

Tape #1- June 11, 1964

CONVERSATION WITH MR. JAMES FARMER

A. Mr. Farmer, I remember reading somewhere a remark of yours that for you at least, segregation had been a challenge and a stimulus, that though you had never felt yourself inferior, nevertheless this gave you a focus for your energies, when you were young.

I think that is true. You must understand of course, that my childhood was somewhat unique, and that my father was a professor at a college practically all of my early life, and I lived on the campus and thus was insulated and isolated from some of the problems in the community.

A. In a way then, you could have whatever benefit there would be from the challenge without the deadening weight of direct contact with the process of segregation.

That is right, yes, I would say that that is true. I would not want this to be interpreted as a justification for segregation.

A. I think we can avoid that, that interpretation. Now, challenge is the very essence of achievement though, isn't it? What kind of challenges do you see as normal for the child or boy as different from the challenge of segregation?

Well, let me put it this way -- I think the greatest challenge that I fixed as a child, was to prepare myself to try to get rid of segregation, to do what I could to oppose the thing and bring it down. My entire life was dedicated to that proposition.

A. Lets see, CORE was founded in 1942 -- what particular need, what vacuum did you conceive of this organization as filling at that time?

Well, at that time I was working for the Fellowship of Reconciliation

as Race Relation Secretary. Now the Fellowship is a religious Pacifist organization and in the course of my duties, I had been studying a great deal about Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi -- his works and his life, and more recently had taken a tour through the South -- a speaking trip -- visiting Negro colleges. This was my first trip South since leaving the South in 1938. I visited the South on this tour in the Fall of 1941 and came back to Chicago, which was my headquarters then, convinced that something had to be done that was not now being done -- that the current approaches to the problem were not adequate, and therefore was determined to use the Gandhian techniques in a battle against segregation, we wanted to add new ingredients to the struggle that was then going on.

A. That is, as opposed to the legalistic approach, is that right for one thing?

Yes, well, not really opposed to it --

A. I don't mean -- as distinguished from it, I don't mean in place of it.

Yes, we saw our approach as supplementing that approach, we felt that the new ingredients that needed to be added were as follows:

1. Involvement of people themselves, that is the rank in file -- not relying upon the talented tenth, not relying upon the experts and the professionals to do the job.

2. A rejection, a repudiation of segregation. In the past, we have felt that too many people had lambasted segregation verbally, and had then gone ahead and allowed themselves to be segregated. It was a contradiction, and we felt it was important for individuals to remove themselves from the support of segregation. This was following

in a sense, the views of Thorough, Henry David Thorough.

3. Emphasis upon nonviolent direct action -- that is, putting one's body into direct confrontation with the evil and the perpetrators of the evil and accepting the consequences of one's action.

So it was on these principles that CORE was founded in 1942.

A. Several questions come out of that, I would like to have you speak about -1. What results did you look for, I don't mean necessarily practical results looking for the abolition of segregation; but what changes -- or by what process of change do you expect this to come about? Moral awakenings on the part of a white community, for instance? Moral awakenings on the part of a Negro community? What various results has steps toward the achievement of a practical end

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Well, we saw -- first I ought to say that we looked upon our efforts in the early forties as being experimental -- experimenting with a new technique, and we longed for and dreamed about the development of a mass movement, which fortunately we do have now; but we saw it as first appealing to the conscience of the majority, and second, making the continuation of segregation so expensive that it would become intolerable.

A. Now, how would you describe that process? It has already become expensive.

It has already been expensive, yes, and what we wanted to do was to use the economic power through the boycott, and to do that effectively required larger numbers than we had at the outset. We wanted also to get people in their withdrawal of themselves from the support of segregation, to withdraw their money from the support of segregation --

in terms of financing and subsidizing and investing, etc.. These are all a part of the plans initially in CORE.

A. I was a quotation here that runs something like this -- it is from Eric Lincoln -- he says that the question has been at times, whether the Negro with his hypothetical -- the Negro is, you know, wants real integration or whether he wants a kind of superficial integration which allows him to feel himself equal in principle but withdrawn in practice, as if it was his own community. Now, ~~xxx~~ I assume, I won't speak, but I assume if you are interested in actual integration, not superficial integration, ^{but} then that case you have a problem with the Negro community, don't you, too?

Yes, I think this is a -- the great debate that is going on in the Negro community at the present time.

A. Please analyze that, will you?

Well, I think that most Negroes ~~xxx~~ -- I don't want to use the term the average Negroes, because I don't know what that is -- but most Negroes, the rank in file, the ordinary John Does whose skins are black -- most Negroes are not really concerned with the issue of segregation, of separation versus integration. The real issue for them is getting the heel of oppression off their neck, they know something is hurting them -- they are not sure what it is -- and they want it removed. Now Malcolm X and I can address a mass rally the same morning, he can get an applause talking about separation, I can get an applause talking about integration, and I think this is a significant fact. Now, it is the responsibility of leadership to analyze this heel of oppression that is on the neck and define it and come up with ideas as to how it can be removed.

A. You mean isolate the actual aspects of the practical problem.

That is right, yes, and so the debate that is going on is among leadership. Now, I am an integrationist, I believe the solution is not separation but is integration, but it is important for us now to define that integration -- what do we mean by it? Do we mean that the Negro as one tenth of the population in this country would be absorbed into white culture, into white society, and thus would disappear and lose his identity.

A. Even the bloodstream disappears.

Yes. And I think not, this is not what I am searching for -- this is not the type of integration that I am looking for. Instead, I am looking for a situation whereby the Negro has pride in his culture, his history, the contributions that Negroes have made in American History and before that, in Africa -- that he has an identity, that he knows who he is and has a pride in it. Thus, he can come into an integrated society as a proud and equal partner, who has something to give, something to share, and something to receive. Now, that to me is more in line with American History than any idea of a merger or an absorption -- disappearance. We've had the concept in America of unity through diversity, and I think that the same thing should apply to the racial situation in our country.

A. This reminds me of the discussions that appeared in the work of DuBois, you know, on the question of the split in the Negro, the pull toward an African tradition or at least toward the American Negroes cultural tradition as opposed to all the other. That is, you don't see that as a real problem, you see it solved in terms of American cruelties.

That is right, it is a problem for each individual Negro -- as DuBois put it, every thoughtful Negro at some time has asked himself the question "Is he an American Negro or is he a Negro American"?

A. Now, a man may not search -- search is the word you used, I believe -- for absorption, blood absorption, but it may eventuate. Now some Negroes at least, in the fact of eventuation, comes the withdrawal from it, has lost their identity through that absorption.

Of course, yes. I would not shrink from it, however, I think that this should be a permissive absorption. An individual Negro chooses to ~~marry~~ marry an individual white person, then fine. I do not think this would happen with most Negroes or most white people, indeed. Nor do I think that most Negroes will choose to live in what are now lily white suburbs. I believe, however, that they ~~must~~ ^{ought to} have a choice and that it should be an open society. If the Negro wants to live in lovely ~~white~~ gardens or lovely lane, then he should do so; but in the foreseeable future, most Negroes are going to choose to live in what are now the ghettos.

A. Now this is about choice, you said.

Yes, it should be a matter of choice, not a matter of compulsion. That is why I prefer at this stage, to speak of it as a battle for desegregation, rather than a battle for integration.

A. Because that is the first step, at least logically the first step in the process -- that is what you said --

Yes, that is right. This ties in also with another debate that is going on in the whole American society now, with regard to race relations -- is whether we want to become a blind, for the color

blindness is a thing to be sought. Many of our civil rights laws have been based upon the premise of color blindness, in jobs and in housing, etc.. You can't have a quota, you can't look for Negroes you know, certain number or percentage of Negroes in the housing project -- it is illegal to ask the race or look at the race -- when you seek employees, you do not seek Negro employees or white employees, you must seek employees, etc.. Well, I think this is a fanciful notion, I don't think that color blindness in the American concept is a realistic one at all. I think that instead of feeling that we should sit beside a Negro and say "I don't see the color of his skin, I don't know the color of his skin" -- we should be able to say "Yes, I know the color of his skin and he is black, but so what?" And that, I think, is more American.

A. A university or college that I know, they have a very large given them to encourage the attendance of Negroes at . It is against the laws to inquire into the race, religion or color of applicant or possible student. So here you find a strange collision between the -- and they have to get around this.

That is right, and I think the laws are wrong. I think the laws are outmoted now and need to be changed. We ran into it in a little campaign we had in seeking jobs for Negroes in a small chain of restaurants. The owner, the manager finally agreed to meet our demands, hiring a certain number of Negroes, but he said "We get our employees through a State Employment Service, we certainly can't go to them and ask for 25 Negroes, it would be a violation of the law". Well, I checked with some friends in the

State Employment Service in that particular state and they said that it was very simple -- have the man call us and we will notify our office, which is in the heart of the ghetto, and tell them to send this man 25 qualified persons, regardless of race, color, creed or national origin.

A. Bootleg!

That is what it is, yes, I think the laws as they are now worded are wrong, and that we cannot be color blind, now we have to have a color consciousness aimed at wiping out discrimination.

A. This leads to a matter of quotas, doesn't it? How do you conceive the quota, as a provisional, transitional device?

Yes, in housing I think quota is necessary -- in order to avoid resegregation. In all the tipping point after an area or project becomes more than a certain percentage Negro, then it tends to become all Negro. I think in order to avoid resegregation, we have to have a benign quota. I am in favor of such a quota in employment -- for tactical and practical reasons, we do not call for quotas now in employment -- we call for numbers instead, in order to see faces -- the black faces there.

A. You mean the number of Negroes, instead of a quota of Negroes.

Instead of a quota of Negroes and a number of Negroes, as a start.

A. The quota system does have in extension, some very grave dangers, doesn't it?

Of course it has dangers, yes. We and fought against quotas in colleges and universities, because we felt that quotas

were used to discriminate; but now our quotas can be used to eliminate discrimination that has existed and to create a more equitable situation.

A. You have read Oscar Hanlin's little book "Bell In The Night" that has recently come out?

No, I haven't read it.

A. He makes a -- he is very much opposed -- I wouldn't say opposed, that is not the word -- he is keenly aware of the danger of quota systems if they are not boxed around by a control which is recognized as devices, because they can spread in all kinds of directions, defeat the very purpose for which they are intended; but he also makes a remark that one of the dangers in the present situation is that integration has become a -- the very word 'integration' -- and has led to unrealistic readings of actual situations, that equality is the key, not integration, because in a situation you can't integrate by any immediate process, and he refers I think, to the Harlem schools situation as an example of that -- an example of that, where you can conceivably aim at equality and work toward integration, but you can't make up the testing point in an overall way -- say a New York or Washington school situation. How would you respond this notion?

Well, there I think it has to be both equality and integration. Our experiences in the past have indicated that in the school system, you cannot have equality under segregation.

A. This is back to the past, there is no question about it. But what do you do in a city like Washington, D.C., when there aren't

enough white school ~~with~~ children in the public schools to go around in an integrated city?

Well, in that case, you do as much as you can, you do as much as you possibly can, given the situation.

A. There are some people -- some Negroes I know who say there should be a law to go out in Virginia and corral them and bring them in.

Well, that is nonsense, that is sheer nonsense. I think now in the New York City situation, a great deal more can be done than has been done, to create integration, and I believe that on the public school level, integration is terribly important. We see it in the development of the -- we see the dangers of not having integration in the development of national sentiment among Negroes, and anti-whites sentiment -- that would be offset if our children studied in the same schools and became friends. I think it is terribly important even to take artificial methods -- such as bussing sometimes or such as of schools, or changing the school zones, in order to achieve integration, for the sake of letting our children get acquainted.

A. Dr. King and I were talking about this a few weeks ago -- a couple of months ago now, and he was saying -- some breaking point in time, thirty minutes might be the upper limit of time on the bus for a child of a certain age, you know -- he was saying, not lay down a program, he was saying there is some point where we have to have other considerations modified, the possibility -- sort of a common sensible view of this, where you break this, you see. Two hours each way on a bus is one thing, thirty minutes or forty-five

minutes is another thing on a bus for children of certain ages. He was simply , he was not laying down, say 30 minutes or 45 minutes -- those were the two times he used. He was saying the situation must have a gentle context for the benefit of the child -- he was not legislating or laying down a schedule of distance, he was saying we must see a context for the individual child's benefit is involved in this.

Well, I think that the issue of bussing has been greatly overplayed and exaggerated, because in any of the solutions that have been offered -- the proposals that have been offered for providing integrated quality education in northern cities, bussing has been a minor part of such plans. The limited number of children bussed and for comparatively short distances, also there is the fact that the people who have opposed bussing most vehemently have said "If you bus our children, we will pull them out of the public school system and send them to private schools" where incidently they would be bussed for long distances. Yes, many parents bus their children all over they city to attend good schools -- private schools. Also, in the rural areas, in the counties, bussing has become an integral part of the educational system with the central schools established, you know, for the sake of quality education; so that I think that the issue has been greatly exaggerated and has become something that is hung up for discussion.

A. Smoke screen for some in discussion, anyway.

A. You were saying that you were inclined to believe -- correct me if this isn't right -- that the hung jury in the two trials of Beckworth, were honest, not rigged for public consumption.

Yes, I am inclined to believe that, I see no evidence of any rigging of the jury in that regard. I think that the State knew very well that it would be impossible to get 12 men, or women for that matter, in the state who would vote for a conviction, and they probably assumed that there would be either an acquittal or a hung jury.

A. You said that there was a change in Mississippi, though, in recent times of attitude, is that this exposure to public glare of publicity?

I think so. Mississippi felt that it was an island, it didn't care what the rest of the country or the rest of the world thought, and that what happened in Mississippi was the business of Mississippi and of nobody else; but that came to a rather abrupt end with the freedom rides and 225 people were jailed then and these people were from all over the country. Their home communities became greatly concerned about it; in fact, one state sent a delegation down to look at conditions in the state penitentiary where the freedom riders were. Well, ever since that time, there have been activities in Mississippi -- voter registration, demonstrations against segregation, etc. -- so that Mississippi knows now that if one Negro dies, is killed or if a house is bombed or shot, that it becomes headline news throughout the country, and Mississippi cannot stand to lose from this sort of thing. Say, I am not convinced that the new awareness in Mississippi of the fact that other people's eyes are on them, will effect changes in segregation system. I think that they are just as convinced, just as determined to maintain segregation as they were five years ago,

or more, but now they realize they have to be a little more sophisticated and subtle about it.

A. Lets sort of out who is the t h e y -- you see.

Yes, that is a very good question. I think that Mississippi, as far as the political power structure is concerned, is monolithic on segregation -- on this issue, and more than any other state in the country -- any other state in the South, it is a police state and is a controlled situation, so that I think there is some basis for people's suspicion that the jury might have been rigged. I don't think that massive violence occurs in Mississippi without approval, there are no accidents in that sense; if there is massive violence, then the word has been given, and violence can be prevented in Mississippi. For example, when the freedom riders came into the state, everyone knew they were coming in, they knew when. Yet, Ross Barnett who was governor at the time, went on the air, went on television every day before the freedom riders came in, telling people the race mixes as he called them, were coming into our state -- forget about it, he said -- don't come into town, don't get your guns, don't do anything, let us handle it and we will handle it according to law and order and we will see to it that the state segregation laws will be supported and maintained, upheld -- and that is what happened. There was a crowd of people at the bus terminal, but these people were largely reporters, plain clothesmen and policemen. There were no mobs, they stayed home. Now in Alabama, you can have accidental mob, mass violence, because it is not that efficient in its police operation. The police in Mississippi are more efficient than police I have seen operate any place else in the country -- like

clockwork, with precision. About a month before Medgar Everts was shot, I was riding with him from Greenwood to Clarksdale to see Dr. Henry, and night had fallen. He asked me to go along with him partly because he didn't want to drive alone at night. As we drove along, he told me that he didn't really go along with nonviolence as completely as some of the people in the movement, and if I looked in his glove compartment, I would find a loaded 45 there, and furthermore, every time he gets into his car, he checks under the hood and under the seat and everything else. Well, he said that in addition, nothing passes him on the highways in that state at night. We were going about 70 miles an hour and after a while he commented to me that the car behind us which had four men in it, had been with us for 15 miles and we've got to lose it, he said. We went up to 80, they stayed with us -- we went up to 90, up to 100 and the speedometer registered 110 before we pulled away from it. He told me that he doesn't let anything pass him because he has had too many experiences being stopped at night or attempts being made to block his car or force him off the road, and also there have been many cases recently, where people have had rather surprising accidents on the highway, which he does not believe were accidents. He said that in addition, lynchings still go on in the state, dead bodies not infrequently -- black bodies, that is, float down the Pearl River.

A. There have been five unexplained killings, I read in the paper, since last January --

Five unexplained killings -- were they all Negroes?

A. All Negroes, yes. This is my recollection of some news story.

I know when I got out of jail -- out of Parchment Penitentiary -- on that particular day, I was the only male who was bailing out, there were several girls who were bailing out, and there were two vans to take us back to town -- back to Jackson, I was put in the large one all alone, the girls were put in the small one and I later found out why this was done -- it was to give me a rough ride you know, starting suddenly, stopping suddenly, hitting curves and have me tumble all over the huge van. But before we got in the van, a van drove up with the new freedom riders who were being brought to Parchment. Some of them recognized me and began singing freedom songs, it was a serenade. There were two Mississippians that are standing there chewing tobacco or smoking -- one of them said to the other and he looked at me "He must be one of the big shits" and the other one said "Yeah, if I could get my hands on him, he would be a dead shit" -- this was said just loud enough for me to hear. I found out the man who made the latter comment was the driver of the van taking me back to Jackson. Here I was, locked into the huge police van with this driver, he made it a very rough trip and when I would look out of the barred window and see that we were approaching a bridge, I, in my minds eye, could see him turning the steering wheel and jumping out -- it was a rough horrifying trip.

A. I'll bet! Did you read the report in the Press about Charles Evars speech at Nashville at the KACP dinner?

No, I didn't. What did he say?

A. Well, I don't know, you see -- all I know is the Press -- I don't know of anybody who was actually there. This was -- it may

be verbal, it may be something more than verbal -- you reminded me of it by speaking of our brother being armed, which I knew -- Mr. Lawson told me and others have told me that. But anyway, according to the Press, the Nashville Press, he said that ~~expressed~~ ^{he preached} unselected reprisal, if a church is bombed, we will bomb a church -- he was using the word 'we', we was actually his phrase. If children are killed in the church, we will bomb a church with children. Nonselected reprisal, you see, straight down the line; and I wrote him about this and he ~~w~~ said that he was misrepresented. I checked back on the report -- the other reporter was a Negro reporter that he was called in by the editor of the newspaper and do you stand on this, are you sure you have and he said "Yes" -- from there we rest, you see. Some say that he was carried away with the occasion, this didn't represent his responses. I don't think it is very important but it is -- it was used very, I think, unfortunately by people against him. I don't think it happened that way, if it did happen.

I don't know Charles Evars views, I have met him only once and that occasion I didn't have a chance to talk with him; but I do know that such views would be in conflict with the official views of the NAACP.

A. I know that, too -- I know that, too.

I remember Robert Williams' case --

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See Tape #2