

*Julius Lester's Search for the New Land: History as Subjective Experience will be published in October by the Dial Press. His most recent book is Revolutionary Notes (Richard Baron); earlier titles include Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama (Dial Press and Grove Press) and To Be A Slave (Dial Press), runner-up for the 1969 Newberry Award.*

# REFLECTIONS ON REACHING THE AGE OF THIRTY

*Julius Lester*

I am growing old. Every day I look at my children and their growing is the yardstick of my aging. When my daughter is fourteen, I will be forty. When she is twenty-four, I will be fifty. I am growing old. The bills which come in the mail are now addressed to me and it is I, not my father, who looks in the checkbook to see which ones can be paid immediately and which must wait. I read the paper and my eye skips the article about a demonstration and comes to rest on one about the six per cent increase in prices last year and I understand why I spend more and more money to bring home the same amount of food. I read the paper and I am not as interested in Congressional debates on troop withdrawals from Vietnam as I am in debates on extension of the sur-tax and tax reform.

I am growing old and I become aware of it when I talk to the young who say they are revolutionary. I do not disbelieve them, but I am reluctant to trust them completely. I look at them and wonder, will they still be talking about revolution when it is their time to earn the dollars to pay the bills? Or will these years of their youth merely be a pleasant interlude affording them nostalgic pleasures on quiet evenings in the days of their aging.

The young have said, "Don't trust anyone over thirty" and there is truth in that. It is those over thirty who have betrayed the moral principles in which the young believe and fight for and which the revolution will make real for every man. Yet, I can say with equal truth, "Don't trust anyone under thirty." It is easy for them to talk revolution, because they have little to risk. Their revolutionary commitment has not been tested by rising prices, increasing taxes and low wages. They can be pure revolutionaries because they do not have to worry about losing jobs because of their political beliefs and activities.

I am haunted by a statement of Robert Frost's: "I was never a radical in my youth because I didn't want to be a conservative in my old age." And what a shock it is to realize that there is life after twenty-five. In fact, most of it. (As adolescents all of us were certain that we would die beautiful tragic deaths by the time we were twenty-five. When we don't, it is horrifying to realize that we have fifty years, more or less, in front of us that we have to do something with.) It is at that point that the revolutionary commitment of our youth is tested to its utmost, for revolutions are not lived in the grand parades of the masses down broad boulevards, nor in the columns of the guerrilla band, with its fixed purpose, making its way

through the forest. Revolutions are lived day-by-God-awful-day, like the drops of water from a slow-dripping faucet. When we are young, we want wrongs to be righted instantly. We have no time to wait. "We want the world and we want it NOW!" sings Jim Morrison of The Doors. But what if we don't get it NOW? (There is no doubt that we deserve it NOW, but whenever the dispossessed take control of the world, there is every probability that those of us now alive will have provided sustenance for the worms and will be smiling vacant smiles toward a sky we cannot see.)

You reach the age of thirty and you slowly understand that you may not even be a memory in anyone's mind "when the revolution comes." Some never recover from the shock and with the knowledge that they will probably not be around to benefit personally from the new society, they decide to get all they can out of this one and let the new take care of itself. And they become good liberals. Others become disillusioned and bitter. Others, however, face the challenge of being thirty and revolutionary, of being committed to and working for total change in the society, while making a living from and raising one's children in that society. And challenge is not an adequate word to describe trying to live such a life. An agony of agonies it is. (I remember the months preceding the publication of my first book, *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama*. I wanted it to be read, to be sold, of course, yet if it were, I would make money from it. America is the only country that ever existed in which you can make a living by talking and writing about the destruction of the country. What kind of revolutionary am I, I wondered, who gets semi-annual royalty statements on his latest book about revolution? What kind of revolutionary am I who can get \$500 for giving a 1½ hour talk on revolution at a college? What kind of revolution is this? One must accept and live with the contradictions. Only the monk and the nun can live pure lives in this society. The rest of us have to live impure lives even as we work for the pure society. It is like a woman with tuberculosis getting pregnant.

There are those who have decided that the demands of the revolution are such that they must be monks without monasteries—no marriage, no family, no long-term romantic involvements. They will spend 100% of their time and their lives working for the revolution. That is good and necessary. But there are those of us who married before revolution meant something more than what happened in Russia in 1917. There are those of us who considered ourselves revolutionary, but wanted our lives, too. (I first met Nancy when she was 14. It was the same summer I met Joan, whom I married six months later. We were at a camp and Nancy was the most beautiful girl there—blonde, blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked, nubile as only 14-year-old girls are and totally apolitical. She was the image of Miss Junior America and at the time, I thought her mental capacity didn't exceed her image. She wrote me off and on after camp and when she entered Barnard three years later, we would talk

on the phone occasionally. She said she had changed that she was involved in SDS, had been on demonstrations and considered herself a revolutionary. I remember the morning the black students took over Hamilton Hall at Columbia the spring of '67, I was roused from my bed at 6 A.M. and asked to come up and give them some advice seeing as how I had all this experience in "the movement." All my experience told me that the best advice was for everybody to get some sleep like I was trying to do and take over the building later. That was my first thought and I commented to myself that, yes, I was getting old, but revolutionary commitment was stronger than common sense and I got out of my warm bed beside my warm wife and ventured out into the morning up to Columbia University which I didn't give a good goddam about. If they didn't want to set it on fire, I would come home and go back to bed, which is exactly what happened. And as I came out of Hamilton Hall, who should I see standing out front in the rain, but Nancy. A week later, as I followed events at Columbia in the pages of *Newsweek*, there was a picture of her making a picket sign and I couldn't believe that this was the same girl I had known when she was fourteen. I was and we went out several times and I learned that she was serious, one of the most serious of the young I've ever met. Revolution for her was synonymous with life. But one evening that summer she said to me, "I know that I'm a revolutionary, but I want to have kids." She laughed. "I know what you're going to say, but my life will not be complete if I don't. I really don't think I can be a complete revolutionary otherwise." I sipped my beer and told her about sick children who cry for eight hours, about diapers that always need changing, about baby-sitters you can't trust, about having children and finding that it isn't like the pictures in the Ivory soap ads. She said she knew. A few weeks ago she called to invite me and Joan to her wedding. I'm glad that she is going to do both.)

It is not easy and the older one gets, the more difficult it becomes. I am so afraid that when I am forty, my daughter will have for a father a man who does not understand, who does not listen and who does not learn from her. She may have for a father a man who unconsciously sold his idealism and commitment for the security of a bank account, a home and a little comfort. She may have for a father a man whose love of humanity has turned to hatred because humanity did not respond with a resounding YES when he cried, "We want the world and we want it NOW!" Her father may be a man whose bitterness is so pervasive that he will be loath to see her generation succeed where his failed.

Being a revolutionary means not only fighting to bring about that change, but it means maintaining a constant vigil on one's self, searching for the weaknesses and faults within which must be destroyed if he is not to betray the dreams of his youth. The jazz musician and revolutionary, the late John Coltrane, wrote a composition

called "Vigil," of which he said: "(Vigil) implies watchfulness. Anyone trying to attain perfection is faced with various obstacles in life which tend to sidetrack him. Here, therefore, I mean watchfulness against elements that might be destructive—from within or without." Just as the monk keeps God at the center of his being, I must keep the necessity for revolution at the center of mine. (Is there any difference between the two?) I must fight to keep it there, no matter how large the royalty checks may get, no matter how many "good" reviews my books may get. (Rosie was twenty-six and the mother of four girls. She, her husband and children lived in a three-room railroad flat. He worked at a wrought-iron furniture plant two hours away from our block. When he came home from work, it was only long enough to eat, shower, dress and go out. Three rooms filled with furniture and children is no solace after four hours travelling to and from work and eight hours on the job. Rosie had no place to go, except to seances once a month where she talked to the dead. And when it is easier to communicate with the dead, there is no word to describe what living has become. She had wanted children, but her husband had wanted a son. A man who has a son has a future. A woman has only the present. She hadn't minded the first two children, even though they were girls. However, when the third child was also a girl, she lived in dread of the fourth pregnancy. And she wanted nothing less than death when the doctor congratulated her on the birth of her fourth girl. What kind of woman was she that she

could not give birth to a boy? No one had ever told Rosie that the male determines the sex of the child. The fifth child was a boy, but Rosie couldn't care. She could only wonder why it had taken so long. Her pregnancies were over, but there were too many clothes to wash, too much food to cook, too little money to do anything with and too many children. There was no energy to care for them. There was no time to care. There could not be even any desire to care.)

I must fight to remember, now that I am thirty, that the revolution is Rosie. Rosie must be freed so that she can be Rosie and no matter how much the pain the living with the contradictions creates in me, it is nothing to the pain of Rosie, who will not even have the opportunity to fight for her life as I fight for mine. Thus, I become responsible not only for me, but for Rosie.

I am growing old and I never thought I would. When you are twenty, it is impossible to imagine being thirty. When you're thirty, it is not only easy to imagine forty, you can feel the inevitability of fifty. And feeling it, I am so afraid, sometimes, that when I am fifty, I will have forgotten that Rosie's life is in my hands, for I am a revolutionary. I will have forgotten that the beat of my heart does not belong to me. I must keep a constant vigil to see that this does not happen, for if it does, I will have betrayed by birthright and negated my reason for being and my children, in the fullness of their youth, will have no choice but to kill me as I lie sleeping.