

Mr. WARREN: This is Tape #3 of the conversation with Mr. Cohen and Miss Turner - proceed. You were going to say something, Mr. Cohen, about Mr. Farmer and Dr. King on the matter of self improvement and goal end.

Mr. COHEN: Yes. It seems to me that the appropriate thing for Jim Farmer to have done, was not to have done things that appeared to be blocking off the expression of hostility and resentment that occurred in the Brooklyn chapter of CORE, but rather to develop programs for other chapters of the national office which adequately expressed that same sense of frustration in the ways that Mr. Farmer thought appropriate. Now, quite obviously the World's Fair demonstration that he and ^{Bruce} ~~Bard Rusten~~ led was a hastily put together very expensive operation in which I suspect very few of the people who participated deeply believed. It was an attempt to answer in a pretty pedestrian fashion what the Brooklyn CORE was doing. I suspect that there were other kinds of action projects that the national office could have come up with that would have projected the same sense of hostility and frustration in a way that was acceptable. It seems to me that the response to such hostility has to always be programmatic and it also - it always has to run deep, and it has to hit at problems that people can recognize and channel off the emotions and the feelings that ^{Bruce} ~~Bronson~~ and Englander and the other people were expressing. And in a sense, the same thing applies to what Martin Luther King was saying about being the best street sweepers and so on. It's no longer

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 2

appropriate to talk about being the best street sweeper. What it is appropriate to do is to involve those street sweepers and the taxicab drivers and the post office people and every other person in a movement where by doing things themselves they achieve a kind of involvement and a kind of personal excellence that they have never been able to achieve before. You don't want to be the best damned street sweeper, but if you can engage yourself in a movement that's going to open up opportunities for a lot of other people, you're making a much more - I think a much more profound contribution. We're not worried about street sweepers, but we are worried about building a movement that's going to change things. So I think that what King said was just inappropriate.

RPW: Was that ever appropriate - historically speaking? Was that a bad thing from Booker T. Washington to have said back yonder seventy-five years ago?

COHEN: That's a hard kind of question to answer. People in different historical circumstances respond differently. Obviously very few people in the movement now in their guts could respond possibly to the image that Booker T. Washington projected, because that is not what we feel in our guts now. And we would make a judgment and say well, if Washington was block or if he was a moral man he shouldn't have said it. But quite plainly there were compelling historical reasons for him to say it. I think it's much easier for us to confront the contemporary counterparts of Booker T. Washington and say,

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 3

buddy, you're just out of step with history, and there are more creative things you can be doing.

RPW: But as a historian you certainly are acquainted with the problem of assessing the motives and significance of people of the past imaginatively, so maybe King is our Booker T. Washington. Would you go that far?

COHEN: Maybe King is - pardon?

RPW: Is our Booker T. Washington. Would you go that far?

COHEN: No. What we were saying while you were changing tapes, King comes from a southern context, and he talks out of a southern context, he talks out of a situation where black people are oppressed and deprived in a way that people who live in the north really can never even understand. And the building of confidence and the building of pride is a much, much deeper problem in the south than it is in the north, and I suspect that when Martin King was talking to that Bridgeport audience in Connecticut, he was really talking to black folk in the south.

RPW: Is it strange that so much leadership has come from the south in the freedom movement? I believe it has come from the south.

COHEN: Well, I think we are seeing a change in that. I think that what's happening now all across the country, on a local level and in national organizations, is that we are beginning to realize in the north that we have in effect passed the first stage, we have just about gone through the first stage of the struggle which you might call the

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 4

public accommodations stage. We can pass fair housing laws and FEP legislation, and public accommodations laws in the north from now until we're blue in the face. But until we achieve what Ruth Turner was calling economic and social justice there will be no substance in those laws for the mass of black deprived or, for that matter, for the mass of white deprived. So that our job in the northern part of this movement is to move beyond the stage at which the south still is - the public accommodations stage - and to establish a model for building a movement that is going to achieve basic - the basic social and economic justice that's going to make legislation meaningful.

RPW: You speak as though the race issue were a rider on a broader concern.

COHEN: No. This - as a matter of fact I think if we weren't so damned busy doing things here, I've been trying to write something about this. No. But it's ironic that the major side effect of the civil rights struggle in the last - oh, ten years, has not - the major side effect has been the national recognition of poverty as a pressing social concern. The oppression, the deprivation, the black people face in this country they face and have faced as a result of their being black, not of any other social and economic conditions. But the fact of the matter, in 1964 is, is that they face that deprivation and oppression with increasing numbers of white people. It is no longer possible to say to the white plumber, move over, buddy, and give me a job, because a job is his job and in New York there are twenty-seven thousand building

trade people unemployed and they will not be re-employed even if the industry moves ahead at top pace. So it's not that the race issue is a rider on this more fundamental question. The race issue is fundamental and it's what's generated in the way in this more fundamental question. We'll continue moving on the race issue and hoping that through our efforts and the efforts of other people working in the white community, that we'll be able to achieve the justice that will make it possible to bring this race thing to a fruitful conclusion.

RPW: I must say I have sort of lost the thread here, not meaning to.

When you're actually discussing you seem to make the economic and class question prior to a race solution. Am I misunderstanding you?

COHEN: It's not a question of priority. You take the goals of the movement up until today. They have been the achievement of equality in a formal sense, in a legalistic sense - fair housing - open occupancy - fair employment, public accommodations, equal schooling. And then you sit back and you think, well, let's just suppose in Cleveland or New York or any other northern city, that we had this legislation, that we had a desegregated school system - you ask the question, what, then, would we have with respect to schools? This is what we were saying a little while ago. We can desegregate the schools in Cleveland tonight, and tomorrow morning we would have many of the same fundamental problems that we still have. School desegregation cannot be fruitfully implemented unless we effect some very basic changes in our educational system.

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 6

RPW: Fair housing?

COHEN: Fair housing cannot be implemented until masses of people have the economic wherewithal to implement it. The same is true of fair employment. Fair employment is not going to get anyone - is not going to get a significant number of people jobs, because jobs are disappearing at a much more rapid rate than they're being created. So it's not a question of priority but a question of asking yourself how you fulfill the goals of the civil rights movement, and we have begun to see that you fulfill the goals of the civil rights movement by moving on two levels - the legislative, or the legal, and other levels, such as the social and the economic.

RPW: Miss Turner?

Miss TURNER: You want my comment on that as well?

RPW: Yes.

RT: I keep referring to the statement that Bob Moses made in a treatise - I can't remember now what it was now, but the statement was that it is our job or the society's job to prepare itself for the Negro, and I think this is extremely relevant to what Dr. Cohen has been saying, and that is that, you know, until the problem of unemployment is solved, the ending of segregation for the Negro will mean nothing. It will mean absolutely nothing. It will simply mean that we will have integrated unemployment roles. And unfortunately that's not the kind of solution for which I am working or anyone else for that matter. The same result would be true in education - we'll end segregation tonight,

and tomorrow we'll have a desegregated poor educational system. And it is poor because it isn't preparing any children - at least in Cleveland - for the kinds of jobs that are opening up now. Similarly, in housing we will end segregation tonight and find that no Negro can afford to buy the kind of houses that are now available for sale. So, clearly we have to work for more than just desegregation. This isn't going to solve many of the basic problems.

RPW: Let's approach the question another way. Let's say that tomorrow morning we have the economic system functioning beautifully. We have jobs for all. We have FEP laws enforced - on the books and enforced. Have integrated education. What then?

RT: Well, if that's possible, it seems like we could settle back and live happily and normally again. Except, we have a problem of attitudes to overcome. The problem of working out after the segregation has ended, working out the adjustment of people so that they can really gain from the experience of integration. Unfortunately, the minds of too many Americans are so narrow that they wouldn't be able to gain that much from being - living next door to a Negro or working next to one. So that's another area in which we would have to turn our attention. And we'd also have to turn our attention to the problem of overcoming the backlog, overcoming the tremendous gap that has existed over these four hundred years. And that would have to be done by giving priority, giving special preferential treatment to Negroes by equipping them to overcome the problem and the gap that has existed

between the white and Negro communities.

RPW: What kind of backlog are we talking about? What kind of difference between the communities are we talking about? Let's push that a little bit.

RT: We're talking about the basic economic difference, for example -

RPW: Excuse me - we were going to settle that - we had that settled, you know, tomorrow morning.

RT: Oh, well - all right. You still have a problem of people not being prepared to take the jobs that are open to them. That's - even if it's settled tomorrow, you still have the problem of many young people not able to take the jobs now opening because of the fact that they haven't had the proper educational background. So special training programs, crash programs and what have you would have to be initiated for the drop-outs, for example, for the ladies on ADC, to train them for the jobs that are now open and available.

RPW: We keep getting away from race, though. I'm trying to isolate the race, you see, from the economic context.

RT: I don't know if we can. I'm sorry, I don't see how you can.

RPW: Race is - excuse me - you can't separate the race question from the economic context?

RT: Well, you - I mean, I think that the two are very much intertwined. You're saying that you're erasing the conditions, and yet you've still got the backlog which comes from all these centuries of Negroes not being treated as equals and consequently considering them

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 9

- themselves not equals. You've got all the business of brainwashing which is - that is, lack of respect of oneself, to overcome. And you've got the problem of a white society and white standards and white textbooks, and the fact that the Negro has not been able to see himself as participating in a society to overcome. These are all psychological factors, too, of course. Many problems would not be solved by ending it, you know - psychological problems, sociological problems.

RPW: piece in Commentary some time back?

RT: No.

RPW: He said that there would be no solution of the race question until the absorption of the Negro race. Here's the quote. The Negro problem can't be solved in this country in no other way than by assimilation.

RT: I won't buy that. I refuse to accept it because it seems to me then that we are accepting again the American standard of a melting pot. In other words, in order for me to accept you, you've got to be like me. And we have got - as a country, we have got to reach the point where we can accept individuals as they are, and not force them to our own standards. I would reject that theory totally. I do reject it.

RPW: What about - do you feel, as a Negro, the problem of symbolisms in a white culture, values being tied to light, to white, as symbols, and darkness carrying the symbolisms of less value or evil?

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 10

RT: I feel it very strongly. And this is of course one of those psychological things that has to be overcome as the conditions are erased. The fact is that over the centuries - over the centuries here, white lies are not nearly as bad as black ones, and, you know, there are just all kinds of symbolisms - black sheep and white sheep, and - yes, it's very clear, and in fact it was possibly done purpose-
ly at some time.

RPW: Purposely? What about those African tribes where you have a dance of good and evils, and the dancer, representing good, wears white headdress and white robe, and the dancer, representing the evil principle, wears black?

RT: Yes, there were also some Asian cultures where white is a sign of mourning, and we don't read about those in our history books. We don't hear about them and talk about them in our society.

RPW: Well, suppose we have both kinds. Why is it difficult to say that night is a time of terror and day is a time of, you know - the terrors of the jungle disappear or the cave disappear, and we carry those. That it's not a put up job ^{but} the nasty white man is symbolism.

RT: That may be, but it's been very useful for his purposes in view of the fact that the white-black symbolism was made so important in slave times, that - in fact, it was made so important that Negroes tried to bleach their skin to get away from it and straighten their hair.

RPW: And some still do.

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 11

RT: And some still do. Clearly, it has had an effect. You know, it's no accident, it seems to me, that Christ is always portrayed as a blond blue eyed person in white robes, and that baptism is always taking place with white - I think that to a certain effect this is cultural and can't be overcome, but in terms of the effect that it has had on the Negro psychology it has to be overcome. At least we have to give him something to balance it with, and we have not done this in this culture. We have not appreciated the beauty of blackness. A tiger or a panther is appreciated for his blackness, but a Negro woman is not - at least not in the wide culture. All of our beauty contests -

RPW: It was in the southern white culture.

RT: Yes, but sub rosa, and in a very degrading kind of way.

RPW: But still appreciated, as such.

RT: Never openly and never betrayed in newspapers and never on television, and never talked about and never advertised in magazines - no.

RPW: Well, not now. There was no TV in those days, I'm talking about.

RT: There wasn't in any of the media. It was never praised in any of the media. Beauty contests never considered blackness as a criterion for beauty. Negro girls were not encouraged to in fact participate and are still not encouraged to participate in beauty contests because somehow being black does not mean that you're a candidate for beauty.

X - No 2 p
Ruth Turner

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 12

RPW: Let's cut back to the Reconstruction for a moment. Let me ask both of you this question. Muirdahl, you know, had a scheme for what would have been the ideal solution for Reconstruction in the south. First, the compensation to slaveholders for the emancipation, second, expropriation of land for the re-settlement of freedmen but payment to the landowners for it. And there are some other items too. Let's stop on those. How do you react to those?

RT: Well, they would have been steps in the right direction, but there has to be included in a plan like that some way -

RPW: Let's stop just a second. Would you object, or do you feel any resistance to the idea of compensation to the slaveholders for the emancipation?

RT: Morally yes, because I feel that they unjustly held slaves in the first place.

RPW: What about The Athenians. Now, do you feel that was an immoral situation? The Athenians held slaves.

RT: I think any time a man that degrades another man to the position of a servant without respecting his human potential and dignity, that it's an immoral situation.

RPW: Is that unhistorical, Mr. Cohen?

COHEN: No - no, I don't think so. I don't think it's unhistorical at all. I think that a lot of your recent questions turn around something that is very important to answer, however. And you ask if all the problems were solved tomorrow, or if they had been

solved after Reconstruction, or if they were solved whenever, then would we be happy, then would the problem be solved? Obviously not. Your question about light and darkness - after the legalism, after we have a legal solution to this problem, and after we have the economic and social preconditions that will not make people see Negroes as someone who wants to share their scarcity, we will still have a lot of problems. There will still be a mythology of blackness and that's not going to disappear very quickly. It seems to me we have to recognize that people and societies move in complicated and often very curious ways, and one of our jobs is to try to anticipate what the most basic levels are in which they move and try and reach some solution there and hope that after we've reached that solution we can confront these other rather more subtle problems and see what can be done about them.

RPW: Do you feel a resistance to Muirdahl's proposal? Suppose you, knowing what you know now, live in '65. How would you respond to this proposal of Muirdahl's to the Reconstruction settlement? Of course that's not all his proposal - that's part of it - it's the beginning.

COHEN: You mean the compensation -

RPW: Compensation and the expropriation of land with compensation for the land.

COHEN: Expropriation of land for the freed Negro?

RPW: But payment to the owner.

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 14

COHEN: Well, from the point of view - the abstract point of view, it might well have been a functional scheme. It might have worked. From the moral point of view I think what Ruth said was right, or was correct, rather, that from that sense it's impossible to condone morally paying someone for taking away something which was never his damned property to begin with. But there's a further point which I think I was trying to make a few minutes ago, and that is that in a social movement you can't assume that tomorrow people can be made sinless or can be made so humane that they are no longer human. And part of our job, it seems to me, is to make it possible for people to still remain human and be somewhat more humane.

RPW: Let me put the question more sharply. Suppose you had the power, knowing what you know now, and were back there at that time, and could have said - I will have it this way - you will do it this way - you will compensate the slave owners for the freedmen, you will expropriate land for their use but pay the planters for the land. Knowing what you know now about the course of the last hundred years, would you do it or not? Assuming also this would have worked, would have evened our society, would you have done it?

RT: You know, it's so difficult here in our movement now to plan from one week to the next - (talking together) - no, but I'm just saying, the complexity of the issue is such that you just can't give an on-the-spot

RPW: I will give the consequences if that had happened, we'd have avoided this massive poverty in the south for a hundred years, and

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 15

we would have had the integrated school system that began with the freemen's bureau and all that would have been worked out - we'd have been over the hump a long time back. But the price would have been to pay the slave holder for his - quotes - property, and pay the landowner for the expropriated land. It comes out beautifully. Would you still do it or not?

RT: Well, you see, I would question it would all come out beautifully -

RPW: ... That's the terms of the question.

RT: No, but I want to make this point, because in doing so you would have in a sense reinforced the slave owners' attitude about the Negro that he was something that was indeed property and was recognized as property by those who were paying him for the property.

RPW: I didn't state it that way. I stated it the other way.

RT: I realize that, but I'm still saying that the problem attitude or the problem of basic human respect for another individual would not have been solved by doing this, and if it had not been solved I'm not so sure that we wouldn't still have many other problems that we -

RPW: I didn't put the question that way. I put the question in another way. Suppose we got a more or less workable integrated society, that we don't have now anywhere in this country - would you have paid the price?

RT: You ask me if I would compromise with my ideal for the end result -

7

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 16

RPW: It's not a cultural ideal - there are two ideas here in competition, aren't there?

RT: Yes, there are. Of course you're asking an idealist of this and that's why it's so hard to answer you.

RPW: But two different ideas that now compete.

RT: I know it. I really just can't answer that, because you're making assumptions that -

RPW: I'm entitled to make assumptions in terms of the game.

RT: All right, but you're making assumptions means that I can't answer the question.

RPW: It means you find it too painful to answer the question one way - a real split, isn't it?

RT: ~~That's right.~~ I think that's about the best assessment of it. It's too painful to answer the question and it's also - the relevant premises are not - agreed upon.

COHEN: ... that poses the same kind of question ... A member of our executive committee and a very close friend of both of ours who was killed recently here in Cleveland in the process of a demonstration, and we can go on asking the question from now until the day that we die whether his death was in vain or not in vain, and whether the ideal of the movement was in some sense in concert. But the ideal of preserving his life which I think was very much worth preserving - Ruth wants to say something.

RT : I was saying that we were not in the position to decide one way

or the other. That was a matter of fate and we accepted the results of that and interpreted them. I mean, we are not, and we did not put ourselves in a position to decide for Bruce.

COHEN: Well, yes, but - I mean, there's more to it than that because in a sense we helped to decide what would happen to him, even though - you know, tracing responsibility is a very tenuous business. We did help to decide what happened to him, and that's what we all felt for - and I think probably still feel to a certain extent.

RPW: That isn't a parallel it seems to me to the question I proposed (talking in background) - How would you respond, Mr. Cohen, if you had the power to put Muirdahl's program into operation and the certitude that it would bring on a decent integrated society?

COHEN: Well, my response is really the same as Ruth's, that - perhaps I'm a bit more cynical than she is, I don't know. Certainly in the abstract if you gave anyone a chance to think about this they would probably say, well, if I had the power in that situation to achieve the Utopia that you say I have the power to achieve -

RPW: At that price.

COHEN: At the price of money, I think probably most people would say, well take your damned money and give me the Utopia. But there's a point that Ruth is making that that is not the way things happen.

RPW: That's not the question I'm asking you. I'm asking you what resistance - if you feel resistance how much resistance do you feel to it?

Ruth Turner - Tape #3 - p. 18

COHEN: Well, it seems to me that most people, especially people in the movement, would feel a deep resistance to that kind of a massive compromise of their ideals. The reason I suggested the example of Bruce Klentner was that this is precisely what happens in any social movement. You have one foot in society and you have one foot very much outside of it on a purely moral level, and you can't resolve that kind of situation. It's like assuming you can resolve any serious moral dilemma. What you do is the best you can.

RPW: Can you solve anything on abstract moral grounds - ever? Except your suicide.

COHEN: I don't think you even solve your suicide on abstract moral grounds, to tell you the truth, but again I think that's a rather arbitrary way of putting it. You don't solve anything on abstract moral grounds because this is not an abstract moral world, but your abstract moral grounds have a real vitalizing -

(end of tape)