

Ed King – Bonhoeffer House, Charlottesville, Virginia – 2/27/02

Thank you, and I thank you for letting me come. I want to meet and interact with students.

History looks back on the civil rights movement as an inevitable success. We would not have had the successes that we did have if we had ever thought it was going to be that successful. We started _____ on a spiritual journey. We were aware that people had tried since the end of slavery and the overthrow of reconstruction to do something about segregation. We were aware that America had had the problem of racism from our beginning which started here in Virginia, and that good people had not been able to find the way through this. I would think most of the people that I was with in 1960 when the student sit-ins started met a few older people and we thought we might make a difference but we never thought it would be in our lifetime. By 1964, the Freedom Summer in Mississippi, most of the leadership (and SNCC you understand didn't really have leadership. Everybody was leadership!) most of the people did not think they would be alive the next year, even the next fall. So we were unprepared in a strategic way to even use the successes that we had.

We would never have gotten up to the victories of '64, '65 without it being a faith perspective. That we were called, that we were set apart, in religious terms we were anointed, we were baptized. Some people could consciously use that kind of language. Others would use it and I would realize that's what they were saying. You can't give yourself to something that you don't expect to live through; you can't give yourself to something where the people you called to take a stand may be butchered instead of yourself unless you feel like you are part of something that has gone before and that will come after.

I was blessed by my very first arrest when I became a martyr back at Boston University School of theology. And I really was trying not to get arrested. I think if you've read [*God's Long Summer*] you'll know the details but maybe giving details will help. I helped organize the sit-ins working with Jim Lawson, people like this. [The] first meetings we held on that that I went to was on January of '59 but preparations were

being made even earlier. And naturally, things started in the wrong place. Greensboro people had read some of our literature and had started a week or so before it was to start in Nashville. I was sent in Montgomery, Alabama, as a white southerner with theological credentials, to go in as a minister. And I went into an area of enormous violence and trying to work between the sides. I was setting up meetings between white students like Bob Zellner whom I was supposed to meet but didn't. Trying to set up meetings between college students, between black and white clergy. The college's students were a little afraid, the clergy were very afraid, and the white women were willing to meet with Black coeds. I thought if I got that far [I] figured I could get the male students involved later.

We were meeting in a Black restaurant and the police raided the restaurant, and the restaurant was not trying to have a sit in, but it was called a sit in because it was an interracial meeting which was against the law. So I got arrested totally by mistake. If being on the front lines was a mistake. But I was trying to preserve my clerical status with the Methodist church and so on and work behind the scenes. The lawyers from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) all there staff. . . Martin had just moved to Atlanta, but Ralph Abernathy and everybody else I was having lunch with . . and we were all arrested. Then they discovered they had somebody from Boston so they accused me of helping organize this interracial [group??] They had not even raided that kind of a place during the Montgomery bus boycott.

Among our attorneys was Clifford Durr, Virginia Durr. (a terrific book, *Outside the Magic Circle*¹ about Virginia Durr. These are folks from the Southern aristocracy. Virginia Durr's father was a Presbyterian minister. She was a sort of _____ Unitarian from 1960 or more. But he'd come out of the southern church and despite family, an attorney who had suffered enormously during the McCarthy period, was supporting the civil rights movement. They had helped out with the bus boycott. Very key roles there with Mrs. Rosa Parks.) Virginia Durr talked to me after I'd got out of jail and talked about how her father the clergyman, other clergy she had known, her grandfather, that everybody in the South in the church knew that racial issues were wrong, that segregation was wrong. And like everybody in the South really understood that slavery was wrong

¹Barnard, Hollinger F., Ed. *Outside the Magic Circle: the autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr*, Touchstone 1985

and that people had to turn the gospels upside down to justify it, that is there was such a tradition of over justification of slavery and she saw that as a kind of symptom that we really understood it was wrong but nobody knew a way out. And she said that people all of her life had struggled for this (and she would have been in her sixties at that time) and that probably what we were doing with the sit ins wouldn't make a difference. She said, "but if you want to be sure your [going] to make a difference, you've already lost." and she said, "You have to act as if this is the moment." She was talking [kyronic??] moment but sort of saying it is never up to those of us who are acting to even know. All we can be sure of is that if we blow it we have ruined it. And if it is not the moment it may still be the next tiny step that you do.

And as she talked about how important it was for white Southerners to be involved, that I shouldn't worry about having been arrested and what that would do to me as a clergyman in the Southern church. As I said, she would have been pretty Unitarian by that point but speaking in very very traditional faith terms. And that maybe this was what everybody had been waiting for, and that we had to move. And then she said, "You know our grandfathers," she meant her grandfather who had been a slave owner, I'd have to say my great grandfather. She said, "Our grandparents were never free to do good or be good." They knew what was right, that slavery was wrong, that racism was wrong, but they didn't know what to do about it.

So I got more of a theological lesson from her, and certainly from the black people I met in Montgomery at that time, and then as I was with the movement from the beginning, I am convinced that most people saw the civil rights in these religious perspectives. That that was who we were, a set apart chosen people. And we didn't know where we were going. We were on a journey. After a while I would see myself as... my role was kind of priest to the movement. Many, many people would sort of wonder, "how have I been blessed to be part of this?" and could even wonder about you folks, and my children, and now I have grandchildren. "What will people think if they don't have a movement like this?" We really said things like that. "Have we been blessed in some way." But not, "Have we just been lucky" but "Have we been blessed and what are we going to do with this blessing?" That we were here at this moment, but we knew people

like Mrs. Durr, and I met black people who could say, “Ten years ago we tried this and it failed.”

In that conversation I had with Mrs. Durr she went back over everything she had done in her life, and particularly during the depression when everybody was suffering, and there certainly were a few horror stories of race, like the Scotsborough case right there in Alabama. One of my seminary professors had been one of the chairman at the time of the Scotsborough defense committee. And here he was in the 1960's and he had worked on this stuff since the early 1930's. She mentioned incident after incident which didn't rally the American people to come around and make it a full movement. And people who had spent their entire lives and were now dead who thought that at the end of the First World War there would be change. Well there was, at Tulsa, Oklahoma. Riots putting blacks back in their places across the country. Blacks had thought, and Medger Evers told me the same stories, and older black, that we would get this great change. It didn't happen. People thought, surely with the labor union organizing going on in the South across racial lines, with people coming in out of a Neibuhrian tradition and the socialist somewhat pacifist tradition trying to organize the Southern Tenants Farmworkers Union (STFU), that that was the moment. And it always failed. So one, my task was preaching when we felt failure, we [are] not call to succeed, we were called to be faithful. That meant something to that generation of blacks in the South and whites.

Eventually we had more Northern whites and northern blacks come in who were one generation further removed from traditional American religion than those of us in the first in the first waves. For good or bad, I think you'll know what I mean. And now, you know, what? 25% of Americans wouldn't know what you meant if you said Good Samaritan, that meant kindness, something like that. The Biblical stories were all part of what we did; they were part of how we kept going.

If you think of some points, throw in some questions, I may leap anywhere.

What we had to do in the civil rights movement, some of this we understood at the time, I look back on it. For many people the role would have been Freedom. I had a lot of black friends out of SNCC today, who want to say that freedom was the goal and not integration and the beloved community. I did have an understanding that I was going to support the Black goals whatever they were as long as they were non-violent, and if

blacks took up violence to get their freedom from oppression then I would understand that. I mean, Americans took up violence to get our freedom from oppression from the British. I would not think it was going to be the ideal but that all Americans had to support that. And I think that most of the black people I knew had a deeper goal. At least until 1964/65. And that goal would have been integration. That freedom from oppression could be best achieved by racial integration and achieved with them.

Beyond that some of us who supported integration as an ideal would have talked of beloved community. Integration would have kind of been equal justice and people together whatever they thought of each other. The Beloved Community, we would be brothers and sisters. And it was for that dream, not just freedom, but for that deeper dream that people could keep going, could go back. People could fight a battle, any battle, once. But you could go back for something deeper.

I have a lot of black friends now. . . A lot of Black studies programs, and I speak at some of those programs around the country, [in] a lot of them the teachers have the emphasis that people in SNCC and the civil rights movement were really not interested in integration. And that seems to be a fashionably politically correct idea. I did not hear that. I heard the people really were interested in integration, really did believe in the beloved community and on the front lines in Mississippi that's what people talked about. And people came to the front lines in Mississippi from southwest Georgia, from Selma, from other places where they were _____, and they did believe in that.

Tactically [and] strategically what we had to do within the movement would be called consciousness raising now. We had to get the oppressed people to change their identity of themselves. They had to stand up and claim their freedom and claim their dignity. And this was done over and over in the sense of you already are a child of God, you are born again in this sense, you can now claim who you are in the eyes of God. We said that and we meant it. Somebody might laugh that they were saying it. I would have a Roman Catholic friend who was black who could preach like a protestant and use the language, but I never felt it was hypercritical, that it was not manipulating the people into what standing up. . . They were called upon to stand up for what was inside them, that the blood of Jesus had been shed for them and they could stand up. And that was the starting point for their identity. And then to stand up and fight the system, and when you

stood up you also had to hold up your brothers and sisters who were suffering. Hold on to each other, hold up each other, and everybody stand up.

The second thing we had to know to do was let America, the rest of the nation, know that black people weren't just waiting to be save from Washington. That they were standing up demanding. Now, that shocked America but once we got the message out, and the message got out chiefly through churches all over the country. I spent a lot of time talking to church groups in Iowa, Wyoming, Colorado, Montana. we had to get the support of Republican congressmen from those districts to make the system work. We first appealed to Washington, to the liberals in the white house, the Kennedys and Johnsons and found out they weren't going to help us. _____ we had to make the whole American system work, and the civil rights movement did that in a beautiful way. rallying all kinds of people, but we did that chiefly through the churches to get into these communities and that common identification. Then once Americans said that blacks really are right in wanting change, and they were right in demanding it not begging for it, then people would pressure congress and we should get political change in Washington to begin to defend the civil rights movement.

The third thing we had to do was with white southerners. The white southerners had to be convinced or demonstrated. And we used *demonstrations* to get all these points out. Then you could talk after someone had a visual image of what you were doing. whites had to understand that blacks were not happy in their place. Northern whites had to understand that first because northern whites attitude was, "Well if I wanted to vote and nobody would let me I wouldn't put up with it." Or, " If blacks aren't voting it must be because they are illiterate and they aren't interested." So it took four or five years of heavy education there. But the churches being the institutions through which we did the education.

We had to convince white Southerners that blacks are not happy in their place no matter what your maid tells you in the kitchen. My favorite story about that is out of Montgomery where white women were sure that it was only communists from the North who were stirring up the bus boycott. Because as one white women told Virginia Durr my friend, she said, "None of the black people here in Montgomery are supporting this Martin Luther King man." She said, "I talked to my maid, and my maid has been with me

for forty years and Agnes is seventy years old, and Agnes told me what she thought about Dr. King and the bus boycott. And Agnes said, “I won’t go near any of those trouble makers I haven’t been on a bus in three months, and I’ve told three of my daughters and all of my grandchildren to stay away from this white folks troubles, and nobody in my family will go near those busses!”²

Well, how happy was she in her place?

Well white people thought that, and they had to see that it was there own people that they had grown up with. The local blacks who really didn’t like segregation and who were demanding a change and whites had to be convinced there will be change. And whites had to be convinced they had some responsibility, at least to stop the violence of the Klan and of the police. So we had to divide the white community and to _____ them off so that people began to take moral stands for decency which they could do in their religious tradition on small issues. And that was the kind of thing we were trying to do. That’s what we did.

I’ve got some pictures of a demonstration here

On the matter of demonstrations. You’ve seen a lot of it on TV and on VCR’s and so on. What kind of people go on demonstrations?

Here’s three pictures I used at a women’s studies class at Yale two years ago, of black and white people demonstrating about police brutality. The pictures show children at a demonstration. Two adults, black woman about 40 years old, white woman’s about 35 and two children. Martin Luther King was condemned even by church people, or maybe especially by church people South and North, for using children in the demonstrations in Birmingham, in a major turning point when he used the children.

The adults were afraid.

The adults would loose their jobs.

The adults would be beaten.

The children were free.

We had learned with the sit-ins that college students, if they were willing to put their entire future on the line had freedoms that their parents didn’t have. But most black

² The same story is told by Martin King. Martin Luther King, edited by Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York : Intellectual Properties Management, Inc. in association with Warner Books, 1998) p.66

college students did not join the demonstrations. They were the first in their generation to be going to college. They were told, "It's more important for you to get a college degree and be anew leader in the community. Don't jeopardize that." Very early on in the sit-ins black colleges were expelling students. Most colleges in the country if you have a prison record, it really didn't matter what it was for, you'd be out. So we used college students [who] discovered they had freedom, but it was always a small number of people who did it. Although within the first three years over 50 000 people had been arrested in non-violent demonstrations in America chiefly in the South. But let's remember segregation extended heavily north of Baltimore on the Eastern shore and St Louis and Oklahoma and places like that had arrests and sit-ins. OK that was chiefly college students who didn't have to worry about loosing their jobs but were putting their careers on the line.

Then, in 1963 Martin [Luther King] used the children in Birmingham. What do you folks think about that, using those children in Birmingham?

[Silence]

I was told you'd answer me and you'd fire back. Obviously you know I'm a teacher and the correct answer was he did the right thing and it worked! He didn't know that it would work. Those children might have been killed. The ultimate answer to using the children in Birmingham in April and May of 63. We end that summer with the march on Washington, but the answer of the white south to the use of children and the March on Washington was killing the children in the church in Birmingham.³ So children in Birmingham did die and within months of Martin using them in the streets. Was that leadership manipulating. . . using. . .if you had power and you convinced somebody through hymns and prayers, psyching them up to go out and risk their lives, aren't you using a kind of power on them just like the military officer is? You may not shoot them if they turn and run.

Student: How much convincing did these particular kids need because I have heard different stories about how Birmingham played out and some of it was spontaneous,

³ Four girls died when in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. September 15, 1963.

volunteering action by the older kids and then after that it became a little bit more organized. But to me that makes a little bit of a difference how coercive the authority. . .

I think it also might have been that Martin may not have been able to control them. They were coming forward wanting to do something aware that there wasn't enough manpower or woman power left to continue what was going on and they had been inspired by what was happening. Some of them went to the rallies. They certainly knew about sit-ins and things for two or three years. I think they wanted to move. I think the debate with SCLC, Fred Shuttlesworth and others and Martin was whether they should try to stop the students. But ultimately they are accused of using the students, using the children.

Greg Hite (student): I think one of the problems with a first civil rights historians and sort of myth, is that there is this image that. . . ministers get this idea that segregation is wrong and our communities need to do something about it and they inspire their parishioners who then get involved who then teach their children that this is wrong and everybody moves forward when I think a great deal of it is children are telling their parents they need to stand up and do something and then parents are dragging their ministers into it. And then things happen. But there is this idea that, "Well he is the minister so he must be in charge, he's standing at the front of the group so he's the one running the whole thing. . .

Well Ella Baker understood all of that and others, that you've got to let the minister stand in front. we certainly understood that in the Jackson movement with Medgar Evers, that the ministers are going to be against it if they are not called leaders. But most of the black ministers did not become involved. As late as the time of Martin's death in 1968, Dr. King could not have preached in anything except First Unitarian Church in Jackson in the white community and that church even had a few black member. But I would say at the time of his death 75-80% of the black congregations would not have let Dr. King even into their pulpit. They've got pictures of him now and they would deny that, just like SNCC militant people like to deny how much Jesus talk

they used and how much it meant to them to be able to use it. Most of the Church was not with it; most of the church was a drag. Fannie Lou Hamer would all but threaten violence on the ministers to get them involved.

The leadership in the black civil rights movement I would say was disproportionately Methodist, certainly was heavily protestant, and that is obvious. The very top leaders like Martin may have been Baptist, and he had splits with the black Baptist denominations, but in most of the communities that I know about, the key people who were ready first were black Methodist women. And the Methodist church had a tradition in this country of social concerns, but a deeper tradition that a born again life was a life of citizenship as well as a life of salvation. And you just didn't make those distinctions. In Mississippi the bishop of the black Methodist church gave out orders in 1963 that black Methodist churches were to be open to Medgar Evers for rallies and were open anywhere in the state for SNCC to use.

There were no other buildings. The public schools are controlled by whites. You could not meet in a public school, you can't go rent a hall in a hotel. The church is the only place that literally had space. Now, the bishop didn't say Sunday morning or the communion service or the Good Friday afternoon service is going to be civil rights meeting, but he said, "This space," which is controlled by black people, "will be open for voter registration work." There was no other place."

So in most communities there was a little pressure from a church hierarchy, when you went to a local minister that his bishop, who might be 500 miles away, has still said that even if he didn't join the movement he had to let his church do it. If his church did it he knew he would be targeted by the white community. But you know some of the theological differences there and structures. But that was pattern, church came in in that sense.

When I showed these pictures to this women's studies class, about this size or a little smaller at Yale, I think these were graduate students too, and I was playing with them about women in the movement. Here I was, a white male talking about it and what did they think of children here. Well, none of them wanted to respond in a maternal fashion, but they felt there was something wrong with having the children there. If these pictures had been two women, a black woman and a white woman, demonstrating. The

sign says “Stop Police Brutality” and “We Want the Vote” or something about registering to vote. Well that was fine. And I said, “Well, what if these were both mothers and they were risking their lives and their children would be left at home?” Well, does a mother have a right to risk her life? The class was not very comfortable with that. Half the people felt that those children should not be there. I have never done this with a class of men. All these people supported the civil rights movement, the two little children on a civil rights demonstration, this is in Mississippi in July of 1965 where there is enormous violence going on. Do you have a right? It certainly got the photographers. It certainly used the children.

OK, imagine you are a mother or a father, would you have wanted a six year old child or a nine year old child to be placed on the front line. These are the only people in that demonstration. There are 500 people in a prison camp near by at this moment where people have been tortured and brutally beaten. So this is a pretty violent situation.

Charles Marsh: Where was the prison camp?

In Jackson. In the fair ground in Jackson. It was opened in '63, this is 1965.

Do you have a right to bring children out? Up until that point we had never been able to hold up a poster sign because the police would move in instantly and get it. It blew their minds to have children there. But they were quite capable of beating children. They hesitated and they actually didn't beat them and we got some wonderful photographs taken, and then they were all arrested. Did we have a right to use children?

Molly Davis (student): Absolutely. As a mother of two I would have to say that. . .

Peter Slade (student): . . .and who has used children. . .

Molly Davis (student):. . .and who has used children in demonstrations before, [laughs] I do think the goals of the parents are passed on to the children and there is this sense that children have an innate sense of what is right and what is wrong in someways when more clearly than the adults that are in charge of them, i.e. their parents. And I feel like that is

one of the gifts of children, you know, that my little boy says, "OK this isn't right" and you are kind of like, "Well yeah it's not right."

You know, I think they can feel as strongly about it as we can. And this sense of we have to protect our children, yes we do, but on the other hand we as parents have to have some sort of risk that we allow our children to be passionate about things in the same way that we are.

I got the idea of doing this with classes when I saw these pictures on exhibit in the Smithsonian about five years ago, and people were shocked. There were other civil rights pictures and the pictures of the children in Birmingham who were older than this (although there were children, 3rd, 4th Graders in Birmingham. Maybe as young as six or seven. But most of them are high school students; these are definitely not even junior high). Well I played devil's advocate and didn't tell the people in the Smithsonian that I knew the history of the pictures. And I would get people talking. And soon I had fifteen, twenty people standing there looking at these pictures, "Did people in the civil rights movement have a right to do this?" And the majority of them were saying no, that they didn't know that Dr. King would put children that young on the lines and so on, and I didn't argue that they had the wrong King.

In actuality with this picture I was the King who designed it. I consider it one of my best theatrical productions. I wrote the script. I designed the scenery. The photographer didn't get all the white columns that I wanted (but this won international prizes). It is on the steps of the governor's mansion in Jackson, Mississippi, where I had been two years earlier with a bleeding man because the governor had said he didn't think there was any real violence in our state and the next time I knew about it, let him know.

And then there was an attempt to kill us.

He had gotten beaten instead of me because I had let him drive my car. Fortunately he turned out to be from Pakistan so he wasn't an American citizen so we were able to persuade them not to go through with the plan to kill us. And we had to drive twenty miles chased by the Klan all the way and he had to keep driving, and I finally decided he'd gone this far he could go all the way to the governor's mansion before we

go to the emergency room. Using somebody else again! And so I had taken him up there bleeding on the steps and the Governor wouldn't see us.

Well, two tears later people had been tortured (I'm present when this goes on), 500 people are in prison, on a voting rights demonstration of the Freedom Democratic Party, we're trying to get word out that people are being tortured by the police, we can't break through into the national media, and so we needed something sensational to demonstrate that we were telling the truth about these horrible things happening. So we went to the Governor's mansion, I decided how people would dress. We carried an American flag because we knew the flag triggered the police. They would grab the flag and if you held on to it they would beat you. And we had told the little boy that and he said, "It is my flag!"

And I said, "Well, they may try to take it."

The only thing that fowled up was that since it was the governor's mansion the police didn't have on helmets and I had wanted them to be in helmets. Everything else went well, it got photographed. They jerked it out; the mother (she is the mother of the two children) has the sign "No More Police Brutality, We Want the Right to Register!" Unfortunately, this photographer did not get her face, it all had to happen very quickly. This is Mrs. Aylene Quinn, she was the first lady to support SNCC in McComb when SNCC first moved in, one of the pillars of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and one of the people organizing the demonstrations.

[TAPE TURNED]

. . . her home was bombed, one of the children was injured. They happened to be in the back part of the house or they would have been killed. How do you explain to children 5 years old. . . 9 years old. You can talk to the nine year old

"Momma, why did they bomb our house?"

"Because we had these white college students spending the night with us and there is no other place for them to stay."

"Why are they here?"



Any black Mother had had to either isolate her child from racism, and many middle class parents did that, so that it was never discussed. But you still had to teach your child, “Don’t drink white water.” You at some point had to deal with it. So that she was any black mother in one sense, but in another sense it was deeper and she’d actually staged a sit in at the White House where that other big white man Lyndon Johnson didn’t want to talk to her. And she and several ladies from our movement went up there at the end of the summer demanding, and finally were allowed to see the President, that they wanted freedom and that included not having their children killed and dynamited in their homes.

So this is not just a woman, but she comes across that way, and the white woman is a northern volunteer. She happens to be Doctor Finer, a medical doctor with the medical committee on human rights [which] was just getting organized in that time, and in her bag (she is carrying a big bag) well, it was so heavy you could have used it to club several policemen if you had been swinging it around. The bag is full of first aid material in case those children are hurt, and full of medication to get in to the prison because we weren’t able to get any doctors in and we needed a doctor in the prison where people had been tortured and beaten. So we’ve all kinds of things going there and we got wonderful publicity and we began to have stories in the national press on the next day that there was police brutality in Jackson, and nobody was beaten in the jails after that.

Are we using people? The adults made their decisions.

Were we manipulating the sympathy of the American people? Do you have any rights to do that? How do you communicate when you can’t just sit down like we are doing now and saying, “Let’s talk about it.” Who were we?

Let me mention a few poems. I would circulate Bonhoeffer’s poems in that prison – the one I am talking about – in ’65. I had done it earlier. In my sermons and things I would use *Who Am I*. . . several Bonhoeffer poems. Talk about *Stations of Freedom* sometimes we’d talk about who Bonhoeffer was. Some of the SNCC people had heard and had read and _____. We would circulate poems from other places. The Freedom songs of course were poems and people from the movement sometimes wrote poems. Here is a poem written by a Northern white volunteer in McComb where Mrs Quinn lived at the end of Freedom Summer of 1964. *What We Have Been Trying To Do*. He had worked in McComb and in Liberty and Amite County (that’s Will Cambell’s home for

some of you who know Will.) I think this says where the best of Americans your age were at the end of the summer of '64. How old were we at the end of the summer of '64? Very few were more than 22, 23. I would say almost all of the leadership of the civil rights movement, SNCC, CORE, SCLC people, none of us were baby boomers. (No offense intended Mr. Marsh.) You've got this image of the sixties as people whose idea of demonstrating was to strip naked and go in front of the Pentagon or the wading pools in Washington and that Freedom meant sexual freedom, personal freedom, every kind of greed that capitalism could stand for you have a right to possess and own for yourself. That was not our motive. Here is a Northern student who has been moved by the religion of Southern Black people in the movement and by whatever religion we had within it:

What Are We Trying to Do?

We gave grass a helping hand and turned it into cactus,
We gave fuzz[?] a helping hand and turned it into rope,
We gave glass a helping hand and turned it into mirrors,
We gave rock a helping hand and turned it into bowling balls,
We gave fire a helping hand and called it Hiroshima,
And now cautiously we give man a helping hand.

Now today we wouldn't say "we give man." I don't think a poem like that can come from anywhere except a concept of original sin.

We have fallen.

We need the love of each other but ultimately we need grace.

We've got to do something like demonstrate, even put Mrs. Quinn's children on the line.

Act with Power and Authority.

Tell the president of the United States we demand that you do this and so on.

Does that sound like people who are out to change the world? Yes.

Does it sound like people who are confident, who are arrogant?

He gave that to me at the time and shared it with a few other people. That is a religious poem. That's the generation of the freedom fighters.

Did Bonhoeffer have confidence that the underground church, the professing church, the witnessing church, could really change everything in Germany? Finally things were so desperate there's the plot. Did he have any confidence that that could really work? You are called to do what you can within the limits of what you are.

OK that's a place we can stop. Surely somebody out here can come at me on some of that.

What did the Northern White Church do . . . the movement wasn't as successful in the North and what did they do wrong or why. . . where was the church in all of that?

Well the movement had to spread to the North because there were racial problems there. I think they were much deeper and playing with the religious contradictions (we did in the South) and that could reach white Christians. Playing up the citizenship contradictions that "Here is Klan violence, you have to take a stand against it."

There is a big fight going in Washington right now, a major fight about the future of the country over a judge from Mississippi who has been nominated by the President to move from being a federal district judge to the 5th Circuit in New Orleans. This man's name is Pickering, he is being lynched by the liberal establishment. He is accused of being a racist. Well he didn't do what I did. And I somehow was blessed at the right moment, at the right places, people pulling me along, and then I would say God using me or things happening that I kept going. I had teachers I had ministers, even people in high school, church and public schools. He didn't. This man was a racist. He was a racist when he was a college student at Ole Miss. How would you like to be judged when you are 60 on something you did when you were a student? My liberal democratic friends, and that is my party, have brought out documentation of racist statements this man made in 1959 when he was a student at Ole Miss. Sure he said it, but in his town which was the headquarters for the Klan that had bombed Mrs. Quinn's home and others, when he finally saw it in his own town he publicly stood up against the Klan and risked his life and the life of his children and was one of the people who made a turning point in the whole state openly standing against the Klan. He didn't openly stand and say we were wrong to be segregationist in the past. But he did the right thing. He did it as a Christian

and as a citizen, and I have seen the man over the last thirty years grow. He is one of the most important people we have in the state. The reason he is being targeted right now is that he is pro-life, and the issue is not to let anybody on the federal court and if this man can be destroyed then the president will not be able to nominate anyone who is pro-life to the Supreme Court. So Mississippi is being used as an example because any white person from Mississippi, 'specially if they are conservative Christians which this man is (an evangelical Christian), its very easy to say they must be racist. Well that's using prejudice in a different kind of a way. But this man had stood up against violence. We'd got these people moving on the basis of their American Citizenship and their religion.

By the time the movement got into the North, '65,'66, I don't think religion was as deep in either the black or the white community and that is what Martin knew how to do, to appeal peoples consciousness, to their sense of being an American, but I don't think he had as much to work with in the North. And you had people in the black community from the time the movement begins, really begins in the North (mid sixties) you've got urban violence, you've got white people really frightened. How frightened could white people be in Mississippi of an invasion? Well they were, but it turned out the invasion was only a thousand people, it wasn't a hundred thousand or two hundred thousand as _____ Sherman. But people were afraid, and then they could see us demonstrate. We do not have weapons in our hands. we are willing to put our lives in your hands. We are not forcing you the way the union armies did. And then they could listen. I don't know how anybody in the North and that was white could have listened with burning cities. Your fear is real. Martin didn't support the burning cities, he tried to say if we don't do something quick then these people who are more militant than I am, you know, we won't be able to work this out. But I don't think he was bale to communicate a message. People had real fear. People in the South had real fear based on the Union armies and the fact that American democracy had not found a way to end slavery without the violence of warfare, but we demonstrated, Mrs. Quinn putting her children out there is a kind of message, "We are not going to force you at gun point, we are not going to burn your buildings, we are not going to loot and riot in the streets." And once the looting and the rioting got started then blacks who wanted to be militant could always get a camera, could always get press attention, and you had one militant star after

another arising every five or six months. Always competing, always saying there is something faster than what Dr. King is talking about. “We can give it to you now!” Remember my point at the beginning, Dr. King and SNCC and the early movement, we did not think we would live to see the results that we’ve seen.

So “Freedom Now” to us was a slogan but it was what we had to proclaim if it was ever to be. I think people in the North wanted results very fast and the combination of ideas that we had talked about just wasn’t going to work there.

[Inaudible question re. prayer in the movement]

People did pray for their enemies, prayed for the people who might beat us. When we would have demonstrations in churches we knew that violence was less likely but that it was possible. But when we had demonstrations at the churches there was very little violence but rarely would the students, black or white, who went to an all white church not come away in tears. Just the pain of not being able to get through. What we would say at the churches is “Can’t we just pray together? We can’t do anything else together in this city, in this state. Can’t we stand here and pray together?” we actually did that for about six to eight weeks before the police started arresting us because people were beginning to talk. They would pray together, “Lord help us find a way to get past this, help us to get through this.” We never had demonstrations without prayer, without witnessing – the kind of evangelical sense of somebody saying what had happened to them some other time – through Selma we never did anything without prayer in our small meetings in living rooms for strategy and without prayer before hand, before you went out. Some people may have said, “Well we just bowed our head to be polite to the others.” But that is a bigger recognition of religion than would be [in] a lot of America today. I think it was genuine

The Northern students who came in, many of them were Jewish, would say, “Well, I haven’t grown up in a traditional religious home.” But they were in awe and envy of the faith of somebody like Mrs. Hamer or Mrs. Quinn or all of these people. “I wish I could have that kind of belief.” And they would talk to me as a college chaplain (because that’s what I was and then they understood as chaplain to the movement) confessing their wonder and awe and wishing they had some of it, but seeking and exploring.

The music would be prayer. Mrs. Hamer's songs were deliberately religious. Worked out, thought to be that way. I was at a Methodist church meeting in Mississippi a few weeks ago on race relations and the song leaders thought they were doing the right things and they butchered, and I knew that several of the black clergy were very upset, so they did *This little light*.. that Mrs. Hamer would sing.

This little light of Mine, (Pom) I'm gonna let it shine. . .

Just roared through it. . . . Well I've sung that at funerals. It is not a peppy song at all, but almost any song can be made peppy ----- . And then we left out all of the religious verses and I looked in the Methodist hymnal and the religious verses were left out. Modern 1990's hymnal. . . same with *We Shall Overcome*... But Mrs. Hamer would say "This little light, Jesus gave it to me." Everyone is already thinking "I'm going to let this little light shine. . . the Sermon on the Mount!" And underneath that, "God has touched my spirit, I have to respond. I've got the light, Jesus gave it to me I am going to let it shine everywhere." well we would sing "all over the world," and everywhere she meant even at Parchman down in jail house.

[sings] Even at the White House – I'm gonna let it shine

My God! In front of Caesar's palace! I mean you'd better have God with you.

What do you think . . . you know the scripture sources for that one. we sang at the same Methodist church *We shall Overcome*, but we wouldn't sing those offensive lines. we sang "We will be brother's and sisters" "All around the world" stuff like that. we did not sing that "I am afraid" we did not sing "God is on our side." Those sound like arrogant verses.

[sings] God is on our side.

But before we would sing that one we would sing "We are not afraid." That's a proclamation of faith because we were scared to death. But what we meant is almost like "We are not afraid for our souls. we know we are in God's hands. We know some of us may get beaten. Somebody may not live through this." So how can we say black and white together? That's eschatological, that can hardly be thought of, what an absurd idea. And the "We are not afraid." and then "God is on our side." And it didn't mean my army is always blessed by God. What kind of scripture references might be behind that song

that people fifty years ago even in labor unions in the South would have understood the biblical basis for what they were doing. Anybody have any ideas on *We Shall Overcome*?

I'm not going to ask the people in religious studies they all know.

Nobody?

This is the 56th psalm when everything has gone wrong for David and he is trying to hide out in the caves, or that's what we think the psalm is:

Be merciful to me, O God, for man would swallow me up;

Fighting all day he oppresses me.

My enemies would hound me. . . etc. etc.

Whenever I am afraid. . .⁴

I'm skipping a few verses here. He doesn't say "I am not afraid but he might as well have said "I am not afraid for I trust in you." He is a little more honest than we were.

Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You.

In God (I will praise His word),

I will not fear.

What can flesh do to me?

All day they twist my words;

All their thoughts are against me for evil.

They gather together,

They hide. . .

I've used this at meetings, everybody knew what I was talking about. People who knew that somebody might be hiding in wait for them on the way home from church. That their car might be run off the road.

they mark my steps,

Thank God we didn't know how much the FBI and military intelligence was marking our steps. Found out in later years when Dr. King would ask me to go up to places like Ohio during the Selma campaign, military intelligence was tracking me. And I don't think they had mixed up Martin King and Ed King.

⁴ Quoting from the New King James Version

*They gather together,
They hide, they mark my steps,
. . . they lie in wait for my life.*

... *O God!*

*You number my wanderings;
Put my tears into Your bottle;
Are they not in Your book?*

Not my words of praise and deeds, my tears!

When I cry out to You,

Then my enemies will turn back;

Did he really think his enemies might not kill him? Sure you put it that way. Why do I know this?

because God is ,in this version it says, *for me.*

Some of the earlier translations say

God is with me and God is on my side.

I am not afraid. My enemies will turn back even if everyone of us in this church doesn't live to see it because God is on our side.

In God I have put my trust;

I will not be afraid.

What can man do to me?

Well they can kill me but that's not really what ultimately matters. That's the we're not afraid part of *We Shall Overcome*. And that phrase is biblical.

No test, but how many of you know the phrase "We shall overcome" and think of that as biblical?

It is what our faith is about. As Christians we will celebrate that Easter but in a sense every religion is saying there is more than me and mine and today. There is yesterday and there is tomorrow and the victory is in God's hands and Christians are saying in the cross and the resurrection God has already done it. But "We shall overcome" to a southern Christian audience the words were biblical when they started. From first John

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God⁵ . . . born again.. whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith. . . .
and on and on. If I were doing a sermon I'd going

[laughter]

. . . no, no, it elaborates it, but that is from the section on love. And it is love that overcomes and yet how can we love each other. Even, how can we love ourselves because we know we have failed. And somehow God forgives even me. But the Epistle of John could do that. This is the gospel of John. In John 16. There's going to be trouble everywhere. Jesus said to them:

Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.⁶ Why do I talk to you all about this?

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

It is still a powerful song if people sing it at the Berlin wall or if they sing it at a student demonstration for better food in the cafeteria, or in Beijing at the square, but we haven't done our missionary work when we have let the religious part of it which gives it even more power. . . its not just a song of people standing up against odds. Mrs. Hamer knew that. She had been raised in a church which knew that at a time when you don't have to say what is scripture. When you don't have to say, "The Good Samaritan, that is a story that Jesus told in the Bible, the Bible is a religious book. . ." That is where we are headed as America. . .

How should our generation react or respond to the sins of past generations, specifically the causes of the civil rights movement?

In the first place we don't condemn anybody, we don't condemn everybody who failed in the past. Let's assume that even the worst of them had something good in them that's Gandhian and Christian. Let's also assume that we have opportunities and knowledge that they did not have. Let's also assume that we are wounded, that we are

⁵ 1 John 5:3 ff. (NKJV)

⁶ John 16:32 ff.(NKJV)

ignorant, that we don't know. In discussions in the civil rights movement in the 60's we would often talk about the 1990's and couldn't even imagine another century and wouldn't there be problems that today we do not see. Now, lets say in '63 and '64 nobody would have been talking about the women's movement which rose out of the civil rights movement in Mississippi in its most important impetus. We said that all these people we're condemning. The black people who say nothing can ever be any different and its supposed to be like this, and the white people who said its supposed to be like this and were blind. We really did say, "We are like them, they are like us, and we happen to think we see with the light but we are blind about something else." The idea of rejecting all white male Americans, or changing the name of a school in New Orleans from George Washington to, you know, Malcolm Christ or something, because Washington owned slaves. I mean, the most militant people in SNCC would sit around saying, "Who are these enemies? The silent blacks who won't move? The whites? We see something, how do we communicate with them? Not that we know the answers. . ."

To work on anything is important. Until '64, summer, everything we did -- other than the big march on Washington -- everything else was small. Birmingham became the first sort of big thing. The sit-ins were a few people in a few places, lots of them by the time you added them together, but in no community was it more than a handful who started something. And most of what we do all our lives will be tiny steps and it will be what we can do with people closest to us. When we talked about beloved community we were trying to be it as a sign for the future and we discovered how hard it was for us to even love one another. One of our slogans that has been *massively* distorted was, "Do your own thing!" We used that in the Mississippi movement to mean: I have absolute trust in you, and if we call upon you to march in Canton on Friday and last week you marched in Greenwood and you say, "I think I'll fall to pieces, I don't have the guts to do it, I will not be there" We knew that you would be with us in spirit and "Do your own thing" meant we all don't have to be doing it all at the same moment. We know where your heart is and you don't have to prove it. We won't feel abandoned if your aren't with us because tomorrow I may be afraid to go and do something. And look what's happened with that phrase now.

I think the most important issue we have in the country right now is about life, right to life, and I think that fits in historically very much with the civil rights movement. Just before we began the '64 summer we talked about, "We either move America in this positive direction or America will move in the direction of outcast, rejecting, isolating blacks or genocide." The Mississippi legislature passed laws that were genocidal on the eve of Freedom Summer. SNCC people talked about, "If it moves in that direction we have to take up arms. If they are going to kill us, if they are going to control black births. . ." and so on. The things were never enforced but the State passed laws trying to restrict welfare if a woman who had more than one illegitimate child. We even passed a law that said a woman who had a second illegitimate child would be imprisoned. We had problems of compulsory sterilization. Mrs. Hamer was sterilized. We had white doctors seeing that the black population, which once needed to produce as many children as possible to work the plantations, once we began to mechanize them we had too many black people and too many potential voters, and so sterilization was being done. And it was Roman Catholics in the civil rights movement who were so shocked by that. Mrs. Hamer could say, "Its happening," she knew.

Today in Mississippi, two thirds to seventy five percent of the abortions are done for black children in the womb. In America in 1995 we had reached the point that black abortions were about thirty eight percent of all abortions in America, almost three times the black population rate, and Hispanic abortions then had approached twelve percent which was close to the Hispanic level, and the Hispanics being predominantly Roman Catholic. In 1995 the majority of the children whose life was snuffed out in the womb were black or Hispanic. Today it is about sixty percent [of] all abortions in America. Is that freedom for somebody or is something else going on? Fannie Lou Hamer was the first person to talk to me after *Roe vs. Wade* came down and she said, "Rev. King, this is another racial thing, this is the answer to the civil rights movement, they are going to get rid of black babies." I know you have a variety of opinions on that.

Let me give one positive story from Mrs. Hamer, then we will break, on where religion is and prayer. At the Democratic convention in 1964, of massive historical importance, but at the convention we are struggling to be recognized, to get some kind of change. Hubert Humphrey has been told he will not be allowed to be Vice President

unless he can control the blacks. (We are dealing with the great liberal establishment!) We have meetings. We are organizing people all over America. There is enormous pressure on the convention and on the Democratic Party. And Mrs. Hamer and I and others would meet, we are meeting with Hubert Humphrey. And Mr. Humphrey explains to me and Mrs. Hamer things like war in Vietnam , that we need somebody for peace in the White House, or next to the (White House). He discusses socialized medicine and used the word to me, that that has to be a goal. Everything from the New Deal that had not been accomplished; medical care, health care, education. . . everything that he could and had spent his life training to do, and what it would mean to have him as Vice President. And she said, “Mr. Humphrey, I got fired from my job on the plantation and Path and I,” her husband, “ we had to leave our home. And God took care of me, and some friends took me, and they shot into the home and the bullets went over my head into the wall and God took care of me. Senator Humphrey, if you get this job of Vice President the way they are making you get it, you will never have power to do for good any of the things you’re talking about.” And I remember Virginia Durr saying her minister father and grandfather were not free in the old South to do good or be good. And she told the Vice President, “You will never be able to get there.” And she didn’t refer to Shakespeare and all the master pieces of western literature which would have dealt with that, or Faust or anything else, she went to the Bible.

And he was very uncomfortable, and she said, “Oh no Senator Humphrey, God will take care of you. Senator Humphrey I am going to pray to Jesus for you.” He refused to meet with her again.

Thanks for staying so long.