

# Outsiders and Insiders: Race and American History

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I'm happy to recognize some people that I know in the audience, but one that I want to mention, only because it meant so much to me to write about her father, in the first chapter of the book: Vernon Johns. His daughter, Altona Johns Anderson, is here from San Francisco. I'm very glad you're here, Toni; thanks a lot.

I want to speak, and in fact I have to mention a few Vernon Johns yarns here, in honor of Toni, because I think they can fit in with exactly what I wanted to speak with you about tonight. This is a lovely thing to get to talk about, because I get to violate my own rule. My own rule basically is to stick to narrative history, to story telling, with as little analysis and as few labels and as few abstractions as possible.

Now, I'm going to talk to you a little bit about some of those abstractions, just to prove to you that I'm interested in them, but not just for that, but because I think that there are important lessons that come out of them. The longer that I work in this field, the more I grow to feel that there is something very special about cross-racial history, particularly the American history. I'm going to talk about what I see as special properties of this history, and then work from there into a smorgasbord of Vernon Johns stories, personal yarns and even theological speculations that I think derive from that.

All history to me, in a certain sense, is a struggle between outsiders and insiders, in a kind of prosaic way of thinking about it, whether you are defining outsiders and insiders as the Roman citizens versus barbarians, or who's cool at your high school as opposed to who's not.

There's always a struggle about it, in which most of the advantages go to the insiders and always have. Hollywood makes a thousand films about that. But one thing that outsiders have, as though in compensation for the advantages they lack, is a special vision. If you are from an outsider culture, generally speaking, you have a better vision of the special properties of the majority culture that excludes you than the people within that majority culture have of themselves.

Given the principles of relativity, we don't feel the room spinning around, and things that strike outsiders or space people as great revelations, we take for granted. And for that reason, naturally enough, you find that outsider cultures are known for special vision, special observation, special acuity.

In our culture, the two foremost outsider cultures have been blacks and Jews. There are certain properties that they share

in common beyond the Moses story, beyond legends of Zion, but one of them is the kind of cyclical fluctuation between the desire to break into that majority culture and an inward turningness, that reaffirms who they are – a separateness period – and these cycles have gone on throughout history.

We are now probably at the end of one generation of an inward-turning period by blacks, Jews, and American whites alike: turning inward on one another. Movement history, in the sense that Dr. King preached about it, or movement sense of it – of crossing barriers and enlarging the public's space, making it bigger, discovering things inside yourself that you didn't know were there, recognizing and talking; cross-cultural discovery based on the premise that as the world shrinks, it's imperative that everybody recognize that whatever you are, whatever race, religion or minority, you are a minority in the world, and your ability to survive, let alone be a positive force or a moral force for justice depends on your ability and your comfort and your experience and even your literacy in crossing these boundaries – that is a movement feeling that when you think about it has been absent largely for the past generation among all people in the United States.

If it were not, if that sort of movement, democratic spirit were alive, I think the United States would be more of a model for what's going on in Eastern Europe and South Africa today. It is a sad fact that I don't think very many people are looking to us for inspiration, even though the model, the labels, originated here in modern form. So the outsider cultures have turned inward; the movement spirit is more absent than is commonly acknowledged.

What do we get from the outsiders and the insiders in a period like this, when we have always tended to look to the outsiders, blacks and Jews, for prophets, for great ideas? Most of our prophets have been black. Since the 19th Century, many of the visionary ideas have come from Jews. It's not all the product of being an outsider culture, but I think some of it is, and some of it is because of the special vision they have.

I think that this is important when we think about doing racial history: What can you expect from outsiders as far as seeing history, as far as making history? Making history and recording it, as we know, are two different things. Some of the few arguments I have with movement people over getting interviews have to do with this. People from the movement say, "Well, we made this history and by God, we're going to write it, too." And I have to argue that having lived the movement doesn't, in my mind, qualify them to write its history, any more than writing history qualifies me to lead a movement. And they heartily agree to that.

Special properties of racial history that strike me as relatively obvious are number one, that whenever Americans have struggled over the intuition of race, the Democratic intuition and what it means to be a Democratic government – what that means inside, what that means in practice – when the struggle has really intensified, almost always the issue at hand has been race; whether we're speaking of the Constitutional Convention or the Civil War period or Reconstruction or on down through the

Progressive era and on through into our time, civil rights and even today, it's an unspoken reality.

One of the interesting things about the movement is, you see movement people come along and take things that are unspoken but true and speak about them as though they are real and make them *there*. And one of the things that appears to me to be true, at any rate today, is that all the great issues in politics that politicians studiously avoid – whether they be the deficit, the cities, the educational system, drugs, or practically any political issue that is being postured about or avoided or addressed with the politicians staring them squarely in the knees – are at one level or another racially driven. We avoid that. Racial history is at the heart of American history consistently from the beginning and yet it is poorly covered. I believe that it is poorly covered; it's poorly treated in history, it's poorly treated in journalism.

I was taught that the Constitutional Convention had to do with the small states and the big states – not the slave-holding states and the non-slave-holding states. I was taught about the redemption of the Reconstruction government – not by the Klan, but by people who recognized the grave depredations that had been inflicted upon the noble white South by carpetbaggers. President Kennedy said he was taught that same history at Harvard.

Time after time we get synoptic labels; our racial history is reduced to things that are very difficult to understand. Why is that? These are special properties I see about racial history: Aside from the fact that it's important and it's made by outsider cultures, the history is very difficult to do. You have this peculiar paradox of it being arguably the most important issue, the one closest to the true meaning of democratic experience, and in King's argument, which I will get to later, even to the depths of religious meaning, and yet the one that is remote in our history.

Well, one reason, of course, is that it remains very sensitive because the cultures are separate from one another: lack of common cultural language for the ordinary commerce and language of what a culture imparts as far as status, family, marriage, what's important; church, politics. We are still so separate about that, that the issue, of course, is sensitive and you only have to look at Louis Farrakhan, or even the Andy Rooney story. Jimmy the Greek, Al Campanis, on and on. These stories illustrate that we are sensitive about certain principles, but I think basically what they reveal is more our sensitivity than the principles, because the basic driving force in all of those stories is to get that away because we don't want to deal with it, whether we are speaking of Farrakhan or Jimmy the Greek.

I was just listening to a tape the other day. I've been working on King and Selma, or the Selma movement, and George Lincoln Rockwell, the Nazi commander, showed up in Selma and accosted King during a march and said that he was going to prove that King's philosophy was the work of the devil and that King would reveal, would receive this message within 48 hours. And this was said in a kind of a menacing way, because there had been many rumors that King was going to be killed in Selma at the time.

And King turns to Rockwell and says, "Well, Mr. Rockwell, I would really like to engage with you and talk about that, and we're having a mass meeting tonight, and I will give you 15 minutes in my pulpit to discuss that, and now I would like to talk with you about it, either then or afterwards." And the silence after he said that – not just by Rockwell but by other people – was startling silence. This is more of a movement response than the sensitivity that we have in most racial issues today. I don't think that we really need to argue, in a way, that these things are sensitive, but they are and it impedes history, because it makes people tight and tense about what they feel they can say.

More importantly, racial history is also hidden. It has always been hidden. It does not exist in most standard historical records the way commercial history or diplomatic history exists. If I had to rely in my book on newspapers or standard historical sources, my book would not have been written. I believe that it would have been almost impossible to write it now because so many of the crucial people from Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin, on and on, have died. The history is hidden partly because people wanted to keep it hidden, on both sides of the issue.

The whites certainly did it. The whole name of the game was not to acknowledge the legitimacy of a grievance, because to acknowledge it was to run the risk of being humiliated by the fact that on an elementary issues of politics, the president of the United States, for example, was powerless to affect the practices of white barbers in Iowa who refused to cut the hair of black customers. There was something that was so belittling to the dignity of the leaders of the free world that the best and the safest approach was always to somehow deflect attention elsewhere and not recognize these issues and deal with them, and that was true of a relatively liberal presidency right on down to southern governors back during that period.

It was also hidden on the black side as well. For obvious reasons, it doesn't exist in the black press, by and large. You had a 10 percent minority of the population with no newspapers, no state houses, no police forces, no networks, no great institutions of power, and the private reality is that only a tiny of percentage of them are really involved in the movement, current bragging notwithstanding, and that the ones who are, are at one another's throats over what, if anything, should be done. To allow that private reality to come to light is to reveal a 10 percent minority as 1 percent of the 10 percent, and that 1 percent is divided into five or six ferociously contending factions. Therefore, there was an enormous amount of effort during the civil rights movement to conceal what was really going on behind the scenes of the movement.

So the history remains hidden; you can't find it in the Atlanta Daily World or Jet Magazine – you can find a little more in Jet – but you can't find it there any more than you can in the Atlanta Constitution.

Because the history is sensitive and hidden, I believe that it is also perishable – meaning, the racial history, cross-racial history, more than any other in American experience, can vanish. It vanishes by becoming myths, by becoming labels, by becoming

analysis, by becoming things not grounded in reality so human and so well documented in cross-cultural experience that they cannot be refuted by a counteranalysis. I consider it to be ungrounded mythology of the Civil War, largely of Reconstruction, which there are noble efforts to, in effect, reconstruct Reconstruction, but I think that most of the primary materials for doing that are sorely lacking because the ground level experience was not collected at the time.

Great passage: When the film, "The Birth of a Nation," 1915, was screened at the White House, Woodrow Wilson came out and took it upon himself to, in effect, put Hollywood on the map, creating the whole culture, the beginnings of the culture that later became Hollywood, by announcing to waiting reporters that he had just witnessed history written in lightning, in that film's portrayal of the Klan's destruction of the Reconstruction governments in the South; signaling a powerful, subliminal cultural truce, I believe, between the white North and the white South over the meaning of the Civil War, saying, "We have got to stop quarreling about this because it's paralyzed American politics. And we can at least agree that there was something romantic back there, whatever it was, and that there's a kind of a respectable, social Darwinist segregation that will allow the Progressive movement to continue."

Out of that mythology, basically, I think, the Reconstruction period to a large degree was not only turned into a myth, but then turned onto its head, and now it's very difficult to know what it was, and it is a formidable task indeed to reconstruct it, as I said.

My feeling about it, therefore, was that I really believe that there is a special place for journalism, for talking to people, for trying to go across racial boundaries in doing racial history, because the resources are not there; it's not in the newspapers, it's not in the letters of Cordell Hull. You can't find this stuff.

The weapons to keep the history from becoming mythology and therefore coming up for grabs, perishable and even vanish, are severely diminished, and so then we will continue the maddening paradox of having race be our most important running historical story and our most poorly perceived and covered story historically. So this is a pitch for oral history; it's a pitch for journalism, at least some techniques of journalism being applied, if not to the final version and final drafts of history to the collection of primary material in order to keep this material going.

Now I believe this much more strongly today than I did when I went down on that voter registration campaign twenty years ago. All I had then was a notion that I had missed the civil rights movement, that somehow, even though I was very late to it, it had impacted me, it affected me, and I really didn't understand what it had been made of. I had been very frustrated in my attempts to learn from written materials what it had been made of, because everything seemed to me to be hopelessly analytical or rhetorical, that this or that was not militant enough or too militant or too Christian or too non-Christian or too economic or too non-economic or too this or too that.

From whatever position, it seemed to me that these analyses, which were meant to command history and to be the tools of appropriating and understanding history, were really, however well intentioned, often more barriers or buffers to discovery and what cross-cultural history really was and is, than they were aids. That's what I felt, but I didn't know what to do with it, and in fact, I had never dreamed of being a writer of any kind, at this time when I went down there.

I made a deal with John Lewis, who was then coming in as the head of the voter registration project, that he would allow me to go down to 20 counties in southwest Georgia, that had never been visited by the civil rights movement, and they didn't even have any contacts there. What he didn't tell me is that they had virtually run out of money and that things were really drying up and that I was the only one fool enough to even consider this at the time, which was to try to cover 20 counties in 80 days of the summer, no more than four days in any one county, stone-cold turkey, with no experience in the movement beforehand.

This idea caused a huge stink at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, where I was a graduate student, and what we called then a finishing school for crisis management. The approved summer program between the two years of the masters project was what was known as basically summer experience: at the Ford Foundation, Congress, the ILO in Geneva and the Taj Mahal of policy analysis, back then at any rate, the Bureau of the Budget. If you got a summer job working there, that was what you were supposed to do, and when I came in and proposed to the faculty committee that I was going to go down and work for John Lewis and travel around because I felt that I needed to learn something and I had missed it and I felt something important kind of dissipating before my very eyes, it met with a cold reception. There was a big stink about it; this was a very ideological time, as you might remember from 1969.

They finally agreed that they would let me go if I would write a five-page policy memorandum on the implications of my experiences in southwest Georgia, and the conditions there for economic development in southwest Georgia, as it affected monopsony in the labor market. I'm making fun of the topic a little bit, although at the time, believe it or not, I thought there was a lot to that, because I had learned that these tiny little families, and every county had one dominant white family, that there was a lot of strangling of the county by resisting economic development merely for psychological supremacy of remaining the big fish in the pond. The Carter family was one like that, but there were many of them.

So anyway, I went down there. And within a few weeks: an outsider to the outsider. One of the reasons I decided that you gain special vision, although this is my own haphazard way, is by the extraordinary willingness to make a fool of oneself, and I went down there and my modus operandi was to drive into a brand new county to look for the black side. These were little courthouse towns down in the South. They had a courthouse in the middle and there was a square, the obligatory Confederate memorial on the square, there was a Ford dealership almost always catty

corner from the Confederate memorial. There was a tractor store and a farm implements store and a drug store and a dime store and a couple of filling stations and a little residential area behind that and then maybe a quarter of a mile back, farmland. That was the universal pattern back then, and it was easy to find which of the four quadrants was the black part of town, because it was the part with no pavement.

My plan was to go there, find that, find the biggest church, go in and ask for the minister and introduce myself and begin discussing voter registration in the hopes that I had found another Martin Luther King – an undiscovered Martin Luther King. The preachers uniformly gave me the heave-ho, usually with a long winded sermon about all the committees and meetings that they had already had.

This was a terribly disillusioning experience for me at the time. Particularly on top of the fact that I, having seen voter registration campaigns in searing detail at times on television screens, assumed that what I had seen was a universal experience, and it was a very big shock for me to come down there and find that in many of these counties, nobody cared a whit what had been seen on television affecting a county, maybe only two counties over – that these counties might as well have been in 1959 or even '49 or '29 for all they cared. Very futile, very frightened. These were all black majority counties with practically no black registered voters. Anyway, it took me a long time that summer, and many terrible mistakes, to realize that.

I experimented high and low, I tried many methods, but the first thing that I learned that was of any lasting value – aside from the fact that the black township populations were hopelessly divided amongst themselves, or seemingly hopelessly divided – was that I shouldn't be talking to men at all. It was not what station or what occupation I was looking at, I was looking in the wrong sex. That was hard for me. Nobody would tell me that.

But by the end of July, I knew enough that I was out talking to a lady who was a daughter of a slave and well known to be kind of the unofficial matriarch of the black population of this tiny county. I went in and talked to her about the fact that they landed on the moon that day – Neil Armstrong, the first man had landed on the moon. That was by way of small talk, and then I started talking about registration in the county.

And she says, Well, how do you know that people landed on the moon?

And I said, Well, I saw it on Walter Cronkite this morning, on television back at the motel.

She says, Well, do you believe everything you see on television?

I said, No, but this was a news story.

And she said, Well, on news stories, have you ever seen the Simonized wax commercial?

And I said, I'm not sure which one you're talking about.

And she said, Well, the one where the children float across the kitchen on an invisible shield of Simonized wax, and they don't scuff the floor.

And I said, Yes, I've seen that, I've seen that. Yes, that's a commercial in the news show, but not part of the news show.

And she says, Yes, but do you believe that?

And I said, Well, I believe that they can create the effect of the children floating on the Simonized wax, across the kitchen floor, but I don't believe the children were floating actually on the floor, no.

And she says, But you don't think they did that about the people landing on the moon?

And I said, No, I don't think so.

And she says, Well, have you ever seen a fist fight where people really got hit in the mouth?

And I said, Yes, but not too bad and have even been in a few.

And she said, Where a tooth got knocked out?

And I says, No, no, fortunately I haven't - maybe in football, but not a real fist fight.

She says, Well, I've seen plenty of them and when people get their teeth knocked out right there, maybe a fist full of them, they don't get up and start talking again the way they do on "Have Gun Will Travel."

And I said- Now, already by this time, I knew that this was a conversation on more levels than what was going on about the moon. And here I was talking to a woman in a county that was 60, 70 percent black, with maybe with maybe 30 black registered voters. I'm a white stranger, 22 years old, a graduate student, who shows up on her doorstep talking about voter registration and she's talking to me about how do I know and how does she know who to believe, when she's lived there for 80 years, and I'm suggesting that she put her life, and whatever else she knew better than I do, in jeopardy on my word. But what we were really talking about was landing on the moon.

She finally ended up by saying that she knew that men had not landed on the moon and that she was tired of talking about it, and that she knew they hadn't landed on the moon because God wouldn't let men land on the moon.

And I said, Well, wait a minute now, how do you know that? Why does God care whether they land on the moon or not?

She says, Well, if God allowed mankind to land on the moon, then all they would have to do is fill up the tank on their spaceship and they could get right into heaven. Therefore, he would not allow men to land on the moon.

Now I had learned enough to know by then that meant that she was not interested in a voter registration campaign. But I also knew that there was no way that I could reproduce the meaning of this conversation in a policy memorandum that would reach the language of the people back on the Princeton Faculty Review Committee. It had nothing to do with monopsony in the labor market.

And I also knew that these experiences were more intense even - and I'll say this in due deference; I did have some intense learning experiences at Princeton - but they were more intense than anything that I had been accustomed to in the classroom, and therefore, that's why I started keeping this diary which I had never done before and I have never done since.

And by the end of the summer, it had grown up into maybe 300 pages and when I got back to Princeton, I turned it in as my policy memorandum, which precipitated another stink as to whether it was acceptable for me to continue in the graduate program. So I then produced a policy memorandum on economic development, monopsony in the labor market, too, as an appendix to this diary, but then there was a whole subordinate satellite series of questions as to whether my heart had really been in this memo or whether it was an afterthought or – you know.

Anyway, it was quite difficult. It all worked out and without telling me, one of the professors on the faculty review committee sent this diary off to this magazine which, with a kind of a larceny and free wheeling style that I later came to employ myself, set several excerpts in type without notifying me. So the first thing that ever appeared or was published under my name was accidental.

But it came to me that all the things that happened to me that summer reinforced the intuitive notion that cross-cultural history is not difficult to do because the abstractions are too hard to master, it's difficult to do because the humanities are too hard to master. And those are at a different level than history is normally written.

In that light, later on, I really tried to stick within the craft insofar as possible – not that I'm pretending that it's not informed as I can with my ideas about what is important, what to dramatize and what not to dramatize – but to confine myself to dramatic narrative and characters that are, if possible, real in human terms whether they are enemies, friends, white, black or whatever, so that they are more grounded in the humanities which are what escape the history, I believe, and make it vulnerable.

That's why I believe oral history is so vital. I discovered Vernon Johns years later, when I could finally get a contract to do this. At the last stop of the original or what I call the documentary research, before I started interviews, was Memphis. Memphis is the only place where Dr. King was killed. Memphis is the only place, to my knowledge, that created a special oral history project after the civil rights movement. Shortly after the King assassination, an informal series of meetings took place. Citizens there who got together and called meetings, met together in homes, and introduced themselves to one another, blacks and whites, mostly strangers to one another with a few cliques of friends, and said, "We don't know each other; we don't know what happened here; we don't know what it means, and we probably don't agree what it means or what we think it means, but we can all agree that it was important."

So they set out to do oral histories – with everybody. And when they finished that, they went around to the radio stations and the television stations and collected the outtakes – not only copies of the film, and those of you who are in broadcast journalism know that its not easy to get anything out of television stations, but freshly done outtakes and copies; they got those, and I don't know how they did 'em.

It was one night when I was down there, working in this little collection, the Mississippi Valley collection at Memphis

State University, where these citizens deposited their oral histories. I had been reading them. One of them showed Ralph Abernathy being interviewed by a very young reporter outside the morgue on the night that King was killed. Abernathy was pretty clearly in shock, couldn't speak very well, and the reporter couldn't get him to say anything. And finally in desperation this guy, I think he was on his first big story or something - frankly, I really identified with this guy, who was up against a comatose and none-too-loquacious-anyhow Abernathy, who wouldn't say anything. Finally he says, "but Rev. Abernathy, when did you first meet Martin Luther King?" And all of a sudden, it was like Abernathy went into a trance and he said, "I first met Martin Luther King on a cold January Saturday afternoon in 1954 when he arrived at my parsonage in the company of the man who until then had been my mentor and the light of my life, the Rev. Vernon Johns."

And he started telling all these amazing Vernon Johns stories, about how he sold watermelons and didn't wear socks, and that Abernathy used to get teased by the preachers for selling underwear and women's lingerie for Vernon Johns, and how he preached an amazing sermon about Lazarus and Dives and he was going on and the reporter could not stop him. Having labored for half an hour to get him started, then he couldn't stop him. And he kept saying, "but Rev. Abernathy, we have reports that federal troops have been called into Washington, Chicago and 30 cities are in flames," and this, that and the other, and none of it penetrated Abernathy.

I'm very grateful to those people for collecting that oral history, because had it not been for that, Vernon Johns would have remained to me a mention in passing, as Dr. King's predecessor at Dexter Avenue Church. But from that moment I began thinking that if he's that important, to penetrate there, maybe I should begin asking people about Vernon Johns, and invariably when I did, I would get a response like the white reporter got from Abernathy.

They would start telling me these amazing Vernon Johns stories. I say that in the interest of collecting oral history. I say that the humanity, I believe, is very important for preserving this kind of cross-racial history. I don't know how far this has changed the definition of what is and what is not a story in the news business; to reflect the realities of how intense and how vital democratic experience is across cultural lines.

I'll just mention a couple of examples, because I don't think - and this is not something that I've really thought out terribly much - but it's amazing to me to talk to some of the best journalists I know, print journalists - Jack Nelson, Claude Sitton, people of that caliber, who covered this movement, and to have them tell me on the one hand that their lives have never been the same since the first 15 minutes of their first mass meeting - when they walked into a mass meeting in a black church and heard the singing and the forms of communication and education. And on the other hand [that this never got into a news story] and that they were always really frustrated because they said, this is something the broadcast boys should do, but there was never to my knowledge a mass meeting from Montgomery, from Albany, from Selma,

from Birmingham, from anywhere, broadcast on American networks during the life of the Civil Rights movement, just as there was no special on the life of Martin Luther King, or Bob Moses, or Ella Baker, or anybody else in this period.

Part of that is the same thing we were talking about earlier: What is the story; sensitivity, hiddenness, what is the story? And the story often was, who's winning, segregation or the movement? And that had to be the framework of the story, and things had to be framed and balanced, and so often the stories, even by the sensitive reporters, they had to couch them – reporters who knew their lives were changing under the impact of this – had to couch them in terms of, the situation may be getting out of hand because leadership and control is passing to the extremes on both the Negro side and the white side, with the Klan and obstreperous young people in demonstrations out of control and the possibility for moderate progress there is teetering this way or that, and unfortunately, that's how most of the stories had to be written.

So journalism, hiddenness, all of these things are very strong. They are with us still today. They blind us, I think, to the central importance of what these stories were all about, which was the development of what a movement is. Because a movement is a central institution, just as the mass meeting is a central institution to the black civil rights movement of this period, that is largely unstudied, unknown and unexperienced.

A movement in the larger sense is democratic, but what a democratic movement is – something that enlarges the public space and allows people to feel things that inside themselves they didn't know were there and to be rewarded for a faith in strangers – is part of the democratic experience that is not in and of itself the subject of journalism, either feature journalism or certainly news journalism.

I think if it were, that Eastern Europe and South Africa would be more consuming stories here, not just as a matter of news but for how they compare in spirit to what's going on in the United States. Or, if this inwardness were different and we were in a different phase of our cycle and a less dangerous phase than we are now, that we would be of more inspiration to those truly historic movements that are going on there. So far as I know, no one in the world is looking to the United States for inspiration in these historic times, right now, and that's a truly sad thing because I think the movement spirit is not present here.

I want to close with five minutes with theology and stop.

What King said and what he learned largely from his friend, Reinhold Niebuhr and a hidden rabbi – at least a not-that-well-known rabbi that I have been working on a great deal recently, named Abraham Hessel [sp] – is that the connection between the theory of his movement and democratic theory is that both, like modern religion, were born of a ferocious, historic, epic-making war against pride.

The great crisis that Niebuhr produced in King was of destroying King's rather facile notion that he could oppose Daddy King's embarrassing fundamentalism as a student and still live with his conscience as a preacher who didn't believe in any of that, by preaching uplift and enlightenment that might help people

a little bit along the way and thereby overcome some of the evil in the world – both for blacks and for whites. And Niebuhr said that there's no evidence whatsoever that enlightenment and education reduces the evil in the world, that since pride is the doorway for evil and the gateway to sin, and education often increases rather than reduces pride, pride and education can often work against progressive force.

This made King feel like a hypocrite – made him feel that Daddy King may be more honest than he was. It produced a profound crisis in him and it produced a profound crisis in the world of theology, which dismissed Niebuhr, despite his reputation at the time in the '30s, until Hitler rose up a few years later in the most sophisticated culture in the world and proved to some degree that sophistication, culture and education are no barrier and guarantee against pride and evil. What's so interesting about this, if you look in the Hebrew scriptures, the pride there being necessary to subdue, the war against pride makes possible reverence and awe and brotherhood by reducing the blinders that people have, and self-regard is what blinds people to others.

For King, and for the prophets – and what he and the prophets have in common is this amazing effect of audacity, of crying out against injustice contained within the realization that reverence requires that their prophet rise up and make them blind too. In King and in the prophets, it's an effect I call a wood stove: that it heats up and that it becomes incandescent and you can see it in the language of the prophets and you can see it and hear it in the timbre of King's voice. This is what they are talking about, I believe, when they are talking about the eye of the needle in the New Testament theology, but it comes also in the Old Testament too, that you need just enough pride in human beings to light up their insides, to make them human, and not enough to blind them to the humanity of anyone else.

That's what non-violence was all about for King privately – he couldn't say it publicly, but there were several times in private remarks – it's not the violence itself in self-defense that makes him reject it, it's that invariably you have to cut off the humanity of the person that you are defending yourself against and that opens the way to enemy thinking and to pride and to inverting your whole moral system and thereby to evil.

King believed that we had two chances to maintain this discipline, to maintain this contact even with our enemies, to resist pride, and the two chances basically were that this doctrine – this thin window he believes is at the heart of both the Democratic message that all people are created equal, in the sense that their votes count the same and that they have the same self worth – is similar in the theological notion that there is some sort of brotherhood implied in our very humanity, that is the best evidence for whatever kind of benevolent purpose and purpose to history that one may feel.

And so, if you are too sophisticated to believe in religion, you can look to this democratic movement, this enlarging, this reaching out, as the best hope for really what democracy and the democratic intuition means as proven throughout our history by the expanse of the race issue in American history. Or if, on the

other hand, you were too modern to believe in democracy and you think that in the national security age, we need spies, secrets, experts and various other things, and that the democratic intuition is our great national secret – that it's outmoded, but in a non-recognized way – you might alternatively take the second chance and see this democratic movement as the one hope for a moral universe to make us something other than slabs of meat.

So you find this sense of resisting the separation. That's the parable of and the meaning of the great sermon of Lazarus and Dives that Vernon Johns preached with his inimitable title, "Segregation After Death," and that Dr. King used to quote frequently also. It's this refusal to lose human contact, even with your enemies, that was the heart of the movement, and that I think also needs to be the heart of our historical approach and our journalistic approach to try to change the way things are done.

The famous story that I had been dealing with in 1964, the year that the billboards plastered the south alongside the Impeach Earl Warren Billboards, were the billboards of Dr. King at the communist training school, Highlander Folk School where he went in 1957 to deliver the 25th anniversary address. Myles Horton just died recently; the founder of that was one of Reinhold Niebuhr's graduate students back in Union Theological, about the time that Niebuhr wrote this book that so affected King.

But he went there and the state of Georgia had a clandestine undercover reporter who went up there and took a photograph of King, and that 25th anniversary was covered by Abner Berry of the Daily Worker and thereby for the state of Georgia. The fact that it was interracial and covered by the Daily Worker – it's a fact, though, that it was a communist training school – that was the photograph that appeared on all the billboards and there are mountains of evidence in the FBI and there are people today, in fact, I still get letters from people sending me that photograph and saying this proves that everything that you've been trying to do is a fraud. The thing can never be stamped out, it keeps coming and the FBI has a huge file on it and on how many people there belong to how many front groups and how many outright communists there were. They could only find Abner Berry and various other communists and third-degree and second-degree, eighth-degree, ninth-degree, on and on and so on and so forth – which they gleefully presented to Robert Kennedy, leaving to him the choice of whether it added to up to whether or not it was a communist training school – which was a task that Kennedy manfully declined to address in his Senate testimony. But the issue of whether it was a communist training school still lives on and was hotly debated all through the 1960s – this one episode.

What is so amazing to me is that in all this investigation, nobody, insofar as I can find, including the Georgia investigators who took the picture and the FBI agents who interviewed and questioned all the people who were there, recorded what King actually said at the 25th anniversary luncheon celebration at Highlander Folk School. And what the most salient passage was to me was quite an interesting one – it was a run of oratory that you find frequently in early King but is never quoted very often.

He said, "I believe that places like Highlander are vital for the future of the country." I don't have it exact, but I got most of it exact cause I've read it over many times. He said men in America hate each other because they fear each other, they fear each other because they don't know each other, they don't know each other because they can't communicate with each other; they can't communicate with each other because they are separated from one another. And it's only by this almost supernatural determination not to allow that separation to destroy or to deteriorate or to infect the process of experiencing history, writing history, making history and writing history later – that I think that we can derive from this period the lessons that are so vital to preserve today. Thank you very much.

## **Taylor Branch**

Taylor Branch is a native of Atlanta, where he confesses to growing up somewhat unaware at first of the civil rights revolution that was beginning to sweep the South and then the rest of the nation. He told one interviewer that at age 16, he was a roving-eyed, apolitical Southerner interested in sports and chasing girls. But that was before he saw the dogs and the fire hoses turned against demonstrators in Birmingham, an event that he says changed his life.

He became interested in history and politics and majored in American history at the University of North Carolina. He protested against the Vietnam War, he campaigned for Eugene McCarthy in 1968, and then he went on to Princeton as a graduate student in politics and religion and philosophy. While there, he spent a summer in a voter registration project in Georgia. His diary that summer became an article in the Washington Monthly—a small and very fine magazine that exposes the foibles of the federal government and other institutions, and where Taylor still is a contributing editor.

This launched his career as a journalist and writer, and later he wrote for both Harper's and Esquire magazines. Prior to beginning his work on "Parting the Waters," Taylor had written several other books—a novel, "The Empire Blues"; "Blowing the Whistle," with Charlie Peters, the editor of Washington Monthly. He co-authored "Second Wind" with basketball great, Bill Russell, and he was the ghost writer behind John Dean's account of the Watergate scandal—the book called "Blind Ambition."

Then came his monumental effort—the six years that it took him to research and write “Parting the Waters: America in the King Years”—a book that is both a biography of Martin Luther King and a history of the civil rights movement in the United States. It’s a book that’s big—more than 1,000 pages—but as readable as it is big. “Parting the Waters,” which was published in 1988, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Non-Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize for History.