggle to expand the base on campus and the larger struggle in the streets. For simplicity and clarity, I’ll talk first about the four-year campaign on campus, then venture southward.

Obviously NAG was an unprecedented entity in student life at Howard. It fit neatly into no familiar category. It was never a recognized student organization, but it wasn’t one of those informal “homie” cliques either. You know, kids from the same city, D.C. or N.Y. or Philly who shared high schools, histories, and local youth cultures and who tended to hang out and party together at Howard. NAG came from *all over*. But despite our obvious individual differences and regional diversity, and our collective “oddness” so far as traditional student groupings

went, we actually had much more in common than might readily have been apparent.

For the most part, NAG folk were good students. All of us were intellectually curious and read avidly, and a few of us were already quite accomplished. Tom Kahn, for example, was the author of an influential pamphlet on the civil rights movement called *The Unfinished Revolution*. Bill Mahoney published a novel, *Black Jacob*, while still an undergraduate. The Wheeler sisters—Jean and Sharon—maintained four-point grade averages most semesters during their four years, and a majority of us stayed on or near the dean's list.

But it was much more than a question of academics or “intelligence,” because, among our peers at Howard, any number of equally smart students who were never members of NAG nor participants in the movement. And, of course, as people like to say, we were a generation favored by history. Which is true. History was kind to us. We had come along at an extraordinary historical moment that presented black youth with an unprecedented opportunity to engage society militantly.

But, more than academic intelligence, all NAG folk seemed to share certain personal qualities, which enabled us to respond effectively to that historical moment and to that campus. What bound us together was a great interest in and respect for our people and a passionate identification with the African struggle everywhere, whether in Mississippi, Mozambique, or Montserrat. And a sense that, as a consequence of the sacrifices of previous generations, we not only would not have to accept what they had, but could do even more.

One thing that reflects the spirit of the times among that generation of activist youth—white and black—is the recurrence of certain favorite quotations, ideas that spoke to collective human responsibility. These quotes were prevalent during my high school and early college years. Later in the decade these would be replaced by more overtly revolutionary slogans from people like Che, Malcolm, and Uncle Ho. But when I was a freshman, a lot of the people I knew would have some combination of these high-minded quotes up somewhere in their room. I remember three of these quotations.

One was from Dr. King's *Stride Toward Freedom* to the effect that “If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.” The second was from the white jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes: “As life is action and passion, it is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his time at peril being judged not to have lived.”

But the most common one—which I would later occasionally use to end speeches—was Rabbi Hillel's famous quote: “If I am not for myself, who is for me? And when I am for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”

* * *

As I would soon discover, just about all of our Southern members had been—even from high school—questioning, resenting, and often resisting the racist protocols and practices of segregation in their hometowns. Many had attempted to organize resistance as best they could—often very lonely resistance—to the daily humiliations of the racism around them. Ironically enough, Dion Diamond (Virginia), Cleve Sellers (South Carolina), and Hank Thomas (Florida) had been sent off to Howard by parents anxious, with excellent reason, about their son's survival in the South. Ed Brown had been expelled from college in Louisiana for leading sit-ins. Sending them to Howard turned out to be a case of "Oh, please, Bre'r Bear, please don't throw me in that briar patch." Once on campus, every one of them headed straight into NAG, where they would turn right round and put themselves in harm's way in some of the hottest battle zones of the South.

All of which is to say that my new friends were strong-willed—read mule-stubborn—young adults who could live without peer acceptance. They did not mind—or had become accustomed to—being considered "strange" or "different." So the status conformism that dominated Howard student culture held absolutely no terrors for them.

But similarities in fundamental attitudes notwithstanding, we were in no way intellectual clones of each other. Folks were stubbornly independent; therefore arguments and disagreements could be fierce, passionate, and unending. As Joyce Ladner famously said, "SNCC folk would argue with a street sign." Well, NAG folk would argue with the sign *post*. But the strident rhetoric never managed to conceal a deep mutual respect. Many of my comrades looking back over the years would admit to a feeling that I certainly shared: a relief bordering on euphoria. It was a lot like finding a long-lost family that you hadn't previously known about, but with whom you instantly recognized your kinship. And to this day you will hear the word *family* being used among us. Except, of course, that unlike biological family, this one was completely self-selective. This was a family that the times and the accidents of history had chosen for us.

The discussion at the very first NAG meeting I attended showed, as I've said, that we were simultaneously conducting two different struggles. Our ultimate aim was to participate in the struggle for human rights in the nation. Our duty, therefore, was to try to put large numbers of our peers from the campus into active participation in that struggle. This meant organizing our fellow students. But that effort is not, and should not, though it frequently is, be confused with trying to build "a student movement." Let's be clear here.

Narrowly defined, a “student movement” comprises only students acting in self-interest as a class. Consequently it engages issues affecting student life, i.e., student culture, student rights, entitlements, autonomy, and so forth. I don’t mean in any way to disparage those issues. I remember from “Science” a leftist put-down: “One class-conscious worker is worth a thousand students,” but that is not at all what I’m saying. Of necessity, NAG was involved in all of those “student” issues, *but never as an end*. We had to engage them to get to where we really wanted to go—the fight against racism in the general society. We were an organization mostly of students but we were not a student organization.

So even though we would completely transform the administration’s stunted view of student rights and compel at least some respect for student activism, transforming Howard’s institutional culture was never a primary (or even much of a secondary) goal of ours. But if we were to organize our peers for the larger struggle, we had no choice. To get to human rights in society, we had to begin with student rights on campus.

In the early sixties all American higher education was paternalistic and condescending toward students in ways contemporary students would not possibly believe. Traditionally, black schools, being at the mercy of a racist status quo, were even more problematic. In fact, they were downright authoritarian: “We don’t understand *rights* here. What we understand here is *responsibilities*.” Student rights were what the administration said they were. Hence any struggle for the hearts and minds of the Howard studentry would inevitably have to begin with a serious butt-rubbing with prevailing institutional attitudes and practices. Inevitably a facedown with the administration.

There was much talk of widespread apathy among African students born in America during these times. That’s not entirely fair. There was more fear than apathy. There was so much economic insecurity and racial intimidation where most of us came from; many Southern students were afraid to act because their parents were totally dependent on white folks for their living. Then too the administration (whether consciously or not) did everything to encourage that insecurity. The institution also actively encouraged juvenile social behaviors among students—a kind of prolonged adolescence—which discouraged bold political initiative on the students’ part. What therefore was described as black student “apathy” was to some extent carefully constructed out of equal parts economic insecurity, intimidation, and an imposed paternalism. We didn’t *want* to accept the racist status quo, but we were constantly being told that we had no alternative. But why *white* students of the time, the alleged beneficiaries of the American system, should have been so apolitical and apathetic in their behavior is, however, quite another story. One I will not recount here. In any case, all this was about to change dramatically.

Our efforts to organize a “student movement,” although in one sense a diversion, were by no means a waste of time and energy. Because, in struggling for the mere right to exist and organize on campus, we gained experience, developed political skills, and tested techniques, all of which would prove invaluable in the wider struggle. So, in yet another quite unintended way, Howard was our laboratory, in this case for political education and even more important, political *praxis*. Take for example our perennial struggle for official recognition, which, of course, we never won. As we have seen, the university simply could not afford to let us win. So why would we continue to beat our heads against that particular brick wall? Why, indeed, expend all that time and energy? Because the campaigns served to maintain a high movement visibility on campus.

Students took sides, overwhelmingly in our favor. How could they not? So, by increasing student awareness and attention, the process became even more important than any possible result. And, in stifling our initiatives, the administration was frequently so openly manipulative that NAG always won by losing. Not to mention, of course, that the issues often involved fundamentals like free speech and freedom of association and of political action. We learned early that you can lose, but you are never defeated so long as you never abandon principle.

Besides, wrassling the administration to a standstill was excellent training and practice. Students had been accustomed to accepting in loco parentis, the principle of administrative parental authority. (This was when American parents still had authority.) The administration handed down *dictats* that students were not to challenge . . . openly. For instance, women had strictly enforced nightly curfews, but men did not. No student group openly challenged that double standard. Unthinkable today.

Prior to this time student defiance had been covert. It took surreptitious “social” forms, “getting away with” drinking, violating curfew, or flouting some other equally intrusive but ultimately trivial rule. I don’t think it had ever before taken the form of *public* and *systematic* challenges to administrative prerogative.

So that is exactly what we did. And challenging the status quo was for us not only excellent training, but fun, big time. Because we always had to be impeccably prepared, this meant researching university rules and procedures and even civil law. Anticipating possible administration moves and figuring out in advance how to counter them. Learning the different techniques of negotiating from a position of no real power, when to bluff, when to fold, when to stall. This, of course, is a situation that we—and the whole black movement—would constantly face in the struggle in the larger world. As Bill Mahoney would sometimes say, “Today the administration, tomorrow the state.”

NAG got pretty good at this kind of political maneuvering. Occasionally, on finding themselves outflanked in a meeting, our administrators would resort to naked authoritarianism, the “Because we said so” approach of harassed parents everywhere. Or they would simply adjourn meetings indefinitely. Naturally we would rush the story into the student paper and NAG’s support with the students—and progressive faculty—would rise dramatically each time.

Sometimes we would be left little alternative but open—but invariably polite—defiance, upping the ante, “heightening the contradictions,” expanding the scope and terms of the dispute even to the extent of threatening litigation. Later in quieter moments administrators would admit that they were simply unaccustomed to this degree of toughness and defiance from mere students. I mean even parents didn’t usually threaten the university with lawsuits, much less students.

Of course NAG never actually sued Howard, but the mere threat established that we were adults, not children. And we did have the benefit of excellent legal advice and representation. An extremely canny litigator on the law school faculty, Professor Herbert Reed, advised and represented us in court whenever we were arrested.

Professor Reed didn’t look like anybody’s militant. He was a heavysset, rumped, slow-talking Southerner with very much the manner and affect of an ol’ country lawyer. Which could fool you. A clear, tough-minded black man, he was a great lawyer. I’m not sure he could or would ever have represented us against Howard. But he did brief us on the law and exactly what to say to fill bureaucratic hearts with dread. Professor Reed was yet another elder who gave us courage and confidence. Give praise and thanks.

From these experiences we took a number of lessons, not all of which will apply to every political circumstance, but which certainly worked with a resistant, if not totally hostile, academic establishment. So the lessons probably still do apply . . . if only for students in a university setting.

First: Be clear as to your goals and even clearer as to your strategy. Do not confuse these.

Second: Indeed be “neat, clean, and polite.” But also hang tough, and the tougher you have to get, the more polite, correct, and *reasonable* your tone and demeanor must be.

Third: Do your homework and your research. Surprise them with the *accuracy* and *thoroughness* of your preparation, with what you know. Be prepared to outwork the suckers and let them see that you are.

Fourth: Be focused and uncompromising on *principle*, but be creatively flexible on tactics. That is, be consistent but never predictable. Always surprise them.

And the last thing: Never leave your sense of humor at home. Always

find the ironies, laugh, and let them see you laughing. Especially when they don't know why you are. As Junebug Jabbo Jones (may his tribe increase) says, "What us Africans need most is a lot of patience and a sense of irony." Now these worked for us at Howard. They will work in a university setting where the institutional self-image tends toward reason and civility and where interests are not totally and irresolvably opposed. They will not, repeat, *will not* work, with say, armed barbarians or irrationally savage racists. Or with an inflexible government establishment whose "interests," as they understand them, give a low priority to justice for your people or the alleged guarantees of the Constitution. We would find that out to our great sorrow.

The two key student organizations for our purposes were the Student Council, which controlled funds, and the newspaper, which reached the whole campus. We targeted both successfully. In those days there were no such things as student radio stations or campus television channels. But NAG always had a presence on the newspaper, the *Hilltop*. Charlie Cobb and Mike Thelwell were on staff, but we all—Tom, Muriel, Hank, Jean, Courtland, Bill, Ed, myself—regularly contributed stories about the movement.

By the year (1962–63) Thelwell became editor in chief, the movement had completely captured that organ. The dean of men (let him be nameless) belatedly realized this and took what he apparently thought was clever and effective preemptive action. But, to be truthful, the dean might have been provoked to this.

A few weeks into the semester the sports, news, and feature editors, looking quite crestfallen, came in as a bloc and asked for a private meeting with Thelwell. They seemed oddly uncomfortable and embarrassed. They had, they told him, a confession to make. Right after their organizational meeting they'd been summoned to a meeting in the dean's office and had been instructed to report on the new editor. To their great shame, they had agreed. Why?

The editor in chief was, the dean told them, clearly a radical—possibly a communist—or crazy. For the good of the school, their duty was to observe and report to the dean personally any sign of instability, or worse, potentially subversive behavior, on the editor in chief's part. This agreement had been on their consciences ever since and they wanted him to know.

"So what were you supposed to be looking for, coded messages from Cuba?"

"Anything subversive. Besides, you know, 'you ain't right in the head anyhow.'"

"Well, what have you reported thus far?"

“Comaan . . . what d’you take us for? Course we ain’t told him nothing.”

“Nothing, huh? Pity that. ’Cause, y’know, that greasy-headed, chitterling eating Uncle Tom is quite right. You do have a responsibility to report . . .” Thelwell reached into a desk drawer for three envelopes, which he flourished. “In fact, I do want you to report to him.”

“You want us to report you?”

“Please. Tell him that I showed you these three stamped and addressed envelopes that I keep always in my desk. Tell him I said that one was to my personal attorney, one to the American Civil Liberties Union. The third is to the National Student Association Committee on Student Press Freedom. Tell him that I brag *all* the time that I can’t wait for the administration to try to censor the paper or arbitrarily move on the editor. Tell him I bragged how he would not only make me famous, *but* have not *one* but *three* heavy-duty lawsuits on his fat, nappy head in a New York minute. Tell him I said that.”

The trio came back laughing, saying the dean had seemed grateful. He told them they’d done well; that their information was valuable; thanked them profusely and assured them that if they ever needed his assistance in the future, he would certainly be there for them. That was the last we heard from that gentleman all year.

“Oh, Bledsoe, you ain’t nothing but a greasy chitterling eater,” as Ellison’s invisible man said about his college president.

But, of course, the *Hilltop* to which we all contributed became a sho’nuff overt organ of the student movement. Wherever there was a civil rights campaign, we’d write up the stories prominently. I was just shown a story I wrote in 1963 about the Baltimore campaign where Howard delivered five hundred demonstrators. (The buses were paid for by the Student Council—a cultural field trip we called it.)

Charlie Cobb, who had gone to work with Bob Moses in Mississippi, sent back regular field reports from the Delta. Hank Thomas spent his junior year in and out of Southern jails for CORE. He sent back a hair-raising column called “We Shall Overcome,” to which I sometimes contributed. By the time he got back to campus Hank had the distinction of having been legally banished from the sovereign state of Alabama and placed under penalty of jail if he were ever so much as to set foot within that state’s borders again. That’s how crazy those crackers were. Junior year I wrote stories on the Baltimore and Cambridge, Maryland, campaigns for the “We Shall Overcome” column.

The other really important official student organization that would have to be infiltrated if NAG was to be effective was the student government, officially the Liberal Arts Student Council (LASC).

Under capitalism, money talks—in fact, according to your Supreme Court, money is *speech* whose freedom must therefore be protected. And the LASC was where the student money was. So we were always active in those elections, campaigning for the election of our members—Jean Wheeler, Tom Kahn, Phil Hutchins, myself—or our allies. So that at least some of the students' moneys could be directed away from such officially approved "social" activities as homecoming parades, ROTC's "Officer and His Lady" balls, and cotillion-like irrelevancies of bourgeois affectation and status inflation that Courtland called "niggeratti pretentiousness." Of course, the Greeks complained bitterly. According to them, the Student Council and the newspaper did not give enough emphasis to "social activity."

However, by my junior year we were able to elect Tom Kahn (who was white) treasurer, Phil Hutchins, who would ultimately be the last chairman of SNCC, vice president, and me a member. That was the year of the Route 40 and Baltimore campaigns. Somehow Student Affairs never quite figured out, or really wanted to figure out, what those bus rentals for "cultural field trips to Baltimore" actually were. Baltimore? Cultural? Give me an ever-loving break. Those were the years in which our gradual politicization of the student organizations burst into full flower.

I have been talking as if the level of serious student politics we brought to bear was unprecedented at Howard. And in the sense of open confrontation, it was. In the prevailing climate of authoritarian paternalism in which students were expected "to act like kids" and consequently did, and where the administrators' control was preemptory and unchallengeable, we were, probably, something new. We represented the first wave of a new student militancy that would crest in the late sixties. But we were not entirely without precedent.

For at Howard, we had at least one important recent predecessor, a consummate student politician, an "inside player" who'd operated very differently from us, but very, very effectively. I came the year after he graduated, but the NAG veterans, Tom Kahn, Hank Thomas, Mike Thelwell, and Bill Mahoney, talked of the outgoing LASC president with utmost respect. This brother's contribution to the direction and growth of the emerging student movement and the way he achieved it deserves to be much better understood.

[It was freshman orientation in '59. S.O.S. Same ol' same ol'. The usual procession of petty bureaucrats—vice assistant this and dean the other—subjecting the captive frosh to an unending, irrelevant stream of platitude after cliché, after bromide, after nostrum, after condescending inanity. The level of discourse was infantile, head hurting. Ms. Hamer had the right term for it: "It were very discouraging."

Then, at the end of all this, the president of the student government was introduced, a skinny, craggy-featured young man in large, horn-rimmed glasses and a bad suit. I guess I didn't expect anything different since he was only a student, on the same platform as the administrative mush-mouths, and seemed quite obviously to be an afterthought on the program.

But, bro, it was a breath of fresh air. The student leader was brilliant, a man among boys. He was wonderfully articulate, clear, purposeful and sharp strategically. Nothing rhetorically militant but controlled and pragmatic in his language. And he was talking real politics, his plan to use our government to establish student rights and affect the struggle in the society. I couldn't believe it. He was clearly the most intelligent and effective speaker on that platform. It was far and away the best political talk I'd heard since setting foot in the country. . . . And remember, this was in the middle of a presidential campaign. Now, it could be that the speech sounded so great only because of the crap that had preceded it. But it was the first thing I heard that made me proud to be a Howard student. I realized for the first time the real possibilities of American student politics. —EMTJ

Timothy Jenkins graduated the year before I arrived but I would meet him in Nashville after the Freedom Rides and the next year in Greenwood, Mississippi. He must clearly have been a new breed of student leader to the Howard fossils, as he apparently was a new Negro to the leadership of the National Student Association, where he played a shrewd and effective role at the time of the sit-ins.

What is significant about this brother is that he chose to go inside the system, but always with purpose. I've always told young people who ask, "Yeah, it's possible to work honorably within the system, but *only* in service to a serious movement outside." You gotta have a radical alternative outside that you can serve from inside. That was Tim.

He was from Philly, so on campus they called him "the Philadelphia Negro." He was said to be an honest brother, but "slicker than pig grease" (only they didn't say "grease"). He was known to be shrewd and tart of tongue, help us, Jesus. When Ms. Baker's first meeting with the sit-in students took place in Raleigh, the Howard student government quietly contributed some significant travel funds. That was Tim.

As an undergraduate he had traveled abroad. He'd lived with a Serbian family in Sarajevo where he said he'd had his "first exposure to white tribalism." He'd visited revolutionary Cuba with a NSA delegation. Which inclined him to run for vice president for international affairs in the National Student Association. So before the convention in 1960 he started his campaign.

What happened next was supremely ironic, though none of us knew the details at the time.

As was later revealed, an influential faction of the NSA leadership was

covertly being subsidized and “handled” by the CIA. These CIA “assets” became concerned that this clear, unapologetic, nonshuffling, nongrinning, effective Negro might prove “uncontrollable” in charge of international affairs. But Tim’s campaign had been skillful. At NSA he was the rare black student leader and much too popular and persuasive a candidate to be simply “dissed.” However, the CIA faction thought that domestic affairs were relatively tepid, not so “sensitive” compared to international affairs. So they brokered a political solution in which Tim Jenkins emerged as VP for *national affairs* just as SNCC was aborning. Suddenly national affairs were what was happening and our brother could not have been better placed, in his words, “to represent those Southern kids on the front lines” within the national student establishment, as well as to channel all kinds of foundation resources to the Southern movement.

But Tim was so consummate an “inside” player that few in the NSA establishment knew that he was also at the same time on the executive committee of the early Students for a Democratic Society, when it was still affiliated with the League for Industrial Democracy. There he worked to build an alliance between radical white students and the Southern black movement in ways that we will discuss later.

It should be evident that Tim Jenkins did not look or behave like the conventional image of the “militant” black student. But no students I can think of had a more positive effect on the development and direction of our movement during its formative years. My point is, in some circumstances, there can be a role for clear and effective black activists *inside* the system. At least that was true *then*. I’m not so sure about *now*. Later, it even seemed to make a certain pragmatic sense when Tim, then in law school at Yale, said he was joining the Republican Party. He told us then that “a lot of influence” could be wielded by a skillful and honest African operating within that party. But history surprises us all, does it not? Tim joined the Republican Party of Rockefeller, which turned into the party of Strom Thurmond, Jesse Helms, and Clarence Thomas. Help us, Jesus. Some would say there’s not a dime’s worth of difference between them, but in a small, practical way there really was. But it might not be enough of a difference.

So, NAG did have at least one effective political predecessor in student government, one who managed to divert “insider” resources to the struggle. If so, NAG was, in effect, only continuing in that tradition when we moved into student government. Looking back, I guess those Howard students who felt constrained to remain aloof from the struggle back then can now take some comfort that they were at least represented in the struggle by some portion of their student activity fees. During my college days

READY FOR REVOLUTION

the struggle on the campus would prove both instructive and valuable, but that would come later.

As an eager freshman I was much more concerned with getting into the struggle in the streets. That's where I really wanted to be. It would not be long before I'd be fully involved. Fully involved, almost consumed.

Nonviolence— Apprenticeship in Struggle

Premed freshman Carmichael had arrived at Howard fully prepared to embark on the road to medicine. Cleve Sellers recently reminded me just how well prepared for that I had really been. Thanks to a contribution from the faithful Mummy Olga, I was, in practical terms, probably the best medically equipped freshman. Almost certainly the only one to arrive fully armed with stethoscope, rectal thermometer, and little triangular rubber hammers used to bang knees in order to check reflexes. Yeah, I sure was ready, Jack.

The medical hardware had been Mummy Olga's proud contribution. She was working at Harlem Hospital, where she admired the young African interns, no doubt fondly imagining her son among them. She had somehow managed to come by these items (I won't say she liberated them, Mummy Olga being far too good a Christian for that), which she proudly produced just before I was to leave. Her little surprise. I hadn't the heart to tell her that it would be at least five years before I'd be needing anything like that. ("But hi! It in't doctor you go study? I thought you was going study doctor, *oui?*")

Mummy Olga's equipment notwithstanding, what increasingly preoccupied my mind from my first NAG meeting was not listening to heartbeats, but the anticipation of my first demonstration in the South. Course, I'd walked many a CORE picket line in New York. But this would be the South. The real movement. The hostile crowds and cops I'd seen on TV. The war stories from the NAG veterans only made matters worse. I simply could not wait for my own baptism by fire. The discussions, and the planning and training sessions, were interesting, but they only served to whet my impatience for action. Would I, could I, maintain nonviolence in the face of attack? What would my first arrest feel like?

Next to veterans like John Moody, Hank, Courtland, Bill, I felt like a rookie, eager to earn his stripes and fully belong.

• • •

My freshman year I regarded as a training period, greatly respecting the more experienced leadership and considering myself in training under them. One brother in particular I regard as having trained me, by his example of courage, calm determination, and evident strength of character. Because he was a slow-talking Southerner, and not ideologically glib, some NAG folks regarded Hank Thomas as "kinda country." But even they had to concede his moral power. I just thought he was one of the most impressive young black men I'd ever met.

He was a big, strong ol' dude too, a rangy six foot five with an athletic build. In fact, he'd turned down a football scholarship to Wisconsin in favor of an academic scholarship to Howard. And those Howard coaches really wanted him to play defensive end for the Bisons, but he was totally committed to the struggle. I really admired Hank. Whatever he said he would do, you could absolutely count on. I came to believe that this quality is particularly strong in Southern black culture. I would encounter it over and over in Mississippi and Alabama. In the youth *and* in their parents. Ed Brown had that quality, as did his brother Rap, now Jamil al-Amin. As did Bob Mants, Annie Pearl Avery, Dory Ladner, James and Willie Peacock, Randy Battle, and so many others.

Also, I learned a lot from Hank about growing up under segregation, in St. Augustine. The schools there were completely segregated but many of the teachers were very conscious black people. Students were taught speeches by Frederick Douglass and Dr. Martin Luther King and sang the "Negro National Anthem" by James Weldon Johnson. During the Suez Crisis, a large picture of Gamal Abdel Nasser, "who looked exactly like Mr. Mason, the biology teacher and football coach," appeared in the hallway. At Ghanaian independence, President Nasser was joined by President Nkrumah, "who looked to us exactly like Mr. R. J. Murray, our principal, so," Hank told me, "we learned about the African struggle and completely identified with these African leaders."

After my experience at Bronx Science this made quite an impression: the international black consciousness that these Southern African teachers were quietly nurturing in those segregated schools. Later I would constantly hear similar things from other African students from the South.

I once met a brother who grew up in St. Augustine with Hank. This guy (Benjamin) told me that Hank had amazed his peers when at fifteen he single-handedly struggled with segregation in the movie theaters. The teenagers did not have much in the way of entertainment, so "the movies were a real big teenage thing." Hank refused to accept segregated seating, so he was thrown out. He announced that he would never again pay money to be disrespected, so "he never set foot again in a movie theater until he left for college. We were all amazed, and admired him, but,

man, we weren't about to deprive ourselves of the movies. Hank stood alone in that."

I would also learn a lot, often at considerable personal risk, from another Southern brother, who was exactly the opposite of Hank. This brother was from Virginia and was as slight as Hank was big, as swift, verbal, and volatile as Hank was calm and deliberate. Dion Diamond was so skinny that Courtland used to say, "Put Dion and helium in a room and Dion would rise."

Dion was superclean, a campus fashion plate—no small feat on a campus where "vining and styling" was a major occupation—and intense to the point of being hyper, with a mouth on him that would not quit. You did not want to git into no dozens with this brother. No you did not. Then too he always managed to surround himself with fine sisters, "dusky Southern belles," while styling, signifying, and talking macho trash. But feisty and aggressive? Help us, Jesus. It was nothing for Dion to talk down towering football linemen and just humiliate them with his quick wit and razor tongue. Seen him do it more than once. He'd simply talk some big ol' dude down. We figured it was only a matter of time before someone would mess up his face for real, but it never happened that I know of.

Truthfully, at first I didn't quite know what to make of Dion. What was this skinny shrimp doing with all them fine sisters anyway? And he always looked an inch away from getting "in yo face and on yo case" with his wasp-smart, mouthy self. But I got to like Dion a lot, even if he did get us into tight situations. He was, as I would discover, dangerously fearless and dedicated.

Of course we were all activists, but Dion and Hank were nonviolent shock troops. As was Cleve Sellers, who entered in my sophomore year. The word *activist* described Cleve. In fact, his parents had sent him to Howard in part because, as a high school organizer and "troublemaker," he'd become marked in Denmark, South Carolina. He'd organized high school student resistance to the point where he was thought to be targeted by the Klan. Not only were there anonymous threats, but his parents were advised by "respectable" whites that it would be best to get Cleve out of town. At Howard, Cleve and I would become close friends and soldier together through many a struggle.

A rather more cerebrally oriented element in the group could, for want of a better word, be called "intellectuals," though one of them claimed to "reach for his gun" whenever he heard that word.

Tom Kahn and Paul Dietrich were white, deeply committed pacifists and, as everyone understood, gay. They were—apart from Bayard Rustin and Jimmy Baldwin—the only gay people we were aware of who were in

the movement. Somehow it was never an issue. It was simply the way they were. They neither hid nor proclaimed it, so there was nothing to discuss. I don't think anyone felt it necessary even to give it much thought. I can't—nor can anyone I checked with—remember any sense of avoidance, denial, or curiosity within the group. It was simply a given, something of no pressing importance and, above all, private. Anyway, it was not really anyone else's business. So what was there to discuss? There were just too many important public issues for the group to be concerned with somebody else's sexuality.

Tom, being a Howard student, was more centrally influential than Paul in campus politics. He was also our channel to Bayard. Tom had graduated high school young, at fifteen or sixteen, then made his way to New York, where he'd been involved in radical politics until, at twenty-one, he'd come to college. A pacifist and socialist, he was one of a small group of white radical youth who'd become protégés of Bayard Rustin's, with whom he was said to be close. Tom was a shrewd strategist with by far the most experience of us all in radical political organizing, having, as it were, studied with Rustin. His influence on NAG campus strategy would be profound.

Paul Dietrich, also a pacifist and radical, had a Chinese partner said to be a son of one of Chiang Kai-shek's warlords. In addition to Jazzland, his popular little jazz club in the African community, Paul was also partner in a large, fashionable Chinese restaurant on Connecticut Avenue. Occasionally Paul would treat NAG folk to a good meal there. One evening Paul came over to our table just grinning and gestured across the dining room to a large, noisy table of old white men.

"Recognize any of them?"

"Hell, no. A bunch of ol' white geezers in bad suits. Why?"

"Look again carefully." He smiled mysteriously. "Know your enemy. That red-faced one is Eastland. Next to him, Stennis, both of Mississippi, and Russell of Georgia." He named a few more Dixiecrat congressmen and members of their staffs. As he explained, these luminaries would, in "the Southern way," go duck hunting in the fall. The game was brought to the restaurant to be converted into a variety of exotic Chinese dishes, after which their Capitol Hill colleagues were invited to a duck feast. Our African presence across the room did not seem to affect their segregationist appetites.

"So, Paul, consorting with the enemy, huh? Tell the truth. You do anything to the food?"

Paul was indignant, or affected to be.

Courtland Cox was from Trinidad by way of New York, but I hadn't known him in high school. Another big dude, Courtland was always thoughtful, deliberate, and given to aphorisms. "Blackness is necessary.

But it is not sufficient” is the one everyone remembers. Courtland always went out of his way to give the impression of being serious and organized. He still does.

The movement brought him some extraordinary experiences all before the age of thirty. I recently saw a picture of Courtland back in 1963 at a table with Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, Dr. King, James Farmer, and A. Philip Randolph planning the March on Washington. He was representing SNCC while still a Howard undergraduate. Later in the sixties, Courtland sat on the Bertrand Russell commission on the Vietnam War. Later, at the initiative of C. L. R. James, he was named executive secretary of the secretariat for the Sixth Pan-African Conference, where he had to negotiate with heads of state, African governments, and contentious liberation organizations. His surprising conclusion: “You know back when Dr. Du Bois and George Padmore were organizing the Pan-African Conferences and all black folks were still colonized? Well, it had to have been a hell of a lot easier then.”

As he explained, now they had to deal with governments as well as their oppositions, complex protocols, and outsize egos. If the opposition was given the slightest recognition, the government would boycott. If the opposition was not officially recognized to their satisfaction, then *they* would denounce the congress. Where countries were still fighting for independence, there would sometimes be two, three, or more rival groups, each insisting that it alone represented the liberation movement. It was incredibly complicated, “an old-fashioned, down-home mess.” But still they managed to have a congress. “I’m sure it was easier before we were allegedly ‘free.’” Courtland complained.

Two other comrades with whom I have maintained contact over the years are Bill Mahoney and Mike Thelwell. Both were into writing fiction. Mahoney was an olive-skinned brother from New Jersey with a strikingly Asiatic countenance. A strong face whose prominent cheekbones suggested Native American ancestry. The first time I saw him was in the dorm working at the front desk and, as always, reading a book. His very first words to me were something about Hegelian dialectics. No showing off. That was just the way his mind worked most of the time.

In 1963, Jim Forman sent Mahoney back to D.C. to work with Thelwell in setting up a Washington office for SNCC. Talk about an odd couple. Thelwell says that when he met him at the bus station, Bill came off the bus with a wooden box on his shoulders. “Where’s the rest of your luggage?” Thelwell asked. “This is it,” Bill said. In this wooden box were books, a blue work shirt, a pair of jeans, a few socks, and some drawers. And that was it, Bill’s worldly goods—a change of clothes and a lot of books.

For some reason women were attracted to Bill, who often did not seem to notice.

One sister, Jeanie Bell, got his attention though. Jeanie was a smart, organized, effective, bighearted woman who worked for a union. She was also attractive. Without her the Washington SNCC office would have been empty. She got her union to contribute used desks, filing cabinets, mimeograph machines, typewriters, you name it. Anyway, Jeanie fell in love with Bill and took him in. She had a real nice apartment too. This was no student crash pad. So Bill's wardrobe, diet, and address immediately improved along with his love life.

Then Jeanie had to attend a union convention out of town. She was gone only a week. When she returned, she came into the SNCC office. "Oh," she said. "Bill wrote me." "Must be true love," we said. She produced the letter. On SNCC letterhead, it read like a field report. "Look at how he ends the letter," she said, laughing almost tearfully. Her true love concluded after reporting matter-of-factly on movement events, "Yours for freedom, William J. Mahoney."

Bill is one of our casualties, having been severely damaged psychologically, he believes, by agents of the government. A number of our people have symptoms sufficiently similar to his to at least raise the serious possibility that something may indeed have been done to them, possibly while they were in jail. Even so, we have stayed in touch. Every year in Conakry I can depend on receiving at least two lengthy, complicated letters from Bill raising knotty philosophical and political questions.

His partner in the Washington office, Mike Thelwell, was NAG's sole "foreign" student. An African born in Jamaica, Thelwell first appeared on campus bearded and wearing an army fatigue cap. He was so vocal and tireless a defender of the Cuban *barbudos* that on campus people knew him as "Castro." When people would ask him if he was from "the islands," he'd pull himself up to his full height. "The *islands* indeed? I'm from the *continent* . . . of Jamaica." That always cracked me up. The brother's all right, but still, he's got his pompous Caribbean side. These are friends I made from my first semester. We learned a lot together, and together we'd experience serious struggle, as you will see.

At the time, we paid no real attention to one important aspect of NAG. However, as Cleve's list indicates, fully half of the core membership were women. This seemed entirely natural to us, in no way remarkable. So much so that we never thought even to add up the numbers. (Nor, in fact, to count the whites.) We all wanted our people's freedom and were together equally involved in the struggle. What could have been simpler, clearer, or more natural? We didn't think in "gender" terms.

Our sisters asked no quarter and gave none. They neither requested nor expected special treatment as women. And we didn't offer it. There was no women's caucus within the group. Ruth Howard, Muriel Tillingham, Karen House, Jean Wheeler (Smith), Karen Edwards, Cynthia

Washington, Mary Felice Lovelace, and their sisters were simply NAG members, fellow rebels, our comrades in struggle, constant, bold, always ready to step up, perhaps even taken for granted.

Women faced a very different set of cultural assumptions than did men on that campus. Some institutional proscriptions, cultural expectations, and social conventions affected women and did not even remotely extend to men. Of these, the dorm curfews were only the most obvious. In fact, only after an incident with a sister daring to wear her hair natural did the men in NAG even begin to think seriously about how these double standards affected our sisters. For us to understand exactly how serious and tough-minded our sister comrades had to be even to *think* of choosing radical political involvement in the first place. And then to stay involved for the long haul as many of them would do when we moved off the campus and into Southern Freedom Houses.

In the “feminine” culture of the Howard women’s community, a heavy conformity was demanded. Conformity to social conventions of “fashion,” of “feminine delicacy,” to the decorativeness and frivolity of “the Southern lady.” In short, to a set of superficial, severely limiting “women’s” roles that were invidious and pervasive. In defiance of such reductive, deeply entrenched attitudes, our sisters chose to be intellectually serious, politically engaged, self-defining young women, and to do so publicly. In so doing, they had elected to be part of a small, militant minority. Not an easy thing at any age, much less at the age of nineteen and against the weight of a stultifying, all-enveloping campus tradition. In that environment, merely to join NAG was already—for the sisters—a declaration of independence, a stubborn, public act of will and moral conviction that we men never had to take on in anything like the same way. And this was even before facing the other rigors of the movement: arrests, violence, and the hostility of white mobs.

It is no wonder then that our sisters proved such dependable and admirable partners in struggle. I’m embarrassed that back then we men never sufficiently appreciated the psychic *cost* of their commitment. Or, if we did, we certainly never gave it public recognition. Except, you know something? On reflection . . . I’m not at all sure just how kindly these bold, independent-minded sisters of ours would have received any such attempt at special treatment on our part. They might very well have handed us our heads.

At first, D.C. was not really too different from New York. I’d worked some with New York CORE in the Northern struggle. The D.C. CORE chapter, led by Julius Hobson, an older professional man, was not large. We saw Julius Hobson as an experienced struggler, a good strategist, an uncompromising militant, and a man of selfless devotion, one to whom we were

prepared to listen and whose direction in matters of struggle we would accept. Within D.C., Hobson would engage de facto segregation and discrimination in areas that are still problematic today: education, housing, and employment. At the demonstrations Hobson staged, NAG students would be, in effect, his foot soldiers on the picket lines.

Julius Hobson had a strong reputation as a fighter, so naturally he was demonized in the local press as a dangerous radical, a black militant. Which, of course, only endeared him all the more to us. Clearly, all he was doing was attacking injustice and confronting the establishment with the contradictions of their own hypocrisy. He taught me a lot that first year.

Occasionally, if a large demonstration was needed, we'd go over to Philly on a weekend. This also was training, but I mention Philadelphia for a different reason: one of my greatest abiding regrets from this period.

Only when Paul Robeson died did I learn that all during the late sixties this magnificent black artist and fighter for humanity had been living quietly in that city. We never knew. I wish we had, because for all of us in the movement he was a legend. A veritable demigod in his endowments of courage, intelligence, principle, and character. In NAG we played his records and talked about him all the time. Sterling Brown spoke of him movingly. We admired his great dignity, militancy, and stubborn integrity. The way as an artist he embraced the struggle, celebrated the common people, and embodied and expressed the power and beauty of African culture in America all over the world.

Paul Robeson was an exemplary black man, a true Pan-Africanist in his lifelong affinity and identification with African culture. He said often and proudly that his father had always told him, "We are descended from the Igbo people." When he was thirty-eight, he declared his identity, as an artist, with the oral historians of traditional Africa: "Had I been born in Africa, I would have belonged, I hope, to those families which sing and chant the glories and legends of the tribe. . . . I would have liked in my mature years to have been a wise elder, for I worship wisdom and knowledge of the ways of man." Such clarity so young. To us he was a wise elder and a great example.

And all this time he was so very near and we somehow never knew. Had we but known, NAG would certainly have sought him out to pay respect. We would have marched to wherever he was in Philly with our picket signs, serenaded him with freedom songs. Just to praise and thank him for his example and inspiration to our generation. I believe, I know, that his great warrior's heart would have appreciated that. It certainly would have done me good. It simply never occurred to us at the time (1961-63) that this legend of our culture and struggle could have been so very close.

[I believe Ture must have forgotten—because he would certainly have known at the time—that SNCC had later found occasion to express our debt and grat-

itude and that Bro Robeson's last recorded public appearance (1966) had been at a SNCC benefit. I know it would have consoled Ture had he lived to read the following:

"In his closing years Robeson dropped out of public awareness and was largely ignored by the leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, except for the militant young leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. At a gala celebration of his sixty-seventh birthday (1965) Robeson was deeply moved when keynote speaker John Lewis, then chairman of SNCC, proclaimed, 'We of SNCC are Paul Robeson's spiritual children. We too have rejected gradualism and moderation.' " Indeed? —EMTJ

The first year I was at Howard my friend Larry Greenbush from Kokista at Science was at American University, also in D.C. Larry didn't like the place much, and he'd seize every chance to go home to New York on weekends. Often I'd go with him. AU had many affluent students with cars, so we had no difficulty getting rides. Sometimes chipping in for gas, sometimes not.

On those rides I developed a deep hatred—one shared by many—for Route 40, which at that time was the main route out of D.C. Once Route 40 entered Maryland, everything was segregated, *evrahihang*. On those rides we'd leave as early as possible on Friday afternoon, which usually meant before supper, so the food question would inevitably arise. On Route 40, to buy food, I'd have to go round the back. The white students would say, "No problem. We'll buy the food and bring it out. We'll all eat in the car." A logical enough solution, but one that I always declined. Larry would also refuse to buy from segregated establishments: "Nah. I'll wait till we get to Jersey. Ain't hungry anyway." But I knew he was at least as hungry as I was. Larry was, after all, a big nineteen-year-old who loved to eat.

Strangely enough, we could never discuss or talk easily about it. So we simply sat silently in the car waiting for the others. Each pretending not to be hungry. But of course I knew why Larry was never hungry. And he certainly knew that I knew. But it remained unspoken between us, both of us strangely embarrassed to silence by the painful absurdity of a racism that had nothing to do with either of us. But I believe we grew closer in those silences.

It would take NAG some years before we could properly attack Route 40, but we were always looking rancorously at it. It was a constant irritant to those of us from Philadelphia, New Jersey, and points north. How this humiliation to Africans born in America (and their friends) became an international issue and a target of the movement is an interesting story. And to us, quite instructive. The year I went to Howard, 1960, was celebrated as "the Year of African Independence," and by 1963, the number

of new African, Caribbean, and Asian embassies in Washington had mushroomed. These comprised the “nonaligned” bloc, a third force in international affairs, and the Western democracies (formerly colonial masters), led by the United States, were contesting with the Soviet Union for influence with these nonaligned nations.

Naturally Asian and African diplomatic personnel traveled frequently between their Washington embassies and their U.N. missions in New York. This meant that black and brown men and women, some with the rank of ambassador, would be driving up to roadside greasy spoons in cars with diplomatic license plates and insignia. But were the Route 40 crackers impressed? No, sir! They knew “niggers” when they saw them. They rarely failed to insult the diplomats, embarrass the Kennedy administration, and delight Soviet propagandists. Every time it happened we exulted.

The Kennedy administration—check this out—the U.S. government prepared and was about to release an announcement of a new policy. Harsh penalties would be imposed on any Route 40 establishment that embarrassed the administration by refusing service to dark-skinned *foreign diplomats*. Think about that. That announcement was canceled when someone in the administration [*most likely Harris Wofford — EMT*] pointed out to the State Department that such a distinction was not likely to sit well with millions of American citizens who were black. This apparently had not occurred to them. Can you believe that?

This did not stop the State Department from privately calling in the restaurant owners to encourage them to learn to distinguish between Africans from the continent and those born in America. At least so it was rumored in Washington. We had no reason not to believe it.

So when CORE called for sit-ins along Route 40, we were more than ready. There was a lot of press because of the international aspect. It was the only civil rights campaign I was ever on that had—however obliquely implied—the public endorsement of the Kennedy administration, which had greeted the CORE announcement with vaguely supportive mutterings about national interests.

Which might also have been why it was some of the easiest campus organizing NAG ever did. Or it could just as well have been that a lot of our peers nurtured their own humiliating memories of Route 40. Whatever the reason—probably a combination—the Howard delegation that arrived at the staging area—a large Baltimore church—was some five hundred strong.

Students from schools across the Northeast—Brandeis, Harvard, Yale, Cornell, New York University, and Johns Hopkins—answered CORE’s call. When we and the Morgan State students arrived, the church was already half filled with white students (good ol’ CPT?). I suspect that

many of these white students were youthful “New Frontiersmen,” inspired by JFK’s injunction to “ask what you can do for your country” and eager to put an end to their president’s international embarrassments. Of course, what with the admission policies and high tuitions of those schools, their half of the church was pretty much lily-white. Almost totally. Somehow these delegations had managed to get there before we did, even though we were coming from a mere forty miles up the road.

However, the moment when Hank Thomas and Muriel Tillinghast led in our delegation was curious, highly dramatic. Every head in the church turned toward us as this line of serious-faced, young Africans kept filing in and gradually filling every pew on our side. The sitting students broke into applause, which, considering the issue, was more than a little odd. Once seated, however, we returned their applause.

This odd, surprising moment was quite affecting but also ironic and more than a little ambiguous. But mostly moving. A house of Christian worship, filled with young Americans neatly divided down the middle, one-half black, the other white, saluting each other with polite applause before setting out together to engage segregation. And brought together probably as much by the foreign-policy interests of the government regarding independent Africa as by outrage over domestic racism. As the *Reader’s Digest* liked to say, “Only in America.” Of course I applauded vigorously too. But my applause was for my old friend Larry, who was by then long gone from D.C.

Toward the end of freshman year I’d finally get my chance to head to the Deep South. As they say, be careful what you wish for. . . . The CORE Freedom Rides that spring changed my life, as they did the direction and character of the student movement. This was when I decided, definitely, to be seriously involved in this struggle. From now on, serious commitment.

Just two days ago I watched a group of young Africans on American TV talking about nonviolence and the “olden days” of the movement. They “respected” the movement, they said, but had difficulty identifying completely because they themselves were not “passive.” They all agreed that they could not imagine themselves being “so passive.” “No, no, no,” I shouted at the screen. “*Passive* is exactly the wrong word.” In fact, you’d be hard-pressed to find a more inaccurate term. But that is a widespread mistake and is much more than a problem of language.

Nonviolence is—in terms of human evolution anyway—an unnatural response in certain situations. No question. In American cultural terms, particularly the cowboy, mountain-man, outlaw, carbine-and-six-gun culture of the American frontier, popularized over the media, nonviolence is clearly aberrant, a cultural contradiction. But that is irrelevant.

Because, as *technique* of social struggle, nonviolence is anything but passive. Quite the reverse. (How can you have a “passive” movement? That’s a contradiction in terms.)

Now, on one level nonviolence *is* a philosophy of life, an ethical principle, a way of being in the world verging on the religious. On another level, however, it is merely a strategic approach to struggle. But on both levels it is a very stern discipline. And no discipline is ever “passive.” That’s the first thing. Which is what Dr. King (peace be unto him) had meant when he explained to me, “Stokely, you have to understand one thing. The beauty of nonviolence is that you never let any outside force, nothing outside of yourself, control what you do.” Check that out. That’s discipline, Jack, and self-control. I will come back to this aspect.

Nonviolence as a strategy of struggle, as personified and pronounced by Dr. King, gave our generation—particularly in the South—the means by which to confront an entrenched and violent racism. It offered a way for *large* numbers of Africans to join the struggle. Nothing passive in that. (Remember now, only a limited number of people and a certain kind of person can successfully be recruited for a riot or armed struggle. Think about it.)

One must remember that the patron saint of nonviolent political struggle, Mahatma Gandhi, successfully used the technique to liberate an entire subcontinent from the imperialist grasp of what my Rasta brethren call properly the “brutish empire.” It is useful to remember the correct term, which is *nonviolent direct action*. It is the *direct action* aspect that my friends and I gloried in. It was directly confrontational, even aggressively so, only in a nonviolent way. Nothing passive about this.

But this is not really the same thing as pacifism, with which it is often conflated. Pacifism is the total personal renouncement of any and all forms of violence in human life in all situations, whether personal or state-sponsored. This aspect of pacifism is ethical and religious in effect and can often appear passive. But the deepest aspect of this, called radical pacifism, is aggressively activist, envisioning a world in which the armed violence of the state—the military—is replaced by “armies of nonviolence.” Nonviolent techniques will replace armed, military conflict as the means for negotiating political disputes between nations. A book by Krishnalal Shridharani, an Indian theoretician of radical pacifism, called *War Without Violence* is the radical pacifists’ key text. A noble, visionary idea, but (not having read the book) I have great difficulty envisioning such a circumstance, a universal nonviolent substitute for war.

Part of our training in NAG was in elementary techniques of nonviolent confrontation. How to maintain discipline under physical attack. The various responses and positions by which to protect yourself and others

while under attack. We were also introduced to the history and theory. In this, Bayard Rustin was our great teacher. As a committed pacifist and the quintessential radical activist, he could instruct us in the principles as well as the tactics and techniques of nonviolent direct action. Bayard had been one of two radical pacifists—Glenn Smiley being the other—sent in 1955 by the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) at the outset of the Montgomery bus boycott to train the young and inexperienced Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Improvement Association in the *techniques* and *psychology* of nonviolent mass action.

Which had been only fair. There was considerable justice in this. As I discovered, Bayard had been arguing passionately, indeed agitating tirelessly, for many, many years that the only hope for combating racism while avoiding race war in America was through nonviolent direct action. He had been—with mixed results—trying to get the FOR to commit to training the African masses in America in the techniques and philosophy of nonviolent struggle. Thus, in 1955, events in Montgomery would seem to have made a prophet of him.

Rustin wrote an important essay on this topic called “The Negro and Nonviolence,” which we studied in NAG. The piece, which is addressed to the FOR, the national organization of radical pacifists, begins with a catalog of incidents of racial violence and injustices suggesting an impending racial cataclysm. When first I read it in 1960 at Howard, it felt alarmingly contemporary. What is sobering is that now, nearly forty years later, it still retains much of its contemporary feel. Check it out:

Even in normal times, changes in social and economic patterns cause fear and frustration, which in turn lead to aggression. In time of war, the general social condition is fertile soil for the development of hate and fear, and transference of these to minority groups is quite simple. Organized violence is growing in the North and South. The Ku Klux Klan is riding again, employing more subtle methods. Negroes and whites in Southern iron ore mines, as well as in Mobile, Alabama, shipyards, are going armed to work.

Bayard then lists ominous violent racial events from across the nation: on the job, in the streets, within the armed services, cases of “Negro soldiers and civilians being killed by whites.” He next describes a building black response with numerous cases of groups arming themselves amid a widespread sentiment to respond in kind in an organized way. “Growing numbers of Negroes see mass violence looming.”

All of which presents the pacifist community, “those of us who believe in the nonviolent solution of conflict as a duty and an opportunity,” the

need to point out the practical necessity for "nonviolent direct action as the only way, consistent with the end he desires, that the Negro can attain progress."

While conceding the difficulties—"nonviolence as a method has within it the demand for terrible sacrifice and long suffering, but, as Gandhi has said, 'freedom does not drop from the sky.' One has to struggle and be willing to die for it"—he then argues that the approach is entirely consistent with the religious culture, moral sensibility, and highest traditions of the black community.

Certainly the Negro possesses qualities essential for nonviolent direct action. He has long since learned to endure suffering. He can admit his own share of guilt and has to be pushed hard to become bitter. He has produced, and still sings, such songs as "It's Me, Oh Lord, Standin' in the Need of Prayer" and "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." He is creative and has learned to adjust himself to [difficult] conditions. But above all he possesses a rich religious heritage and today finds the church the center of his life.

The essay concludes with an eloquent appeal to his fellow pacifists to stand with the black community in the coming struggle.

Those of us who believe in nonviolent resistance can do the greatest possible good for the Negro, for those who exploit him, for America, and for the world by becoming a real part of the Negro community, thus being in a position to suggest methods and to offer leadership when troubles come.

Identification with the Negro community demands considerable sacrifice. The Negro is not to be won by words alone, but by an obvious consistency in words and deeds . . . we can add to world justice by placing in the hands of thirteen million black Americans a workable and Christian technique for the righting of injustice and the solution of conflict.

That just blew me away, when, as a nineteen-year-old freshman, I first read it. Blew me away, Jack. The only word that came to me was *prophetic*. Especially when I noticed the date—October 1942. Fourteen years before the Montgomery boycott produced Dr. King. "Wow, that's how long this brother's been on the case. Just about as long as I've been alive. Oh, wow." My admiration for Bayard's activist spirit, vision, and endurance just grew.

Clearly that 1942 essay was a strategic proposal addressed to the Fellowship of Reconciliation urging them to put their radical pacifist nonviolence to the test against American racism. It seems they did try. I suspect that the establishment of CORE in 1946 was their answer. With,

until the Freedom Rides, quite modest results. It is not difficult, therefore, to imagine Bayard's high excitement upon reading in 1956—fourteen years later—of the adoption of nonviolent principles by the Montgomery leadership and community. No wonder he rushed down to place his practical and tactical expertise at the disposal of the visionary but inexperienced young minister.

That was Rustin the theoretician and strategist. I would discover that he was also, in his younger days, one of the more skilled practitioners, one-on-one, of the psychological discipline of nonviolence. This too is worth a careful look, it being quite different, not theory but a practical application of specific techniques.

The most obvious and common situation for the nonviolence technique is the publicly staged engagement—demonstration or sit-in—where there are witnesses and an audience, preferably the press and the police. The cops, even when hostile, cannot really stand around in the presence of witnesses and watch the situation escalate into murder. It's as simple as that. In these situations you can occupy the moral high ground merely by maintaining nonviolence and keeping your dignity. Your attackers will inevitably appear brutish and irrational, the mob. You win the battle of the image, especially if TV cameras are present.

However merely maintaining a strategic nonviolent posture on public demonstrations does not entirely encompass what Dr. King meant by discipline and control. He was talking about actually taking control of a situation and an opponent, actually imposing your will even as he rains blows down on your unresisting head. This is, in effect, more than merely disarming your attacker. This controlling of the situation entails a nonviolence of word, deed, and demeanor, a nonviolence of spirit if you will. Basically, it is simple. You merely had to eliminate everything in your behavior—word, deed, look, gesture, or body language—that might provoke or nourish the impulse to violence, the evolutionary conditioning to battle, in your opponent.

All these techniques are illustrated in another of Bayard's essays from this period, which we studied in NAG. "Nonviolence vs. Jim Crow" is actually a textbook illustration of all aspects of nonviolent technique: moral, psychological, religious, physical. It perfectly illustrates Dr. King's notion of nonviolent discipline: "You never allow anyone or anything outside yourself to dictate your action."

The essay is an account of Bayard's arrest in Nashville for the crime of refusing to move to the back of the bus. During the incident he is repeatedly and brutally beaten and verbally abused by the arresting officers. If you aren't being properly analytical, it will look like just another case of a Negro head-whopping at the hands of Southern cops. That he is finally

released by the district attorney, who addresses him "kindly" as "Mr. Rustin," may seem a very small victory won at an excessively high price. Yes and no. And certainly not to Bayard. For him this is no random incident, it is a planned and successful demonstration of nonviolent technique by a master. Observe:

Recently I was planning to go from Louisville to Nashville by bus. I bought my ticket, boarded the bus, and, instead of going to the back, sat down in the second seat. The driver saw me, got up, and came toward me.

"Hey, you. You're supposed to sit in the back seat."

"Why?"

"Because that's the law. Niggers ride in back."

I said, "My friend, I believe that is an unjust law. If I were to sit in back I would be condoning injustice."

Angry, but not knowing what to do, he got out and went into the station . . . for about thirteen miles north of Nashville I heard sirens approaching. The bus came to an abrupt stop, and a police car and two motorcycles drew up beside us with a flourish. Four policemen got into the bus, consulted shortly with the driver, and came to my seat.

"Get up, you _____ nigger!"

"Why?" I asked.

"Get up, you black _____!"

"I believe that I have a right to sit here," I said quietly. "If I sit in the back of the bus I am depriving that child"—I pointed to a little white child of five or six—"of the knowledge that there is injustice here, which I believe it is his right to know. It is my sincere conviction that the power of love in the world is the greatest power existing. If you have a greater power, my friend, you may move me."

How much they understood of what I was trying to tell them I do not know. By this time they were impatient and angry. As I would not move, they began to beat me about the head and shoulders, and I shortly found myself knocked to the floor. Then they dragged me out of the bus and continued to kick and beat me.

Knowing that if I tried to get up or protect myself in the first heat of their anger they would construe it as an attempt to resist and beat me down again, I forced myself to be still and wait for their kicks, one after another. Then I stood up, spreading out my arms parallel to the ground, and said, "There is no need to beat me. I am not resisting you."

At this, three white men, obviously Southerners by their speech, got out of the bus and remonstrated with the police. Indeed, as one of the policemen raised his club to strike me, one of them, a little fellow, caught hold of it and said, "Don't you do that!" A second policeman raised his club to strike the little man, and I stepped between them, facing the man, and

said, "Thank you, but there is no need to do that. I do not wish to fight. I am protected well."

An elderly gentleman, well dressed and also a Southerner, asked the police where they were taking me.

They said, "Nashville."

"Don't worry, son," he said to me. "I'll be there to see that you get justice."

When we reached Nashville, a number of policemen were lined up on both sides of the highway down which I had to pass on my way to the captain's office. They tossed me from one to another like a volleyball. By the time I reached the office, the lining of my best coat was torn, and I was considerably rumpled.

Finally the captain said, "Come here, nigger."

I walked directly to him. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Nigger," he said menacingly, "you're supposed to be scared when you come in here!"

"I am fortified by truth, justice, and Christ," I said. "There's no need for me to fear."

He was flabbergasted and, for a time, completely at a loss for words. Finally he said to another officer, "I believe the nigger's crazy!"

At the courthouse I was taken down the hall to the office of the assistant district attorney, Mr. Ben West. As I got to the door I heard a voice, "Say, you colored fellow, hey!" I looked around and saw the elderly gentleman who had been on the bus.

"I'm here to see that you get justice," he said.

I left the courthouse, believing all the more strongly in the nonviolent approach. I am certain that I was addressed as "Mister" (as no Negro is ever addressed in the South), and I was assisted by those three men, and that the elderly gentleman interested himself in my predicament because I had, without fear, faced the four policemen and said, "There's no need to beat me. I offer you no resistance."

I won't comment on Bayard's use of psychological techniques, those are obvious. Except to say not everyone could have used them as effectively as Bayard did. Bayard was an impressive physical presence. He would have been impeccably dressed and would, in the rural South of the time, have appeared obviously educated, intelligent, articulate, and "cultured," for a "colored" man.

Those, plus his personal dignity and natural flair for dramatic improvisation, were as essential to the outcome as any of the moral issues. And although he was obviously improvising as he went along, it was not entirely spontaneous. The broad general terms of his responses were standard nonviolent techniques, carefully controlled and developed for effect

much like in a theatrical performance. He, the victim, actually controlled the audience's responses. Notice how, while he was ostensibly speaking to the cops, he was really addressing the onlookers. Bayard was good at that. Not everyone can do it.

The two things that most surprised me when I first read it were the prosecutor's letting "Mr. Rustin" walk and the four conscientious white men who intervened on his behalf. I better explain that. Were I to say this in a speech (or let it stand as written), the next day's headline would read, "Kwame Ture doubts that white men have consciences." Which would be stupid. In my time, I been called a lot of things, but nobody ever called me stupid.

However, one further step in the theory and practice of nonviolence I—no doubt a spiritual failing on my part—was unable to follow. It is here that we begin to hear talk of "soul force," *agape*, or love force and the moral redemption of the aggressor. According to these principles, disarming the violent impulse by complete nonresistance is only the first imperative. You must then seek to establish a moral human contact by looking the aggressor gently in the eye. And, speaking nonaggressively, addressing him as "friend" or "brother," expressing not anger but "reason," a "spirit of love and forgiveness" and your "common humanity." That's the theory anyway. I found the practice to be a lot different.

Truthfully I was never into that kind of spiritual evangelism. I never saw my responsibility to be the moral and spiritual reclamation of some racist thug. I would settle for changing his behavior, period. Moral suasion, legal proscription, or even force of arms, whatever ultimately it took, that's what I'd be for. I've always been content to leave saintliness to the more spiritually evolved among my brothers and sisters. Besides, to tell the truth, I've never really seen that human contact stuff to work. Well . . . actually . . . the closest I ever came was once in Cambridge, Maryland.

We were having a sit-in. One minute I was sitting on a stool at the counter of this rinky-dink diner. Next thing I know I'm lying on the floor and somebody over me is cursing, ranting, raving, and kicking repeatedly at my midsection. This guy is really pumped, I mean the dude is raving. Then quickly he runs off. I never even got a good look at him, much less engaged in any "brotherly" eye contact or loving reasoning. The only contact I recall was between my head and the floor, his boot and my belly.

But that night we're in the mass meeting in the church when this white boy comes in and apologizes to the group and to me personally. He wanted us to know how really sorry he was. First and only time I ever saw that. Some of the folk were really moved, saw in it the hand of God, y'know. The guy, his name was Eddie Dickerson I believe, turned out to be decent enough. We ended up sending him to New York CORE for training. Next time I saw him was in a picture. He was sitting in a restau-

rant in the South and the owner was smashing eggs over his head and kicking him. Anyway, I don't make any claim to having converted Eddie with nonviolent soul force. All I did was roll into a ball to protect my stomach. So . . . I've always had honest doubts about the conversion of sinners by the moral force of nonviolence. For me and most of my friends it was merely a valuable if limited strategy.

I was surprised that four Southern onlookers came so unequivocally to Bayard's defense because that patently did not conform to our sense of the South in 1960. Not with anything I read in the press, saw on TV, or heard from my friends. Nor would it conform to my own experience only a few months later. Also, I was particularly puzzled because the incident had taken place way back in 1942, the year after my birth. In, to my understanding, the bad ol' days of rabid Southern bigotry. So it didn't add up. Could the South have been getting worse, being more violent, more racist, more mean-spirited in 1960 than it had been twenty years earlier? This really puzzled me. So much for "progress," eh?

Well t'ain't really much of a mystery. See, the South had in fact changed for the worse. In reality, the Dixie that we would go into within a few months was in many ways a much more violent place than twenty years earlier. Why this should have been so is interesting, though I won't pretend that we understood it so clearly at the time.

It's actually quite simple. The events Bayard described took place years before the Supreme Court desegregation decision of 1954 (*Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*). The effects of that decision must be understood clearly. The decision didn't—and still hasn't—desegregated American schools. But it profoundly, profoundly affected the South—white Southerners and the African communities—but in very different ways.

The court's decision was greeted with a resounding silence from the national leadership and the two other branches of the federal government. Eisenhower, the president, never said a mumbling word in support of the court's decision, contenting himself with grumbling that his appointment of Chief Justice Earl Warren was the "biggest damnfool decision" of his presidency.

And the Congress. No clear unified response there either. In fact, the very first response was from Senator James "Big Jim" Eastland, plantation owner from the Mississippi Delta. Almost the next day, "Ol' Jim" rushed to the Senate floor to denounce "this political legislation by a political court which the South will nevah obey." He issued the classic Confederate call for "interposition and nullification," which in this vacuum of national leadership set the stage for everything we in SNCC would later encounter in the South.

It was a field day for every Confederate patriot, racist demagogue, and

opportunist politician in the South. They saw the schools decision as the first serious crack in the Southern edifice of legal segregation. They proclaimed the sacred, patriotic, and ancestral duty of evrah red-blooded good ol' boy to rush to the defense of the Southern way "as oah foahfathers did at Antietam, Manassas, Bull Run, and the Battle of the Wilderness, we must prove worthy sons of gallant fathers," etc., etc. The press for the most part was hysterical. The Jackson, Mississippi, *Clarion Ledger* predicted "blood flowing in the street which must be laid on the steps of the Court."

Membership in the Ku Klux Klan, which had been in serious decline, shot up to its highest level in fifty years. In the Mississippi Delta, a plantation owner called together a new organization—the White Citizens Council—four months after the decision. The council's sole purpose: to organize resistance—and it spread like kudzu across the Southern landscape. *[Exquisitely symbolic of the deterioration of race relations, or their illusion, in the region is that Robert "Tut" Patterson of Itta Bena, the founder of the White Citizens Council, had in boyhood been "best friends" with Aaron "Doc" Henry, a leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the NAACP.—EMTJ]*

Previously "moderate" politicians saw which way the wind was blowing. George Wallace (Alabama), who would become governor, and Governor Orval Faubus (Arkansas) changed into rabid defenders of segregation overnight. A year after the decision, our age mate, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, would be butchered and thrown into the Tallahatchie River in the Mississippi Delta town of Money. His acquitted murderer, "Big" Milam, told a reporter that when he saw a picture of Till standing next to a white girl in a group of black and white kids with whom he'd graduated from junior high school in Chicago, "My friend, that's when I knew I had to kill him. That's what the war is all about down here." Milam was subsequently elected sheriff in a neighboring county.

Simply stated, what happened was that between 1954 and 1960 the thug element of the South took control. With the full encouragement of the media, the complicity of the capitalists, and the opportunism of the politicians, "ol' Bubba" took over. In fact, Bubba became the political leadership. A desperate "us versus them," "iffen yo' ain't with us, yo' agin us, a traitor" garrison mentality arose. An atmosphere of beleaguered, tight-jawed conformity enforced by intimidation and reprisal, fear and threat, descended over Dixie. One brave white woman journalist in Mississippi, Hazel Brannon Smith (peace be unto her courageous spirit) wrote in a 1959 editorial, "Today we live in fear . . . it hangs like a dark cloud over us, dominating every facet of public and private life . . . almost every man and woman is afraid to do anything that would promote harmony and goodwill between the races."

Now that was the white South of my generation's experience. Tense, hostile, armored. Naturally we thought it had always been that sharp-edged and vicious. That's why we were all amazed by Bayard's defenders on that bus. I still doubt that in 1960 those same decent men would have been able to summon up the moral courage to come to the defense of any Negro challenging even the slightest manifestation of segregation in the way Bayard had done. His superb skills and nonviolent virtuosity notwithstanding. Sad. Unfortunate. Ironic. But true. But in our time the South was showing its worst face to the world. A time in which "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

That essentially was the result of *Brown vs. Topeka* in the white South. It had a very different effect in the African communities there. The legal implications of the decision were not lost on us either. In our churches, schools, Masonic lodges, beauty parlors, barbershops, and juke joints, our people understood—or hoped they understood—that finally the highest court had decided that, at least in one area, we were entitled to the fairness and equity promised in the Constitution. And a central tenet of black Southern aspiration had always been the importance of education. That was why those Reconstruction congresses of freedmen had set up some of the first public education systems in the nation. And that this was a beginning.

Consequently this decision was clearly seen among black people as the highest achievement of the "judicial strategy" that the NAACP had doggedly been pursuing for fifty years. It was a splendid victory. And now that finally the high court had spoken, justice must surely follow. Glorah hallelujah. The Arc of the Universe, it curve toward freedom. It do. A nation not of men but of laws. Praise His holy name. And for the first time since 1896, the law was on our side. Thank you, Jesus!

But what our people saw instead was, all around them, the mobilization of Confederate rancor and resistance. Klan parades. Physical, psychological, and economic intimidation, lynchings and beatings. Mobs mobilized against young children. Previously rational white "friends" becoming silent or turning racist. The proliferation of Klan and Citizens Council propaganda. From the rest of the nation and the national government, silence. Things were in fact worse. All motion is not progress.

Our people did the only rational thing: they began to arm themselves. Returning Korean War veterans organized community self-defense: "Put not your trust in princes nor in sons of men, for in them is no salvation." The preachers could have added, "Nor in courts of justice or in legal proclamations."

The biggest irony—the law of unexpected consequences—was that the *Brown* decision really was the highest achievement of the judicial strategy.

But it also brutally exposed the severe limitations of a purely legalistic approach. A great victory, true, and it wasn't that nothing happened: things actually got worse. Clearly something more was needed, additional strategies, a different approach. But what exactly? Race war? Into this vacuum stepped—the next year, 1955—the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Martin Luther King, the faith of the black church, Gandhian nonviolence, and civil disobedience. The merger of two foreign philosophies, one (nonviolent direct action) from India, the other (civil disobedience) from the far reaches of New England transcendentalism, with black religious culture. Once these were cobbled together by Dr. King, it gave the Southern African community a moral philosophy to justify resistance and the techniques to execute that struggle.

Cool. But why, especially in the face of the ominous, armed white mobilization around them, would our people respond so massively? Because in Mrs. Hamer's phrase, they "were sick an' tar'd of being sick an' tar'd." And because also with the judicial strategy, our struggle had been entirely in the hands of our heroic but invisible lawyers. Quietly, doggedly, against the grain of legal precedent and sentiment, they had trudged from courtroom to courtroom hidden and unseen: a struggle by proxy. The general community was neither involved or even always aware.

But with this new way—nonviolent, mass-based direct action—the entire community, everyone who would, could be a part and hope to survive. Everyone brave enough could share in the struggle for his or her own liberation and be seen to do so. It was public and you didn't need education or money or to be a lawyer. So in Montgomery the community—ordinary folk—came together, stood strong, stayed off the buses, and walked for a year. They strengthened each other and watched their own strength grow. Folks were fired from their jobs. [*White housewife*: "Beulah, good as we've been to you, I jest know you aren't involve din this boycott foolishness, now, are you?" *Beulah (righteously)*: "Oh, no'm, Miss Anne. I sho ain't in that mess. Me? I jes' stays offa them buses an' leaves dat fool'ness alone. Yes, I do."—EMT] People arrested. Some beaten in the streets. Cars burned. Houses (Dr. King's among them) bombed. Police harassment. The Klan paraded. Fired shots in the dark. Planted dynamite. The White Citizens Councils issued proclamations. Across the entire South, Africans watched and prayed. Took collections in church. Sent money. In Montgomery the community, the common people, stood firm. It was the faith, courage, and endurance of the ordinary people that pushed the leadership at every step. A movement was born. Rise an' shine an' give God the glory. Glorah. Glorah hallelujah. Praise His holy name.

That, in the proverbial nutshell, was the background of what we would be facing in the South before my freshman year was over. Now, what we're talking here is history. History as I lived it and understand it.

But I've never told anyone I was an academic "historian," so it is probable I have neglected to mention something quite important. So be it.

In January of 1960—I was still in high school then—the administration in Washington changed. Democrats replaced Republicans. A "vigorous, progressive, young" president, so they told us, took over. He proclaimed a new challenge of energetic and progressive activism when Americans should "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." It was a great speech . . . until you really studied what he was saying. But many of us heard what we wanted to hear. And some of us believed him. So, soon indeed, we would test the sincerity of those words about defending freedom and paying any price.

The Great Leap Forward: The Freedom Rides

Much has been written about the Freedom Rides. I am not sure what I can add. But as a participant from almost the beginning, I would like to tell the exact truth of those events. Like so many events in the struggle, the rides began in considerable ambiguity and uncertainty. The most lasting consequence of the rides was the change they would set in motion regarding the role and form of SNCC. In this way, the rides changed many lives, my own included.

When, in 1961, we first heard the plans for the CORE project that the world would come to know as the Freedom Rides, our response was mixed. At first a long silence, then incredulity, which turned rapidly to skepticism.

“They going do what? Oh, man. From *D.C.* to *New Orleans*?”

“Ah says to hush your mouf. Say whut? Is dey crazy?” Then a long, pensive silence as people visualized what was being proposed. And, I think, silent because no one wanted to be the first to say out loud what we all were thinking.

The plan, however, was simplicity itself. In any sane, even half-civilized society it would have been completely innocuous, hardly worth a second thought or meriting any comment at all. CORE would be sending an integrated team—black and white together—from the nation’s capital to New Orleans on public transportation. That’s all. Except, of course, that they would sit randomly on the buses in integrated pairs and in the stations they would use waiting room facilities casually, ignoring the white/colored signs. What could be more harmless . . . in any even marginally healthy society?

CORE’s purposes were twofold and quite clear. Practically, the intent was simply to “test” the implementation of a fifteen-year-old Supreme Court ruling mandating the integration of facilities for interstate travelers. For fifteen years there had been flagrant noncompliance with “the law of the land” as handed down in the *Morgan* case (*Irene Morgan vs. Virginia*, 1946). Then, in 1960, the *Boynton* case (*Boynton vs. Virginia*) had rein-

forced that finding. So now not only were there *two* Supreme Court decisions, but the implementation machinery existed in the form of the Interstate Commerce Commission. No legislation was necessary; all that was required was John F. Kennedy's proverbial "stroke of the pen," which, though long promised, had not been forthcoming.

The new Kennedy administration had come into office mouthing rhetoric about the national government's responsibility toward the constitutional rights of *all* Americans. CORE's plan would test their sincerity and their resolve, for in JFK's famous phrase, was not "sincerity always subject to proof"?

The second purpose was more symbolic, even sentimental: a celebratory recapitulation of a "Journey of Reconciliation" through the upper South that CORE had undertaken back in 1947.

There would be two major differences this time. Legally, this trip should have been less controversial since it did not involve civil disobedience, being in full compliance with federal law rather than in "defiance" of unjust ones. But of course legality was never at issue. Also, while the Journey of Reconciliation had prudently confined itself to the so-called border states of the "upper South," this one would be headed through the Deep South, into the very "heart of Dixie," a region that had changed considerably since that first journey and entirely for the worse. The South was now literally an armed camp, racially polarized, politically tense, hard-edged.

For some of us there was still another complicating factor. In accordance with Gandhian practices, CORE would be "informing the competent authorities" of their intention and itinerary. In this case the U.S. president, attorney general, and the director of the FBI, as well as the chairman of the ICC and the CEOs of Trailways and Greyhound. It is tempting, in historical hindsight, to report that NAG immediately and unreservedly embraced this plan. But we didn't. Not at first.

Of all the other organizations in the movement we were closest in temperament to CORE. We shared their activism, admired their militancy. Their members were our friends, our allies, our brothers and sisters. We supported each other's demonstrations. But this . . . this Freedom Ride? What was the CORE national office thinking? We had some serious questions. Were we prepared to go? Did it make political sense? Was the issue worth the risk?

"Ah, man, it ain't nothing going happen. It's just some American citizens riding a damn bus, man. The Kennedys got no choice. They gotta uphold the law. Ain't nothing going happen, you'll see."

"Shoot, in Mississippi? In Alabama? Is you crazy, Negro? Nothing going happen? Them folks be lucky to *survive*, bro."

"I'm witchu, Jack. Hell, I'm part of this movement too, but I'm mah

mammy's only son and sho nuff too [expletive] young to be dying for no [expletive] seat on no [expletive] bus, you dig. It ain't worth it, y'all."

But being NAG, rationality prevailed, and the proposal was analyzed, dissected, taken apart, and plain worried to death. Two major and unresolved areas of concern surfaced. We could all agree that *all* racism had to be attacked and constitutional laws enforced, but this strategy? The more political ones—led by Tom Kahn—questioned the conceptual framework: the viability of any strategy whose success or failure was totally dependent on factors beyond our control, in this case, the behavior of the enemy. For it to work, they'd have to be the dumbest crackers in the world. All they had to do at each stop was meet the riders, escort them safely out of town, and repeat that all the way to New Orleans. The Freedom Ride would have disappeared without trace or effect. I wouldn't be writing this.

Later that summer Tom would write:

I think we have to recognize that the Freedom Rides were a fluke—a bomb whose fuse we never lit. When it exploded, the noise was louder than anyone had expected. We owe the impact of the rides . . . to the irrationality of segregationist officials. Had they not been so insane as to permit and encourage mob violence and bus burning . . . the Freedom Rides would have been just another . . . nonviolent project. This it seems to me, is the most obvious weakness of the Rides . . . I don't mean they should not have taken place . . . only that a project whose significance and impact are attributable to circumstances entirely controlled by an irrational enemy should be recognized for the peripheral undertaking it is."

So much for strategic coherence. Others of us were morally queasy about a strategy whose *success* required that your people's lives be placed in serious jeopardy. I mean, if the racists have "the sense that God gave a bedbug," as Mr. Turnbow would say, then nothing would happen and the project would have, in one sense, failed. If, however, and only if, our people were seriously brutalized, then *that* would represent success? That didn't ring quite right.

Another issue we questioned was the Gandhian practice of informing the "enemy" authorities. That was Gandhi in India, this is the U.S. of A. What some of us feared—later proven beyond any doubt—was that a letter to J. Edgar Hoover was tantamount to a telegram to the Klan. Wasn't that a little much like setting up your own people?

There were no answers that evening, just these troubling questions. What it boiled down to was simple. For fifteen years the law had been clear and ignored. The machinery for implementation had long existed. No one did squat. Black people continued to be humiliated and abused

on interstate travel. So what alternatives were left? Only nonviolent direct action. Brave and committed people would have to place their bodies—their physical survival—on the line. Was this not at the heart of nonviolent direct action as we all understood it?

Ironically, a project intended to test the resolve and values of the Kennedy administration instead tested us. It had the immediate effect of forcing us to a sudden and painful self-examination, challenging, if only theoretically, our own personal commitment. I say theoretically because at that point we weren't yet being called upon to make a decision. It wasn't our project, so we didn't *have* to do anything . . . yet.

But the discussion brought home to us something important and chilling: the extent to which raw violence was really *always* the last line of defense, the ultimate weapon of Southern bigotry. That the survival of segregation's oppressive social arrangements was predicated on the threat of violence and the generation of fear: "Bring that mess on down heah, nigger, and we will kill you." As simple and vulgar as that. We had now come face-to-face with the reality that the entire edifice of racial oppression in Dixie was propped up—with the clear complicity of the national government—by the violence of both the mob and the state. Often in the South a distinction without any real difference. And most important, the realization that if we were serious about going forward with this movement, we would all *personally* have to confront this, sooner or later, faceup.

Which is probably why we were a quiet, thoughtful group leaving that meeting that evening. Hank Thomas, deep in thought, seemed even quieter than usual. I was thinking seriously too. I could see no compelling reason to make any decision just yet, but I could sense that one would be coming. Shortly after that, Hank told us that he had called CORE headquarters the next day, volunteered, and had been accepted.

Everybody had long respected Hank's quiet dedication and courage, and when I heard what he'd done, my admiration for him only increased. But for many of us in NAG, the questions persisted and arguments continued. Once Hank had joined up, the questions were no longer so abstract. The thought of one of our own on that bus made it real. CORE's plan was not yet public, but for the next few weeks the "ride" was all we talked about.

Whatever doubts persisted, though, were kept inside the family. Publicly on campus we expressed full support and awe and admiration for the riders' courage. Which was quite true. Besides, wasn't it the government's clear responsibility to protect the lives and rights of law-abiding American citizens traveling peaceably in their own country?

Then it turned out that D.C. was not only the staging area, but that the group would gather there for an intensive week of bonding, training, nonviolent workshops, and situational role-playing prior to setting out.

The night before the volunteers' departure, Paul Dietrich gave them a dinner at his Chinese restaurant and invited folks from NAG to join them for coffee afterward. I remember this dinner clearly, and that meeting the actual volunteers was a bit of a shock.

As it happened, there were thirteen riders—James Farmer, CORE chairman, and twelve volunteers—so the grim symbolism was obvious: Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper, or more cynically Christians walking fearlessly to face lions. Neither image was really exaggerated because a markedly religious, indeed spiritual, mood prevailed at that table. This was years before the counterculture fixation with exotic and self-dramatizing dress. This group was conservatively dressed, almost formal. They looked nothing like media-image militants or revolutionaries. My impression was of quiet seriousness and complete respectability, an abiding gentleness and determination, a strength of spirit. Conversation was muted. At that table no one raised his or her voice. This was not at all like NAG's meetings. SNCC's two representatives, Hank and John Lewis, seemed clearly the youngest.

I was actually shocked how elderly, more like parents, some of the CORE veterans seemed to me. The one married couple—a soft-spoken college professor and his gentle wife [*Dr. Walter and Mrs. Frances Bergman from Michigan*—looked to be in their sixties. Paul whispered that a big, graying, distinguished-looking gentleman had been a navy captain commanding destroyers in World War II [*Commander Albert Bigelow, USN, Ret.*]. The warrior had become a pacifist, commanding a small boat, *The Golden Rule*, into the South Pacific to obstruct U.S. nuclear testing at Bikini atoll. Another wiry, older white gentleman [*James Peck*] had been arrested on the original Journey of Reconciliation in 1947. Clearly he had kept the faith. I also remember a young black minister [*the Reverend Elton Cox*], a middle-aged white lady [*Charlotte DeVries, a writer from New York*], and six other younger folk, mostly Africans. [*In addition to John Lewis and Hank Thomas of SNCC, there were Ed Blankenheim, Joe Perkins, Jimmy McDonald, and Genevieve Hughes from CORE.*]

That evening was my first meeting of John Lewis, and like everyone else in SNCC, I was overwhelmed by his courage, his quiet determination, his conviction in the rightness of the cause. He was a seminary student, if not already a minister, always soft-spoken, and dressed in a suit in the cut of a Martin Luther King. I was extremely proud of John as our chairman and representative.

When we joined them, Paul said that we had just missed an extraordinary moment. James Farmer had signaled for attention and addressed the table. He had told the gathering that although they were leaving in the morning, people still had time to reconsider. No one was obligated to go. It would be better, he said, for anyone who had developed the slightest

doubt or second thoughts about the serious step they were about to take to withdraw then. For their own consciences and the good of the project. There would be no shame in that, no dishonor.

Perhaps, he said, it might be too difficult for anyone experiencing doubts to come forward publicly in front of the "family." But anyone who wished could come see him privately afterward, he'd understand. Or if even that was too embarrassing, one could simply not show up at the bus station in the morning.

On May 4, 1961, a group of us went to the bus station to see them off. All thirteen were there. Everyone tried to maintain a cheerful facade, smiling, joking, trying to disguise the foreboding we all felt. As we watched the buses drive away, I was filled anew with admiration. But I was also sick with fear . . . for them.

For the first week we followed their progress through reports from the D.C. CORE chapter. Nothing happened in Virginia. They were through North Carolina. Nothing serious. We began to be cautiously optimistic. In the Rock Hill, South Carolina, bus station, John Lewis was knocked unconscious, as was Albert Bigelow when he stepped between John and his assailants. But by May 12 they were in Atlanta and we thought, if this is the worst that happens, it will be better than we dared hope. Then came Alabama.

Before they left Atlanta, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth called from Birmingham to warn the riders that the Klan in that city had been organizing publicly for a week. Even before they reached Birmingham, all hell broke loose. This violence, we must be clear, was neither random nor spontaneous. It was carefully planned and orchestrated. In the town of Anniston and then in Birmingham, the buses were met by armed mobs, obviously prepared and waiting in ambush.

When the first bus arrived in Anniston, Professor Bergman was knocked unconscious by a blow to the head from a baseball bat. He subsequently suffered a stroke and was paralyzed for life. James Peck was also brutalized but was not permanently damaged . . . then.

The second bus was surrounded by a mob shouting threats and armed with clubs, chains, and guns. The riders told the driver not to stop. The tires were stabbed and blew out on the outskirts of town. The mob, following in cars, threw incendiary bombs into the disabled bus and tried to seal the doors. The riders managed to get out, some suffering from smoke inhalation. Hank Thomas was on that bus. What saved them, he told us, was that the fuel tank exploded, forcing the mob away from the door. His lungs were burning from the smoke when he staggered out, coughing.

A man approached him solicitously. "Boy, you all right?"

"Yeah . . . I think so," Hank began, whereupon the man produced a baseball bat and clubbed him down.

Uniformed police on the scene were said to be "fraternizing" with members of the mob. That evening on TV at Howard, we and the rest of the country saw that bus burning on the side of the highway. But after much difficulty, another bus was secured, and the group went on.

At the Birmingham bus station the mob was much larger and more savage. None of the riders escaped injury. James Peck was left for dead in a pool of his own blood. His head wounds would require fifty-six stitches and he would suffer permanent neurological damage.

Asked why, after the violence in Anniston, no police were at the Birmingham station, Bull Connor, the police chief, explained that it was Mother's Day. All his officers were with their dear old mothers. Later it was disclosed that the police had cut a deal with the Klan: once the bus arrived, the Klansmen were to be given ten minutes free and clear with the "outside agitators."

The next day the group—those able to travel—were met by an even larger mob when they arrived back at the Birmingham bus station. Since buses were clearly out of the question, they decided to fly to New Orleans. That proved no easier. The mob followed them to the airport, where they were again surrounded. Every time a New Orleans flight was announced, the airline received a bomb threat. It was chaos. But at least the police kept the mob off our friends. After some twenty harrowing hours and only after the intervention of a Justice Department official (John Seigenthaler, special assistant to the attorney general), they finally made it onto a flight out.

At Howard we followed these events, heartsick with horror and impotent anger as our worst fears were not just realized but exceeded. All of us had grown up watching Southern mobs on TV—Montgomery, Little Rock, New Orleans. But this was much different. This time the people being badly hurt and in danger of being killed were folks we knew and respected. The political leadership of an entire American state had not merely abdicated to mob violence, they clearly seemed to be encouraging and orchestrating it. And until the Kennedys dispatched John Seigenthaler to negotiate the riders' escape from the Birmingham airport, the federal government had been invisible.

At least invisible to us. It turns out that there *had* been federal involvement, albeit an ambiguous one. In Anniston, Birmingham, and elsewhere, the FBI had given the Freedom Riders' itinerary to the local police. Presumably for their protection? Yeah, let's be charitable. However, the FBI also had hard, specific information that some of these local cops were active Klansmen, so they had to know that the Klan would get the riders' itinerary. The FBI also had prior knowledge of the planned violence.

[As Burke Marshall, at the time head of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, said on the television documentary Eyes on the Prize:

"The FBI had information . . . it turns out that was quite specific about what was going to happen in Birmingham. They may have had similar information about Anniston, but I'm not sure. But they clearly had advance information from Klan sources that the Freedom Riders were to be attacked in the Birmingham bus station and that the police were going to absent themselves. The Bureau did not pass that information along to anyone in other parts of the Justice Department. They didn't inform the Civil Rights Division. They didn't inform the Attorney General."—EMT]

We also later learned that Robert Kennedy—at least after the pictures of the burning bus flashed around the world—had been blistering the phone lines to Alabama governor John Patterson, who, a year earlier, had been the Kennedys' man in Alabama. (Patterson had been chairman of the Kennedy for President Committee in that state.) There you see clearly what we were up against—the hybrid nature of the Democratic Party. An allegedly "progressive" young president in bed with the segregationist governor of a racist state. The deadlock of vulgar political expedience on both sides. Given the razor-thin margin of JFK's victory in 1960, the last thing the Kennedys wanted was to alienate the Confederate vote. At that time, remember, voting in Dixie was strictly "white folks business." This political consideration (on the part of the Kennedys) was to emerge again with far-reaching consequences for our young organization.

Instead of affirming the riders' rights and enforcing the Constitution as he was sworn to do, Bobby Kennedy issued his call for "a cooling-off period." Which was wishy-washy enough. But I've never been able to forget or excuse his blaming the violence on "extremists on both sides." That really got to me. *Extremists? Both sides?* I don't recall that anyone in the media called him on the extreme absurdity of that moral equivalence. The image of that small group of lawful, peaceable, gentle, supremely decent people I'd met, set against the hate-shouting ignorance of bus-burning, club-swinging Klansmen? In any event, the call went up from liberal quarters to stop the rides. After all, nobody wants to see innocent people murdered.

James Farmer came under incredible pressure. In Atlanta he'd received news of his father's death and had temporarily left the ride to fly to his mother's side in D.C. and so had missed the violence in Alabama. Now he was presented with a conflict between his politics and his conscience.

The last thing that this decent, humane pacifist, whom I would soon get to know quite well, wanted on his conscience was the death of another human being. Fundamentally also, he was patriotic, intent on improving

his country, not, as the Kennedys were implying, debasing its international prestige. However, he was now being told he was in danger of doing both. He was receiving a veritable deluge, obviously orchestrated, of phone calls from allies of all stripes, liberals and various "highly placed" individuals all appealing to his patriotism, his humanity, and his sense of "responsibility." Somehow it seemed to escape the callers (and the media) that they were calling the wrong "leader." That it was the president's responsibility to safeguard the integrity of the nation's laws, to maintain the peace and the physical security of its citizens, thereby protecting the nation's image in the eyes of the world. Brother Farmer protested that the riders had broken no laws, burned no buses, and that to end the rides would be to capitulate to lawlessness, bigotry, and violence. To no avail.

Finally CORE announced the indefinite "suspension" of the Freedom Rides and were praised for their wisdom and responsibility. Brother Farmer also received at least one more phone call, this one of a slightly different nature.

In Nashville, the SNCC students were as horrified as we by the ugliness of the brutality. But for them the implications of the CORE decision, understandable though it was, were much worse. We got a phone call from Diane Nash, calling on behalf of the Nashville group.

"Hey, you watching this mess?"

"Whad'you think?"

"Sure is bad, ain't it?"

Diane was a persuasive young woman. It was not just ugly bad, it was ominous. If the Freedom Rides were stopped because of violence, and only because of violence, then the nonviolent movement was over. We might as well disband SNCC. Our movement is over. Give the racists this victory and it sends the clear signal that at the first sign of resistance, all they have to do is mobilize massive violence, the movement will collapse, and the government won't do a thing. We can't let that happen.

"You right. But what can we do?"

"I just spoke to Mr. Farmer. Told him that if CORE was unable to continue, we would. There's no choice really."

"What'd he say?"

"What could he say? Asked if I fully understood the danger. That, y'know, it could be suicide. I told him that was the risk we had to face. Is NAG with us?"

"Call you back after we talk."

Whoee! Gut-check time now.

Diane was always a clear, militant, uncompromising sister. Committed to the philosophy of nonviolence. One of the most admired people in SNCC. And real, real pretty too. The coolly pragmatic Tim Jenkins once

famously said that Diane and most of the Nashville group “were addled by righteousness.” On this call, though, she was dead-on right.

That urgent meeting was very different from the first discussion a month earlier. All the strategic and political second-guessing that had seemed so momentous just months before receded into the distance now that the survival of the movement was at risk. Just one more instance of how politics can surprise you. In fact, the first wave of volunteers from NAG included some who had initially been most skeptical of the political wisdom of the tactic. Paul Dietrich who had been moved by the muted drama of that last supper in his restaurant, left immediately. Dion, Travis Britt, John Moody, Bill Mahoney, and I arranged to move up our final exams. We followed as soon as we were free. SNCC’s strategy was to keep the bodies coming and to fill all the jails in the South if necessary.

May Charles was funny. I guess today you’d call it in denial. She was just so sure it had to be a bad joke.

“Don’t run them kinda joke, boy. Think you can fool your mother so? I know you. School’s over. I hear the noise. You calling from the bus station downtown. So you can walk in jes’ now and laugh at me. I know you, Stokely.”

“May Charles, this is for real now. Something I gotta do. I only ask one thing. If the press should contact you, just tell them you’re proud of me, okay?”

“Get out of here. You chatting nonsense. How I to tell them I’m proud of stupidity? You mad? Fighting for people who don’t even care about you.”

“May Charles, I’m fighting for all of us. Anyway, say you proud. Don’t embarrass me, please . . . I beg you.”

Sometimes when students from the South joined the rides, their parents would have to denounce them publicly. They were no longer their children. They didn’t agree with that foolishness. Couldn’t understand what had got into that girl’s head. Course that was fear. And survival. Telling the white folks what they wanted to hear. Which of course was promptly and prominently published in the local papers. Do you suppose those whites really believed that okeydoke? Talk about delusional.

My dad was different. He knew what I was involved in and was quietly proud. I knew that. But he hadn’t realized the *extent* of my involvement. He was concerned about my academics. I assured him that I’d be careful, and that I would stay in school until I graduated. Then I got on a late flight to New Orleans. May Charles hadn’t been crazy. She had heard background noises, but I was calling from the D.C. airport, not the New York bus station.

. . .

It was about 9 P.M. when I made that call home because CORE had arranged for a night flight that would arrive in New Orleans at about 3 A.M. The thought was that at 3 A.M. the airport would be relatively deserted, few cops and no mob. Travis Britt, a NAG senior, I believe, from New York would be traveling with me.

At the airport Julius Hobson met us with another volunteer, Gwen Greene, from the Baltimore civic action group. I knew Gwen and her sister Connie from demonstrations. NAG would sometimes support their actions in Baltimore, and they would come to D.C. to support ours. Everyone really liked the Greene sisters; they were devoted strugglers—militant with sunny, ebullient personalities and radiant smiles. I was both happy to see her (I liked Gwen) but a little apprehensive for that same reason. But our sisters-in-struggle were always up front, neither seeking or expecting special treatment. If I'm not mistaken, on the Freedom Rides, women would ultimately outnumber men in the Mississippi jails.

This was at least a week since Diane Nash's history-changing call. While I had been moving up my final exams, waves of students had been moving into Mississippi by bus, where they were immediately being arrested.

By the time I could get away, the decision had been taken to test the railroads. Which is why we were to fly to New Orleans and join a group going into Mississippi by train. We would be the first group doing the trains, and it was not clear just what that would be like. We all were a little nervous. Julius Hobson gave us our instructions, and they were precise. Almost cloak-and-dagger, like operatives going behind enemy lines.

The flight would get in at three o'clock. We should carry our bags on and get off early. The authorities weren't supposed to know we were coming, but what with tapped phones, you could never tell. So we should act as if we were traveling separately. He described exactly the CORE worker, Rudy Lombard, who would meet us. What he looked like. What he would be wearing. We should simply follow him out to the parking lot, but separately and without giving any indication that we knew him.

Rudy was accompanied by another worker, Oretha Castle. We were nervous but the airport cops paid us no attention. Once outside in the warm, humid Louisiana night, Rudy and Oretha greeted us like family. I remember the shock of recognition I felt breathing that air so warm and soft, with a familiar sweetish smell. It took me a second or two to identify it—from my childhood. It was the smell of the tropics: Trinidad. Also I had an immediate warm feeling for the CORE workers. Which turned into respect as I saw how they operated: cool, efficient, and organized.

Rudy and Sister Oretha drove us into the city to the African commu-

nity where we were put up in some run-down projects. All the way my neck swiveled side to side trying to take everything in as the sun rose.

This was the farthest south I'd been, the real deal. The feel of the air, the fruity, swampy smell, the surrounding lush vegetation. But you know what really represented Deep South to me: my first sight of tall trees festooned with beards of Spanish moss. The mere sight of those moss-bearded trees etched against the rising sun said *Louisiana, plantation, slavery, bayou, swamp, lynching* . . . the mythical South. Just seeing those trees sent a tremor through me.

Then we came to the city and the projects. I knew housing conditions in Harlem, but the conditions of the projects in New Orleans were absolutely appalling. We were all shocked. But the people living in these abysmal conditions were warm and kind. They took real good care of us and even embarrassed us by treating us like heroes.

Rudy and Oretha brought us our tickets and clear instructions. CORE had publicized the change of target, and already a crowd was reported at the railway station. So we could expect at least one mob. What else wasn't clear. It was thought unlikely that the Klan would try to bomb or derail an entire train. But who knew? Once in the station, moving into the trains, we'd be on our own. "We'll be on the scene, but nowhere near you. You guys will have to get through the mob by yourselves. Good luck."

See, you must understand what had been happening with the buses. Within days of Diane's call, Southern (and some Northern) students had begun converging on Birmingham, determined to continue the rides from the scene of carnage where the original group had been brutalized. From Nashville, Diane dispatched the first seven students by bus. Being who they were, two of the students sit right behind the bus driver and decline to move when ordered. Wednesday, May 17, they arrive in Birmingham, where Bull Connor arrests the two and places the others in something he calls "protective custody." For two days in the Birmingham jail the brothers and sisters sing freedom songs and go on a hunger strike. A little past midnight Friday morning, Bull Connor himself arrives and without explanation takes the students out of the cells and into police cruisers. They have no idea where they are really being taken. The police say they are "being taken home."

The police drive them through the darkness 120 miles to the Tennessee border, where they are deposited at a railroad crossing on the highway. They are told that "a bus or train will be along directly," at which point they should return home. A bus or train? More likely, the Klan, the students think, as the cops drive away. They feel completely exposed and defenseless. They know their arrests as Freedom Riders have been in the

media. Who else knows about their whereabouts now? They do not trust the relationship between the Alabama police and the Klan. They agree that they can't stand there on the highway, so they walk across the tracks until they see a small, ramshackle house. One of ours, or God help us, poor whites? They decide to risk it. A cautious voice calls fearfully through the door. It's after three o'clock in the morning.

"Who ye be? Who dar?" Hearing black voices responding, an elderly African man peers out cautiously into the darkness.

When the old man let them in, he wouldn't turn on a light and spoke only in whispers. When the sun came up, he went to buy breakfast, which took him a while. He explained that since he and his wife didn't buy large quantities of food at one time, he'd divided the order and walked to three different stores to avoid suspicion.

Later the students managed to call Diane. When the car she sent from Nashville arrived, the driver asked, "So where we going? To Nashville or back to Birmingham?"

As they were leaving, the old lady had hugged each in turn. "Gawd bless y'all. Y'all some brave chilluns. Yo' doing de Lawd's work."

But we know, don't we, that it was that anonymous, isolated, vulnerable old couple, like so countless many other Southern Africans we would meet in the struggle, who at great risk to themselves recognized and performed "de Lawd's work" that morning.

Once back in Birmingham, they sought refuge at the Reverend Shuttlesworth's house,* where they met up with Ruby Doris Smith, a Spelman College freshman, who had made her way from Atlanta, and some Northern volunteers who had come to continue the rides. Bill Mahoney and Paul Dietrich from NAG were with this group.

*Once we were out of jail and able to compare notes, the adult figure that commanded a respect bordering on awe from the students was the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, the movement's point man in Birmingham. Everyone had their Reverend Fred story. It was Reverend Shuttlesworth who scouted the Klan and warned CORE of their preparations there. It was Reverend Shuttlesworth who walked into the station and carried the unconscious James Peck to the hospital. It was Reverend Shuttlesworth who would spend the night with the besieged students at the bus station that Friday night. In Montgomery, two days later, it was Reverend Shuttlesworth who met James Farmer and conducted him through the hundreds of angry whites surrounding the Reverend Mr. Abernathy's church where Dr. King and the new group of student riders were trapped.

In the movement, many of us worried about Reverend Shuttlesworth's survival. We figured that sooner or later the racists would murder him. Indeed, his home was bombed and there were countless threats and attempts, but Reverend Shuttlesworth soldiered on. Someone suggested sentimentally that perhaps even the Klan respected his courage too much to kill him.

That Friday the Reverend Shuttlesworth accompanied the students back to the Birmingham station. That entire night a mob surrounded the station, periodically lobbing in stink bombs. This time police were present, holding the mob at bay with guard dogs. Not unreasonably, none of the bus drivers would agree to drive the group.

"I got me but one life, and Ah be damned effen Ah'm giving it to no NAACP or CORE," one driver said not unreasonably. Of course in that time and place all the drivers were white. So our comrades spent the night surrounded in the bus station. It was scary, a standoff. "But at least if we couldn't leave," a student said, "the crackers had to stand there all night too."

The next morning a driver was found, and under massive security the group left for Montgomery. Floyd Mann, the conscientious, highly professional director of public safety of Alabama, reported, "When the bus left Birmingham, there were sixteen highway patrol cruisers in front and another sixteen behind with a helicopter flying overhead looking for potential trouble."

However these state forces disengaged once the bus entered the municipal jurisdiction of Montgomery, and the bus drove into an apparently empty bus station. A young brother named Freddy Leonard, whom I later met in jail, was on that bus and told me what it was like getting off that bus. The station was absolutely, eerily empty when they arrived at high noon, he said.

"An' then all of a sudden, just like magic, white people! Sticks and bricks! *Niggers!* Kill the niggers."

Floyd Mann reported that, once the Freedom Riders alighted, mobs of white people appeared "from everywhere" and "law and order had broken down." He later reported that he'd had "confidential information" that the Montgomery police planned to be absent from the station that morning. Mann almost certainly saved some lives that day. Seeing that the Freedom Riders were being brutalized with baseball bats, he "had to threaten to take some lives." He put his pistol to the heads of some of the bat wielders and threatened to shoot. He also fired a shot into the air. He undoubtedly saved some lives, but as usual our side took the casualties.

Sitting in our cell, Freddy Leonard and I would become close friends. Freddy told me that what had saved the Africans was a white student named Jim Zwerg from Wisconsin. He was brave, Freddy said, because when the mob saw him, they were so enraged at this white man, they forgot about the Africans for a moment. They just engulfed Zwerg and nearly killed him. John Lewis was knocked cold. So was William Barbee. Barbee and Zwerg were damaged for life. Freddy was convinced that only the sound of the shot that "some white feller" fired saved them.

Bob Zellner, a white Montgomery student who had agreed to deliver

a message to one of the group, arrived a few minutes after the bloodletting was over.

["It was the weirdest thing I'd ever seen in my life up to then. The platform was deserted. I mean empty, man. Not a living soul. And silent? Mah Lord, an eerie, eerie silence. The middle of the day and dead quiet. My footsteps were the only sound and they seemed to echo.

"But the scene, ol' buddy, was like a movie set of a battle scene. But no bodies, only pools of blood on the concrete. Silence. An empty bus, door ajar, a window broken in. Silence. Sticks and bricks scattered around. And clothes. Here a sneaker, there a skirt or a pair of jeans. A broken suitcase or two. Dead silence. And everywhere textbooks and notepads scattered around. That affected me 'cause I knew it was students my age. And an open Bible lying in a pool of blood. I remember there was some kind of construction going on so there was one of those plywood construction fences. Well, embedded in that plywood was a brick, flung with such venom that it just embedded itself in the wood. I stood there looking around that echoing silent, littered, bloody scene in amazement. I just knew that people my age must have been killed. It was a bad, bad, feeling."]

No more than a few months later, Bob Zellner became the first white from the Deep South battle zone to join the SNCC staff. He would be arrested as many times as me or more, and the Klan would put a price on his head.

I had been taking exams in D.C. while all this was happening, so at the time of my Southern train ride, I hadn't yet heard the grisly details. As promised, a mob was waiting for us at the train station. I'd seen large, vocally hostile crowds at demonstrations in Virginia and Maryland, but nothing like this.

It seemed large. They were shouting. Throwing cans and lit cigarettes at us. Spitting on us. And swinging, actually fighting each other to get in a good lick at us. Travis Britt, who had courage, led the group. He was magnificent, plowing through that crowd. I was on the outside, Sister Gwen Greene on the inside. To this day I don't know how, but under Travis's leadership we got through and onto the train. Some of us were bleeding, but we all got on, wiped off the spit and blood, and the train set out.

That journey through the mob had been utter chaos. So much happening at the same time that it's all a blur. One thing I remember clearly. Usually in scenes of chaos and violence I find myself fixing on one specific thing. I try to concentrate on that object while ignoring the rest.

I remember this little old white lady with a cane. So old that cane should better have been a walker. But there she was, face contorted, shaking with rage and infirmity. Was she a passenger en route somewhere who stumbled on the scene, or had this ancient person come out to defend the

Confederacy? Anyway, I fixed on this old lady and she on me. Our eyes locked, and the one thing she clearly wanted most was to bust my black head with that cane. Hate was in those old eyes. As I approached, her rage grew visibly. She was trembling so much I began to fear she was about to fall out with a heart attack before I got close enough to hit. I was nineteen years old. I couldn't believe that the color of my skin could evoke such hatred in another person. This old woman was shaking so bad that the blow from her cane wasn't hardly a blow. But I got some serious licks from others in the crowd.

I don't remember if we were by ourselves in the coach, but luckily no one on the train attacked us. Mobs were waiting for us at every stop, doing everything they could to get at us—crashing the doors, trying to run over the guards and conductors. But they weren't traveling so they couldn't get on the train without a ticket. That probably saved us. They tried to break the windows. They tried to throw rocks and cans through the doors as soon as they opened. It was really a battle. Nineteen years old, I was tasting frontline battle seriously for the first time, though I had no idea yet what Freddy Leonard and the others had just gone through in Birmingham and Montgomery.

We arrived in Jackson, entered the "white" waiting room, which was, to tell the truth, only tolerable. But the "Negro" one? I took one look and made up my mind then and there that, campaign or not, I would never go into one of those. And I never have. It was squalid, stained, uncleaned, unswept, just horrendous. It seemed to be kept that way intentionally as an insult to black people's senses and dignity.

Into the white waiting room comes Captain Ray and his cops with his famous "move on or you're under arrest."

While we were waiting to be processed, I was discussing Thoreau with another student. This seemed to bother one of the cops.

"What there you talking 'bout theah, boy? You going be picking cotton. Tha's what y'all be doing."

I looked at him. "Yo *mamma* be picking cotton fo' I do." His face reddened. The students started laughing, picked it up, and dropped some serious dozens on him.

"Oowie, Stokely says his *mamma* going pick cotton."

"Tha's cold. Wonder if his *mamma* could?"

"Think his *mamma* smart enough?"

"Dunno, man. My mom pick cotton. You think his *momma* could hold up, picking cotton?"

"Judging by him, I would'n think so, man."

That pretty much set the tone of the young students' response to Mississippi authority. It also indicated the difference in attitude and demeanor

between us and the older generation of CORE activists and ministers, who really were pacifists. Our overall posture was, of course, nonviolent, but our attitude was not pacifist. We would show these cops that we weren't asking nor giving quarter, so they would select us for their special treatment.

SNCC's strategy was simple. If they kept arresting us for defying segregation laws, we'd fill the jails in Mississippi under the slogan Jail, No Bail, which was the same for the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (South Africa). By early summer, when the Freedom Rides were discontinued, some 445 students, pacifists, clergypersons, and other people of conscience of all races and from all over the country would come together in Mississippi prisons. Many would be forever changed by the experience, the students especially. I believe that women were in the majority of those political prisoners.

We were in with experienced activists, some revolutionaries, clergy, and college professors, so the jail term was like a university of social struggle and moral discourse. Many students would fall away and return gratefully to their regular lives and careers. Others, a small hard core, would emerge determined, tempered, and more focused on continued struggle than when they'd gone in. That was certainly my experience. Most of us would go on to become SNCC's first full-time organizers. Others—usually the spiritual pacifists out of Nashville—would gravitate to Dr. King's staff. Others signed up with CORE. Most of the ones who did not commit full-time to the movement continued to be active in some way. But for those who joined up full-time, whichever organization we went with, we remained a close brotherhood and sisterhood of shared experience. For us, that prison experience would be life altering, a rite of passage, a turning point.

The first thing I learned in that Hinds County, Mississippi, jail made a lasting impression. After the explosions in Alabama, the Mississippi segregationists knew two things. That we were coming and that white Mississippi had to avoid the negative international publicity that Alabama had earned. Still, the "pride and sovereignty" of the great state of "Mississippi" was involved, and they couldn't afford to let the Freedom Riders openly flout their segregation laws and escape unscathed. The outside agitators had to be damaged. But after Alabama, the "good white citizens" could not be seen doing the damage, so Bubba had to be restrained in the presence of the TV cameras. Instead, the authorities gathered a dozen or so of the toughest black prisoners, lifers and long-termers with violent records, and made them an offer they didn't think they could refuse. The hard-core prisoners would be given civilian clothes and taken secretly to the bus station, and all they had to do was stomp down the agitators,

really mess them up, in return for easy time, reduced sentences, maybe even a small cash payment.

"How 'bout that, Sam? Ain't no one much care whut you do to them Communists an' race-mixin' mongrels. Heahs yore chance to whip some Northern white-trash haids, no questions asked. Now how 'bout thet?" To the authorities' surprise, however, those African men said no. Except for one, there were no takers.

When I heard that, I almost cried. My spine tingled and my eyes almost teared. We're talking about a state that did not convict *any* white man for murdering even the most prominent black citizen. In two years, Medgar Evers would be a case in point. A white corrections officer could expect more hassle for taking an out-of-season deer than for shooting down a black convict. Especially those long-term hard-timers with manslaughter or even murder on their record. And these brothers, these jailhouse desperadoes, knew exactly how totally at the mercy of the penal system they were. And they still had the courage and principle and clarity to say no, even if they mumbled.

"Expects not, Cap'n. Nahsuh, sho don't thank Ah kin do that, suh."

The first chance I got I asked a trusty about it. "Don' know directly anything about that, bes' you ask white folk. White folk, he know." Now how was I supposed to do that? "White folk" turned out to be an older, dark-skinned prisoner of few words. I asked him.

"Yup. Sho is. Tha's the word anyway."

"You sure? Do you know any of the brothers?"

"Yup. Knows 'em all. Mos' of 'em anyway. Dey be's some hard mens. Dey *all* have the name of a mean man."

One of them was his good buddy. I said I'd like to meet him. To thank him. "You gotta go to the farm fer that. An' I heard he ain out in the county no more. He done gone, boy. White folk bin an' done taken him off."

He didn't know where. But he *hoped* his friend was in the hole in Parchman.

"You *hope* your friend's in the hole?"

"Yep. I sholy do hope that."

I've always thought those nameless, principled "hard mens" to be heroes of the movement and shudder to think of the price they must certainly have paid. My people, my people.

As the numbers of political prisoners grew, we were segregated from the Africans in the general population. We were put in a block on the first floor and met for a few hours a day in a rec room. The Freedom Riders spanned generations and ideologies. There were a number of older black ministers. James Farmer had himself been a theological student. The Rev-

erend James Lawson, the mentor in nonviolence to the Nashville students, was there. Another minister, the Reverend C. T. Vivian, was really defiant. He was calm, dignified, nonviolent, but made no concessions to the racists. When they called him "boy," he told them, "My denomination normally ordains *men*, not boys." He had a bandage around his head for omitting to say "sir" to the racists. Among the students from Nashville, three brothers were seminarians: John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, and James Bevel. They were students of Reverend Lawson's in nonviolence and were serious about "Christian love" and the redemptive power of "the beloved community." Reverend Lawson was a committed pacifist who had studied Gandhism in India and served a prison term as a conscientious objector during the Korean War. This group would hold a nonviolence-workshop-cum-prayer-meeting during rec period. The NAG folk—Bill Mahoney, Hank Thomas, Dion Diamond, John Moody, me, Freddy Leonard, and a few others would generally abstain from the prayer and hymn singing, preferring to discuss the politics of our situation quietly off to one side.

At night, the entire group would sing freedom songs, which united all factions and outraged the authorities. At night we could hear the women Freedom Riders singing over in the female unit:

O Freedom, O Freedom,
O Freedom, over me.

And we'd sing back:

Just like a tree that's planted
by the water,
We shall not be moved.

Apparently the entire prison was hearing us serenade each other, and the other black prisoners would pick up on it too.

One of the women leading the singing had a remarkably beautiful voice, unusually powerful and pure. "I know her," said Freddy Leonard. "She from Nashville. Her name is Joy Reagon."

"Is she as fine as her voice?" I asked.

"Yes, she is. In fact, finer."

"*Whoee*, boy, then when I gets out, I'ma ask her for a date. See if she can be fine as she sounds."

"No, you ain't," said Freddy. "No, no, no. I'm going *marry* that woman, boy."

Joy Reagon I never met. She remained for me a hauntingly beautiful, pure voice coming into my cell out of the Mississippi darkness.

They say that freedom
Is a constant struggle . . .

But I did meet her brother Cordell, who was also a freedom fighter in SNCC and also an extraordinary singer with the SNCC Freedom Singers. But guess what? Freddy Leonard did indeed marry Joy Reagon. Obviously ol' Freddy was a man of his word.

Then the brothers upstairs got involved in the singing. As we continued to sing freedom songs, Big Hank Thomas was our song leader. The prisoners on the floor above would sing back their work and prison songs. That was some incredible music. Some of those prisoners could really sing, and their song leader was simply amazing. This brother had a powerful, vibrant baritone and a unique roots singing style. Especially when he'd line out the words of the dirgelike "common" meter songs, and from calls around the block the other brothers would respond and draw out the lines in the old-fashioned "long" meter style. It was beautiful and haunting and unlike anything I'd ever heard, taking us, it seemed, out of the cell and all the way back to Africa. The nearest thing I've heard to this brother's style is a kind of Wolof male singing I've heard in African countryside villages.

This brother, rotting away in a Mississippi cell, was a world-class talent. He'd have been a sensation singing in the Village. The prisoners' songs were moving and defiant, especially the ones about prison life.

See that man a yonder
On that big white hoss
Yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh,
Doan know his name but
Dey call him boss.
Yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh.

Weren't for that man an'
His shaggy ol' houn'
Yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh,
Be in New Orleans fo'
D' sun go down.
Yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh.

See that man a yonder, he
A dangerous dude.
Yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh,
Had me a pistol, Ah'd be
Dangerous too.
Yeh, yeh, yeh, yeh.

Of course to the prison administrators this situation was intolerable. Black musical culture across class and gender (also race, since the white Freedom Riders were singing along too) was uniting the African prison population with the political prisoners. If we didn't stop the damn singing, the mess cart would stop coming on our block. This little cart dispersed gum, sodas, and snacks. The junk food was no big deal, but the cigarettes were to many of us. Because of soccer I didn't smoke and never developed that habit. But many Freedom Riders were chain-smokers. For them it was a real crisis. Not to worry or stop the concerts, though. The brothers upstairs let down a bag on a string. We put in our orders and the money. The bag came back and the smoking and singing continued.

This lasted—for me—little more than a week. More political prisoners kept coming in almost daily. We were filling at least this jail. Besides which our presence, unity, and quiet defiance was “bad for prison morale, a destabilizing influence.” Had to have been the guards' morale. It certainly wasn't the prisoners. Consequently, we were informed, we would be moving to Parchman Penitentiary, where they would know “how to handle troublemakers.”

In truth my heart fell. I knew Parchman by reputation. It was in the Mississippi Delta. It and Angola (the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola) were reputed to be the two most brutal prisons in all the South. There must be dozens of blues and prison songs about those two. Parchman was famous in song and legend as a hellhole. I knew exactly what we were going: to a concentration camp and serious torture.

We continued to sing, but now perhaps in a tone of bravado masking an undercurrent of real anxiety. At least so I thought. Also, we were anxious about the sisters. Were there women in Parchman? No one knew. Some of the brothers' girlfriends were over in the female wing. “Man, them crackers at Parchman better not mess with my lady, man. I don't play that.” Empty posturing, of course, but I suppose it made them feel more like men and hid their anxiety.

In retrospect, I suppose the Hinds County jail experience was not the worst. The food was barely edible but at least we weren't beaten. And for the time we were there, our influence on the local African prisoners had been remarkable. All in all, a psychic victory.

I think the head jailer may have had something to do with the relative restraint of the jailers while we were there. Clearly this was not their usual behavior, for at first the local black prisoners simply couldn't believe that we could defy the racial protocol of the prison system and not be immediately beat down.

Anyway, the night before we were to leave, the head jailer came to visit. I'd seen that man before. When we'd first come in, he'd issued a

warning. In his jail he'd not tolerate Communists and troublemakers breaking the rules. We'd find that out. Give any trouble and he'd be forced to rule with a ruthless hand.

Once the singing and "fraternization" started, he returned and tried to exert authority by threats and withdrawal of petty privileges. And we would argue with him, nonviolently of course. Which I think had made an impression on him. Because he'd given us a lecture. Perhaps, he said, we weren't really evil Communists. "Y'know, y'all ain't real bad boys, you ain't killed, robbed, or raped nobody." So maybe we were just misguided. So he set out to set us straight by explaining what we didn't understand about the Mississippi way of life. He himself did not hate "Negrahs." Why, as a boy he used to go fishing with them. And Negroes in Mississippi weren't *mistreated*. They were treated *fairly* (some would apparently confuse *fair* treatment with *mistreatment*) and preferred the present arrangements. The usual stuff.

So the last evening he comes and grasps the bars of the cell hard. I mean, I could see his knuckles turn white. He is clearly agitated and begins to talk about his life, his beliefs, and his maid, Annie. "Annie was *gude*. She raised my five kids." The family loved Annie dearly. When she died, the family wept. They all went to her funeral. Every year they place a wreath on her grave. So we should see that we had it wrong on race relations in the South. "Yeah," Bill Mahoney muttered, "but we can't ask Annie, now, can we?"

Then he got real personal, even passionate. I didn't know what to make of it. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He began to shake. He was, he said, a Christian man. He believed in God and the Southern way of life. Nothing would change that ever. He was really emotional.

"Now y'all caused me a heap of trouble. But you are human beings. You ha' your beliefs and I ha' mine. But I wish you to know, in mah heart, I dew not wish you any harm." And he turned and walked away.

It was heavy. That kind of naked emoting always is, so I tend to distrust it. But I think this man was sincere or at least sincerely troubled. Why else had he felt it necessary to come?

"And Pilate washed his hands," one of the Bible students said. And in truth, the jailer's last statement, with the prospect of Parchman facing us in the morning, was less than comforting.

You are human beings. . . . In mah heart, Ah do not wish you any ha'am.

Now, when my group had arrived at the county jail, the earlier group had not been there. That's when "white folks" had told me about the offer to the "bad mens" and their refusal. The Freedom Riders had been transferred to the county farm, where the Reverend C. T. Vivian had been

beaten down for neglecting to say "sir." C. T. Vivian was always a very proud black man who made no concessions to racism. And he was sharp of tongue.

Later in SNCC I would hear the story of another "Freedom Rider" who had a very different experience at the county farm. His name will appear nowhere in CORE's records so I want to tell his story now.

When the Freedom Rides reached Alabama, Jesse Harris was a seventeen-year-old high school senior, I think from Jackson but it could have been McComb. He saw the reports, had been greatly moved by the courage of the riders, and so decided that *he* would meet them when they got to Jackson. So Jesse made his way to the bus station, waited until the bus pulled in, followed the riders into the white waiting room, and was arrested with them.

While he was being booked, the cops discovered that Jesse was local and not formally a part of the group, hence completely unprotected. CORE had no idea of this local boy's existence and arrest. I know I hadn't until a year or so later. The Jackson courts, of course, did not welcome the idea of this kind of defiance catching on among "their" local Negro youth. While we "outsiders" were sent to the city jail in Jackson, Jesse, alone and by himself, was sent to the county farm and out to work in the fields.

The first day when the "Walking Boss" gave him an order, Jessie answered simply, "Yes." [*C. T. Vivian had answered simply, "No."*]

"Gawd damn it, boy, you from Mississippah, you're 'sposed to know to say 'Suh' to a white man." Jesse told him that he said "sir" only to his father or to elders whom he respected. The guard slapped him and swore that he'd teach him how to talk to a white man. He sent for "Brown Bessie," a thick broad leather strap greatly feared by the prisoners. Jesse was ordered to lie on his belly across a nearby log. After the beating, weakened from pain, Jesse stood up, shaking, on trembling legs.

"Niggah, I reckon you know to say 'Suh' now, huh?"

Jesse looked the white man silently in the eye. Then he stepped up to the log and laid down again. The "walking boss" decided that "this nigger's crazy." And told him to get up. I suspect that even that racist didn't have the heart to continue the torture. As far as I know, Jesse never said sir.

Later on the SNCC staff I would meet Jesse Harris. He was a tireless organizer and director of the Maccomb project; Jesse was greatly respected by all of us at SNCC. When the movement in Mississippi dissolved around him, Jesse Harris became a minister for the Nation of Islam in Jackson. He exemplifies the spirit that I came so much to admire in the best of our people in Mississippi.

[*Charlie Cobb:*

"Jesse was real cool, an amazing brother. I remember he used to caddy for the

white folks at the Jackson Country Club. He taught himself the game. Once he told me how he used to win money off the men he caddied for. That shocked me, y'know. Hustling crackers in Mississippi. He said, 'But, Charlie, I used to do it all the time. Did it frequently. But, oh, Charlie'—he grinned—'you had to play a very careful game.' I guess so. Ol' Jesse was tough, shrewd. I really liked the brother. But you know, Jesse disappeared. Some time ago I was trying to find him. Went to his old neighborhood. Talked to his sister, his friends. The neighbors. No one had seen Jesse in two years. No idea where he might be or what might have happened to the brother. He'd simply disappeared. A brother with a lot of heart." Nuff respect, Jesse. Peace be unto him.]

Parchman farm, oh, Parchman farm. I'd heard folk singers in the Village singing about Parchman all during high school. Now I was nineteen years old and heading there myself, into the legend. I sure hoped those songs were exaggerated.

They came for us by night, presumably for security. The enveloping darkness did not make me feel secure. What was this ominous place we were going to? What was lurking unseen in the surrounding darkness? A highway patrol car led the way. The ride was fast and rough. Sudden jamming on of brakes. Equally sudden drag-race starts. We were thrown around too much for there to be any singing. I can't remember much about the journey of about two hours. My first sight of the Mississippi Delta, which was to be my first organizing assignment, was simply of a vast, eerie, formless darkness surrounding our bus. It was like being adrift in dark space. I had no idea the role this strange, haunting place would play in my political development and my growing sense of my people's lives.

The Delta is an unnaturally flat, low-lying area of land, pool-table flat. So flat that in daylight this treeless, featureless flatness stretches before you like the sea all the way to the horizon where land and sky merge. So flat that Ed Brown, who would head our project in Holmes County, swears that he could ride a bicycle to the store while coasting all the way. Then turn around and ride back home and still be coasting all the way. It is an area of rich, black, alluvial soil, some of it wetlands and cypress swamp reclaimed by the labor of enslaved Africans, an arrangement still very much in effect when SNCC got there.

The Mississippi Delta was the location of the immense *Gone With the Wind*-type cotton plantations worked by thousands of Africans before the war. Parchman had been an antebellum slave plantation growing cotton. Cotton itself being an African immigrant from the equally fecund Nile Delta of Egypt, from which the area took its name.

Parchman Farm is, of course, the state penitentiary. It is a working farm and is the only operation of the state government that regularly turns

a profit. It was designed, organized, and run along the lines of an antebellum slave plantation for *humanitarian* reasons in the 1890s. Say what, plantation slavery as a humanitarian reform? I'm serious, check it out.

See, to meet the state's labor needs in the 1880s, allegedly "free" Africans were scooped up, framed, and "leased" to plantation owners to serve out their sentences. No longer being slaves, i.e., valuable property, their lives were expendable.

And the postbellum venture capitalists were even worse than the plantation owners, if you can imagine that. These adventurers were looking for quick fortunes draining and filling swamps or in turpentine camps deep in the wilderness. In the swamps and forests, conditions were inhuman, unimaginably brutal. The work was dangerous and accidents frequent. Also the men were starved, brutalized, murdered, or simply worked to death. The death rate in these camps was astronomical, at times over 30 percent. The survivors, emaciated and often sick, returned "in such wretched misery, the mere sight of which would touch the most obdurate and cruel of hearts." A scandal ensued. A reform movement organized the state penitentiary at Parchman plantation, along the *organizational lines of antebellum slavery, as a humane improvement*. Don't take my word, check it out for yourself. Go to primary sources, not the Internet.

In Parchman, the working prisoners are called gunmen. Not, of course, because they are armed, but because they work "under the gun." In this case, the rifles and shotguns carried by the "riding and walking bosses." Today prisoners aren't usually chained together, but that used to be normal.

Except for the leasing of prisoners (which was stopped in the 1940s), it had operated essentially unchanged since its founding in the 1890s. There was only one major difference from slavery. Progress? Improvement? That depends on your point of view. When we were there, poor whites also worked the fields under the gun. *That* wasn't true during slavery. Racial progress? Your call.

At Parchman, we were taken to the basement of a long, low brick building where we were made to strip and stand around completely nude while waiting to be processed. From a group of off-duty guards came a chorus of crude and hostile comments. Some of these guards carried what I at first thought were long nightsticks. But these seemed to be of metal with three sharp points—like a trident—at one end. One or two of the guards grinned and made menacing gestures toward us. I would soon learn that those were cattle prods. Well, Parchman was a farm, I guess it had cattle. The metal cylinders contained powerful batteries, and the three little points were terminals emitting a strong electric charge. We would meet

these cattle prods again, a favorite tool of law enforcement in parts of the Delta and Alabama.

When those points touched your skin, the pain was sharp and excruciating, at once a jolting shock and a burn. You could actually see (three puffs of smoke) and smell (the odor of roasting flesh) your skin burning. I'm surprised the animal rights movement hasn't yet made an issue of their use.

The man in charge of the processing was a massive, red-faced, cigar-smoking cracker in cowboy boots and a Stetson who strutted and stomped about blustering out orders and "promises." Deputy Tyson obviously fancied himself a wit.

"This is not a threat, it is a promise. I kid you not." It was quite a performance. In less foreboding circumstances (and if we weren't buck naked like our ancestors [Africans] while being enslaved), it would have been tempting to dismiss Tyson as a buffoon or a caricature from a bad movie. But complete nakedness and vulnerability curtails one's sense of humor. To protect us from the other prisoners, so we were told, we were going to be locked down in maximum security in the safety of death row.

They lined us up still naked in single file.

"Ah heahs you boys likes t'march," Deputy Tyson chortled. "So now y'all can jes' follow me. Ah'm Martin Luther Coon." We followed the Stetson, the broad behind, and a cloud of rank cigar smoke down long, narrow concrete corridors.

The cells were no more than six by nine feet, concrete, windowless, with two steel racks for bunks, a sink, and a commode enclosed by steel bars. As we came in the row, we noticed three large, boxy metal structures on the walls outside the cells but gave them no attention. We were two to a cell, which we left only for a weekly shower. I was in the first cell and my cellmate was Freddy Leonard from Nashville. We became not only friends, but allies. We were almost the same age but he looked at most fifteen. (I saw him on a TV program a few years ago and Freddy still looked like a teenager.) He had an open, honest face, a cheerful and mischievous disposition, and an easy grin. You couldn't not like Freddy. He was compact and muscular and had the heart of a young lion. We were the youngest Freedom Riders and got on well together.

In the cell next to ours was James Farmer, who took a paternal interest. He was himself a preacher's son, a former seminarian, a pacifist, and really a gentle, good-hearted man. He told us stories about his early days in struggle and we learned a great deal from him.

One of James Farmer's stories I've never forgotten. It amazed me and Freddy and illustrates something I'd been learning about the philosophy of pacifism.

When CORE was founded in Chicago, it was an offshoot of the paci-

first organization FOR (Fellowship of Reconciliation). CORE's first target was a skating rink that discriminated against Africans. That was illegal in Chicago, after the manager turned away a black group from CORE, then admitted their white comrades, they had the goods on him. They filed charges and the manager was arrested. This caused great anguish and hand-wringing within the group. Eventually they took up a collection and bailed the manager out. We were incredulous. Why would they do this?

For two reasons, Mr. Farmer explained. One, they felt the manager, a working man trying to keep his job, was only a tool, in fact also a victim of racism. The poor guy didn't make the policy. And more important, many felt strongly that the police represented the "coercive power of the state" and its implied "monopoly of violence." Calling on the state to arrest the manager was a hostile act incompatible with true pacifist principles. So after some soul-searching, they bailed the guy out.

Which turned out, as Mr. Farmer explained, to be a good decision, politically speaking. Why? At the next FOR board meeting, Mr. Farmer gave his report on CORE. On hearing of the arrest, some FOR board members were sufficiently upset to entertain the notion of ending their support for the young organization. They were mollified only when it was explained that CORE had indeed bonded the manager out. Young Mr. Farmer got off with a stern lecture on proper pacifist ethics.

To Freddy and me that seemed not only excessive, but to miss the point. It was obvious to us, then and now, that Africans in America had the clear right and duty to use all means available to fight their oppression. Later, when I studied the abolitionist movement, I saw the split between Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison on that very issue: militant force or only moral suasion in the fight against slavery. But back in that cell I did not yet know that this story, which seemed so curious and incredible, was actually a pattern of things not only in the past but in the future of our struggle.

Which shows that the trajectory of our struggle in America is really cyclical, full of ironies and contradictions that seem to recycle themselves ad infinitum. That Greek philosopher Heracleitus was wrong in our case: Africans in America seem always to be crossing and recrossing the same river.

Given that the political prisoners were in lockdown 24/7 and confined two per cell, it might be expected that time would hang heavy. Not at all. No way, José, not with this group. What with the range of ideology, religious belief, political commitment and background, age, and experience, something interesting was always going on. Because, no matter our differences, this group had one thing in common, moral stubbornness. Whatever we believed, we really believed and were not at all shy about advancing. We were where we were only because of our willingness to

affirm our beliefs even at the risk of physical injury. So it was never dull on death row.

The first battle of wills with Tyson came early. We didn't win. About the second day, we began singing our freedom songs. In marches, Tyson: "Y'all gon' ha' to stop that singin'. We ain't having none of that [expletive] heah." Next visit. "Ah'm warning you. You gonna lose yore mattresses." The steel ledges had a pattern of perforations, and even through the thin mattresses you felt the sharp edges of every hole when you tried to sleep.

When we didn't stop, Tyson came for the mattresses with some guards and trusties. Freddy and I decided we wouldn't surrender ours, nonviolently of course. When they snatched mine out from under me, dumping me on the floor, Freddy decided to wrap himself around his. The guard yanked Freddy and the mattress into the corridor but couldn't pry it loose. The guard swore. "Boy, you must not know where you is. Gimme that. Awright, go git 'em, Shorty." A muscular prisoner jumped in and stared whaling on Freddy. Of course he got the mattress. It was humiliating. Shorty was black. I knew the brother didn't have a choice, but did he have to appear so willing a tool? Afterward, to my astonishment, Freddy defended him, saying he wasn't so bad.

"What you talking about? He like to take yo' head off."

"Hey, he coulda hurt me real bad, man. But he was pulling up. I could feel it, man. Besides, I know it hurt him worse than it hurt me. Every blow he came down on me, Shorty was crying, man. That's why I gave him the [expletive] mattress."

So now we were left with the cold steel bunks and the thin shorts and singlets. But it's midday in Mississippi. The cell block is warm enough, hot even. After lunch, the preachers decide to praise their God with prayer and hymn singing. I think they thought that since the jailers professed to be good Christians, they'd not interfere with their worship. But Tyson wasn't having any of that either. He orders them to stop.

Well, the preachers inform him that they are going to praise their God. That like Daniel in the lions' den, like, I forget their names—Shaback and Shebago Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, they too would make a joyful noise unto the Lord under any circumstances! So if the state of Mississippi needed the money, which clearly it did, they could auction off the mattresses. *They* were going to praise their Lord!

"Is that raht?" Tyson said. "Ah see, said the bliin' man. Wal, tell you whut. Y'all can give yore hearts and souls to Jesus, 'cause yore asses gonna belong to me." He slammed the door behind him. Deputy Dawg (as Hank christened him) was never noted for originality.

The service began with renewed fervor. Freddy and I even joined in the more militant hymns. Then the deluge. A fire hose. They hose down the entire row.

"Hallelujah! He washing away our sins," someone hollered.

"Next time, bring some soap!"

But we are all soaked. There's water on the floor. The walls are dripping. It's uncomfortable, but not too bad. The service continues. Then there is a loud humming noise. We assume Tyson's trying to drown out the singing. So we sing louder. But as the sun goes down, we discover that the machines are either air conditioners or exhaust fans creating a powerful draft. (I doubt that the state would have lavished air-conditioning on death row, but as the night went on, it sure felt like it.)

Since our clothes are wet, the concrete floors are flooded, the bunks are cold steel, and the commodes attract and keep the cold, we can't touch anything. Freddy and I kept walking in circles all night, tight circles, trembling and freezing in the night of a Mississippi summer.

I think Tyson kept those machines going for twenty-four hours. Needless to say, the preachers forgot about praising their God in those conditions. Sneezing, coughing, and some swearing replaced hymn singing that night. Sheback and Shebago, whatever their names were, they are forgotten too. No more singing and praising God at night.

Round midnight, cold and miserable, I couldn't help it. I shouted.

"Yo, Bevel. Reverend Bevel. We're freezing an' it's all your fault. You just had to go tell Tyson about that fiery furnace, huh?"

Cold as we all were, people had to laugh. 'Cause there was some truth in that.

As many preachers and religious people as there were in that jail, there were real differences even among the faithful. Of the young Nashville seminarians around the Reverend James Lawson—James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette, John Lewis—Bevel was by far the most interesting and unpredictable.

Short, muscular, shingly bald-headed with a heavy, dark beard, Bevel had the burning eyes and visionary intensity of a Russian mystic. He was always, I mean *always*, arguing—passionately—some highly original, far-out position or the other, and I, for one, was never quite sure: Was that constant gleam in his eyes fanaticism or mischief? Was Bevel entirely serious, crazy, or just putting you on? But he could be depended on to take it on out to the edge, whatever "it" might be at any given time.

Prior to the hymn singing, there had been a discussion of the possibility of seeking bail for the group. This Bevel had ridiculed as totally lacking in faith. Dismiss all thought of bail. Righteously fill the jails. Absolutely no bail; when it was time, God would show the way out. All that was necessary was faith. And to praise God like Paul and Silas. Had they forgotten the spiritual, now a freedom song?

Paul and Silas was bound in jail
Had no money for to go to their bail
Paul and Silas began to shout
Jail door opened
And they walked out.

Had Bevel been serious? Who could ever tell with Bevel? All I know is that no jail doors opened that night and instead the Lord had sent a flood.

Don't be misled. I liked Bevel. He was a soldier, always unpredictable and often funny, but a soldier only in the Lord's army. Another time when they were working with Dr. King, Bevel and Bernard Lafayette found themselves in a small-town Alabama jail. Bevel begins his Paul and Silas rap again. What Bernard hadn't noticed, but Bevel had, was that the jailer had failed to secure the cell door. So Bevel suggests they pray themselves out.

"My brother, I *feels* the power today. The grace an' presence o' Almighty God. Oh, yes, Ah do. Ah feel it. Let us pray, Reverend." After some devout outloud prayer—"Ah want you to come to us, Lord, like you came to Paul and Silas"—on the line, "*jail door opened*, ol' Bevel rises.

"Open your heart and open your eyes, my brother. Behold, the power of faith," and he smites the door open before the astonished eyes of his friend Bernard. That was classic Bevel.

Freddy and I figured that being the youngest, and in the first cell, we should be the first line of resistance. So we determined never to cooperate, to resist as much as possible while maintaining nonviolence, but pushing that posture to its limits.

That's when Tyson introduced us to something I've never seen mentioned in anything I've read about torture in America's prisons. Something they call wrist breakers.

These were viselike metal contraptions that were applied to the wrist. One metal clamp went under your wrist, another fit over the top. A bar above the top clasp had a threaded hole into which a T-shaped rod—also threaded—was screwed. By screwing it down on the upper clasp, the pressure on your wrist could be increased unbearably. It was essentially a small vise. The pain was excruciating. If you tried to ignore the pain, they'd twist it laterally so that you would feel your bones in the joints of your arm about to break. Involuntarily, your whole body would have to follow your arm. You'd leave your feet and flip over like a fish. If they continued to twist, you'd find yourself rolling over on the floor following the pressure on your arm.

The first time I saw it I said, "Hey, I'm never gonna do that. Even if they break my arm." When they put it on me, I said to myself, "I'm not gonna flip," and planted my feet. The pain became intense. Next thing I knew I found myself on the ground revolving. "Yow," I said. "How did that happen? When did I flip?"

But being nineteen and arrogant, Freddy and I learned nothing the first time.

"Next time," Freddy woofed, "I ain't flipping. They going *have* to break my arm."

Course I was not to be outdone. "Me? Well, I going show them they can't *even* break mine."

Next time Tyson pulled Freddy outside the cell first, while I remained locked inside. They tightened the wrist breaker, and sure enough poor Freddy flipped. "Had enough?"

Freddy held up his wrists and turned them over. "Hey, you ain't even broken them yet."

Tyson got mad, but he knew that breaking Freddy's arm would be too much. He swore and threw him back into the cell.

Then my turn. After I'd flipped a couple times: "Had enough?" After Freddy, what could I do? I stared at him. He flipped me again. "Enough yet?"

I lay there and began to sing a movement song: "'I'm going tell God how you treat me, one of these days.'" The entire row joined in. I think we won that one, barely . . . on points.

The next one was a loss, though self-imposed. This was the ill-conceived hunger strike. One of the white comrades, a Gandhian whose name escapes me, had started a hunger strike. His personal witness. I don't even recall a specific issue. It may have been a generalized "noncooperation with evil" taken to its limit. Or there could have been a specific demand. I don't remember. But this fellow had been on a hunger strike for some days. The suggestion arose that in solidarity we should all join in. Then came the debate, a long discussion, the mother of all arguments.

Our cell was united and solidly rejectionist: no hunger strike. Freddy and I were adamant on that. Here we are being whupped on almost every night by these jailers, and you want to talk about a hunger strike on top of it? No way. We need our strength to face these pigs. Generally the other NAG folk and the politicals were opposed, the ministers, pacifists, and Gandhians for. They argued for unity. Unless we all participated, it wouldn't be effective. They had to be able to say we all were on strike. Not some, it had to be all. It was a Gandhian technique, etc., etc. We argued. We discussed. We disagreed. We ultimately wore down.

Finally, Freddy and I were the only holdouts, and being the youngest, we'd clearly have to give in sooner or later. Which we did, but we never

agreed with the tactic. I know that a number of others didn't either. But the process is important. Notice what had happened. What had begun as purely an individual witness, a personal statement, had become, through righteous rhetoric and group pressure, a group tactic, binding even on those with serious objections. We would encounter this dynamic time and again in the struggle. Sometimes the result would be positive, but it could often be just the opposite.

Freddy and I didn't want to be the only cell eating while our colleagues starved, but we had our conditions. Freddy said, "Awright, y'all, I'm in. Told you not to have no hunger strike, but I'ma go along. I promise you I won't be the first to break it. But I'm sho nuff going to be the second one."

"I'm with Freddy," says I. "I don't agree with this either. Except I'm not gonna be the second or the third. I'm going to be the last."

Next morning we told the trusties to take the food back. The whole block was on strike. They were puzzled, never having encountered that before. Tyson came and told them to leave the food. When they came back for the plates, Freddy and I checked carefully. All were untouched.

Supper time, a miraculous transformation. The food, which had always been disgusting, suddenly looked appetizing and smelled great. Fried chicken, peas, greens, and corn bread still steaming and with what looked and smelled like butter. They placed the trays in the slot in the door where we could see and smell the food. The penalty for knocking over the trays was solitary confinement in the hole, so we couldn't even do that. We had to endure the smells. And it got worse (and the food better). Roast beef, mashed potatoes, pecan pie. I hope the other prisoners got to enjoy it when the trays went back untouched.

Then in a couple of days the stomach pains began and didn't stop. I now have the greatest respect for Bobby Sands, the Irish patriot who went for sixty-six days on hunger strike. The arguments now became louder and more contentious, the conflicts sharper. Freddy figured it was the pain. And all this great food sitting under their noses. "When they start shouting and screaming on each other," Freddy theorized, "it distracts them. They forget the pain and don't smell the food." I'm sure he was right, but for the next few days death row did not sound like an oasis of verbal non-violence.

Freddy and I maintained that the whole thing was stupid and useless. The pacifists talked about Gandhi's fasts. We didn't want to hear that. We weren't Gandhi. We were soldiers in a fight. It was absurd and counter-productive to weaken ourselves. That was doing the racists' job for them. Why help them? Our job was to survive, not starve ourselves to death. Many of my attitudes toward struggle were shaped by those discussions.

From our cell we could see the trays come in and go back out. For a

few days all that good food remained untouched, to Freddy's increasing frustration. Then, on about the fourth day, Freddy leapt up, pointing and shouting. "Look, look, that one's empty. Someone done ate."

"I don't know who," Freddy sang out to the others, "but someone just ate. I don't care who it was, but Freddy Leonard's gonna be the second."

Whoever it was apologized. He had been sick, a medical condition, etc. Freddy said he didn't care anything about that. He, as promised, was going off the strike.

"Hey," he said between bites, "the strike's broken, man. Forget them, go ahead and eat, bro."

"No, man, I'm the last one." But I was mad.

"Why?"

"I've got my reasons. You'll see."

By the fifth day, the strike was just about over. Next day, the only two not eating were me and James Farmer, the voice from the cell next door. He claimed the strike was doing wonders for his waistline. By then I'd gotten to appreciate "Mr. Farmer" as I called him. And I learned a lot from him about organizing. Course we couldn't see each other except once a week when he'd pass in front of my cell on his way to and from the showers. But Freddy and I got to see everyone passing and what condition he was in.

Anyway, Mr. Farmer and I kept up the strike for one more day. He wanted to be the last striker. Because, I think, he was the CORE leader and had supported the tactic. But I said no, I would be last. On the seventh day he broke his fast. Freddy said, "All right. You can go now." I declined. I wanted to say something to them before I ate. I waited until after supper that evening. I had my little speech all prepared.

"Friends, most of you don't know me. My name is Stokely Carmichael. I'm in with Freddy Leonard. You may have heard of us. We're the youngest in here. Myself, I'm a very young man but I intend to be fighting the rest of my life so I'll probably be in jail again. So probably will some of you. So this may not be the last time we are together in prison. That's why I want you to remember my name. Because if we are ever in jail again and any of you even mention the words *hunger* and *strike*, I'm gonna denounce you properly. I'll be the first to denounce you. You can tell everybody that. That if they are ever in jail with Stokely Carmichael, never ever mention anything about any hunger strike."

All that night I thought about breakfast. Now that I was free to eat, the night seemed interminable. Of course with the strike over, the next day the food had reverted. It was again awful and, for good measure, so oversalted as to be barely edible. Thus ended the hunger strike.

June 29, my twentieth birthday, found me in that cell. It would be the first of many I was to spend in Southern jails. It got so that people in

SNCC would say, "Hey, it's Carmichael's birthday. Keep your distance from him today unless you want to be arrested too."

Shortly after that, Mr. Farmer was bonded out. [*In James Farmer's account, from the start CORE's legal strategy had been to bond people out by their fortieth day in jail. If they served longer than that, under Mississippi law the appeals process was no longer available. —EMT*] Then, without consulting SNCC, CORE decided that the Freedom Rides had made their point: no more riders were to be sent in and the ones in jail were to be bonded out. Freddy and I and the six people with us were opposed. We thought we should just go ahead and fill the jails. But to no avail. We were all bonded out.

According to the deal that CORE had made, once out of Parchman all Freedom Riders were immediately to leave the state. But some strong members of the local African community were having none of that. They would not have us slink silently out of the state like criminals. No. No. No. The bread of fellowship must be broke. Appropriate words be said, proper ceremony observed, and the occasion marked and duly acknowledged. Was this strictly necessary? Of course not. But it was right. In that atmosphere of racial tension and threat, this took courage. It would have been prudent and safer for the local people to keep their distance from us "outside agitators." But these brave people weren't about to turn their backs on us.

So when we were released, delivered by bus to Jackson, and told to get out of the state, a committee of these bold local people were present to receive us. They took us to Tougaloo College, where a lavish reception had been prepared. The gym was all decorated and there was a sign, "Welcome Freedom Riders."

Now, we all were hungry and had all lost weight. I was like a walking stick, I mean gaunt. Even I knew that I had to be looking bad, but I had no idea the spectacle I presented until later when I saw, and failed at first to recognize, a picture of myself coming out of that jail.

In the college gymnasium we were greeted, praised, thanked, and above all, fed. But not before a particularly eloquent minister gave thanks. He thanked God for sending us, us for coming, and God again for bringing us safely out of the house of bondage, suffering, and evil. There was singing, music, dancing, and food. Welcome tables heaped with food, delicious, clean, Southern cooking, skillfully prepared and lovingly presented.

A youth committee of brothers and sisters our age were in charge of hospitality. Among them was one sister who just sparkled. She seemed very much in charge: responsible and just the slightest bit imperious. But, oh, she was beautiful to me, gracious and radiant. I forgot hunger and the apparition I must have appeared and sought her out.

Her name was Mary Felice Lovelace and her parents taught at Tougaloo. She was an art student at Howard. At *Howard?* I was incredulous. She was on campus? Lived in the dorms? And I'd never *seen* her? *Her?* She was intelligent, black, militant, and beautiful. How could I not have noticed her? That just didn't seem possible.

[According to the young lady, it wasn't. She has a differing recollection of history. She told writer Charlie Cobb that during one of Washington's infrequent snowfalls the previous winter, Carmichael and Ed Brown had been pelting passing coeds with snowballs in front of Slowe Hall. Infuriated when Carmichael caught her flush, she jumped in his face and lectured him on the error of his ways in no uncertain terms. To such effect, apparently, that the offender completely blocked out the entire incident. At the Tougaloo reception she thought she recognized him, but couldn't associate the earnest, "heroic" Freedom Rider with the grinning campus hooligan. —EMT]

I told her about NAG. She said, oh, definitely, she was in. We danced a lot and agreed to meet on campus in the fall. Mary Felice Lovelace would be my first and—during my college years—my only love. She was smart, talented, and tough-minded, but loving. I was always proud to be with Mary and thought we were destined to spend our lives together, but the movement would intervene.

We got out of Dodge that evening. In New York, we were met at the airport, driven to the CORE office to meet the press. I immediately called May Charles and told her I was free and in New York. Naturally she started to cry. Then to laugh. Then she couldn't wait. She was just excited, bubbling over. Immediately she went to sit in the window looking for me to appear on the street.

CORE was planning to send us home in cars, but I got tired waiting and took a train. She saw me while I was well up the block, but wasn't sure it was me. Then she really started to weep.

"Oh, my God. Look at what they have done to my son."

She asked, but I'd never tell her any details. "Oh, nothing to it, Mom. It was okay." But seeing how I looked, she never believed me. She immediately began to fatten me up with every "strong" dish from the Caribbean she could think of. When she informed all her friends and relations that "Stokely look like death, Where is thy sting? Grave thy victory?" well-meant Caribbean nourishment flowed into our house from all quarters of the extended family.

I lay at home for most of July, resting. Occasionally the CORE office would call to ask me to take a speaking engagement for them. People, it seems, wanted to hear from a "Freedom Rider" and I guess James Farmer remembered the "kid" in the next cell. Whatever the reason, they

kept asking me, and I began to gain experience in public speaking for the movement.

These were usually fund-raisers, though, and as was the case with Willie Sutton and banks, CORE had to go where the money was. Thus I found myself in some truly opulent surroundings talking about Parchman Farm, poverty, and oppression to sympathetic rich white folk, quite as though there were no connection. Some of these apartments reminded me of that penthouse party during freshman year at Science.

It was disjunctive, almost schizoid, and as it turned out, a token of things to come. Later, with us in SNCC, the same contradictions would surface. We'd be sending young field-workers, some of them coming out of hardscrabble sharecropper poverty, into trappings of enormous wealth and power, there to tell moving tales—we called them “war stories”—of our people's suffering and resistance. It was classic Americana, shades of runaway darkies and Northern audiences.

During this period I met another brother who was a great influence on the movement and who would be a great example of constant commitment: Harry Belafonte.

The effective and consistent contributions of Harry Belafonte to our peoples' liberation struggle in our time is not fully or widely enough understood or appreciated. When I met him, this “star,” pioneering popularizer of Caribbean music, was already an influential presence in our struggle. Activist, counselor to leaders, strategist, diplomat, fund-raiser, mentor to youth, Belafonte was an all-round key player in our struggle in this country, the Caribbean, and across the length and breadth of the continent. He has done this quietly, effectively, and admirably, without any need to seek the limelight.

He has not merely responded when asked but has taken creative initiatives where necessary. To my knowledge he has been a principled and positive force. His example of devotion and commitment among artists has enhanced the struggle in our time. Like Paul Robeson before him, whom he greatly admired, and Miriam, my first wife, his art was always in service to our culture and our struggle. In struggle, Brother Belafonte is one who came early and stayed late. Yes, he is. And of course, in personal wealth and his career, he paid a price.

In our music-loving Caribbean household, he was a culture hero. My family, especially my father, were most impressed when I told them whom I'd just met.

One day Harry was meeting with a group of Freedom Riders from the New York area. He invited us to be his guests at a concert in Forest Hills that night. Queens? Oh, man, to a city kid that's the far side of the moon. I was planning to hang with my boys in the Village that evening. So

I was getting ready to beg off when he mentioned that Miriam Makeba would be appearing with him.

Say what?

“Oh, Bro Harry, what time? How do I get there? We’re gonna get to meet her, right?”

That evening I took such a long time and such inordinate pains getting dressed that my sister Janeth (Nagib) noticed.

“Stokely, where you going? Why you dressing up so? Posing in front of the mirror an’ all, eh?” I told her it was nothing. I was going to meet Miriam Makeba is all.

“Ooh, Stokely en’t telling the truth,” she squealed. “Say he going to meet Miriam Makeba.”

My schoolboy fantasy was back like a big dowg. Not only was I going to meet her, I was going to make an impression, Jack. Sweep her off her feet. Yes, I would. After much thought and trying on for effect, I settled on a silky Harry Belafonte shirt. The kind with flared collars, a deep V neck, and billowing sleeves with my best slacks. I was clean and, so I thought, looking great.

That evening I couldn’t take my eyes off her on the stage. She was wearing a sheath dress with a long slit in slinky material in an orange-and-yellow Matabele print. A tall hat in the same print set off her large, expressive eyes, her soft, rich skin, and the finely chiseled beauty of her classic Bantu face. In the stage light she was truly exotic, sensual, and feline in motion with that richness of her voice. She was kickin’, and if I was blown away, and I really was, I could see I wasn’t the only one. She captured that audience. But I was cool. I *knew* I was gonna get her attention. She was going to notice me. Yes, she was.

And I did. Soon as our eyes met, I saw her start. She looked at me again and her face changed. I knew she was mine. Something flashed between us. We both knew. We both could feel it. . .

Hah. I wish.

When my turn came to meet her, I pulled myself up to my full height, squared my shoulders, turned on my most dazzling Belafonte smile, and looked ardently down into her eyes.

I took her hand. “Miss Makeba, you were incredible.”

“Oh, thank you so much. Very kind.” She gently disengaged her hand, turned, and reached out to the next in line. I stood, empty hand extended with that dumb grin on my face. Some impression. Eight years later when we met again in Conakry, she had absolutely no recollection. None. The best-laid plans of men . . . and boys.

But I recovered. Toward the end of a pleasant month at home where I was a minor neighborhood celebrity, the phone rang. My mother handed

it to me. It was Nashville SNCC. There would be a political seminar during August. They were sending me a plane ticket.

"Cool," I said. "Cool. You know I'll be there. Count on it."

"Be where?" my mother asked, alarmed. "Where you think you going again?" Her voice was sharp, tense.

"To Nashville—" I never got to finish explaining.

"No. Oh, no. Over my dead body. Oh, no. Look what they did to you. After you not mad. Oh, no." All I could do was wait for her to catch her breath. It took a while.

"I'm sorry, but I gotta go—" And she was off again. And it wasn't theatrics either. May Charles was deeply, truly afraid and she let it all come out. She wept. She raged. She screamed.

"May Charles, this isn't something I want to do. You have to understand, I'm going. I got no choice. It's something I *have* to do."

Gradually she calmed down and went into the bedroom. I could hear muffled sobbing, but when she came out, she was calm. She walked past without a word and started to iron my clothes.

"But I won't be needing good clothes," I protested.

"Yes, you do," she said. "At least, if nothing else, you'll be looking decent."

That I think was my mother's Waterloo. The point at which she realized—and accepted—that nothing was going to stop me from participating fully in this struggle. At whatever the cost. However she'd made peace with herself on the issue, she had. When I left for Nashville, it was with, however fearfully, her blessing.

Nashville: A New Direction

On the surface it looked like any other academic seminar meeting in a university classroom anywhere in America. Nothing (except perhaps that, highly unusual in that time and place, the visiting “faculty” were thoroughly racially integrated) distinguished it from any other “interdisciplinary graduate workshop,” as the organizers described it. And indeed it was resolutely and rigorously academic. It boasted an extensive list of required readings, mandatory class attendance, and required “a term paper in a special area of choice” from all participants.

I don’t recall that formal academic credit was offered, but if it wasn’t, it certainly should have been, because, to put it simply, it seemed like summer school by another name. So why was I so all-fired determined not to miss it and so jump-up impatient to get there? Because for four weeks that August, Nashville would become the hub of a newly confident, evolving student movement, and that Fisk University seminar room would be at the center of it all.

I felt honored and excited merely to have been invited. I recognized a good many of the names of the scholars who would be coming to speak to us, including some high-powered progressive intellectuals of the time: Dr. August Meier, Kenneth Clark, C. Eric Lincoln, L. D. Reddick, Herbert Hill, and, I was proud to see, a couple of our Howard stalwarts, E. Franklin Frazier and Rayford Logan. These luminaries came for expenses and a princely honorarium of \$25. Also there would be some of the activists we most respected: Ms. Ella Baker, the Reverend James Lawson, and a promised “roundtable with Dr. Martin Luther King.” Which alone was reason enough to be excited. A few other names—Harris Wofford, Red Sarrat, Clarence Mitchell, Henry Van Alestyne—I did not recognize. These turned out to be Washington insiders, some from inside the Kennedy administration itself. As I would learn, their presence was not accidental.

One unit on this scrupulously complete program excited much laughter and joking from everybody. “Hey, Chuck. Whose idea was this? Sex?

And *Race? In the South? We need to learn about this?* “You trying to say they related? Surely you jest.” I can’t recall who the scholarly expert for that unit was, but there it was on the program, sho nuff. Our planners, bless they hearts, was nothing if not earnest and thorough.

What was most exciting was the prospect of being among other strugglers again, and getting to know those young activists whose names I’d been hearing but whom I hadn’t really met—even though some of us had been in the same jails. In Nashville, we’d get a chance to see and really connect with each other.

Actually I couldn’t really think of these folks as my “peers.” Of course, anyone with Freedom Ride jail experience was considered a “veteran.” So at nineteen years old I was a “movement veteran.” But I was still among the youngest in age and experience, if only by a year or two. If I were a “veteran,” then the people I was meeting were “generals.” People I really looked up to. Diane Nash certainly. Ruby Doris Smith came out of Atlanta with Oretha Castle, whom I’d met as an experienced struggler in New Orleans. Also another impressive sister from Nashville named Lucretia Collins, all committed fighters.

In Nashville I would first meet most of the emerging leadership who would play crucial roles in the organization, the Southern struggle, and therefore in my early political life for years to come.

That’s when I first met Tim Jenkins, the student government president I’d heard so much about at Howard. John Lewis was in the seminar as were Chuck McDew, Charlie Jones, and Charles Sherrod (a charismatic seminarian who had just been hired as SNCC’s first official field secretary). Lester McKimmie, a devoted brother who would later work closely with me in D.C. in the Black United Front, was there, as was my Parchman cellmate, Freddy Leonard. From D.C. there were John Moody and Dion Diamond from NAG and our close ally Reggie Robinson, leader of the Baltimore student movement.

I quickly realized that the real architect of the seminar was Tim Jenkins. He had seen a need, thought up the project, and used the insider influence of his NSA vice presidency to secure funding for it.

Tim Jenkins explained when we met, “Even before the Freedom Rides I didn’t think we could allow the energy and excitement of the sit-ins simply to dissipate.

“After the rides, it was even clearer that the student movement, if it were to survive at all, would need a new, sustainable program and focus. And I certainly wanted to nudge it down off that lofty, ethereal plane of ‘the beloved community,’ and the excessive religious zeal of the pain-and-suffering school of struggle.”

He got no argument from me on that, Jack.

Today, Tim adds, “I felt that what the movement really needed at that

point was not idealism or inspiration but information. Hard, pragmatic information about how the political system actually worked . . . or failed to work. Where the pressure points were. What levers were available that students could push. Where allies might be found. Who the real enemies were. What exactly was the nature of the beast we were up against? That was the purpose in Nashville."

As I was soon to find out, a more specific agenda than information sharing was present in Nashville. McDew, Tim, and Chuck Jones were convinced that the young movement needed to identify national interests with goals that were compatible with our own (which were at that time quite unformed or at least only being formed)—interests whose resources could be tapped into and brought to bear. That was the big question for me: Did such "interests" actually exist in the nation? And, if so, how could mere students even approach them? And why would they take us seriously?

By the time we came together in Nashville, Tim and the others were beginning to believe they had located just such an interest. A powerful interest indeed, and here's the thing. *They*, apparently, had come to us. And this powerful interest? The Kennedy administration, no less. Say what? I couldn't believe what I was hearing. What did they, could they, want with us? Incredible. But apparently true, and as it turned out, quite a story.

Even while some of us were still sitting penned up in Parchman, Bobby Kennedy's emissaries had begun sending out feelers to the student movement? Git outta here. What was he up to? Was he now talking to "extremists on both sides"? Maybe it was "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do . . ." time, huh?

I wasn't about to cut him any slack at all, Jack. On Parchman death row, we had talked about him like a dog. Hey, wasn't it because of *their* failure to enforce their own laws that we were sitting in that hellhole in the first place? And for what, buying a ticket and riding a bus? C'mon. Gimme an ever-loving break, bro. That hadn't been everyone's reaction, but it was most people's and it sure was mine. But, I couldn't wait to find out what in the world the attorney general of the United States could possibly want with us.

Actually his interests turned out to be clear enough. Naive, on at least one crucial issue, but clear.

It seems the administration was determined to "minimize any further possibility of again being blindsided by unexpected racial crises." According to official Washington, the Freedom Rides had been an "unmitigated disaster." We had succeeded only in "damaging" American foreign policy interests; "tarnishing" America's image in Africa and Asia; "embarrass-

ing” the administration internationally *and* giving a “propaganda victory” to the Soviets. A total disaster, *unmitigated*.

Yeah, well . . . that was *their* perspective. I wasn’t buying any of it. Not for a New York minute. Which is not to say that all this hadn’t happened. It had, but all politics is perspective. From where we stood that interpretation—which, incidentally, was also what the media was running—was outrageous, a total inversion of reality.

Yeah, they had reason to be embarrassed internationally. Excellent reasons, but these had nothing to do with us. It was their inability or reluctance, demonstrated to the entire world, to discipline their renegade Southern provinces by enforcing federal law and stated government policy within their own borders. That was the embarrassment. And that was on them, not us. They were merely embarrassed, but we had *suffered* because of their timidity.

And was the country’s international image “tarnished”? No doubt there either, and well it should have been. For it wasn’t tarnished by anything we did, but by the unregulated, irrational, racist violence that the administration was seen to tolerate against black people and their allies. And the “Soviet propaganda victory”? That too. Hey, all the “leader of the free world” had to do to deprive the Soviets of that “victory” was to be seen around the world to be *living up* to the nation’s own lofty rhetoric about democratic freedoms and human rights for *all* its citizens. Y’know, there is a name for this kind of moral inversion and we all know what it is.

So how did the administration propose that such international political embarrassments be avoided in the future? Well, that’s where certain “serious domestic political concerns” of the brothers Kennedy, which would come to affect us, *seriously* came into play. These concerns involved the next presidential election (1964) and “Jack’s razor-thin margin of victory in 1960.” *Razor-thin?* Try less than half of one percent of the popular vote. But here again was a serious matter of perspective, because the administration’s take on this was the exact opposite of ours. A difference in perspective that had a lot to do with the upsurge of movement militance during JFK’s short tenure in office.*

*In the election of 1960, JFK had received a late, sudden and unexpectedly large majority of the black vote. More, if memory serves, than any other Democratic presidential candidate except FDR, and far more than had been predicted by pollsters. See, JFK, the candidate, had absolutely no civil rights record going into the election and consequently no visible support in African communities. Nonetheless, this late black surge. Naturally, we saw that as the margin of his very thin victory, which it was. Had those black folk not voted or gone the other way, Nixon would have been president. So, we felt, the president owed the black community something, at the very least respect, a fair hearing, and our civil rights.

They, however, saw the returns very differently: as a sign that, for 1964, they

JFK's narrow margin was why the administration strategists were now so convinced that on no account could they afford to alienate the "Bubba vote" any more than they might already have. Further public confrontations with the leadership of the Dixiecrat wing of the party had to be avoided at all costs. And since they had almost certainly already lost significant Southern white support because of the Freedom Rides, then perhaps, maybe, the registration of at least a portion of the South's 4 million disenfranchised blacks might help offset that loss. On both counts they felt they needed us. Naked political self-interest? Of course. But, hey, that's the name of the game. And so far as the politics of American presidents usually went on the question of our rights, it was an unusually enlightened self-interest.

Hence the overtures to the movement: it would be, they argued, in everyone's—the nation's, the government's, the Negro's—best interest if the "extremists" in SNCC and CORE could be persuaded to abandon confrontational direct action tactics to concentrate their efforts, quietly, on voter registration. Everybody wins.

For them, the proverbial two birds with one stone. This tactical change, they felt, would buy them "a cooling-off period with no surprises or unsightly washing of the nation's dirty racial linen in public," while hopefully a new base of "Kennedy voters" would be created in Dixie. (We knew this was *naïve* from the git. No way would those Southern crackers welcome Africans voting.)

needed to placate their party's Southern wing and its white Bible Belt Baptist constituency, which had looked with suspicion on Kennedy's Catholic faith. Same facts, different priorities. This would be a constant in my experience with American politicians.

The story behind the late black crossover is kinda funny, instructive, and ironic. The week before the election, Dr. King was being held in a Georgia county jail with a bad reputation for violence. JFK was persuaded—against the advice of his brother, Bobby, who was said to be livid when he heard—to make a phone call to Mrs. King "simply to express concern." Daddy King was so moved by this small gesture that he made his famous declaration: "I've got a bag o' votes to deliver to the man who cared enough to wipe the tears from my daughter-in-law's eyes." Or words to that effect.

Clerical networking took place, and the Sunday before the election, endorsements of JFK rang out from Baptist pulpits across the black nation. Much is ironic in this story. Not the least of which is something Dr. King told me when I got to know him . . . *doctrinal sectarianism* might not be too strong a term.

Before the phone call, his father and his friends and allies in the Baptist alliance, "all them old Baptist preachers," he said, "had absolutely no more intention to either endorse or vote for Kennedy than the man in the moon."

I wondered why.

"Are you kidding, Stokely?" Dr. King asked. "You forget, the candidate was a *Catholic!*"

And for us, voter registration would accomplish two things also: the jump-starting of a drive for full citizenship for “the Southern Negro,” which had been betrayed in 1877. And, if we “militants” would only cooperate, we would be pleasantly surprised to find how supportive the administration could be. Of course, being in jail, I wasn’t at any of those meetings with the administration. But, so I’m told, a raft of promises were dangled: financial support, legal protection, and even none too subtle hints of draft deferments for registration workers. And on one occasion, this was presented by the attorney general himself, in person, live and in color!

[Ture’s reading and recollections of this crucial transition period are precise and accurate so far as they go. A more recent account—by the excellent social historian Taylor Branch—fills in gaps in young Carmichael’s direct experience and expands our understanding of the full extent of the Kennedys’ role in this transition. —EMT]

Branch writes, “. . . They [the Kennedys] immediately stepped up efforts to create a well-financed, tax exempt organization to register Negro voters in the South . . . the clandestine pursuit resembled the campaign to secure tax benefits for those who had helped ransom Bay of Pigs prisoners . . . Kennedy himself intervened with IRS Commissioner Mortimer Kaplan to secure that exemption for the Voter Education Project . . .”

The Kennedys’ idea was to bring all the civil rights groups “*under uniform rules and a central budget.*” The wild cards were, of course, SNCC and CORE, the two activist organizations responsible for the Freedom Rides and with whom the administration had the least contact.

“. . . On June 16,” Branch relates, “Attorney General Kennedy received a delegation from the Freedom Ride Coordinating Council . . . they hoped to receive federal help [protection] for the Freedom Rides. . . . But what they instead received was a counter point from the Attorney General. ‘The Freedom Rides were no longer productive,’ he said. [They] . . . could accomplish more by registering Negro voters . . . if they would agree . . . he’d do everything . . . to make sure they were fully supported and protected . . .”

He mentioned the confidential work . . . [going on] to secure tax exemption and large foundation grants.

“This was too blunt for Charles Sherrod, who was on his feet . . . sputtering indignantly at what he regarded as a bribe. . . .”

“‘You are a public officer, Sir. It is not your responsibility, before God or under the law, to tell us how to honor our constitutional rights. It’s your job to protect us when we do.’ *[Go deh, Sherrod, sho do sound like SNCC to me —EMT]* Wyatt Walker, fearing he might attack Kennedy in the frenzy of his sermon, pulled him [Sherrod] back to his seat by the pocket of his pants.

“. . . Kennedy and his aides pressed their points then and later. They went so far as to extend confidential promises that the administration would arrange draft exemptions for students—so long as they confined themselves to quiet political work. Harris Wofford put the choice to them most graphically: they could have jails filled with Freedom Riders or jails filled with white southern officials who tried to obstruct federally protected voting rights.”—Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*

After leaving those meetings, people had sought advice from elders. They had to. Was the administration serious? Could they be trusted? What should the students be doing? One person they had consulted was Harry Belafonte. He advised them not to reject the idea out of hand. You first need to get yourselves organized to think it through. Figure out the politics, then make your decision, he told them. He then made a generous personal contribution to begin that process [*a reported \$10,000*]. Folks were just overwhelmed, and I believe that marked the beginning of Bro Belafonte’s long relationship—as adviser, benefactor, and big brother—to the young freedom-fighting organization.

To say that these administration signals took us students by surprise would be the grandmammy of all understatements. Folks were, depending on their inclinations, in turn suspicious, flattered, surprised, confused, or all of the above simultaneously. Remember now, at that point, SNCC wasn’t even a real organization. A vigorous, exciting movement sure, but an organization? Not hardly, no way.

So all the time we were in Nashville discussing “Should we?” what was really in the back of everyone’s mind was “Can we?” As a practical matter—with no staff, no full-time field organizers, not even a real office—in short, no real organization—were we in any position even to be dealing on that level? A different group of folk might have been intimidated. We probably should have been, had we known better. But with these guys? Nothing intimidated us. SNCC would become famous for not having sense enough to be intimidated. But a lot of intense late-night discussions and soul-searching took place, and it was all very exciting. Things were moving fast. You could just *feel* in the air that something big, new, was fixing to happen. It was not only exciting but even a little scary, and I was just overjoyed to be part of it.

Night after night of long, intense, interminable discussions as young people sorted out their ideas, values, beliefs, fears, commitments, and priorities. Were we really ready for this? Occasionally leaving campus to sit in at a department store was one thing. Full-time organizing in the Deep South was entirely something else. What about our educations?

Folks wrestled with that. Some prayed. We all sang: “Guide mah

feets, Lord / While I run this race. / Lord, I don't want to run this race in vain." Or: "Wade in the water. / Wade in the water, chillen. / Wade in the water. / SNCC's gonna trouble the water," and the haunting, long meter "We'll never turn back."

I learned how interesting and brave my new comrades really were. After what we'd seen with the Freedom Rides, nobody, but *nobody* had the slightest illusion about what might be awaiting. Was *all* this really our responsibility? And if not ours, then whose? If not now, when? Each of us had to search his or her own character and conscience.

One idea really took hold. I can't recall who first said it. Or if anyone did. It probably just evolved. But it became a kind of mantra. As students we have a unique responsibility. At this stage of life we are at our most free. The freest we will ever be. We have neither family, career, mortgage, or any other adult responsibilities to tie us down. If we can't afford to do this now, when will we be? *If not now, when?* If you're serious, you gotta do it now or git off the pot.

For me those sessions were important. I think that was when we began to bond into "a band of brothers." I know that I certainly started to feel the strong respect and love for these brothers and sisters which has lingered all my life. Tactically and politically I had no problem with the voter registration proposal. I was with Jenkins and McDew . . . we couldn't just continue sitting in indefinitely. We had to take it to another level and I was all for the new political direction. Thanks to Rayford Logan [*The Betrayal of the Negro*], I was very clear on the history. After the betrayal of Reconstruction, it was the systematic disenfranchisement of our people that had started the whole mess. That had paved the way for almost a century of Jim Crow exploitation, discrimination, humiliation, and lynching. And the nation's betrayal of its own professed principles.

So the vote, if not the answer, was certainly the start. We could finish what Reconstruction had started. With Africans voting, the South would be a different place, unrecognizable. So it didn't seem much of a choice to me. Besides, when was the last time the political interests of any American president coincided with the political empowerment of black people? Hey, while our interests weren't identical, they were at least compatible, so I hoped.

One thing though. And this is where the administration seemed really naive: nobody in Nashville had the slightest illusion about any "cooling-off period." If the crackers had gone stone-mad, butt-kicking crazy merely over a few seats on a bus, why in the world would anyone expect them to sit still for black folk voting? Uh-uh, this was gonna be dangerous. But if the feds—the powerful federal government—were gonna be seriously involved this time . . . maybe none of us would have to die.

To me it was an offer we couldn't afford to refuse. Not if we were serious, anyway. And I knew that I was going to be part of it, no matter what. Obviously this would mean a different level of commitment. For a start, people would have to drop out of school, if only temporarily. (Actually, most never made it back.) And I'd only just finished giving my father my word that I'd finish school at all costs. That was my, and a lot of other folks', largest question, our educations. But I was in. That was definite.

While this discussion was raging, all kinds of folk kept coming through Nashville. I particularly remember two brothers who were to be important in this new organization. One was an articulate, irrepressible, boyish-looking guy from Atlanta who always seemed to have an infectious grin on his face and a twinkle in his eye. Julian Bond passed through but didn't stay long. Seems, if memory serves, Julian had other things on his mind just then since the young lady with him was his bride-to-be and they were in the process of eloping. Julian now insists that there had been a wedding but not quite an elopement. A subtle distinction but I guess he should know.

The other brother who dropped in was a young journalist/school-teacher from Chicago named Jim Forman. He didn't stay long either because he was working with a struggle heating up in a town called Monroe, North Carolina. First time I saw this stocky, curly-haired, almost baby-faced older brother, he was stopping folks—to jawbone them passionately—about support for this brave community and their remarkable leader, Robert Williams. Last time I remember seeing Jim—some forty years later [*Hartford, 1986*—the brother was still buttonholing folk and talking up some new strategy of struggle. Indefatigable Jim Forman.

In a few months, Jim would sign on as the first full-time employee and executive secretary for SNCC, which at the time was more of a dream than an organization. James Forman, more than any other single person, would manage the nuts-and-bolts transformation of SNCC at its most crucial time. Administratively, Jim turned a loose association of contentious, widely scattered, diffuse student groups into an effective organizational force at the cutting edge of the black struggle for human rights in the South. That was no easy job and it would consume him completely. Hey, we never were a hierarchical, leader-centered group like SCLC nor a centralized bureaucracy like the national NAACP. But for a while we were the most spiritually unified, focused, creative force in the movement. And it was Jim had everything to do with creating the administrative base and scraping together the support to make that possible.

In later years I would hear people who were not there say many things about Jim, and indeed, he and I would come to our own parting of the

political ways. The necessary organizational role Jim undertook would almost inevitably place him at the center of political controversy, confusion, misunderstandings, and even slander. That comes with the territory. If you can't stand the heat, git from in front of the stove. But, as much as humanly possible, against overwhelming odds and some incredible pressures that I myself would later come to understand fully, Jim Forman was an anchoring, stabilizing presence at a time when the organization needed such a presence. You should read his book [*Making of Black Revolutionaries*].

The task Jim undertook at that crucial moment was not only difficult and demanding, it was well nigh impossible. Without James Forman's devotion, strength, responsibility, resourcefulness, and innate decency, the character of our infant organization—if indeed it survived—and consequently the history of the movement would have been very, very different. Tell the truth and shame the devil. Our people owe Jim Forman a lot.

But back then in Nashville, all Jim was talking about was this Carolina town called Monroe and a local NAACP leader called Robert Williams. In a short time, this brother would become a great inspiration and a lesson to us in SNCC, as well as a symbolic and ideological leader to a number of radical groups across the spectrum of the black struggle. That story was crucial in how we came to understand the struggle we were involved in.

After they were released from Parchman that summer, Paul Dietrich and Bill Mahoney were among a group of about ten, mostly white Freedom Riders recruited by Forman, to come to Monroe. The group's presence was to show white support and bring their experience in non-violent protest into the mix.

When Paul and Bill got back to D.C., they had an interesting tale to tell. For one thing, both were absolutely convinced that Robert Williams's insistence on armed self-defense was the only thing that had saved their lives. And Paul was a devout pacifist.

These Freedom Riders along with a small group of local youth had run up a small picket line in the center of Monroe. The picket was in support of a range of community issues. It was a Saturday and the downtown was crowded. A large crowd formed. Gradually the crowd turned into a mob. Verbal abuse turned into occasional blows as agitators whipped up the crowd. What police were present did nothing to control or disperse the mob. In fact, the cops were verbally hostile to the picketers.

[Bill Mahoney later told us: "I just knew we were dead. Man, we were completely surrounded by angry white folk. People started jumping out of the crowd to take a swing at us. Next to me, Paul (Dietrich) was knocked dizzy by a vicious blow to his ear. While I was supporting Paul, someone slugged me over

my eye. People on the line were bleeding. The threats got louder. It was clear that it was only a matter of time before they would swarm over us.

"I had been watching this old, old toothless man in overalls getting hysterical. His face was all red and convulsed. He kept screaming, 'Kill the niggahs. Goddamn, kill 'em. Go on, kill the niggahs.'

Then I saw the old man's face suddenly change. He started pointing over my head. 'Gawddammit,' he cried. 'Them niggahs got guns. Them goddamn niggahs got guns.' The old cracker started jumping up and down, pointing and weeping and shaking with rage. 'Gawddamn,' he wailed. 'Them niggahs got guns.'"]

Suddenly there was movement in the back of the crowd. Car horns blared and the crowd surged and parted. A small squadron of taxis led by a car filled with black men came into the square. The men in the lead car jumped out carrying rifles. Facing the crowd, they called the picketers into the cabs.

"Yes, they did," Mahoney said, "and I'm convinced that's the only thing that saved our lives."

At first glance, Robert Williams, an obscure local NAACP leader from small-town North Carolina, might seem an unlikely candidate for a symbolic, revolutionary leader to a host of radical groups in the late sixties. Equally unlikely was his elevation to the pantheon of heroes of the resolutely nonviolent student movement that we were in 1961. Unlikely, that is, if you believed the national media, in whose account Williams was an unstable personality, a dangerous radical, an advocate of armed racial violence, and a hunted criminal whom the NAACP had been forced to expel for "political irresponsibility."

But in this, Williams was different only in degree from a lot of people I've since worked with in our struggle and greatly respect. I've noticed that the corporate media aren't really dependable in their depiction of our black leaders who refuse to compromise our people's rights, or of the truth of our condition, or of those who dare to step outside the narrow boundaries of acceptable struggle that this system tries to impose.

With few exceptions, most of the figures I truly honor have been, and usually at the highest point of resistance in their lives, demonized by the press and hounded by the government. However, once safely in their graves, they might rate an honorific postage stamp (Malcolm X, Dr. Du Bois) or even a national holiday, as with Dr. King (peace be unto their names). Or, being older and physically impaired, like the great Muhammad Ali, their images might be recycled into those of secular saints or national treasures. Conveniently forgetting of course that when, at unbelievable personal sacrifice, Ali made his principled stand against a stupid, vicious war, he was the most vilified and hated black man in white Amer-

ica. So Robert Williams is in excellent company. Even so, I wouldn't bet on his getting a postage stamp anytime soon.

But consider this. Roll of honor or list of public enemies? In the previous generation, my father's great hero, the Honorable Marcus Garvey, and Paul Robeson, as well as Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, all at some point were demonized, jailed, or hounded into exile. And of people I've known, worked with, respected, and learned from—Julius Hobson, Cecil Moore, Malcolm X, Gloria Richardson, Assata Shakur, Robert Williams, Muhammad Ali, Jamil al-Amin (H. Rap Brown), and even Dr. King himself—all at some point, whenever they were seen to cross that media-imposed line of "responsible" black protest, were subject to vicious character assassination by the press.

We had first encountered Williams's name in my freshman year, early in the Kennedy administration, in a way that could not help but get our attention. It was during the U.N. debate on the Bay of Pigs debacle.* Engaged in a desperate exercise in diplomatic damage control, U.S. ambassador Adlai Stevenson piously announced he deplored "the betrayal of the Cuban revolution," and he reserved his government's right and affirmed its will to send assistance—military when necessary—to any people struggling anywhere for human rights and democratic freedoms. So there!

At the end of which, the Cuban representative, Ambassador Raul Roa, rose to read a letter he'd just received. Apparently, he'd been asked by the representative of another people struggling against oppression to convey an appeal for just such American military assistance. To wit:

Mr. Ambassador:

Please convey the following appeal to Mr. Adlai Stevenson: Now that the United States has proclaimed military support for people willing to rebel against oppression, oppressed Negroes in the [American] South urgently request tanks, artillery, bombs, money, and the use of American airfields and white mercenaries to crush the racist tyrants who have betrayed the American Revolution and the Civil War.

We request the world's prayers for this noble undertaking.

Robert Williams, President, NAACP
Union County, Monroe, North Carolina

I'm told the delegates and the spectators in the gallery erupted. I know we at Howard howled. Reportedly Ambassador Stevenson and the U.S.

*The spectacularly unsuccessful U.S.-sponsored invasion of revolutionary Cuba, a sovereign nation.

delegation were conspicuously not amused. We had no way of knowing Roy Wilkins's reaction, but it was a sure bet that the very conservative head of the NAACP didn't find it funny. But after that we in NAG became curious about this brother. Later, what Bill and Paul had to report about their experience in the Monroe struggle turned us into strong Robert Williams supporters. For us he became a kind of counterexample to unvarying nonviolence. Turns out Williams'd been fighting racism across the board for a real long time—dating to the time of the Montgomery bus boycott—but with a somewhat different approach. He had tried all avenues—voting, negotiation, lawsuits, demonstrations—and finally insisted on the most fundamental of all human rights: the right to self-defense.

That U.N. letter impressed us with Williams's audacity. His willingness to cross boundaries, to step out of "his place" to confront and embarrass the government with its contradictions and hypocrisy before international forums. Bayard Rustin—speaking I'm sure from experience—used to say, "One thing they do not forgive: under no circumstances shall any Negro dare criticize America from a foreign country." Paul Robeson had found that out at great cost. As would Jimmy Baldwin and Malcolm later.

The more we found out about Robert Williams's struggle, the more there was to admire. You know what stood out about him? His outrageous and extreme self-respect. He wanted nothing more and refused anything less than full human respect for his people: the full, equal rights of all free human beings. That was it. Which, of course, in that time and place made him "crazy." The Monroe story is important for this generation to know and understand clearly because it was a great lesson to us.

Not long after Williams had begun to organize the Monroe community to assert their rights [*circa 1958*], the state struck back. They announced a vindictive, federally funded urban renewal program clearly designed to dismember the black community. As Williams tells it:

"They came through the community where we lived. The stable section, where 90 percent of blacks owned their homes, some valued at over \$35,000. 'Course this was where the leadership was, the militants, the voters, the guns . . . the resistance. Those sections where the housing was poor, where black homes didn't even have indoor toilets, they completely bypassed. No urban renewal there. Naturally we protested, but they were having none of that. And there were federal funds involved too. We decided to file suit.

"Then the president visited India. There he made a huge pronouncement. He and the United States wanted all the people of Asia to have decent housing and adequate food. We saw the opportunity. We sent a telegram to Prime Minister Nehru. We described the threat to black people's houses in Monroe and asked Prime Minister Nehru to convey the

message to President Eisenhower. We signed it from the NAACP. Apparently the Indian leader delivered the message effectively with spectacular results.

"We expected Eisenhower to denounce the telegram as a fraud. Or that he would jump all over us when he got back. But instead, a strange thing happened. When he came back, he asked this African-American, Dr. Snowden, who worked in Housing, to contact us and assure us that he was every bit as interested in our houses as he was in houses for the people of Asia. That we could rest assured that there would be no urban renewal in Monroe until the law was fully complied with. . . .

"That stopped the program dead in its tracks. It just bogged down . . . finished. Of course the local officials never forgave me for that. We were always embarrassing them."*

That's what I mean by his audacity and his instinct for the contradictions within the establishment.

But Williams's work and reputation had really begun a few years earlier. A marine veteran of the Korean War, Williams came out of the service with a mission. He returned home to Monroe and immediately began to resurrect the local NAACP chapter, persuading his fellow veterans and ordinary country folk to join. By all accounts, it was not a typical chapter. It consisted of a "rougher element": domestic workers, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and of course Williams's brother veterans. Its militancy was a constant thorn in the side of the state NAACP leadership.

The next year, Dr. Albert Perry, a prosperous, young black physician, was elected president of Monroe's new interracial Council on Human Relations. Composed of "representatives of both races and all faiths," this new organization was created by various local churches to promote public awareness and understanding of problems affecting good feelings between the races in Union County. The two presidents, the tough ex-marine and the idealistic young physician—black men both—would find themselves at considerable risk and, working together, pushed to the limits.

Dr. Perry's ordeal began in the summer of '57 after a black teenager drowned while swimming in a farm pond. The African community was upset at the absence of safe facilities for its youth. Dr. Perry and Robert Williams represented the community's concern to the city council and the recreation commission. The white officials were sympathetic. Indeed, a swimming pool for blacks was envisioned, but for some time in the future "when funds became available," they chuckled.

Fine. But, until then, could not black kids have some access to the town pool? Perhaps, on the basis of, say, one, maybe two days each week?

**Black Scholar* interview, May 1970.

Sorry. That wouldn't be feasible.

Why not even one day a week?

Afraid that wouldn't be possible. You know . . . the expense.

Expense?

Well, you can see, can't you now, that this would mean draining and cleaning the pool each time? Surely you understand that?

The two blacks left. Next day Williams escorted a group of kids to the pool only to be refused entry. On the basis of which the NAACP filed suit. According to the local media, this was a hostile act that could conceivably result in the closing of the pool, thus depriving white children of a safe place to swim.

That's when the Klan became really active. It began to have regular meetings, at which Dr. Perry was, for some reason, the main focus of their venom. The day after the first big Klan meeting, a phone caller informed Mrs. Perry that her husband had been sentenced to death. After which, death threats became a nightly occurrence in the Perry household.

The Perrys reported each threat to the police, who simply dismissed the reports, often with overt hostility. The Perrys decided they would not be run off. The men of the community volunteered to protect their doctor and his wife. Each night, a "shift of some fifty fellas" would stand armed watch around the Perrys' home. The next night another fifty would take over. Armed men escorted Dr. Perry to his office and home again. "I was very well protected. I was never by myself for one moment."

The threats continued as the Klan upped the ante. They took to ending their meetings with a show of force: a caravan of cars, shining their lights, blaring their horns, firing guns, and shouting insults while parading through the black community. Often the parade was led by a police cruiser, and always it drove by the Perry home a few times. Dr. Perry recalls that the car interior lights were kept on so that the robed and hooded Klansmen were clearly visible. In some of the cars, women and children could be seen. The siege of the Perrys lasted from August to October 1957.

After a Klan meeting broke up the night of October 8, a particularly large and noisy motorcade, preceded by a police cruiser, entered the black community for the last time. As the lead car passed the Perry home, the night erupted with sudden and sustained rapid fire from over fifty guns, most of which seem to have been those short, loud, efficient M3 carbines of Korean War vintage. And the shooting was not coming from the Klansmen. In an unpublished eyewitness account by novelist Julian Mayfield, "The fire was blistering, disciplined, and frightening. The motorcade of about eighty cars . . . disintegrated into chaos with panicky robed men fleeing in all directions. Some abandoned their cars to flee on

foot. One carload turned into a dead-end street where they were cut off by Robert Williams and a detachment of armed men."

The terrified driver begged "Mr. Williams" to please let them go. They just didn't know what they were doing and promised never to come back into the black community again. Yes, sir, they fully understood how close they had come to being killed.

In the end, no deaths were reported, only because Williams's troops had been instructed not to kill anyone unless absolutely unavoidable. This time, we fire "high or low." Whether the terrified Klansman who had begged for his life would have honored his promise never to return cannot really be known. The Klan suddenly became scrupulously law-abiding after the city council belatedly passed an ordinance prohibiting late-night motorcades. Henceforth, travel within city limits after nightfall, in groups of more than three cars, would require a permit. The invasions of our communities ceased.

Having failed to take Dr. Perry's life or run him off, the racists next went after his reputation and livelihood, accusing him of performing an illegal abortion on a white woman. They succeeded in framing, convicting, and jailing the young doctor and taking away his license for a time. What was particularly disgraceful was that the entire community—black and white—and particularly his medical colleagues, knew that, as a devout Catholic, Dr. Perry had always refused to perform any abortions or sterilizations, even when they were legal. (Under state law, these procedures were permissible under certain conditions.)

Yet we are to believe that this very religious man had suddenly decided to perform his first abortion, not a legal one but a criminal one, upon a *white* woman reportedly of dubious reputation? That he undertook to violate a lifetime of religious principle, civil law, *and* Southern racial taboo in the climate of hatred, death threats, and harassment that was surrounding him? Give . . . me . . . uh . . . bureak. Please.

After his conviction by what would almost certainly have been a lily-white jury (which in that climate would have included some Klansmen or Klan sympathizers), Dr. Perry fought for his reputation, career, and freedom for two years, all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court

Apart from whatever contributions the loyal and generous local folk were able to offer, Dr. Perry was left to bear the considerable expense of his legal defense by himself. He discovered that the impeccably circumspect NAACP did not "as a matter of policy" take "sex cases." (A curious policy. It explains, among other things, why the Communist Party had been left to carry the fight to save the nine "Scottsboro boys" from legal lynching in Alabama. Or why, in too many cases, brothers were left without defense before the accusations of white women desperately try-

ing to salvage reputations and status, or before the hysterical fantasies and neuroses of culturally repressed Southern belles. Or why, when a black man like Dr. Perry refused to be intimidated or run off, the system's last dependable resort was the sex, race, and white womanhood card.)

After the dismissal of his last appeal, the woman whose testimony had convicted him recanted to Dr. Perry. She was going crazy she said. It was on her conscience . . . promises and threats had been made. But she was now willing to testify truthfully. But it was too little too late. The doctor was off to jail.

After his parole (July 1960), Dr. Perry's professional difficulties continued. But the brother was neither beaten nor broken. Listen to how this decent, supremely wronged man evaluated his experience. In 1961, he told Jim Forman:

"Anything I've said about the rights of man I believed then and I believe now. I have not changed . . . I've been a doctor. I've practiced medicine in this county for nine years. I've now been without my license for two years. I've been a convict in a state penitentiary. I've been an exile from home. And it hasn't changed me. . . . The community's made me feel good . . . most people think of what I did as a sacrifice. . . . Well, I think we all should sacrifice something, all of us. . . .

I think most people, black and white, know it was a frame-up. . . . Surely, I think I must do my part. I don't think I'll ever get through doing my part."

I never had the honor of meeting Dr. Albert Perry, but I cherish the utmost respect and admiration for the brother's spirit. But still, nobody has ever been made to pay for what was done to him so long ago. Even now, someone should still be made to pay.

While the railroading of Dr. Perry was still going on, a series of unrelated racial incidents brought Robert Williams his first notoriety in the national media and his (first) suspension by the NAACP leadership.

First came the infamous—or world-famous—"kissing case." Boy, talk about showing your worst face to the world. At the time I was a junior in high school. I well remember the surge of absolute outrage that swept the black community when this story broke. It was every bit as intense as the response to the acquittal of Emmett Till's murderers in Mississippi had been a few years earlier. Here's what went down.

One evening in October 1958 in Monroe, a young girl [*seven years old*] mentioned to her parents that in the course of playing "house" she had either kissed or been kissed by one of her little playmates. I have no idea what this child could have thought as she watched her father storm out of the house, shotgun in hand, in search of the alleged kisser. Or when she saw him joined in this undertaking by a posse of similarly armed

neighbors. Or at hearing her mother declare to the press that she would have killed the boy herself had she the chance. Providentially, before any of these wrathful vigilantes found him, the kisser [*David "Fuzzy" Simpson, aged seven*] and his accomplice [*James Hanover Thompson, aged nine*] were arrested by the Monroe police. These perpetrators would spend the next six months in juvenile jail.

Upon their arrest, the boys' mothers—both of them domestic workers—appealed to Robert Williams for assistance. He notified the NAACP and asked them to intercede on the boys' behalf. However, a week later, when they were tried, convicted, and remanded to reform school, the boys had no legal representation present. The sentencing judge [*one J. Hampton Price, juvenile court judge*] kindly reassured the mothers that with good behavior the boys might be released before their twenty-first birthdays.

Later, once the story broke nationally and after Robert Williams had traveled to New York to further publicize the outrage, the NAACP retained Attorney Conrad Lynn to represent the boys. They had by now been in juvenile jail nearly three months, during which time their mothers had not been permitted to see them.

Then the incident became an international embarrassment after the story ran in the European press. International committees were formed. Prominent foreigners uttered denouncements. Petitions from thousands of indignant Europeans reached the White House. The North Carolina attorney general is reported to have publicly complained that he might be forced to release the boys because of the "propaganda." Whatever the reason, after they had spent some six months in jail, the state quietly released the two boys (pint-size sexual predators?). Neither explanation nor apology was given. Again, Bro Williams had taken the country to the court of international opinion. Also an important precedent had been set: the NAACP, however belatedly, had taken its first "sex" case.

The next year (1959) came three incidents in rapid succession, which broke the proverbial camel's back. A black woman working in a hotel was kicked down a flight of stairs by a guest. In a new spirit of militancy, the sister pressed charges. Shortly thereafter a mentally impaired black man [*James Mobley*] was arrested for the attempted rape of a white woman. Mobley was brain damaged after being injured in a workplace accident.

Next, a white man [*Louis Medlin*] was arrested and charged similarly: with attempted rape. Except that this victim was black. That the white man was even arrested is in itself interesting. That the woman was six months pregnant might have had something to do with it. The man had entered her house and attacked her in the presence of her son. He then pursued her into the yard, where the attack was witnessed by a white neighbor, willing to testify. Perhaps not least, though, the anger in the black community was so intense that Williams had been hard-pressed to

prevail on his men not to go after the alleged attacker in force. Whatever the reasons, charges were preferred.

"Since he's been charged," Williams is reported to have argued to his troops, "we must at least give the courts a chance."

However, all three trials concluded within days of each other with predictable results. The hotel guest who had kicked the black woman down the stairs walked. The brain-damaged black man, convicted and jailed. Within hours that same afternoon, the white man [*Medlin*] was cleared of all charges.

Having counseled his followers to give the system the benefit of the doubt, perhaps Williams felt particularly ill-used, even betrayed. In context, his statement from the steps of the court seemed—to me and my friends in the movement—both logical and perfectly justified. Not at all unreasonable. He said, in part:

"If we cannot take those who do us injustice before the court, it becomes necessary to punish them ourselves. . . . We cannot rely on the law. We can get no justice under the present system. . . . Since the federal government will not halt lynching in the South, and since the so-called courts lynch our people legally, if it becomes necessary to stop lynching with lynching, then we must be willing to resort to that measure. We must meet violence with violence."

The media coverage, predictably, was sensational and essentially devoid of context. Myself, I had no problem with Bro Williams's position then and I have no problem with it now. We come from a long line of patient people, but inevitably there comes a point . . . Among my peers in the movement, as for a great many in the African nation, Brother Williams had simply been stating forthrightly what we all were feeling. We may not have adopted his position on self-defense then, but within the ranks of the young movement was a great deal of sympathy for it. Not so, however, from the NAACP leadership, which promptly engineered Williams's suspension. I believe they would have expelled him if the rank and file would have gone along. Anyway, once the suspension was up, his people immediately reelected him.

By the time I met up with Paul Dietrich and Bill Mahoney that fall (1961), Robert Williams had become a hunted fugitive and taken political asylum in Cuba. The triggering event had happened while they were in Monroe, at the very moment they were being rescued from the mob at the courthouse by Williams' men.

News of the mob had spread through the city and surrounding black communities. And as is usually the case, the news was well attended by rumor: a Freedom Rider had been killed. The demonstrators had been mauled. Injuries and deaths had occurred. An angry crowd of black

men, many armed, had gathered around the Williams home. He had just about succeeded in calming and dispersing the crowd when a car driven by a white couple blundered onto the scene. In his version, he took the frightened couple into his house for their own safety because the crowd was angry and volatile. After about an hour they drove away. The couple later claimed they had been detained at gunpoint. The government charged that Williams had held them "as hostages." There's no question that guns were present at the scene, but Williams insists they were never menaced or coerced, and that once the crowd dispersed, the couple had left of their own free will.

Howsoever, Williams, his wife, and Mae Mallory, a sister from New York, became fugitives. Bro Williams would spend ten years in exile in Cuba, then China and Tanzania, before returning to America in 1970. All of which served to invest his name with the patina of legend.

So there I was in the summer of 1961 with the generals in Nashville in the middle of the debate over the future of the movement. Trying to think through the next stage of our struggle amidst everything that was happening. But of course it wasn't all theoretical debate. We were, after all, activists, so we just had to have an action project. The Nashville leadership obligingly came up with one. At a large supermarket on the edge of the African community, the shoppers were almost completely African, but none of our people were employed there. Reportedly, the staff didn't always show respect or courtesy to the shoppers. So this store was a natural target. As soon as the sessions ended in the afternoon, we'd throw up one of those Don't Shop Where You Can't Work picket lines.

A few of the NAG brothers were on the line—Dion Diamond, John Moody, Reggie Robinson, and I'm not sure who all else from D.C. may have come by. But, apparently, our attitude and presence were noticeably different from those of the Nashville core group. Though nonviolent, we weren't *exactly* passive in the way we carried ourselves, especially the sharp-tongued Dion. Other young people and adults from the community were beginning to come out on the line, and they, unlike the leadership, hadn't had the rigorous training in Gandhian philosophy the Reverend Lawson had been offering for almost two years.

Crowds of white hecklers began to gather every evening. When these whites would shout threats and racist insults, the new folks would tend to stare them down or even answer in kind. But technically we were maintaining nonviolence on the line.

Dion and I spent a lot of time together. We were staying in a little African-owned hotel close to the Fisk campus. Between the hotel and the campus was a small movie theater, also African-owned. We passed it every evening. The sister taking the tickets was strikingly beautiful. A young sis-

ter, our age or younger, she was sooo fine. A radiant, warm smile, velvety black skin, and a soft, deep voice with slow, musical Southern cadences. And there she was every evening when we passed.

We noticed her. She noticed us. Dion and I eventually got to know her. We'd tease her just to see her smile and hear the music of her laugh. Dion, being Dion, got competitive.

"Yo, man. The sister digs me, man. It's *me* she smiling at. Ain't that right, sister?"

"Oh, mah sister," I'd say, "have mercy. Don't hurt this fool. Leave him in ignorance. Let it be our little secret."

She'd smile and pretend to be embarrassed, unable to choose between "two such fine gen'lmen."

Then a group of brothers off the corner started to mutter. They it seems had eyes for the sister too. The usual American stupidity. Turf and territory. Attack any stranger coming into town rather than, as said in Africa, welcoming the stranger from another village. These youths got a little bolder every evening.

"Dion," I warned, "them boys getting ready to touch us."

"That's only 'cause they don't know us, man. Once we tell them who we are, they ain't gon' touch us. You'll see." He brushed it off.

So . . . one night I'm rapping serious to the sister, hoping to get a date, when the block boys came up and mumbled a bit rough. So I told them, look, I know you wondering where I came from. What I'm doing here an' like that. Well, I'm from New York. You know we ain't got none a' this segregation (expletive) in New York. Yet here I am fighting these crackers and the po-lice. An' y'all who live here ain't doing squat. But it's *me* you wanna fight. Uh, uh, uh. Why me and not Mr. Charlie?"

That stopped them short.

"Y'all the ones down there at the store?"

"Yeah, we the ones down there."

"W'ell, you know, we be up for that. Excep' one thang, man. We don't go for none a' that nonviolence stuff. Y'know?"

Dion had come up and was listening.

"Hey, Stokely," he whispers, "let's organize these brothers." So the conversation begun. Finally we told them. Well, you don't *have* to practice nonviolence. We ain't goin' ask everybody to be nonviolent. *We* are nonviolent. That's our choice, but you ain't gotta be, so long as you find a way to struggle. That's all. Nonviolence is hard, it ain't for everybody. But the fight is everybody's. You don't have to do what we do. As long as you fight. We're not gonna tell you *how* to fight, as long as you do. Everybody's gotta be in the fight.

So the brothers began to talk and to organize themselves. When we saw them, they'd ask about the demonstrations and keep saying how they

wanted to do something. We said, "You gotta do what you the spirit say do." After that, the vibes on that block changed. The young lady in the booth told me they'd even started to speak up for me. She said they told her, "He's a real down brother, girl. You need to check this brother out."

Anyway, a few days later—a Friday evening I think—we were picketing and the crowd was large, loud, and real hostile. Threats, insults, very loud. And a lot more police than usual. But the cops were just standing around "a-watching an' beholding" as Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer would say. But doing squat while the crowd got louder and bolder. You could feel that something was fixin' to happen.

The ringleader was one big, *loud* ole boy who had everything evil to say. Each time I'd pass by I'd look dead into his eyes and just grin at him. A special nonviolent picket-line grin I'd developed for the Nazis in D.C. Then, I'm passing in front of the store window when I sense in my peripheral vision a shape bearing down fast. I start to move away while turning to see. Before I can turn, he charges into me and slams a forearm upside my head. I staggered, thrown back by the force. As I fell, my legs flew up like a scissors kick in soccer, and my boots shattered the plate-glass window. Boom. As I hit the ground, I rolled away as sheets of glass came crashing down where I'd been lying.

The whites started pointing at me and yelling, "He did it. He ain't non-violent." The hoods rushed down on us followed by the cops, making arrests. Of course, you know who got arrested. Just as the police van was beginning to move, pandemonium broke out. There was an entirely new sound. I looked back and saw cops and white folk scurrying around, dodging bricks and bottles. The mob scattering in panic.

Turns out it was the young brothers from the corner. Apparently they'd found their own way to struggle. When the brothers saw us arrested and being thrown around by the cops, they came down throwing bricks and bottles and whatever else they'd stockpiled.

While we were being booked, John Lewis and some of the Nashville leadership went off on me about the window. Dion and others pointed out that I'd done nothing, merely nonviolently allowed the assailant to knock me down and into the glass. Somehow, Dion and I were designated "troublemakers" and put in the same cell. According to the cops, we were "leaders of the disturbance." How they arrived at that I didn't understand. Probably because of the window and Dion's irrepressible mouth. He simply would not be cowed. Dion's fearlessness would soon give me courage.

I've had a lot of experience in jails since this time. But this one? Whoa, it was unforgettable. This one was very, very strange.

We're in the cell, unable to get to sleep. About two o'clock in the morning we hear footsteps approaching. I turn over to see a young white cop

staring at us. He's holding a pump-action shotgun, which he loads. As he does this, he's staring at us and cursing. Dion and I exchange glances. Now what?

"So you the two _____ little sons of bitches who started this, huh? Wal, tonight you some dead niggers. I'ma kill yore black _____."

He cocks the gun, cursing all the while. His eyes are bloodshot and staring as he moves the gun back and forth, first on me, then on Dion.

We are frozen. Dion in one corner of the cell, me in the other. The gun swings from one to the other. The cop is ranting and cussing. I'm stiff as a board trying to watch the guy's eyes, his trigger finger, and the yawning muzzle of the shotgun at the same time. I watch as it swings away and back over to Dion. Then I hear Dion's mouth. I cannot believe my ears.

"Come on, you cracker so-and-so, shoot. Pull the damn trigger. Ain't nobody scared of you. Shoot. I'm ready to die if you bad enough. Shoot, white man. Do it." Dion just goes off, and as I see from the corner of my eyes, *he's steadily advancing on the gun*. A veritable torrent of language flowing out of his mouth, defiant, challenging, nonstop language. Talk about putting me through changes. One minute I'm sure I'm dead, the next I'm absolutely certain that I've gone out of my mind. I can't believe Dion. I remember thinking, "F' God's sake, Dion, shut up. Please. This man's drunk. He's crazy. You fixing to get us killed, Dion."

The cop stares at Dion, begins to tremble, and swings the gun back over to my corner. What could I do? Having no choice, I start up too.

"Yeah, cracker, go ahead. Pull the _____ trigger. We ready to die. Are you? Pull the trigger."

The policeman really started to shake then. Which was, if anything, worse. Now two voices are coming at him. Silently he lowers the weapon, turns, and walks away. I sink down on my bunk, listening to the footsteps recede. I can't describe the range of emotions. Fear. Anger. Disbelief. Relief, then exultation, then anger again. At Dion. I will not repeat exactly what my first words to him were—in effect, Dion, you crazed so-and-so . . . that's my life you messing with. You understand that your crazy self damn near got us killed?

"Me," said Dion. "Me crazy? Negro, we alive, ain't we? Did he pull the trigger? Boy, you should be kissing my feet for saving yo' shiftless life. Best you never forget this, Negro. When in doubt, jes' follow me. Always follow the kid."

For some reason, I found myself laughing. "You de man, bro, I'ma follow you. I'ma follow you."

Crazy-assed Dion Diamond.

• • •

As we got out of jail, there was a big meeting at which the Reverend James Lawson presided. A mass meeting of just movement people, in his church in Nashville. It seems that just about everyone was there. The point of this heavy, heavy meeting, as we soon discovered, was to try Dion and me for causing the violence at the demonstration. Both of us, but especially me, even though Dion had had a bigger mouth in organizing the brothers off the block.

It was all very solemn. A real tribunal. John Lewis was the most outspoken, but the entire Nashville leadership was quite vocal. They were just calling me out by name. Very stern lectures. There was even talk of expelling me from the nonviolent movement. *That* got my attention. Hey, now, this be serious, Jack.

I sat quietly, trying my best to look calm. But my mind was racing, organizing my defense. Actually *expelled* from our people's struggle? I was worried. I mean really nervous. I said nothing, trying my best not to show how utterly wretched I felt. So miserable in fact that it never even occurred to me to question whether this group even had the right to expel me. I thought that if these guys who I respected so much, this splendid new family, were to decide they wouldn't have me, then what could I say? I knew I'd continue to struggle, but with whom? I never stopped to think that NAG was probably too ornery to let anyone else expel one of us. They'd probably take me back.

So I had a bad couple of hours. Twenty years old and expelled from the first movement I'd found that really touched my soul? I prepared my defense and waited.

But slowly, oh so slowly, the tone of the meeting began to swing when SNCC people from the other cities and the younger people began to speak up.

"Listen, yo," they began to say, "we really don't have the right to tell the whole community how they must fight."

"Yeah. We can use nonviolence as our means, but that's only us. If other folks want to use other means, should we, can we stop them? That's elitist."

"Maybe, but on our demonstrations we can."

Wow. My hopes began to revive as different voices began to be heard. I could feel the kangaroo court atmosphere gradually lightening.

Then ol' Freddie Leonard jumped to his feet.

"Hey. The fact is a lot of us agree with Stokely. In fact, we *wanted* to throw some bricks and bottles too. We getting real tired of our mamas being insulted and our heads being whapped. Tha's right." There was a chorus of *Ahmens* and *Ride ons*.

Finally, the Reverend Mr. Lawson adjourned the meeting. I think that

when he and John Lewis saw that the sentiment of the meeting had changed and seemed about to challenge the principles of total nonviolence, they forgot about condemning me. They just adjourned the meeting and forgot about it. If memory serves, that was about the end of it.

But I learned a lot. Naturally, I was most relieved. And I want to make something clear, I had no resentment toward either the Reverend Mr. Lawson or John. I mean, you simply had to respect their courage and their principles, even if you didn't embrace them all quite so absolutely. And the incident taught a valuable lesson that I've always made a point to observe. When you're involved in action with another group on their turf, you have to be absolutely sensitive to their political discipline and values. You've got to. Got to. Unless prepared to do that, don't become involved. Absolutely. I've been guided by this principle ever since.

While we were in Nashville that August, something happened in Atlanta. A small thing, quite unremarkable. A serious, quiet-spoken, serious, Harvard-educated young teacher from New York got on a bus for Cleveland, Mississippi. Robert Parris Moses was accepting an invitation from a remarkable man named Amzie Moore to come into Mississippi to work on voter registration. The only defense Bob carried with him was a direct number to the civil rights Division of the Justice Department. In undertaking this little trip Bob was going against the conventional wisdom of the older civil rights groups. Mississippi was, they felt, a closed society that had either murdered, intimidated, or run off every black who had ever tried to organize resistance there. They told Bob that it was far too dangerous and primitive a place to send organizers into. Not with any hope of survival, much less success.

Bob is reputed to have said (something I can well believe), "But that is only a hypothesis, untested. Someone has to test it. That's the scientific method." So he went in alone. Bob not only tested the hypothesis and survived. He succeeded in building one of the most dramatic grassroots, populist organizations in recent American political history.

When the Nashville seminar broke up, Reggie Robinson and Chuck McDew would go to join Bob. I was quite torn, but promises to my family prevailed. I headed north for my sophomore year at Howard.

To School or Not to School

Much was pulling me back to Howard that fall. When I got back from Nashville, I'd again reassured my father that, whatever happened in the movement, I'd first finish school. Besides, I relished the atmosphere of intellectual ferment on campus. True, I was still wrestling with the career question: medicine or something else, politics? But I enjoyed some of my courses, respected many of my professors, and really enjoyed the Caribbean and African friends I was making. Most of all I really looked forward to hooking up with the NAG circle and catching up with movement news. Now a sophomore and a movement "veteran" I was a very different person from the entering freshman of a year ago. I'd "been down into the South," done hard time in jail, and had stories of my own to tell. Besides, and very important, there was that self-possessed young lady from Tougaloo who had seemed to stay on my mind all summer . . . So there was a lot to engage me at Howard. And yet . . .

During that first semester my attention was seriously divided. Bob Moses, whom I was yet to meet, was in Mississippi in a place called Amite County. Two D.C. friends—Reggie Robinson (from Baltimore) and Travis Britt (who had led us onto the New Orleans train)—had gone to struggle with him there. Also Dion had stayed south to work for SNCC and Hank (Thomas) was taking the year off for CORE. The front lines of our struggle were in the Deep South. I'd had my first real taste of it and definitely wanted more. But I had promises to keep. So I was back in school, but for how long?

Mary Felice Lovelace seemed as happy to see me again as I was to see her and felt no need to hide it. I always liked that about Mary, she was very direct. Even though she'd stayed on my mind all summer, I found her even more attractive than I'd remembered. Hey, I did find her prettier than I'd remembered, but that isn't what I mean. I'm talking about her manner. She was smart, with a quietness and reserve that could be mistaken for shyness but really was confidence. She was funny and warm and affectionate. But also serious, fiercely loyal, and on matters of principle,

very single-minded. In fact she could be quite stubborn. And she was black and proud of her people.

That fall Mary had a studio course all afternoon on, I believe, Wednesdays. I was free then and ended up spending every Wednesday afternoon holding her paints and handing her brushes and keeping her company while she painted. That way, we got to know each other and soon became inseparable. We were each other's first love, and all during my college years, she was my only love. We remained close until the movement drove us apart and she married John O'Neal. John, also in the arts, was creative director of the Free Southern Theater (a cultural outreach of SNCC) and a funny, really decent brother whom I've always respected.

[Ivanhoe Donaldson, SNCC field secretary:

"I remember Mary and John's wedding. Man, I was never in my life so relieved as when that preacher pronounced them man and wife. A lot of SNCC folk were there and you could feel the nervous tension in that church. My heart stayed in my mouth the entire time. I was absolutely sure that Carmichael and his guys were gonna stage a raid. That any minute he'd come storming up the aisle to snatch Mary. I was so nervous I was almost shaking." (This may be the only time that Ivanhoe has gone on the record as being scared. —EMT)]

Mary's presence was a strong incentive to my staying in school. But even so, it was far from a done deal. That first month I kept wavering with every new report from Amite County.

The first thing I heard was that Bob Moses had had his head busted in the street. When I heard the details of that, my respect for Bob increased. Later we would come to understand that his response to the attack was typical of him.

It had taken him about three weeks to identify five or six brave souls in the community willing to come to a voter registration class. On his way to the meeting he was attacked and his forehead was split open by a black-jack. Bob got up, went home, washed his face, dressed the wound, put on a clean white shirt, then hurried to the meeting. After which he went to the police and proffered criminal charges against his attacker (the sheriff's son-in-law). Of course the cops couldn't believe that a nigger, even a crazy Northern one, would actually bring charges against a white man.

[Bob later explained:

"I know that the people already had excellent reason to be nervous. So if I appeared at the first meeting covered in blood with my head gaping open, that would have been the end of voter registration in that community. I pressed the charges simply to establish that we had that right. And to show that I wasn't going to be intimidated either by the attack or the law."]

When I heard that, I knew that sooner or later I was going to stand alongside this brother in struggle. With each new report, it kept building.

The next news was that Travis, after taking a group to attempt to register, had been beaten unconscious on the courthouse steps in a town called Liberty. My suitcase got packed and unpacked one more time.

Then, a week later, when the next group went, the SNCC worker—John Hardy—was knocked unconscious, pistol-whipped by the registrar while his back was turned. That same week some people fishing in the Big Black River pulled out a sack weighted with stones. Inside the sack was the decomposing corpse of what had once been a black man.

All of this within the first month of Bob's arrival in Amite County. The fate of SNCC's first Mississippi project was clearly hanging in the balance. So why were we in school? Shouldn't we all be heading south to reinforce Bob's hard-pressed troops?

Then, very shortly, the terrorists changed tactics and upped the ante. If you notice, except for the corpse in the river, all the violence had been directed toward the organizers, the "outside agitators." But seeing that SNCC was not intimidated or likely to be driven out, the Klan decided to send a brutal message to the local folk. Mr. Herbert Lee, a respected farmer with whose family Bob had been staying, was murdered in broad daylight and in the presence of witnesses. A member of the NAACP, Mr. Lee was a leader, along with E. W. Steptoe, of the voting drive in Amite County.

It was September, cotton-picking time. Mr. Lee had taken a load of his cotton to be ginned. He was sitting in his truck in a long line of neighborhood farmers, black and white. The killer—E. H. Hurst—a childhood playmate of Mr. Lee's and his next door neighbor, was a state representative and a known Klansman. Hurst got out of his truck, pistol in hand, walked up to Mr. Lee, and after a few words, shot him in the head. The body lay for hours in the dust where it had fallen. That same day a coroner's jury brought back a finding: justifiable homicide. Some black farmers who had been present were coerced to testify that Mr. Lee had threatened Hurst with a tire iron.

There it was, the one thing that Bob had feared the most had become a reality. This was a crucial moment for him and for SNCC. A soul-searching time, a morally and spiritually harrowing time. Bob was willing to risk his own life, but was he prepared to risk the lives of the people he was organizing? "If I hadn't come, those children would have a father tonight," he said. What was our moral responsibility in such situations? It was an issue we in SNCC would have to confront time and again, wrestle with and ultimately resolve.

And where was the federal protection—"voting is a federally protected right"—the government had assured us? A short time later Bob got an unequivocal answer to that question. Here is how it happened.

Louis Allen was a neighboring farmer, a quiet Christian man, not much

involved in the movement. "Ah called mahself keeping out of that mess," he said. He had been at the gin that day, sitting in his truck behind Mr. Lee's. He'd seen the murder. The police had ordered him to say that Mr. Lee had brandished a tire iron. It was a lie, but he had been in fear for his life. But, he said, he was a Christian man and his conscience gave him no peace. It was a sin to tell a lie on the dead. He knew Mr. Lee for a decent and brave man. He respected him. So he was sick at heart for his "false witness." "It was a sin and a shame to slander the dead," Mr. Allen said, "so let the fur fly with the hide. I'm gon tell the truth."

But to whom? Certainly not the local police. So whom? Bob accompanied Mr. Allen to the FBI office in Memphis. They held out no false hopes. If it came to a hearing in Mississippi, they said, they could not protect any witness. Besides, what was the use? No Mississippi jury was going to convict a white politician anyway. Best Mr. Allen keep his mouth shut and learn to live with his conscience.

Which might have been honest. Except that by the time Mr. Allen got home, there were threatening messages: "Nigger, you a dead man. We know where you been." So much for federal protection. Maybe (and I don't for a minute accept that) the feds couldn't protect this honest citizen, but did they have to rat him out? After he was badly beaten by a sheriff's deputy, Mr. Allen abandoned his property and fled the state. A few years later [*January 1964*], he quietly ventured back to complete the sale of his house. He never made it out again. Like his friend Herbert Lee before him, his body was found lying shot to death, in the dust of his front yard. Another early lesson for SNCC. Another moral burden for Bob.

All this during my first semester back. It was not at all clear that I was going to be able to resist the pull of that violent, primitive place. At home over the Christmas break we had another long family discussion. I again agreed to stay the course in school. Which I would do. But, at the end of each academic year, the moment my last exam was turned in, I would be on my way to Mississippi.

We would all receive another important early lesson from a really sweet young brother in the incoming crop of freshmen. A lesson in political survival, the viciousness of my hometown police, and the callousness of the courts.

The young brother's name was Khalid Sayeed. A Moslem out of Harlem (I think Nation of Islam), Khalid would be NAG's first political casualty. When he first started showing up to meetings, this brother really stood out. First of all he looked all of fifteen years old. Then too he always wore a suit and large horn-rimmed glasses like Malcolm's. A quiet, thoughtful brother, he also stood out in NAG because he was so unvaryingly polite and serious, almost formal in his manner.

At first, Khalid'd just show up at meetings, saying little but listening and watching every discussion carefully. If a book or essay was mentioned, Khalid would have it read by next meeting. He took in everything, *evrah thang*. I can still see his serious, expressive eyes behind those glasses turning to each succeeding speaker like someone at a tennis match. I began to sort of look out for the brother, partly because he looked so young, was so serious, and also because he was my homeboy from Harlem.

In fact all we veterans kinda adopted him as a younger brother. From his name and deportment we figured he was from a Muslim family and was at our meetings trying to sort out the different ways one could be a black man in this country. Because, naturally, NAG's confrontational integrationist posture would have been at considerable odds with the Nation's ideology. Whatever the case, Khalid had been a constant, quiet presence at all meetings and volunteered for any mundane task that came up.

Pretty soon he was at all our demonstrations. I recall his being badly gassed with us in Cambridge, Maryland, later on.

Then, at one of our early meetings one year, I think it was the semester after the March on Washington and the Cambridge campaign, someone missed him.

"Hey, someone's missing . . . Where's Khalid?" No one could remember seeing him.

"Dig, man, the brother is Muslim. Could be he's had second thoughts about the movement."

"Maybe he isn't in school. Folks do flunk out, y'know."

"Hey, not Khalid. That brother was seriously booking."

"Well, we gotta check it out."

At the next meeting, someone, I think Courtland Cox, reported, "Khalid's not in school. The brother is in jail. Yeah, that's right, the slammer. Remember those idiots, call themselves militants, who got themselves busted, talking about blowing up the [expletive] Statue of Liberty?"

The meeting seemed in shock. There were groans, shouts, and anguished expressions. Say what? Oh, *hell*. No. Not that sweet little brother, oh, man. But a newspaper clipping outlined this so-called plot. Sure enough, among the arrested was "Khalid Sayeed, student, 18."

People were angry and grieved. At first, our anger was directed mostly against whoever had involved the young brother in this harebrained nonsense. "Man, the [expletive] Statue of Liberty? What the [expletive] was the point of that?"

When the trial opened, that anger only increased, though it changed direction significantly. We were able to follow it because it received prominent, sensationalist front-page coverage in the *Washington Post* and

the *New York Times*. The chief prosecution witness turned out to be the one in the group with the most “militant” rap. Under cross-examination the witness admitted to having supplied the idea, some guns, and the explosives. On the stand at the beginning of his testimony, this Negro identified himself by his “slave name” and occupation: he was a New York City police detective.

The naked entrapment was, even in the *New York Times* report, blatantly obvious. Yet all the accused were convicted and given long sentences, clearly we thought, to “send a message to young black militants.” The detective/provocateur was warmly commended by the judge.

I don’t know what ultimately happened to our young comrade. (Courtland says he thinks he remembers that there was a successful appeal of some kind. I sure hope so.) Nor do I know what happened to that contemptible, conscienceless excuse for a black man, the cop provocateur. But I do know what should have happened to that traitor, were there any justice at all. I think I know the message they intended the case to send to young Africans. It was, however, not the message we took. Just the opposite, in fact. Simply recounting this travesty I can again feel the outrage, the murderous rage that settled on us as that trial unfolded. With us, all they succeeded in doing was creating some embittered black youth. I have never forgotten what it taught me about excessively vocal militancy and police agents in our organization.

At the end of that first semester there was a meeting—in Atlanta, I think—and some folk from NAG went. But our family always spent that holiday together so I went home, despite the thoughts of Mississippi swirling in my head.

When I returned to school after the Christmas break, I don’t think I had even finished unpacking my mother’s ironing when Pride, an African down the hall, called me to the phone. I was hoping it was Mary Felice, but Pride said, “No, my brother, I think it’s your mother.” Which seemed unlikely since I had only just got back. “I guess I must have forgotten something at home,” I thought. It was a Sunday evening, January 21, 1962.

I could hear and feel the upset in May Charles’s voice. Finally I heard what she was telling me. My father had died that afternoon.

I could not believe my ears. Adolphus Carmichael was barely forty years old, a wiry, industrious man full of energy and life. His death took everyone completely by surprise. I maintain that he was worn down and driven to an early grave by the pressures of racism and capitalism in this country. My father literally worked himself to death providing for us.

[Mabel Carmichael remembers:

“Stokely had just gone back from the Christmas break. When he came

back for the funeral, he never looked at the body. Never once. 'May Charles,' he said, 'I want to remember our father the way I left him last week.'

"My husband died on a Sunday. He'd worked late that Saturday. Sunday morning he stayed in bed, which for him was unusual. Then he told me he really didn't feel like going to church that morning. Which was very unusual 'cause he was a lay preacher, a real pillar of that little church. He asked me to bring him a glass of water. When I came back, I began to laugh and tease him.

"His mother had been a very good-looking woman and sometimes he'd joke, 'Boy, if I only had my mother's nose, you'd be sorry. These women really wouldn't leave me alone then.' So when I brought him the water, he was lying there looking especially handsome to me. I said, 'You're always saying you wanted to look like Mumah. Well, right now you look just like her.' He smiled, took a sip, and gagged.

"The ambulance was there in a matter of minutes. The EMTs ran in with oxygen. They ran in and put on the mask. One of them said, 'He made it.' I began to pray, 'Oh, thank God. Thank you, thank you, Jesus.' The man looked up at me.

"'Who are you, lady?'

"'I'm his wife. Oh, thank you. Thank you, Jesus.'

"'Oh, lady,' the man said, 'I'm sorry. That's not what I meant.'"]

My father's sudden death was a crisis for us all. *Shock* would be about the best word. Total and unexpected. First, complete surprise and disbelief. A bad dream, not real. Then numbness and disorientation, like sleep-walking.

A shock for all of us, and of course one can't quantify such things, but I think it was hardest for my mother and maybe my baby sister, Janeth (now Nagib), who had particularly glowed and flourished in her father's love.

Besides suffering the loss of her first love and helpmate while still a young woman, my mother now had to face the financial vacuum created by his death. Which she did. She saw that we kept the home our father had made us and that the children were educated. Coming home from the funeral, she told me, "And as for you, go right back to school. That's what your father wanted. I'll manage."

Which finally resolved the matter of school for me. There was no longer a choice: movement or no, I'd have to finish at Howard.

I returned to school and immersed myself in study and the politics of the campus and neighboring states. I think the movement distracted me from brooding too much about my father. I would experience, for example, serious and brutal campaigns in Cambridge, Maryland, and Danville,

Virginia, during my time in school. Carloads of us from NAG would regularly drive south for SNCC meetings.

That semester after my father's death, if memory serves, I took "Introduction to Philosophy" with a brilliant young brother named Conrad Snowden. After that course, I was hooked. I loved the clarity and logic and especially the intellectual discipline—in short, the habits and elegance of thought that was philosophy. So I changed my major. Besides, since I'd already had most of the required science, I figured I could always return to medicine after graduation if I so chose. But the movement would take care of that.

To help the family, I, like most other Howard students, had to work. But even here, in the kinds of work I did, the movement was a factor. Unlike most of the guys, I never drove a cab at night, waited tables, or manned the lobby desk in white apartment buildings.

The National Council of Negro Women had a support system to help activist students stay in school. Ed Brown, Courtland Cox, and I received work scholarships for which we counseled and advised youth in the high schools. I can't remember the name of our school, but I recall it had a basketball court upon its roof.

Also, an important NAG adviser and supporter was a craggy-faced Yankee named Warren Morse. A socialist, Warren was an official in a fast-growing local union (AFSCME) and hired us for his organizing drives. Ed, Courtland, Butch Conn, and I would get up at 5 A.M. and spend a few hours before classes handing out leaflets and talking to workers as the early shift changed. Warren made a point of hiring NAG folk. After I graduated, Phil Hutchings got my job. Warren was our ally and supporter. He has remained a good friend. After he retired to the mountain wilds of Vermont and I was based in Conakry, we continued to correspond regularly.

In yet another unusual work-study. Professor G. Franklin Edwards had designed an experiment/course in which some of us participated for academic credit, and as I recall, some kind of tuition waiver. Professor Edwards had designed a study examining the nature and causes of different kinds of resistance among black youth. On the one hand, the "positive" political resistance presumably represented by the sit-in student types, i.e., us. On the other hand, the self-destructive, antisocial resistance expressed in youth crime and juvenile delinquency. The study entailed, among other things, bringing representatives of both groups together to examine how they related. We met inside the Norton Reformatory, the District's high-security youth jail by another name.

I'm not sure what the study revealed. But Ed, John Harper, Courtland, and I had no difficulty becoming quite friendly with the young "criminals." Especially with one remarkably intelligent young brother, said to be a particularly "vicious" murderer. As far as fundamental attitudes, we

found little that separated us. The real difference, so far as we could see, was just opportunity and education. That's all. I remember that I told a group of those inmates about the "hard mens" in the Mississippi jails. The ones who'd refused to attack us. They liked that story. One of them said, "Don't surprise me, man. I think same thing would happen here too. Dudes may not say it, man, but they dig what you guys be doing. You all be representing us, man."

It was always sad to leave the brothers locked up inside while we headed on back to campus. There but for the grace of God . . .

Despite all this work, the bulk of the financial burden of my education remained on May Charles's shoulders. Only this year did she produce a bunch of Howard receipts and explain how she'd managed to pay them. That year, an uncle of hers in Canada had died leaving \$3,000 to each of his young relatives. May Charles deposited her share toward my education. Each semester, after she'd paid that bill, she would struggle to replenish the little cache before the arrival of the next one.

The Hearts and Minds of the Student Body

Now that it was clear what I'd be doing for the next three years, I turned my attention seriously to campus politics. Since we had no "official" presence on campus, NAG knew that we'd have to infiltrate recognized student organizations. I've already mentioned the newspaper. The real plum, though, because it had money and a degree of legitimacy, was the Liberal Arts Student Council. As "Deep Throat" rasped to the journalist, "Follow the monay," which is what we did.

We targeted the council. Tom Kahn shrewdly got himself elected treasurer. An ally, Vernon Gill, became president with our support, while a couple of other NAG people (Karen House, Jean Wheeler, Muriel Tillinghast) and I were elected to the council.

The idea was to find, as Tim Jenkins before us had done, progressive, politically effective ways to use the student activity fees that the council controlled. One such effort we called Project Awareness.

Project Awareness was certainly the most visible political initiative we were able to launch with the Student Council's resources. In ways we had not anticipated, it also proved one of the most personally affecting to us in NAG.

Tom Kahn, at that time one of our most experienced activists and a shrewd strategist, was treasurer of the council that year. As "floor whip," I got quite good at organizing the votes. So, we got the council's unanimous approval for Project Awareness.

Student Affairs, however, greeted the proposal with suspicion, correctly sensing NAG's fingerprints all over it and consequently assuming subversive intent. Well, they were half-right. But really, nothing was subversive about the project, unless free speech and open discussion of ideas is subversive. Or perhaps it was simply that the proposal included none of the approved and traditional uses of student funds: balls, cotillions, beauty contests, or homecoming parades. It proposed to raise campus awareness of social issues by staging debates between well-known advocates on opposing sides of controversial questions.

We were, of course, careful to couch the proposal in the most high-minded of academic values. Freedom of inquiry, open debate, full discussion, and from the most rigorously *nonpartisan* posture. Hence the debate format.

Even so, the idea completely confounded the bureaucracy. (The new director of Student Affairs, Carl Anderson, was young, more forward-looking, and an honest brother. But, poor guy, his job was to represent to us the views of the old-generation deans, something that he managed to do with impressive integrity.) This, after all, was unfolding at a “Negro college” within a shout of the Capitol and in the dark shadow of McCarthyism. The bureaucrats delayed the proposal, stalled, obfuscated, and eventually bucked it all the way to the President’s Office, where President Nabrit, to his credit, approved it *in principle*.

However, each debate had to be individually approved. Although I can remember no speaker actually being rejected outright, in each instance so many questions were raised, clarifications requested, and such general nervousness evinced, that never until the last minute was it clear whether any program would really happen.

That taught me a lot about the *dependency* in which white America needed to keep our community. Naturally we were enraged. Not at the nervous Nellie administrators, but at the totalitarian political racism of a system that *needed* to impose this kind of dependency, control, and fear upon our elders. I was venting about this to a brother from Alabama in the cafeteria one day. The brother, whose name I think, was Laverne put things in historical perspective for me:

“Hey, mah man, that ain’t so bad. My daddy went to Tuskegee, man. An’ he told us that there the administration warned students *not* to walk around campus *with they books in they hands, man*. Yeah. Check this, brother man. The white folks might not like seeing no niggers with no *books*, you dig? And the faculty? Man, some of them had decent cars? But whenever they had to drive out of town, man, them dudes put on *chauffeur caps*. Tha’s right, chauffeur caps, bro, so the crackers wouldn’t know them fine cars belonged to them. Them cars was too good for black folk. Shoot, mah man, now heah you come talking about *socialism and free speech* an’ ain’t nobody come to lynch yo’ black butt? Or put you out of school? That’s American progress, my brother.” It may have been progress or it may only have been geography.

Hearing stories like that daily, we in NAG vowed that ours would be the *very* last generation of Africans in this country expected to buck dance, shuffle, or Tom for white folks’ approval. Bet on it, the very last. We were real clear on that. And, of course, quite wrong.

Unexpectedly though, our first debate (between two white men on a black campus)—the venerable and respectable socialist Norman Thomas

and an ultraconservative columnist called Fulton Lewis III—proved a huge critical success. “Socialism or Capitalism?” was a sho-nuff public relations coup so far as the administration was concerned. The Washington media, which usually paid scant attention to Howard beyond some occasional patronizing advice, not only came on campus but were full of praise. The press liked the “high intellectual tone” of the debate and Howard’s “courageous affirmation of academic freedom.” Once white folk approved, administrators visibly preened and, for a few days, even smiled warmly at us on campus. Which did not mean, however, any lasting reduction in the level of administrative anxiety and vigilance. When we proposed the debate “Integration or Separation?” between two black radicals—NAG’s political mentor Bayard Rustin and Nation of Islam minister Malcolm X—administrative anxiety resurfaced at full flood.

And, help us, Jesus! Or better help the beleaguered bureaucrats, for next year we proposed to bring a prominent, card-carrying member of the *Communist Party USA* onto campus! The subject was “Is the Soviet Union a Progressive Society?” Herbert Aptheker, radical historian and editor of *Political Affairs*, the theoretical organ of the CP and a historian of black people, was to debate Saul Mendelson, also a historian and a member of the National Committee of the Socialist Party. Whoee! Trouble, blues and trouble.

Talk about anxiety and confusion; as the *Hilltop* made sure everyone knew, “Dr. Aptheker would be the first known Communist to speak at the university under official auspices.” As you can imagine, it wasn’t easy. The poor bureaucrats squirmed and wriggled and bucked it all the way up to President Nabrit, who courageously approved it. *Approved* is almost certainly the wrong word. He allowed it to happen. The dark shadow of McCarthyism was still long in the city.

Tom Kahn immediately congratulated the university “for its far-sighted commitment to academic freedom. Its endorsement of the right of students to hear a diversity of views places Howard in a category with Harvard, Oberlin, Antioch, and other top schools that have traditionally been havens of free speech and open inquiry.” Yeah. Well. But those were private schools, not a black institution under the thumb of every jackleg know-nothing Dixiecrat demagogue. President Nabrit was a brave and principled man, but his momma didn’t raise no fool. His response to Tom’s encomium was a masterpiece of Washington-speak. To wit:

“This is something that *Howard* is not participating in. However, we would be interested to see what develops. These things require much thought and an involvement of many factors. *Howard* has no position on the matter and neither do I.” Be interesting to decode that, but bottom line: the debate went forward. One other person stands out. Professor Emmett Dorsey, head of the Government Department. For both con-

roversial debates—the Aptheker and the Malcolm X—when everyone else was running for cover, Professor Dorsey agreed to be our moderator.

The Malcolm/Bayard debate has, of course, now become legendary. To this very day, whenever—and wherever—I meet people who were at Howard with us, that is what they seem to remember first. Just a few years ago, party business took me to Nigeria. I needed transportation in a small town in the east. A middle-aged professor gave me a ride.

“Bro Ture,” he said shyly. “Don’t you remember me? I marched with you in Washington. I was at Howard.” Truthfully, I didn’t remember the brother. Then his face lit up and he smiled. “I’ll never forget,” he said, “the night you guys brought Malcolm X to campus.” Neither have I. And I’ve had similar conversations with Howardites I’ve met all over the African world—Jamaica, Trinidad, Ghana—over the years.

At that important time for us in NAG, Bayard was very much a real presence, a political mentor. We admired his freewheeling activist spirit, his radical tenacity and resourcefulness under pressure. And his tactical dexterity and debating skill as a public speaker. At that time we also accepted his analysis of the movement—essentially a socialist critique calling for a united front among American progressives, particularly the labor movement and the black struggle. (Later, of course, we would have serious ideological and tactical disagreements, but even in our disagreements I’ve always respected Bayard’s long-term commitment to struggle.) Bayard’s was radically different from Malcolm’s public position at that time, and I think we expected Bayard to win the debate hands down. What actually happened was different and instructive.

Project Awareness was NAG’s only *official* public project, funded and approved by the university. So it had, as we intended, a visible effect and presence in university life, but its unintended effect on us in NAG was even greater. To understand this, one must understand something else about the realities of the time as it affected us young Africans, and not only at Howard.

Then as now, if you were young and black (forget gifted) in this country, you were always looking for honorable terms to define yourself and your relationship to the society. What in this “white republic” truly represented you? With what or whom could you identify? And where did one look to find them? If one did not find these figures and values within one’s immediate circles—family, friends, school, or church—you were not going to find them anywhere else, certainly not in the public media. Until the movement came along, we Africans—unless athletes or musicians—were rarely to be seen, except on the local news being accused of crimes. (I’m constantly being told there’s been great progress made, but from

what I've recently seen of the U.S. media, you coulda fooled me. Must be a different definition of progress.)

Back then when an African appeared in the programming, it was usually one stereotype or the other: a servant, a grinning clown, a buxom Aunt Jemima. Occasionally a responsible Negro spokesman—a Roy Wilkins or a Whitney Young—might make an appearance. But whatever he, and it was invariably a he, had to say would be addressed to the sensibilities and expectations of the white establishment—corporate and political—never to us. It was a kind of preemptive self-censoring. Which is why Bro Malcolm could make such a good rhetorical living dogging these “so-called Negro leaders,” as he called them.

So our generation never expected to find much that represented what Dr. Du Bois had called “our spiritual strivings” in the American media. The exclusion of racial minorities generally, and militant and intelligent black voices in particular, was near total. We used to say in NAG, “A free black mind is a concealed weapon.” And someone would always add, “Yeah, an’ the media going make darn sure it *stay* concealed too.”

This exclusion was so complete that *Jet* magazine even ran a small weekly column alerting Africans to every TV program that was going to show a black face, any black face, that spoke a single line or sang a song. It was usually a short column.

But then there was sport.

Twice a season when the Washington Redskins played the Cleveland Browns, the dorm TV room was jam-packed, and not because of the color symbolism of the teams’ names either. And *evrah-black-body*, no matter where he came from, was a Cleveland fan. Why? Because of the peerless, the incredible, the transcendent Jim Brown. An African who was so absolutely and undeniably superior in what he did that even the racist press called him “superstar.” And besides which, beyond athletic dominance, Bro Brown was a socially conscious, outspoken black man.

But in this media-imposed white curtain, there were two notable breakthroughs. Whenever *Jet* gave a heads-up that either of two young black men would be on, you had to push and wedge your way into the TV room. Standing room only, bro. And James Baldwin and Malcolm X (peace be unto them) never disappointed us. Clearly, especially as you look at the procession of grinning, styling, empty, obscenity-spewing black faces merchandising commodities on the media today, sometimes less can indeed be more.

Even though Jimmy and Malcolm, superficially at any rate, appeared dramatically opposed in their messages—which come to think of it was probably the reason they were on TV in the first place—they were important to us for the same simple reason. Unlike the “responsible” spokesmen, unable or unwilling to risk offense to white patrons whose support

they hoped to win, Malcolm and Jimmy were free black men. They spoke the truth as they saw it. They never apologized for us. They attacked, eloquently, every demeaning definition imposed on our people. They made no concession to racist arrogance or ignorance. They never backed down. And they took no prisoners.

Clearly, obviously, and demonstrably smarter than their white interlocutors, they refused to play Mr. Bones or Mr. Tambo,* but took them to school, put them under heavy manners, and instructed them sharply and sometimes, much to our delight, painfully. In the dormitories at Howard—and I'm certain at other black colleges—young Africans of our generation had our attitudes informed by their examples.

I don't know if these two brothers ever fully understood just how much they meant, how crucially important, how painfully necessary, their kind of bold representation in those times was for our age set. I certainly hope they did.

We never tired of watching them. Well, y'know, they weren't on that frequently, so every time was an event. And whatever the program or setting, the scenario was always the same. Either a media "personality" or a collection of them, all white and by their own definition experts on everything. Certainly more intelligent, better informed, and more sophisticated than their "Negro" guest, whom they fully intended to instruct and lecture on the realities of the "American race problem," official version. Their condescension and smugness would be palpable . . . at first.

Then of course came the show we had all gathered to see and come to expect: the ambush and dismemberment. The visible wilting and melting away of their arrogance as Jimmy or Malcolm carved up and demolished the edifice of unexamined clichés, platitudes, and evasions by which they pretended to describe racial realities in the country. This rarely failed to happen. And what was sweetest about it was this: the more supercilious the host, the more satisfying was his public discomfiture on national TV. Hey, what is going on here? This is not, repeat, is not *happening*. Why, this ungrateful burr-head never even went to college. Here, I put this (expletive) darkie on TV and this is the thanks I get?

Two different things were going on. The first was an illustration of two observations Jimmy Baldwin had made when he came to talk to us at Howard. "Black Americans have the great advantage of never having believed the collections of myths to which white Americans cling." And: "White Southerners delude themselves that they know the Negro. Nothing could be further from the truth. Negroes, on the other hand, know white people very well because we have had to observe them very carefully. Our very lives depended on it."

*Stock buffoons from blackface minstrelsy.

The other factor was the abiding superficiality of the media “experts on everything,” who had, before the show, most likely devoted all of fifteen minutes of thought to the issue of race. Then they would presume to lecture highly intelligent black men who on those questions were living experts, having confronted, analyzed, and reflected on racism their entire lives. So what could you expect? Had it been a boxing match, any competent referee would have declared “no contest” and stopped the carnage. But we ate it up, Jack. Yes, we did.

Project Awareness introduced us not only to Jimmy and Malcolm, but also to other prominent artistic, intellectual, and activist figures from the older generation. I’m talking now about folks like Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, John O. Killens, and Ossie Davis. The kind of folk you respected greatly but never imagined you’d ever get a chance to meet.

What was surprising about this was that without exception these accomplished elders seemed glad to meet *us*. They seemed to approve of what we were doing, to take us seriously and even to respect us, or at least what we, as “sit-in students,” represented to them. On occasion, much to our embarrassment (and barely concealed pleasure), one of these celebrities might say, on meeting us, something like “Aha. So you are the guys I’ve been reading about, the ones raising so much hell? I’m real proud of you guys.” Something like that.

Well, you can imagine how that made us feel. But happily the *activists*—Jimmy, Harry, Bayard, and Malcolm—never *said* things like that. They *showed* us their care and support. By taking time to talk with us. By their advice and mentoring. By their evident concern: the willingness to raise bail when necessary, to rise to our defense as needed. To us the value of this support across generations was beyond measure. So whenever I meet students, any young people really, who are serious about struggle, I always try to do likewise. To advise, strengthen, and encourage them in any way I can.

The debate would be the first time I would be seeing Malcolm X up close. Bayard we already knew. Sometimes when we had a large demonstration, he’d come and afterward always lead a discussion. Sometimes he’d bring an African leader. I recall at the time of Zambian independence Bayard brought the new president, Kenneth Kuanda, whom he introduced by his praise name, the Lion of Zambia, to speak to us in NAG. So we knew Bayard well. But Malcolm, the racist demagogue regularly demonized all over the white press, who was making his first appearance at Howard, was a real novelty.

We met him when he got to campus. Thelwell interviewed him for the

newspaper, then brought him over to a little dinner we had organized for our guests.

Upon his appearance in the small dining room the atmosphere abruptly changed. Suddenly the room became totally silent but strangely charged. The clatter of silverware, the hum of conversation, everything just stopped. All heads turned to the door.

There he stood, smiling almost diffidently in the doorway. Tall, slender, his horn-rimmed glasses glinting, the expression of his lean face alert, carrying himself erect, with a formality, a quiet dignity, in his posture, yet beneath it an unmistakable warmth. Without doing a thing for a moment he simply commanded the entire space.

"*Salaam aleikum*, brothers and sisters," he bowed. "Sorry if I'm a little late, but your young editors turned me every which way but loose. They were without mercy."

He politely declined to eat with us, explaining that for religious reasons he ate only one meal each day. He sat a little apart taking cup after cup of black coffee and our endless questions. Malcolm had a *presence*, something you could not miss but neither could you quite name. It was a noticeable life force, an energy field, an aura, a . . . *something* quite unlike that of any leader I'd ever seen until I had the honor of meeting (peace unto him) President Ahmed Sékou Touré. El Comandante Fidel Castro Ruz is a leader who also radiated a similar personal magnetism. Now, Dr. King had great charisma . . . once he started to speak. That was the power of *nommo*, the African spoken word, God's trombone, but before Dr. King unrolled that magnificent voice and revealed the eloquence of his moral force, he could be standing in the room and you might easily not notice him. But if Malcolm or Sékou Touré or Fidel Castro stood completely still and silent in a large, crowded room, you—everybody—knew it, Jack. Yes, you did.

There Malcolm sat, drinking coffee and answering our questions, and with every answer his stock rose, as much because of his manner as his answers. He was unfailingly courteous, treating each questioner and his or her question with wit, care, and a great respect, which put everyone at ease . . . only somewhat at ease, not entirely. Because at the same time he always radiated a ripple of tension, a banked power, and a quality of alert, guarded watchfulness that really was like a great cat's. And everyone present could feel it.

One small but electric moment made an impression on me. The only administrator at the dinner was Dean Patricia Roberts. (Peace be unto her spirit.) That she was there at all tells you why we all admired her. The dean was an attractive lady, close to Malcolm in age. Dean Roberts challenged something Malcolm had said and a sharp, if formally polite

exchange ensued which both seemed to enjoy. Then, Malcolm made a sally, I forget exactly what, and gave the dean a long, challenging look accompanied by his slightly ironic grin. Their eyes locked for an instant. Then Dean Roberts, before she looked away, actually seemed to blush and emit something that sounded suspiciously like a soft giggle.

Dean Roberts was one self-possessed, strong, consummately cool African lady who rose to unprecedented heights in U.S. establishment politics. A career in which she encountered presidents, heads of state, cabinet secretaries, and such other highly placed miscreants. I'll wager none of them ever succeeded in inducing Patricia Roberts Harris to blush and lower her eyes. *Ever*.

The opinion of the overwhelming majority of the audience was that Malcolm won the debate. We were surprised, because as I've said, NAG expected Bayard's position—which we generally shared at that time—to prevail. But it was, no question at all about it, Malcolm's evening—emotionally, rhetorically, and dramatically.

Bayard (peace unto his name) subsequently told his biographer, Jervis Anderson, that he had organized the Howard debate at Malcolm's request. According to Anderson, during a conversation on a Harlem street corner, Malcolm had lamented that although he was being invited to speak at Oxford, Harvard, and other "great" white colleges, Howard, the "capstone of Negro education," had never dared invite him. Bayard allowed as how he could organize a Howard appearance for Malcolm, but (for reasons we know) it would have to be in a debate format.

I'd never heard this version until recently, but it certainly seems to explain a puzzling impression that some of us had at the time.

I can't remember who spoke first. But I do remember Bayard doing two things that were totally uncharacteristic. One, he spoke quickly and almost perfunctorily when his turn came. There was none of his theatricality or his usual fire or for that matter his analytical rigor. In fact, I doubt that he even used all his allotted time. He ran down his usual democratic socialist, integrationist class analysis of the American scene. The reasoning and the logic were there. The passion and fire seemed missing, there were two moments of transcendently Rustinian gamesmanship. Having concluded what seemed a hurried, rather cursory initial presentation, Bayard paused, then fished out and consulted his timepiece. "I believe," he announced, "I should stop heah. Because I am fully cognizant that the ministah has by far the more difficult and untenable argument to construct."

Second, after Malcolm had spoken, Bayard again graciously—but uncharacteristically—conceded his rebuttal time "to the ministah because it seems quite apparent that it is he whom this audience really needs to heah at considerably greater length." Say what? No one has ever seen

Bayard yield time, microphone, or a platform in any debate before—or since, come to think of it.

But this should not in any way detract from the brilliance of Malcolm's performance. Not in the least. On that platform that evening Malcolm was so remarkable that I can say that he won the debate. Clearly. *Clearly*. He "won the debate." However, Malcolm did not "convert" me or anyone else in NAG that evening.

See, if you had to characterize NAG's politics at that stage, you'd have to say we were radical reformists . . . but evolving. We were secular and militantly confrontational within the framework of a nonviolent activism. Our intention? Merely to push, prod, and pester American social practice into greater conformity with the nation's high-minded, much ignored constitutional rhetoric and its "democratic" principles. No more, no less. Being "young and idealistic," we still thought this possible. A hard struggle, yes. A long one, yes. Painful, certainly. But at least . . . possible. Or so we hoped. And definitely worth fighting for. So we did not expect to be converted to some fundamentalist theological worldview and a political and social solution based on racial separation. Notice I said *social*, not *cultural*. So we weren't converted. But I for one certainly learned something of lasting importance from Malcolm's performance that night.

Over the past two and a half years I'd been immersed in much that—inevitably—was informing my view of the world. I'd been exposed to the excitement, the hope, the optimism—and the real problems—of emerging Africa. To a sustained conversation—politically, culturally, intellectually—on blackness. I'd experienced Southern black culture and Howard "genteelity." I'd done time on a Mississippi prison farm and walked many a picket line in hostile country. But intellectually my general political worldview was still anchored in the principles of my high school Marxism, essentially a European theoretical context, albeit a "revolutionary" one.

But what Malcolm demonstrated that night in Crampton Auditorium on the Howard campus was the raw power, the visceral potency, of the grip our unarticulated collective blackness held over us. I'll never forget it. A spotlight picked him out as he strode, slim, erect, immaculately tailored, to the mike on an otherwise darkened stage. When he uttered the traditional Islamic greeting of peace, *salaam aleikum*, the answer came roaring back at him from the center of the hall. "*Wa aleikum as salaam.*"

[On reflection, Ture and I now conclude that the Nation, as was its custom, had brought in a large number of the faithful and occupied the center of the theater. Hence the initial roar. After that, the students were caught up in the general responses from all over the hall. —EMT]

Then Malcolm went into his introduction of himself. I think I remember it exactly after thirty-five years. It was classic theological nationalism.

"*Salaam aleikum*. I come to you in the name of all that is eternal"—pause—"the black man."

This time, the deep roar came from all over the hall, and it was visceral.

"Before you were American, you were black." Roar.

"Before you were Republican . . . you were black." Roar.

"Before you were Democrat . . . you were black." Biggest roar.

After each variation a roar of affirmation. The hairs tingled on the nape of my neck. The audience just erupted around me, I mean *erupted*. It seemed entirely spontaneous, a sound somewhere between a howl and a roar. As if this gathering of young Africans—from the continent, the Caribbean, America—were freed to recognize their oneness, to give loud affirmation to something they were being educated, conditioned really, to suppress and deny: our collective blackness.

Malcolm's talk was, as I recall, well received. He recapitulated his reading of American history with his unsparing indictment of its recurrent racism and brutality. In this, Malcolm's oratorical approach was as simple as it was effective. A single, repeated powerful line of indictment followed by a capsule of historical evidence. To wit:

"The American white man is the world's greatest racist." (Ref: African slavery, Indian genocide, Chinese exclusion, Japanese interment, etc.)

"The American white man is the world's greatest killer." (Ref: Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Plains Indians, police and Klan violence, etc.)

"The American white man is the world's greatest liar." (Ref: Violation of constitutional guarantees, Native American treaties, etc.)

"The American white man . . . world's greatest . . . rapist, thief, deceiver." (You fill in the blanks.)

After which—this one was always sensitive for me—he attacked the "unmanliness" of leaders who would watch white men brutalize their women and children while professing "nonviolence"

"We are nonviolent with those who are nonviolent with us. But we are not nonviolent with those who are not nonviolent with us."

Course, with this, all the brothers in the room who'd never been on our picket lines suddenly found justification for their absence. But it was powerful. I recall being most impressed by the philosophical way he concluded, saying in effect:

"My stand is really the same as that of twenty-two million so-called Negroes. It is not a stand for integration. The stand is that our people want complete freedom, justice, and equality. That is, respect and recognition as human beings. That is the objective of every black [person] in this country.

"Some think that integration will bring this about. There are others who think that separation will bring it about. So integration is not the

objective. Nor is separation the objective. The objective is complete respect as human beings.

"The only difference among so-called Negroes in this country is not in the objective, but in the method through which this objective should be reached."

Obviously those are not Malcolm's exact words on that night. But they are close and they are Malcolm's words [*delivered elsewhere*]. They state the gist of his closing argument at that debate as I remember them. As I recall, upon his conclusion almost the entire room was on its feet, I first among them.

That this message should have been so enthusiastically received by an audience most of whom were being so heavily programmed for "integration" and upward mobility in the American mainstream may have seemed something of a contradiction. But, as Junebug says, "If you don't understand the principle of eternal contradiction, you ain't going understand diddly." Certainly the crowd's response did not prefigure any sudden influx of Howard students into the Nation.

It was simply refreshing for young Africans to hear someone stand up and so fearlessly describe the real America black folks knew and experienced daily. Especially in a setting usually so relentlessly cautious, guarded, and overly sensitive to the delicate sensibilities of the same white ruling class responsible for perpetuating our people's oppression. In fact, I cannot remember the media's response to this debate or if they were even present.

The other program I remember most vividly was during the next academic year, 1963. No debate, but a symposium. This one was no way as controversial, but proved no less profound in what it taught me.

The subject was literature, more precisely, the role of the black writer in struggle. What I hear they call today "the culture wars." Naturally we invited Jimmy and his friend Lorraine Hansberry [*Raisin in the Sun*], actor/playwright Ossie Davis, the novelist John O. Killens, and Ralph Ellison [*Invisible Man*]. Our elder brother, friend, and mentor Professor Sterling Brown agreed to moderate. At the last minute after announcements had gone out, Mr. Ellison sent his regrets. Ms. Hansberry (peace unto her spirit) also was unable to participate, but this was truly for reasons of health. Not too long after that, the sister danced and went to join the ancestors.

There was another capacity audience and the evening had a movement/Howard focus. Jimmy Baldwin was coming off a speaking tour on behalf of CORE, so he was focused on struggle and at the peak of his eloquence. Ossie Davis was a Howard alum whose play *Purlie Victorious*, a comedy on the absurdity of segregation, was just ending a successful

Broadway run. John O. Killens, whose classic novel *Youngblood* was one of my favorites, had a son at Howard who wrote for the *Hilltop*. Killens had also written the screenplay for the movie *Odds Against Tomorrow*, in which Harry Belafonte starred. The tone of the evening's rhetoric was militant and engaged.

Killens: "America is in many ways desperately sick and the Negro is the doctor who might save her. . . . America, I [the Negro writer] am your conscience."

Jimmy Baldwin: "It is the responsibility of the Negro writer to excavate the real history of this country . . . to tell us what really happened to get us where we are now. . . . We must tell the truth till we can no longer bear it."

Again, another great public relations success for the school so far as the white media were concerned. But the most thorough and perceptive coverage came in the *Washington Afro-American*, a weekly then edited by a militant young editor named Chuck Stone.

As our group was leaving the auditorium, a tall figure wearing shades and a trench coat with upturned collar rose from a seat in the last row and started to slip out. Why was this tall brother wearing shades at night?

"Hey, that's Sidney Poitier!" Courtland Cox said.

"Man, you crazy."

But it was. "When I heard that all these cats were going to be together in one place . . . you know I just couldn't miss it" was what he said.

Ed Brown, Courtland, and Butch Conn shared a little apartment on Clifton Place, and somehow—we hadn't presumed to plan anything for such distinguished visitors—we all ended up there. Being D.C., the liquor stores were long closed, but Ed, of course, knew a bootlegger.

Another anonymous drop-in was at the symposium. I never saw him myself but others did, and later Malcolm X confirmed to me that "whenever I hear that this little brother is going to speak in any town where I am, I always make a point of going to listen, because I always learn something." Malcolm made no secret of his admiration for Jimmy Baldwin. "I believe," he once told Jimmy, "that if I am the warrior of this movement, then you are its poet." Whoee, let the church say "Ahmen."

The impromptu gathering afterward was the most memorable part of the evening. Our older writer brothers reasoned with us like family. We glowed, strengthened by their regard and evident concern. And these accomplished elders all seemed so at ease in that small, raggedy student apartment. Remember now, this was November 1963. We had three years of struggle behind us. So was the March on Washington and Dr. King's Dream. John F. Kennedy had recently been gunned down. The national mood was sore, tense, and uncertain, as was our mood. One theme kept recurring from these men of respect. Essentially this: "In our generation we could not do what you are doing. We're glad that you can,

proud that you do. But we worry for you. You young people need to be very, very careful. We ain't asking you to stop, but are you quite sure you really know the things this country is capable of?" Turns out we didn't then, but it wouldn't be long. . . .

The high point of our reasoning came as the sun was rising after we had literally talked the night to death. It fell to Jimmy Baldwin to summarize with his usual clarity.

"Well, here we are, my young brothers and sisters. Here's how matters stand. I, Jimmy Baldwin, as a black writer, must in some way represent you. Now, you didn't elect me, and I didn't ask for it, but here we are. . . . Everything I write will in some way reflect on you. So . . . what do we do? I'll make you a pledge. If you will promise me, your elder brother, that you will never, *ever* accept any of the many derogatory, degrading, and reductive definitions that this society has ready for you, then I, *Jimmy Baldwin, promise you I shall never betray you.*"

There was a brief silence. Then a loud "Yeah." I know most people's eyes had tears in them. I think every one of us there took that pact seriously.

Recently me 'n' Mike Thelwell discussed that moment. Thelwell said, "Y'know, Jimmy was probably the one who took it most seriously. He never betrayed us. You remember this?"

"This" was a newspaper clipping from 1968, five years later. If I'd seen it at the time, I had no recollection. And I think it's something I would certainly have remembered. Black Power was under vicious media fire. Brother Rap was being hounded with "incitement to riot" charges. I had just returned from Africa and had had my passport lifted by the government. I was being mercilessly pilloried in the press for allegedly calling for "revolution." Jimmy was writing from Paris and the headline read, "Baldwin Batting for Carmichael." Brave, loyal Jimmy. I saw immediately how the column recapitulated much of the discussion that night five years earlier.

I first met Stokely Carmichael in the Deep South when he was just another nonviolent kid, marching, talking, and getting his head whipped. Those times now seem as far behind us as the flood, and if those gallant, betrayed boys and girls who were then using their bodies to save a heedless nation have since concluded that the nation is not worth saving, no American has any right to be surprised.

. . . I've never known a Negro who was not obsessed with black power. Those representatives of White Power who are not hopelessly brainwashed will understand that the only way for a black man in America not to be obsessed with the problem of how to control his destiny and protect his home, his women, and his children, is for that black man to become in his

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own mind, that something-less-than-a-man which the Republic—alas—has always considered him . . . and when the black man, whose destiny and identity has always been controlled by others, decides and states that he will reject the identity imposed on him, and control his own destiny, he is talking revolution.

. . . Now I may not always agree with Stokely's views or the ways in which he expresses them. But my agreement or disagreement is absolutely irrelevant. I got his message. Stokely Carmichael, a black man under thirty, is saying to me, a black man over forty-six, that he will not live the life I've lived or be corralled into some of the awful choices I've been forced to make. And he is perfectly right.

Yes, indeed, small, slender James Baldwin was a constant brother, a warrior spirit. He kept the faith with our generation.

Check this. As the struggle developed in the sixties, we began to hear more and more about a "generation gap" in America. As technological developments change the general experience of each generation, that "gap" seems to be widening. But, between my age set and our adults? Sure, there were inevitable "generational" tensions. The usual suspects: differences of style, musical tastes, language, perspective, tactics, and attitudes, yes. But there was a bedrock, a solid platform of understanding and respect. I do not recall or believe that usses were ever *alienated* one generation from the other. There was *never* an unbridgeable gap of understanding and sympathy. To us that was a particular affliction of white America we Africans were happy not to have.

But now, when I listen to our youth and to people my age, I get the impression that this American disease may seriously be threatening our community. I truly hope not. We Africans don't need it and cannot afford to let it happen.

Because my age set, the generation of the sixties, needs desperately to see in our young people the serious commitment to struggle that our elders were happy to recognize and encourage in us. A generation that came of age in struggle and that now commands resources our parents never dreamed of should, and I believe would, embrace—joyfully—and support a coherent, creatively radical movement among our youth. And I know how much our youth, as we were, would be inspired and encouraged if they could feel the support and respect from their adults that we enjoyed. Far too much history needs to be passed on and better understood, and way too many dangerous and crucial new struggles are to be waged, for our generations to be alienated from each other. But, I can see that things are not so clear for youth today, the enemy not so exposed and easily visible. As the Mystic Revelations of Ras Tafari sing:

The enemy is around you
Seeking to devour you.

That's why today's youth, who are no less daring, no less venturesome, and no less interested in our people, our struggle, and our heritage than we were, truly need our guidance and our support. They live in confusing times. We need clarity and each other. Pass it on.

We received a unique political education on that campus "proudly there on hilltop high," as the alma mater phrased it. Certainly not the education my parents had envisioned—think of May Charles going off on poor Mr. Beckenstein back at Science for suggesting that politics was "in my blood"—but nonetheless an invaluable education in the contradictions and ironies of black American politics.

Certain questions, persistent ambivalences, kept coming up in one form or another. Questions that, at first anyway, never seemed to get answered definitively. Some came with the territory of being nineteen years old. Some from being nineteen and an activist. Still others came from being nineteen, activist, and African born in America. And particularly with being that age and of that race in that time.

Only now do I see clearly that one source of these ambiguities was our constantly being told by adults of the unprecedentedness of our generation. So that for us there were at first no models or guidelines. As the movement gathered strength, any fool could see that the society would either have to change seriously or kill us all. That was clear. Whether the society wanted to or not, it would not, could not, remain the same. That too was clear.

But in what ways would it actually change? That was the problem. Real change? Token change? One persistent view we kept hearing: "You young folks will have such *opportunity*. Such interesting opportunities. I envy you all. Many, many more opportunities than we ever had. How I envy you. Now is the time to be young. You are a favored generation."

Yeah. But boil it down to gravy, what did that really mean anyway? That we conform to all the attitudes, values, and style of corporate America? Try for graduate school at Harvard [*Mrs. Carmichael remembers that after leaving Howard, Stokely was offered a full scholarship to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy at that august institution. —EMT*] and hope, assuming that this would really be a viable option, to integrate an otherwise unchanged establishment? Or did one have to continue standing outside, as my grandmother would have said, "pelting stone and flinging rock." Or was there yet a third way, an honorable way, to be "in it but not of it" as Tim Jenkins was proposing?

Some of the age set, those of our peers you never saw on a picket line, took the first path. They buried themselves in the library and positioned themselves to take advantage of opportunities that the movement would open up. Many of them did well for themselves, allegedly proving that “the system works.” But for many of us a whole lot more was seriously wrong with America than the mere fact of our exclusion. Remember the rhetorical question “Who wants to integrate unto a sinking ship?”—i.e., a fundamentally brutish and unjust system? This was the issue, our brother Jimmy would say, “the fearsome conundrum,” that we—all of us in the movement—would have to wrestle with during these years.

The first case involves Dean Patricia Roberts. We respected her even before the Malcolm debate because the year before the debate, Mary Lovelace (the first love of my young manhood) had decided to wear her hair in public as the good Lord made it. This was at least two and a half years before the “Afro style” would sweep the African community. Of course I thought Mary looked absolutely beautiful.

But, those colored Victorian spinster ladies, the dorm mothers? They panicked. There can be no other word for it. Strangely threatened at the sight of a head of natural African hair, they absolutely panicked. And having panicked, eminently respectable, usually motherly ladies become real mean, yard-dawg mean.

“Chile, are you crazy? Don’t even *think* of leaving this dorm with that wild African bush on your head.”

“Girl, best you go put a scarf over that rat’s nest.”

“If your momma know what you’re doing, she’d die of shame.”

“I’ll even give you the money to get it done.”

No, she couldn’t go among “decent people” looking like that. It would disgrace “her family,” “the school,” and “all black folk.” If that crazy girl did not get some sense, there would be nothing for it but to expel her from the dormitory.

Of course, all this did was get Mary mad and the rest of NAG up in arms. Today it seems absurd. It is easy now to laugh at this level of false consciousness and backwardness. But then it was a sho-nuff crisis and a battle of wills.

Even if I hadn’t been in love with Mary, I’d a been angry. But I was in love, and as Ed Brown said, “madder than the preacher when the mule kicked his momma.” I was all for throwing a picket line around the women’s dorm. But mad, really, at whom? At the deepest level it was pathetic. At those suddenly hysterical old ladies so completely alienated from themselves? Helpless captives to an aesthetic imposed by racist arrogance? Most pathetic was that they truly believed they were actually acting in Mary’s best interest. That they were protecting the values and the

precious few hard-won gains of “the better class of Negro people.” Until young Dean Roberts intervened. Both Mary and her Afro stayed in the dorm. After that we regarded the young dean as a strong ally among the bureaucrats.

Sidney Poitier was then America’s first sho-nuff “black matinee idol,” the Denzel Washington of the early sixties. His name meant box office and the brother made a point of only accepting roles that portrayed our people with dignity. Handful though they were, the few black actors of the time who occasionally made it into film—Harry Belafonte, Yaphet Kotto, William Marshall, Woody Strode, Ivan Dixon, later to be joined by Jim Brown—had that principled sense of responsibility. This of course was before the wave of blaxploitation films showed us graphically that not all motion is progress. Particularly for black folks in Hollywood.

Poitier’s movie *Lilies of the Field*, for which he would win an Academy Award, was about to open nationally. Prior to general release a series of showings were scheduled in major cities, the proceeds to benefit the civil rights movement. So naturally NAG was invited to the D.C. fund-raiser in a fancy downtown theater. We could not otherwise have afforded the price. It was a major social event. The star would be in attendance and the liberal establishment—black and white—turned out in all its finery.

A group of us in our jeans were standing in the lobby feeling a trifle uneasy amongst the affluent, elegantly turned out Washington players and wanna-bes. Then in swept Poitier himself surrounded by a crowd of dignitaries, assistants, and media types. When he saw us across the lobby, he stopped, took a second look, pointed at us, broke into that incandescent matinee idol smile, and strode over to hug and greet us, much to the amazement and envy of the assembled dignitaries. We even were a little surprised too. It was an extremely nice gesture. I was impressed that the brother even remembered us from the Malcolm debate. But he was always good that way. The next year he and Belafonte would come to Mississippi to support SNCC’s summer project.

Then, and this is the real story, in comes Dean Roberts, looking fine. She too comes over, and of course, we start to signify.

“Oh, Dean Roberts. Ooh, best-looking lady in the *house*. You looking good, Dean. Sho is good to see you out supporting the movement. Sho hope you keeps on going, one step at a time.”

“Keeps on going? Exactly what’s that supposed to mean, guys?”

“Well, Dean Roberts, progress, yours. Having made it to a respectable movement event like this, with affluent white folk *and* a Hollywood celebrity and all, maybe you’ll make it onto the picket lines one day. There’s demonstrations next weekend in—”

“Come on. You guys know how much I support the struggle. But we

have to make intelligent choices here. Some of us work best from the inside. I am much more valuable to you working where I am than out carrying a sign. You understand that some folk have to stay on the inside, pulling strings, don't you?"

It was a strange moment. We had been teasing, but the dean was serious. I was not sure whether she thought we completely believed her, or even whether she completely believed herself. In Washington, people were always hinting at influence in high places and their quiet work "behind the scenes," which, of course, by its very nature could neither be seen nor verified. I figured this to be more of the same, the usual D.C. bougie cop-out. Besides, what kind of *insider* influence could a mere Howard dean have in the racist beltway politics of the time? We all liked and respected the dean, but we'd heard it all before. So I was skeptical.

Well, as it turns out, I sure was dead-up wrong on that one. I discovered this nine years later when the incoming Carter administration announced its cabinet, and there was our dean, the first African woman cabinet secretary [*Patricia Roberts Harris, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development*].

"Well, well, well," I said. "Looka that. So it wasn't no jive after all, huh? The sister had really been playing some serious, 'hardball insider' politics all along. Obviously with a result like this she had to have been playing tough too. I'm convinced that the dean would have continued to fight hard for our people from the inside. I'm sure of that. But I've often wished we could have talked. So much had happened since that evening in the theater foyer. I've often wondered how the dean (peace be unto her) would have evaluated her choices and what she must have learned and been able to accomplish for our people from her high position on the "inside."

[*A Hilltop report of a demonstration was written a few weeks after the movie preview by NAG leader Muriel Tillinghast. It pointedly mentions "a popular lady administrator who cannot be named" whose presence on the picket line greatly encouraged the Howard women. —EMT*]

One of the memorable experiences that touched on this inside/outside question came later that spring [*March 1963*]. The campus paper had created a brief stir in the D.C. media with a story about a gymnasium under construction on campus. This story would bring the movement squarely onto the placid campus. Big time. Why this should have been the case is interesting and instructive. Consider: The year is 1963. The funds for the gym come from the federal government. The contract is awarded by the General Services Administration. John F. Kennedy is still president for another few months. Brother Bobby is attorney general. The administration, self-proclaimed "leader of the free world," is constantly being embarrassed internationally by evidence of the domestic racism being

turned up by the movement. So much so that they have evolved a formula that is trumpeted daily into Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and into black America. It goes something like this:

"Unfortunately, some *pockets of prejudice* continue to exist in some areas of American society. However, the *official* policy of the U.S. government is one of full democracy and racial inclusion. The federal government is in total and vigorous opposition to all lingering vestiges of racial or religious discrimination in American life. Racial discrimination within all federal institutions is strictly prohibited."

So . . . whatever racist mischief Mississippi states' righters might be up to, one does not expect to encounter racism or even tolerance of racism within the federal government itself, right?

However, what the student newspaper reported was that our new gym was being built at a black school, under federal contract, *by segregated labor*. Of the ten or so local labor unions working there, only three—the carpenters and the laborers—were integrated. The two *laborer* locals were for some unfathomable reason virtually all black. But all the building trades *craft* locals—the ironworkers, steamfitters, sheet-metal, plumbers, and electrical workers unions—in the District and Baltimore were lilywhite.

The *Hilltop* reported that an official of the electrical workers had offered this explanation to the Civil Rights Commission: "Nigras are all afraid of electricity," while a plumbers union spokesman told investigators that "Jews and colored folk don't want to do plumbing work because it's too hard."

We'd all known the story was coming, but I was hot, especially because of my father. It brought back vividly the many bitter conversations I'd listened to between my father and his friends about their experiences in the building trades in New York. So while the racism should have been expected, it was shocking and insulting to encounter it on our campus. *And* under federal auspices.

What made it even worse, if that were possible, was that D.C. was a majority black city. One where the only real industry was the building trades, from which our people were systematically being excluded. The ironies and insults abounded. The *Hilltop* also reported that our administrators had raised the issue in the past, only to be completely "dissed." The paper reported:

University officials told the *Hilltop* that the university had no control over the awarding of contracts for university buildings. The federal government, through the General Services Administration, is responsible for letting the contract and supervising all stages of construction until the finished building is turned over to the school.

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There had been, it was disclosed, numerous meetings between the university and representatives of the unions and contractors in an attempt to correct the situation in university construction programs in the past.

Quite obviously to no avail.

A separate story in the same issue announced the funding of a university project to "improve social conditions" in the rapidly deteriorating surrounding community, where black male unemployment approached 40 percent.

The *Hilltop* editorials took no prisoners:

It is difficult and painful to believe that a situation so antithetical to the professed goals of this institution . . . so utterly subversive of the principles and ideals upon which Howard University is predicated is allowed to continue.

. . . The G.S.A., in awarding this contract as it did, is guilty at best of negligence, at worst of a cynical and cavalier insult to this university and everything it represents. . . .

. . . President Kennedy should know that "sincerity" is indeed subject to proof . . . if within the bureaucracy of his administration . . . there is a policy of "softness" towards segregation he is wasting his time and ours.

The newspaper and the student government sent pained, indignant, but detailed letters to the GSA, the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, and the contractor, and we waited.

Boy, on this issue all the students were hot. Most of their career aspirations were based on the feds following through as promised to open up job opportunities for them on federally funded projects across the nation. The ironies abounded. Almost all of our newspaper's ads came from defense corporations with fat federal contracts proclaiming themselves "equal opportunity employers."

So students were aroused. How could they not be? The hypocrisy was clear. The racism of the unions, clear. The complicity of the federal government, clear. The disrespect for us, the school, our administrators, and black people in general, blatant.

But here's the real irony, for NAG, in purely political terms, it was the perfect issue, and we worked it like a Delta mule. So why didn't we feel triumphant? In this case, Muhammad didn't have to go to the proverbial mountain . . . the mountain had indeed come to Muhammad. Like it or not, the movement had draped itself firmly around Howard's ivory tower. "Dang, y'all done brought that mess right up on campus now, ain't you?" Yes, we had.

• • •

While we waited for a response to our letters to the two federal agencies, mobilization on campus went on. The agencies did not reply to us, but to the media: "they were unaware" . . . "they were investigating," etc. Except that we found a year-old report from the Civil Rights Commission that had clearly documented the racism in the Baltimore/D.C. unions. The Student Council passed a resolution calling for universitywide demonstrations. Vernon Gill, LASC president, sent copies of the resolution to the media and the two federal agencies. We waited.

Then a funny thing happened, which to this day I can still neither explain nor understand. Word came—quietly. I can't remember who brought it but I can remember the lowered tones in which it was delivered. The executive chairman of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity—a black man—would meet with us. Say what? With us? A buncha students? Why? We hadn't sought such a meeting because, truthfully, it hadn't occurred to us. So who was this guy anyway and why did *he* want to see *us*?

We were told that he was "the most powerful black man in the federal government," that's who, Hobart Taylor Jr. A Texas lawyer, he was a protégé of Lyndon Johnson's, "LBJ's eyes and ears" on the committee with responsibility and full authority to enforce compliance on all federal contracts. He had the full support of the vice president, and as the committee's first black chairman, his appointment was proof of the administration's seriousness about ending discrimination on federal contracts. Wow. Impressive.

And he wanted to meet us? But why? Couldn't be that the brother was going to ask us to cool it, could it? Nah. He'd have to be crazy and you didn't become the "most powerful," etc., by being dumb. [*We had yet to encounter Clarence Thomas. —EMT*] So . . . why? It could only be a victory. You know a courtesy, to give us a briefing before the announcement. We should be honored. Think so? Well, what else could it be? But why was the meeting scheduled for 8 P.M.? Well, he a busy, important man.

Now, of course, I understand that it was of a certain genre of Washington meeting—one of those clandestine gatherings that never appear on any official's schedule, but which one reads about years later.

So, full of anticipation and questions, us goes, a group of us. I remember Tom, Mike, Cleve, Ed Brown, Courtland, and I don't know who all else. But we presents ourselves at some massive federal building at exactly 8 P.M. Obviously expected, we're met and whisked inside in no seconds flat, through echoing, deserted corridors of power and into a large, imposing, otherwise empty office, where "the most powerful black man" is sitting at a large desk.

He turns out to be a stocky, open-faced, affable, youngish brother wearing a sharp suit and a welcoming smile. We exchange pleasantries, shake his hand, congratulate him. "Brother Taylor, it's really good to see one of us so well placed," etc. "Yeah, it sho do do mah heart *gude* ta see one a'usses messing in such high cotton," Ed growls at his most folksy. We joke that this may be the most black folk ever to gather in that room. Almost certainly the first all-black meeting there ever. Almost like a building occupation, huh? Mr. Taylor seems relieved that we're smiling when we say that.

And then down to business. We listen for the announcement, which does not come. In fact we can't really understand what the brother is saying. It is not that his language is lawyerish or obscure. Each sentence is clear enough, but oddly oblique, nothing is adding up. But we all get the idea that we are being sent a message. That the brother is clearly trying to tell us something. But what? I even begin to be a little paranoid: "Why is the brother talking so strangely, can the place be bugged?" I find out later that I'm not the only one who had that thought.

Looking back, I now recognize the source of the problem. It was as if two different people—two masks—were talking to us. One being a loyal older brother and a committed black man, the other being the chairman. One trying to show us reality, the other repeating the official line. But by the time he's finished we are thoroughly confused, so we ask directly. It's been over thirty-five years so I can't remember exactly who asked what, but it went like this:

"Okay, Brother Chairman. You are telling us that current federal policy is against discrimination in government contracts, right?"

"Yes, absolutely . . . the executive order . . . oh, yes."

"Great . . . executive order, the policy. But is there the will? This *is* serious, right? I mean, it will be enforced, right?"

"The will? Oh, definitely . . . there *are* people in this administration who are real serious on this. Real serious. Generally speaking, yes."

"Good, good . . . And this is the agency that has that responsibility, and the authority, to enforce the policy?"

"Yeah, uh-huh. We do . . . we have."

"The authority to enforce compliance?"

"That's right. We sure do. Well, theoretically anyway."

Silence.

"*Theoretically?*"

"Theoretically, yes . . . it's complicated . . . there are powerful forces . . . but theoretically, yes . . . statutory authority, yes."

"Okay, brother. Then what about the Howard gym? We got the policy, we got the will, and we got the agency, so . . . ?"

"Well, as you know, that's being investigated."

"Investigated? But that's a matter of record . . . the Civil Rights Commission report . . . do you have any doubt?"

"Doubt? Me? No. I know it, you know it, the government knows it . . . Negroes are excluded. No doubt."

"And that is against policy, right?"

"Right."

"And, you do have the responsibility to enforce policy? I mean, that's your main job, right?"

"Right."

"So . . . will you pull the Howard contract?"

"Well, no . . . *that's* not going to happen."

"But you do have the authority . . . you could . . . I mean, if the facts warranted, you *could* pull a contract, right?"

"Well, theoretically anyway. That would be extreme, though. Complicated . . . there'd be repercussions . . . there are considerations . . . powerful interests . . . important people . . . who'd not be happy."

"But can you at least threaten? Y'know, make some motions, scare them a little?"

"Maybe . . . perhaps . . . we'll see."

"Can I ask this? Has the committee ever . . . ?"

"Intervened? On a contract you mean?" Pause for reflection. "Well, can't recall that it has. Not yet, anyway."

"Why not?"

"As I said, there are some important people who wouldn't be very happy."

And so it went. Round and round it goes, where it stops, nobody knows. Finally, a light shined. So we go back over the territory.

"Just to make sure we understand. You're telling us that government policy prohibits discrimination on federal contracts?"

"Absolutely."

"That the exclusion of Negroes on the Howard contract is not in dispute?"

"Absolutely. On that and every other contract in the District."

"And that you—and this agency—have the responsibility to enforce . . ."

"That's right."

"But that there is nothing you will, can, or intend to do?"

"All of the above . . . at this time."

"Why?"

"Well, there are some very powerful people . . ."

"Powerful people? Who? Where? In the administration?" Slight nod. "The party?" Barely perceptible nod. "In business?" Nod. "Well, who are these people?"

"Let just say, some very powerful people."

We thanked him and left, wondering just why he had called us in in the first place. Somehow, though, no one thought to ask that question.

"Damn, that was weird."

"Wasn't it? Kafkaesque."

"What the hell was it all about?"

"Beats the crap outta me. But, y'know, I think the brother was really trying to tell us something."

"Yeah. I got that feeling too. But what?"

"I kinda somehow feel sorry for the dude, y'know?"

"Sorry? For the most powerful Negro in Washington? Yeah, me too."

"Man, that was some weird. So much for working on the inside, eh?"

"You sure got that right, bro."

Soon though I'd get another slightly different lesson on the subject. We went back to campus to inflate the rhetoric and mobilize the students.

The Student Council president, an ally named Vernon Gill, said that since the feds had failed to "acknowledge or answer letters sent in the name of the Howard student body," the council was calling for a "massive demonstration" at the building site on March 22. Not only that, the Student Council had set up a committee of mobilization, and many fraternities, sororities, and the student councils of all five schools had pledged support. So if there was no reply by March 16, demonstrations would commence on the 22.

All of which was totally unprecedented. This was the *official* student government and a host of recognized student organizations. And the action would be on campus. Consequently, our administrators couldn't deny or finesse Howard student involvement on this one. What would they do? And, more to the point, what would the Kennedy administration do? As the days ticked by, we kept issuing statements. Nothing happened.

At about eleven o'clock on the day of the demonstration, which is supposed to begin at one, a few students are beginning to gather on campus. Thelwell and I are in the newspaper office going over the issues and planning strategy. Along with Gill, both of us are supposed to speak at the rally before the demonstration. NAG has already decided that it will be a dignified, peaceful march for the benefit of the press, not a confrontation. We don't want student "civilians" hurt or arrested. By then, after campaigning all over the South, we considered ourselves "soldiers" in the struggle, or as a song had it, "in the army of the Lord."

Then a phone rings and we are informed that the president's office is looking for us. President Nabrit wishes to see us. The quick-witted editor [*Muriel Pettaway*] who took the call said she would try to find us.

On that campus the president was a remote, lofty presence. Neither of

us had even so much as spoken to him face-to-face before. Uh-uhm. This can't be good. Man, he's going to try to get us to stop. No, he won't, he knows we can't do that now. Yeah, but suppose he *orders* us to? Damn, why don't we just don't go? Say they couldn't find us. We go *after* the demonstration. We can't do that, it's sneaky, we ain't kids, goddamn. Yeah? But why do we have to go *now*? We go *after* the demonstration, it's easier to get forgiveness than permission. You know that. Yeah, but that would be disrespectful. Besides, Nabrit isn't the enemy. We gotta go now. Why would he wait till the last minute? He's smarter than that. He knows that this way we would almost have to defy him. Well, we have no idea what kinds of phone calls he's been getting. Remember, *there are powerful people . . .* and there's always the budget. So we don't go. We gotta. No, we don't. Not now. What if he tells us to fold? He won't. He might. Let's hope he doesn't because we can't. Look, we won't be disrespectful or defiant. We'll be polite but very clear. And take the consequences? What choice do we have?

"Yo, tell the president's secretary we're on our way."

So we put on our game faces and walk across the campus, past where students are beginning to gather. Neither of us have been inside the president's office before. The door to his inner office is closed. The secretary says he's expecting us. We should knock and go in. We pause, look at each other. Thelwell seems to be stifling a sudden grin. What's funny? We knock and open the door.

The president is at his desk, signing letters. We stand there till he looks up. "With you in a minute," he says.

We can read nothing from his face. Then he rises and walks toward us.

"Young men"—he has a husky, Southern voice—"you all done . . . why I think you done jes' right. You done exactly right." He holds out his hand. I take it. Thelwell looks about to faint from relief.

"These folk, shoot. I tell 'em. I keep telling 'em. All this talk about civil rights . . . why it don't mean a dadburn thing as long as a man can't get hisself a decent job to support his family. Hell, y'all done jes' exactly right." Both of us are speechless. A little embarrassed. We just shake his hand and mumble modestly.

"And," he said, "that demonstration y'all planning. I guess you can claim a victory. By now one of these should be waiting for you over in your office. He handed us a document. The letterhead said U.S. Department of Labor.

Washington, D.C., March 27

Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz acted today to require contractors and unions building the gymnasium at Howard University to comply with the nondiscrimination clause of the construction

contract. If they fail to do so, the Secretary said, he will ask the Justice Department to enforce compliance.

... Secretary Wirtz acted in his capacity of Vice Chairman of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity and in accordance with the executive order issued by President Kennedy in 1961.

... we are now convinced that persuasion alone will not produce the action required.

... He referred to attempts to influence contractors and unions to end discrimination at Howard University and in government construction in the District. Investigation, he said, has shown that ... qualified Negroes are available to do such work and to enter craft apprenticeship programs.

The secretary gave the unions ten days to begin compliance or the matter would be referred to the Justice Department.

Walking back across campus, I asked Thelwell. "What were you grinning about ... at the door?"

"You noticed? It was literary. You wouldn't understand."

"Negro, don't be playing that."

"*Invisible Man*. You know, send this Negro a little further."

So we had a rally where about two thousand students showed up. We did what politicians always do. We claimed a victory. The matter was never referred to the Justice Department and no one ever explained to us the changes agreed to. But it was a splendid victory ... on the inside. I believe the electricians may have taken on three Negro apprentices that year.

Mississippi (1961–65): Going Home

They say that freedom is a constant struggle.

When we left Parchman prison in July 1961, many of us knew that we would be coming back. If not to prison, then certainly to the Magnolia State.

We had been learning a lot at Howard: that was our laboratory. We learned even more in NAG: that was our on-the-job training. But Mississippi was my real education and SNCC my alma mater. In black Mississippi I was blessed. Mississippi first taught me the pain and the joy of struggle. It crystallized my politics, opened up my eyes, and taught me how to organize.

SNCC introduced me to the brotherhood of shared danger within bonds of loyalty. Yes, it did. But the struggle in black Mississippi first brought me face-to-face with the best in my people: their patient courage, quiet nobility, and the beauty and power of an enduring culture that had brought them whole through centuries of slavery, poverty, and unspeakable oppression. In meeting them, I would meet the best in myself. Yes, indeed.

In high school I'd read this phrase somewhere: "The South is every Negro's Old Country." I can't recall which famous black writer said that, but at the time I figured it applied only to Africans born in America. Because even folks born in Harlem or Newark would have grown up with their family's Southern stories and memories. Made sense. But of course it had to be different with me. My extended family being Caribbean, our ancestral stories had a calypso rhythm, an island accent, not a blues beat. The South wasn't my old country, so I thought.

So why was I engulfed by an almost nostalgic sense of recognition and homecoming? The place neither looked, sounded, nor really even *felt* like the Trinidad of my childhood, but I sure felt very strongly that I'd come home. I could feel it. But I couldn't *explain* it. It was a gesture, facial

expression, an attitude, a personal style and spirit, and these almost always in older people.

The first time I heard anyone else try to describe that exact feeling of *recognition* was Mrs. Hamer, some years later when she came back from Guinea. And guess what? My second time having that same feeling as strong was four years later when I first was in Guinea myself.

There in the Mississippi Delta's vast, almost eerie flatness of cotton lands; in its small hamlets and rural churches, on its dark, dusty plantation back roads; from its fetid jails and the cattle prods and blackjacks of brutal "po-lices"; in the drive-by shootings and midnight bombings of night-riding Klansmen—I saw the best and worse of which human beings were capable.

When I say I learned a lot in Mississippi, that's the Lord's truth. But you know, the truth is, I probably *unlearned* twice as much—which is just as important, in some ways perhaps more important. So this chapter is not an account of SNCC's Mississippi campaign. That can be found elsewhere. This is more about what I learned and unlearned there and the people from whom I learned it. Because, by the time I would leave Mississippi [*early 1965*], I would be clear on what my life's work was to be. I had discovered what I was—an organizer—and that the movement was my fate.

Greenwood . . . Leflore County . . . the Delta. By the time the school year was over in June 1962, Bob Moses had moved his operation from Amite County into the Delta. One could call Bob's move, as we did, a "strategic withdrawal" or a "tactical relocation." In SNCC we never used the word *retreat*. But, truth be told, Bob and his organizers had sho nuff been run out of SNCC's first Mississippi beachhead down in Amite County. The jailings, beatings, bombings, and finally the murder had, as intended, paralyzed the local community. For the moment nothing more could be accomplished there, so Bob'n them had to move. But we would be back.

Chuck McDew, last one out and locking the Freedom House for the last time, left a note for the Klan, "po-lices," or other interested parties: SNCC DONE SNUCK. But only to resurface in the heart of the place they called the Delta. And this time, SNCC would not be moved. Bob and his troops had learned a thing or three. As they say, experience runs a hard school. Which is how it came about that the new base to which I reported that June 1962 was in the city of Greenwood in the county of Leflore.

The Greenwood SNCC office was four blocks over from the black high school. Which must still have been in session because no sooner had we arrived at the office when a group of high school students came trooping in, all laughing and excited. Soon as they saw us strangers—a carload of us had driven over from Atlanta—the teenagers became shy and fell silent

and wide-eyed. So I went over to talk and ended up with a place to stay. The place that would become my home for the next three years whenever I was there.

I was captured by a rangy, long-legged fourteen-year-old, dark and pretty with smooth, lustrous Wolof skin, an animated expression, and huge, expressive eyes. Miss June Johnson decided that I was to stay with her family and nowhere else. When I met the family, I discovered that her mom, Mrs. Lulabelle Johnson, took care of the twelve children of the family. Yet there was always a bed and something to eat for me in that house. That was only the first of many lessons that would, one day, inevitably steer me back to Mother Africa. I became close to the Johnson family, the parents, the grandmother, and the children. In fact, I felt like a family member, and all the Johnsons became stalwarts of the movement in Greenwood. Over the next four years, Mrs. Johnson would take care of a great many SNCC people coming through Greenwood. She always called me her son.

[June Johnson remembers:

"The high school to which I went was the Broad Street Regular High School which was right down the street from the SNCC office.

"No way we could have gotten home without passing by, so we would detour right in. . . . One afternoon Stokely was there. . . . I thought he was very demanding. I thought he was abrasive. I saw that he was profound about his blackness and I thought he was very sincere and very committed to what he had come to Greenwood to do.

"So he began to talk to us about school, and what did they teach us about our history? We pretty much told him and he began to tell us what you need to say to your teachers. What you need to say to your principal. He was very challenging, very intimidating. So in order to develop a working relationship with him, we told him we were country kids growing up and weren't accustomed to people talking to us that way. Like we were grown and that we weren't allowed to talk that way to our teachers and ministers. That if we did, we'd probably get kicked out of school. . . .

"So he developed classes for us. And not just history, he had people helping us with our maths. So we'd have these sessions at night and Stokely was always on our case about our hair, about frying our hair and about our history. And he'd talk to us about why it was important for us to become part of the movement and help people in Greenwood to become registered voters because they could empower themselves and get out and challenge the racist system. . . .

"See, how Stokely came to live with us was because . . . My mother was resisting the movement when it first came. So I was in a serious battle with my mother because this was something I really wanted to do. I'd heard them [the parents] talk about how they were abused and mistreated by these whites in the town. How my mother had to work from five o'clock in the morning to five in

the afternoon for fifteen dollars a week. With twelve children, and my father (Mr. Theodore Johnson) was in the cotton business. He was a cotton binder. So because I wanted to be in the movement, I was mad about bringing everybody home. See, if I latched onto them and brought them home, demanding that my folks feed them and put them up, that gave me leverage to be in the movement, and that's how I got involved.

"Yeah, and that made a lot of us at home. We don't know how, but everybody had a place to stay. But my mom? She thought the sun rose and set itself on Stokely, because Stokely had a charm with older people. He had a charm about himself and my mom took a deep love for Stokely. And because Stokely worked very hard, she took good care of him. She'd make sure he'd get at least one hot, balanced meal every day. My mother would save and hide food for him so other folk wouldn't get it. She would do that. Yes, she would. Because Stokely was determined."]

The Delta itself was not to be believed. Day after day you could sit in the middle of it and not believe what you were seeing or hearing. The landscape was my first experience in *unlearning*. It was unlike anything I'd ever encountered. Quite literally one vast, flat, unbroken cotton and soybean plantation. A friend from Howard I took on a tour of the Delta wrote about the experience:

In its precise geographic meaning, [the Delta] refers only to the wedge of land between the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers but [it] extends in popular usage to most of the northwestern quarter of the state. The area of the Delta coincides almost exactly with the Second Congressional District of Mississippi, the home of Senator Eastland, the Citizens' Council, and of the densest population of Negroes in the state. . . .

What can be said about this place that will express the impact of a land so surrealistic and monotonous in its flatness that it appears unnatural, even menacing? Faulkner comes close to expressing the physical impact of the region: ". . . Crossing the last hill, at the foot of which the rich unbroken alluvial flatness began as the sea began, at the base of its cliffs, dissolving away in the unhurried rain as the sea itself would dissolve away."

This description suggests the dominant quality: a flatness like an ocean of land, but within the vast flatness, a sense of confinement, a negation of distance and space that the sea does not have. And there are the rivers—in the east, the headwaters of the river called Big Black, and sluggish tributaries, the Skuna, Yalobusha, and Yocona, which flow into the Tallahatchie, which in turn meets the Sunflower to become the Yazoo, which was called by the Indians "the river of the dead." The Yazoo flows south and west until it meets the Mississippi at the city of Vicksburg.

. . . I once entered the Delta from the west, from Arkansas, over a long,

narrow old bridge that seemed to go for miles over the wide and uncertain Mississippi. It was midsummer and a heat that seemed independent of the sun rose from the land. The slightest indentation in the road's surface became a shimmering sheet of water that disappeared as you approached it. The numbing repetition of cotton fields blurring in the distance wore on one's nerves and perceptions. This has been called the richest agricultural soil in the world. So it may have been, but it also is tough and demanding—no longer boundlessly fecund, it now yields its fruits only after exacting disproportionate prices in human sweat and effort. An old man told me, "For every man it enriches it kills fifty," and some folks joke that "the Delta will wear out a mule in five years, a white man in ten, and a nigger in fifteen."

Which describes only the physical impact of the place, not the primitive economic and racial realities of the society. *Unlearning*. I had understood going in that the Delta was "impoverished," in fact the "poorest section of the poorest state in the Union."

Hell, no. No, no, no! The Delta was in fact very, very rich. It produced great wealth. It was agribusiness on a gigantic scale, highly productive, heavily government subsidized, and based almost totally on the equivalent of slave labor. Our people's slavery.

I must be fair, it wasn't *really* slave labor. Plantation workers, all black, were paid . . . \$3 a day from can see to cain't. In 1961, the Delta was rich; it was only *the people* who were poor. Dirt poor. Nineteenth-century poor. *Third world*, to use the favorite term of the U.S. media, poor.

Working on voter registration, I would meet some black folk who did not officially exist. This is 1960s America I'm talking about. I'm talking about people who had been born, lived, worked, married, had children, and would die on the white man's land where they were born, without their birth having been registered anywhere off that plantation. No agency of the state had any official record of their existence. I don't know how widespread this was, but I did meet people in that situation. Some of them had never ventured farther than twenty miles from the plantation of their birth. Until, that is, the owners began to speed up mechanization so as to turn them off the land.

Education? Hey, in some of these counties the *first* schools for blacks had hastily been built in 1954 *after* the *Brown* decision. They didn't even bother to call these squat, ugly concrete-block structures schools: they were designated Negro Attendance Centers. Truth in labeling, Mississippi style.

Medical care? I can still remember a SNCC field report from Panola, a county that was really just one large plantation. The SNCC workers were distressed by the running, chancrelike sores on the faces and limbs of black children. The adults on the plantations felt that when the children

entered the fields to work the cotton, the “pizen” (insecticide sprayed by planes over the cotton) entered any little scratch or break in the children’s skin and ate away the flesh like acid. We also discovered that people could typically pass their lives on these plantations without once being examined by a doctor or trained nurse.

(In 1963 SNCC had a conference in D.C. The D.C. staff sent all our local people for complete workups from the Medical Committee for Human Rights. Mrs. Hamer, who, until joining the movement had spent her life on a Mississippi plantation, had always had a noticeable limp, which she told us was the result of childhood polio. However, the results of the first complete physical examination of her life—this great-souled woman was then in her forties—revealed she’d never had polio at all. She’d broken her hip as a child. The fracture had never been examined, diagnosed, or set, hence the limp and constant pain she would live with the rest of her life.)

I’m talking about human conditions so primitive and brutal for black people that visitors from the North invariably responded with shock, pain, and disbelief. “Oh, my God, this can’t be happening in America. No, not in the twentieth century!” Hey, better believe it.

The elaborate and expensive machinery was nothing *but* America: the crop-dusting planes, the massive tractors, the huge cotton-picking machines, were twentieth-century corporate America in spades.

And this was no hidden aberration lying below the radar screen of America’s social conscience. This arrangement was not only *tolerated*, this exploitation was heavily *subsidized* by the federal government, making every American taxpayer, white and black, complicit in the brutalizing of their kin. Then there was the complex network of ownership uncovered by Jack Minnis’s SNCC research department. These plantation factories must have been very profitable investments. One was owned by the corporation supplying electricity to Boston, Massachusetts. The majority stockholder of another was Her Majesty, the Queen. Yeah, you heard me. None other than Elizabeth *Regina*, Queen of England, Empress of India, and by the grace of God, majority owner of one of the largest Mississippi plantations only slightly evolved from outright slavery.

Until I left Mississippi in 1965, this eerie, brutal landscape that seemed so completely oblivious to the passage of time would be my base.

Yes, suh, I were “jes’ a-learning and unlearning” as Mr. Hartman Turnbow might have said.

But the most important thing Mississippi first taught me was to really love my blackness. Not that I *ever* hated it, but *really* to love it, that’s whole ‘nother question.

Like everyone else in America I’d been hearing how beaten down,

backward, and “slow” the “Southern Negro” was. They’d been “buked and scorned,” oppressed so long and so hard, they’d had all humanity, all pride and resistance, beaten out of them. They’d been reduced to shuffling, scratching their woolly heads, content to bow, grin, and drawl “Yassuh, boss” to any white man. Sounds familiar, right? Besides which, having retreated into a “pie-in-the-sky” religiosity, the Southern Negro would wait for death or the Lord to deliver them. Not exactly promising raw material for militant struggle.

Consequently we “idealistic” Northern students would have to “save” them. We were, in effect, modern missionaries bringing “enlightenment” to the “benighted Negro.” Now I’d never exactly believed any of that crap. That had not been my experience at Howard, nor in the New Orleans project, nor the Mississippi jails. But it was in the air. It was implied in the ignorant questions of smug white reporters. It was, and continued to be, the subtext of the media coverage. But it was flat-out nonsense. Utter nonsense.

I met heroes. Humble folk, of slight formal education and modest income, who managed to be both generous and wise. Simple, homespun, unlettered, hardworking, self-respecting men and women, Sterling Brown’s people, who took us in, fed us, instructed and protected us, and ultimately *civilized*, educated, and inspired the smart-assed college students.

I could go on for a long time about the courage of our “local peoples.” But why reinvent the wheel? You can now consult some excellent books on that subject.*

To be as we were, young and black, and to have the opportunity to work with and get to know women like Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, Mrs. Annie Devine, Ms. Victoria Gray, Ms. Susie Ruffin, Mama Quinn, and Ms. Lulabelle Johnson was more than a privilege. It was a benefaction beyond price. I count myself and my SNCC friends very, very lucky indeed.

Because of women like these, some strong men, and the spirit of community we found there, an amazing thing happened, something one would have thought impossible and quite unbelievable. How is it possible to live surrounded by extreme privation, amidst the most brutal *material* poverty; in an atmosphere of unrelieved tension; with your life in real and constant danger; and yet day after day find yourself at your most focused and fulfilled, your spirit at peace? Every day to find terror bal-

*Ture particularly recommended five books: Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, John Dittmer’s *Local People*, Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, Kay Mill’s biography of Fannie Lou Hamer, and Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez’s *Letters from Mississippi*. —EMT.

anced by exhilaration? But incredibly enough, it happened, it did. Ask anybody who was there.

When dosing me with her bitter bush medicines, Grandmother Cecilia used to encourage me, "Boy, what don't kill you will surely strengthen you." Well, some of us were surely strengthened, a few of us it killed. Many others bore no visible wounds but were permanently damaged. We call those our walking wounded. *They don't come by ones . . . they don't come by twos . . .*

[June Johnson remembers:

"Stokely had a charm about himself with older people. And he had the utmost respect for ministers. Now, it was all right for him to do what he had to do. I mean, he was profound to white folks when they called him boy. He made it very clear that there were no boys around. He was not afraid of the police. He had to make young people know that in order to be free you had to pay a price, a serious price. And that there was nothing wrong with going to jail and he went to jail many times in Greenwood. Many times.

"But in spite of what his vocal was in terms of this and that in public, there was a certain way that he carried himself amongst the people. Stokely had a mild demeanor that he could sit down and be very patient, calm, and intellectual and talk through with ministers and what have you. But he wouldn't accept to be disrespected, and then he didn't allow you to disrespect local folk. He didn't allow that. No, he didn't. Now, it was all right for him to do what he had to, but he didn't accept seeing outsiders come in and be disrespectful to the local people. He was very much a local-people person. He was very much for the people . . . always."]

The strong men keep coming . . . strong men coming on . . .
the strong men, strong men . . . coming.

So very much to unlearn . . . I figured, of course, that I already knew all about our history. Why, I even considered that was part of my *mission*, to teach the youth our true history.

Well, sitting at night and listening to some remarkable older men talk about their lives—the things they had seen and done; things that had happened to them and their families; the many, many, many different kinds of struggles and strategies they'd tried; the economic heroism of their very survival—was an education. An education in endurance and resourcefulness. These were some brave, smart, solid, centered, infinitely hard-working men, who understood their lives fully. What emerged from their stories was that their people's poverty was not accidental or inevitable. And that the racism around them was *not* simply random acts of irrational prejudice by individual whites. That the evils of Mississippi racism were the expression of a systematic, public policy by the state designed to effect

and perpetuate the subjugation of black people. That in an American state, the government was, and had been, waging open warfare—physical, psychological, economic, and military—against half the population simply because they were black. *And*, that this warfare had been conducted for one hundred years openly, within full view and with the complicity of white America, from the president on down. “Ain’ gon’ lie to you, son, that’s the way it be down here.”

Yeah, you say, so what’s new? You’re not saying you didn’t know that? Course I knew it, *abstractly*, from books. But I never began to *really feel* it until I looked into the eyes and lined faces of men like Amzie Moore (a truly great African), Mr. Dewey “Big Daddy” Greene, Mr. Hartman Turnbow, Mr. E. W. Steptoe, or Mr. C. C. Bryant and listened to their voices telling their stories. *Then* our history became real to me.

Sometimes the one thing that is the most glaringly obvious is the thing everyone overlooks. Something so blatantly obvious no one seems to see it. Well, I’m sure y’all remember the racist mantra that was (is?) conventional wisdom of white America or Jim Crow? It go somethin’ like this:

When two races are unequally endowed but occupy the same area, the only logical, wise (and kind) thing to do is to separate them. Thus each could develop at its own pace. The superior race will not be dragged down or polluted by the inferior, while the less competent one can also proceed in its own limited way, without being overwhelmed and made to continually confront its own inferiority by forced competition, which it can only lose, with the superior race.

Even if you’re too young to have heard that particular version, I’m sure you bin hearing its contemporary version from the current generation of right-wing racists who seem to have hijacked the political discussion in white America.

Now I can’t think of any African I ever knew who believed that bull-dooky. But one heard it so often from “educated Southerners” that I had to assume that they, and white folk in general, must really have believed it.

Then one evening I’m unable to sleep and everything I’ve been seeing and hearing about the “great state o’ Missipah” is running around my head. The entire, elaborate structure of discriminatory laws and statutes. The succession of “Mississippi plans” designed to keep the Negrals in their place. Because, make no mistake about it, the single, central organizing principle, the major civic concern upon which the social, economic, and political arrangements of the entire state were predicated, was white advantage and black subjugation. And that was clear. The hierarchy of social status, the protocols of racial etiquette and exclusion, the codes of manners and behavior, were *all* racially determined and

painstakingly designed to crush my people's spirit. An entire apparatus of law and practices created for one purpose: to encumber and impede black progress. No other earthly reason. None. Like South Africa under apartheid.

"Oh, wow," I yelled. What could have been more obvious? *Them crackers don't even think we inferior at all. They can't.* The entire organization of the state was indisputable proof of that. If you so sure a people are inferior, you don't need to spend the time, energy, and obsessive effort creating this barricade of economic and educational impediments and political restrictions. For what? To keep an *inferior* race "in their place"? Surely, if you *know* they inferior, then you simply leave them to stagnate, anchored in place by the weight of their own incompetence. So that's not it. They scared of what might happen if we had a fair shake. *Aie*, by their deeds shall ye know them. From that moment of insight (it takes great insight to uncover the obvious) a lot of things began to fall into place for me.

Language, and especially the spoken word, has always had a serious hold on me. From my earliest childhood I've been just fascinated by words and the sounds and rhythms of words and our people's voices. I still am. Our people take pleasure in wordplay and in the rhythms, tones, and music of spoken language. *Usses jes' loves to play with our language.* Where do you suppose Dr. King's eloquence came from? And I wasn't the only one in SNCC who came to appreciate the soft cadences and slow music of Southern black speech. In fact, we used to make jokes when, after a month or so, some visiting white graduate student—even a doctoral candidate or two—would begin to sound like "unlettered and ungrammatical" sharecroppers. Imitation, they say, is the highest form of flattery.

For me it was a pleasure and instructive to listen carefully to the skillful way our people use language. Once, I remember, I was talking to this older man, a field hand, outside his little house. A car came into view raising a cloud of dust in the distance. "Oh, oh, son, best you step inside the house for a spell." I stood inside the door and listened as the plantation owner blustered and berated the brother about outside agitators, gratitude, and voting. The brother assured his employer that he knew nothing "bout that mess." He had "no more use for it than a rattlesnake." Their last exchange was classic. It went something much like this:

"J.T.," the boss asked earnestly, "answer me this: Have we evah abused or mistreated you?"

"Weal, Cap'n, Ah *cain't* really say as you has. Nahsuh. Nah, you knows, I sholy couldn' say nothin' like that, Missa Charlie."

"Good, good. An' ain't Ah always treated you fair? Ain' Ah *always* been right with you?"

"Cap'n," the brother said thoughtfully, as though searching his memory, "you know, *I got to say* you has. Yessuh, I sho gotta say that. I *could nevah* look in your face and say yo' hasn't been good t'me. Nahsuh, Ah sho would never do that, suh."

"J.T."—the boss beamed, confirmed in his own benevolence—"you a good ol' boy."

"Mighty kind of you, suh," J.T. agreed. He watched the car drive out of sight, then turned to me. "Son, tell me one more time where that meetin' is to be."

When I first heard Mrs. Hamer talk about how disgusted the people were, I had no idea at the time that her description would become such a part of popular vocabulary. "We be sick an' t'ard of this mess. Fack is, we sick an' t'ard o' being sick an' tar'd. But we keeps on, an' we keeps on, 'cause we got to keep on keeping on." And again in Atlantic City at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, when she told the Democratic leadership, "We didn't come heah for no two seats, for *all* of us is tired." I seriously doubt that Hubert Humphrey or Walter Mondale recognized the many layers of meaning, the complex levels of political wisdom and ironies, compacted into that simple little sentence.

The day I told Mr. Hartman Turnbow how three generations of movement women—Mrs. Hamer, Annelle Ponder, and June Johnson (my little sister)—had been beaten in the Winona jail, his face grew overcast, his voice thoughtful.

"Y'know, son," he mused, "water seek de low places but power seek de weak places." Another time he told me, "Soon as the leaves turn color in the fall, evraah peckerwood in Holmes County an' his pappy, they calls theyselves goin' a-hunting. They be after them li'l ol' squirrels and rabbits. With them, huntin' be a tradition an' a practice. But, y'know somethin? Iffen them li'l critters had some guns of they own? Why, I bet you the very next day they be mighty few white men's lef' in this county be calling theyself hunters. *So effen Ah had me Bob Moses' job? Why, Ah'd git me some guns an' Ah'd sweep all the way from Holly Springs raht down to Biloxi.*"

Mr. Turnbow never staged his march from Mississippi's most northerly town to the sea, but after he tried to register and "some white fellers" tried to burn him out, "I were not being nonviolent. Ah had me my rifle an' Ah commenced a-popping." When the sheriff accused him of attempting to start the fire himself, Mr. Turnbow asked, "Sheriff, now why would Ah try to burn mah own house an' Ah don't even have no insurance on it?"

A few days before or after his friend Mr. Herbert Lee was gunned down, slight, wiry Mr. E. W. Steptoe went to the Liberty courthouse to register. The sheriff, gun conspicuously in hand, challenged him. "What business you got heah, Steptoe? State your damn business." Mr. Steptoe, looking from the gun to the lawman's eyes, said mildly, "Wal, Sheriff, *if Ah*

lives, Ah reckon I'm goin' reddish to vote." And he stepped right on past the hulking lawman.

My people, oh, mah peoples.

We had a Freedom Day in one of the Delta towns, the first one in that county. One old lady, dressed in her Sunday best and exuding determination and pride, had walked the line in the blazing sun all morning. After taking and failing the test, she was asked by a reporter how she felt.

"Right proud," she said. "Why, suh, Ah feels downright proud." Because, as she explained, even though "we ain't what we *want* to be, an' we ain't what we *goin'* to be, Ah thanks God Almighty that *we sho ain't what we was.*"

I've got the light of freedom, I'm gonna let it shine.

And, of course, there is the Reverend Mr. Hulme and the governor. It was before my time but had deservedly become legendary. Only days after the *Brown* school decision, the governor [*Hugh White*] called in seventy black leaders to denounce the court's decision and to belatedly propose an "education equalization" scheme, by which he proposed to begin to close the \$115 million differential that separated the state's spending on black and white education. One hundred and fifteen million? Tells you something about "separate but equal," huh? The meeting ended with the Reverend Mr. Hulme's famous response.

"Guvnor, you shouldn't be mad at us. Those were nine white men who rendered that decision. Not one colored man had anything to do with it. The real trouble, Guvnor, is that for too long, *you've given us schools in which we could study the earth through the floors and the stars through the roof.*"

And we should not lightly dismiss that forty acres and a mule either. Later, Kwame Nkrumah would tell me, "All liberation begins with land." Working the Delta, we began to see clearly how the withholding of those forty acres had been no trivial blow. In fact, almost exactly a hundred years later, the lasting, visible, painful consequences of that betrayal were still indelibly etched in our people's condition. Of the many, many betrayals and disappointments Africans had suffered at the hands of this republic, I began to see how Congress's failure to make good on its promise of those forty acres to the freedmen was arguably the most far-reaching and injurious. No doubt about it.

Organizing in the Delta, it was easy—and painful—to see just how our people's history—and by extension that of the entire South and the nation—would have been vastly different had those forty hard-earned acres bought and paid for by centuries of stolen labor been distributed.

Organizing in those counties where some black families held and worked their own land was so much easier, a pleasure. In certain parts of

Holmes County—Mileston for instance, or in a wonderful little community called Mt. Beulah, where *all* the land was owned by Africans—you immediately felt the difference in people's confidence and manner. The way they presented themselves.

Folks didn't shuffle, they stood straight and looked you in the eye. Their eyes didn't flicker uneasily over your shoulder to see if the man was watching. These communities had a spirit of self-sufficiency, of independence, and of collective capability and cooperation. Wherever our people could, by their own effort, coax a living however modest from their own land, you found determination and inner psychological strength.

And across the state, leadership often came not from those whom Mrs. Hamer used to call derisively "the preachers and the teachers," but from men (and one notable woman, Mrs. Laura McGhee) who owned land.

And then there was the church. True, on occasion Mrs. Hamer would denounce fainthearted "preachers and teachers." And I was coming from Harlem where a favorite target of the stepladder nationalists was "Reverend Pork Chop" and it was common to hear Christianity, "the white man's religion," denounced simply as a snare and impediment to black liberation.

Let the record show, though, that most of our meetings took place in small, rural churches. And that in the summer of '64 in Mississippi alone, over thirty such churches—most of whose insurance had suddenly been canceled—were burned to the ground. Crimes for which, by the way, no one has ever been charged.

So that what I came to see was that our people's "religiosity" was neither simply (as some opinion had it) passive escapism nor the tight-jawed and self-righteous sanctimony of self-proclaimed "saints." What I came to see very clearly was that with our people the religious impulse at its finest was something much more profound. Morally and socially effective, it incorporated a living vision of history, self, and struggle. A vision that was central to their survival, both spiritual and psychic.

Folks used to think I was joking when I'd say that one reason the Mississippi Project was one of SNCC's most successful was in no small part due to the fortuitous accident of Bob's last name. Until, that is, they sat in a crowded church and heard Mrs. Hamer leading the singing of her signature freedom song. And heard her, when she reached that verse, sing:

Who's them sisters dressed in black?
 Must be the hypocrites turning back.
 Who's them sisters dressed in red?
 Must be the children Bob Moses led.
 Go tell it on the mountain . . .

Then, even the most obtuse could not fail to feel the recognition of biblical inevitability that would ripple among the older folk and the more devout of the youth. At such times I'd joke to myself, "If only my folks had had the foresight to name me Joshua, this movement would be unstoppable."

For these folks the movement was inevitable, the long-awaited fulfillment of prophecy. They *knew* it was coming, the only thing they didn't know was *when* . . . for "no man knows the day or the hour." When some nervous old preacher, justifiably worried about exposing his church building to the danger of a movement meeting, would ask querulously, "Son, you sure this be the Lord's work?" I could resort to the Old Testament to make an incontrovertible case. I did a lot of organizing out of the pages of the Old Testament.

"Oh, yes, Reverend. T'ain't just the Lord's work, it's the Lord's *will*, Reverend, the Lord's will. As the good book say, 'Come let us labor in the vineyards of the Lord, for behold the harvest is great though the workers be few.'"

Because this *African* Christianity of our people was a living faith selectively based on the highest values of ancient scriptures. From the depths of slavery, against the intractable evidence of their bitter experience, our ancestors had reached their imagination deep into the sacred books of the ancient Hebrews (a very *African* world by the way) and plucked out an enduring metaphor of their condition and a view of history. A long view, which our people enshrined in the doctrine and liturgy of their church and the poetry of their sorrow songs. Those same spirituals that Dr. Du Bois had called "the most beautiful expressions of the human spirit this side of the seas. The singular spiritual heritage of this nation." *Let the church say ahmen!*

So my "peoples" were strong in faith and certain of their ultimate deliverance. For in faith all things are possible. And overarching this narrow world was the infinite grace and certain justice of God's purpose, the gradual and unchanging arc of whose universe curved toward freedom.

So my people articulated a God, the God of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. A God of justice and of ultimate and righteous retribution. A God who absolutely forbade oppression and was not mocked. A God who bound the captives' wounds, "There is a balm in Gilead," they comforted themselves, "to make the wounded whole." A God who cast down the mighty—"Pharaoh's army got drowned," they exulted—who raised up the lowly, yea making the crooked straight and the rough smooth. For were we not also God's children? "In time, chillun, all in God's time," they counseled, "'cause even the sun do move, no lie can live forever, and the arc of his universe, it curve towards freedom. *It do, it do.*"

So my people were sho nuff armored by faith—a faith not in princi-

patities or powers, not in the goodwill of princes nor in sons of men, but in the ultimate justice of divine purpose, that irresistible motion of the universe that manifests among men as history. And the Lord helps those who help themselves. So a faith in their own strenuous and collective effort: "Lifting as ye climb. Walk together, chillun, don't you git weary." Seize the time when it come.

Yeah, you say, so that's the tradition. You probably learned that in the chapel at Howard. Mayhaps, but what I *saw and felt* in Mississippi was that these ideas were real, still living and informing the people's view of reality and themselves as much as they infused the language of their songs. So that, let us say, at a meeting in a lonely church—never mind that the Klan or the sheriff's men were driving by flashing their headlights—when we sang "Guide my feets, Lord, while I run this race, for I don't want to run this race in vain" or "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land, tell ol' Pharoah, let my people go," and "Wade in the water, chillun, God's gonna trouble the water," it was prophecy being fulfilled and history made manifest around us.

Not in spite of, but because of the danger, and through those ancient songs, the music, we were at one with our ancestors. You felt their presence. At these times when we would sing these songs, I'd always get an almost eerie feeling that, somehow by the power of that music, time was eclipsed. I think we all shared something of that feeling. But I know I'd feel in those moments of peril that our mood and circumstances were exactly the same as our ancestors'—those nameless Africans, enslaved in this strange land, who out of faith and the troubles they were seeing had composed words of such enduring inspiration. And through the words and the music we felt their presence. How else could the words of those old songs, essentially unchanged, feel so right and work so well? "How can you," as the Mystic Revelations of Ras Tafari would ask, "Sing King Alpha's song in a strange land?"

It was an experience that we could not have bought and is never to be repeated or forgotten. It is little wonder that our most effective local organizers all could sing and summon up where necessary the rolling cadences of a song sermon. Some like Sherrod and Bevel were indeed young seminarians. Sam Block (peace be unto him), Willie (now Wazir) Peacock, and Hollis Watkins were all beautiful singers. I never was much of a singer myself, but I did learn to preach a little bit. . . .

Hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick.

That was one of Sterling Brown's favorite lines. It was his metaphor for the folks' artful way with a story. When he used it, Prof meant a style of indirection, cunningly saying one thing to signify another.

It didn't take me any time to see how deeply ingrained in the people's

style of discourse this approach was, especially in public situations. It became clear that some older folks took great pride in constructing stories that took a crooked path to hit a straight lick on whatever issue was being discussed. Almost as if it were intellectually beneath them to simply jump on the naked issue without first "dressing it up some." Some of the younger Southern people seem to have mastered that style and skill—Bob Mants and Ed Brown in particular come to mind.

Later when I'd encounter almost the exact same storytelling approach to discussion among village elders in the hills of Guinea, it would feel familiar and comfortable. In Mississippi, you saw this best in "mass" meetings, most of which rarely had more than thirty people in attendance. I recall one meeting "out in the rural" where the community had come under severe pressure because of the eviction of people from the surrounding plantations. People whose homes were already crowded were taking in families less fortunate, a child here, two there. But clearly that could only be a desperate holding action. The crisis was real, growing, and coming ever closer.

The movement was appealing for federal intervention in terms of emergency aid. Good luck. We were also collecting food and clothes in the North, but this too could only be a drop in the bucket. So the meeting was unusually well attended and the mood very, very somber. "What is we gon' do?"

As was the custom, everyone who felt so moved got up to testify. I remember two speakers. First was, I think, a preacher, a stout, bull-shouldered, older gentleman with a close-cropped head and a deliberate way of talking. After him a large lady would pick up on the man's effort with a story of her own.

What is we gon' do?

"Wal," he said, "it put me in min' of a time when things was mighty hard . . . fer the rabbits." Then in a deep, unhurried voice that commanded the meeting's attention, the deacon tells a story. The hounds were hunting the poor defenseless rabbits to near extinction. So hard-pressed they couldn't even sneak into the fields to nibble a little grass. Driven to distraction, the rabbits called a mass meeting. Unable to find a solution, they decided to commit mass suicide. Yassuh, to drown theyself. So they locked paws and started for the river. A long line of rabbits moving as one in the moonlight. They topped a rise and came face-to-face with the hounds out looking for rabbits to chase.

But when them ol' dogs saw this long, unbroken line of rabbits, shoulder to shoulder, advancing on them steady, them ol' hounds turned tail and took off running. Ran so far and ran so fast they were outen the county before sunup. Rabbits had no more trouble. Not a bit.

Hit a straight lick . . .

Folks were laughing and applauding, but not everyone. "Now, Elder Jones, I know you ain't saying we gotta go drown ourself, now, is you?"

"No, you know he ain' saying any of that," the large lady intervened. "He saying something else. Y'know, hit remind me of these two little boys.

"See hit was these two brothers walking along jest a-chunking rocks at evrah thang they meet. Evrah thang dey see, nothing but a rock up side dey haid. They come upon a cow. The biggest boy, he went upside that ol' cow's back with a rock. The cow jumped up, holler moo, and run off. The li'l one laughed. You know how boys is."

So the path of destruction proceeded to their great amusement. They hit a mule, a donkey, a pig, a rooster, and a duck, each of which gave the appropriate bray, cackle, or quack, ran off or flew away. "Then they comes to this big, I mean it was a big, ole hornets nes'."

"Ooohiee, looka that," said the little one, "Le's bust that sucker wide open." He drew back his arm, but his big brother grabbed it.

"No," he said, "no. We ain't gon' chunk that un."

"We isn't? Why isn' we gonna bus' that one?" the younger asked. "Le's do it."

"Nah. Uh-uh, we's sho ain't gonna bust that un," the older brother said. "An' the reason we ain't gonna do none o' that is . . . *because dey's organized.*"

. . . *Wid a crooked stick.*

The men used to tell a different kind of story when they were "drinking likker an' telling lies." Out in the plantation quarters the likker in question was an evil-looking, oily, yellowish stump likker the man called "gosh" or "slap-yo-mammy." This moonshine smelled bad and had a metallic taste, but the stories were good. A good many of these tall tales concerned a slave named John, more properly High John the Conqueror. Now, High John he was a "be" man. He be there when times was good and he be there when times was hard. He be always outwitting the white folks and successfully stealing pigs or chickens, which he'd share with the hungry folk. Ol' High John, High John the Conqueror.

High John's owner was a gambling cracker. He'd rather bet money than eat shrimp, and High John was clever enough to win him a lot of money. Now, on the neighboring plantation was a slave named Goliath. This Goliath was a massive, bullet-headed, bull-necked nigra, meaner than a jailhouse dawg and strong as ten mules. His master had a standing bet of one thousand gold dollars that no one could beat this slave fighting. He'd killed more than twenty strong black men.

So High John's master's eyes got big for them thousand dollars and he set to thinking. "Boy," he called one of the slaves. "Go fetch me John."

"Boss, High John done gone fishin' and say he don't want no nigras disturb him."

The master didn't like that one bit, but he knew High John. "He said that, now did he? Well, I guess I jes' have to go disturb him my own self. Boy, fetch me mah horsewhip." And off he stomped looking mighty angry.

Down to the creek there was High John lying on his back in the shade holding a cane pole twixt his toes.

"John," said Ol' Massa, sweet as milk, hiding the whip behind his back. "Yo' know that Goliath nigger?"

"Reckon Ah do," said John, looking at his line. "Reckon Ah do, Cap'n."

"Think you can whup him fighting?"

"Doesn't thank," said High John, who was not one to waste too many words on white folk.

"You doesn't, uh, don't think you can?" Ol' Massa asked.

"Doesn't thank," said High John. "Ah knows."

"You don't think. You knows? Knows, I mean know what?" Ol' Massa asked. He wuzn't right bright, y'know.

"I *knows* that boy ain't goin' fight me," John explained.

"Oh, yes, he is," Ol' Massa said. "'Cause I already done bet Colonel Jackson one thousand dollars."

"You done whut?" High John looked at him. "Well, makes no never mind. That boy ain't goin' fight me."

"Well, you best be right," the boss man said, "'cause, n——, if you lose me my money, you gone wish he'd gone on an' killed yo' black ass."

"Yo' money safe, Cap'n. That ol' boy don't want no smallest part o' High John. I kin win yo' that money, but you may not like how Ah'm gon' do it now."

"You win me that money, boy, you be all right with me. I won't fergit you. Boy, but you damn sure better be right. Heah me?"

"Bet yo' life an' live fo' evah, Cap'n. That boy ain't gon' want no part of me. An' Ah knows you ain't gon' fergit me, neither."

And High John pulled his straw hat back over his eyes and make pretend he sleeping.

Day of the fight all the white folks gather at the fighting place. All the blacks be watching from a good distance 'cause none of them cared to get too close to that crazy Goliath. He were a fearsome sight. He were seven foot tall, even though he had bowlegs, and went about fo' hundred pounds. His li'l ol' pig eyes were bloodred, his skin were coal black. He had an iron collar and a long, heavy ol' iron chain round his neck. On both sides this chain was fixed to a sturdy tree. Live oak on the right. Hickory tree on the left, and evrah time Goliath jerked them chains them

big ol' trees would creak and bend like they fixing to break clean. He jes' a-foaming and a-bellowing and a-smacking hisself upside the head. Pow. Pow. Pow. He were a fearsome sight, yes indeedy.

The fight s'posed to be at noon. The sheriff, who was holding the two bags of gold, pulled out his watch.

"Five minutes," he announced. "Yore boy ain't heah in five minutes, the purse go to Colonel Jackson."

High John's missis she start to fume and fuss at Ol' Massa. Jus' a-fussin' an' a-furning. "Tol' you going lose owah money. That shif'less John done run off so now you done lost a slave too. An' if John do come, it's the same thang. That ugly ol' Goliath n—— going kill him sho. Oooh, I cain't bear to even look at him. You crazy ol' fool," an' she jest would not stop.

Be half a minute to go an' the sheriff be looking at his timepiece and counting down. Ol' Missis so angry until she cry living eye water and she ain't stopped fussing even one little bit. "You dad-blasted ol' fool. Done lost us our money and one shiftless darky."

Suddenly Ol' Massa give a mighty shout. "Great Gawd in the mornin'. Here come John. We got us a fight. We got a fight." He so excited his face gits all red and he jump into the air and slapped his Stetson down in the dust. Everybody—even Goliath—turned to look where he pointing.

And sho nuff heah come ol' John. Had him on a top hat and a white linen suit and he be riding a white horse. It was Ol' Massa's best suit, his bes' hat, and his favorite thoroughbred racing horse. An' there come High John, horse be jes' a trotting an' a-cantering, John he be jes' a-stylin' and a-bowing, greeting the folk jes' like he was a congersman.

"Howdy do. Good to see ya. So good o' y'awl to come. Howdy. Good to see ya now."

Jes' coming through the crowd a-bowing and a-smiling and tipping his hat polite as you please. Yas, suh. Ol' High John. High John the Conquerer. Even ol' Goliath forgot to roar and beller, he stood jes' a-watching an' beholding like the rest of folk.

Ol' Missis, she could not believe her eyes or her husband's bes' suit or his bes' hat or his purebred racing horse.

"N——," she screamed. "You shiftless, no-count, nappy-head, chicken-stealing, snuff-dipping—"

She never got to even finish. High John jumped down offen that horse an' walked over to her.

"Woman," he roared, "ain't I done told you not to evah call me outen mah name?"

And he opened his hand and *kapow*. *He smacked that white woman down in the dust.* Y'hear me, chillun?

There was a dead silence, broken by this loud crash. When Goliath, crazy as he was, saw High John smack that white lady, it scared him near

to death. He tore down them trees, broke off them chains, and took off a-running. Nobody know where he go.

"Negra bad nuff to smack Ol' Missus," he muttered, "whut he gon do to po' me? That *mus'* be the baddes' negra God's got."

Ol' High John look at that boy a-running. "Colleck yo' money, Cap'n," he say to Ol' Massa. "Diden Ah tell you that boy doan want no part o' me?"

Ol' High John. High John tha Conqueror.

[This, I know, was young Carmichael's favorite of the High John stories.
—EMT]

A Band of Brothers, a Circle of Trust

A great deal has been written about SNCC, not all of which is accurate. By far the best of these accounts are the witnesses from folk who were there. More of our movement brothers and sisters should make a serious effort to write their stories before it's too late. There is still a lot of history—much too much—that we carry around only in our heads. The late-comers, outside observers, and foreign correspondents who have done most of the writing can't help but impose their own political preconceptions and Monday-morning-quarterback hindsight. Some of this, surprisingly, is quite good, a lot just plain wrong, and some outright malicious. We must tell our stories. I won't say we "owe it to history" if only because I've been hearing and ignoring that for a great many years.

I came onto the SNCC staff just as the organization was beginning to take form after the Freedom Rides. The time when folks first began to drop out of school to work full-time in the South. I watched the organization grow, evolve, and disappear almost as quickly as it had grown. I was there and know what happened, much of the how and why, and exactly the way things went down. Or at least, I have strong views on that process, and of course, I make no claims to being a historian, so what follows is in no way intended to be a "history of SNCC." It is *my* experience, what I learned from it then, and what I've come to understand since.

That SNCC was unique—an organization of American youth that actually played a central role in transforming the political history of the South and the nation—is now commonplace. Everyone says that. But the things that were most unprecedented about the organization seem either to have escaped most observers or to have been egregiously misunderstood.

Let's begin at the gitgo. With Ms. Ella Jo Baker (eternal peace be upon her). When Ms. Baker called that first meeting of sit-in activists, nobody attending, but *nobody*, could have envisioned anything like an *independent* organization. What you saying? We're talking about college "kids," black Southern college students, operating off their campuses on weekends.

That's what we all did. Nobody had any idea that they could create and maintain an *independent* political organization. Or become full-time freedom fighters. None. None of them were even *thinking* in those terms. Ms. Baker planted that seed. I can still hear Julian Bond talking about how floored he and the other students at the Shaw University Conference were at the notion of an independent organization run by students.

Then, once the issue was discussed and the conference voted to be independent, reality set in. How was it to be structured? How administered? Who would pay for the office? The phone? Where would the money come from to bond folks out of jail? To pay lawyers? That might explain some the attractiveness of the Jail, No Bail slogan. Then again, how would people live? Would there be salaries, and if so, where was *that* money to come from? And that was just the practical part. The nuts-and-bolts, dollars-and-cents, pay-the-bills part (which, thank God, Jim Forman would take on his shoulders and wrestle with for almost the entire life of the organization). The part about whether an *independent* organization of mostly African Southern students could survive even for a month, part. At their most wildly optimistic, folks gave the organization five years to live.

[Chuck McDew remembers:

"We didn't really know exactly what we were going to do, but we knew we were going to change the face of America. We talked in terms of five years for a couple of reasons. First, we felt if we go more than five years without an understanding that the organization would then be disbanded, we run the risk of becoming institutionalized or being more concerned with trying to perpetuate the organization and, in doing so, giving up the freedom to act and to do. So we talked about five years, period. The other thing we said was that by the end of that time you'd either be dead or crazy. . . . We'd seen people burn out already. It hadn't been a full year and we were seeing that already. . . .

" . . . We were taking it on faith. None of us had ever done it (putting together an independent, militant organization), so we really didn't know how to do it. Chuck Jones—another of the three founding 'Charleses,' of McDew, Sherrod, and Jones—put it this way: 'Man, we just plain jumped off that cliff blind and learned to fly on the way down.' "

It was Ms. Baker who provided the metaphorical wings. Her calm, rational presence and evident confidence in us gave *us* faith. We could do this.

But it really was the CORE Freedom Rides—which we had made ours—and the Kennedys' sudden interest in black voter registration that promised us what little start-up money we had, or thought we would have. Though, as Jim Forman would be quick to point out, let the record show, that the bulk of this liberal VEP (Voter Education Project) money that the Kennedys had been dangling before the movement continued to go to the

older “adult” organizations. And this long after it had become crystal clear that the organization with the most staff working full-time and most creatively on voter registration was SNCC. I guess we students were a cheap date. A hundred dollars of VEP money could pay the salaries of ten of our field secretaries for a week. I doubt whether the NAACP or SCLC could have hired two people for that.

At the same time, other questions equally or even more fundamental had to be engaged. Questions we had to ask ourselves and continue to ask ourselves over the life of the organization. Ask and be prepared to have the answers change and keep on changing as the organization grew in size and influence and as political conditions changed around us. We may have all arrived at the same jumping-off place, but we had reached that place from very different starting points and by slightly different routes. So we had to find common ground on which to agree.

Just what is SNCC? Organizationally? Politically? Philosophically? What are its goals, purposes, and means? How do we understand ourselves? What is our role? How would SNCC be different from the NAACP? From SCLC? Were we kidding ourselves and really just trying to found an *institution* after all? Something intended to outlive us? Thanks largely to Ms. Baker, those questions got answered in ways that allowed us to bond together seamlessly, at least for then.

But, as I’ve said, these questions would also persist over the life of the organization and even beyond. Because, up to today, wherever ten or twelve SNCC veterans are gathered together, these questions will certainly raise their gnarly old heads, *fresh* and contentious as ever. For if, as Chuck Jones put it, we had to learn to fly before hitting the ground, we also had to decide the style and trajectory of that flight: Just what kind of bird were we, buzzards or falcons?

The answers we came up with gave the organization its identity and evolving character. Which of course had everything to do with the people we were or imagined ourselves to be. The urgency of these same questions had made those endless all-night discussions—which had begun in Nashville—so exciting and intense. I’m not going to even try to recapitulate those debates now. What is important is that they came out of the absolute necessity to define ourselves as we went along and to keep doing that. The process this gave rise to and became a large part of the organizational culture.

In fact, before long, left intellectuals began analyzing SNCC’s “ideology” of “participatory democracy” and our “antileader philosophy.” Both concepts were held up as SNCC’s prescription if not for organizing society at large, then certainly for running a radical political organization. Especially *participatory democracy*, that became the New Left mantra, their

answer both to "representative" democracy *and* democratic centralism. We always laughed at these theoretical formulations.

Because this wasn't SNCC "ideology" or any kind of advanced social "theory." I mean, we never proclaimed that the organization *had* to proceed by consensus rather than majority vote. Or, as C. (Junebug) Cox would ask, "Where is it carved in stone that decision-making *has* to entail all night debate until consensus is attained? I have seen no graven tablets." Well, it just happened that way. Why? Because it had to. Because it could not conceivably have happened in any other way. I don't understand why people couldn't see that. Check out the situation.

You've got twenty or thirty very different young people in the room. All have taken time out of school because this is where they want to be. Nobody is being paid to be there. Each is in some way a rebel. These be some stubborn folk. Most are leaders back at their schools. None are particularly good at taking orders or allowing themselves to be intimidated. And if they don't *believe* in something, you can flat out forget it. But they do believe generally in what the group is trying to do, which is to fight injustice and end racism. Many will have shared dangers together. So they like and respect each other, particularly the courage and commitment. The level of *education* varies, but the level of *intelligence* is high. Unusually so. But the level of involvement is even higher. There are some strongly held views. Some will become "famous." A few will become politicians. A number will officially be declared "geniuses." Some will go on to distinguished careers. Some will never make it back to school, and some will never fully recover from the stress and danger. But as a group they are some very, very interesting young people.

So far as the young organization is concerned, nothing, but *nothing*, is written in concrete. So how are decisions to be made in such a gathering? Decisions that folk will honor and be bound by? The notion of an authority figure, leader, or group of leaders issuing orders is laughable. No person or group has authority to "fire" anyone. Close majority votes won't work because what if the minority seriously disagrees? Nobody is gonna risk his or her life for a program or policy with which he or she seriously disagrees. I think you begin to see the dimension of the problem.

All you could do is talk it out. Whatever time that takes. And because folks really respect each other and the purpose that brought them here . . . and because the issues are deadly serious and decisions have to be made . . . and because people are indeed earnest and the talk is interesting, folk hang in. Most everybody contributes something to the discussion, if only questions at first. Gradually, very gradually, shared understandings, an analysis, and language acceptable to everyone begin to emerge. Then someone, sometimes but by no means always Ms. Baker, summarizes. "Okay, now, are we agreed that? . . . Can we say the

following? Do I hear objections?" Bingo! Consensus. Joy, happiness, hugs. A sense of unity, accomplishment . . . relief.

But its being SNCC, there's always going to be one: "But I thought we said . . . I still don't understand why . . ." Groans, muffled curses, and we have to back up and start over from whatever the point of objection was.

But, y'know, for quite a while it did actually work like that. If only because there was no other way it could have. Of course, I never claimed to have been the most patient African in the world, and sometimes my impatience would show. But once, very gently, Ms. Baker pulled my coat. "Stokely, you know, you're going to have to learn to be more patient."

"But, Ms. Baker, some of these people jes' loves to hear themselves talk. I know them, they be testifying and posturing . . ."

"So . . . let them. They will get to the point. Not everyone can be as quick as you, Stokely, but everyone is as important."

"I know that, Ms. Baker, but still . . ."

"Of course it's important that we all *agree*. But it's just as important that we all *understand*. However long that takes. *We have to work with people where they are*. Now some folks don't say much. But you watch them. They are listening very carefully. And thinking. Some are dealing with these questions for the first time. But they are learning and soon they'll be speaking. In SNCC, they have to feel free to speak and that's important however long it takes."

Ms. Baker was right, and as you can see, I've never forgotten that conversation. It became an article of faith for me in all the organizing I've done during my life. Because what came out of that process was more than an organization or even a philosophy. It was really a "culture," a way of dealing among ourselves and with the people we were trying to organize. Somewhere along in there—very early—we took to calling ourselves "a band of brothers and a circle of trust." [*Later amended to "a band of brothers and sisters."*—EMT] Which I believe we were. But "participatory democracy" was neither theory nor ideology, it was simply necessary. There were real issues to resolve, a clear role to define, a collective identity to agree on.

So far as structure, we had only two officers: a chairman who "spoke for" the organization, and an executive secretary, who did the administrative work. There was also an executive committee of, I believe, some twenty-one people, which was supposed to "set policy," but that was a joke. Not because we didn't respect the committee, or because it never met or took a vote, that I remember, but because no one was ever quite sure who was on it or who wasn't. It did not matter. Whenever the executive committee met, whoever happened to be around and felt like it simply sat in and spoke his or her piece. I can't remember any staff member present ever

being challenged nor, come to think of it, any "policy" that it handed down. I mean in early SNCC.

"Offices" didn't matter but we really respected our officers. Jim [*Forman, executive secretary*] because he worked so hard, was deeply committed, resourceful, and really fought *hard* for the survival of the organization—politically and financially. John [*Lewis, chairman*] because he was brave and had paid some serious dues. Besides, he seemed to actually like going around reading speeches that reflected what we were about. That, at first, was about all the "national" structure that we needed or wanted.

How we understood ourselves and our roles evolved naturally out of those legendarily long meetings. Here are some of the hard questions we wrestled with and the conclusions we arrived at. Of course, and lucky for you, the long, winding discussion that got us there cannot be reproduced here.

What is SNCC really?

We are a collection of mobile organizers. We go wherever there is a need, when we are invited, stay only as long as we are wanted, and serve the people's needs as they tell us. *So, we do anything?* No. We help the community do as much as they are willing to do, within reason and "SNCC principles," as long as it serves the struggle. *Serves the struggle?* To empower the people to represent themselves and liberate the community.

What aren't we?

SNCC is not a membership organization (NAACP) trying to organize local chapters or build an institutional membership base. We organize the people to speak in their own interest and try to leave behind us strong leaders and organizations forged in struggle. We are not one-shot mobilizers (SCLC) who come in to lead and speak for the community. Mobilizing hundreds of people in mass demonstrations and arrests, then leaving the community to pick up the pieces when media attention shifts. Our way is to live in the community, find, train, or develop representative leadership within strong, accountable local organizations or coalitions that did not exist before, and that are capable of carrying on the struggle after we leave. When we succeed in this, we will work ourselves out of a job. Which is our goal.

We were not as naive as this sounds. In fact, we used to joke that to the extent we were successful, it would be precisely those organizations we helped create that would one day run us out of town, our militant presence having become an embarrassment. Either so they could assert their autonomy or move to mend fences and enter pragmatic negotiations with the local establishment, which by that time would have no reason to like us. In fact, excellent reason to hate our guts.

Well, then, who are we?

People young enough, free enough, as yet without the family and career obligations, which will surely come, and bad enough to be able to devote full-time to the fight against racist injustice. *But why?* Because we may never have that degree of freedom or the opportunity again. But for whom? For our people—our parents who could not do it and for our children who will not have to.

And for how long?

How long? Not long. Remember “free by ’63”? Yeah, and “still alive in ’65?” For as long as it takes or as long as you can. Folks drop in, folks drop out, but the struggle goes on. Everyone’s contribution is important. We say we work with people where they are. Some can give a month, some a year, some everything. Some will come to a meeting, others will go to jail. Some will slip a dollar in your hand, others put up their house for bail. We work with people where they are—from each according to his ability . . .

On nonviolence.

Talking about SNCC principles . . . I mean, can we talk about nonviolence? What’s to talk about? That ain’t negotiable. We nonviolent, period.

Yeah, but what does that really mean? At all times and in all ways? See, the other night I was at Mr. Steptoe’s. When it got dark, the family brought out their guns. Asked me if I wanted one. What’s SNCC’s position then? What was I supposed to do? What does the organization expect? *Whoee, long, long* discussion.

Conclusion: SNCC is officially nonviolent. This organization will not buy, store, or distribute weapons. SNCC workers will not carry guns. But we certainly cannot and will not be asking folks living in the teeth of the Klan to unilaterally disarm. You want to take that responsibility: to ask folks not to defend themselves? How can we?

Fine, but what if they offer us a gun? Well, bro, tha’s between you, Jesus, and your conscience. Do you even know how to handle a gun? Can you shoot straight? Do you help defend the home or do you be nonviolent? That’s entirely on you.

That seemed right to me and most folk. But a few people wondered openly if that was in “the true spirit of nonviolence.” Dr. King says that “the *tactic* of nonviolence without the *spirit* of nonviolence can be a form of violence.” I also knew that I wasn’t about to check on my people up in the Delta to see if anyone going out on the highway after dark was carrying something heavy. Especially after the terrorists sprayed Bob and Jimmy’s with a semiautomatic rifle outside Greenwood.

On red-baiting and political respectability.

People are reporting that “liberal supporters” are saying that they hear that SNCC accepts “help from Communists.” That “it is immoral to work with Communists.” Say what? What exactly do they mean?

Well, that we can't be working with certain unions, certain lawyers, *and* certain individuals. Well, like who exactly? A few names are mentioned. What? When I call so-and-so, they are always ready to help. *Always*. No questions asked. Or, man, *she* has always been our most dependable supporter, always helpful. Or, hey, *that's* who is handling my case in Alabama. Long, earnest discussion. Conclusion?

We can't afford to be hostage to any such sectarian history. First of all, it just isn't right. Second, we can't afford it. What'd we look like asking folks for they political history and checking for ideological purity? That ain't SNCC. SNCC will work with anybody who supports our programs, shares our goals, honors our principles, and earns our trust. Period. Cheers, applause. That became our stated policy. It did not please the totalitarian liberals, and the CIA assets in the national media would continue to red-bait the organization. That was not only absurd, it was counterproductive. It merely increased our contempt for that kind of political litmus test. Whenever reporters would raise it to me, I'd tell them, "Hey, you don't worry about the Communists, worry about SNCC. We way more dangerous, Jack."

There is no question—which may be the single thing everybody agrees on unequivocally—that the person most responsible for this process was Ms. Ella Jo Baker. No question. Her mere presence was crucial to the dynamic and tone of these early meetings. She was so patient with us, very patient. She paid us the respect of taking us as seriously as she took the struggle. She was always clear. Always focused. I've never heard her raise her voice. And in return, our respect for this extraordinary woman was so unconditional that we would not even think of showing her the disrespect of raising our voice or swearing in a meeting. Her mere presence disciplined those meetings.

When I think back on those times, I'm amazed to realize that Ms. Baker was then roughly the same age I am now. Amazing.

The sharpest image I retain of Ms. Baker from this period: It's one, two, or even three in the morning. The meeting has been going all day. People are bleary-eyed, disheveled, sprawled out all over. Some twenty-year-olds have even nodded off. And there's Ms. Baker sitting erect. She is wearing a dignified but stylish blue suit, stockings, and if memory serves, a small, elegant hat. She would not be out of place in church or at a NAACP board meeting. She seems quite alert and her eyes follow each speaker intently. But you can't really see her entire face because she's wearing a surgical mask against the thick cloud of smoke from the many chain-smokers in the room. At the end of the meeting she's looking unrumpled, fresh, and still alert.

Of course, a number of other adults supported and advised us. I've

mentioned Bayard Rustin at Howard and Harry Belafonte's early and constant encouragement. At those early meetings another important adviser was a young history professor from Spelman, Howard Zinn, who wrote the first book—and still one of the best—on SNCC's early days [*SNCC: The New Abolitionists*]. Then there were the local folk. In Mississippi, Arnie Moore was Bob Moses's great mentor, though I suspect that Bob's leadership style was patterned—whether consciously or not—on Ms. Baker's. The Reverend Ed King, a young, white clergyman from the Mississippi establishment, was a stalwart ally and was made to suffer greatly for his "treason" to the Southern way. Later, after I became chairman, Dr. Martin Luther King was helpful to me personally with advice and support. In southwest Georgia there was the remarkable King family, A. D. and Slater King. In Selma, Alabama, an extraordinary family of warriors called the Boyntons. And in Lowndes County, Alabama, Mr. Jackson and his family.

But Ms. Baker was far and away our most influential adviser, a constant presence, counselor, and role model; she was in many ways the organization's principal architect. For, even beyond the internal culture—how we organized ourselves and related to each other—Ms. Baker's influence was profound and far-reaching. The organization's political orientation, moral outlook, and organizing principles owed much to her guidance. But this guidance was so natural, so gentle and unobtrusive, as to have been almost imperceptible at the time.

See, all her adult life, Ms. Baker had been an organizer. She had become very, very good at it. As a young woman she had been a traveling "orator," traversing the South to set up local chapters of the NAACP. This, I believe, was back in the forties. Later she would serve as director of chapters for the NAACP. This is when, I believe, her affinity and respect for people at the Southern grass roots really matured. After that she had been, in effect if not in title, the experienced organizing intelligence giving form to Dr. King's young SCLC. My impression is that Mrs. Baker was as disillusioned by the male chauvinism as by the hierarchical fixation on status in the leadership of both groups. Also by a certain elitism; and a bureaucratic disregard for the intelligence and ability of local people "at the grass roots" that flowed from those attitudes. So naturally Ms. Baker would consider it her duty to help this new, youthful organization in which she was so invested to avoid those tendencies. Because she clearly understood the danger of becoming that against which you are fighting, she was never doctrinaire. About the most inflexibly dogmatic statements she ever permitted herself were "a strong people don't need strong leaders" and "we who believe in freedom cannot rest." She never did.

Ms. Baker never ever pulled rank, traded on the authority of her

greater experience, or wielded that authority to try to impose a direction on our youthfulness. That was just not her way. Nor did she adopt the transparently condescending liberal pretense to equality of “Gee, kid, I don’t know any more than you, we’re all here learning together,” which some teachers affect. She respected herself and us far too much for that. She knew way more than we did and we all knew that. What she was was our trusted adviser, our teacher, and an “authority” figure. No question about that. So naturally we took all our tough questions to her. But we never got a dogmatic or in fact almost never, a direct answer. Usually she preferred to answer with another question and then another, forcing us to refine our thinking and to struggle toward an answer for ourselves.

“Ms. Baker, should we . . . ?”

“Well, certainly you *could* . . . but what is the result you really want to achieve here? If you do thus and so, how do you think so-and-so is likely to respond? If you do X, what will that say about this organization?” Then she’d be content to sit back and listen carefully as we wrestled with the issue, groping our way toward a shared understanding. I’m not sure that Ms. Baker always agreed 100 percent with every conclusion we reached. In fact I know at times she did not. But I know she truly believed *we* had to make our own decisions so long as the process was open, inclusive, and rigorous. We all learned a lot about organizing—I know I certainly did—from being around Ms. Baker. And it wasn’t just process either. It was also substantive. Our definition of SNCC as a group of organizers, for instance. Or our faith in and respect for the local people. Our egalitarianism and notorious distrust of hierarchical leadership.

A number of other myths about our organization need to be corrected one hopes once and for all.

There’s the question of “whites” in SNCC and the “black nationalism” that drove these “good white liberals” out. In the typically reductive, simplistic, media-driven version of history, SNCC began as an “integrated” group devoted to a mystical Christian vision of a communal “beloved society,” before the rise of an intolerant “black nationalism” ruined this interracial Eden. Or there’s its opposite, an equally inaccurate revisionist version. According to which “race relations” in SNCC were never really all that good. The organization had always, from the git, been riven by racial/sexual tensions and jealousies so that the apparent color-free harmony had always been just a myth. Some commentators even allege both at the same time. Gimme an ever-loving break. Both are equally pernicious. I believe I can shed some light here. As usual, the truth is far more interesting than that conventional piffle.

If I say that SNCC was never an “integrated” organization. That no “white Americans” were ever on the SNCC staff—certainly not the field

organizing staff. That, if they joined, “whites” never survived in SNCC more than a month. That “nationalism” was no exotic import from Northern ghettos, but indigenous to the Southern communities out of which we came. That the organization was “nationalist” from its first day. . . . You’d say, “Aha! There we go! Ture either has completely lost it, is being deliberately provocative, or is crudely trying to rewrite history again.” ’Fraid not. All I’m doing is telling the truth.

Start with the “beloved community.” Honestly I never knew what that meant. I always did have real difficulty getting my head around it conceptually. What exactly—in practical terms—did it describe? Of course, I understand that the term comes out of a race-free, Christian, pacifist vision of lions lying down with lambs and swords beaten into plowshares, and grounded in Gandhian nonviolent activism. I also know that it had currency among spiritual pacifists, the social gospel seminarians out of Nashville who had studied with the Reverend James Lawson. Nobody had any real objection to the term as I remember. *But* I certainly never used it and can’t remember anyone from NAG ever doing so. Nor Ms. Baker or Mrs. Hamer nor any of our local staff, nor the local people from the communities for that matter.

However, the Reverend Mr. Lawson is credited as the principal author of the very high-minded founding document coming out of the first conference. I believe the term *beloved community* first appears in that statement and was subsequently recycled.

However, everything I understand about that meeting suggests also a realistic concern with practical political questions from the very first. Also a strong identification with the African liberation struggle from the git.

Was I quite serious in saying there were no “whites” in SNCC? Aha, you say. So what about Jane Stembridge, Bob Zellner, Sam Shirah (peace be unto him), Dinky Romilly, Mary King, Casey Hayden, Betty Garman, Bill Hansen, Jack Minnis, Penny Patch, Ursula Junk, Mendy Samstein, Danny Lyon, and a number of others? What were these guys, tokens? Department-store mannequins? Black folk in whiteface?

Gimme a break. They were friends, allies, comrades, SNCC staffers, and brothers and sisters in the struggle. But, as usual, you’re not listening. I never said no whites ever *joined* SNCC.

[Some did and one heard all kinds of amazing stories about that: Sam Shirah’s Sunday-school teacher had been George Corley Wallace. Chuck McDew said that “when Bob Zellner joined SNCC, it ended three generations of family Klan membership.” The Freedom Singers give a concert in a small town in backwoods Minnesota. An eighteen-year-old high school graduate is so moved that next day she sets out to hitchhike to New York, convinces the SNCC office there that she has a contribution to make, and ends up working very well in

Mississippi. A young German exchange student at a small Midwestern Catholic college (Ursula Funk) hears the call. With the mother superior's blessing, she leaves for Mississippi and devotes a couple of years organizing women's co-ops for the Poor People's Corporation. —EMT]

So how could I say there were no "whites" in SNCC? Because upon joining us, those comrades stopped being "white" in most conventional American terms, except in the most superficial physical sense of the word.

To start with, for these young "white" Americans even to seriously *think* about joining the struggle in the conditions that prevailed meant that they were unusually conscientious and socially aware young people. Then, quite apart from the danger, the ones who joined were "whites" who had no problem working happily in a black organization with black leadership and that worked mostly in rural black communities at considerable risk. That alone would separate them from the general run of their white countrymen—then and now—and entitles them to our respect.

And, while all of us would be changed by the experience, our "white" staffers had at least three particularly attitude-changing experiences that "white" Americans almost never have: working with blacks in complete equality; being on the receiving end of white racial hostility; and being immersed in the highest expressions of black culture while meeting the black community at its very best. What thinking young person could avoid being changed by even one of these experiences, much less by all three together?

Socially and politically our comrades of lighter complexion stopped being "white." When they experienced the full force of racist hostility from Southern white politicians, police, and public opinion, compounded by the indifference or paralysis of the national political establishment, whatever class and color privileges they might have taken for granted were immediately suspended. At moments of confrontation they were at as great a risk as any of us, and as "race traitors" were sometimes in even greater jeopardy.

"Boy, best you hush yo' damn mouth. Fur as Ah'm concerned, you lower'n any [expletive] nigger, heah? Ah'd shoot you easy as Ah would a rattlesnake."

Or, the flashlight shines into the car and stops on a young white woman.

"Aha, now looka heah. Gal, ain't you got no shame? Tell me some-thin', wicha these niggers you sleeping with? Or Ah bet you doin' them all, huh?"

On the one hand, American bigotry at its ugliest. And on the other, just the opposite, the same cultural realities that were affecting and educating us all: the warmth, texture, language, style, music, spirit, and moral

strength of black Southern culture all brought together in struggle and resistance. This was a remarkably sharp juxtaposition. And it was exciting and transformative, a unique moment in American history, and we all were changed by it. Entirely a matter of perspective. Seriously. So I meant it and as a sincere compliment when I said there were no "white" people on the SNCC staff.

Or that SNCC was never an "integrated" organization in any conventional sense of that term. You know the usual integration: a group of blacks adopting the attitudes, lifestyles, vocabulary, and values of "mainstream" (read *white*) American culture, hoping to become assimilated and begging acceptance in a white world. The movement—SNCC, at any rate—was far, far better than that. In fact, the cultural dynamic was exactly the reverse of that melting-pot model of "integration," which was exactly the cultural imperialism we had fought at Howard. Integration meant black folk trying to become "white." In SNCC, "white" folk became "black."

All of us—regardless of color—who struggled inside that organization were forever changed, by the times and by the experience. Being young, how could we not have been? So those of us within that circle of trust became family and remain so to this day. Because for a brief moment it had been possible to believe—and, in SNCC, it was as true as it is likely ever to be in this society—that race, class, and indeed even gender did not really matter. We had far more important external things to concern us.

But this is America and we would not be permitted to escape the society's crude realities forever. It would become clear that SNCC's spirit—internally—was like a dream within a bubble, a thing insulated, but only for a time, from the realities of class, color, status, and education in the larger society outside. You see this most clearly when you look at the fate of different branches of this "family" since the movement days. The difference between the lives and careers of the local staff—the Annie Pearl Averys, Jesse HARRISES, Willie RICKSES, MacArthur COTTONS, Randy BATTLES, etc.—who were the real cutting edge of SNCC, and those of the educated "middle class" blacks and most of the "white" members of the family once the high tide of the movement crested and receded in the South.

But for a time we were not conscious of this. Why? Because if SNCC was, as the press took to calling us, the "shock troops" of the Southern movement, these local African youth were the shock troops of the shock troops. Nuff respect. But after the "heroic days," the issues of class, color, and education, which for a moment had seemed to disappear within SNCC, reasserted themselves in peoples' lives in the society outside.

* * *

Of all the remarkable and surprising people I met in the Mississippi struggle, none was more interesting and influential than Bob Moses. By the time I finally met Bob in Greenwood in the summer of 1961, he was already in my mind something of a legend. During that academic year he was to us, watching from Howard, not simply just the head of the Mississippi project, but had become almost a symbol of the SNCC spirit. I mean, anyone who was doing the things we'd been hearing had to be not only a great leader, but more than that even, a sho-nuff *hero*. And of course, to look the part. I mean, you could always tell at a glance who the "hero" in a movie was, right? There always was that certain look. So you just know that this Bob Moses had to be larger-than-life: at least as dramatic and articulate as Bayard, as charismatic and physically imposing as Malcolm, and as eloquent and inspiring as Dr. King. At least, that's clear. So you knew I just could not wait to meet this paragon.

So that morning we gits to the Greenwood office. Folks be coming in and out. Field secretaries, Sam Block, Willie Peacock, "Do Right," John Hardy, James Jones. Some local teenagers. Lots of energy and excitement. I met a lot of folks. But no Bob Moses. After a while I realized this and asked where he was. "Man, I really want to meet that brother, y'know." The teenagers nudge each other and giggle.

"Hey, he say he want to meet Bob." Titter, titter. Whatever was funny was lost on me. "Hey, he be right back, man. You gone git to meet him, sho nuff." Giggle, giggle. "In fack, here he come now." I turned to the door eagerly. But the only person there was this stocky brother I been talking to briefly. We'd exchanged a few sentences, as I seem to recall, about Camus's *The Rebel*. A quiet brother, almost nondescript in baggy overalls, a white T-shirt, and brogans. He had an open, roundish brown face with faint freckles and wore thick, round glasses that gave him a studious, even owlsh appearance. His voice was deliberate, low-key, almost muted, but his eyes were focused, always intense, always serious, and kind. Everything about this brother seemed utilitarian, serviceable. Even the no-frills way he dressed. That was Bob.

I hadn't realized who I had been talking to because Bob had absolutely no swagger about himself, no posturing, no ostentatiousness, no self-projection. Just this quiet, attentive seriousness to whomever he was talking to. His manner was always the same, almost self-effacing. Which does not necessarily mean humble because, as we know, ostentatious humility can and usually does mask the most outrageous of egos. But with Bob it was as though he were not at all interested in impressing you with his brilliance or importance. Or for that matter even what impression he was making or failing to make. In fact, quite the reverse, as if he were trying to transcend and efface his presence so as to concentrate on the problem, the idea. And to get you to move beyond the superficial and focus on *ideas* too.

Bob always listened—and the thing is, you could actually see him listening—far more than he ever spoke. And whenever he did speak—whether in a meeting or from a platform—it was softly and thoughtfully, almost haltingly, as though he were deliberately screening all emotion and rhetorical flourish out. I cannot remember hearing Bob ever utter a slogan of any kind. Nor, come to think of it, raise his voice or issue an order.

He had left a teaching job to come south, and in a basic way he remained a teacher very much in the style of Ms. Baker. Rather than giving orders or answers, he was good at defining issues, what became known in SNCC as “raising questions.” Usually ethical questions.

“It seems to me what we need to ask ourselves is, are we willing to endanger the lives of other people, the local people, who work with us?”

“We are nonviolent, but do we *have the right* to ask Mr. Steptoe to remove the guns from his home where his family is sleeping because SNCC people happen to be there that night? Can we take away a man’s right to defend his family?”

Jes’ a-raising questions.

As you have probably surmised, I came to admire Bob a lot. I mean a lot. He had been a doctoral candidate in philosophy at Harvard when we met. I was changing my major to philosophy. Bob’s example of clarity and rationality influenced me in that decision. When I got to know him, we’d sometimes discuss philosophy. I remember one night in a Freedom House we sat up almost till sunup discussing a tough philosophical problem. That was Bob. He taught me a lot of philosophy.

[Moses remembers one such session:

“One particular night Stokely and I spent several intense hours going over the proof of Goedel’s completeness theorem for first-order quantificational logic, which I’d studied in graduate school. You know, one of those philosophy-of-math courses. It’s a difficult proof to understand. That evening showed a side of Stokely that was not in public view: a demand for understanding and clarity about difficult, abstract, highly technical logico/mathematical material. I was deeply impressed by his insistence on mastering the proof, especially in that setting.”

Hearing this I couldn’t help suppose that the Freedom House in which this discussion took place was one of those bugged by the Sovereignty Commission. Can you not see those watchdogs of Southern freedom reviewing this tape?

“‘Gittin’ anythang good on that tape, Bo?”

“‘Hard to tell, Cap’n, mighty hard. Listen at this. What you reckon them nigras be saying? They must be talkin’ Communist, huh?”

“‘No, son, that’s code. They talkin’ code, boy. Best we send it on to the FBI for decoding, y’know?”

“‘Oh, yeah. Tha’s right, Cap’n, les’ do that. Boy, there sure ain’t no flies on you, Cap’n.”—EMT]

Bob was really, as we used to say, “into” existentialism, particularly

Camus, believing strongly that we are what we do. Not what we say or what we might even *think* we are. But what we actually *do*. How we treat others. What we accept or condone for ourselves and others. What we resist. If you exploit others, you are an exploiter. If you oppress, you are an oppressor. If you sell out principle, you are a prostitute. It is only in the act of rebellion—not in talking or posturing—that you become a rebel. And there is a human moral imperative to rebel against all injustice. Simple enough, right? Well, try to live by those precepts. Bob really seemed to try and, far as I can see, still does. To the extent that Bob was a leader in SNCC, he was so by example, and his authority came from the respect that example earned from us.

The other thing that was really important to me was this: you could not be around Bob long and fail to see how much he really loved our people and was totally committed to our liberation. Obviously our styles and personalities are very different. But as a young man and budding organizer, I was influenced by Bob Moses in fundamental and I think lasting ways. Many of us were, to some extent. Because, boil it down to gravy, Bob was, first of all, a phenomenal organizer. Thoughtful, smart, infinitely resourceful, and most important of all, effective. In Mississippi, with his ability to inspire and instill courage in all kinds of people, myself included, he was able to create something really remarkable.

[Endesha Mae Holland:

"Bob was so gentle . . . so kind, you couldn't ask for anybody better. He planned strategy. He got people out of jail. He calmed nerves. He soothed feelings. He made everybody feel like they had a part to play. I 'member one time he pointed to me. He said, 'Now, Ida, now you been to jail before. You know how to go to jail.' I was so proud. I was glad to say, 'Yes, Bob, I do know.' I was so glad to be used for something. While the whole town was looking down on me, the movement said, 'You are somebody.'"]

In fact, I missed the famous March on Washington because of Bob. We had gone up with the group from Mississippi, but then Bob asked me to come with him on the day of the march to meet with some radical white students who wanted to talk about how they could be involved. It was a big SDS convention, I think somewhere in Virginia, but I'm not sure. We didn't know what might happen in D.C. on the day, it could have proved dramatic. (It didn't, but I did miss Dr. King's Dream in the original.) Yet I didn't hesitate a New York minute. I was just too honored to be asked by Bob to accompany him. I remember watching Bob talk to those white students and being just incredibly proud that this brother was our leader. Bob and I argued that activist white students, if serious, should come off the campus and undertake to organize poor communities of whites. If, for example, they would set up SNCC-like projects, say among the miners in

Appalachia, that could be the basis of an alliance, organized by students, between poor whites and poor blacks. The meeting was enthusiastic about the idea but I cannot say what, if any, follow-up there was.

[Our brother's account of this student meeting on the day of the march is the only lapse of memory I encountered in the many hours of taped memoirs he left with me. Months after completing this chapter I leafed through Danny Lyon's magnificent book of movement photographs.

In the foreground of a crowd shot before the Lincoln Memorial there stood a group of SNCC stalwarts singing. Clearly recognizable were Hollis Watkins, Willie Peacock, Jim Forman, Annell Ponder, Courtland Cox, and next to Julian Bond in the foreground is Bob Moses. A few pages on it hit. Whoa now! By Carmichael's detailed account, Bob isn't supposed to be there. He's at an SDS meeting in Virginia.

Moses confirmed his presence at the march. He also remembered he and Carmichael's being at the SDS meeting, but was certain that this meeting was in 1964. Clearly, then, Carmichael's memory must have conflated the two events. But then, where was he on the day of the march?

I distinctly remembered, as did everyone I checked with, his being at the field headquarters on the Mall the day previous. (He'd been driving a car loaned to the march by a local company. A D.C. cop gave him a ticket. To his unconcealed amazement and glee, a captain strode over, remonstrated with the officer, took the ticket, and tore it up. "Well, look at this," Stokely said, grinning. "I guess Bayard really done made the revolution.")

But no one could remember seeing him on the day and none of us knew where he was. Nor could we imagine anything that could have lured him away from so dramatic a political event. That, we agreed, simply wasn't like Stokely. So, where could he have been? A mystery. A great puzzlement. We concluded that there must somewhere be a sister—once militant and powerfully alluring, perhaps still so—who could, if she so chose, shed some light on his whereabouts that day. —EMTJ

The next spring (1964), Bob would give me the greatest honor and responsibility I'd had in my young life. When he came to D.C. to organize support for the Mississippi Freedom Summer, Bob asked me to serve as director of the Second Congressional District (the Delta) during the Freedom Summer. I was moved, overwhelmed as much by the responsibility as by Bob's confidence. To be appointed to that job, and by Bob? I couldn't believe it.

It's the summer of '62. The movement in the Delta has survived its first year. And well enough to spread out of Greenwood and into the small towns, rural areas, and plantations of neighboring counties. Indianola is the county seat of Sunflower County, home of Parchman prison and

James Oliver Eastland, millionaire cotton planter and powerful Dixiecrat chairman of the Judiciary Committee of the U.S. Senate.

The flat Delta earth is baking underneath the afternoon sun. It is hot and stuffy in the rickety, old retired school bus. The faces of the eighteen or so people—SNCC worker Charles McLaurin and some local people—carry a sheen of sweat and fear. The police cruiser has trailed the bus since it left Indianola. The driver drives carefully, scrupulously observing the speed limit and all traffic laws. The cops continue to follow and everyone is tense.

The local people are from the town of Ruleville. They are the second group from there to make the trip to Indianola to attempt to register to vote. The registrar has been abusive. The sheriff threatening. All have failed the test. Now they are worried, wondering whether they have not been foolish. Whether it was worth the risk after all.

A siren screams and behind them blue lights flash. The bus pulls over. The driver is called off. The people can see him being interrogated. The fear is almost tangible. Without motion the heat becomes unbearable inside the bus. Then the silence is filled with a rich, powerful contralto voice, singing:

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round
Turn me round, turn me round, turn me round
Cause I want my freedom, I want my freedom,
And I want my freedom now.

The singer is a shortish, rotund, brown lady named Fannie Lou Hamer (peace be unto her). When she reaches the second stanza—

Ain't scared of nobody
Cause Ah wants mah freedom . . .

—the lines are literally true because everyone has joined in. Mrs. Hamer would say later that she had burst into song to “encourage the peoples ’cause Ah could see that evrahboddy was a-feared an’ I just didn’t know anything else to do.” That inspired burst of song—and what happened after she returned home that afternoon—would change Mrs. Hamer’s life. Her boldness and the inspired intervention—not to mention the great resonant voice—had caught Charles McLaurin’s attention. Was not this evidence of the grassroots leadership spirit that SNCC was committed to finding and nurturing in the Delta?

At the courthouse the registrar had required Mrs. Hamer to interpret a section of the Mississippi Constitution about “de facto law.” She had

failed, she said, because "you know I knowed 'bout as much any 'facto law' as a mule knows 'bout Christmas." She had also been required to name her employer.

When Mrs. Hamer reached the Marlowe plantation where she'd worked as a timekeeper for eighteen years, her husband, Mr. Perry Hamer, was worried. News of her aspiration to citizenship had reached the plantation before she had. The owner had been looking for her all afternoon. The bossman was succinct. Either Mrs. Hamer removed her name from the list of applicants or she should remove herself from his plantation.

"Well, Mr. Marlowe," she said, "I didn't go register for you. I registered for myself."

That night Mrs. Hamer sought shelter in the Ruleville community. Shortly thereafter, night riders shot into the house where she had been staying.

[According to Kay Mills's excellent, very thorough biography of Mrs. Hamer:

"The next morning the boss told Mr. Hamer to tell his wife to come back home. Things would be like they always were. She replied, 'That's just what I'm trying to git out of. Things be like they always was? I want change.' Years later, Marlowe's son Dave said his father hadn't meant to throw her off his place. . . ."

"When she reached Ruleville that night, Mrs. Hamer went to the Voting Rights meeting. She said she had been thrown off the plantation and had no place to go. 'I jes' thought I'd come on out here and tell y'awl.' Her friend Mary Tucker spoke up.

"Don't say you ain't got nowhere to go so long as I have a shelter. If I ain't got but one plank you can stick your head under there too.' And she said, 'Thank you, Tuck.' And Joe McDonald said 'If you ain't got room, I got room,' and we just put our arms around her.'" —EMT]

That's how it began. Of course, Mrs. Hamer would become a symbol to a great many people across the nation. And I suppose, something of a symbol to us in SNCC too, but in a particular way. We knew and loved this stout, earthy, kindhearted lady. Yes, she represented something important to us. But she did not merely represent an *idea*, some SNCC *theory* of grassroots leadership. The twentieth child born into a family of sharecroppers, Mrs. Hamer *was* the grassroots, the "local peoples" SNCC is always accused of "romanticizing." I'm talking here about Mrs. Hamer's spirit. Her warmth. Her values. A fundamental decency and generosity. Her simplicity and absence of self-importance or pretentiousness. She simply embodied in her jes'-plain-folks way all the qualities and values we were coming to admire in the local peoples.

She was smart and really funny, and by virtue of her history and experience, politically very astute. Unlettered though she was politically, she had a shrewd understanding of political and economic power

and the injustice of its effects on poor folk in this country because she had lived it. She had been induced by the bossman to pick her first cotton at the age of six, for candy.

With no formal education beyond the sixth grade, she was powerfully and wonderfully eloquent. Though untrained, she was an artist, a great singer. And a very forgiving human being. 'Buked and scorned all her life because she was black, she was unfailingly sympathetic—and helpful whenever she could be—to the suffering of poor whites. This in spite of the history she told me. In her childhood, her entire family worked in the fields. One year they seemed to be making some progress. After a good crop her father managed to buy a pair of mules and a cow. They woke up one morning to find the animals dead. Poisoned by an envious white neighbor. The family never recovered economically.

More than a symbol, she was day to day a real leader in her community, and as real to us as member of the family. And if she was also a symbol, she was a symbol of the best in our people, and the best of what SNCC wanted to think the struggle was all about. Simple as that.

When white men in the Winona jail savagely beat three generations of black women, they had no idea how close they came to triggering a race war. Those were three of the most loved and respected of the movement's women. [*Mrs. Hamer was forty-four, Annell Ponder was in her twenties, and Stokely's teenaged "little sister," June Johnson, was fifteen. —EMT*] There were brothers in Greenwood who had the means and certainly the intention. Especially after Medgar Evers was murdered in Jackson the next day.

That one was close, I mean narrowly averted, and I'm not talking hours. I'm talking minutes. Brothers were about to roll on that two-bit jail. Maybe they should not have been dissuaded.

The facts are well-known. Our sisters had been returning from a voter education workshop. The bus stopped in a mean, ugly little town called Winona, and four of our sisters entered the white rest room and were arrested. When Mrs. Hamer got off the bus to inquire, she was arrested too. The cracker cop who informed Mrs. Hamer that she was under arrest kicked her as he did so. In her cell she could hear them beating the younger women.

"After I was placed in the cell, I begun to hear sounds of licks and screams . . . the sound of licks and horrible screams, and I could hear somebody say, 'Nigger, can you say, yes, sir?' She never would say yessir and I could hear when she would hit the floor . . . them licks jes' asoundin'," That was Annell Ponder screaming. She never said *sir*.

"After that I heard some real keen screams, *real keen*, and after that was when they passed my cell with a girl. She was fifteen years old, Miss Johnson, June Johnson . . . the blood was running down her face."

Then they came for Mrs. Hamer. Two black prisoners* were ordered to hold her down and beat her with a studded leather strap. Mrs. Hamer asked, "How could they do that their own race?" Turns out they could. The whites oversaw the work, threatening the black men whenever they appeared to lighten up.

"I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in mah head, telling me to hush. Another white man—my dress had begun to ride up high—he walked over an' pulled my dress back down as they beat me. Then he pulled my dress back up and they continued to beat me." Mrs. Hamer came close to death in the immediate aftermath of that beating. She said that the nightlong ministrations of Euvesta Simpson pulled her through. But whenever we talked about it, Mrs. Hamer would merely wonder how people who called themselves Christians could treat other human beings in that way. A question she managed to ask her tormentors before she was bailed out. She was still asking it with genuine bewilderment years later.

Another day I'll never forget was when I drove Mrs. Hamer to a small town called Sunflower City. We had no sooner left the car and started walking down the street when a white man passed us going in the opposite direction. An ordinary-looking white man, bald head shining, wearing khakis.

But Mrs. Hamer froze stock-still and caught her breath audibly. Something strange happened to her face as she turned and glared after the man. The change was so sudden that I was startled. Her usually benign expression was gone, replaced by something I'd never before seen in her face and never ever saw again. This look of revulsion, contempt, and anger was so intense that I at first took it to be a sign of physical distress. A heart attack, perhaps? It couldn't be something totally out of character, like a hate stare?

"Mrs. Hamer. What happened? Are you okay?" I cried.

She took a deep breath and shuddered. "That's Big Milam. The cracker who murdered that poor boy Emmett Till." That was the only time I ever saw anything other than compassion on Mrs. Hamer's countenance.

Another thing I remember about Mrs. Hamer is her elation and joy when she returned from Africa in 1964. *[A SNCC delegation visited Guinea on the invitation of President Sékou Touré, which had been arranged by*

*This case was actively pursued by the Justice Department, and five police officers were actually brought to trial on federal charges. The two black prisoners found the courage to testify to being threatened and bribed to participate in the beating of Mrs. Hamer. The Mississippi jury acquitted the police. It is not known what fate befell the prisoners when they were returned to Parchman Farm after testifying against the police. —EMT

Harry Belafonte. —*EMTJ* Here was this daughter of Southern sharecroppers speaking neither French nor any of the African languages yet talking on and on about how completely at home and connected she had felt. She had been thrilled and couldn't stop talking about black folks running things. Pilots flying planes, etc., etc. And she was sho nuff in love with Sékou Touré (peace be unto him).

"Oh, Stokely, the president came to visit. Oh, he was sooo handsome, all in his white robes, an' he was so kind." Despite the language gap, she had spoken with everyone she'd met. "Oh, Stokely, those people be jes' like us. The way they fix they hair, some of them. How they stand, how they walk, even the way they carry they babies." Like many returning Africans, she could not exactly explain the powerful feelings she'd experienced, but understood that it was real.

"But, Stokely. It was so *strange* . . . I jes' *feel* that I got family there . . . I mean people my own blood . . . who I'll never know."

When I was leaving the Delta, I went to say good-bye. She gave me a big hug.

"Stokely, you know that so long as I got a house in Mississippi, you got a place to stay. If there ain't but one chicken wing in the pot, you got half."

Mrs. Hamer was a great-souled sister.

I've said that Mississippi first taught me to really love my blackness. Which it surely did. But it taught me something else important. That what I really was and wanted to be was an organizer.

Organizing in those circumstances was rough. It was a constant hassle, challenging and demanding. The most demanding work I'd ever done. But it was also the most satisfying work, fulfilling and at times just outright inspiring. I'd never felt anything like it. It brought out the best in me, qualities I had not known I had.

The thing that remains with me most strongly from that time, when everything else—the violence, the cops, the politics—recedes, is an incredible sense of community, of closeness and warmth, that we had. Which is all that made the movement possible in the first place. Within the organization we had some remarkable models like Ms. Baker and others I've mentioned. But as organizers we had to work with the entire community. The ordinary folk, from the older people, the preachers, the mothers and fathers, to the young folk, the teenagers, and even the little kids. As an organizer, you had to work with *evrahbody*. You had a role and an identity with the entire community. A slightly different role with each group. That was a revelation and a real pleasure to me.

You had to earn and keep the community's confidence and respect. So you couldn't set yourself up as some "leader" or be trying to tell folks what to do. Or asking people to do anything you wouldn't first do yourself. I

mean, here you are, all of twenty years old, and you are social worker, teacher, political adviser, as well as “son” and eager student to the elders. To the youth, you are peer, friend, big brother, role model, tutor, mentor, and even sometimes coach and playground supervisor. I loved it all.

We were trying to organize an entire community, but the core of the movement community was really a particular group of strong families, grandparents, parents, and children. The Johnsons, whom I’ve mentioned; the Greenes, Mr. and Mrs. Dewey Greene Sr. and the children, Dewey Jr., George, and their sister Freddie. The McGhee family, who asked and gave no quarter, Mrs. Laura McGhee and her warrior sons, Silas, Jake, and Clarence, the giant paratrooper. And there were other families whose names don’t come to mind.

[Endesha Mae Holland:

“It was so beautiful to see women like Ms. Lulabelle Johnson and Ms. (Laura) McGhee. They would walk with such pride. They shoulders be back and their titties be sticking out a loooong way in front of them. Mama say you could see they titties a whole block before you see them. An’ they be walking with such pride. They be jes’ marching. An’ I can remember myself tryin’ to walk with that heavy step they used. Look like the earth would jes’ ketch their feet and hold them up. These women would walk they walk, y’know, and when they gets up in front of this human blockade of po-lices, they start talking they talk and singing them songs. ‘I ain’t scared o’ nobody, ’cause I want mah freedom . . .’

“Oh, chile, it jes’ made me so proud.”]

As I would quickly discover, these were families in which the parents had never surrendered. Had never accepted the limitations racism tried to impose. Who never allowed their kids to believe for a minute that their possibilities stopped at maid, cook, or cotton chopper for white folks. Parents who instilled and demonstrated self-respect, no matter how materially poor their circumstances. People who had been hearing about the bus boycott and Dr. King, the sit-ins and Freedom Rides, so before we got there, they had been touched by the spirit of the times, even down there in what Bob Moses called the “heart of the iceberg.”

So they knew or expected or hoped that the movement would one day be coming. But they also knew—in fact had lived—the history. So these “Freedom Riders” as they called us, if and when they came, would have to show them something real before they would jump out there or allow their children to. But, once that that happened, look out. There would be no turning back. As the song went:

I done pledged my life to the fight,
and I never will turn back,
Lord, Ah must go,
Ah shall go,

Ah will go

. . . To see what the end will be.

What I learned from the younger generation was different. The Greenwood project had not been started by Northern “liberators” but by two local college students—Sam Block and Willie Wazir Peacock—recruited by Amzie Moore. These two brothers first showed me the ropes, taught me the territory and how to go about organizing amongst the folks. For one thing, both Sam and Willie could sing more than a little and preach some too. Valuable skills indeed for a Delta organizer. They taught me much more besides.

Sam had come into Greenwood first. All alone. People talked about that time with wonder. As soon as the whites figured out what Sam was about, they took action. First they threatened the old man who had rented him a room. Regretfully and almost in tears, he asked Sam to leave. Sam understood that since his cover was blown, no one in the community would dare shelter him and he wouldn’t put them on the spot by asking. So he slept in an abandoned car for the next three weeks. But every morning he was out organizing on foot. That alone got my respect. But there was more. Next, they arrested Sam, I forget for what nonsense.

The local judge ordered him out of town, adding that if he had good sense, he’d leave the state too.

“No, Judge,” said Sam. “You know I ain’t about to do none o’ that.” As he was leaving the court, the sheriff put in his two bits, warning him as to how he didn’t expect to see him anywhere in Greenwood again. “Wal, Sheriff, in that case I guess you just gon’ ha’ to pick up and go. ’Cause I’m sure not going no place.”

That’s when the local folks got brave enough to give him shelter again. After that, Sam slept in a different house every couple nights. You can see why he was respected in that community, was ol’ Sam Block.

He and Willie inspired many of the young men of Greenwood, some of whom became SNCC organizers. I’d be spending most of my time with these guys. They taught me a lot, and I guess I taught them something too. You could say we learned from each other.

George Greene knew everything there was to know about car engines. He was into stock car racing. I think he’d had some training and wanted to be a race driver. He taught us those skills, high-speed turns and “fish-tails” and generally how to take evasive action at high speeds. You couldn’t really call it defensive driving because it was essentially aggressive. George had me practice until I was fairly good, or at least competent at it. Later on when SNCC began to get a few cars, George would soup them up so as to be able to outrun the Klan or, if necessary, the cops.

In 1964, when I became district director for the summer project,

George fixed me up a car. I mean mah man *fixed* it. He souped that engine, reinforced the suspension some kinda way, and I believe even did something to the brakes. I'm not sure what all George did or how legal any of it was, but I was driving something very like a race car, a stone bomb. Despite the traveling I had to do that summer, I always felt real confident in that car. Even a little cocky. What with the Klan patrols, the cops—local and state—and just your average redneck citizen with his rifle rack in the rear window, you always felt vulnerable on the highways. But with George's driver education and the bomb I was driving, I felt right secure, thank you very much. I knew nobody—cop, Klan, or whoever—could keep up with me unless I wanted them to. But it couldn't outrun bullets. By the end of the summer I'd have reporters gawking and exclaiming over all the bullet holes in that car. Thank you, Bro George, and George, May Charles, my dear worrying mother, thanks you too.

I was away on a speaking engagement, so Silas McGhee was using that car the night the white folk shot him in the head. He recovered, but when I heard, my first thought was that seeing Silas in the car, the terrorists had shot him thinking he was me. I felt just awful. But then I realized that they probably hated Silas worse than they did me. The McGhee boys, Silas, Jake, and the big paratrooper, Clarence, along with their mom—had seriously been waging a war of their own with a mob at a movie theater in Greenwood for weeks. That was one family that never “took low” for anyone. There was no quit in them.

The more time I spent with the young people of Greenwood, the angrier I became. Deeply angry. I first noticed then something I've since seen again and again among our people all over the world: the criminal deprivation of opportunity—whether from racism, poverty, or both—and the waste of potential among our youth. You see such spirit, such curiosity, energy, intelligence, and real talent in our young people being denied the opportunity to develop. Incredible human potential being wasted by social injustice, and the denial of resources, nothing else. Where the society is underdeveloped and poor, it's bad enough . . . but in the “richest, freest country in the world”?

But for a moment, even in a limited way, the movement gave some young people the chance not just to assert their human and political rights, but to discover and express their talents as well. The best example of this from Greenwood was fifteen-year-old Ida Mae. Whose mama ran a juke joint that was said to be somewhat disreputable. Ida, like other teenagers, used to hang around the office a lot. Bob Moses set her to work typing, something she had never done, and pretty soon she was—much to her own surprise—not only typing regularly, but listening, conversing, learning, and reading everything she could lay her hands on. Her bubbling

excitement over Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* was just unforgettable. She was blown away, she said. Not only was the book about black people, but black people in *Mississippi*. And, it was written by a *black man* from Mississippi. She was just overwhelmed. "I didn't ever imagine no black person could do anything so great." So I told her about Ms. Margaret Walker down in Jackson. She wanted to go to Jackson to talk to her. Maybe she did, I don't know.

See, when Ida Mae was twelve, she was doing domestic work for a white family. One day, the wife told her to take the husband a drink of water. When she brought it to the bedroom, the man pulled her onto the bed and raped her. At fifteen, by her account, she was an apprentice prostitute. "When I saw all them SNCC workers coming through, seeing they was new in town, I thought mebbe I could turn me some tricks." Then Bob put her to work. Seeing her intelligence and curiosity, a volunteer helped her get into a Midwestern college, something she had never even wildly envisioned. Some years ago, someone asked me whether I remembered Ida Mae Holland. Yeah, why? Because she is now Endesha Mae Holland, Ph.D., one of the leading dramatists in the country and a professor somewhere in the New York University system, tha's why.

Whenever I went back to Mississippi, I'd hear stories like that. Another was about a young girl from a sharecropper family who went to a freedom school and was inspired. She went on to earn a doctorate and was heading up a community health organization somewhere in the Delta. Or, the little brother from Holmes County who as soon as he was old enough organized the little town he came from and was elected mayor at nineteen. Oh, there are stories. And they were good to hear. But what about the thousands of others just as able?

[The young woman is Dr. L. C. Dorsey, executive director of the Delta Health Center in the black town of Mound Bayou.

The young politician must be Eddie Carthen of Tchula, which is quite a story. In the early seventies, I took a group of students to a conference in Mississippi, and we literally ran across a very articulate young man sitting under a tree and who appeared about the same age as my students. He claimed to have been elected mayor of Tchula. Apparently, the incumbent white mayor—who had been in office some twenty years—flatly refused to vacate town hall. Instead the mayor elect was arrested on some pretext. Though legally elected, I don't remember if he was ever allowed to officially take office. It was a long, complicated series of events so utterly outrageous it was hard to believe. But the young man did not seem either crazed or delusional. Later, folks in Jackson confirmed the story. Before we left young Carthen, one of my students asked him where he'd learned so much about politics.

"From the movement," he said. "When I was fourteen, I went to the Freedom School, tha's where I first learned about politics."—EMT]

Of Marches, Coalitions, Dreams, and Ambulance Chasing

A harassed-looking Bayard strode into the office visibly and dramatically agitated.

"Heah I am," he complained, "working frantically against all odds, *tearing* mah hair trying to fashion a social revolution, and *all* you young SNCC Negroes can think about is . . . is . . . is *ambulance chasing*? I need you *heah*. *History* needs you, *heah*."

Classic Rustin. Only Bayard could move in the same sentence from highly theatrical distress (torn hair) to grandiosity (social revolution) to an acid put-down (ambulance chasing) to emissary of history. That was one of the reasons why working with him was never dull.

I think the date of that little outburst was probably June 11, 1963. It could have been no more than a day or two after the Danville, Virginia, atrocity. Bayard was then trying to negotiate the politics while beginning to organize the logistics of what would come to be known as the August 28 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Several friends from NAG (Tom Kahn, Ed Brown, and Courtland Cox) were working on Bayard's staff for the mobilization.

On June 10, one of the most methodically brutal police assaults on unarmed, peaceful demonstrators of the entire movement had taken place in the Virginia town of Danville. Earlier the Danville movement had appealed to SNCC for help, and we'd sent four organizers there. Young, brave Dottie Miller (later Zellner), Avon Rollins, Ivanhoe Donaldson, and Bob Zellner had answered the call for workshops in techniques and the discipline of nonviolent protest.

After negotiations with the city authorities went nowhere, the Danville movement staged a march and pray-in on the steps of City Hall. It was chilling. Really outrageous. I mean, here was a group of peaceful, respectable, dressed-for-church demonstrators, thoroughly trained in the discipline and spirit of nonviolence, led by two Christian ministers kneeling in prayer on the steps of the Danville City Hall. For this act of defiance, the police unleashed fire hoses, followed by squads of cops

swinging nightsticks. It was nightmarish. Obviously the Danville police had been impressed by Bull Connor's tactics in Birmingham a couple months earlier.

The police response had been swift and savage. I mean brutal, and coldly methodical too. First, blasts from fire hoses swept the people into the streets, tearing off clothes and rolling people along the pavement. Then, before they could regain their feet, a wave of cops and, I believe, deputized garbagemen, swinging clubs beat them where they lay. It was the worst systematic brutality we'd yet seen, not excluding Dr. King's Birmingham campaign, which had dominated the international headlines earlier that spring. But of course, the national media had not been in Danville.

Naturally—as with the Freedom Rides—the immediate impulse on all SNCC projects was for folks to drop everything and rush to Danville to reinforce our battered brethren. “We cannot and will not allow violence to . . . etc.” Hence Bayard's ambulance-chasing dig. It worked. Ed and Courtland did not defect to Danville, but stayed to help Bayard fashion his “social revolution.”

[Danville is a small (45,000) Virginia city on the banks of the Dan River. A third of the population (15,000) was black. It was a textile and tobacco town, home to Dan River mills. Danville took particular pride in two distinctions: having the “largest single unit textile mill in the world” and of having been “The Last Capital of the Confederacy.” It was also a classic company town; the Dan River corporation, being by far the largest employer and taxpayer, pretty much ran the city government. Their mills employed eleven thousand Danville residents. Of this workforce, some eleven hundred were blacks and only in the most menial jobs. The highest-ranking, best-paid black employee was a machinist at \$80 a week. In town, blacks were segregated in housing, education, municipal employment, public accommodation in restaurants and hotels, and even were denied use of the city library, allegedly the site of the last full meeting of the Confederate cabinet. —EMT]

That spring, a new organization, the Danville Christian Progressive Association, led by three prominent clergymen [*the Reverend Lansdell Chase, the Reverend Lawrence Campbell, and the Reverend Alexander Dunlap*], began to petition the city for relief, especially in education and employment. They asked for jobs as police officers, firefighters, meter readers, and clerks. They also mentioned streetlights, paved roads, and garbage collection in the African neighborhoods. Rebuffed completely, the ministers Dunlap and Campbell led a march on June 5 in which two hundred people were arrested. That's when they appealed for help from SNCC. And that's when it got ugly.

The police attack on June 10 left “drenched and bloody bodies lying in

the street" according to Dottie Miller's field report. Of sixty-five demonstrators, forty-eight needed medical attention at the segregated hospital. When Danny Lyon, the SNCC photographer, arrived at the hospital, it was by his account like a MASH unit:

"Wounded people were sitting on the floor in the halls. People with lacerations and fractures were lying on stretchers waiting to be stitched up. Forman kept telling me to take close-ups of the wounds. I photographed a man whose shirtfront was completely covered with his own dried blood. His broken arm was in a sling. Next to him stood his friend, one eye swollen closed, his head split open in two places; sutured shut, the swelling rose about two inches from his scalp. These people had been kneeling in prayer at City Hall."

Before the march, fifteen SNCC organizers had been sent into Danville. In her memoir, *Freedom Song*, Mary King describes a town on military alert, patrolled by local cops, state troopers, military personnel with helicopters, and a militia of deputized municipal workers, mostly untrained laborers and garbagemen carrying clubs. Fear and harassment were constant.

Clearly the "Last Confederate Capital" took its historical inheritance seriously. In fact, after SNCC called for a boycott of Dan River mills products (supported in New York by the ILGWU*), the enduring presence of "history" there became manifest. When a local grand jury brought back indictments of "incitement to violence and war" against our workers, it was a capital offense based on a statute dating to 1832, during the panic in the aftermath of the Nat Turner rebellion. This prohibited "inciting the black (slave) population to violence and war against white citizens." The prosecutors did not see the irony. Had nothing changed in 130 years?

But Danville was only one place. That summer of the March an estimated fourteen thousand people were arrested in similar nonviolent protests across Dixieland.

Bayard's little performance had summarized exactly the ambivalence and the tension the movement was experiencing in the spring of '63. Bayard and the venerable A. Philip Randolph (God's peace on them both) had first raised the idea of a march that winter, December 1962. Their idea had been to focus all the energy and the movement's scattered resources on the national government, which had been dragging its feet. The Kennedy administration was entering its third year and had done nothing effective, at least that we could see. Then all that spring, nonviolent protests had been raging *all over the South!* Apparently spontaneously,

*International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

communities were organizing themselves to engage the injustices and the humiliation that surrounded them.

And I do mean *all over the south*. Black people were *happening*, Jack. It was a black nonviolent *intifada*. SNCC was getting daily requests to send organizers everywhere. Even up to within forty miles of the nation's capital. Even before the request from Danville. Earlier that spring SNCC Atlanta had asked us to help train a spirited movement in a hardscrabble little town called Cambridge on Maryland's Eastern Shore. All spring semester, groups of us had been going from Howard every weekend to work with a sister named Gloria Richardson and her people in Cambridge. Cambridge was one mean town, but Gloria and her people were great, spirited, and serious. Reminded me a lot of folks in Mississippi.

So . . . black people were happening, Jack. If you cared at all about your people, it was an exciting, hopeful spring to be alive and active.

Now the bad part. SNCC was entering its third year in voter registration and had staked out the hard places. Those "black belt" counties in the Delta of Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, and southwest Georgia. We had agreed that CORE could have Louisiana. We were working where Africans were in the majority and the vote could theoretically make a real difference. Which is why the repression was so desperate. As Mr. Turnbow said when I explained this, "Power seek th *weak* places, water seek th *low* places, but SNCC done seek th *hard* places, seem like r' me."

In every one of these places our staff and the local people had been seriously terrorized. And the federal government—the Justice Department, the FBI, those Kennedy liberals who had promised so much—where were they? Nowhere to be found. Worse even, for wherever we did see an FBI presence, it was rarely easy to determine which side it was on. The Atlanta office constantly tried to make sure the Feds knew. We phoned, wrote, and telegraphed the Justice Department. We notified liberal congressmen. We complained to the press. All to little avail. To say we were disappointed in the administration and JFK's "new frontier" would be an understatement. Scratch *disappointed* and try *betrayed* and *abandoned*.

[The following telegram from September 14, 1962, bears witness. It is quite representative and could easily have been sent in September 1961 or September 1963 and every month in between. Only the names and places would have needed to be changed. —EMT]

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING
 C/O SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE
 330 AUBURN AVE.
 ATLANTA, GA.

PLEASE URGE THE UNITED STATES JUSTICE DEPARTMENT
 TO CONDUCT FULL INVESTIGATION AND APPREHEND THOSE

WHO KILLED UNIDENTIFIED NEGRO MAN IN GOODMAN, MISSISSIPPI. INVESTIGATIONS ALSO NECESSARY ON SHOOTING OF MARY LANE BURKS AND VIVIAN HILLET IN RULEVILLE, MISSISSIPPI. ALSO SHOOTING OF CHRISTOPHER ALLEN, JACK CHATFIELD AND PRATHIA HALL [SNCC STUDENTS FROM THE NORTH] IN DAWSON, GEORGIA AND BURNING TWO CHURCHES IN DAVISON AND ONE IN LEESBURG, GEORGIA. A WAVE [OF] TERROR AND KLAN REACTIVITY IS SWEEPING SOUTHWEST GEORGIA AND MISSISSIPPI. FEAR WE CANNOT PROTECT OUR FIELD SECRETARIES AND POTENTIAL VOTERS WITHOUT DIRECT INTERVENTION OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

CHARLES MCDEW, CHAIRMAN, SNCC

Which is why the idea for a march on Washington made sense when we first heard it in December 1962. Yeah! Let us unite and focus all this activity in one place. Let's bring nonviolent direct action to the seat of government. Sit-ins in the halls of Congress. Campouts on the White House lawn. Let them either enforce their laws and professed "policies" in the South or be "embarrassed" again before the world. Let the nation and the world see what we've been seeing. Who they going to lock up? Us? When they can't seem to lock up the Klan? By then I was ready to take my chances. I really wanted to sit in, in Senator Eastland's office.

I know there were people around Dr. King and many in CORE and certainly SNCC who, with our supporters, could have turned out at least two thousand hardened veterans ready to face jail in Washington if necessary. Hell, we were already getting our heads whupped, our churches burned, and our people shot while the national government did diddly. Let them arrest the movement on the steps of the Capitol before the eyes of the world. Course, not everybody felt that way.

Bayard and Mr. Randolph's plan was to present a united front of the civil rights leadership. But Roy Wilkins (NAACP) and Whitney Young (Urban League) (peace be unto them), the "inside" players, were having none of it. No, Suh. Bad idea, this "march." Unwise. Untimely. Impolitic. No march, and certainly, certainly, *certainly*, Lord, *no* direct action. That would embarrass the president. Damage delicate relationships with supporters in Congress. Alienate powerful liberal allies. Anger the general public. Trigger white backlash. Utter madness, bad idea.

Since we had seen precious little hard evidence of presidential "goodwill" or "powerful liberal allies" or "congressional supporters," we wondered whether these "so-called Negro leaders" (Malcolm's term) might not be having delusions. I mean, endanger the administration's civil rights bill?

In 1962, the White House had been floating a "moderate" civil rights

bill as its legislative priority. But—and I remember this clearly—when Congress reconvened that winter, January 1963, the media reported that the civil rights bill was now on a “back burner.” The administration’s legislative priority was now a *tax cut*. Sound familiar? So what was there for the march to endanger? Besides, far as I was concerned, the bill was a red herring anyway. What was needed was not any *new* legislation, especially not a “moderate” bill, but some real political will! As in serious *enforcement* of the laws that already existed.

Given the arguments of Young and Wilkins, the march idea was stalemated. It could go nowhere all winter long because Bayard and Mr. Randolph remained committed to a united front. Then came the spring. Birmingham police brutality and the specter of race war captured the national attention. Wilkins and Young began to feel a little heat from thousands marching in the streets. Well, maybe a *certain kind* of march, a carefully orchestrated and controlled *gesture* . . . nothing too militant or threatening, then maybe . . . And then presidential priorities began to shift again.

In June, in fact the week after the Danville police atrocity and Bayard’s little performance, President Kennedy addressed the nation in prime time. It was a good speech, no question. He talked for the first time about the moral issues in the implicit injustice of racism and with a new sense of moral urgency resurrected his civil rights bill.

I should say a little more about that speech. It was announced that the president would “address the nation” on the *question of civil rights*. *All three networks would be carrying the speech live and in prime time. Whoever*. Either this was going to be important or else the White House and the media were hyping it so we would think it was important. It was also rumored that his “wise men”—or most of them—opposed the speech. In the climate of the time, that got your attention. So millions of Americans, white and black, tuned in. Given the administration’s record, I was sure it would turn out to be just another cop-out. But I was surprised. It was accurate, clear, and truthful. The clearest, they said, since Lincoln’s second Inaugural Address (1864) a hundred years earlier. That’s a long time for presidential silence, friends. I think this speech has to be what accounted for JFK’s great popularity among ordinary black folk in the South. It was probably also what—as much as anything else he did—earned him the enmity of whites there. (When the news of Kennedy’s shooting reached Jackson, the staff reported that Africans stayed off the streets, where gangs of good ol’ boys celebrated with loud cheers and rebel yells.) But what did Kennedy actually say that night?

He began by declaring civil rights “a moral issue as old as the Scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution.” Simple and self-evident truths that no American president had had the vision to see, or the

courage to say, for a hundred years? Apparently not, so he deserves that credit.

Then when I thought he might ask us to be patient and nonviolent again, he addressed his white countrymen:

If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public; if he cannot send his children to the best public schools available; if he cannot vote for the public official who represents him . . . who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with counsels of patience and delay? One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves. Yet their heirs are not fully free . . . from the bonds of injustice . . . from social and economic oppression. And this nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.

Historic? Perhaps. Certainly. But it was no more than we'd been saying all along.

In Jackson, Mississippi, that night after the speech, Byron De La Beckwith shot down Medgar Evers from ambush. Some days after the speech, JFK met with the national civil rights leaders,—who were now discussing the march with new energy—to suggest strongly that any confrontation in D.C. would doom his legislation. Congress would respond ill to any “intimidation.” Any violence or disruptions in the streets of the nation’s capital would only strengthen the hand of the racists in Congress. Would “alienate” and lose the “goodwill of the American people,” among whom he clearly did not include us or the people we worked with.

So, another one of those “tough” political calls. Wilkins and Young supported the administration’s argument. Bayard and Mr. Randolph, supported by the activists, did not want to abandon the march. Keep it alive if only as a threat. Finally they agreed to scrap the idea of *any* direct action or confrontation with the administration. It should be a giant rally *in support* of the administration’s legislative program. Once the White House gave cautious, tentative approval, that was the turning point. Check it out. The very establishment that had been the *target*, the fully deserved target of the demonstration, was now giving *permission*? And then only if we promised to be good?

Enter now the “liberal establishment.” Suddenly all kinds of “powerful and respectable” organizations (not the AFL-CIO, though) found it possible to support the march publicly. Bayard had his coalition, but there would be a price. From now on everything, but everything, would have to be approved by them, or indirectly by “representatives” of the White

House: the program, the speakers, the route of the march, the slogans, the signs to be carried, and of course, even the speeches. What, in fact, the Negroes would be allowed to say. At least in our case that was true.

Thereafter this "coalition," the so-called Big Ten, would take full credit for the passage of the civil rights bill of 1964. Quite as if the hundreds of aroused communities, the thousands of demonstrators in the streets and jails, the fire hoses and police dogs of Birmingham, had had nothing to do with getting the attention of the president and Congress in the first place. And, most galling of all, was this self-righteous attitude, that by supporting the bill, *they* were bestowing a great favor on the Negroes. That we ought to be grateful to them for granting us rights that other Americans—even ones off the ship only last week—took for granted. Gimme a cotton-picking break!

Which is not to say that Bayard and Mr. Randolph do not deserve honor and credit. They surely did. For their initiative and persistence had forged the alliance that made the march possible.

And the march itself? It was a spectacular media event. The first real political "media event" of the sixties. That is to say, a "political event" choreographed entirely for the television audience. And, by the way, look again at the pictures. That was no 250,000 people as reported by the D.C. police. It had to have been at least twice that. Easily.*

Dr. King may indeed, as he said he intended, have "subpoenaed the conscience of the nation" with his great speech. Later, when they received the leadership, the Kennedys were said to have been moved by the "dignity, peacefulness, and grandeur" of the spectacle. And undoubtedly that "river of black and white humanity" flowing through the city to stand before the Lincoln Memorial had a certain "grandeur." All true. A grand and moving spectacle.

But it is also true that in cold political terms, the march changed nothing. At least in the immediate aftermath. Next day, business as usual. Cops all over the South were back to whupping heads and taking names with a vengeance. In the Congress, the civil rights bill somehow managed to again fade into the background and out of discussion. Once more, apparently, a dead issue. So much for your powerful liberal coalition. A year later the bill would pass. But credit for its passage belongs even more to

*Jervis Anderson reported, "Seymour Perves, the march's publicity director, distrusted all police estimates of black political gatherings. . . . 'I went crazy with that figure,' he recalled. 'I was standing next to Randolph, and I leaned over to him and said, 'Brother Randolph, I happen to know there are at least four hundred thousand people here.' But Randolph was a man of principle. He said it would be improper to announce a figure larger than what the police gave him.'" —EMT

those four young girls murdered in a Birmingham church three weeks after the march. Or to the morally depraved racists who planted that bomb. Or maybe to Lee Harvey Oswald or whoever actually fired that rifle in Dallas two months after that.

Yeah, tell the truth and shame the devil, 'cause, as they say, the truth shall make ye free.

[Had Ture thought of it, he could well have extended credit for passage of the legislation much closer to home. The civil rights bill, HR 7152, was signed on July 2, 1964. By then our three workers on the Summer Project (see next chapter) who were murdered in Neshoba County, Mississippi, had been missing for almost two weeks, during which time the Mississippi struggle had completely dominated the national media attention. —EMT]

All of which is important to understand properly because a lot of mythology, folklore, and historical rewriting surrounds this subject. Even if we did not and could not have understood it clearly at the time, the political tensions that dogged the march from the beginning were not incidental. They were fundamental. And one "minor" event on the day itself would be prophetic: the censoring of John Lewis's speech. Which, according to the conventional wisdom of the establishment, had represented "irresponsibly radical attitudes of a politically naive student element," which had always been "disruptive" of the "movement" and which later would "destroy" it. Utter, utter nonsense. Let's be clear on that.

First of all, when John's speech was censored, this so-called grand movement coalition was all of two months old. Something cobbled together with the permission of the Kennedys. Bayard's coalition materialized only after the compromise resulting from the Kennedy meeting in June. "Once Kennedy agreed," Tom Kahn told me, "all kinds of liberal support miraculously appeared. The morning after, it was like a different world."

I mean, for three years, all over the South and elsewhere, thousands of black people and conscious whites had been in the trenches, peacefully and nonviolently agitating for rights supposedly guaranteed to *all* by the Constitution. And we had been battered by the violence of the mob and the state. All this time the conservatives had attacked us relentlessly, as did much of the nation's media, and not just in the South either: the great liberal *establishment* had sat on their hands. True, they did not leap to attack us like the Southern racist and their Northern right-wing allies like William F. Buckley and Judge Bork. But they essentially stayed aloof, silent as the grave, unable, apparently, to decide whether black folks were actually entitled to the rights of American citizens or if their effort to gain them deserved their support. So where was all the "moral leadership" then? Where was the coalition? *Hey . . . check . . . it . . . out.*

The march (August 1963) was their first public act affirming the

basic moral right to simple justice for our people. Yeah. And they hung in until the voting rights act (1965). Then, as soon as we raised the call for Black Power (1966), they split. Where have they been since and where are they now? Of course, there have been honorable exceptions, but in general? So don't talk to me about no "liberals" or the "grand civil rights movement/coalition" either. Okay?

The response to John's speech was therefore very much a sign of things to come. Very much so. For that speech was no rabid diatribe of radical excess. Hey, SNCC had carefully put that speech together to accurately and truthfully reflect our experience. It may not have been pleasant, but it was all true. Maybe our experience was not so pleasant either, no American Dream. So kill the messenger, shall we?

John pointed out that even as he spoke, nine of our people were under indictment in Albany, Georgia, not by Dixiecrat politicians but by the federal government. The very same Justice Department, he pointed out, that was unable to do anything about four field secretaries—all young students—who, for peaceful picketing, were in jail, denied bail, and being threatened with death penalties in Americus, Georgia. Which side, he wondered, was the federal government on?

He talked about hundreds of our people in jail for voter registration. He talked about the thousands of *my* people in the Mississippi Delta evicted from plantations or working for starvation wages, \$3 or less for twelve hours of work. Would the Kennedy bill help them? Would it protect women and children from fire hoses and police dogs?

Also, John pointed out, the "glaring contradictions" of the American political system "in which the party of Kennedy is the party of Eastland and the party of Javits [Senator Jacob Javits, R-NY] is the party of Goldwater." "Where," he asked, "is our party? The party which will make such marches unnecessary?"

The future deputy minority whip of the House of Representatives went on to deplore American "politicians who build their career on immoral compromise and ally themselves with political, economic, and social injustice and exploitation." I'm sure John has not forgotten those words. The speech concluded with a direct appeal for more "ambulance chasing" when John called on Americans in the thousands to "stay in the streets of every city, town, village, and hamlet until the unfinished revolution begun in 1776 is complete."

I saw nothing unreasonable or objectionable there, do you? Still feel that way myself. The real question is, what kind of "coalition" are you in when you cannot even publicly describe your own experience or openly raise and agitate for your deepest concerns? So that whole speech issue can be seen in retrospect as a clear portent of things to come—the stifling restraints of premature "coalition."

One other point of correction. History has it that SNCC was “pressured” into accepting censorship. Not true. SNCC made no concessions to liberal sensibilities or establishment pressure. John, Forman, and Courtland *did* accept certain changes, but not in order to curry favor with the powerful or appease liberal sensitivities.

[Courtland Cox was in the room and remembers it this way:

“Poor Bayard. Man, he hadn’t really slept for at least a week. Continually running around putting out fires around the clock . . . dealing with everything from the politics to the logistics, to the press and the police . . . from the White House and the ‘allies,’ to Roy Wilkins and Malcolm X . . . making sure there would be enough medical personnel and portable toilets. I mean preparing for every contingency. And then on the morning of the march this? It all seemed such nit-picking, totally unnecessary. I mean some of those objections . . . the word revolution, and even our association with the African struggle. ‘One man, one vote is the African cry, it must also be ours.’ They even wanted that out? So at first we told Bayard, ‘No way. Over our dead bodies.’

“[Bayard] understood perfectly. He was between a rock and a hard place. But he was cool. He just went into the crowd and brought Mr. Randolph, who said to us:

“‘Young men, I’ve waited twenty-two years for this. . . . Would you young men accommodate an old man? I’ve worked all my life for this.’ That’s why we negotiated a few changes. For had we walked out, as we were quite prepared to do, that would have been the headlines: ‘SNCC breaks unity on March. Movement divisions exposed.’ We just couldn’t have that.

“Man, I just looked at that old gentleman. That venerable old warrior at least seventy-five years old, who had fought for our people all his life. . . . And here we were a third of his age. . . . How could we do that to him?

“But I’ll never forget. Mr. Randolph supported us on Africa. And on revolution? He said, ‘Nonsense. Revolution is a perfectly acceptable word, which I myself use whenever it is appropriate.’ End of argument.”]

I’ve always felt that it was not really the language or even the ideas that were being objected to. And it could certainly not have been the facts. Those were indisputable. So what was offensive had to have been the *tone* and the spirit of the speech. I think it just wasn’t sufficiently *humble*, and above all, it didn’t sound *grateful*. You dig?

Sounds crazy? You right, it is crazy. But for reasons best known to themselves, white folks seem to need and expect us always to be grateful. See, I’m convinced that it couldn’t have been the actual changes, which, after all, were slight and subtle, that had been the issue. It was the idea that we *had* to submit to changes on demand. You could say it was both symbolic and psychological. Nonetheless, we went through the motions for Mr. Randolph and Bayard.

You know the Boers in South Africa had a term in Afrikaans for that

attitude, *baaskap*. That was the guiding principle behind apartheid. *Baaskap*, that which must be maintained at all costs. What it meant was unchallenged control, dominance, ownership, literally white “bosshood,” white supremacy. SNCC had encountered the idea all over the South: in the jails and the courthouses, on the plantations. I guess we met the Northern liberal version of *baaskap* at the Lincoln Memorial. But it never has worked, not in South Africa and certainly not at the march. Because here’s how Mr. Randolph (peace be unto him) opened the speeches in his keynote address:

“Let the nation and the world know the meaning of our numbers. We are not an organization or a group of organizations. We are not a mob. Nor are we a pressure group. We are *the advance guard of a moral revolution* for jobs and freedom. The *revolution* reverberates throughout the land, touching every city, every town, every village, where we are segregated, oppressed, and exploited.”

Revolution: a perfectly acceptable word. I myself use it whenever appropriate. . . .

The day before the march, the scene at the planning area on the mall was highly organized chaos, mind-boggling. An air of excitement, of anticipation, of feverish preparation for something unprecedented and major. But what exactly?

In one area enclosed by a mobile picket fence, guarded by a detail of police (bomb threats had been phoned in), teams of volunteers at long wooden tables toiled busily away at a variety of tasks. Staff communicated with each other by means of walkie-talkies. Some teams were stapling poster board placards (bearing the five officially approved slogans) to slender handles. Volunteers from local churches were making thousands of sandwiches for box lunches. Others were packaging assorted merchandise, officially approved souvenirs—march mementos, pins, pennants, etc.—for sale to the expected multitudes. Others were stacking official march programs with rules of conduct and the line of march and so on. A great many cops and city and federal officials, obviously under orders to be cooperative and welcoming, bustled about smiling and looking for ways to be helpful.

Lots of NAG members were working. I found Ed and Courtland.

“Wow,” I teased. “All this sweetness and light, bro? It hurt mah eyes. Y’all done got the federal government on our side at last, huh?”

“Yeah,” Ed growled. “Looks so to you, do it? Wal, I hear they also got every cop in the District standing by. Capitol Hill po-lice, federal marshals, they even calling dudes back from leave, mah man.”

“Yeah, not to mention the troops massed with tanks and stuff just outside the District. And just in case, I hear they got paratroops on alert in

North Carolina. Be here in an hour if they decide they need 'em. Sweetness and light? Look more to me like terrified and ready, bro."

Inside the work area there were government production teams, USIA, Voice of America, etc., posing the volunteers (interracially, of course), shooting miles of film, interviewing workers. "What does this mean to you?" "Why are you here?" "Smile now, this is going to Russia and Africa," they said. "You couldn't have a demonstration like this in Moscow or Havana now, could you?" No kidding, more than one guy actually said that.

Aha, I thought, so that's the line, huh? American democracy at work. Forget the grievances that brought people there. A Cold War propaganda victory for the government and "democracy."

I can hear some of you: "Well, but isn't that true?" Wrong question. Misses the point entirely. First of all, I didn't know then and still don't know what the march had to do with Russia or Cuba. Besides, I knew the newsreel films the government was fixing to distribute all over the world wouldn't include shots of the troops and tanks massed on the edge of the city or the paratroopers standing ready. Nor candid shots of civil rights workers inside the Parchman death house.

So even before the issue with John's speech the next day, we were already uneasy. By what perverted reckoning does a protest against American inhumanity to black folk suddenly transform into an endorsement of the very system that oppresses us? Or the government that tolerates it?

Gimme a bu-rake!

Case in point. The morning of the march, news came that Dr. Du Bois had died in Ghana. That grand old man who, almost single-handedly for sixty years—the entire course of the century—had been the intellectual architect of the struggle for our liberation in this country and the world was dead. Had he been in the country, would the *coalition* have afforded the doctor his richly deserved place of respect on that platform before the Lincoln Memorial? I truly doubt that.

Related to which, a message of support and warm fraternal good wishes to the African-American people in their struggle arrived at the march headquarters. It came from Chairman Mao Tse-tung on behalf of the Chinese people. Dr. Du Bois especially had been greatly respected by the Chinese people and government as he was in many nations across the world, so that message may have been a tribute to the grand old man by the Chinese government.

Now, whatever your politics, greetings to the righteous struggles of African-American people from the head of state of the world's most populous nation are significant and should be received that way. Right? I mean, anyone presuming to speak for our struggle must be able to rec-

ognize this and find a way to respond with appropriate courtesy and dignity. That, as they say, ain't rocket science.

Well, apparently not to Bro Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, who could have elected to remain silent, but did not. He chose to issue an insulting statement—gleefully reported in the *New York Times*—repudiating the chairman's message of sympathy, support, and friendship from the Chinese people. Now *that*, I thought, was extreme, not John's speech. It was rude, unnecessary, and ungracious.

I don't recall the exact language as quoted, but I do remember the tone. It had to do with American Negroes knowing who our friends are. Our not needing or appreciating support from international riffraff, Communist dictators and such. When and if, however, the Chinese people enjoyed democracy, then maybe . . . Something like that. [*Apparently the CORE leadership felt the same way. Brother James Farmer's rejection of the Chinese expression of support, however, was issued from a Louisiana jail. An irony that could not have escaped nos hermanos chinos, as Fidel would refer to them. —EMT*] In SNCC we found that truly embarrassing. Not so much for what it revealed about the *mentality* (for Bro Wilkins was by all accounts a very intelligent man) of those Malcolm used to call "the so-called Negro leaders," as for what it said about the puppet status to which they had been subjugated within the U.S. political system. "A place for every nigger and every nigger in his place," as the Southern governor used to say.

Some folks suggested that the brother had not really written that statement, that it may in fact have originated with the State Department or even the CIA. But, even if true, would that be better or worse? Your call.

Talking about democracy. Earlier that spring as the registration drive picked up momentum in the Delta, the authorities moved to crush its spirit by making a serious example. In the tiny rural town of Itta Bena they arrested a group of workers after a voter registration rally. Then they arrested fifteen more in Greenwood. These were all local youth, including some of Bob's first recruits from Amite County—Lawrence Guyot and two high school students, Curtis Hayes Mohammed and Hollis Watkins. The other workers arrested were from the Delta. Some of them served the time (four months) in the Parchman death house as we had. Others were sent to the Leflore County prison farm. And all for trying to register American citizens to vote. The important point is that these were all local black youth, who were consequently not protected by national media attention as the original Freedom Riders had been. Or by the Kennedy Justice Department. As a result, the thugs in the prisons felt free to torture them and did so. I assume they intended to send a message to other local young people to stay away from voter registration.

They tried to make them believe they were about to be killed. Or that some of their friends had already been killed. Some were hung by their wrists from handcuffs. They were all kept naked in their cells for forty-seven days. Another punishment was the "hot box." This was a small zinc box completely exposed under the Mississippi sun in which you were kept until you passed out. All for registering voters? And our federal government knew that this was happening and was powerless to intervene? Gimme an ever-loving break.

I was in Greenwood the day the brothers were released and I could see they were in bad shape. Ol' Guyot had lost one hundred pounds. (He could afford that better than any of us, 'cause usually he hovered up around three hundred pounds.) That wasn't Larry's best year. First the cops in Winona had beaten the bad out of him when he'd gone to see about Mrs. Hamer and the three women. Then four months in Parchman. Guyot was funny, though. They say when he came back from the beating at Winona, face all swollen and bruised, he headed straight to the meeting that night. When his turn came to speak, he strode up to the front of the little church and stood glowering wordlessly at the people in a challenging way. The church became silent. Guyot glared at the people. Then his fist shot out pointing at the people.

"Immanuel Kant," he thundered, "*wants to know. Do you exist?*" That's Guyot, another bro who came early and stayed late. He is still organizing in the D.C. community. [Guyot remembers the Immanuel Kant quote differently. He thinks the incident happened a year later after he got out of jail in Hattiesburg. —EMT]

I think that just about all those guys just out of jail came up for the march. Jimmy Lee Pruitt was from Itta Bena. He was eighteen years old and had passed out in the hot box. On the way to D.C., the SNCC car he was in broke down in some small Carolina town. No mechanic would fix it so they had to abandon the car. But Jimmy Lee gets to the march. The marshal stops him because his sign isn't authorized. Jimmy is stubborn, he ain't giving up the sign. It's his sign. The only one he came to carry. Finally, they have to refer the case upstairs. The head marshal listens to Jimmy and makes an allowance. He can carry his sign. The disputed sign? It read, "Stop Criminal Prosecutions of Voter Registration Workers in Mississippi."

Enough said. But it was a magnificent spectacle.

Cambridge, Maryland was—might still be—a nondescript, hard-bitten, little town some fifty miles or so from the nation's capital. It was also, during the spring and fall semesters on both sides of the March on Washington, NAG's local Mississippi. Many brothers and sisters from Howard, and the Maryland black colleges, served their apprenticeship in grassroots

community organizing there. It was close enough so we could drive over on weekends. It was where many of us—Cynthia Washington, Cleve Sellers, Stanley Wise, Bill “Winky” Hall, Khalid Sayeed, Muriel Tillinghast, John Baptiste, Reggie Robinson, and Johnny Wilson—got to experience a protracted campaign and the emotional satisfaction of working with a strong, spirited community of black people rising up to face down their oppressors and refusing to back down.

To get to Cambridge from D.C. you had to drive over the longest, highest bridge I’d ever seen. That bridge was kinda *ominous*. It was incredibly high and miles long so that at first you felt like you were driving up toward the sky, and when it started to descend, that you might be leaving the known world for a region that time had passed by. Cambridge’s social arrangements and attitudes were classic and reminiscent of Mississippi or South Africa.

In this hardscrabble town with a stagnant economy, working-class life was not easy for anybody and almost impossible for poor blacks. Although Cambridge was smallish, it sure had a well-defined ghetto. The dominant impression was not just of depression, but of neglect: rows of weather-beaten wooden houses already dilapidated and steadily deteriorating. In 1963, the population of the town was fourteen thousand, of which a third was African. Unemployment among us was 29 percent, and much of what employment there was, was—as in the Delta—seasonal. So that 30 percent of our people who were employed worked for thirty weeks—or less—each year. Sixty-six percent of all African families had incomes of less than \$3,000. You get the picture. Some white working-class neighborhoods seemed almost as bad, but of course we did not enter those communities if we could help it.

To compound its economic woes, the town was rigidly segregated and highly discriminatory. Municipal employment and city services—health care, housing, and education—were either segregated or flatly excluded Africans. For example, the long-promised housing development for the African community: even though the federal government was providing the money, the mayor’s office had twice managed to delay or postpone the construction. Blatant stuff like that.

The white political establishment was not just entrenched in a racist past, but was outright hostile and arrogant about it. They didn’t even try to disguise their racism. They were unwilling to concede anything to the movement, not even the *appearance* of respect. It was as though the very idea of having to sit and talk to “their” blacks who were suddenly getting “uppity” was an intolerable insult to their personal dignity and to the natural order. They were giving up nothing but hard times, Jack, and they didn’t try to hide it.

Inevitably, after talks got nowhere and the movement took to the

streets, the police conduct mirrored the politicians' attitudes. That's when CNAC (the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee) turned to SNCC, and as the closest SNCC groups, NAG and the Baltimore students went in.

The other distinct aspect of white Cambridge was a clearly organized faction that regularly used violence against the movement. Not just the loud, aggressive crowds that usually surrounded demonstrations. Those we were accustomed to. (Remember, it was in a Cambridge sit-in that the young man had attacked me, then come to the church to apologize.) No, now there began to be regular reports of gunfire at night . . . shots into people's homes out of the night and physical attacks on blacks traveling alone or in small groups after dark.

I have no proof that this vigilante violence was either organized or condoned by the authorities, but I saw no attempt to stop it either. In the face of the political hard line and police hostility, the black community felt exposed and unprotected. A group of African men under arms began to patrol the community at night. And soon, when the sound of random gunfire was heard at night, it meant that shots were being exchanged.

That spring (1963), tensions increased in the town. In one notable incident that June, the police appeared to behave both professionally and impartially. Two white men had turned up shot on the outskirts—or just inside—our community. Later that same night some businesses owned by whites went up in flames, apparently torched. The next day, or soon thereafter, a mob of nearly four hundred armed white men chanting racist slogans marched on the black community but were stopped by police blockades on every road leading in. Tension on both sides of the color line rose. By this time, I was down in the Delta, but a SNCC project staffed by NAG folks was in place in Cambridge.

On July 14, carload(s) of whites drove through the main street in the African community firing into houses. They ran into organized defense. Sustained fire was returned from various points, off roofs, out of windows, behind cars and trees, etc. That exchange of fire lasted more than an hour.

Of course that got the attention of the national press, who were remarkably evenhanded. The media duly reported Cambridge to be a "war zone," lamented the "breakdown" in race relations, and righteously deplored the violence on *both* sides: that of the whites who had come through our community shooting and the blacks who had dared to fire back. Media indignation grew when, the next day, Gloria, the CNAC leader "refused to repudiate black violence."

Actually, she had deplored *violence* and called for a serious investigation. She'd also affirmed CNAC's commitment to nonviolent protest. However, while she strongly condemned the invasions and the violence by the invaders, she pointedly declined to condemn the defenders. "When

you are attacked by a rabid dog," she said, "you don't run or throw away the walking stick you have in your hand." Which was enough to earn her a chorus of condemnation—totally spontaneous and well informed, I'm sure—from "responsible" Negro leaders, as well as various liberal "friends of the Negro," including the president of the United States. But Cambridge had gotten his attention.

Even though, or perhaps because, JFK was clear that the violence showed that "[the] Cambridge [movement] had lost sight of what demonstrations were all about," his Justice Department suddenly sprang into action. The attorney general called an emergency meeting in Washington on July 22 to address precisely the issues that CNAC had been trying without success to raise for half a year. Are we to believe that this sudden administrative urgency had nothing to do with the awful specter of an armed black community determinedly defending itself against white attack? Perhaps. Or with the March on Washington now definitely coming their way in a month? Perhaps. But a "high level" meeting was hastily organized.

I should say something about the Cambridge movement and its leader. The city of Cambridge—in its political and racial arrangements—was at once completely typical yet unique. One curious contradiction: Cambridge was, in terms of apartheid and black powerlessness, as racist and feudal as any rural Mississippi county or any Transvaal county town. In that way, it was typical. But unlike in Mississippi or South Africa, blacks in Cambridge could and did vote. Passing strange, eh? The "dictatorship" of the majority?

The other anomaly was that the "militant" leader was a woman. And Gloria Richardson was a real leader. She was one tough-minded, tough-talking field general who marched at the head of the troops on every demonstration unless she was in jail. Gloria was another of the movement's many remarkable women. We liked her a lot.

It is hard to believe that Gloria, a slender woman with shoulder-length hair and a café-au-lait complexion, was then in her early forties, for she seemed much younger in style and spirit. In the fitted jeans she often wore, with her easy, direct manner, and in her passionate commitment to the struggle, she seemed like one of us. And in fact, reporters often mistook her at first for just another student. Yet the loyalty, respect, and affection with which the local people—at least those active in the struggle—regarded their leader was unmistakable. But she drove the politicians crazy. And she was accustomed to abusive phone calls and death threats nightly. Even some elements of the black community—the local NAACP leadership and the small class of local black professionals—found her too controversial, "confrontational," and something of an embarrassment.

Why this should be so was curious, for her own family was of that class. She had studied theater at Howard and was a sorority sister there—an AKA—which should tell you all you need to know about her social background, and a lot about the social/racial history of Cambridge.

Although blacks voted, our community there was powerless and seriously oppressed. Yet a small, snug class of colored professionals coexisted and seemed to have made their peace quite comfortably with things as they were. Gloria had been from that group. Not only were there lawyers in her family, her grandfather was a politician. He was the first Negro to serve on the Cambridge City Council (1912), and he had held that position for *fifty* years. But to what end? Given the concrete conditions we found there, you could accurately say that Cambridge blacks must have had “representation without representation.” This situation seems to have been a direct result of the town’s history. Up until the Civil War, the great majority of the Africans in Cambridge were enslaved, but a small community of “free colored” were permitted a few more “rights” than the slaves. They or their children could not be sold and no law prohibited them from seeking education. The more I heard, the more it sounded like “the coloreds” in South Africa to me.

As with all SNCC projects, the rank, file, and leadership in Cambridge were ordinary folk. And the organization was democratic so the grass-roots people doing the work were free to express long-suppressed feelings in the political discussions. Which they did. Gloria respected that and represented their decisions (as in the referendum) honestly. For this she caught a lot of flak from the white establishment and the press, but worse, elements of the now discredited old-line black “leadership” were not slow to join in the criticism. Tell the truth, God laughs.

About a week after the famous Cambridge shoot-out, a high-level meeting took place in the Justice Department in D.C. When Gloria and her delegation (the CNAC group was accompanied by SNCC observers John Lewis, Reggie Robinson, and Stanley Wise) arrived at the meeting, there were, to their great surprise, no representatives of the Cambridge city government present.

Instead, they found members of the Maryland political leadership: the governor’s chief of staff, the Maryland attorney general and assistant attorney general, and a soldier introduced as General Geltson, commander of the state National Guard. Nobody from white Cambridge. Not a soul. *Nada*.

These two groups were joined by Bobby Kennedy and Burke Marshall (attorney general for civil rights) and a black gentleman in a suit.

At the meeting’s end an agreement in principle was worked out between our side and the Maryland officials. It was a good agreement. All

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the previously nonnegotiable injustices were addressed in a rational and fair way. It was agreed:

1. To begin the complete and immediate desegregation of public schools and hospitals in Dorchester County.
2. Construction (at federal expense) of two hundred units of public housing in the Cambridge black community. (The African gentleman in the suit turned out to be Robert Weaver, head of the Federal Housing Finance Agency.)
3. Employment of a (one) Negro in the Cambridge office of the Maryland Department of Employment and a second Negro in the post office there.
4. Creation of a Cambridge Human Relations Committee.
5. Amendment of the Cambridge town charter so that places of public accommodation could be desegregated.

As I said, nothing ground shaking or radically disruptive; in fact, quite reasonable and moderate. Our folks left that first meeting exultant, wondering what all the hassle and unpleasantness of the last six months had been about. Once there was the political will, previously insurmountable problems became quite manageable, right?

The next morning a delegation from Cambridge—the mayor and key members of the City Council—were somewhat truculent, but agreed to sign on condition that CNAC would agree to suspend demonstrations. CNAC says no problem. As long as there is observable, good-faith progress being made toward implementation, reasons to demonstrate will no longer exist. Demonstrations are, after all, not fun. People have better things to do, etc.

Whereupon “The Treaty of Cambridge” was formally signed by both parties with some distinguished witnesses indeed. (Messrs. Robert F. Kennedy and Burke Marshall, the attorney general and assistant attorney general of the United States). Well, I guess, as every schoolchild knows, “wars” are always and only concluded by “treaties,” right?

The ordinary people of Cambridge were euphoric and very proud. This was real progress, more than they had really expected. More than in the last fifty years. And they *themselves* had done it. By standing up for themselves. By defending their human rights. It had all been worth it. The risk. The danger. There was *some* justice in the world after all. It was, the SNCC folks said, very moving. Our first clear victory. And the first unambiguous sign of the system working for us.

As far as I know, those elements of the agreement that were the responsibility of the federal and state authorities proceeded in good faith. The goodwill of the town government officials was another matter.

They were victim to a sudden onset of democratic scruples. Suddenly, they announced that before the town charter could be amended (so as to end apartheid), the change had to be *democratically* approved by a citizen referendum. Say what? The same citizenry—some at any rate—who'd been firing into our community? In the prevailing climate this seemed a transparent and cynical ploy to change the agreement after the fact.

Gloria and CNAC screamed foul and the membership voted not to participate in any referendum on their rights. A decision that was widely and roundly criticized as at best "bad politics" and at worst "bad faith," with Gloria in particular being singled out for great abuse. Hey, I thought the community was absolutely correct on the principle and the *politics*. Still do.

First of all the politics. Given the demographics and the intense racial polarization, the referendum could never have passed. No way. That's why they *had* it in the first place. Even had they *wanted* to, not enough whites could have summoned the courage to cross over. That was clear. And on the principle? Even if some whites would have crossed over, which of *you* would be prepared, and are you now prepared, to subject your fundamental rights and dignity as a human being to the whim and caprice of your neighbors' vote? No, you wouldn't. Nor will *you* ever be asked to. But *we* should? C'mon . . . gimme a break.

When, to no one's surprise, the referendum failed that fall, demonstrations resumed and were met with increased violence. Violence, in this case, in support of "democracy." Think about it. This time, black folks were not only angry, they felt betrayed. Cambridge, Maryland, became a dangerous place. Soon martial law was declared and the town occupied by four hundred national guardsmen under the command of Brigadier General George W. Geltsen.

By the time we gather back at Howard the semester after the March on Washington (September 1963), the situation in Cambridge is stalemated. The movement is dug in but there is no progress at all to report. At every turn, the city government stonewalls. They aren't giving up an inch and certainly not to a "rabble" of "their" uneducated field Negroes and a bunch of students and outside agitators led by Gloria.

Gloria was holding the movement together with the help of SNCC staff, and students from NAG and other schools came in regularly to help with workshops, registration, and petition drives or to march in demonstrations, but with no victories and little progress to report, local people were getting tired and discouraged. The intoxicating sense of progress and accomplishment of the previous summer was a distant memory.

Ironically, the single thing that still united the black community and kept the movement strong was the presence of the National Guard, which cordoned off the black community every night. They were sup-

posed to be “keeping the peace” or even defending the community, but black folks felt besieged. The young guardsmen were, after all, armed Maryland white men. People in the community were certain that when off duty, the guardsmen fraternized with the local whites. Our folks didn’t feel secure, they felt *occupied*, as in occupation, military.*

The next spring, the 1964 presidential primaries begin. George Corley Wallace, the rabidly segregationist governor of Alabama, national symbol of Southern white resistance, and candidate of the Ku Klux Klan, declares his candidacy. Not only that but he’s going to kick off the Maryland campaign—you got it—in Cambridge. Talk about a calculated provocation, fishing in troubled waters. Outside agitators?

Gloria tells us that Wallace, apparently with the full cooperation if not the invitation of the authorities, will be speaking to a white-only audience at a local skating rink. What is usses gone do? She tells us that as far as the people are concerned, it’s an insult and a deliberate challenge. They know we gotta respond in some way. Can they count on NAG support?

So some of us—Courtland, Ed, Cleve Sellers, Thelwell, and others—begin going over to discuss strategy and help organize whatever action is to take place. Some people question whether the movement shouldn’t simply ignore Wallace. That redneck demagogue be there for a night and he’d be gone . . . Yeah, but if we do that . . . Another of those interminable discussions. People have strong feelings on both sides.

Once we get to Cambridge, however, it becomes clear that doing nothing is not really an option. No way the community could just ignore Wallace’s visit. Not after Birmingham, and the four young girls in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Certainly not after everything people in Cambridge had been subjected to and are *still* going through. No way. They wanted the movement to do something effective. But what? There really weren’t a lot of clear options. A bad hand any way you read it.

Few real options, and as usual, no easy ones. But we had to do something. That was clear.

Once we start organizing the community, certain other things become clear. People seemed proud of and fiercely loyal to Gloria. And they are embattled. I mean, by now it is not at all uncommon to see guns being worn and even offered. Now, don’t you even venture out at night, they advised. And if you do, best you carry you something. Don’t go out there without you got you a piece, son.

Our rally is in a fraternal lodge and folks really turn out. A number of

*People from the Cambridge staff or community really ought to write down the details of our people’s experience under this occupation, which went on for quite some time, well into the next year. There was nothing else quite like it in the entire movement.

NAG folk, along with activist white students from area colleges and a couple of SNCC photographers from Atlanta, have come in. And of course the national media is out in force, looking for a sensational story.

After the speeches the people form a line in the darkness outside the lodge. There are over six hundred of us but you can't really see everyone in the dark. The reality of marching in darkness through hostile white territory is suddenly very real and sobering.

Gloria takes her place in the lead. A group of us—a lot of NAG women are on that march—from NAG fall in behind her. We set out and march down Race Street, at most five blocks.

Ranks of guardsmen in full battle dress, carrying carbines with fixed bayonets and standing in close order, completely block the road. A few carried enormous airfield searchlights. Behind them you can see and hear a large crowd of whites. Silently we march up within fifteen yards. Gloria moves up and engages the general. It is so quiet we can hear every word. He orders her to disperse the march. You have no permit, he says. Does George Wallace need a permit? she ask.

She stands for a moment. A slender woman looking at a solid wall of soldiers towering over her. Then she pushes a rifle aside, tries to step through the ranks, and is immediately arrested. I believe a picture was taken at that exact moment that would appear on front pages across the country. Two brothers (John Baptiste and Khalid Sayeed) go to her side and they too are arrested. When the general bellows at us to disperse, we all sit down.

The troops begin to put on gas masks. We have expected that and carry damp cloths to protect our faces against tear gas. The standard drill is to get low, cover your face, breathe through the damp cloths, and wait for the gas to disperse. We are ready. No big thing.

A SNCC photographer, Cliff Vaughns, moves up to get a picture of the troops in the masks. They grab him. I hold on to his ankle as the soldiers yank on his arms. Poor Cliff is airborne. Danny Lyon gets a picture of that. And then this curious figure moves out of the ranks of the soldiers. He too is masked, has two large metal cylinders on his back, and a long, hollow metal tube in his hands.

[In Danny Lyon's immortal words, "He looked like a vacuum cleaner salesman from outer space." Cleve Sellers recalls, "... a strange uniform. He looked like an astronaut. His uniform was iridescent, giving off a faint, eerie glow." From descriptions of the gas's effect it appears to have been an incapacitating chemical agent being experimentally developed for the military during the sixties. It seems to be the same gas used in today's military to "neutralize" the area around downed aviators before masked rescue teams are sent in. That night in Cambridge, one death—that of an infant in its crib—resulted from its use. —EMT]

The man with the canisters points the tube [*allegedly a flamethrower converted to this purpose —EMT*] at us and a thick, wet, clinging cloud of white smoke billows out over us. The cloud envelopes those of us in front first, and after that I can see nothing. Instantly my eyes, nasal passages, throat and lungs are afire. I cannot breathe. I remember thinking, this is it now, I'm dying. Then, nothing . . .

[*Danny Lyons:*

"Stokely Carmichael, then twenty-two years old, was seated in the front of the line of demonstrators and the gas was sprayed directly into his face. He must have suffered terribly. That night most of the staff went to visit him at the hospital."]

I may have been lucky, for the next thing I remember is waking up in a hospital bed the next morning. I have no recollection of how I got there. I later learned that, in the total chaos, Cleve Sellers had found me lying unconscious and that he and some brothers had commandeered a car to drive me to hospital. I have no doubt, given my childhood respiratory problems, that those brothers saved my life that night.

I can't tell you what went down after that because I was completely out of it. But others were conscious and what they described was total chaos. People choking, retching, trying to run away, and passing out. People screaming in fear and agony, vomiting and soiling themselves because they'd lost control of their bladder and bowels. Reports of guardsmen advancing on hysterical citizens, firing their guns as they came. [*Since no gunshot wounds were officially reported, the guard must have been aiming high. —EMT*] Pure chaos and brutality.

[*Cleve Sellers:*

"The gas made our wet handkerchiefs burn like fire. It also burned our nostrils. When we attempted to breathe out of our mouths to save our nostrils, the gas attacked the insides of our mouths and throats. My throat and stomach felt as if I had gulped a mouthful of burning acid. The gas threw us into total confusion. We forgot about demonstrating, Governor Wallace, and the skating rink. Everybody jumped up and started running. I took about fifteen steps and collapsed.

I held my aching head up and tried to peer out of my burning, tearing eyes. The guardsmen were about thirty feet from me. They were moving forward shoulder to shoulder with their bayoneted rifles extended like spears. They grunted in unison before taking each step: 'Ah-HUMP-CLUMP, ah-HUMP-CLUMP, ah-HUMP-CLUMP!'

"I ran about a half block before the guardsmen began to fire their rifles. They were grunting, shuffling, and firing in unison: 'Ah-HUMP-CLUMP-CHOW! Ah-HUMP-CLUMP-CHOW! Ah-HUMP-CLUMP-CHOW!' My throat was on fire. My legs felt like rubber bands and my mind was hallucinating.

"I managed to clamber over the fence. I thought I had reached safety. I was wrong. I was running in the street again. The guardsmen were still behind me.

They were still coming—and still shooting. All of a sudden, the street was bathed in a bright light. In my confused state of mind, I paused to catch my breath and figure out what was happening. Looking back in the direction of the guardsmen, I discovered the source of the light. The guardsmen had turned on the searchlight and pointed it in our direction. It was blinding. All I could see were the silver bayonets of the advancing guardsmen.

"I am certain that a lot of people would have been seriously injured if a small group of black men had not started shooting at the guardsmen to slow them down. It was like a scene from a western movie. The men would run a few steps, crouch on one knee, and fire; run a few steps, crouch on one knee, and fire.

"I ran to the CNAC office, which was filled with people. Most of them were too sick to talk. Stokely was the sickest of all. He was in terrible shape. Tears were flowing from his eyes, his stomach was still retching, and he was only partially conscious. I tried to talk to him, to ask him how he felt, but he didn't even recognize me.

"Come on! We've got to get him to a hospital before he chokes to death!" I yelled to a group of men standing nearby.

"Grabbing Stokely by his underarms, we dragged him to a car. He was too weak to do anything except moan. We were outside the black community before I realized what we were doing. Oh my God, I thought. Here we are driving, black and unarmed, through a hostile white community during a race war. My head began to clear up—fast."

When I awoke the next morning, I had no idea where I was. The sun was shining. A nurse was in the room so I figured it was a hospital. I found I could stand, so I asked for my clothes.

"Why? You can't go anywhere," she said.

"I'm okay," I said, thinking her objection to be a medical one.

"Maybe, but you are under arrest. You can't leave."

"Lady, I'm grateful to you for taking care of me. But ain't nobody arrested me. How can I be under arrest? I'm outta here."

"Way-all, the police brought you. But, I guess I can't stop you. Hey, I'm not a cop."

So I gits back to the office and most of the leadership is in jail. At first I see only some volunteers and some young community people, except, of all people . . . General Gelston. And he's blustering and lecturing them about outside agitators, Communists, and knowing what's good for them, etc., etc., when I walk in.

"You," he cried. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be under arrest."

"What are you doing here?" I ask. "You're a war criminal. Chemical warfare against unarmed folks. You should be in jail, not me. Unless you have a warrant, you better leave." Which, to my great surprise, he does. I

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still don't know why. But so did I, before he could come back with reinforcements.

Oh, yes, by the way, George Wallace received 43 percent of the vote in the Maryland Democratic presidential primary, which should tell you something about that electorate and the referendum debate.

Summer '64: Ten Dollars a Day and All the Sex You Can Handle

They say in Mississippi, no moderates have we met.
You either be a Freedom Fighter
Or Tom for Ross Barnett."
—SNCC freedom song

Just for the record: I did not at first support the Summer Project. In fact, for all kinds of reasons, a lot of people on staff were not at first supportive either. And I always retained an ambivalence. But once the decision was made, I was a good soldier like everyone else. We worked ourselves like rented mules to make it happen. And once we were swept up in the momentum and excitement, we'd have rather died than see it fail.

In many ways, the Mississippi Summer Project was a turning point for a whole generation of us. It was certainly the boldest, most dramatic, and traumatic single event of the entire movement. It certainly had the most far-reaching effect: for national party politics, for that activist college generation, for the state of Mississippi and the movement there, and especially for SNCC as an organization. After the summer, none of those would be the same.

What was my initial objection? Primarily this: That it was way too ambitious. That it would be a serious mistake for the organization—*our* organization—to extend itself so far beyond our own internal capabilities and resources. That there were organizational dangers in taking on any project that, like this one, depended on large numbers of outsiders. A project entailing *five times* as many volunteers as there were staff in *all* of SNCC, as well as involving a good many other organizations, each with its own agenda on whose resources we would have to depend to fund much of the project? It seemed real risky in terms of the organization's identity and even its independence.

As usual, there was great debate within SNCC. The other major projects (southwest Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas) felt—and rightly so—that

such a huge project would suck in all SNCC's resources and attention. But if Mississippi can bring it off, they decided, more power to them. The local Mississippi staff had different concerns, but that was mine, that we were in danger of overextending ourselves.

We were in Washington when I first heard that Bob and the folks in Mississippi were proposing to invite a thousand volunteers—lawyers, doctors, teachers, and students—into the African communities of Mississippi during the summer of '64. They were to set up community centers, freedom schools, libraries, health and legal services, *and* work on voter registration and community organizing. *Wow.*

When we first heard it in D.C., it was in many ways like Diane's call for Freedom Rides all over again. At first, this long—I mean loooooong—silence as people tried to visualize exactly what this would mean. How it would work. Whether, in fact, it *could* work. *Oh, wowie.*

Hey, by now you must have some slight idea what working in that place was like. So it should not be too hard to imagine what our responses at Howard were based on. Hey, we'd come through the Freedom Rides. I'd been in the Delta. We'd witnessed the March on Washington. We'd been to Cambridge, to Danville—we'd seen, so we thought, *evrahtang*. But this . . . Bob'n them calling for a *thousand* volunteers? *In Mississippi? Oowie, git back!*

Say what? *A thousand?* You kidding me. Where they gon' come from? Where they gon' put them? Hey, can they *actually* bring that off? Isn't there going be certain bloodshed? *Uh, uh, uh*, he'p us, Jesus. Is they crazy?

If you thought about it conceptually, it had to be either an act of madness or a daring stroke of genius. A few said that was "a false dichotomy," it wasn't necessarily either/or, that it could and probably almost certainly was both. Either way, it would call for a phenomenal effort in organization. You pays yo' money an' you takes yo' choice. Which, at first, folks did on either side. Forget about the size and scope, concentrate instead on specific tasks. That way it would become manageable. Which is what I tried to do.

I'm certain that had such a proposal come from anywhere or anyone else, it would have been dismissed as an impractical, even dangerous fantasy. You must recall that in the atmosphere of those times, the air was full of grandiose, "militant" schemes and rumors, most of which dissipated into space no sooner than they were uttered. (Remember the New York World's Fair Drive-In Campaign?) But this was Bob Moses talking. And he never ran his mouth loosely. *If* Bob said it could happen . . . "Bet yo' life and live for evah . . ." Besides, we were SNCC. We did the impossible. By the time the decision was final, we were already working hard.

. . .

Some context is necessary here. By fall 1963, the Mississippi movement was stalemated. It had been a long, tedious war of attrition. We thought we'd seen *everything* that state was capable of throwing at us, run dead up against all the machinery of repression and techniques of obstruction at the state's disposal. The "closed society" had gone into a systematic war mode. It began at the courthouse level. There, local officials, the registrars, the sheriffs and the cops, presented a unified first level of resistance. They were backed up on the next level by the White Citizens Councils—the business community and especially the plantation managers, who systematically fired any black who tried to register and evicted hundreds *before* they could even try. In winter 1962, the counties cut off the federal surplus foods to twenty-two thousand blacks. By tradition, these "commodities" were all that kept people from starving over the winter while they waited until they were needed for the seasonal work when the cotton-planting season began. That, exploitative though it was, had been the arrangement for generations. Now the state claimed not to be able to even *afford* the cost of distributing the food. Soon, though, they would find contingency funds for all kinds of bizarre weaponry, most of which would never and could never, we hoped, be used.

The legislature had created a Sovereignty Commission, a spook-and-dirty-tricks agency to threaten and defame citizens while bugging and infiltrating spies into the movement. In this, the local media were willing agents. The few newspapers that tried to stay aloof were starved of advertising, boycotted, and run out of business. To go back and read the Mississippi newspapers of that time is an education in the abuse of freedom of the press. They created, circulated, and kept recycling a stream of the most scurrilous lies, slander, abuse, character assassination, of any and everyone even close to the movement. Then too there was the constant hate and fear-mongering. We were not only anti-American agents of atheistic Communism being run and funded out of Havana, we also were deranged, diseased, drug-crazed degenerates, mongrels, and sexual perverts.

[Case in point. Ursula Junk, the German exchange student mentioned earlier, recently obtained her Sovereignty Commission file. In those days, Ms. Junk was a famously chaste and devout young Catholic woman on the verge of taking sacred orders. She was therefore considerably astonished recently to find herself identified by the McComb police as a German prostitute imported from Munich, whose black stockings were necessary to conceal the syphilis sores that were said to cover her legs. —EMT]

I mean this was the kind of stuff that, if you were a segregationist and you believed it, gave you no choice. It *clearly* would be a patriotic act, a civic duty, to exterminate vermin such as we were alleged to be. Obviously, as in the case of Medgar Evers, some had already acted on that impulse. How many more deaths like that could we expect?

And this insanity was everywhere. I mean *evrahwhere* and at all levels. A steady stream of it came out of the governor's mansion, whether from Ross Barnett or Paul Johnson, his successor. [*When Johnson succeeded Barnett, he praised his predecessor because "under his able administration, 116,000 Negrals fled the state." —EMT*] In Washington, the Mississippi congressional delegation, led by Senator "Big Jim" Eastland (millionaire cotton planter), faithfully recited it into the *Congressional Record* and to fellow travelers in the national press corps. And all this was *before* the Summer Project announcement.

All of which is to say that not many black voters—probably no more than maybe three hundred total—had been registered in two and a half years of hard work. And for those few, the black community had been made to pay a fearful price. That is how matters stood in August '63 when someone came up with the inspired (or perhaps only desperate) idea of a parallel "freedom" election during statewide elections that November. Since every official avenue is blocked, why don't we just run our own election?

A freedom vote? That's nuts. What good is that? Only the state can run elections. We can't be electing nobody our own selves.

True, but we can show that if they *were* allowed, our people would indeed participate. So, what'll that prove? That an' fifty cents'll buy you a cup of coffee in New York. Maybe. But it will also destroy Eastland's myth that "Ouah Nigrals are happy. They have no interest . . . , etc. Plus, even if it's only a "mock" election, it will give the people the experience of an election campaign and casting a vote for the first time in eighty years. See, we'll run a full campaign. Candidates, posters, rallies, meetings, the works. We'll take it across the state into counties we haven't yet been able to penetrate. Think of it as an organizing device.

Doc Henry (peace be unto him) agreed to run for governor on a freedom ticket with Ed King, a white Mississippian, as lieutenant governor. [*Aaron Henry, state NAACP president and the Reverend Edwin King, Tougaloo chaplain and scion of the Mississippi establishment. Shortly thereafter, the Reverend Mr. King was run off the road at night and nearly killed. His face carries the scars to this day. —EMT*]

The tactic turned out a great success. Our candidates traveled the state. Well, almost the entire state. Some counties and towns were still considered too dangerous. But after the election the movement had a statewide list of contacts, which became the basis for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

On election day, polling places were set up in churches, beauty salons, barbershops, country stores, just wherever our people were to be found. There were even mobile ballot boxes in cars. And very important, it was a unified effort. The entire Mississippi staff along with SNCC organizers

from other projects and all our local community activists pitched in. It *felt* like an election. And except for the small fact that it had no official legal force, it *was* an election. Over eighty thousand black Mississippians cast their first vote for a political candidate.

Before 1964, the freedom election was the largest openly and conventionally "political" demonstration we'd ever tried in Mississippi. There were the expected harassments, arrests, a few beatings, and the usual stream of threats, *but nobody was killed or seriously injured*, and there were no bombings that I recall.

A statewide campaign like this was unprecedented and stretched the staff thin. A young Stanford professor, Allard Lowenstein, volunteered to organize a group of student volunteers to come down and work on the campaign. Bob accepted the offer and forty students from Yale and Stanford came into the state for the three weeks leading up to the vote.

[Lowenstein was a politically ambiguous figure. A former NSA leader, reputed CIA asset, and a future congressman from New York, he kept popping up in and around the movement here and in Africa. At this time he was teaching at Stanford. Years later, in one of the more tragic and ironic incidents of the time, Congressman Lowenstein (D-NY) would be shot and killed by one of the Stanford students he had recruited for the freedom election. —EMT]

From all accounts, these volunteers made a real contribution in many ways. In others, it was a learning experience for them and us. Some things they did well. They had technical skills and some prior sense of what an election campaign entailed. That was good. But though they were supposed to have been briefed, some—not all—seemed to have no idea of movement reality. For their own safety and everyone else's, the local staff had to keep explaining brute reality to them. You could call it a mutual learning experience.

The thing that was most instructive, though, was the violence. During the three weeks the volunteers from elite private universities were in the state, nobody—local person or volunteer—was badly hurt. I mean, despite this being the most visible, active, far-ranging, and provocative political activity SNCC had yet attempted, the level of violence had not noticeably risen. In fact, had seemed to diminish? Odd.

Except, of course, that these volunteers—some of them anyway—were among the most well-connected young white people in the country. The true beneficiaries of the system. A few were said to be from extremely wealthy and powerful families. Some were the children of politicians, I think in one case of a U.S. senator. And naturally, the national media had followed them into the state. Also, there was suddenly a visible if temporary FBI presence at the rallies. Bob later explained to me, "That was the first time that I realized that the violence could actually be controlled. Turned, y'know, on and off. That it wasn't totally random. I realized that

somewhere along the line, there was someone who, even if they didn't actually order it to happen, could at least send out word for it to stop. And it would . . . at least for three weeks. That was a revelation."

That was one part of it. You can see why people have claimed that this freedom election was the model for the Summer Project. And it may have been, if not the model, then at least a precedent. But there had also been a real downside to the experiment.

A few of the volunteers—not many but a few—were almost sent home. I'm not sure, maybe one or two were in fact asked to leave. Why? Apart from a misguided and dangerous sense of entitlement and class prerogative, acting as though nothing could happen to *them*, a few seemed incapable of respecting the experience and accepting the authority of local staff. Whether this was because the staff was black, young, or merely local, I don't know or much care. But it was antithetical to everything that was most important to SNCC. And it is also why so many of the local staff at first resisted the idea for the Summer Project.

One of our best project directors was a brother named Dickie Flowers. He was smart, sassy, disciplined, and very effective. Dickie was well respected in SNCC. Forman said that Dickie came to him quite distressed before the Summer Project. "Look, Jim," he said, "I'm the project director. You know I know what I'm doing. Yet when those volunteers were here, I all the time found myself saying I'd been to damn Morehouse. Jim, now you know I ain't been to Mo'house or no house."

Apparently, as it turned out, even Bob himself had some quite serious reservations. In fact, in his usual manner, he'd at first held off taking a public position. Folks assumed this was to avoid undue influence and to allow the staff and community leaders to debate the pros and cons and arrive at their own decision. Which was only right: it would be a major undertaking and these were the people who'd have to make it work and ultimately to bear whatever consequences resulted. This, after all, in a state where just two and a half years earlier most people had been scared to give a bed to a freedom fighter. Most churches afraid to open their doors to the movement. Now we were talking about housing a thousand volunteers?

But there was more to Bob's silence. Today Bob admits that at first he was not at all sure about the plan. Another one of those critical moments of decision in which we had no clear guidelines or precedents or guarantees. Another one of those "learning to fly on the way down" situations. But since it was unthinkable to abandon the local people we'd put in motion at great risk to themselves, and to whom we had given commitments, Bob knew we had to do something different.

[Bob Moses remembers:

"You know what really made it clear for me? They murdered Louis Allen. That's what made the difference. See, in '63, after they killed Medgar, Bob Spike

[the Reverend Robert Spike, Director, Commission on Religion and Race, National Council of Churches] came to me and said he would begin to organize a visible national religious presence in the state. So he brought sixteen clergymen to the Freedom Day in Hattiesburg, where there was all that police violence. Remember, that's when Rabbi Joseph Lelyveld and others were badly beaten. . . . It was after that, at a meeting in Hattiesburg, that the Summer Project idea was raised. Guyot will remember that. Reverend Spike was there too. I said nothing at first. I was still trying to come to grips in my own mind with all the implications. There were so many. . . . And you know, the law of unexpected consequences. Then, during the meeting, the news came that Mr. Allen had been murdered. I went out to where the family was, spoke to Mrs. Allen. On the way back, it became clear that we had to do something, something big, that would really open the situation up. Otherwise they'd simply continue to kill the best among us. I'm not even sure what direction the discussion was heading when I got back to the meeting. But that's when I began to argue strongly that we had to have the Summer Project." —EMT]

That spring semester (1964), with the exception of the action in Cambridge, all NAG's energy was focused around the situation in Mississippi. It was still winter when we heard about Mr. Louis Allen.

We knew we couldn't let that go. So we decided we had to symbolically place the responsibility where it truly belonged, on the Justice Department. So we organized this march. We had this small coffin that we were going to carry through the march and then deposit on Bobby Kennedy's desk.

*[There's a street in Itta Bena called Freedom.
There's a town in Mississippi called Liberty.
There's a Department in Washington called Justice.
—sign in the Greenwood office —EMT]*

A lot of folks were at that march, mostly SNCC supporters from the area colleges. There had to be at least a thousand, maybe twelve hundred, marchers, black and white. Pretty impressive. So there we were, a group of us parading the coffin at the head of the march leading down Sixteenth Street to the Justice Department. Someone said, "Hey, there's Bro Malcolm." And sho nuff there was the brother standing on the sidewalk reading our signs. He was by himself and we shouted at him to come join us. He merely smiled and shook his head. But I could sense that a part of him really wanted to.

We gits to the Justice Department to find a line of cops out front. Before we can figure out what to do, the doors spring open and two security guys come out pushing wheelchairs, the occupants of which are

dumped unceremoniously on the pavement. Tom Kahn and Courtland Cox had gone before us to Kennedy's office, and when they weren't permitted to see him, they had spontaneously decided to stage a sit-in. The wheelchairs were, I guess, Kennedy's nonviolent alternative to calling the cops. Then the attorney general came down to talk with us. All I remember is how small, skinny, cold, and harassed he looked in his shirtsleeves. But neither I, nor anyone else I've spoken to, can remember a word he said to us that day. I guess we weren't smart enough to understand that it was "history."

[Ed Brown:

"It was a nice long line, bro, a pretty good turnout. Nearly half the marchers were white. We were singing. Mahoney and myself were carrying this coffin at the head of the march along with Carmichael and Thelwell. We feeling pretty good, having pulled together a pretty impressive march, and we going to confront the feds. Then there was Bro Malcolm with that enigmatic smile of his. It was the first time we'd seen him since the debate with Bayard, so we strut over, all full of ourselves. He, as always, was very warm. So I say, 'Bro, you really should come with us. We going put this coffin on Robert Kennedy's desk.' He laughed and declined. One of us pointed to the march with ill-concealed proprietary pride. 'So what you think of our demonstration, Bro Malcolm? Pretty nice, huh?'

"The brother looked at the line of marchers and he just grinned. 'Wal, since you ask me, my brother, I'll tell it to you like this. Now, if I see a long line of cats and mice all marching toward the same hole? If the cats ask me 'how we doing?'' I gotta say it sure look like you doing fine, right fine. But now, if the mice ask me . . . well, now, you know I gotta give 'em a different answer.' That sorta knocked the cocky out of us, but we couldn't stop to argue. We figured that ideologically he had to say that anyway, y'know. As we were running off to catch up he called after us, 'Remember now, just because you see a man throwing worms into the river, don't necessarily mean he a friend to the fish.' But I did feel that the brother looked a little lonely standing there by himself. I knew he had to be getting a little tired of standing on the sidelines because of the Nation's strict ban on political activity. But for that, I felt the brother would have been happy to come with us to confront the Justice Department that day . . . because, after all, the march wasn't about integration, it was about equal protection of the law. I also felt that with the brother it would only be a matter of time . . . Malcolm was fundamentally an activist.'"]

After that march, and with the exception of the little excursion into Cambridge and the continuing food drive, our attention turned to the Summer Project. Once the project was decided, that was foremost in our minds. If SNCC, particularly Moses and the local people, were calling for a thousand volunteers in Mississippi, we'd do our best to see they got fifteen hundred. We'd do whatever it took.

Bob made a couple of trips into D.C. testing the political waters for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenge at the Democratic National Convention. On one of those trips he asked me to be coordinator for the Second Congressional (Delta) District that summer. I was floored. Ah *means* speechless, almost. Immediately, whatever reservations remained in my mind went on a back burner. Funny, huh?

What caught my interest most was of course the politics. The national politics. The idea of taking a Freedom Democratic delegation into the Democrats' convention. The idea of bringing the struggle before the nation. Challenging and exposing the Dixiecrats' arrogance and racism before the whole world. That really got to me. Bob didn't even have to point out (but he did) how central to the whole strategy the Delta would be, with its population being about 70 percent black. I was in and I was pumped, Jack. Had Bob and the folks in Mississippi asked me to organize West Hell, I'da packed my bags. Yes, indeed.

[Bob Moses:

"The Delta was very important, very. Now what we were faced with, of course, was how we were going to have somebody who could handle all these sophisticated volunteers and the local people. And not just the grassroots but the Amzies too. In other words you had local people that you worked with at the grass roots and (who were) really not part of the network of experienced organizers of resistance. Then you had Amzie Moore and Aaron Henry and a small network of people who had been out there for years and were very sophisticated. There you have a picture of what it would take to negotiate all these different levels.

"It's not just political sophistication. It's more than that. Which is, on the one hand, a feel for the common person which allows you to move freely among them and really be accepted by them . . . a real bond between you and them. So, Stokely had that. But you could have that and not have the ability to work with the white Northerners, all these sophisticated students, and command their respect. But that's yet a different situation from working with the Amzies, right? So Stokely was able to move back and forth among all those levels. Not many people could handle that.

"You look back at what happened in the Delta that summer and Stokely's being able to deliver . . . 'cause Stokely really delivered. And his being able to deliver a delegation which in the first analysis was able to stand up to all that pressure in Atlantic City was just, just remarkable. And it wasn't just Stokely. He brought with him, y'know, that Howard crew. Teams of people who had already learned how to work together and build trust. Really quite remarkable."]

Specific roles flowed from our being at Howard and located in the nation's capital. One task was recruitment, which those of us on campus took on. The other major task had to do with the federal government, the "liberal establishment," and the Washington press corps. Specifically, how to get their attention and the kind of government action that might save

lives that summer. That fell to the SNCC Washington office, which Bill Mahoney and Mike Thelwell had set up six months earlier.

Let's talk about recruitment. SNCC wanted to have as many Africans as possible amongst the volunteers. There, NAG could help, for our members were experienced strugglers, veterans. For them, it would be another moment of truth, a time to stand up and be counted—like Cambridge or the Freedom Rides three years earlier. So the Howard (NAG) contingent was the largest black unit. That part was easy.

The biggest problems we found recruiting additional non-NAG volunteers across campus were family and finances. Some Southern students' families just freaked out, Jack. I remember once two church ladies came to git their daughters and chased me with a shoe fixin' to beat my nappy head flat. Yes, they did.

But the main problem was really economic. SNCC was asking people to bring at least \$500—partly to help with living expenses, as their hosts would likely be poor, and partly to be available to bond themselves out of jail. A lot of our students not only didn't have \$500, but needed to earn their next year's school fees over the summer. That excluded a lot of our people who really wanted to come. I mean a lot who really, really wanted to answer the call. SNCC was able to raise some "scholarship" money, but it wasn't nearly enough.

It's hard now to realize just how precarious the financial condition of most of our students was in those days. Of course, its being Howard, there were some very affluent Negroes. But *they* mostly weren't interested. The ones who really were interested tended to be poor. Maybe today it would be different. I sure hope so for the country's sake. Now more African students might be able to afford to go. But this financial reality in '64 would ensure that the majority of the student volunteers would have to come from the more affluent sectors of white society and private schools.

By then, SNCC had about six really active centers of campus support across the nation. In addition to the SNCC offices in New York and in D.C., Ann Arbor, Chicago, Madison (Wisconsin), the Bay Area of California, and Boston had active campus-based groups. All these bases turned their attention to screening candidates for Mississippi. The process was pretty similar everywhere. By the end of the summer, seven hundred students who had previously been sympathizers would now become activists on a very different level. In truth, we ended up actively discouraging many more people than we accepted. When folks would come in all bright and eager, we had to make sure they understood. First, you'd tell them war stories. Try to scare them to death. "You do understand, don't you? It's entirely possible, very likely even, that not everyone who goes down will be coming back. Why would you want to put yourself in that situation?"

"Hey, this is America, you can't mean . . . ?"

"Yeah, Jack, we do mean . . . Maybe you best go think seriously about this."

In many cases, that would be enough and you'd not see them again.

For those who came back, it got rigorous. See, you had a clear general sense of what you were looking for. You could usually recognize it, but it was not easy to define in words. People at ease with themselves, in control of their lives. Sober, intelligent, self-controlled, disciplined folk who were clear on what they were getting into and why. People, we hoped, who could handle a kind of stress they had never before imagined, much less encountered.

It was generally selection by elimination because *what we didn't want* was much easier to define and usually easier to spot. You couldn't have folks going for the wrong reasons. Folks likely to be a danger to themselves and everyone else. We had to find out who people were and why they thought they were going. No missionaries going to save the benighted Negro or martyrs looking for redemption through suffering. Be on the hard lookout for the stench of personal virtue. No mystics. No flakes. No kids in rebellion, looking for attention or to get back at Mom and Dad. No druggies, beatniks, or premature-hippie types—too irresponsible. Plus folks in Mississippi wouldn't know what to make of them. Nobody flunking out of school and looking for a place to crash. No self-righteous ideologues or zealots out to make a personal statement to the world. *Well, tell me, what exactly would you be doing this summer if you didn't go south?* A most important question.

I'd say that we probably accepted no more than a third. We didn't insist on honor students, but that wouldn't hurt. You didn't have to be class president, or head of your sorority, but that wouldn't disqualify you either. Editor of your school paper? Let's talk. That you got on well with your parents would also work in your favor. We ended up with an impressive group of young Americans at their most idealistic. Interesting people, serious people, political activists, Peace Corps volunteers, seminarians. No pun intended, but in 1964 the country's "best and brightest" were headed for Mississippi, not Southeast Asia, and were genuinely to "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Y'all remember that?

But it was a schizoid time, no question. Unreal. Because at the same time this was happening, another side of America—its worst and most hypocritical—was showing itself within the Washington establishment and the "great state of Mis'sipah." And, the thing is, you could hardly tell the difference, except, and not always, in the style of their rhetoric.

. . .

Truthfully . . . by then I'd thought nothing further could possibly surprise or scare me so far as Mississippi was concerned. I simply could not even imagine that conditions there could worsen. Boy, was I ever wrong.

Once the project was announced, reports from the Jackson office made it clear that a climate of intense war fever was being systematically ratcheted up within the state. You couldn't tell whether this was simply an official campaign designed to intimidate and scare us and the project away, or whether these people actually believed the stuff they were writing and saying. Either way, though, the evil stuff the state and the media were putting around was *all* that the Mississippi public was hearing about the project. Nothing else. It was an *official* and unchallenged incitement to mayhem.

It's not just that, as soon as the project was announced, the violence and harassment increased. That they burned—what was it?—five, six churches where freedom schools were to go. That was normal. Completely expected. No surprise.

I'm talking about something qualitatively and *quantitatively* different from anything we'd yet seen. I'm talking about a deliberate, systematic, unchallenged campaign of disinformation put out by the local media, much of which originated with the governor (through his Sovereignty Commission) and ran through the legislature, down to local mayors and petty politicians, drawing in every freelance racist in the state. Every day it was something more extreme and outrageous, and nobody in authority was challenging it.

Here's what the population was exposed to daily, starting about in April. Tell me if this isn't fear-mongering at its worst, a calculated exploitation of people's anxiety and confusion to whip up anger and bloodlust. In Washington, we read the clippings and looked in vain for one voice of reason and moderation, or even of accuracy.

The political rhetoric had suddenly taken a militaristic tone and a siege mentality: invasions, encirclement, and armed preparedness. A mood of unspecified jeopardy and insecurity. The media's standard term for the project was the "invasion" by "thousands" of degenerates and terrorists, capable of unimaginable debauchery and evil. All the more frightful because it was never really specific. And this never changed. Never.

The Jackson mayor, Frank Thompson, who must have smelled stark naked political opportunity, led the charge. Every couple days he announced—and vividly described—some new security measure. First, he added one hundred new cops to a force of two hundred. Then two horses (*horses?*) and six attack dogs, whereupon he announced proudly that the "Jackson police force is now twice as big as in any city of similar size in the nation."

That apparently did not satisfy the mayor or reassure his constituency. He then announced *in detail* the purchase of weaponry. The cops got 200 new shotguns. Then a "stockpile" of tear gas and the issuing of gas masks to every officer was announced. (Nice photo of this.) The mayor purchased and posed next to (photo op) three military troop carriers and three tractor-trailer-type vehicles to haul away "demonstrators" and two half-ton military trucks with mounted searchlights (nighttime operations?). He then announced that the fairgrounds had been converted into a stockade capable of holding "thousands." At which point he pronounced himself satisfied. "This is it," he assured the citizens. "They are not bluffing but we are ready for 'em. The invaders won't stand a chance. We can handle twenty-five thousand."

Political leadership, Mississippi style. *Oh*, man, how could I have forgotten "Thompson's tank"? This grotesquerie was his pride of purchase, an armored *six-and-a-half-ton* "battlewagon" complete with bulletproof glass, machine gun ports, and four or six built-in tear-gas-gun emplacements.

That was the city of Jackson.

The legislature was not going to let itself be outdone. The governor called it into emergency session, and the stream of legislation that emerged was equaled only by the heated rhetoric with which each measure was introduced. To prepare for the invaders, they doubled the size of the quasi-military state highway patrol and gave it "emergency" authorization in all jurisdictions. They too stockpiled guns and ammunition. They created mechanisms for a statewide dusk-to-dawn curfew. They outlawed freedom schools. Made it a crime to distribute leaflets [*if the leaflets advocated a boycott.* —EMT] It was hysterical but I can't remember all the craziness. They passed a raft of weird, clearly unconstitutional contingency measures just short of outright secession. [*In one town, it became illegal for a white outsider to live with or "otherwise molest" a black citizen.* —EMT] All of which was, of course, duly and sensationally reported in the press.

If this was the state's respectable "leadership," what of its demagogue element? Hey, I couldn't detect much difference. It was equal opportunity self-promotion. That spring, two groups [*the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and United Klans of America* —EMT] launched competing recruitment drives across the state. Organizational competition? Sounds familiar, no? Their message:

"These invaders don't want equality . . . they want what you have . . . your homes and your wives and daughters . . . they coming into your houses . . . evrah white Anglo-Saxon Christian man bettah be prepared to arm himself . . ." One group kicked off its drive pretty dramatically with cross burnings in *sixty-four counties on the same night*. They distributed bumper stickers: YOU ARE IN OCCUPIED MISSISSIPPI.

It was not reassuring to know that the population was being incited from every side. Nowhere in this frenzy was the slightest breath of reason and sanity to be heard. Sad, very sad. But in the circumstances, not unexpected.

The thug element, whether inside a Klan mask or the governor's mansion, had completely taken over next door in Alabama. Six months earlier a prominent, successful white Birmingham lawyer named Charles Morgan had publicly condemned the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in which the four little girls had been killed. For this offense, he and his family were run out of the state, lucky to escape with their lives. So the echoing silence now from the forces of decency in Mississippi was understandable. But it was not reassuring. "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." Not necessarily. It was just that any slight difference that had ever existed between the mob and the state in Mississippi had completely disappeared.

[The following language, from an "official" publication of the United Klans of America (July 4, 1964), reflects the tenor and mood as well as a carefully cultivated sense of victimization and conspiracy:

"We are in the midst of the long, hot summer of agitation promised to the innocent people of Mississippi by the savage blacks and their Communist masters."

Followed by a prayer of thanksgiving:

"On behalf of our persecuted people, we thank thee that our Satanic enemies, the domestic Communists who occupy the seats of power . . . have failed to provoke the violence which would bring down martial law and complete dictatorship on our great state."

Followed by a sacred pledge:

"To preserve law and order, the only way it can be . . . by the strict segregation of the races controlled by Christian Anglo-Saxon white men, the only race that can build and maintain just and stable government."

To which end they pledged to:

"Defend the rights of our posterity from . . . atheistic priests, brainwashed black savages and mongrelized money worshippers. We advise all priests and mongrels that we will not travel your path to a Leninist hell, but will buy you a ticket to the eternal if you insist." Let the Church say, Ahmen!—EMT]

In D.C. we read these reports with amazement and alarm. That state, it appeared, was even crazier than we knew. And as far as we could see, the madness was not being reported in the Northern media the way it ought to have been. Which put us in a strange place. On the one hand, we're getting more and more worried about our people already in Mississippi. At the same time, more people, obviously attracted to the pay and benefits, keep coming in to ask about going down. (One racist newsletter described our volunteers as *"human jetsam coming because they were promised ten dol-*

lars a day, free room and board and all the sex they want from members of both races." I mean, who could resist. As they say in Mississippi, "You cain' beat that with a stick.")

In Atlanta, Julian Bond and Mary King kept trying to get some national coverage of the Mississippi madness. The Washington office was trying to do the same with the Washington press corps. More crucially, they were desperately trying to get some signal, gesture, statement, something out of the national government. Some sign of moral leadership and an indication of concern. Something to signal the Mississippi politicians to cool it. There are all kinds of ways—public or clandestine—to do that. We would have been satisfied—overjoyed—just to hear someone in authority say that the education of children and the registering of American citizens as voters were not criminal enterprises. That the rights of American citizens engaged in these peaceful and legal activities would be protected by their government.

But the only statement from any federal official was from the sainted J. Edgar Hoover, who announced that the FBI had no intention of "wet-nursing" the project participants. Which, whatever the director's language had been, became this headline in Mississippi: "Hoover: We Will Not Wet-Nurse Troublemakers." Talk about sending signals. Whether Hoover was speaking simply out of his own well-established racism or officially for the Johnson administration was never clear. However, *that* was the only statement from any prominent member of that administration, and no public correction was made by his alleged superiors. No disavowal, no reprimand.

All that spring Mike Thelwell and Bill Mahoney wore holes in their shoes trudging all over Capitol Hill talking to every congressman or congressional assistant who would listen. Could a group of congressmen call for a congressional hearing? Well, could they write a letter to the president? To the attorney general? Perhaps officially visit the state. Hold a press conference? *Anything? Before* more people got killed? Some congressmen were concerned and sympathetic but, they explained, for some reason they weren't in the leadership. Finally, in desperation, the Washington office organized our own hearings on violence and voting in Mississippi. They got a panel of distinguished Americans—jurists, religious leaders, and intellectuals [*Judge Justice Pollier of New York, Representative Don Edwards (D-CA), himself a former FBI agent, Professor Robert Coles of Harvard, Professor Howard Zinn, and some others —EMT*]. They invited the press and public. Witnesses from Mississippi included Mrs. Hamer, Mr. Steptoe, Mr. Turnbow, Bob Moses, Ann Moody, and other local folk. The hearings got some press attention, and bound transcripts of the testimony and the panel's recommendations were circulated around official Washington. These distinguished Americans had concluded that on the basis

of the testimony, a dangerous but entirely avoidable crisis and potential tragedy was looming in the state. They called for reason and restraint on both sides and judicious preemptive actions from the administration. That too was ignored.

I remain convinced to this day that the slightest intervention—public or private—indicating firmly to the Mississippi authorities that acts of terrorism and lawlessness would bring serious federal consequences would have saved lives. But that would have required a “profile of courage” from someone in the Johnson administration.

[I continue to believe that a tragic, supremely bureaucratic irony was at work here. I suspect that all the material coming out of Mississippi was routinely kept away from the one person in the administration who would instantly and intuitively have understood and known what to do. And how to do it.

LBJ would have recognized and known how to read the signs. He spoke the language of those “good ol’ boys” and would have known from long experience how to get their attention. I believe had LBJ been apprised of the ominous developments he would have been able to cajole, jawbone, threaten, and scare the pants off those Southern politicians in terms they wouldn’t dare ignore. And that he might have done so out of more than political self-interest. —EMT]

Now, we did have some support. The Commission on Religion and Race (of the National Council of Churches) under Dr. Spike (peace be unto him) for one thing. Also thousands of progressive people sent us their individual contributions after James Baldwin sent out a national fund appeal. But what about the “liberal” establishment? Who can unravel that mystery? Even whether such a creature actually exists? But an attitude in certain circles, I can’t say how widespread it was, surprised and deeply, deeply angered us.

One Midwestern young lady forwarded us a letter from a family friend and Washington “insider” explaining to her parents why she should not be allowed to volunteer. Young “Janie” should not be fooled, he said. This “scheme” was not at all the “altruistic-undertaking-by-idealistic-young-students” being represented. At best it was an elaborate political hoax. (Here, he must have meant the challenge to the Democratic National Convention.) At worst, evidence suggested that it was a cynical stratagem designed by “hardened political operatives” to embarrass the government by exploiting the decent impulses of naive college students so as to lure them into danger and possibly to their deaths. Behind the scheme was a strong suggestion of “Communist influences,” ruthlessness, and unpatriotic motives. That letter has since been lost (had copying machines existed in those days, I know more copies would have survived). The only language I’ll swear to now is the “hardened political operatives,” “Communist influences,” and luring innocent students into jeopardy to

embarrass the government. But the tone and message was exactly as I've described it. It made us furious and bitter.

It struck me as indecent, a craven betrayal. I mean, we'd come to expect this from J. Edgar, or the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission. But from the heart of the Washington liberal network, the "educated, progressive" forces? How widespread was that attitude? Was this the word being whispered around official Washington? Weren't all of us in SNCC "innocent college students" only a year or so ago? Were we too being manipulated, or were we the "hardened" political operators and manipulators? Were we sitting safely somewhere while putting "America's youth" at risk? We, of course, were not "America's youth," right? That was all so untrue and so unfair. I felt we should have confronted the writer in person, but we never did.

It began to emerge that this line really was being pushed by someone. Because versions replete with quotes from "informed observers" and "well-placed sources" began to appear in columns. Generally they evaded any government responsibility and were contemptuous of us in SNCC, of black people in Mississippi, and of the moral intelligence of America's youth. This attitude would have consequences later on. I remember particularly the journalistic prostitutes Evans and Novak, but there were some others. At the time we did not know of the practice of the spook agencies planting stories and feeding disinformation to their assets in the media. But that certainly would explain the total inversion of reality in some of these stories.

I recall that some other columns pointed out that what we intended was legal, constructive, and in any sane society, quite innocuous. That it deserved the full protection of the law, but those were the minority.

[I distinctly remember the mood becoming more ominous with every passing day and each bizarre new report from the state. Were we really recruiting lambs for the slaughter? Would the country actually stand by and see people murdered for teaching schools and registering voters? I spoke daily with staff people in Mississippi. I don't remember a single person there worrying about their own survival. They were concerned for the local people and the safety of the "civilians" coming in, the volunteers. Rather than cynicism I heard a subtext of misplaced, wistful hope for the system. A kind of patriotism of faith. No one wanted to believe that any administration would let a slaughter take place, especially if they had advance warning. Our job in the Washington office was to make sure they had it.]

Some people on the Hill cared. But invariably they were not part of the "leadership," hence no congressional hearing. The Dixiecrat committee chairmen were too strong and the administration wasn't interested.

I remember one day in particular. I was briefing Congressman Robert Kas-

tenmeier (D-WI). I was by now thoroughly horror-struck at what seemed likely to happen. I described the project and then—almost compulsively—began to relate in detail what had been going on in the state.

As I spoke, the congressman slumped lower and lower in his chair. I grew concerned for him but I couldn't stop talking. Then his head bent forward, as if he were gradually being beaten down by the weight of what he was hearing. His head went lower and lower. By the time I was finished with the harrowing account, the poor congressman's head rested on the desk, his arms folded over his ears in a protective shield as though to block out the grim picture. That's how heavy it was. —EMTJ

I want to say that I don't know whether any private interventions—what they called in South Africa “constructive engagement”—were made to the Mississippi authorities by the Johnson administration. Or whether, as it looked to us, they merely stuck their heads in the sand hoping the impending crisis would disappear. If there was intervention, it couldn't have been very effective, because the media campaign to spread hysteria in the state had not lightened up as “D day” came closer. No kidding, that language was actually used down there.

In about two weeks after school was out there was to be an orientation at a little college in Ohio. [*Western College for Women, Oxford, Ohio. The orientation was funded by Dr. Robert Spike's Commission on Religion and Race.* —EMTJ] Most of the students we'd recruited in D.C. felt it wisest not to go home for those two weeks. So after the dorms closed a lot of folks ended up crashing at our place. Cleve and I decided we'd use the time for a little pre-orientation training to prepare the troops for what they would be facing. So our apartment turned into a mini-Freedom House. It was good getting to know the new people. Getting folk to be up-front about their fear and their reasons for going. Only a few had ever been on a picket line and faced a hostile crowd before, but they were clear. Nervous, a little scared, but clear. It's our people, our struggle. It's time I did something.

[*Cleve Sellers:*

“I remember the first time I almost took one for Carmichael and we hadn't even left D.C. yet, Bro. One very warm evening we were all sitting on the front porch chilling. Carol Martin and Doris Wilkerson, two volunteers from the same town, were particularly worried about how their mothers, also best friends, were taking the news of their daughters' summer plans. Worried, as it turned out, for good reason. Because, Bro., all of a sudden these two grim-faced, well-dressed black ladies came marching up the block. They stopped in front of me.

“Are you Stokely Carmichael?” one demanded.

“Wal, ma'am, all depends, y'know, on who's asking.” I smile at them, trying to be funny.

“Big mistake, Bro. Huge. That lady went into her purse, pulled out a high-

heeled shoe and measured my nappy head, with some sho-nuff bad intentions. Stokely comes forward and tries to charm the mothers. They ignore him.

"You two. Go inside. Get your things. You're coming with us." There was a long argument. The girls in tears, but stood their ground. At one point, the mothers even summoned the police who could do nothing but sympathize because the girls were not minors.

"Finally the mothers left, but with the universal parental parting shot.

"Okay, since you grown enough to go to Mississippi, then you grown enough to not bother even trying to come back home. You hear?" Both young ladies not only went to Mississippi but, thank God, came back safely to proud and relieved parents."]

When we got to the little women's college people were coming in from all over. A buzz of excitement, of expectation, was in the air. It was a first-day-of-school kind of excitement. New students coming in, checking out the scene, meeting folks, wondering who all these people were. Except here was an electricity that college never had.

I've seen accounts of tension between the volunteers and the veterans. The volunteers not feeling welcome. Mutual suspicion based on race. Staff being cold, almost hostile. All that stuff. That's not at all what I remember. No way.

Was there tension? What'd you expect? Course there was. Were people nervous and edgy? Wouldn't you be? Was this based on race? Not really. I mean, yes, the Mississippi staff was mostly black, Southern, and poor, and the volunteers mostly white, Northern, and middle class. But so were many of the orientation staff, ministers from the National Council of Churches (NCC), and so on. So it wasn't as if these "sheltered" young whites were suddenly surrounded by "alien" black faces.

In truth, many of the volunteers, like most white Americans, had never really been around black people in any significant way. And the Southern staff was not in the habit of assuming *anything* about strange white folk. *And*, they'd had varying experiences with the freedom election volunteers. And there were a lot more white folk this time. *A lot more*. As more and more arrived, people were looking them over and wondering just how they would fit in. Given the climate they had left in Mississippi, people had a deep foreboding. But race per se was the least of it.

So, was the SNCC staff standoffish and superior, excluding the eager young whites? Hell, no.

The tension and discomfort folks felt would have been perfectly natural even if this were a school social, some icebreaking freshman picnic. And this was no picnic. People were driving up in cars with plates from New York, California, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Vermont, Nevada, you name it—an eclectic mix of people. Volunteers, even when from the same school or city, were in many cases seeing each other for the first time.

So the volunteers, even when of the same class and race, were essentially a group of strangers. Not an especially comfortable situation for most young people. Add to that a certain inevitable anxiety. While the staff not only knew each other, they evinced a real closeness. An unspoken bond of shared experience that could seem—especially if you were real egotistic—a little exclusive.

I think that a lot of the exaggeration about *racial* tension came from the media. They were of course all white and probably felt real discomfort in our black presence. The press also really contributed to this “racial difference” in their own inimitable way by making it immediately clear what story they had come to report. What and who, so far as they were concerned, represented the real importance of the event.

They ran through the campus looking for photogenic “all-American” types for interviews. Some networks even selected subjects to follow up during the summer. I can’t recall that a single staff or local leader was so selected. Nor even a Northern black volunteer.

Strange mentality, the American press. Why on earth would some nineteen-year-old suburban freshman be a more interesting subject than a Mrs. Hamer, a Jesse Harris, or a Mr. Steptoe either in political terms or even for simple human interest? Boy, only in America.

We from NAG bridged both groups. We knew the staff and had been working with white students in the capital area ever since the Route 40 demonstrations. Besides which, the volunteers were real familiar to me. They mostly looked and sounded exactly like the white kids I’d gone to Bronx Science with for four years. I recognized them immediately.

[The clearest, most intelligent discussion of the recurrent black/white tension between staff and volunteer occurs in (white volunteer) Sally Belfrage’s admirable memoir, Freedom Summer. Ms. Belfrage, who worked in Greenwood in close proximity to Stokely and his people, wrote:

“Implicit in the songs, tears, speeches, work and laughter was the knowledge, secure in both them and us, that ultimately we could return to a white refuge. The struggle was their life sentence, implanted in their pigment, and ours only so long as we cared to identify. . . .

“They resented us and this was as difficult for some volunteers to assimilate as it was understandable: the volunteers wanted gratitude . . . and couldn’t understand why there was a tendency to use them simply as the most accessible objects of Negro anger . . . which acted to diminish any self-important, bloated white pride.

“It humbled, if not humiliated, one to realize that finally, they will never accept me. Which then raised the question: why, then, am I here? If they are not grateful for my help, if we are supposed to be struggling for brotherhood and can’t even find it among ourselves . . . ?

“. . . Yet those (volunteers) who exonerated themselves could see no contra-

diction between their innocence and their . . . desire for gratitude. . . Why gratitude? The struggle was as much ours as theirs, and to expect thanks was . . . to feel superior to that battle.

" . . . But we didn't have to come, did we? We could have stayed at home, gone to the beach or earn badly needed money for next semester. . . . And here we are. We came. Among the millions who could have realized their responsibility . . . we alone came. Don't we earn, if not praise, then at least some recognition? . . . I want to be your friend, you black idiot, was the contradiction everywhere evident."

Then, perceptively, even prophetically, Ms. Belfrage observed:

"SNCC is not populated with Toms who would wish to be white. They are not the ones who fill closets with bleaches and straighteners, who lead compromised existences between reality and illusion. They embrace their color and are engaged in working out its destiny. To bend to us was to corrupt the purity of their goal. To understand us meant to become like us, and the situation was too tenuous for the risk. . . .

"Once I heard a white man say to James Baldwin, ' . . . I feel victimized by some of the things you wrote. . . . I feel personal guilt for your condition. But it isn't my fault. What can I do?' Baldwin answered, 'That you are guilty and I bitter is the state of things. It may not be your fault. It is not my fault. It is not enough to feel guilty. Change things.'"

For a couple of days we had an intensive seminar/crash course on the history and culture of the movement, the situation in Mississippi, and plans, programs, hopes, expectations, and rules of conduct for the summer. We had the usual role-playing, singing, film clips, and a succession of speakers. Bob Moses spoke, local folks and staff ran workshops. Perhaps because of the NCC influence there was a strong spiritual/ethical tone. The usual suspects. My old friend the Reverend James Lawson, the Reverend Vincent Harding, and Bayard all spoke on Christian pacifism. The volunteers seemed equally divided: some were quite spiritual and others were like me, basically political in their orientation.

Then, the day before the session was to break up and we were to ship out to Mississippi, a representative of the volunteers' government, a lawyer from the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, addressed the group.

John Doar was a tall, intense young lawyer, and the Justice Department's point man in the state. He knew the state, he knew us, and we knew him. He'd even paid some dues. His federal status did not make him popular with the whites or necessarily immune from physical attack.

The day of Medgar's funeral in Jackson, Doar had stepped between a crowd of angry, rock-throwing black folk and a phalanx of state troopers with drawn guns. He is credited with averting serious bloodshed that day,

and justly so. People in the movement thought of him as a decent man and honest. Certainly John Doar was not the enemy.

Problem was, though, he wasn't an effective ally in any visible way either. See, he'd come down to Freedom Days. He'd observe, interview people, take notes, gather evidence, then return to Washington leaving people with the impression/hope/expectation of federal action. But then nothing would happen. At least nothing that we could see.

Folks didn't quite know what to make of that. Or more specifically, of him. Had he in fact reported and recommended the actions we'd been led to expect? And then been overruled by his bosses, Kennedy and Burke Marshall, whom we knew to have very political connections and agendas? Was Doar an honest man caught up in a politically corrupted system? Or did he speak one way to us, another to the Mississippi politicians, and still another to his bosses in the Justice Department? Doar, the classic insider/team player could not, or would not, say to us, "Hey, guys, there's really enough evidence and clear statutory and constitutional grounds. You know that. I know that. I made the recommendation and argued like mad for it. But Kennedy and Marshall shot it down." That we could have understood, and believed. But he never said that.

I can't remember everything Doar said in his speech, but judging from the volunteers' reactions, it must have sounded like a litany of federal impotence. What followed was a barrage of questions that proved he had not addressed their single greatest concern. Then someone asked directly, "What will be the role of the federal government in protecting our lives?" And the room became very, very silent.

Whether Doar's answer was that the federal government "will or can not guarantee anyone's safety" or "cannot protect you," I can't recall exactly. Whatever the actual words, the message people took was that their government would be absent, not involved. That, so far as their government was concerned, they would have to take their chances with a hostile state, defenseless, precisely mirroring the situation of the black population of Mississippi for the last seventy years.

You could feel a sudden, palpable deflation in that room. Then anger and disappointment. Bob Moses stepped onto the stage to stop the booing. "We don't do that," he told the volunteers, then said that he thought Doar was only being honest with us.

Given what we'd been struggling against in Washington, I was not really surprised by Doar's remarks, but it did seem that so much else might have and should have been said. I have never been able to figure out why Doar was even sent, if that was all he was instructed to say. Was he in fact only a bureaucrat sent, as a matter of policy and strategy, merely to scare people off?

Or, as Bob and others seemed to feel, was he simply being personally

honest? Having been left hanging out there so often, did he now feel he could not take personal responsibility for raising false hopes? Would not again mislead people with the kind of inflated assurances we'd been fed after the Freedom Rides? Well, whatever the motive: scruple or policy, the result was the same. A tragedy for everyone concerned. Remember now, the press had been in the room.

Of all the speeches the press heard that day, that statement of Doar's became *the* story across the country. Frantic parental calls ordering their offspring home began to pour in. Could that have been the intent? If so, however, there would be other quite unintended consequences.

Having received word that the deacon board of a small rural church in Philadelphia, Mississippi, that had agreed to host a freedom school had been beaten and terrorized and the church completely destroyed by fire, Mickey Schwerner, the CORE project director, was deeply concerned. He decided to leave the orientation early to be back with his people. He had left before Doar's speech. With him went James Chaney, a street-smart Mississippi brother who was a key organizer, and an idealistic young volunteer from New York named Andrew Goodman.

Doar's statement, suitably dressed up for Mississippi consumption, arrived in the state with a vengeance, threatening the safety of our workers. I have no idea what the tone of the radio or TV coverage was, but I did see some of that day's newspaper headlines. Incendiary. The press leapt on Doar's remarks like a tick on a fat dog. Vindication. "Fed Tells Invaders: 'We Will Not Protect You.'" Or "No Federal Protection for Invaders/Commies" or words to that effect. You could look it up. And that's only the headlines, the tip of the iceberg. They would certainly also have published commentary, responses from politicians to the report. Even more vindication. Praises for the good sense, however belated, by Yankees in "seats of power." Finally, seeing through the web of Communist deceit, the federal government was now signaling its intention to stand aside, freeing the good people of Mississippi to defend their "way of life" by whatever means necessary. I am certain that this could never have been John Doar's intention.

In the middle of this campaign to demonize us "invaders," this use of Doar's statement was criminal. And, in hindsight, predictable. It not only removed the only remaining restraint but seemed to imply federal license to murder. For some socially marginal good ol' boy, subject to months of demagogic incitement, that would have seemed a patriotic duty. And a clear signal.

This was the media climate into which our three friends drove that day. After arriving in Meridian, they went to check on the folks who'd been beaten and whose church was destroyed and were never seen again . . . alive.

[Before he died, Cecil Price, the deputy sheriff who delivered the three to the Klan, reportedly told a black coworker that he'd been "brainwashed." —EMT]

As I recall, we were training the second group of volunteers when we received the news: the three had gone to inspect the churches and failed to return.

Periodically the reports were updated. A routine was in place. Immediately the staff had begun calling all the hospitals and jails in the area. In Atlanta, Julian and Mary King started calling friendly politicians and media people asking them to investigate. This kind of attention could save the life of workers being secretly held in jails. At first none of the police would admit to holding the three. Next day the police in Philadelphia admitted, well, yes, they had been arrested, but had since been released and had driven away. Most likely they'd left the state. A day later, a group of Choctaw hunters found the burned-out shell of their car in the Bogue Chitto swamps. After that, Bob first told the group that we had to face that Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andy Goodman were in all likelihood dead. You could see how painful it was for him to admit that, even to himself.

[Bob Moses:

"We (the staff) wanted to believe they were still alive somewhere while being scared that they weren't. Once the car turned up, I was sure they were dead. So then, what d'you do? It was especially tough because of Rita Schwerner, Mickey's wife, who was there. Because of her I really didn't want to come out and say that. But then there were the volunteers. They had to be told the truth. Of course, as I discovered, Rita probably knew. Very early that morning old tough-minded Ivanhoe (Donaldson) had gone to her room and invited her for a walk. As they walked over the deserted campus, with Ivanhoe trying to comfort her, finally he'd said firmly but very gently, 'Rita, you know he's dead.'"]

Of course, Mississippi politicians rushed to put their spin on it. The governor and the local sheriff [*Lawrence Rainey, later indicted*], denounced a plot "to get attention and defame" Mississippi. The three were probably in Mexico drinking beer and laughing as they watched the commotion on TV. "Governor Paul Johnson informed the press that 'those boys are in Cuba.'" In Washington, James Eastland called for an FBI investigation of this "civil rights fraud." According to *his* information, the workers had been reported missing *before* they disappeared. No one appeared to question how the senator knew exactly *when* they had disappeared. One influential *Washington Post* columnist, to his eternal shame, actually accused us of intentionally setting up our brothers to be sacrificed. I'll never ever forget that.

[After the gutted car was found, Joseph Alsop, "dean of the Washington press corps" and establishment insider, wrote: "It is a dreadful thing to say, but it

needs saying. The organizers who sent these young people into Mississippi must have wanted, even hoped (emphasis added) for martyrs." The unprincipled hacks Evans and Novak rushed in with identical innuendos of their own. —EMTJ

Now, after the fact, official Washington has discovered authority for all kinds of previously impossible activities. Presidential phone calls to the Mississippi governor; a huge FBI office established in Jackson; a battalion of sailors dispatched to beat the bushes. The previously only "investigative" FBI suddenly discovered the authority to make arrests when, in Itta Bena, agents found and arrested three men who had held two newly arrived volunteers at gunpoint. That single act, widely reported, probably saved many of us in those early days. But it came too late for our three comrades.

In Oxford the mood was at once somber and chaotic. I could see, we all could see, that Bob was devastated. His absolute worst fear. First Herbert Lee, then Louis Allen, now this? I remember Bob always used to say that this movement compressed and speeded up time. That we lived the normal experience of a year in about two months, sometimes less. By that calculus, his three years in Mississippi amounted to thirty years' experience. In that moment, every one of those thirty years showed their mark on his face and in his eyes. You could see that the brother took it hard. For a brief period he seemed almost paralyzed. As though a curtain had come down and he'd withdrawn deep into himself. He sat motionless, staring silently into space, as though meditating or in a deep trance. He stayed like that for hours before he came back to us.

We did all we could to support the brother. "Yo, Bob, you did everything that was humanly possible. This ain't your fault, brother." Of course he knew that. But it needed to be said. *[Only days earlier, he'd written the president outlining the situation and his concerns: "We are asking that the federal government move before the fact . . . I hope that this is not asking too much of our country." —EMTJ]*

We all suffered with Bob, grieved for our three brothers, and felt helpless. It was a terrible, terrible few days. Could we even trust the government to seriously investigate? And the worst for me was not the fear, but the impotence. There had to be *something* more we could do to help the brothers. And for ourselves. For Bob. But what? I discovered that a lot us on staff were feeling that way too. Meanwhile the orientation continued. That at least was something to do.

I really gotta say something here about those volunteers. I know it's been said but I want it on the record. During the next three days they were impressive. Won my respect, yes, they did. Lookit, man, it was heavy. First

of all, any sense of youthful invincibility they might have had was now history. Any feeling of security and preferment was long gone, Jack. This was no longer, if it ever had been to any of them, another chic undergraduate summer adventure. This was ugly. It was real. It was life-threatening. It was a shock. Welcome to the movement. Now you could see it in their eyes. At that point a wholesale exodus would have been natural. Anxious parents were burning up the lines, ordering, pleading, cajoling, bribing (Remember that trip to Europe we talked about?) their offspring to come home. One or two parents personally drove out to retrieve them. One father, so I'm told, came, listened soberly to his son, shook his hand, hugged him, then drove off alone.

What was truly impressive, and to tell the truth quite surprising, was how few left. At one point I recall Bob's being alarmed that no one was leaving. It seemed unnatural. When he spoke to us, he emphasized that people were not only free to leave, they should *feel* free. Leaving carried no stigma. In fact, it would be a perfectly rational, understandable human choice. Few, if any, takers. Why didn't more of these young Americans say, "You know, this ain't really worth my life. I'm going home"? I really can't say. And in a year or two, many of these same people would be denounced as unpatriotic cowards for refusing to go destroy a small country halfway around the world. Those volunteers earned my respect, yes, they did.

The other extraordinary thing one could not help be moved by: the uncommon grace, courage, and dignity of the parents and families of the missing men. I mean, in the midst of their uncertainty and anxiety, in the midst of their loss and sorrow, these people [*Mrs. Chaney, the Schwerners, and the Goodmans*] displayed such courage, such clarity, and such dignity. They were just inspiring. There absolutely had to be something more we could do.

The night outside was pitch-black. I mean *dark*, Jack. Remember the line "blacker than a thousand midnights in a cypress swamp"? It was sorta like that and I was happy as a pig in mud. Very little traffic, so Charlie Cobb and I were gonna sneak into Neshoba County under cover of darkness.

We had a mission, and in case we were stopped we had our cover story down pat. We were schoolteachers headed to Florida on vacation. We thought we were slick too. We even had some high school textbooks (intended for the freedom schools) in the car to support that story. We also had \$100 concealed under the floorboards. But unknown to either of us, a few pieces of movement literature, which should not have been there, were also in the bottom of my bag.

So far as I was concerned, the darkness and the deserted road were all to the good. In Meridian we would hook up with three other teams to go into the county to find out what had happened to our missing comrades.

(At this point, we weren't sure their disappearance wasn't going to be "covered up" in some way. We would try to see that it wasn't.)

In SNCC we didn't abandon our brothers and sisters. We didn't leave our wounded on the field. Even if we didn't succeed in finding our comrades or what had happened to them, we at least owed it to them to go look. Like me, Charlie had also initially been opposed to the Summer Project. He'd worried that the cost would be too high. Now we both were scared that this might be only the opening salvo: the first in a series of such murders during a long, bloody summer. Another reason why we could not allow this to be covered up.

But in concrete terms? Neshoba was in the Third Congressional District, which by agreement was CORE territory. Charlie and I had worked the Delta, so we didn't really know the area, except by reputation. We were going into a place said to be a Klan stronghold, violent and yard-dawg mean. We figured on one advantage: the local people, who, as with Emmett Till's murder, might have information. Things they'd heard or seen that they would not easily share with strange white men. We heard on the radio that the gutted remains of the station wagon had been found by a band of Choctaw hunters. What else might they have seen? Many Choctaws looked entirely African to me. We hoped maybe we could blend in with them on the reservation and take advantage of their knowledge of the terrain. Admittedly not a fully formulated plan, but we were again learning to fly on the way down. (We never did hook up with our Native American brothers, but it wasn't necessary. The black community received us and watched our backs.)

We were driving an old Buick with D.C. tags. It had recently been donated, had not yet been registered to SNCC, so nothing connected us to the "invasion." I was driving carefully and we hadn't been stopped. Now under cover of the deep Mississippi darkness, we figured we were less than an hour outside Meridian. At the CORE community center there—which Mickey and Rita Schwerner had set up—we'd meet up with the three other SNCC teams.

We were just going (carefully) through this deserted little town when the engine started to cough, jerk, and lose power. Charlie looked at me. I looked at Charlie. The car jerked and coughed.

"Man, we've gotta check this out. I'ma have to stop." The brother did not look happy.

"Maybe it's just a wire that's come loose."

"Yeah, but I still gotta stop."

"Well . . . if we must, pull under that streetlight up ahead."

We sat for a moment listening and looking around. The street was empty. Everything was still, reassuringly quiet.

"Okay. We gotta be quick and get the hell outta here."

So we opens the doors and jumps out and come face-to-face with this Southern belle. Talk about timing, Jack. Just as we swung the doors open and hopped out, we hear this frightened squeal. At that precise moment a white woman had stepped into the light. (Wonder where *she* was coming from at that hour.) She takes one look, her eyes all big, her mouth hanging open, and takes off running into the darkness.

We knew then we had to git outta there fast. We give the engine a quick glance. "Let's keep going as far as we can before this car stops. If it stops, we can figure out what to do then."

"I do think it's too late, my brother," Charlie says. I look up and sho nuff there's flashing lights bearing down. Turns out we were only a block from the police station. The cops are suspicious. Clearly on invasion alert. So, I takes the offensive.

"Officers, we're teachers on our way to Florida. We're having car trouble, but will be on our way in a minute." Oh, no, they gotta "investigate."

"Investigate what? We've broken no laws. There's no reason to hold us, Officers."

They search the car and us. Then they consult. Search the car again. Take us to the station house.

"Officer, I know my rights. Either you have to arrest us or let us go." They arrest me. Turns out I've misplaced a letter of permission from the owner. So I'm arrested on suspicion of car theft. Charlie is told to go.

"Officer, I'm not leaving my friend," Charlie says.

"You aren't gonna separate us," I chime in. "We both stay or we both go."

"I'm not leaving my friend. You will have to arrest me too," Charlie says.

"Boy. You must not know wheah yo' is. Best you git your _____ going before we git real mad." Charlie doesn't budge.

[Charlie Cobb:

"What I remember most is the darkness, that woman, and that the jail was real, real bright. Painfully so and the cops wore shades. I figured whatever was going to happen to me would have to happen right there. The evil that you know . . . I wasn't going out into that darkness. No way. I'm thinking why suddenly won't they arrest me for refusing an order? Why do they want me in the street? In SNCC you never leave jail alone after dark. That's what happened to the three missing guys. I remember that one time in the same situation Guyot refused to leave. He told a cop, 'Either arrest me now or I'm going slug you in your jaw.' They arrested him. But I wasn't ready for that just yet. So I just stayed put.

"Meanwhile, you know Carmichael, he's arguing. Demands his phone call. No deal. By now it's late, after midnight. The town should be long asleep. I'm

not sure but maybe they find some leaflets in Carmichael's bag. Now they get real hostile. A group of guys with guns show up. What's this, relatives of the woman? The local home guard sniffing out invaders? (I have seen published reports that "armed civilians were gathering" outside the jail after the discovery of the movement literature. If so, they were nowhere in evidence when Charlie was thrown out of the jail. —EMT) Those guys leave, but now I'm certain I'm not leaving. They put Carmichael in a little cell overlooking the street. He signals me to stay put.

"The cops have a problem. Arrest is not an option 'cause that's exactly what I want. Finally, they rough me up some and physically throw me out the door. I don't see the men anywhere. But I don't know when they might come back. In the car, I retrieve the money. Now what? Should I go back to post Stokely's bond? No. That's just too much like what happened to the missing workers. So I bring the car right outside the jail, where I can see Carmichael's cell and whether they try to bring him out. I lock myself in, put a tire iron on the seat besides me, and cower in the car, praying for sunrise. That was the loneliest, scariest few hours of my life. In the morning I bond Stokely out. That damn ol' Buick ran fine all the way to Meridian.]

All that night I just kept fussing. They must have thought I was crazy. I wanted them to know I was watching to see if they went out after Charlie, but they never left the station.

Next day, when we reached Meridian, the other teams were pacing the floor, debating whether to report us missing. (We were supposed to be clandestine.) Ol' Cleve, I recall, was threatening to come search for us or the Buick. Ivanhoe Donaldson, his teammate, said, "Yeah, Cleve, take the car an' then what? Expect me to come searching for *you* on foot? Then what? Someone else comes searching for me?"

Man, I'd never been hugged so hard in mah *life*, Jack. Which told me how edgy folks' nerves were, convinced we'd fallen victim to the terrorists too. I'm still not sure why we hadn't because, according to the local people, Durant, the two-bit town where the car had chosen to stop, was infamous, even in that county, and "knowed for mean." A place routinely to be avoided by black folk at high noon much less after dark.

The other teams had come in without incident. Dona Richards (Moses), Bob's wife, had volunteered. As Ivanhoe said, "Dona *insisted* and who was going to stop her?" With her was Euvesta Simpson, the sister who'd tended Mrs. Hamer after her beating in the Winona jail, and Gwen Gillon, a gutsy little sister. Brother Ralph Featherstone, a young D.C. teacher, was in Mississippi for the first time, as was Cleve.

Louise, the fine sister in the office who brought us up-to-date and gave us a list of contacts and phone numbers, was visibly emotional. At times she was barely able to control her voice. When she was explaining procedures in case we were stopped, Ivanhoe, who was driving one of the cars,

stopped her. "Don't worry, my sister, that ain't in the script. We ain't going be *stopped*. They going have to *catch* us. At a hundred and twenty miles an hour, more if the car will do it." Ivanhoe was like that.

We studied maps of the county. Looked over the local papers. In a grim way that made it real. Being there and seeing our missing friends described as "race-mixing agitators and mongrels," and worse, was very different from hearing it over the phone back in Washington. I thought, "Yeah, boy, you sho nuff behind enemy lines now." We made our plans and went in after dark in two cars.

What was left of the church was another dose of reality: this little clearing deep in some piney woods reeking of smoke and kerosene. Ashes, charred embers, sheets of rusted zinc, smoke-blackened, all twisted and billowed from the heat. Nothing to be done there. Nothing useful to be found. None of us said much. I was thinking that the last people to look at these ruins were probably our missing friends. We left quickly and quietly.

Our contact was a farmer and obviously a good one. His house had inside plumbing and he owned some land. He was a leader of the congregation of the burned church. Behind his house, a spacious new barn smelled of hay and animals. That's where we hid and slept during the day.

He and his wife were sure our men were dead. "Them same peckerwoods as burnt Mt. Olive church killed those boys." He thought they did it as a warning to the local community because of the freedom school. We were welcome to stay and search as long as we liked. But they clearly didn't hold out much hope. "No telling where those bodies be by now."

That couple was good to us. Very good. The lady fed us an incredible meal. I mean she really *fed* us. And wouldn't hear of accepting any contribution from us. Her husband was organized and clear.

The fewer people, black or white, who knew we were there, the better, he warned. The area be so tensed-up, it was best not to be seen nosing round. Even normally peaceable white folk were liable to be shooting first. So best we stayed in during daylight. There'd be security though. A couple of rifles be covering the back lot and barn all the time. But it was best for all concerned that nobody saw us.

During the day some local men he trusted would be helping us. It wasn't hunting season, but you could run coon anytime. Usually folk ran coon at night, but weren't no law against doing it in the day neither. So the mens be roaming the woods with their long-eared ol' coon dogs and their rifles and shotguns. He didn't figure even the Klan wanted no truck with black men hunting and toting rifles.

We had to talk about that. It meant we'd be searching at night. One of the reasons we were even there was to show the flag. To show the community *and* the whites that the movement wasn't to be so easily scared off.

Hard to do that in the dark. Then, the local men were armed. Should we, those of us who could use them, not also carry guns? We decided that none of us would.

I get asked a lot, "Knowing what you know now, would you again do the kinds of things y'all did then?" I always say, "Absolutely. I'd do it again. Wouldn't change a thing." But y'know truthfully? The one thing I would do differently? I sure would not venture into those swamps and woods again unless I was well armed. And I'm talking superior firepower too. Tha's right, serious arms.

So we went out. This county was very different from the Delta. This was woods, scrubby hills, and swampy bottoms with thick brush and marshy reeds. Clouds of mosquitoes and deerflies that flew into your eyes and mouth. Your face and hands, any exposed skin, were covered and stung. And it was *dark*. Briers and brambles scratched your face and hooked your clothes. We'd been warned of rattlesnakes in the hills and moccasins in the swamps. Unseen things slithered away underfoot, and each time you listened for the rattle and tensed for the strike. It was hot, very hot, muggy, and dark. When you got home before daybreak, man, those ticks and chiggers be all over your skin and in your muddy clothes. And over it all, the constant fear of detection by white folks.

After that first night, I think we all realized how impossible it really was. But nobody wanted to be the first to say it. If I were the one missing, I'd want to know that my comrades cared enough to look. I think I wasn't the only one who must have felt that way. So we tried to rest up in the barn to go out the next night.

[Cleve Sellers:

"Although we were supposed to sleep during the day, it was nearly impossible. We were too tense. The broiling heat and soupy humidity didn't help. The tension that kept us awake by day took on a different character when the sun went down. The daytime fear was diffuse, it produced restlessness and fatigue. The nighttime tension was precise. It heightened the senses. I could hear, see, smell, and feel things that I was oblivious to in daylight. I even imagined I saw things in the pitch black.

We were transported to the area to be searched in an old pickup truck, traveling on narrow, rutty back roads. The driver never used his headlights. At times he'd flick on his park lights for a second to get his bearings. I never ceased to be amazed at his skill, his knowledge of those back roads and apparent ability to see in the dark.

"The procedure was always the same. We'd pile from the truck and fan out. Walking slowly and rarely talking, we'd search swamps, creeks, abandoned houses, and orchards, ruinat barns, tangled underbrush, and unused wells, probing with long sticks. We couldn't use flashlights. In one section there was a fire tower. To avoid detection by the fire watch we even discarded all shiny metal

objects like belt buckles, which might have reflected light. At times we had to pass near to white farmhouses. All farms have watchdogs. We sneaked by ready to run at the sound of a sudden barking that would alert the household. That never happened, thank God.”]

We went back out a couple of nights. Of course, we never found our people. But we did find out a lot about ourselves and about loyalty and what real courage was. That old farmer, his wife, son, and two daughters whose church had been burned. They sheltered, fed, and guarded us. And their friends who drove us out and picked us up, knowing the risk to themselves and their families. I think Mickey Schwerner and his team would have been proud to see the loyalty their local people showed.

But of course by then our brothers were under thirty tons of red dirt in a farm dam. And finding their remains cost the FBI a \$30,000 payment to a Klan informer. Hey, we didn't have thirty pieces of silver, much less \$30,000, and which Klansman was going to confess to us, even if we were offering \$30 million?

After a few nights we could see it was hopeless and getting more dangerous. Besides, our continued presence was putting our host family at risk. I really wish I could remember that brave family's name. So when we heard on the radio that the FBI had taken over the case and that troops [*actually five hundred sailors —EMT*] had been sent in, it gave us an honorable out. Besides, we all had a project to go run.

It was also becoming clearer that Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and young Andrew Goodman hadn't died entirely in vain. Yes, it was an absurd, ignorant, vicious waste of three good young lives. But the belated attention of the administration and the media presence that followed it undoubtedly saved a great many others. Only why did it have to come so late? And at such a price?

[Two of the bodies found in the Pearl River were nineteen-year-old black students who'd been expelled from Alcorn A&M for campus protests. Local Klansmen confessed to having kidnapped and murdered them on their way home six weeks earlier. I believe the Klansmen were acquitted. When their disappearance had been reported to the local sheriff, he had dismissed it: "Them li'l niggers pro'lly gone to Chicago." There had been no investigation. Had two white New Yorkers not disappeared along with Jimmy Chaney, the bodies of Charles Moore and Henry Dee might never have been found.

The most heartrending film footage of the funeral of James Chaney in Meridian shows his eleven-year-old brother, Ben, consumed with grief, weeping inconsolably. Everyone said that his big brother James had been his hero and the center of Ben's existence. That was easily apparent from the intensity of the young boy's grief at the funeral.

Some years later on a visit to Mississippi, I thought of the young boy. "Whatever became of young Ben Chaney?" I asked.

Summer '64: Ten Dollars a Day and All the Sex You Can Handle

"Oh, you haven't heard? He's in jail."

"Goddamn, for what?"

"Murder," they said.

A few years later, I learned that the young man had been acquitted of a murder charge in New York. I pray that he has also regained some peace and equilibrium in his life. —EMTJ

They Still Didn't Get It

I was vice president of the State Conference of NAACP branches. I did everything I knew how. Every time we moved, we had to move according to law. Unless we were advised to do certain things, we didn't do it. But, when SNCC came, it didn't seem to matter what these white folks thought. When SNCC moved, SNCC moved in SNCC's way. I tell you one thing, SNCC gave courage and determination to blacks in Mississippi.

—Amzie Moore, *Voice of Freedom*

That was one hell of a summer. It began in tragedy that was unnecessary, predictable, and avoidable and ended in farce. Or maybe not farce, but in the longer term, a greater political tragedy. And I know that to this day those "smart" Democratic politicians in Atlantic City didn't have a clue. I mean, the so-called leadership. Not a clue as to the chance they'd had and exactly how badly they'd blown it with everything that happened afterward: if not with that election, then certainly with black people, with the white youth of the country. Still not a glimmer. And four years later in Chicago? I guarantee they still didn't get it. Never quite understood that it had all really started in Atlantic City, where they had rolled over and "dissed" our people from Mississippi. [*The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation to the National Democratic Convention.* —EMT]

The Democratic Party leadership had a chance to reach out to embrace the future, and instead they reached back to try to preserve a shameful past. This backward-looking racist response was among the flat-out dumbest political miscalculations the Democratic Party leadership ever made, and that's saying a lot for, the Good Lord knows, they've made quite a few. And it sure came back to bite them big time, didn't it? We'll get to that.

All the time we were searching in Neshoba, I had been thinking about my responsibilities in the Second Congressional District. In fact, I'd been

thinking about little else ever since Bob had asked me that spring. I'd known I would need all the help I could get there. A movement is only as good as its organizers. I was confident—whatever happened that summer—that we'd have good, dependable organizers in the Second District.

Even at Oxford I'd checked out the volunteers carefully. Listening to them . . . the kinds of questions they asked . . . what they said . . . how they'd said it . . . their manner, attitudes, their political smarts. How their spirit struck me. Whenever someone particularly impressed me, I'd get into a conversation with him or her. If my snap impression held up, I'd say, "Ask for the Delta. We can use you in the Delta." You'd be surprised how much you can learn about people from even a short conversation if you pay attention. I ended up recruiting some good folks there. Of course, the staff who would be running other projects were doing the same thing.

The district office would be in Greenwood, my old stomping ground. That was great. I loved that county. We had a real base there, some strong families. And the young veterans who would move "out in the rural" to start new projects and teach the volunteers how to survive. These were my people.

The project director for Greenwood would be Bob Zellner. Ol' good-hearted, "cracker" Bob, smart, experienced, and devoted, was almost certainly the only white person SNCC could put in such a crucial position. The local people accepted and trusted him completely. A Southern thang, I guess. He did a hell of a job on a very hot seat, as everyone knew he would.

But the volunteers, most of whom I'd be meeting for the first time, were still the big question. How many would we have? How, in the crunch, would they fit in? After Oxford, I figured that if they showed up at all, that would be a big point in their favor. They would have made it through two tests. First, the tough recruitment screening, then the tension and excitement of orientation. So you knew they had courage. But having courage was not nearly the same thing as being able to fit into a movement culture in the black community of the Mississippi Delta. That would require discipline, humility, as well as the ability to adapt. How many Bob Zellners can you expect to meet? Well, we'd see.

But even there I had a big hole card, sixteen "volunteers" I already knew well. These were experienced strugglers, who knew how to organize, and most of all they were black. These were the folk from NAG. Three carloads had driven down from Howard to Oxford. I'd told Bob we were a team and he assigned them all to the Delta. So it would be a question of mixing and matching the elements—the local staff, NAG folks, and the white volunteers.

Four of us—Cleve, Ivanhoe, Charlie, and I—drove up to the Delta together from Neshoba County. Ivanhoe was project director in Moss

Point. By the time we got to Greenwood, Cleve had decided to go with him. Charlie would be working with freedom schools all over, but I teased him that Ivanhoe didn't want him anywhere near his project since the night in Jackson Charlie nearly got Ivanhoe killed. According to Ivanhoe, two cops pulled them over: "Y'all them NAACP niggers, huh?" Either Charlie had felt a professional* respect for accuracy or resented the association. "Well, actually, we're SNCC," he corrects the cop, who immediately goes off, but not on Charlie. He snatches Ivanhoe, throws him down, sticks a gun in his ear, and keeps shouting that he's gonna blow his (expletive) head off, until his partner restrains him.

In Greenwood, the scene around the office was indescribable. The community in the immediate vicinity was literally humming and buzzing with activity. Constant traffic. A busload of volunteers unloading. Local adults coming to welcome and collect their volunteers. Kids standing around gawking at the incoming strangers. Boxes of books and equipment for community centers and freedom schools being unloaded. The occasional carload of local white men driving by and shouting insults.

The community looking at the arrivals, the rookies looking at the community. Every now and then a few more cars arriving. Each new group looking hot, ruffled, curious, and a little dazed. Excitement and anxiety, anticipation and uncertainty in every face. What was this place? Just what had they gotten themselves into? For most of them, the next two and a half months would be the sternest test of their lives thus far. How would they do? This heah was for real now, Jack.

For the most part, I'd say they did just fine. For the overwhelming majority—white or black—it would be a life-changing experience politically and culturally. In black Mississippi, the whites experienced at first-hand a side of America they'd not seen and could scarcely have imagined. They learned something about their country, about black culture, and about themselves. Their presence changed black Mississippi, but clearly black Mississippi changed them even more. They might have come for different reasons—adventure, idealism, even to write about it—but most went back better people than they came. That much, I'm sure of.

[This seems to be the testimony of the volunteers themselves in their letters home. See Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez's classic Letters from Mississippi. These letters in perceptiveness, freshness of detail and description, variety of events and situations, and range of experience are unlike anything I've since encountered in civil rights literature. Collectively, they constitute an irreplaceable record of an extraordinary moment in American social and cultural history at midcentury.]

Some volunteers returned to campus or community with an enhanced

*A professional respect: Charlie later became a distinguished journalist.

activist zeal. Many, if not most, went on to careers of service and advocacy in medicine, the arts, religion, education, or politics. Of course, their presence on the project suggests that these inclinations were probably present before the fact.

Perhaps SNCC should have anticipated this development. Alan Schiffman, a Princeton doctoral candidate in philosophy who decided to stay on in Neshoba County, explains, "I'd learned such an awful lot in a short time. It became clear to me that nothing in graduate school was likely to compare in intensity or importance. Besides, I really loved the people in that community. They were so generous, so centered, and so strong. They just didn't take no crap. I felt most comfortable there, such fond memories" —EMTJ

In fact, at the end of summer almost two hundred offered to take a year off and to stay on in the state. Truthfully, I hadn't anticipated that. Certainly not that many. It would create serious, serious problems of too rapid growth and institutional identity for SNCC in 1965.

In Greenwood, the first thing I found was more people looking for assignments than I'd expected. In southwest Mississippi the Klan violence was so heavy that volunteers assigned to Pike and Amite Counties were at first held out and sent to the Delta. Check that out. The Delta? For safety?

In a matter of days everyone had a project and a job. Folks were briefed on security measures, community values, Southern sensibilities black and white, expected behavior, movement values, and shipped out. That was my job. One thing I remember . . . a rush of satisfaction when the car left for Tallahatchie County. You know, that vow I'd made to myself and Bro Emmett Till. That night two years earlier when I first saw the bridge and highway sign to Tallahatchie. "One day we gonna open you up."

That for me was the real beginning of an amazing ten weeks. More incredible stuff happened. And compressed into such a short time. My job as director—really a traveling troubleshooter—took me everywhere, I mean evrahweah, across the Delta, county to county, project to project. I always emphasized security, discipline, and building political power. I visited freedom schools, spoke at precinct meetings and county caucuses, in churches, under trees. I was at freedom days and funerals. Everywhere. I saw a lot and learned a lot. About myself and especially the dangers and demands of leadership.

It was the greatest responsibility and challenge I'd yet had. I was amazed at how people—especially when under stress—responded to a title. By virtue of being "district director" I was seen as having instant authority. People were disposed to like and trust you just because. And to depend on you. Yeah, of course, they'd accept, even seem to need, firm decisions and instructions. But in return they also seemed to expect you

to produce instant solutions to every problem. People depended on you to inspire confidence. You inspired confidence by showing confidence.

Yeah, they expected clarity and decisiveness at all times. But the decisions had to be seen to be fair and intelligent. No stupid moves. No bombast, no empty guarantees: no overstated promises that you couldn't keep and which people knew you couldn't keep. You had to be *credible*. To keep trust, you had to perform. To keep authority, you had to earn it, over and over. To lead not by fiat but by example and work. Of course, some of my own rules I wasn't able to keep.

"We're not here to go to jail. We're here to do a job. Which cannot be done in a cell. Your duty is to stay out of jail if at all possible, okay.?" I ended up in jail four times.

But, for the most part, I think I was able to rise to the demands of the job. Mostly it came naturally. First place, I really loved the job and the challenge. Then I was actually too busy to feel fear. A luxury I simply didn't have time for. So I showed none. And the confidence thing? There I was a true believer. Because I was genuinely confident that we'd succeed. I literally could not imagine failure. I guess people were able to feel that confidence. I simply could not imagine anything more important and necessary that I could have been doing. So of course my enthusiasm and energy were always high and clearly visible.

To the extent I was successful those were the reasons. Some things you can't fake. But mostly, y'know, we fed off the people, staff, community folk, volunteers, the kids. Sure, every day there was some new crisis or atrocity. But, also twice, three times a day there was something else to marvel at. Acts of courage, generosity, decency, even humor. Something more to admire and respect. It kept you humble and committed. You couldn't let folks like this down. Simple as that.

Also, every organizer really needs a sense of humor. And trust me, there was a lot to laugh at. Innocent misunderstandings across class, culture, and race. The absurdity of racism. The dependable and amazing stupidity of the "authorities." And of course if you could make people laugh—especially at yourself and themselves—it really helped. After a while, that became second nature.

(True story. One freedom day about seventy black folk are outside the county courthouse hoping to take the test. Along come these crackers with a monkey on a leash with a sign: "I want to redish too." They and the ape are admitted to the courthouse only to emerge to announce that the ape, being unable to read, had failed the test. From her scowl, this seemed to agitate one of the older black ladies on the picket line. Folks thought she was insulted by the monkey. "What monkey? I ain't seen no monkey. It's thet pitiful-looking, li'l ol' *white* lady what's bothering me. If them peck-

erwoods knowed she couldn't read, they shoulda left her home in her bed. Po' I'il ol' ugly thang.")

As the summer went on, the parts of the job I found myself looking forward to with purest pleasure were my visits to freedom schools. These were probably the most unambiguous successes we had. I tell you, that summer I saw what real education—for students and teachers—could be and mean. It was a joy to see. As well as sometimes painful and angering.

See, going into the summer, my emphasis was on the political. Heavily. Now, of course, I'd always understood the importance of education. That's clear. In Greenwood I'd spent a lot of time talking to June Johnson and her friends and the younger kids about their schools, about books, ideas, our history. So I understood—and deeply resented—the callous, criminal deprivation of education to black youth in the Delta. So I knew the schools were necessary. The idea was logical and appropriate. But I can't say I was real excited about it at first.

But, boy, was that to change, Jack. Fast, quick, and in a hurry. Because forget the idea, the reality was something exciting.

See, I'd known that the students would be turned-on. How not? Learning all the things about their world, their country, and their history that the state's Bantu educational system deliberately kept from them? And especially in an uncensored, student-centered, creative classroom situation. So we'd made the curriculum political and cultural. A lot of black and African history and culture. A lot of discussion of Mississippi politics, the challenge, etc. Exposure to a lot of poetry, plays, and music with strong encouragement to create and perform their own. So I knew the students would have to like it.

But honestly? No way could I have expected the intensity of the enthusiasm, the excitement. By students and parents.

In one school in the district, the day after school opened a couple of teachers were awakened by a knocking on their door. It was dawn, not yet full light. The two women peer nervously out into the semidarkness afraid of what they might see. It was not the Klan. Only their students grinning and calling on them to start school. It wasn't yet six o'clock.

[The following is from a volunteer freedom-school teacher named Pam in Holly Springs, a town not in the same county as Mound Bayou, but quite evidently subject to the same policies of Bantu education. —EMT]

*Mound Bayou was an all-black town. The policy of the school board in that county at that time: "Neither foreign languages nor civics shall be taught in Negro schools. Nor shall American history from 1860 to 1875 be taught." Enough said. —EMT

Dear Mom and Dad,

The atmosphere in class is unbelievable. It is what every teacher dreams about—real, honest enthusiasm and desire to learn anything and everything. The girls come to class of their own free will. They respond to everything that is said. They are excited about learning. They drain me of everything I have to offer so that I go home at night completely exhausted but very happy. . . .

. . . Every class is beautiful. The girls respond, respond, respond. And they disagree among themselves. I have no doubt that soon they will be disagreeing with me. At least this is one thing that I am working towards. They are a sharp group. But they are under-educated and starved for knowledge. They know that they have been cheated and they want anything and everything that we can give them.

I have a great deal of faith in these students. . . .

Love, Pam

—*Letters from Mississippi*

Now I can't be sure of the actual figures, but my sense is that among the volunteers, women may have outnumbered men by quite a bit. (Even though I'm sure we must have asked recruiters to try to sign up more men.) Many on the staff saw that as a mixed blessing. Not through any fault of the women's, but because of the deeply engrained, almost psychotic Southern male attitudes about "white womanhood." Which, I'm afraid, most of the women volunteers were going to represent.

This was cause for real concern, Jack. Young white women in the black community would be seen as a provocation and a flash point for violence. That was reality. A security risk to themselves and everyone else in communities in which lynching was by no means a distant memory. And in the climate of hostility folks could see being created. "Ten dollars a day and all the sex you can handle . . ."? Everyone was nervous on the woman question.

One expedient was to try to "hide" the women in libraries and freedom schools as opposed to sending them canvassing door-to-door. (Course some women did do canvassing, but in all-women or all-white teams.) Naturally, a few women complained initially about our "compromising" with racism and keeping them out of "the real action." But it soon enough became clear that much of the "real action" was to be found in the schools.

(Besides, after answering one or two of the incessant phone calls accusing them in the most vulgar language imaginable of every conceivable "depravity" with hordes of black men, even the most militant women understood clearly why certain precautions were necessary. This blackman/white-woman sexual obsession was pervasive. Check this. Some cops

in Jackson are harassing a volunteer who reveals that in real life he's a med student. What could be more harmless and respectable, right? To these cops it was obvious. "A med student, huh?" One sneered. Obviously that volunteer could be in the state for only one reason. "You here to give abortions to all them white gals pregnant by nigras, huh?")

However, one dividend of the strong female presence was that we were able to open more schools than originally planned. Even then there was unmet demand.

Down in Hattiesburg, where the three churches in which freedom schools were scheduled to go had been burned in one week, the schools opened a few weeks late. The teachers optimistically prepared for one hundred and fifty students and prayed that half that number would turn up in defiance of the terror. On opening day they found themselves calling for ten more teachers to accommodate the six hundred would-be students who appeared.

Remember what I said about those forty acres and a mule? During this summer when I traveled all over the Delta, that had become clear: the serious difference that owning some land made to the spirit of the people. Those folks in Neshoba who helped us so much in the search? Landowning farmers. Time and again I would see the same thing. Any little community where people owned some land, whether in Holmes, Bolivar, or Leake County, the same spirit and community strength.

The community called Harmony was such a place. All summer there'd been a struggle with the local power structure and the Klan. Same ol' story. Harassment and resistance. All summer. When the county tried to close the schools by evicting the people from a community center they had prepared, they simply located the school in a church and built and guarded a new center. Then the county tried to open the "Negro" schools in the middle of the summer, a move intended to close down the freedom schools and avoid the court-ordered integration of first grade in the white schools. The Harmony community parents simply voted total boycott of the Negro schools. It went on and on all summer, a constant struggle. Harassment, resistance, and of course, education in action.

[We have a running account of this struggle from the letters home of several volunteers. —EMT

July 1

About 12 miles away is Harmony (pronounced Hominy), a Negro farm community of about 300-400 population. The people have been active for a long time in the NAACP. They were the first in Mississippi to file suit for integration of schools and consequently there was terrorism last year. . . . Although few of the people have had much education themselves,

READY FOR REVOLUTION

they know the value of it. They speak intelligently and articulately. The first time I began to get excited and optimistic . . . was when we arrived . . . There was a welcoming committee of about 40 people . . . We didn't arrive until near noon, but the people had been there waiting since eight. All kinds of speeches were made to tell us how much we were welcome. It was great.

We are on a farm . . . the most beautiful you could imagine—red, red dirt. They hardly buy any food—even their lard is home made. . . .

. . . We have four old school buildings—run-down, wooden frame, few windows left—filthy. They are old for one reason. There has been no school in Harmony since 1961 . . . But the people had entirely cleaned out one building, put in homemade chairs and tables and arranged the library . . . Today we worked cleaning out what will be our (school) building. . . .

Love, Judy

. . . Then the sheriff came with about six white men, who were introduced as the "Board of Education." . . . After we had finished cleaning the school, they told us we should not use it; it is county property. We (the community leaders) told them it is private property . . . We are getting a lawyer and will fight in court. (The case was lost.)

July 29

Everyday this week . . . the men of the community hammered and poured cement. At noon, about 7 or 8 women all gathered at the center with fried chicken, fish, salad, and gallons of Kool-Aid. . . . It is a thing of beauty to see us all work together. Tuesday and Wednesday was the laying of the sub-floor. Two men cut the wood, two or three teenage boys and girls lay the wood down and hammered it in. . . . It (our new school building) should be up by Saturday, or at latest Tuesday. The land was given by a local man for "the sum of one dollar."

August 6

The men (and some of us when we have time) work on the building up to 10 hours a day with a 100° sun beating down and the humidity so high one's clothing becomes soaking wet after only a few minutes work. The building is guarded at night, because these people, after having had their homes shot into and having a couple of crosses burned in the middle of their community during the last few months, do not intend to have all their hard work go up in flames right away. . . .

August 5

About 4 men or teenagers armed with rifles and pistols stand guard. Every local car that goes by has to honk a specific number of times. . . .

If anyone does attempt to bomb or burn the center, they haven't got a chance. . . .

August 10

The decision came Saturday night . . . the shocking news: the 3 Negro schools of Leake County are opening Monday, August 10th, three full weeks before the white schools. . . .

The parents and students of Harmony were really riled up and voted to boycott totally and use this as a "strike" for demands: equal student-teacher ratio, heat in winter . . . no firing of Negro teachers for registering to vote, no hand-me-down desks, books and buses . . .

. . . And so today, the kids didn't go to school. . . . We spent three hours in Freedom School with all the children, ages 4 through 19. It was exciting and wild—we had the older teenagers each take two or three 2nd and 3rd graders and explain why we are boycotting. . . .

Canton, August 30

We were sitting on the steps at dusk, watching the landscape and the sun folding into the flat country . . . a 6-year old Negro girl with a stick and a dog, kicking up as much dust as she could with her bare feet . . . we could hear her humming to herself, "We shall overcome" . . . —Letters from Mississippi/

I just loved going to talk about the movement or to conduct lessons in those classes.* But I also saw something that has stayed with me all my political life. All real education is political. All politics is not necessary educational, but good politics always is. You can have no serious organizing without serious education. And always, the people will teach you as much as you teach them.

Even with everything that was happening all across the state, organizing the Freedom Democratic Party (FDP) was, of course, my priority, the real challenge. We faced not only the formidable task of explaining the concept—the party and the challenge—to the people, but a hard deadline by which a host of specific things had to be done.

This party had to be organized statewide and a delegation selected by mid-August. Not only done right but scrupulously documented with records kept for the lawyers. Every smallest step required by the state and the national party had to be precisely followed and documented.

In organizing terms, what exactly did that mean? Well, in the Second

*The book *Stokely Speaks* has a transcript of a class on black language that Carmichael conducted in one of the freedom schools.

Congressional District, there were what, maybe twenty-two counties? In each of those the smallest party unit was the precinct, maybe four, six precincts per county. Because the Delta is literally one large cotton/soybean plantation and congressional districts are based on population, the Second District had by far the most counties spread over a much larger area than any other. But that kind of evened out, because some of these counties had small populations and as few as two or three precincts. In each of those precincts we had to sign up members in this new party and get them to do two things. Try to attend the white (regular party) meeting, then, being turned away, come to our own meetings. The time and place of which had to be advertised to prove that we were open to all.

The precinct selects delegates to a countywide caucus. From the county, officers and a delegation to the district convention are selected. Then from each of the five congressional districts, about forty delegates to the state convention in Jackson where the delegation [*forty-four delegates and twenty-two alternates*] is selected for Atlantic City.

Yeah, you say, but isn't that not more or less what happens in all fifty states? Gimme a break. In every state there is party history, infrastructure, experienced officers, full-time party employees, workers, an apparatus in place, and a familiar process that merely has to be activated every four years. And even with all that, the process is still a major undertaking. With us, none of that existed. We not only had to create it all, but given our insurgent status we couldn't cut any corners that might give the Democrats a technical out.

[This description of a precinct meeting by a volunteer in Vicksburg, which although a city and not in the Delta, still captures the initial experience:

Fear reigned at first—but soon people were excited about the prospects of the party and neighbors were talking to neighbors about the “New Thing.” Block parties and mass meetings were being held. . . . Spirits grew. Hundreds of people risked their lives and jobs to come. Representatives were elected. . . . Resolutions were introduced, minutes were kept. . . . The precinct meeting was one of the most exciting events of my life.
—Letters from Mississippi]

And we had to create it among folk who had been kept away from political participation for over seventy years, and who were painfully aware of the risks involved. And to whom we could not—at least not in good faith—make any guarantees. “So, tell me, after we do all this, then what?” We certainly could not promise victory at the convention. But, you know, the people really understood that. “No way to tell what them white folk liable to do, huh? But at least we kin try. Make them have to do

something, right?" And momentum slowly started to build. I spoke at a lot of those early meetings, night after night, one small country church out in the cotton fields after another. I always talked about political power in the Delta. Who had it. How they got it. How they used it. And how, praise the Lord, without any doubt, we were going to get our fair share. And the FDP's challenge was the first step.

[A volunteer's report of the first Greenwood project meeting suggests that Carmichael, even then, was moving toward the political ideas that would transform the movement two years later:

Greenwood, June 22

The meeting tonight was really something. Over two hundred people were there and they were very hip. We all introduced ourselves. Stokely . . . gave a good speech . . . He didn't give them any of this better-street-lights crap, but talked about the question of power. Power is not abstract if you know how Eastland (Senator James O., a Delta plantation owner) controls the appointment of every single (federal) judge in the whole damn county . . . —Letters from Mississippi/

Usually I'd give my little speech and step back and watch the people begin to act politically. It was wondrous to see. In the midst of everything else that was happening, the staff had to maintain focus and discipline and follow this detailed process through in ten weeks. Just thinking back, it really was quite amazing—just to get it done. The staff and volunteers deserve a lot of credit for some truly amazing organizing in pretty trying conditions. No question.

But, you know, the best work from the greatest organizers in the world, which we certainly were not, would have meant absolutely nothing—nada, squat—without some truly incredible community people. Not just brave, but hardworking, resourceful, dedicated people. Actually some quite ordinary, dry-long-so folk who rose remarkably to the occasion. I think it was that summer, night after night, meeting after meeting, that I really came to understand where Ms. Baker's great faith in ordinary people came from. Her unflinching confidence in the democratic political instincts of the grass roots. I saw that time and again, and it was, well . . . inspiring. That's the right word for it.

No, no, I'm not getting overly sentimental or too general here. Statistically I know we're talking about a small percentage of the black folk in the state. So what? That only makes the ones that showed up even mo' bettah. That's precisely the point. When you're involved in dangerous struggle for the people—assuming of course a moral struggle—you will always, always, be surrounded by remarkable people. The best of our-

selves. Think . . . about . . . it, Jack. So whenever I walked into another precinct or county meeting, I just knew I'd be in the company of heroes.

[From several volunteers:

Greenwood, July

What a meeting it was—a totally unorganized group of people had come together for the first of many steps in organizing a local political party. And it was truly democratic. Hundreds of people came to each precinct, compared to the five or ten Mississippi whites who show up for their precinct meetings . . .

Greenwood, August

Of even more significance than the precinct meetings was the County meeting. Here all the delegates from Leflore County met, and a real convention was held with candidates vying for election—with serious discussions of issues and of problems facing the community, the county. You should have seen me after the meeting. I was so excited that I kept running around outside. I was overwhelmed by the history . . .

Moss Point, July

. . . The County convention . . . It was just amazing seeing these people, many, or rather most, of whom have never had any experience at all in politics running the meeting, electing the people and passing resolutions for a state platform. These people, housewives, unskilled workers, many, but not all, uneducated, are fantastic. People who have never spoken publicly before get up and make the greatest speeches . . . —Letters from Mississippi]

And the political instinct was wondrous to see. No one said, "You gotta balance the ticket." So many women. So many preachers, so many this or that. But you know by the time we got to the state convention it was balanced. By the time we got to Jackson I was proud of the group from the Second District.

The "politically unsophisticated" people in their collective wisdom knew who could be trusted. Who deserved the honor. Who had earned the right. Who had a clear head and strong heart. The delegation was a cross section of service and merit, across sex and age, status or education. I mean you had the old warriors—Dewey Greene, Sr., Amzie Moore, Doc Henry, Robert Miles—who'd kept hope and dignity alive during some long, dismal, savage years. The valiant women—the Mrs. Hamers, Mrs. McGhees, Mrs. Johnsons—mothers of struggle. And too, the next generation, a few young college students, clearly intended to keep the struggle going.

[Young Leslie Burle McLemore, a Rust College senior, would write his Ph.D. dissertation on the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, found the first

department of political science at a black Mississippi college, and is at this writing president of the Jackson City Council. —EMT]

Distractions were everywhere, not just cross burnings, church bombings, drive-by shootings, the usual crap, but weird stuff, stuff you couldn't have imagined. Greenwood was the center [*the national SNCC office moved to Greenwood for the summer*] so there was a constant flow in and out. For instance, Bob and I had to handle security for visitors, y'know Belafonte and Poitier, Dr. King, the politicians . . .

Dr. King was my biggest headache. The Klan swore publicly that he wouldn't leave Mississippi alive. I had heard that his people hadn't wanted him to come. SNCC can't protect you, they argued. SNCC will git you killed. So I took it as my personal responsibility to protect him in the Delta. A matter of honor.

He arrived escorted by carloads of FBI. I told him, "Dr. King, I know you nonviolent, but don't worry about a thang. An FBI car will be in front and in the rear. Your car be in the middle, and it will be nonviolent, no problem. But the cars immediately in front and immediately behind you? Those'll be our people, Dr. King, and usses going to be ready for anything." He didn't argue. We stayed real close every minute he was out and moving around. They would have had to kill a lot of us to get to him. And they would have paid a heavy price. Dr. King was cool. He talked about the need to build the party and left without incident. Not a peep out of the Klan. That's something I take pride in.

[I've seen reports indicating that LBJ was every bit as concerned and as active as was our narrator. In addition to lighting a fire under a resistant J. Edgar Hoover, the Johnson administration had leaned heavily on the Mississippi governor and on Senators Eastland and Stennis, holding them responsible for Dr. King's safety, which suggests that a similar urgency from the administration in June might have saved our colleagues in Neshoba County. —EMT]

But guess what the most serious distraction in Greenwood was? Early in the project, the first freedom day [*when large numbers of people descend on a courthouse to try to register*], they arrested over a hundred people—volunteers, staff, local teenagers, me. That was a distraction, yes.

But the biggest problem Bob had trying to keep Greenwood from exploding was the civil rights bill. That's right, passage of the civil rights bill damn near brought the project in the Delta to a halt. Look, if there had been riots or street warfare in Greenwood, the national office and the district office couldn't have functioned. The volunteers would have had to be pulled out. The local Africans on staff would have had to make a hard choice or be caught in no-man's-land between the two warring sides. It would have been a sho-nuff mess.

See, once that bill got close to passing, you began to see even more

carloads of white men, guns bristling, cruising the city. Some were flat-out Klan. Some were supposed to be deputized, armed "auxiliary" police. You couldn't tell the difference. People said they recognized Byron De La Beckwith [*murderer of Medgar Evers, only recently convicted—EMT*] armed and riding as an "auxiliary" policeman.

In our community there was high excitement and discussion, especially among the youth. A pretty large group really wanted to jump in the white folks' face. To exercise their new legal rights. You really couldn't blame them. But we had to take the position: Not now. Leave it for the time being. Now is the time to be focused. Work on the party. Stick to the plan. Be disciplined. Don't let the crackers distract you. The adults supported us in this, but the youth were restless.

Of course I was uneasy with it. It was strange for me and Zellner to have to counsel restraint. Say what? Telling folks not to confront racism? Especially when they now had—allegedly—for the first time, the legal right to put racists in jail? Yes, indeed. Politics do require a lot of patience and a sense of irony, jah. It do. But it was working. One faction—a loud faction of the youth—was real restless. But discipline was holding. Tribute to Bob, the project staff, and the community elders.

Then an amazing thing happens. Exactly the last thing we needed. An outside group, all kinds of press in tow, comes through, intent on "testing compliance with the new law." Dr. King and SCLC, right? No star, dead wrong. It's the national NAACP, Jack! Yep. The NAACP national office practicing direct action? Must be the revolution, huh? Talk about role reversal. Of course they don't consult anyone. Why should they, we the grass roots. So they streak through. And with their press and FBI entourage, of course, they get served. In places none of our folk could afford or think of going to. Upon which they utter platitudes to the press about "a great and historic moment" and split as fast as their cars will take them.

After that how we s'posed to rein in the local youth? Best we could do was to try to keep it disciplined and nonviolent. Which is why my next arrest was at a local white café. Yeah, the civil rights bill guarantees public accommodation. Uncle Roy [Wilkins] gets fed and splits and I'm in jail again. Historic moment.

After which a certain element of the youth simply refused to be intimidated. They started to jeer and exchange threats with the carloads of gun-toting whites. Guns were brandished and occasionally fired. Rocks and bottles were thrown. Then, one night businesses and homes in the community were shot into. Of course so was our office. We began to hear threats of retaliation in kind. Amid this tension, Bob and his project staff decided to try to organize the militant youth.

Somewhere in all this the McGhee family got involved. Silas McGhee

decided he wanted to go see a movie at the LaFlore Theatre. They sold him a ticket, he entered and sat down. But when the movie started, some of the whites went crazy and the cops had to come and take Silas out after only five minutes of the movie. That's how it began.

The rest of July was a running battle between the McGhees, the theater, the mob, and the cops. A few days after the movie theater event, Silas was snatched off the street by a carload of Klansmen, who took him out in the woods. He managed to fight them off with a shovel and escape. But now the McGhees were really mad.

Silas and his brother Jake kept going back to the theater. Five or six times. Each time when they tried to leave, a mob greeted them.

One night a couple SNCC cars had to drive through the mob to retrieve them. The car's windows were shattered and the McGhee brothers were injured by flying glass. At the hospital our people were trapped inside by carloads of gunmen patrolling the highway outside. Finally, in the early morning, a reluctant sheriff agreed to provide an escort. If memory serves, that same night we held the Greenwood precinct meeting.

Another night Jake and Silas went back to the movies, but this time when the mob formed, a towering (6'8"), linebacker-built paratrooper in full dress uniform appeared and faced down a member of the mob. Turned out it was their older brother, Clarence (Robinson), a decorated Korean War veteran on active duty at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. A trained American fighting man, taking leave to come defend freedom, democracy, the Constitution, and his younger brothers in his hometown. Then he got himself jailed for assault.

That was the night Bob Zellner and Mrs. McGhee went together to the jail to see about Clarence. Even today all I got to do is mention the McGhees to Bob and his eyes and grin get big.

"Oh, man, I'll never forget that night. When this cop jumped in Mrs. McGhee's face and shoved her? Ooiee, bro. I swear, that little bitty lady threw the fastest, prettiest straight right I've ever seen. Knocked that sucker clean down, flat on his back and woozy as a floozy. Yes she did."

The McGhees of Greenwood, warrior sons of a warrior mother. But it wasn't but a week or so after that when the Klan pretty near succeeded in stopping Silas for good. I was away and Silas was using my car to take people to a meeting. He was sleeping in the car when some night riders shot him in the temple. Give praise and thanks, the brother survived. But that was one shooting that really got to me. Silas—who I liked and respected a lot—was a year younger than me.

That gives you some sense of the atmosphere in which the FDP was put together. So I don't care who or what you were, you could not help but be moved by the state convention in the Masonic Temple in Jackson. Just the

sight of the hall. All these proud people sitting purposefully under their county signs: Neshoba, Leflore, Sunflower, Amite, Pike, Tallahatchie County. Just even the names themselves, every one resonant with memories of sacrifice, bloodshed, and struggle, were a mark of accomplishment and pride.

When the Neshoba delegates walked in, the room stood and applauded. I guarantee there was not, could not have been, any state convention in the country that equaled ours in any way. Not in spirit, not in fervor, and certainly not in singing. Mrs. Hamer leading "Go Tell It on the Mountain." Ms. Baker's keynote address: "We who believe in freedom cannot rest . . ." Until, Ms. Baker said, the life of every black mother's son is as important as the life of every white mother's son. I looked at Mrs. McGhee in the Leflore County delegation, then Mrs. Chaney in the Neshoba delegation. [*Later, Bernice Reagon and Sweet Honey in the Rock would compose a powerful song around those words of Ms. Baker's. —EMT*]

The people cheered Attorney Rauh when he outlined the politics of the convention and told them justice and history were on their side. Then the forty-four delegates and twenty-two alternates to Atlantic City were selected. Once again I was amazed and impressed by the choices. That group represented generations of resistance and survival, true leadership and courage. Every strength—life experience, character, courage, wisdom—you'd care to name, except maybe wealth and college degrees. I would have matched them person for person with any state delegation you could produce in Atlantic City.

Look, by that August when we left the state to drive to Atlantic City to support the delegation, the staff, as Mrs. Hamer would say, "was all wore out." All of us were physically exhausted from the sheer burden of all the organizing work. Many more of us than we knew then were totally burned out. Emotionally scarred, spiritually drained from the constant tension, the moments of anger, grief, or fear in a pervading atmosphere of hostility and impending violence.

But we were running on hope and maybe faith. At least the local people were, those brave souls on the delegation and the communities that had elected them. They were the ones with the faith. (The press in its usual wisdom would quickly pronounce and dismiss them as naive, politically unsophisticated, uneducated, simple.)

Faith in what? In the truth. In the justice and decency of the American people, once they knew the truth. Once the president and the people really understood what we went through daily in Mississippi, they'd want to do right, wouldn't they? And by now the country—the good people, the decent majority—had to understand what was going on. How could they not?

Hey, all summer the world press had streamed into the state and set up camp. Television, newspapers, magazines, the works. On TV, one Mississippi story after another. The people had seen their friends, their neighbors, their leaders, their children, their volunteers, all telling the story to the world.

And the country had come in to see for itself. SNCC's Northern support offices had organized waves of visitors. Thursday was Parents' Day. Every Thursday, a different group of proud but concerned parents would fly in. Doctors and lawyers arranged to spend a week or two of their summer vacations with either the Medical Committee for Human Rights or the Lawyers Committee. Under the auspices of the National Council of Churches, groups of prominent religious leaders and clerics of all faiths and denominations came to observe. Congressmen and other politicians prodded by conscience or constituent pressure came through, looked around, and made suitably supportive statements at the obligatory press conference. Movie stars and celebrity entertainers dropped in, some even giving free performances in small, isolated country towns.

(One hot afternoon I remember picking Mrs. Hamer up for a meeting. She got in the car and gave me a puzzled look. "Stokely, seems I heard this name before. Who is it?" "The woman's name seemed vaguely familiar but I didn't immediately place it.

"I'm not sure, Mrs. Hamer. But why?"

"Wal, jes' a while ago this little white lady wearing some blue jeans come walking in my house. I never seen her before. She wanted to know was there anything she could do to help me. She jes' wanted to help. Wal, I had this big pot of beans on the stove. So I told her I had to go to a FDP meeting an' didn't have nobody to tend the beans. They was to feed the workers an' I didn't want them to burn while I was gone. She was jes' so glad. She said to just show her what to do. Which I did an' handed her the spoon. I left her in the kitchen. You think that's all right?"

"Guess so, Mrs. Hamer. Why not? Anyone should be able to keep beans from burning. What was that name you said?"

"She say her name is Shirley MacLaine."

I told her I thought the "li'l white lady" she'd left in the kitchen stirring her beans was quite possibly a fairly famous movie star.

"A real movie star, huh? Ain' that something. Uh uh uh." Mrs. Hamer contemplated that for a minute, then smiled. "Ah guess the Lord sure do move in mysterious ways, eh?"

"Why you say that, Mrs. Hamer?"

"Why, honey, He musta knowed that that was my last sack o' beans an' how hungry you young folk be getting. But a *movie star* now? Sho hope she doan let mah beans burn."

That was what that summer was like in black Mississippi. People had

been struggling there for years before we got there. In isolation with no support and little visible progress. Now with this project, the Mississippi movement had broken through. Conditions in the state were finally being exposed to national attention.

So by the end of the summer, far as our people were concerned, the entire country had to know. The national Democrats, even the *president*. Why, honey, didn't he send his personal representative? [*In June, Allen Dulles had briefly come to Mississippi as the personal emissary of Lyndon Baines Johnson. —EMTJ*]

Seems like the whole country—everybody and their mamma—had come, not just to the state but even to people's own insignificant, small towns. Weren't that something? Those three boys hadn't shed their blood in vain, no, suh. So how could the Democrats not know? And when they got to the Democratic National Convention, if they met folk who still claimed not to get it, why then they'd be mighty happy to bear witness their own self. Tell it like it is. Be mighty proud to testify. That was *their* job.

By now a great deal has been written about what happened at that 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. There is no need to tell that story all over again. The facts are "on record." But what about their meaning? The process and the consequences? That's still in dispute. Some important aspects I've never seen explained, and I'd like to add my two cents to that kitty.

For example, what was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party really? It was a bold, creative response to the political realities that confronted us in Mississippi and the South. A desperation tactic, certainly. A political party? Yes, but not in any usual sense. As American political parties go, this one was absolutely unique. Who ever heard of any political party in which no more than 5 percent of its members could even cast a ballot? Yet it accomplished remarkable political results. And it was the single most incredible act of organizing in the entire civil rights movement. I certainly learned a lot from the whole experience.

I remember when Bob first raised the idea that SNCC could organize a party with the black community that would be open to Mississippians of all races and would go to Atlantic City and try to challenge the lily-white "regulars." Folks thought he was nuts. Or fantasizing.

Just consider. Forget for a moment the hostility and terrorism such a party was likely to attract and just consider the sheer work of the organizing and self-education it would require. Not only would we have to learn and follow precisely the involved rules and practices of the local party, we'd have to find people in every beat, precinct, and county who were willing to present their black selves to every meeting of the all-white party

and try to participate in selecting the delegation. Do you fully understand what that meant then? Our people knew who would be guarding those doors. It was a daunting prospect.

This, folks, was the party of E. H. Hurst [*the murderer of Mr. Herbert Lee*] and of "Big" Milam [*who admitted killing Emmett Till*]. The party of James O. Eastland and Ross Barnett. The party of the local plantation owner and all the local blacks' employers, of Klansmen, White Citizens Council members, registrars, sheriffs, and petty small-town bureaucrats who had absolute power over black lives and jobs. The party that had disenfranchised their grandparents in 1877 and had schemed ever since, using every tactic—law and terror—to keep our people away from the ballot box by any means necessary.

That was the party we would be asking our people to find the courage to confront. Then, if they survived that, they'd need to have their own meetings—parallel and public—at every level up to the state convention to select their own delegation. Then, assuming we accomplished all that, a way would have to be found to get our people to Atlantic City. At this time the Mississippi Project didn't have \$500 in the bank and SNCC paychecks like death, according to Shakespeare, "would come when they would come."

Then, while all this was happening in state, folks had to be working nationally to try to generate enough support within the Democratic Party so our people would not simply be dismissed and ignored one more time. The conventional wisdom: "*Oh, man*. What makes you guys think the party will ever recognize you as Democrats? Where's your charter? Or that they'll concede that this challenge has any legitimacy? It'll never happen, bro. And, that's if—an' this a big if—y'all even get that far. If, in fact, those po' folk y'all setting up for God knows what even *manage* to get out of Mississippi at all. Never happen, Jack. Good luck. But I will say this, it bold. It's crazy, but y'all bold."

And as usual, the conventional wisdom seemed right. It was impossible. Any rational person would not even have started. Forget danger, just the work. The massive organizing. The thousand and one petty details—every one crucial—that had to be attended to. Then the national politics. The job of education. The state conventions to be targeted, hoping the leadership would allow us to address the delegates. Finding reliable allies who could be trusted to represent our interests—the struggling, powerless black people of Mississippi—inside the convention.

We all know what happened.

Look, there were no issues (except us) in that convention. No issues at all, none. Remember now, it wasn't in any sense a classic presidential nom-

inating convention. It was a coronation. That of King Lyndon, the Great Restorer. The only real issue being whom he was going to anoint as his running mate, and second, as it turned out, being what to do with us. The two were not unrelated.

Remember now, John Kennedy (unto him peace) had been shot down. *Whoee!* Grief, uncertainty, and great anxiety across the land. Opening salvo of a coup? Right-wing conspiracy? No, not at all. Order is maintained. Into the Oval Office steps the big Texan and the center not only holds, it doesn't even miss a beat. In fact, the administration seems to work better. The nation is relieved and grateful. Because, in memory of the martyred leader, the new president "jawbones" Congress, twisting arms and whuppin' heads, to get through the legislative agenda that had bogged down under Kennedy. Within the party, Johnson is supreme and the country is said to be grateful. Remember?

Barry "Extremism in the Pursuit of Liberty Is No Vice" Goldwater had already wrapped up the Republican nomination. And as their convention had literally read the moderate wing out of the party and insulted, spat upon, and jeered at the *fourteen* black delegates, more than half of that party had already been totally alienated. The few [*only fourteen, lowest number of blacks at a Republican National Convention in living memory. — EMT*] traditional Negro Republicans who had survived the right-wing capture of the delegate selection process were made to feel downright unwelcome. Jackie Robinson is said to have wept. Another said, "I now know what it felt like to be a Jew in Nazi Germany." He needn't have reached so far for the simile; "a black person in Mississippi" would have served even better.

So all that Goldwater would carry into the election would be the far right of the nation, a large part of which was certain to be the white South. That's all, Jack. Nationwide in 1964 a small minority.

Recall also that over the summer, the same week that our comrades' bodies were being dug out of that Neshoba County earthen dam, the civil rights bill had been passed with LBJ's strong support over a Dixiecrat filibuster in the Senate. From that moment on, far as the Democratic Party was concerned, the racist Southern vote was long gone. In Barry G. ("in your heart you know he's right"), the Dixiecrats had a Republican they could vote for with conviction, and as it would turn out, the first Republican Party they could embrace. Even we—politically naive though we were said to be—could see all that clearly. So how could the political pros, the "Democratic heavies," not know this? From their behavior in Atlantic City, evidently they didn't understand or they refused to believe.

Our lawyer at the convention was Joe Rauh from D.C., a force in the liberal wing of the party, and he was instrumental in the challenge getting

as far as it did within the national party. That's true and one must never be ungrateful in politics. Initially, he opened some doors on the inside. That spring when Bob Moses had come to D.C. to talk to political people there about the idea of the convention challenge for the first time, just Rauh's name clearly opened doors.

We were in an initial meeting over at the Institute for Policy Studies with the kind of political people who would even come to a meeting with us at that point, the usual suspects: low-level congressional aides, a few labor union officials, some ADA types, mostly young "progressives." Bob explained the idea for the challenge—the people from Mississippi go to the convention and challenge the national party to renounce racism and exclusion. To become democratic. A long silence, then.

Wow, bold idea, Bob. But hopeless. Never get off the ground. Long shot. Fageddaboutit, the leadership will never . . .

Then Bob says quietly, "Well, y'know, I was just talking to Joe Rauh—" "What, you talked to Joe?"

"—and he said he thought we could be seated. That there was a real chance of that."

The meeting's atmosphere changed immediately, Jack. Immediately. It was now "Oh, my God, *Joe Rauh said that? Really? He did?* Hmmm, so Joe said he thought you could be seated, huh? Well, now, maybe we just better take another look at this, eh?"

I'd been in D.C. four years and had never even heard of the guy. But when I saw the effect of just the mention of his name, I figured I'd better find out who this guy really was.

[Joseph Rauh Jr., a Washington insider, was chief counsel for the United Auto Workers, adviser to Walter Reuther, and a close personal friend of Senator Hubert H. Humphrey (D-MN). He was also a leader in Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the Democratic Party's left wing, and a longtime activist for progressive causes within the liberal establishment of the Democratic Party. —EMT]

After the meeting Mr. Rauh agreed to be the official MFDP lawyer for the challenge, and as a result we saw more doors beginning to open and attitudes among Democratic liberals began to change noticeably. And I mean *noticeably*. No one was saying it was a sure thing. Hey, it was still a long shot. But now it was a *real* long shot, not merely a fantasy one. A world of difference in Washington politics. Now it was "If Joe Rauh is your lawyer, there has to be more to this than meets the eye."

Also, over the summer, Ms. Baker had moved to D.C. and, working with Northern friends of SNCC groups, had managed to identify and cultivate some real support in a number of state delegations [*about ten state conventions adopted resolutions of support —EMT*]. So we were able to go to Atlantic City with some firm allies and strong advocates inside the convention.

And *outside*? Hey, we now had a real presence around the country because of the avalanche of press attention to the state of Mississippi over the summer. Besides, the convention had no real burning issue, and the press always needs issues, so naturally they came to us. We were a good story and we were easy to find and always available.

On the boardwalk outside the convention hall, staff, local folk, and Northern supporters had set up a round-the-clock vigil. Volunteers on their way home from Mississippi detoured through Atlantic City, some bringing their parents. Occasionally the families of the murdered workers came by to stand with us. There were giant pictures of our three martyrs and the burned out shell of the station wagon from the Bogue Chitto swamp on display. The folks kept singing. Mrs. Hamer and Bernice Reagon came by to lead the singing, and members of the delegation came by to make speeches and thank the people. Visiting politicians came to pledge support. At times the crowd reached three, even four thousand people.

Oh, we were a sho-nuff presence and highly visible. Every delegate going into the arena had to pass our vigil. It was all unusually powerful and moving, and many a delegate stopped, looked, listened, and volunteered his vote before going on in.

You know where I was. You know I stayed on the boardwalk, Jack, talking to the people who stopped by. So I wasn't in on all the meetings and wheeling an' dealing on the inside. But I remember someone brought a little portable TV so we could follow some of what was going on inside. I'll never forget what I saw on that TV when Mrs. Hamer stepped up to the mike before the Credentials Committee the day before the convention was to open. She had just begun to talk about her beating in the Winona jail when the network cut to a White House press conference.

LBJ got on and announced some program or policy so trivial that I can't even remember what it was. If he was asked about the convention, the MFDP, or his vice presidential choice, I know I would have remembered everything he said. So either he wasn't asked or more likely didn't answer. Anyway we never saw Mrs. Hamer's testimony, but that didn't matter. The Credentials Committee sure did.

[Subsequent accounts by White House aides report that the president had been closely monitoring the proceedings in Atlantic City. When Mrs. Hamer began to talk, President Johnson, at least in one account, is said to have exploded, "Get that ignorant (or illiterate) black woman off the air." (In some reports we heard, LBJ's final adjective was not the word black.) Hence the hastily called presidential press conference. However, the attempt to keep Mrs. Hamer's story from the American people was only temporarily successful. Later that evening at least one network aired her testimony in its entirety. Delegate supporters reported that their delegations received a flood of telegrams from

indignant constituents that evening. There were similar reports from the White House. —EMT]

That was the situation the night before the convention formally opened. What happened that night and the next morning has been subject to heated debate. Distrust, suspicion, rumors, and accusations of treachery, sellouts, bad faith, and manipulation have flown back and forth. I warrant that there is no one person knows everything that went down. But I will tell you what I do know. But first a little background.

After LBJ stepped up to replace Kennedy, the vice presidency had been left vacant, so as we neared the convention, the politicking among the various factions supporting different candidates was fierce. Of course, in the end, none of the warring camps had any real leverage on Johnson's decision. The president and the president alone would, at his pleasure, anoint his running mate. And on that point the famously poker-faced LBJ was silent and inscrutable as the Sphinx, clearly enjoying the growing anxiety of the aspirants.

When the MFDP appeared on the distant horizon, the camp promoting Senator Hubert Humphrey for vice president was jockeying hard. And that camp was led by Joe Rauh, our lawyer. So, was Mr. Rauh's support of the MFDP purely an act of conscience, or did he see us as a possible pressure point in the larger campaign for his friend and ally Humphrey? Probably both.

Inside the Mississippi movement speculation was rife. People said the reason the liberals literally picked up the MFDP and brought it into the convention—a convention otherwise without issues—was to use it as leverage: a negotiating card in the hand of the Humphrey supporters in the struggle for the number two spot on the ticket.

It is easy and tempting to say—as many do—that those forces cynically used us to advance their real intent, then cut the deal and dropped us. They picked us up, brought us in, put us in play. Then LBJ says, "Y'all dragged this mess in. Y'all better fix it. Ruin my convention an' old Hubert can forget about the vice presidency the way Texas bullfrogs forget their tails, heah me?" So they did.

[After Atlantic City, at the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, Joe Rauh and Clarence Mitchell made our lives miserable (Jan Goodman and I represented SNCC and the MFDP). Nonetheless, on this question, I find myself wanting to record a few words in defense of my old nemesis.

The notion that Mr. Rauh ("and the liberals") seized upon the challenge purely as leverage with which to advance Senator Humphrey's ambitions in an otherwise issueless convention, then dropped us once that purpose was achieved, is a common belief among movement people. It is, I think, a little too pat. Too neat and too simple. Political motives are usually much more complicated and events more ambiguous than that.

Mr. Rauh had for many years been fervently committed to an eventual Hubert Humphrey presidency, so that goal would always have been foremost in his strategic and political calculation. This was no secret: he was always the first to admit this. However, I believe that after getting to know and work with Bob Moses; witnessing the Jackson convention; seeing conditions in Mississippi and meeting the people he was to represent; the MFDP became personal to him, much more than merely another convention issue or bargaining chip.

Certainly his political frame of reference was different from and even incompatible with ours. But within those terms I believe he observed certain principles. He saw, conducted, and described himself as an "honest broker." And we were his clients. I believe that he would not wittingly have debased the professional obligations implicit in that arrangement.

But, in Atlantic City, seasoned operative, veteran of high-stakes convention politics though he was, Bro Rauh was taken by surprise by the intensity of forces he himself had helped put in motion.

With long-standing interests in conflict with more recent commitments, he found himself between the proverbial rock and hard place. I believe he tried, fairly and honestly, to reconcile his divided loyalties and to negotiate a just result. That proved impossible. But I do not believe that in any sense Joe Rauh can fairly be said to have "sold" us out. —EMTJ

No matter how we'd gotten there or why, we knew that night on the boardwalk, that the convention as a whole still had to vote on our challenge. And that when they did, we would win big. Responding to heavy, heavy pressure from the White House, the majority would call for the seating of the all-white Dixiecrat delegation. As a gesture toward us, the report would include *strong* language declaring that no racially exclusive delegations would be seated in future conventions. That was supposed to be our victory.

First, though, another vote had to be made. Congresswoman Edith Green of Oregon (eternal peace be unto her) had circulated a minority report that proposed seating both delegations, dividing Mississippi's delegate votes equally between them, each delegate counting as half a vote. And the delegates from both camps, to be seated, would have to pledge their support for the national ticket in the coming election.

Now, as I've said, the issue of votes was, in practical political terms, purely symbolic. The incumbent LBJ was going to be nominated by acclamation, so any division of the Mississippi votes wasn't going to make any real political difference. It was purely symbolic, but that was some heavy, heavy symbolism, Jack.

The Green proposal was entirely acceptable to our people. They had no interest, despite the treatment they had received at their hands, in kicking the white Mississippians out of the convention. What they wanted was

inclusion. Full participation as equals. As proud Freedom Democrats, the equals of everyone else in the convention. That, they knew, would be a historic political leap forward for black Mississippi. Simple justice and on national TV. (Even if, this time round, they each had only half a vote and nothing to vote for.)

Course now, the white Mississippians did see the matter quite differently. There were congressmen, judges, all kinds of state officials, even a plantation owner or two on their delegation. These local, petty, white supremacist tyrants sharing a vote with *their* nigras? Political equality, even if only symbolic, and on national TV? No cotton-picking way, José.

Apparently this prospect was equally horrifying to the party leadership. Those Mississippi Negroes could not be allowed to “stampede the convention.” They simply could not allow the minority report to come to a vote on the convention floor.

They swung into action, Jack, overnight. Everyone of our “rock solid” supporters they could put pressure on they did. And, as we discovered, these were all loyal party activists, vulnerable at some point along the patronage food chain. What amazed us was how *overnight* the leadership could find the *one* person to whom a delegate could not afford to say no. One small businessman said that his banker called him at midnight—remember that crucial expansion loan . . . ? Another’s boss called—that promotion we’ve been discussing? One strong black lady from either the New York or California delegation, I forget which, was in tears. Her husband was up for a judgeship, his life’s ambition. His sponsor called, she had a choice: us or her husband’s career dream. And so it went. We needed eleven votes, went to bed with fifteen firm commitments, and awoke the next morning with six left standing. There would be no minority report for the convention to vote on. Crisis control, LBJ style.

Then came the famous “compromise.” I guess you could call it the Mississippi Compromise of 1964. The leadership knew it had to throw us something, a sop to our supporters, a public relations gesture. So the Freedom Democrats, we were told, would be given two “seats at large,” which, as the people were quick to see, represented nowhere and no one. The leadership even named the two delegates—Doc Henry and the Reverend Ed King. The rest of our delegation would be “honored guests.” And they pledged never to seat any “lily-white” delegations in the future. They would create a Civil Rights Committee on the Democratic National Committee to ensure this. That was to be our victory. Our people should take it, express joy and gratitude, and go home.

Course it backfired. The white delegation, mortally offended—at what I don’t know—walked out in a huff anyway, calling on their Confederate brothers to walk with them. The local people of the MFD

knew tokenism when they saw it. Maybe if they hadn't struggled so hard, risked and endured so much, and hoped so fervently, they might have gone along with the condescension. But as Mrs. Hamer put it, "We didn't come here for no two seats, for *all of us* is t'ard." The MFDP rejected the compromise.

Now, all of this went down on the morning of the opening day of the convention, and it caused a lot of confusion and rumor, and growing bickering between our "allies" and us. What with the crowds, the press, the camera crews, the politicians, the constant stream of bad information and misinformation, the scene looked to our people like Babylon and the Tower of Babel combined.

All that our people really knew at this point was that their challenge was suddenly over. All these new friends, the good peoples, who had promised their votes were now not even going to get a chance to vote? Sure seemed like Mississippi all over again.

"Stokely, so this is what y'all calls democracy?"

"No, Mr. Turnbow, it's politics . . . as usual."

"Wal now, sure tain't the same thing, now is it?"

"No, suh, it sure ain't."

So what to do? We had a meeting. One of those looong SNCC-style meetings. But this particular meeting was incredible.

Outside, the press was restless, impatient for the story. Inside the convention managers wanted a show of unity. The president would be coming in a day or so, and his advent needed to be seen to be triumphant. The white Mississippians were packing their bags, so it became important, for the appearance of unity, for our supporters watching on TV across the nation, that the MFDP publicly accept the compromise. Have a press conference. Declare victory. Grin. Show gratitude. So they called in the big guns.

Suddenly the first in a long line of friends and advisers began to materialize. "High-ups"—politicians, civil rights and religious leaders—started showing up to advise and explain political reality. That was a *parade*, Jack. A few I knew. Some I recognized, others I saw for the first time. Reuther, Humphrey, Dr. King, Bayard, I think Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, Dr. Spike, assorted congresspeople, religious leaders. A lot of rhetoric, high drama, and surpassing earnestness.

For the party. For the president. For the *country* . . . We gotta have unity. . . . All depends on you . . . the most important decision of your life . . . a great victory . . . be *political*. You gotta accept. . . . For God's sakes, don't blow this . . .

Some—Dr. King, Dr. Spike, maybe even Bayard—say, "Here's what we think, but finally, it's not our decision, it's yours." But mostly I

remember unrelenting pressure: "You simply can't afford to make a serious mistake now."

Many of the delegates were quite confused and uncertain. And who could blame them? This barrage of friendly advice and concern was probably too much. Ultimately self-defeating. Why were the people, only last week voiceless, faceless, powerless, now suddenly so important to all these VIPs? What could they really want? Why did they care so much? If this was such a splendid victory, why didn't it feel like one? The only faces the delegates knew and trusted were those of Bob or Guyot [*Lawrence Guyot, chairman of the MFDPI*], the staff, and those volunteers who had lived with them all summer. And more important, their leaders: Doc Henry, Ed King, Mrs. Hamer, Mrs. Devine, Ms. Gray, Mr. Steptoe, Mr. Miles, Ms. Ruffin.

I believe, rather I know, that if Bob or the rest of us had *told* them what decision to make, they'd probably have done that only because they trusted us. I answered any question about all that was happening as best I could, given the available information. (I was growing more convinced by the minute that, at that point, their decision probably made no real political difference one way or another. But I didn't think it useful to say that just then.)

It seemed to me that the most important thing was that those people leave there knowing that they, and they alone, out of their own intelligence, judgment, and experience, had made their decision themselves. Autonomy. They had earned that right.

When Hubert Humphrey was introduced, heavy emphasis had been placed on his long support for civil rights, as a "true friend of the Negro." In his appeal Humphrey had mentioned the importance of the MFDPI's decision on the nomination of the vice president. Mrs. Hamer was clear, the disappointment palpable in her voice: "Mr. Humphrey, I've been praying about you an' I been thinking about you, and you're a good man. But are you saying you think that your [getting the] job as vice president is more important than the rights of our [400,000] black people in Mississippi? Senator Humphrey, the trouble is, you scared to do what you know is right. Senator, I'm going to pray for you some more."

Humphrey had the grace to blush and was actually silent for a moment. I don't remember what answer he gave her. [*Some reports claimed that at that moment the senator was seen to weep. —EMT*]

The peoples listened closely and politely, asked the important people a few thoughtful questions, and thanked them for coming. Then they deliberated carefully among themselves, took their decision, announced it, and gave their reasons. They had not come for two seats at large or to be "honored guests." The compromise was not acceptable, so they would go home.

I was proud of my people, real proud. Of their dignity. Their clarity. Of the way they had stood up under incredible psychological pressure. The way they saw through the blandishments of the snake-oil salesmen. They had struggled too long and come too far to be chumped off like that. The Democratic Party could, and would it seemed, try to treat them the way the state of Mississippi always had. But they were certainly not going to grin and profess to be glad. They could have stayed in Mississippi and done that.

I was also especially proud that among the strongest and clearest were my ladies from the Second Congressional District—the Delta.

Course now, the politicians and the media saw it somewhat differently. Oh, man! In the name-calling, finger-pointing, and denunciations that followed, we heard and read endlessly how the “apolitical SNCC radicals” had “cynically manipulated” the “simple, ‘politically naive’ people” into a bad political decision. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Gimme a cotton-picking break.

As if the people—especially *these* people—were incapable of cutting through the rhetorical overkill to see that they were being shafted one more time. Yeah, the people running the attack on us were furious, but not, as they claimed, because we had *manipulated* the people. But precisely because we had *not*. They were spitting mad because we hadn’t joined with them and used our influence on the people to help sell them a bill of goods.

From the passion, the venom, the pettiness, and most of the media commentary, you’d think that we had somehow managed to ruin their convention, divide the Democratic Party, jeopardize the president’s election, and splinter the civil rights coalition. Such nonsense, such nonsense . . . such utter, utter nonsense. Help them, Jesus. I still don’t think the decision made an ounce of political difference. But to our people, the principle was absolutely important.

If we had gone into the convention as the little pets, the clients of the liberals, we came out as outcasts, sho-nuff political pariahs. Someone, I think Ivanhoe, said, “We’re the new Communists.” You know how whenever black folk got fed up and took to the streets, you always heard talk about “Communist” agitation? As though black people lack sense enough to know they’re oppressed until and unless some Communist runs up to tell them? That, according to totalitarian liberal opinion, was our role with the Freedom Democrats at the convention.

First of all, the Southern racist vote had been lost long before the Mississippi delegation walked. So, had Johnson’s managers allowed the convention to vote democratically, the Democratic Party would have lost nothing. Not a cotton-picking thing! But it would have gained much.

It would have sent a powerful message of hope and justice to black folk, and of decency, principle, and fairness to the nation, particularly its

youth. A signal of encouragement, especially to a generation of idealistic young Americans of all races, the assurance that they had a political home within the system, a major party worthy of their respect. Instead, millions of the most active American youth were alienated. Instead of looking to the future, the leadership had turned back to try to embrace a messed-up past. A serious failure of vision, principle, and leadership that would come back to haunt the Democrats and the nation in '68 and beyond. And they still didn't get it.

Second, the election: In 1964, Barry Goldwater's brand of ideological conservatism had seemed demented [*"That jackass is nuts."*—LBJ] to the vast majority of the American people. It sounded exactly like the reckless, narrow-minded, chauvinistic, militaristic, neoracist, ultracapitalist extremist concoction that it really was. (It would take decades of propaganda, disinformation, protracted and ruthless boring from within, along with the Nixon/Reagan Southern strategy, before that ideology could fully capture the Republican Party and push the national political debate to the far right.)

In 1964, Goldwater had but two chances, slim and none. Johnson's landslide victory was assured and near total. In the election, Goldwater would carry only a few Western states and some of the white South (which, defecting from the Democrats, would become the base for rebuilding the Republican Party into the conservative monster it has since become). But that was yet to come. In 1964, Johnson did not need the Bubba vote. He could have gone with us and lost nothing. And, perhaps, gained the future.

Leaving Atlantic City, the staff and the delegates were exhausted. But we didn't exactly limp back to Mississippi, our tails between our legs. No indeed. In fact, the opposite.

Many on the delegation were justifiably apprehensive. Wondering exactly what reception would face them on their return. Would the night riders be rampaging? Homes burning? The state officials be seeking vengeance? The volunteers would be gone. So too the national press corp. And for whatever it had been worth, the big FBI presence in Jackson. So there was real anxiety. But also defiance and a certain pride.

Yeah, they hadn't been seated, but they had not been ignored either, had they? Indeed, hadn't they forced the president and the nation to take notice? Yes, they had. And the whites hadn't been seated either. Or, at least you could say they hadn't *sat* either. Could even say they had been run off. So you could fairly call it a draw. Our people had fought them to a standstill. They hadn't given in an' they sure hadn't given up. What we gotta do is go home an' commence abuilding up the party. Keep on keepin' on.

I was thinking sort of the same thing, but about the organization.

SNCC in Mississippi would now have to seriously regroup. It would have to reorganize and draw down from the unreal scale of Freedom Summer to a program sustainable with local staff and resources. Many of my comrades from NAG—Muriel Tillinghast, Jean Weaver, Ruth Howard, Ed Brown, Courtland Cox, Ralph Featherstone—would also be staying on. There was momentum in the community. We needed to build on it.

But a lot of folk, truly exhausted, were on the verge of cracking up. In recognition of this, Harry Belafonte arranged and personally paid for a visit to Guinea.

["They had been on the front lines so long and had endured so much, been doing so much, that I feared burnout. It was clear to me that they needed to get completely away at least for a short while. They all deserved to go, but that was, of course, not possible. We could only take those most in need of a complete change of scenery. A tough choice. I thought that in Africa, the newly independent nation of Guinea had just the right spirit. The people and its young leader, Sékou Touré, had a vision and energy then that reminded me of SNCC." —Harry Belafonte]

Ironic, huh? Everything, as they say, is timing. Here I was, dreaming of Africa since my father's return from Ghana when I was a kid. And as a teenager, listening to the street-corner nationalists in Harlem. Now here was a chance. But really, I was not "wore down" like a lot of other folk, and serious work needed to be done in my district. What with drawing down and building on the Summer Project. That had to be a priority, so I asked Bob Moses and Jim Forman not to consider me for Africa.

A few weeks later, I was in the Greenwood office talking to staff, visiting projects, trying to figure out which ones we should strengthen, which to close, and what programs to emphasize, when Lawrence Guyot, chairman of the MFDP, called.

"The MFDP executive just met, Bro Stokely. Great news, my brother. Stay exactly where you are. Be right over to talk wicha. The 'peoples' need ya, my brother." A deliberate tone of mystery and barely suppressed glee and mischief was in Guyot's voice. Charlie Cobb had it right: "When ol' Guyot gets into that Southern backslapping, good-to-see-ya-fella, king-fish political-boss bag, it's best you keep your hand on your wallet."

Even so I was surprised. He walked in, this broad, poker-shark, bluffing-for-the-pot grin of his plastered over his moon face, squeezed my hand, pumped my arm—"You a great American, Bro Stokely"—and announced that the MFDP needed SNCC help to campaign across the state for the Johnson-Humphrey ticket.

After dropping that little bombshell, he sat back, glasses glinting, grin widening, all three hundred pounds quivering with excitement and glee as he peered intently into my face, clearly waiting for a response. But

I wasn't gonna play his game by repeating stupidly, "You want SNCC to campaign for LBJ?" So I pretended I hadn't really heard.

"I'm sorry, my man, what did you say?"

We stared at each other.

"As the only loyal Democrats in this state, the MFDP is going to campaign for the national ticket."

He stared some more, panting and wheezing with suppressed laughter. I still couldn't believe my ears. Obviously Guyot was now stone crazy. But actually, even if he was crazy, "If this be madness there be method in it." As Polonius said about Hamlet.

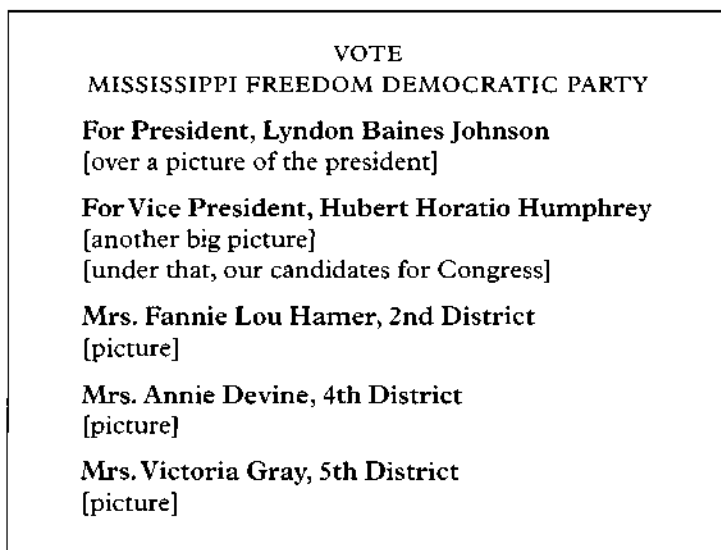
[Another little known aspect of the brother: He always was quite taken with Shakespeare's language. Only recently, Harold Bloom told me that Carmichael once had turned up at Yale and very politely asked to sit in on one of his lectures on the Bard. —EMT]

The Unforeseen Pitfalls of "Success" American Style

Stokely, whatever is going to happen with all you young people in SNCC? You all just going to keep wandering about, goin' from pillar to post with never a firm place to lay down your heads?

—Mrs. Annie Devine, MFDP challenger,
Fourth Congressional District

The record will show that in the 1964 presidential election in Mississippi, Lyndon B. Johnson and Hubert H. Humphrey appeared at the top of a MFDP slate of candidates. So I guess we did end up running the only campaign for the national ticket in the state. We had this poster. Across the top in big letters, it said:



I thought it a real good-looking poster. And I thought it ironic and audacious: boldly co-opting, as it did, the national ticket onto our MFDP slate for a freedom election.

As best we could, we covered the entire state, not just the black community, with these posters. They seemed to have quite an effect. Judging from the way they were torn down, defaced, or riddled with bullet holes, our posters must have enraged somebody. We kept putting them back up.

I figured three distinct groups were involved with the posters. The few moderate Democrats in the state removed them to reclaim their presidential ticket and so not to further alienate white voters. (Didn't work.) Moderate racists were content to scrawl obscenities, while the hardcore—Bubba and ol' Billy Bob—just had to reach for their pistols and shotguns. Most bullet holes were clustered around the top of the ticket. Voting with their trigger fingers?

Ours were the only Johnson/Humphrey posters I remember seeing in the state. But for some reason our appeal to the national campaign headquarters for an appearance by either or both candidates at a giant MFDP rally in Jackson never received the courtesy of a reply. Odd, clearly bureaucratic bungling. We understood the heavy demands on the candidates' time, but couldn't they at least have sent Lady Bird or Mrs. Humphrey? Especially after we mailed them a few campaign posters as proof of our good faith and hard work. I figured for every poster we put up the ticket lost five votes. But, hey, we were loyal Democrats.

At least they never asked us to take the national candidates off our ballot. Which was good because fortunately Johnson and Humphrey did win the freedom election. Which was all they won in the state, because Goldwater and Miller cleaned their clocks in the state-run so-called election. But it was hardly our fault that only 6 percent of our people could vote in that closed affair, was it?

After Atlantic City the atmosphere back in the Delta had been strange. I felt, after the pressure and intense discipline all summer, a kind of deflation. Objective conditions hadn't changed. If anything, they were more dangerous. Yet there was a limpness. Like a taut bowstring suddenly going slack, or a balloon collapsing as air escaped. But that was only within the organization. The mood in the community was quite the opposite.

One volunteer said it was like a movie. Watching a large army breaking camp at the end of a campaign. Confusion, random movement, and a landscape littered with debris. His friend said, with greater cultural precision, that it reminded him of the last day of summer camp. Both perceptions had some truth. Except, of course, that in any halfway decent army frontline troops would be rotated out with fresh replacements coming in. We didn't have that luxury. The same ol' troops had to keep soldiering on.

It actually was quite an emotional scene, especially the parting of volunteers from their hosts and students. What was surprising, though, was the number of volunteers who weren't leaving or were leaving only to make arrangements with their parents and schools in order to come back.

Even among those leaving for grad school or to start careers, you heard expressions of ambivalence or regret. Leaving was "harder than expected." The job wasn't finished. Their students had cried. They had come to love their communities. They felt, they said, strangely guilty about going back to their "real lives."

The ones returning were the ones so affected by the summer's experience that they could not bring themselves to flat-out leave. So they decided to sign up, most of them for a year. That kind of commitment had certainly not been their intention in June, so clearly something had happened to them. That wasn't entirely surprising to me. I'd seen some signs in a few cases that this might happen. But the numbers were a surprise. And from some people I simply wouldn't have expected.

Why did so many young, white Americans feel so strongly? I knew why I was staying and why my brothers and sisters in NAG were. But these relatively privileged and sheltered white youth? I've thought about that. It was not just the novelty or the excitement and the drama. It was something more profound: self-discovery. Hey, I learned something important about myself that summer too. We all did. I think these young, white Americans found and used qualities in themselves that they had not had to call upon before. Confronted situations they had never expected to encounter. Learned some ugly truths about their country and felt they had a chance to do something about it. Young people have an innate sense of justice. All they need is a chance to express it. I know that. But mostly, I think, they felt useful, needed, and truly appreciated. Many, I suspect, for the first time. And it felt real good to them. The deep human satisfaction of serving humanity and trying to make real change.

Part of it too was stepping out from under the narrow social, political, and cultural constraints—the individualistic, status-seeking materialism and muted racism of middle-class America. The project had been a unique event in that respect. A situation quite abnormal in American social arrangements of race and class. Bringing together two strata of the society that were never supposed to meet in friendship and equality. And that never did again in quite the same way, so far as I am aware.

But nobody in SNCC had planned for so many recruits. And all at the same time. How could the organization assimilate them? How could it turn them away? These were some of the most compatible of the group. Decent white folks, but white folk nonetheless. What would their status be? Would they be on payroll, therefore SNCC staff? How would that affect decision-making? The character of the organization? SNCC's way