ROBERT PENN WARREN - ANDY YOUNG (Atlanta) Tape 1 3/17/64

Warren: This is a conversation with Mr. Andy Young, in Atlanta, Georgia, March 17th. Do you remember how or when your present views and attitudes towards active participation in Civil Rights and racial matters began?

Young: Well, I guess it is something that comes, as you said before, implied, from childhood. I grew up in New Orleans and - well, my father was a dentist, but we lived in a neighborhood where there were very few Negro families. In fact, we were, for a long time we were about the only children in the neighborhood, and the neighborhood was largely white. And, yet, my folks were the only professional people in the neighborhood. It was a lower-income neighborhood, where my father had a dental office, and I think very early in life I ran into both the problems of race and class.

Warren: How was his clientele? Were his patients partly white and partly Negro?

Young: Yes, interestingly enough, they were. They were largely Negro, but at times they were up to - oh, close to a fifth of his practice was write, and yet you had a strange kind of social dynamic there, in that financially we were a little bit better off than the whites in the neighborhood, and they were prejudiced against us because of race. My parents had certain class notions against them, and against the Negroes who moved into the neighborhood.

So that - almost from the time that I was able to get out into the streets by myself, say, at six or seven years old, I was caught in this kind of dilemma, and I think I decided then that people were people and that these external categories of economics and race were of little or no significance. And, I was almost always getting spanked by my parents for playing with the wrong kids - and, at the same time, I think the children in the neighborhood, the white children, in the neighborhood, were being spanked by their parents for playing with us. Our yard - our backyard - I think Negro parents in the South try to compensate for segregation by really giving their children all the things that they wanted to have, so that we had basketball goals, swings, wading pools, all of this kind of thing, and - in our yard, and we always had the football and the baseball and this sort of thing - and the kids coming into the yard - my mother was always a little reticent about the kind of people that we brought in to play with us, and we insisted - my younger brother and I - almost always on choosing our own friends. And, if it came time to have lunch and there weren't too many people there, especially since many of the kids we knew that both parents were working and they didn't have any arrangements for lunch, we would insist on mother fixing lunch for everybody that was there. This was, I think, the first thing, but then too, I began to realize as I got a little older that my parents got their

education as a result of somebody else's missionary activity and concern. They went to what was then Straight College in New Orleans, and they were the products of - excuse me -

Warren: You were speaking of your parents and Straight College.

Young: Yes, and almost all of their education came - and they talked very affectionately about the people from New England that came down and provided an education for them. And, it always seemed to me that the middle-class Negro community in New Orleans that had derived its status from somebody else's sacrifice was doing too little itself, so that -

Warren: This struck you -

Young: Yes, that -

Warren: Speaking of sacrifice -

Young: Oh, yes. they were - well, for instance, most of their friends were professional people, doctors, lawyers - all of them doing quite well. Most of them in that stage were just beginning to enjoy the affluent life, and they seemed to have no concern for the masses of people in New Orleans. And, I remember an incident where I guess I was in high school then, when the Flint Goodrich Hospital needed some money. Now, most of the doctors and several of the dentists worked there and made most of their money there, and yet they depended almost solely on Northern contributions.

Warren: That's a segregated Negro hospital?

Young: That's a segregated Negro hospital, but they didn't seem to feel any sense of responsibility, I think, and this always bothered me - that people should - I don't know where I got this notion from, that if something is given to you, y ou have a responsibility to share it and pass it on.

Warren: I understand, by reading and by conversation, that there is still a great lag between some Negro wealth and Negro philanthropy, or Negro gifts to actual - to other forms of good works, including Civil Rights.

Young: Well, this is very true. These people, for instance, would give very little, if anything, to any Civil Rights movement, or a Civil Rights organization. They would probably now, just in the matter of obligation, take out a small membership to the N.A.A.C.P. and given ten, twenty dollars a year, whereas many of them are in the thirty, forty, fifty thousand dollar a year income bracket. So this, I think, it was in the Negro community that I began to get sensitive. Now, part of this was because my parents didn't let me really come in contact with the harshness of segregation in New Orleans. They did everything possible to protect me from any kind of harmful incidents. So, I can't really - well, I didn't get any bitter experiences in childhood, as I think that many Negroes get. But it - still it was all around you.

Warren: Yes. Some people, for instance, Mr. Farmer has said and

he has written this - that segregation actually in his case worked as a spur, as a stimulus to achievement, and this is occasionally said. This is no argument for segregation, but -

Young: I don't think this was the case with me at all. In fact, I always resisted this. I always wanted to be myself. My folks used to try to tell me, "You're a Negro and you can't be just as good as the white person. You've got to be better." And, this was supposed to be an incentive to study, and yet I never studied. I did a lot of reading on my own, but just in terms of achievement, in terms of grades, and when my first integrated school experience was in seminary in Connecticut -

Warren: What seminary was that?

Young: Hartford Seminary. And, I can remember being very determined by that time that I, you know, that I had no burden of the race to carry. I was going to learn what I wanted to learn, and do what I wanted to do, and if-I had great questions about education in general, and I was going to see that I got the kind of education I wanted. If I didn't get A's, it didn't bother me.

Warren: Have you ever had - the controversy between Irving Howe and Ralph Ellison? It involves this point.

Young: No, I didn't.

Warren: It's quite interesting, with Ralph's attitude too, you see. He refuses to be put in the position of being traitor

to the Negro because he is not an activist, and because he wants to be a writer rather than a sign-carrier. He, in fact, calls Irving Howe another kind of Bilbo, wants to put him in his place, the area Howe selects for it, that part of it, you see. I didn't - really off the point, though.

Young: Um,hum. No. But, I think that I never really knew what I wanted to do. My folks tried to mold me into their professional pattern and I rebelled against the black bourgeois value system almost from as far back as I can remember. And, it was really almost after I got through college at Howard University, that I finally began to shape some value structure of my own and choose a direction. I think - it first came out as - well, a desire towwork in Africa in some way, and then yet I went South to pastor a little church in Alabama, met my wife and she was concerned about staying in the South. This was my first experience in the rural South. Her mother had taught in a one-room school house most of her life and her mother was one of these exceptionally, I mean, really brilliant women that was completely self-educated, practically; I remember we went to Europe and her mother - just a small town, three-thousand Alabama, one-room school teacher, sat down and without looking at a note, or a book, or anything, looked at our itinerary - where we were going - and just listed off the places that we should be sure to see, and which museums and certain art objects were. And, somehow she acquired a real general

education and dedication to education. And, my wife picked this up and so it was her desire to work in the South, and this is where I think I began to switch in terms of working here.

Warren: Let me put a question this way: you remember in reading DuBoise, and he talks long ago about the split in the Negro psyche, or the possible split, at least for some people. On the one hand, the impulse to draw toward an African mystique of some kind - a sense of the Negro tradition and Negro culture, a Negro folk-sense, and a blood sense. On the other hand, the pull toward Western, European, Judaic-christian, American society, and values - with a pull to integrate and perhaps be totally absorbed, even by blood, even that in the end. This being - some people take as treason to a deeper obligation. Has this ever been a problem to you, when you think of Africa.

Young: Yes, always.

Warren: That's a real problem? Does it remain a problem?

Young: Yes, in fact, I think it's been pretty nearly - I'm just getting to the point where I'm beginning to be able to resolve it a little. But, for instance, when I got to Seminary, I think I did a lot of work in anthropology, mainly with this in mind. With me, it came from my folks were the assimilationists. They didn't like spirituals, no blues, anything Negroid they shied away from. So, it started in rebellion against this, because my friends, well, rock and roll hit the Negro community a good ten

twenty years - well, it was always in some form. So that there is where we first began to have the clash, when I began to choose - well, in grammar school they sent me to all the New Orleans childrens' concerts on Saturday. I was expected to do all of this kind of thing, and didn't -- enjoyed it, learned a lot from it, but when I also wanted to go, you know, began to buy the rock and roll blues records - they somehow said that this was cheap and I shouldn't bother with this. Well, we fought over that score and I won out, and I think that that's where I began to experience a conflict. Now, I haven't - I don't know whether I can articulate it, but this is one of the things that you say what you really want to do. I think that one of these days when I get around to writing something, that this one of the things that I'd like to experiment with and try to put down in some way, or try to get organized for myself - of the role I take an analogy of - out of my experiences with the work of the churches, that the various denominations really tend to enrich religious life, because each one came into being around a witness to a specific religious insight. Now, I think you lose something when you just kind of water it down and get a least common demominator religious experience, that you get a much deeper religious experience when you begin to appreciate the contributions of these different denominational bodies. Now, I think of the same thing

in terms of cultural traditions. That the Negro cultural experience is real and it represents an authentic attempt to cope with what their existence was at the time.

Warren: In America now?

Young: In America, yes.

Warren: Negro culture/in America. experience

Young: And this is - I think that, well, the concept of family life that was derived under segregation, necessarily had to be stronger - I think this is what, what's her name - Raisin in the Sun - Roy Hansberry, was trying to bring out in the mother that Claudia MacNeil played.

Warren: But it's a matriarchal world isn't it?

Young: Yes, but in bringing this - I don't know that - well, you relate this to the white South, where women were put on a pedestal and had almost no power, or no role in family - no strong role. And, I would say that I don't want to throw out this strong matriarchy, except the American middle road, that I think that the pressures of twentieth century life demand a strong martriarchy, but they also demand a man who is able to, in spite of the strength of the feminine figure, is able to maintain at least some equality. That real equality of the sexes in America is possibly more possible under the Negroes' experience now.

Warren: I know a psychiatrist - a Negro psychiatrist and

analyst in Connecticut, who has said to me that this represents in one sense, the Negro revolution, the Negro revolt, an affirmation of the male principle, after the hundreds of years of matriarchy. .... a man's business.

Young: Yes, but - and a man has to change the society. Women can maintain and strengthen, but the protest role, the role of shaping the world, the creative role in a social and political sense, I think isthe man's, and I think that the movement is giving men an opportunity to really exercise this and find themselves. They -

Warren: Excuse me. This sense then, the general movement corresponds to the Black Muslim principles - on that one point.

Young: Yes, I'd say that the Black Muslims - of course, the Black Muslims are trying to transplent something of male dominance from the East.

Warren: Yes. The motive is different, but it works out the same where the male takes a new role in Negro life, that right?

Young: Yes, now only in that point are they the same.

Warren: Only from that point?

Young: That the male takes a new role, but the women in the movement are not relegated to an inferior role. The relationships that are developing between men and women, for instance, we had it when my wife decided that she wanted to go to jail.

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She didn't actually go, but she did take part. I mean she wasn't arrested, but she did decide that it wasn't enough for a man just to be taking part in the demonstrations, that she had some role here also.

Warren: Do you have children?

Young: Yes, three. This shows the family, over here in the corner. And, we are together cultivating a new family pattern, but not imitating any more. Now, we're drawing very heavily on the little anthropology that we know, and using the experience of other cultures, including and maybe mainly African culture, as - well, at least a buffering point.

Warren: Could you be specific on that - using what from what?

Young: Yes, I don't know.

Warren: For instance -

Young: For instance, my wife's read Sex and Temperament, Margaret Meade stuff, and Jomo Kenyatta's Facing Mount Kenya on patterns of family life. She's had some anthropology also, so that whenever it comes time to face a situation, we're not really able any more to accept what we feel to be a nineteenth/century Western European notion of family life. Now, we don't know really whatwe're experiment- - what we have got. Rather than trying to mold our family into the typical patterns that is expected - a man to go out and do the work and the women to raise the children, if she

happens to get an education, she still uses her education to raise children, or - now, my wife right now is teaching school, but - oh, gosh, I guess I'm not ready to talk about this right now -

Warren: All right, all right.

Young: Mainly because I just don't have it firmly enough in my mind.

Warren: All right, let's talk about something else. Let me give you a quote from Richard Wright on Africa, which you may know already, on his visit to Africa. "Am I African? Had some of my ancestors sold their relatives to white men," he found a belief in magic was not confined to the uneducated - the general culture uncongenial, and quoting, "I found that the African was an oblique, hard to know man, who seems to like to take a childish pride in trying to create a sense of bewilderment in the mind of strangers. I found the Africans invariably almost, underestimating the person with whom he was dealing, too much confidence in his basic reply and so forth, universal suspicion, distrust, inferiority in politics." This is the shock of acquiring the African history, isn't it? Some shock involved, isn't it?

Young: Yes, and I think that we decided too, that we were not Africans, as such, but that -

Warren: Did you go there?

Young: No, we haven't, but many of our friendships in college and in seminary were with Africans, and while there is a kinship, I think that we are - or I am - ready to accept the role of being a sort of a bridgeperson - between Africa and the West. And, that we almost don't belong anywhere - but we can relate anywhere. I mean, we can relate everywhere - I guess this is the - that I don't really feel, you know, completely accepted and at home here, and I know that I wouldn't be - and this is one of the things that helped us decide not to go to Africa as missionaries in any sense - that we realized that we wouldn't be really accepted as Africans and that our role and our place was in a sense in America. That - and there's no - I would - I think that Richard Wright was trying to almost escape from being an American to a certain extent. And, I think we learned a little from that.

Young: He was shocked not to be accepted there, because it was a real shock to him because he expected something else.

Young: Yes, an so we profited by that experience, in fact, Baldwin's experience of running to Europe and trying to escape, We experienced a little bit in the summer. And, I think pretty much decided that while you were accepted in Paris, Maybe the Algerians weren't so - so you got - you just as well go back and fight your problem, and that America is maybe the place where

where the world will learn to live as one p that we have every strain and tradition here, and that by fighting out the personal, as well as the political issues that keep men apart in America, we may be building the kind of bridges that will enable people in the rest of the world to live together.

Warren: There's something about the problem of defining the Negro in America which has taken one manifestation in the re-writing of Negro history. Now, we know something about that. I don't mean merely American Negro history, but the Negro history outside. Let me read you a little passage, "The whole tendency of Negro history, not as history, but as used as propaganda, is to encourage the average Negro to escape reality, the actual achievements and the actual failures of the present. Although the movement consciously tends to build race pride, it may also cause unconsciously, the recognition that group pride may be partlyonly delusion, and therefore results in a devaluation of the Negroes by themselves forbeing forced to resort to a self-destruction". This is from Arnold Rose, Myrdahl's collaborator. I had to read a long passage. Maybe it isn't all - comes over.

Young: No. Well, I don't know whether I doubt it, exactly, but I think that my immediate reaction was that I wouldn't - that I think that there is something in Negro history -

Warren: There clearly is - nobody is doubtingthat.

Young: Yes, and oh, for instance, this was part of my self-discovery too that nobody told me about Reconstruction - nobody even introduced me to DuBoise until I was grown. And, that there was a conscious effort in American history to devaluate whatever contribution the Negro has made, and this is because they don't appreciate - well, we tend to have a kind of intellectual aristocracy in our - among our historians anyway. The contributions of masses of people, of laboring people, of slave labor, even, to the whole economy in American structure, if you even talk about it or think about your Communists - now, I have - I think that as I tried to use Negro history, it probably has been as propaganda, because I never knew any Negro that really thought for himself. I never- nobody ever told me the influence that Frederick Douglas may have had on Lincoln, for instance, or on the whole period of the - whole abolishionist period. And, I think that these are things that we are using to try to let Negroes know that they are not completely without roots and heritage and connection.

Warren: Let's say, all history works to, in one way or another, to condition our activities in the present and our feelings about the present. I don't think Rose, on the record, would be interested in devaluating the Negro contribution. I don't know him, but I assume - I take it as face value. But, take a book

like Africa Slave Revolts, do you know that book?

Young: Um,hum. I haven't read it, but - I've looked at it.

Warren: Where some two hundred odd revolts - been there.

Young: There's a book I didn't yet until a year or so ago.

Young: And now - some critics of the book will say that only there are three, or, revolts, that this is an attempt to inflate something. You'll find individuals, or two-three people in desperate personal rebellion, but no organized revolt, in the three famous ones. And, you find a lot of scares, but not the real thing, and not the organized revolt. This is the case of an inflated piece of history, which is damaged by its inflation, and actually does not do the Negro some of the credit he deserves.

Young: Yes. The problem there, though, is that no Negroes have read Abr Dekker. I don't know - I can count on my hands the people who have really - or even know who he is, or that he exists, that I know.

Warren: Now why is that? Now, you have a range of very selective acquaintances.

Young: Yes, one thing is they almost completely rejected their own heritage back in that period. That -

Warren: Even you own generation?

Young: Yes, yes. Very much so. Until - well, we're just beginning to read DuBoise even.

Warren: Really?

Young: Except when it's assigned by school. Now, Negroes generally have had no interest in their own history, I think, until, well - I'd say almost until 1960, as far as I - except the few people that have really made a career of Negro history.

Warren: Like Wilson you mean? A few like that.

Young: Yes, that's right. And, the masses of Negroes were consciously, I think, trying to assimilate, and they wanted to get as far away from their past - because they wanted to become white. A friend of mine was saying that he sat down very diligently, learning every movement of every symphony that he - he felt that he had to know Shakespeare throughly, and had to memorize quotations and things like this, under the notion that when he had done this, he would be completely accepted in a white world.

Warren: This is the end of tape 1 and the conversation with Mr. Andy Young. See Tape 2.