

ROBERT PENN WARREN RUTH TURNER MAY 7 TAPE #2

Mr. WARREN: This is Tape#2 of a conversation with Miss Turner at CORE, Cleveland, Ohio, May 7 - continue. Where were we?

RT: I think we were talking about Africa.

RPW: Did I ask you about the Italians down the street, and the Poles.

RT: Yes, well, in a sense I feel sorry for them. I feel that they are belonging to two not very different cultures but different - somewhat different - and have not broadened their experience. They have interpreted their belonging to an Italian - well, to an Italian community and something that does not help them understand the broadening implications of - that could mean. I think that - I feel as though our experience was broadened by belonging to more than one.

RPW: Theirs was not?

RT: And I don't believe theirs is. I think they interpret that belonging in terms of Americanism, which has unfortunately not seen the creative value of belonging to lots of different, you know, in-groups. I think that Americanism has attempted to in a sense make American any other kind of identification, or at least to interpret Americanism, or interpret this kind of belonging through American traditions, and it has not been broadening.

RPW: I gather you believe in a fairly pluralistic society where you have a variety of heritages and attitudes - enriching society - is that it?

RT: Yes, I do believe in a pluralistic society. I believe in the kind of society where a man can feel proud of being an Italian and

Ruth Turner - Tape #2 - p. 2

American at the same time and do not see those in any way contradictory. I see for the Negro community that a Negro should be able to be proud to come from African tradition, to have developed a certain tradition of his own here, and at the same time take part in a more American tradition, at the same time, and not to feel - in fact, to feel broadened by that belonging.

RPW: Suppose he feels that over a period of time - time unspecified - his racial identity disappears entirely - then what should he feel? What would you think of it? What would you feel? To be absorbed in an American blood stream?

RT: Well, unfortunately, the melting pot has had a pretty homogeneous and uninteresting flavor to me. If it could be a true melting pot, where the contributions of various groups are acknowledged as such, and that various groups are permitted to make the contribution that they can make and it is accepted as such, then it could be something of value. But unfortunately it has become a grey mass of mediocrity and I reject the melting pot idea if it means that everybody has to come down to the same standard. If losing one's racial identity means becoming a part of a grey homogeneous mixture, then I say it's not worth it.

RPW: Have you read a recent book by Oscar Handlin called "The
"?

RT: No, I haven't.

RPW: He makes the point that the distinction between quality and integration is crucial, that many people in the Negro movement now

Ruth Turner - Tape #2 - p. 3

have failed to make that distinction, have created integration into a shibboleth, forgetting the real issue.

RT: I agree.

RPW: Do you agree with that?

RT: Yes. I feel that those who concentrate on integration and ending segregation have much too narrow a goal, because I feel that the basic issue here is restoring to this country - maybe not restoring, but implementing for the first time economic justice, social justice, political justice. That goes far beyond the bounds of ending segregation per se.

RPW: Let's take a case that's a little different from the way you propose it now. In the New York schools, for certain people like the Reverend Gulamisson, integration is crucial - Negro integration - bus them in - bus them out - stir up dust - that's the main thing. Without that, he says, let the public schools go to hell. Maybe they've served their purpose anyway. He said this, you see. Now, that is an extreme integrationist position. Now, the other position is held by people like those of some standing - Dr. Kenneth Clark and other Negroes who will say that the main thing is not integration, the main thing is equality, because you have to have a period of adaptation given a rough situation like that. So we have the crash program for equality of schools, and politics. But don't make integration, as such, a panacea. That's something to be worked toward.

RT: Well, let me put it this way -

RZGZLZRTZ

Ruth Turner - Tape #2 - p. 4

RPW: How would you put it?

RT: I would say that the goal is certainly quality education for all children. But I don't think we can overlook the fact that failure to integrate the school systems means that for a Negro child that is not a goal which he can attain. In other words, I think the end toward which we are striving and the end toward which all of our programs here in Cleveland have been directed, is quality education for all. But at the same time we would emphasize very strongly - we would insist, in fact, that integration must be part of that total plan. Integration, however, of a poor school system leaves an integrated poor school system. It does not solve the basic problems of quality education.

RPW: What do you think offhand about the bussing system in New York?

RT: I think it's a means to an end. It cannot be seen as an end in itself.

RPW: Would it achieve its end, given the New York system - the New York situation?

RT: I'm sure the New York situation would be somewhat like ours. I think that bussing will achieve the end, and I think here we have to go a bit further. We have to see that the majority group is concerned about the education of its children, and when there's a minority group which is isolated from the majority they are not going to be concerned about the education of that minority. The goal of integration, the immediate goal, would be to put Negro and white children in the same

91 situation, so that the concern which is not there for moral reasons has to be there for selfish reasons. In other words, they're going to be concerned about a school system in which their children are located, and that is, you know, one of the reasons why integration has to take place.

RFW: Let's distinguish two things here. If one is assured, say in Harlem, that there will be this crash half million dollar program immediately put into effect, with integrated high schools, say, but not integrated grade schools because they can't - the objection is it can't be done, say. Would the movement toward integration - integration not as the means but as an end - equality being the - being as a means, taken on right now - not sacrificing any principle, you see - just as a practical matter. How would you feel about that, or would you say integration or death or more schools now?

RT: No, I wouldn't take that position. I would not say integration or death. I would say, however, that it is too easy to feel that by putting in half a million dollars or half a billion dollars into a segregated school system that you are eliminating the evil of the segregation. I feel that I would rather put much of that money, or begin to make similar plans to put much more money into creating the kind of integrated school system, and that is something of the future. But I think if we put too much attention on improving the quality of education without putting at least as much if not much more attention on the problem of creating an integrated schools system which will be

vastly superior to anything we have now, then we're going to find ourselves in a continued dilemma.

RPW: You mean separate but equal, you mean?

RT: That's right - separate but equal.

RPW: Well, suppose that's not the objective. Suppose on reasonable grounds the practical difficulties are so great that you can't get the integration now. You can simply try to bleed toward integration, as it were. You can do it at the high school level but you can't do it at the first to eighth grades.

RT: Well, I would agree. I mean, in a sense you cannot abolish - here for example we're talking about planning educational parks -

RPW: In Cleveland, you mean?

RT: In Cleveland, yes. We would like to see the creation of educational parks. Well, in the time span between now and the time these educational parks are created, we still have the problem of educating the children where they are. Now, clearly, we're going to need a crash program, you're going to need upgraded equality in those schools until the time when we can create that kind of system. I think I would - if that is indeed Mr. Clark's position I would tend to agree. We have to focus our attention on what the past year is going to be, and that is an integrated school system - we have a plan for that - but in the meantime, we have to upgrade the quality of the schools with which we are now working and in which children now find themselves.

Ruth Turner - Tape #2 - p. 7

RPW: According to the morning Times, Harlem opinion tends now to veer toward the crash program and play down integration as either end or device.

RT: Who said this?

RPW: The New York Times this morning.

RT: And who is doing this?

RPW: This is simply a news story - I mean, an analysis of the present situation in Harlem. Excuse me just a second. (rest of tape blank)