

Interview with **Rev. James Lawson**

December 2, 1985

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[camera roll 382]

[sound roll 1335]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKER.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK, THIS FIRST OFF CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE ABOUT THE TWO CHURCHES OF THE SOUTH THE, THE WHITE AND THE BLACK CHUCHES IN THE LATE '50s, EARLY '60s AND THE WHOLE—THE OBVIOUS CONTRADICTIONS THERE WERE IN, IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY BETWEEN SEGREGATION AND CHRISTIANITY. WHAT WAS THE WHITE, WHAT WERE WAS THE—WHAT WERE THE CHURCHES LIKE THEN IN ADDRESSING THESE QUESTIONS?

Lawson: In the '50s and the '60s? Well, you have to understand that the black church didn't see a contradiction in Christianity so much as we saw and recognized that the white church was just wrong. [laughs] They were just simply being unfaithful to what Christianity was supposed to be about. And the black church did try, even in those days, to teach that segregation was wrong, basically. That every person is somebody. That was one of our favorite phrases, one of the phrases that Martin Luther King lifted up, I think, so beautifully. And as a product of the black church, obviously, my own, my own sense of dignity had its deep foundations in the Christian faith. And so that for me the white church was just wrong.

They didn't know what they were talking about. [laughs] That's, that's not where you went if you wanted religion. [laughs]

00:01:36:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FACT THAT SAY THE BLACK CHURCH HAD BEEN SAYING THIS FOR A LONG TIME. WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THAT PERIOD THAT, THAT LEADING UP TO THE—LEADING UP TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT?

Lawson: All right, but there was also a lot of restlessness in the black church. I don't think that, I don't think that we—that, that anything had in the '40s or '50s captured the restlessness in the black church. I mean, by that that there are a lot of people like growing up in those days, like Martin Luther King, who said segregation is wrong and I'm gonna do everything I can to fight it. Now that indicates the extent to which restlessness was already going on. It was true of my own life. It was true in Martin King's father. It was true in my father who was, who was a Methodist pastor. Everywhere he went he organized an NAACP or everywhere he pastored rather, as a Methodist, he organized an NAACP or an Urban League. And, and when he pastored twice in, in Alabama and South Carolina he, before I was born, he carried a .38 under his coat because he said no one is gonna make me be less than a man than I am. So I mean now I don't think any of that was ever captured by, what? NAACP or anybody else. In other words there was, there was a fierce kind of undercurrent of saying this stuff has to stop, and we're not gonna put up with it.

00:03:06:00

INTERVIEWER: THEN WHY DID THAT GET CRYSTALLIZED IN THE MOVEMENT IN 1960 OR AT LEAST IT HAD IN BOYCOTT—IT HAD BEEN, EXISTED IN—

Lawson: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: —MONTGOMERY FOR A COUPLE DAYS IN THE SOUTH. WHY, WHY?

Lawson: Well because by that time it had begun to be organized. That's why it happened in '60, because by that time Martin King had, had come into the focus, he was articulating this restlessness, and articulating the need for—to aggressively attack and aggressively organize against it, so by the time 1960 came around, you know, and the national sit-in, you know, there were sizeable numbers of people who now began to see that, you know see that their, that they could make changes and were willing to try to experiment with how to do that. So as an example, in specifically the Nashville scene, when in Nashville in early 1959 we decided that we needed to begin a movement on downtown Nashville to desegregate downtown Nashville, that was our intention. That was done primarily by the National Christian Leadership Conference which was primarily adult-oriented. But as we shaped that decision through study and workshop and conversation together and then actual decisions that downtown Nashville must be desegregated and that's our next step. So we'd planned,

then, across the summer a series of workshops on nonviolence to begin to start that process and to that work—to those workshops rather, on nonviolence in the fall came people like John Lewis, C.T. Vivian, who was a member of the Nashville group, Jim Bevel, Diane Nash, Bernard Lafayette and a number of other students so we had, we had adults in the community, we had students from Tennessee State from American Baptist Theological School and from Fisk University.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS NASHVILLE LIKE THOUGH AS A JUST EVERYDAY LIFE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCUSE ME AGAIN.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I GOTTA STOP IT.

00:05:12:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: TO TRY TO GIVE ME A PICTURE JUST EVERYDAY REALITIES OF LIVING IN NASHVILLE WERE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TAKE TWO.

INTERVIEWER: —LEAD THE REST OF THE SOUTH—LIFE IN NASHVILLE, NASHVILLE IS BILLED AS—

[sync tone]

00:05:22:00

[cut]

INTERVIEWER: —AT LEAST A BETTER PLACE THAN IT IS SO.

[sync tone]

Lawson: OK. All right.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SECOND.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SECOND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, PRU. [sic]

INTERVIEWER: OK. SO GI—GIVE ME A LITTLE PICTURE OF NASHVILLE IN THE EARLY '60s, SAY EARLY '61.

Lawson: Well the, I, I suppose the picture of Nashville that most motivated me then and still does occurred in the mouth of a black woman who in the midst of a workshop in Nashville in the early part of 1959, perhaps March of '59, a workshop in which we were describing what the issues are facing us today, what the problems are, and what can be done about these. This woman, who I shall never forget said, you men don't really know what life is like in segregation. We are the ones who shop. When we go into downtown Nashville there is no place that we can stop with dignity and rest our feet. There are no restrooms that are marked—are not marked either 'Colored' period or 'Colored Ladies.' There's no place that one could sit down and have a cup of coffee. So, as we do your shopping for you, you're in, often times in your own offices and the like, but we're the ones who bear the brunt of the racism, of the segregation in Nashville. Then she went on to describe the fact that in one dep, dep—large department store, there was a very beautiful children's area, where mothers with their children could stop and their children could play on nice swings and sit on animals, in animal shaped seats, and the mothers could have a cup of tea or coffee or a cold drink while they relaxed for a few moments before they went on and finished their business. But that that wasn't available to a single black mother or to black children. Now, I was not born in the South, of course. I grew up in Ohio. But even there I would have insisted that I did not know what my own mother or sisters, with their families faced, as they moved around doing the work of the family: the shopping, the caring for the rest of us and the like. So Na—Nashville, for even the black middle class, teaching in all-black schools, working in an all-black hospital could be very insulated from the insult and the put-down that went on for those people who worked—

00:08:56:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Lawson: —in the department stores or in the downtown area and those then who did, who were the shoppers and the clients of the downtown.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT IT FOR A SECOND.

00:09:11:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 383]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK, USING SPECIFICS, WHY USE NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION AS A MEANS TO FIGHT SEGREGATION IN THE SOUTH, AT THAT POINT?

Lawson: Well they're both theor-nonviolence, why use it? Well, there are both theoretical reasons and practical reasons. But the most practical reason is that what are, [coughs] what are we trying to create? We're trying to create a more, a more just society. And how do you do that? Well you cannot do it if you exaggerate the animosities. Martin King used to say all the time, if you use the law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth then you end up with everybody blind and gumless or, or toothless, rather, which is right. That of course it seems to me is the conventional wisdom that you, we're gonna all end up dead and blind using present hostilities and technologies to try to solve what are human problems. So nonviolence has the—had the philosophy that when all of the, when this battle is over we expect to be able to live side by side, our children go to the same schools. We expect black people to have the kinds of jobs they want everywhere and anywhere, to live wherever they want to live, to be what they want to be and that means therefore we have to be able to live with one another. So, pragmatically, you cannot do this by hating, killing, slaying, torturing, lynching, you, you will not achieve that. And so from, from a practical point of view we don't want to blow up Nashville downtown, we simply want to open it up so that everybody has a chance to participate in, in it as people, fully, without any kind of reservations caused by creed, color, class, sex, anything else. So in, in that sense, you know, going past any theoretical notions for nonviolence which, you know, many of us hold is the practical issue of how do you achieve a com—community where people are people, where they have a fair chance on life.

00:11:52:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WERE THE WORKSHOPS LIKE THAT YOU CONDUCTED? HOW DID YOU WORK THAT PROCESS OUT AND GET PEOPLE READY TO TAKE PART IN, IN—

Lawson: Well, the first series in Nashville, well it wasn't the first series actually cause we did our first workshop on nonviolence that was single shop as early as '57, '58. But this series was a sort of protracted series and we met weekly for much of September, October, November. And in that we tried to give people a very, a fairly, a good view of nonviolence and we mixed that with role playing of various kinds and we mixed it with experiments they were to play, to carry out in their own personal lives. And then we also added to it the first series of forages into downtown to test which restaurants we would decide to work on. And so, as I recall, in November, everyone who attended the workshop was given the experience

of going to an actual restaurant and sitting in. These were in very small groups and not large groups no more than usually four people and they were not supposed to be arrested. They were supposed to sit, ask for service, if it did not come, which of course it didn't in any case, and then talk with customers around them and talk with the waiter or waitresses, see what their attitudes were and then ask to see the manager or somebody in authority and talk with them about the policy of the place. So it was that kind of experimentation so they got both a feel for what it felt like and then also learned what the situation was for that particular restaurant that was a part of our planning. So the, the workshops, role playing was often realistic, that is, that we would set up confrontations in workshops where a person might get slapped or hit or knocked down and we would experiment, you know, we would help—help the person walk through how do you respond to this kind of hostile situation. So the role playing was a part of it.

00:14:16:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU ANSWER STUDENTS WHO RAISED THE QUESTION OF SHOULDN'T I DEFEND MYSELF? SELF-DEFENSE SHOULD BE EVERYBODY'S RIGHT, IF SOMEBODY ATTACKS ME—

Lawson: Right. Well, we, we, of course obviously, obviously everybody believes in self-defense, so we all do. The—so the issue, the issue from the perspective of nonviolence is what are the best tools of self-defense, well we know, for an example, that if you are in a tough situation, one of the first things you have to do is keep your cool if you can no matter how frightened you are, how many, how ruffled you are by the attack or the hostility, try to keep your head. So obviously the first step is not being swift enough or big enough to deliver a counter blow but is to, as fast as you can see your options and stay cool, stay calm in the midst of the anxiety. So self-defense, no matter how you do it, requires therefore, wit, and courage, and poise under duress, being able to see options. So we—therefore, you know, with that in mind we then tried to suggest a variety of kinds of options.

00:15:40:00

INTERVIEWER: OK—

Lawson: We never, we never pretended, though, that if you tried all these options in a conflict situation you may not get hit or clobbered. We never avoid that because it has to be pointed out that nonviolence and violence have a similarity in that those who practice either norm must be prepared to do some suffering. I mean, that's not what—I realize the army posters don't tell you that, but the reality is, you know, that you not only learn to kill but you also have to learn to expect that you may get wounded or may be killed. So both violence and nonviolence share, suffering. So, the, the issue is not if people will not get killed, but there's a larger issue.

00:16:43:00

INTERVIEWER: IN NASHVILLE, AT THE TIME, CAN YOU GO INTO, JUST

BRIEFLY, THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS FROM THE TIME THAT THE CITY LEADERSHIP OF NASHVILLE FIRST STARTED PAYING ATTENTION TO SIT-INS? WHAT WAS THEIR FIRST RESPONSE?

Lawson: Oh, I can tell you very quickly. When the first—if I remember correctly, the first sit-in in Nashville was December, I mean, rather February 13th 1960 if I, if I recall correctly, that was the first sit-in. And their first response was, well it's only college students and it's like a panty raid in the universities with the fraternities, and it'll soon disappear. That was their first response. And so as a consequence the police were very evident and they protected the sit-ins in Nashville the first weeks.

INTERVIEWER: THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

Lawson: Then, as negotiations began, the mayor called upon his sort of biracial group to resolve the issue and we said, no thanks. Negotiations will have to be directly with the Nashville movement and not through any second or third parties. We want the merchants eventually sit down with us directly. So we started our own process of having people go in to talk with the managers where they could and visit with them about how soon you gonna—you want to sit down. We continued then perfecting the sit-in. We basically called for an economic boycott of the downtown area. By the end of the month the leadership was so the, the—rather, city leadership was so persuaded that they could make it disappear that then the police became the enemy instead of, instead of clearing—keeping thugs out of the stores and off the streets and moving. The police would do—now began to do disappearing acts so that our first incidents of violence against our people began. And on the 27th, as I remember, a Saturday, we had checked with the mayor and the police, in fact, I myself led a group to the police chief. From talking to him I became quite convinced that we would have violence and arrest on the next big demonstrations which were the—that last Saturday in February. And we prepared for that then. We worked out our strategy accordingly and made it clear that everybody recognized who went on the sit-ins in—on that last day on that Saturday that we would have—there would probably be violence and that there would probably also be some arrests. So everyone had to be committed who went out to both—to be prepared to face both. And we organized our strategy accordingly—

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[cut]

[wild audio]

Lawson: —and recruited as many people as we could who, who would realistically understand this. And when that Saturday arrived, we were ready for it.

INTERVIEWER: OK. THAT'S GOOD. OK. STOP.

00:20:16:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 384]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SOUND. MARKER.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, PRU.

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'M THINKING OF THAT ELEMENT IN, IN ANY TOWN AND SPECIFICALLY IN NASHVILLE THAT SORT OF—THAT WERE MODERATES AT THE TIME IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY WHO MAY HAVE FELT SYMPATHY WITH YOU ALL IN THE SIT-IN MOVEMENT, BUT WHO WEREN'T GONNA DO ANYTHING IN PARTICULAR AND WHO WERE WAITING AND WATCHING. WHEN DID THAT, WHAT INCIDENT CAUSED—OR WAS THERE A CRYSTALLIZING INCIDENT THAT CAUSED THAT ELEMENT TO COME OVER TO THE SIDE OF THE SIT-IN MOVEMENT?

Lawson: You have to recognize that in the South generally, those people who counted themselves as moderate also felt that they understand, they understood best how race relations could proceed. So that those of us who acted by organizing movements and events were really counted as very radical people, as upsetting race relations in the community. In fact, what we heard frequently in Nashville in those days in the '60s was that Nashville was a moderate city and had the best working relationships with black people and that in fact the sit-in was not the way to do it and that the people causing the sit-in were going at it all wrong. That it could better be done through calm, quiet, negotiation and the rest of it. So, I'm not sure how you would, how you would type moderates at that point because so many went that route, even the Tennessean, see, did not think that we knew what we were doing, or that we had much to offer about how to lead Nashville to begin to desegregate, desegregate downtown. Now that doesn't mean we didn't have white people who were supportive from the beginning cause that's not true, we did. We had, we had a sizeable number of white people, Will Campbell was one of the major folk helping us organize that, who, who were our observers from the very first sit-in. We had white people who stayed in the background and out of the place, but kept an eye on what was going on, so if we needed to have court witnesses and information and a whole lot of other things we had it in place. [coughs] And it was a good, it was a safe way in many cases because then they didn't have to identify themselves in a church or a university or school and thereby get themselves kicked out. And we, and we did that, quite deliberately. So we had any number of folk who were like that and gave wholehearted support, but supported it from that side. But per—the notion of the moderate element, in some ways, is an immoderate element because it presumed to know more about what was hurting black people than we ourselves knew. And it presumed to know more about how we ought to make those changes than anybody else. Now, at that point, you also have to say that conventional black leadership in some ways also was comfortable

leadership and, therefore, really didn't share in many ways the nitty gritty pains of black folk living under segregation and dehumanization. So—

00:23:55:00

INTERVIEWER: DID SOME OF THEM OPPOSE THE SIT-IN MOVEMENT?

Lawson: Oh absolutely! Are you teasing?

INTERVIEWER: I JUST WANT TO KNOW SPECIFICALLY. HOW DID—

Lawson: Yes. Did people oppose the student movement? Absolutely! In the black community, yes. The national office of the NAACP told student chapters of the NAACP in Nashville, in Richmond, Virginia, in Knoxville, Tennessee, no, do not participate in the sit-in. It is not the way to do it. That was the national office's policy in 1960. So right straight across the South there were all sorts of people in the black community said, that's not the way to go. That's one of the reasons why I said, from the very beginning, that the Montgomery bus boycott is as much a criticism of black leadership and black sort of adjusting to the evil as it was to the society as a whole. That's why I said in the '60s, in 1962, that the sit-in movement and the movement for social change was as much a, a word to the black community. The word to the black community was that we did not have to settle for passivity. We did not have to settle for this evil. And that each of us had a responsibility, in whatever way necessary to begin to get liberated begin to see that we had to organize to do it. The system cannot exist without our consent to it.

00:25:23:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT, GOING BACK TO THE SPECIFIC INCIDENT, EVEN IF YOU DON'T CALL THAT ELEMENT MODERATE, WHATEVER THAT SORT OF AMORPHOUS GROUP OF PEOPLE WERE IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY WHO WERE WATCHING, WHO MAY HAVE DISAGREED ON ONE LEVEL OR ANOTHER WITH WHAT WAS GOING ON, WAS THERE ONE INCIDENT THAT BROUGHT MANY OF THEM AROUND, WAS THERE SOMETHING THAT TURNED THE TIDE?

Lawson: Oh, I think, that with the white community the tide was not turned until after desegregation of the restaurants took place in downtown Nashville and none of their fears were lived out. I think that's where the tide turned. I don't really think—I think that if you did a majority, if you did a, if you had a vote to desegregate the vote would have gone against us all the way through. The, the merchants themselves were persuaded, in fact, that if they desegregated then they would have to take retaliation from the white community. They were absolutely convinced of this. They were convinced that if they desegregated there would be violence in their places. So that we basically had to show them how it could be done without violence and conflict and without effecting their business. And when they finally agreed to do it, and it worked, they themselves were astonished.

00:26:41:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT THE OPPOSITION TO THE SIT-IN MOVEMENT IN NASHVILLE. WOULD YOU SAY IT WAS—THERE'S A LOT OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF OPPOSITION, BUT WHAT, WHAT WAS THERE BESIDES THE, THE SORT OF THUGS TRYING TO DISRUPT THE SIT-IN, WHERE ELSE DID THE OPPOSITION COME FROM?

Lawson: Well obviously the opposition came from the *Nashville Banner* that was vociferously pro-segregation and typed most of us as Communists who were trying to make changes. So it was obviously the case. The mayor of the city counted himself as a moderate, [coughs] but as we made certain kinds of demands to desegregate he felt it couldn't be done at that time so he pragmatically opposed many of the measures we did. Although we did force him to publicly saying that downtown everybody should be served [laughs] before it got settled. And, and that happened in a very interesting fashion because one morning, very early, Attorney Alexander Looby's home was bombed. He was the chief, he was our chief lawyer in the trials that were going on in Nashville, by this time, with those of us who had been arrested. So his bomb was—his home, rather, was bombed at 3 o'clock in the morning. Our central committee met immediately and determined that we would have that day, then, a big march, and we mobilized and we had several thousands of people, people then marched from Tennessee State University down Jefferson Avenue to the city hall and at the city hall we had designated Diane Nash and C.T. Vivian to make our statement to the mayor. We asked the mayor to be present. And so he came out and met, and met us as we got there. And I cannot recall now whether it was Diane or Nash—Diane or C.T. who asked the, the right question, but they asked him point blank well if you, if you really don't believe in segregation and what not, then do—would you say to the merchants that, that they ought to open up and serve everybody black people in it and he did—didn't make the admission then, that he called upon the city to serve everybody, the merchants to serve everyone. So that was one of the interesting breaks that we got before the merchants talked seriously.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S CUT THERE FOR A SECOND.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M GONNA RELOAD.

[cut]

00:29:12:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FIVE.

Lawson: All right.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE STUDENT MOVEMENT OR ACTUALLY ABOUT THE FORMATION OF SNCC, SPECIFICALLY. IN WHAT WAY AND WHY DID STUDENTS BECOME, THE DRIVING FORCE OF

THE MOVEMENT OF THAT PERIOD IN, SAY EARLY '60s?

Lawson: Well, because in some ways students were freer than anybody else in the black community. That's why. They were young. They had campus responsibilities but for the most part they were people whose families were supporting them more or less in one fashion or another or supporting themselves by scholarship and working. So like the pastor of the church, of the black church, they were in many ways, the—among the freest people in the community so far as being able to take risks and not having to worry about the future in that sense.

INTERVIEWER: AND WHAT ABOUT THE FORMATION OF SNCC?

Lawson: So, well SNCC, SNCC of course grew out of the Easter weekend conference of 1960 in Raleigh. Our Nashville group was—were a part of the major group that wanted that conference to happen and went to it. And we had people from all over the South, for the most part, except for perhaps Mississippi in terms of students, a few adults, and it's out of that conference came, that SNCC was organized.

00:30:50:00

INTERVIEWER: WERE THERE ANY WHITE, WHITE STUDENTS AT THAT POINT?

Lawson: Just a handful, just a handful, primarily from the National Student Association which was done—that was a part of our planning, the National, National Student Association sent a delegation and that was the primary white, white delegation—

00:31:11:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Lawson: —and also the primary northern delegation. Otherwise the—pretty much was from the centers in the South where there had been a strong sit-in campaign.

INTERVIEWER: OK. THANKS. OK, LET'S CUT.

00:31:25:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 385]

INTERVIEWER: OUTSIDE INFLUENCES ON STUDENTS LIKE INTERNATIONAL

INFLUENCES—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —YOU WOULD SAY LIKE, IN THE EARLY '60s, THERE WAS A SENSE OF THIS—OF YOUNG PEOPLE AS STUDENTS MOVING TOGETHER OR, IN OTHER WORDS, WHY WAS IT— WHY WAS IT STUDENTS IN THE EARLY '60s THAT WERE MOVING? STUDENTS HAVE ALWAYS TRADITIONALLY BEEN, YOU KNOW, HAD THAT FREE TIME ELEMENT BUT WHY IN THE '60s? WAS IT INTERNATIONAL REASONS OR WERE THERE OTHER REASONS THAT CAUSED IT TO BE STUDENTS WHO WERE SEEN IN THE VANGUARD AT THAT POINT? YOU CAN GO AHEAD, LET'S START.

Lawson: Well, I think, it be—it was students in the United States, at that particular time, because we'd had a Martin Luther King and a Montgomery boycott that had impacted many minds. John what—John Lewis testifies to that, Jim Bevel, and then as, basically, organizations in the community began to talk about these matters and open up opportunities students were among the first to see them and to take advantage of them. For example, in the workshops in Nashville, Jim Bevel said, when I, in the process of the teaching, raised issues about Vietnam, which I did in all of those workshops back then, said, well you're crazy, but I think you're going to do something about segregation so I'm with you. So he later converted, of course, and saw the international scene, but I would say that he would be a typical illustration who started out primarily because he thought something could happen. Stokely Carmichael said this to me many times in the '60s.

INTERVIEWER: SAID WHAT TO YOU?

Lawson: That the only reason I'm doing this is because I think we can make some change now. He did not have the pan-African connections in those days and we debated violence, nonviolence, and jails as well as in Nashville. He had no such connections it was, it was primarily, he was fed up with segregation and racism in the United States and he wanted to do something about it and we acted like we were gonna do something. So, yeah, I think that was the prim—sort of prim—I think that's a sort of primary motivation among many students. They had a method, Ezell Blair who started the, the workshop, I mean, started the sit-in in Orangeburg, North Carolina—not Orangeburg, Greensboro. Greensboro, North Carolina.

00:34:01:00

INTERVIEWER: WILL YOU—DO YOU WANT TO START THAT JUST FROM THE BEGINNING ABOUT EZELL BLAIR?

Lawson: Oh, Ezell Blair, who started the sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, said he had been influenced by a little comic book, *The Montgomery Story* that had been done by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and was a kind of a primary guide on nonviolent action.

00:34:25:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU FIRST HEARD ABOUT THE GREENBORO SIT-IN? WHERE WERE YOU AND WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION?

Lawson: I was in Nashville. I was, I simply applauded it, but I said—

INTERVIEWER: YEAH, BUT WHAT IT IS. JUST WHEN YOU HEARD ABOUT IT.

Lawson: Well, on February the 1st, 1960 when Ezell and three other persons sat in at Woolworth's in Greensboro I applauded it, but also said, but you see, you should have started it earlier in Nashville, cause we were ready, by that time. We had a core of people committed that we had permitted December, we had permitted Christmas to interfere with us and we had permitted exams because I was then back in theological school also in—at Vanderbilt University.

00:35:11:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU PERSONALLY AT VANDERBILT WHEN IT CAME OUT THAT YOU WERE LEADING THE WORKSHOPS AND, YOU KNOW WHAT WAS THE ATTITUDE OF THE SCHOOL TOWARD YOUR POLITICAL WORK?

Lawson: Well—

INTERVIEWER: VERY SIMPLY.

Lawson: —very, very quickly the faculty was generally in support. The administration became very frightened when the press, especially *The Nashville Banner* proceeded to attack me as being a Communist outsider using Vanderbilt as a base and as a cover for my nefarious political activities and, of course, not being a theological student continuing his academic preparations for the ministry. So the net result of that is that in the late part of February, I guess it was, the executive committee of the Board of, of Trustees of Vanderbilt happened to be meeting, my name was being splattered over the front pages and on the editorials and the radio and the executive committee voted to expel me from the University. They did not do due process. They did not consult the faculty under which I was working and, and for, and for whom I was in a person of good standing, a student of good standing. They simply expelled me. And that, of course, didn't help because then when that happened members of the theological faculty also resigned. They, they therefore sent in their letters of regsernation [sic]—resignation. And the School of Law and the School of Medicine, especially, the schools of the graduate schools and sci—and the sciences became very concerned that the trustees could discipline a student without any reference to that student's rights or the faculty and the like, because it's the faculty after all that grants the degrees. So they got into the act and eventually the Chancellor was confronted by some four hundred, I'm told, faculty people who had letters of resignation, who were ready to leave.

00:37:30:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT DID YOU GET REINSTATED THEN?

Lawson: Yes, they reinstated me in June. I did not accept it though because they fired the Dean of the Faculty of Theology. And I felt they were substituting one scapegoat for another. So, I didn't go back.

00:37:52:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY THE, THE LEGACY WAS OF THE NATIONAL SIT-IN MOVEMENT? IN A BROADER SENSE?

Lawson: Well, [coughs] our influence was very great because of course in 19—

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU START OVER WITH THE—JUST, JUST THE TITLE—

Lawson: The influence of the National Movement was great. Perhaps more so than any other single movement with the exception of the Montgomery boycott. The reason for that was that we, as King said, was—we were a model movement. And we combined strategizing with learning and experimentation and struggle. We did not stop with the sit-in of 1960. We moved to theaters. We moved to bus station, train station, barber shop. We moved to mop up other restaurants in the community so for a decade, at least, after 1960 that movement was continuing to be a very dynamic movement setting the pace all across the South for change. Then, in 1961, we determined that the violence in Alabama could not stop the Freedom Ride. So we immediately called Martin King and others and said we're going to continue the ride from Anniston, Alabama to Birmingham and to Montgomery. The ride cannot stop. And our people immediately went, so, a goodly number of us were arrested, in fact John Lewis was on that, not John Lewis, but, but a number of our students got beat up and what not in, in Montgomery in what we call the Mother's Day Massacre. I led the first group of bus riders from Montgomery to Jackson, Mississippi where, of course, we then had several hundred people get arrested. So we were influential in that sense. All sorts of people who then were involved in that continuing struggle. Then thirdly, because we had combined trying—helping people to be students and to read and to think, and to have a whole picture of a nonviolent approach and methodology, we therefore had produced the best trained people. So people like C.T. Vivian, Diane Nash, John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, Marion Barry, Lester McKinney were people who fanned out all across the South became SNCC field workers, became SCLC field people and, and that meant they carried on that same style. I myself, of course, by '60 had become director of nonviolent education for SCLC and was traveling all across doing these workshops in every—in many, many of the movements. Did the first workshop in Fannie Lou Hamer's home in, in Ruleville, Mississippi, as one illustration. So that's the reason.

INTERVIEWER: THANKS. OK. CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MY BATTERY IS—

[cut]

00:41:11:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK REVEVREND LAWSON, PICKING UP FROM YOUR LAST QUESTION—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SEVEN.

INTERVIEWER: —IF YOU CAN MAKE THAT JUST A LITTLE BROADER, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY WERE THE—WAS THE IMPACT OF THE MOVEMENT OF THE EARLY '60s ON THE, SAY, THE WHOLE HISTORY OF THIS COUNTRY BECAUSE IT—

Lawson: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: —NOT JUST FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY, BUT FOR PEOPLE—

Lawson: Yes, of course. Well, the most phenomenal contribution of the struggle of the '60s to the nation is almost an unknown. One doesn't find it written up anywhere when the '60s are discussed. But, a consciousness emerged in United States that made people aware of issues like poverty, racism, deprivation of opportunity, and that consciousness produced a coalition from the unions, from civil rights organizations—

00:42:22:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Lawson: —from the churches, from Judaism, Catholicism, and the Pro—Protestantism—

INTERVIEWER: OK LET'S STOP THERE FOR A SECOND. IS IT POSSIBLE—

00:42:34:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 386]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: SO IF YOU JUST SAY, THE, THE IMPACT OF THE MOVEMENT—

Lawson: The impact of the movement of six—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: HOLD ON, SIR.

INTERVIEWER: OH, I'M SORRY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

Lawson: The impact of the, of the movement of the '60s is hardly recognized. Though, one could say, that we have a Reagan as president because of the reaction of the society to the far reaching changes that were beginning to be made as a consequence of the '60s—

INTERVIEWER: YOU KNOW, I'M SORRY, CAN I—LET'S CUT FOR A SECOND.
THE PROBLEM WITH THAT IS I CAN'T USE—

[cut]

00:43:23:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING.

[sync tone]

Lawson: Can't live in the past too long. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S TRUE. OK, WHENEVER YOU'RE READY, YOU READY?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ONE SEC. YOU READY.

INTERVIEWER: OK. SO THE WHOLE IMPACT, THE IMPACT OF THIS WHOLE
MOVEMENT.

Lawson: The impact of the movement of the '60s has hardly been recognized either in books or in much of the writing that I have read. The movement produced a new consciousness in the United States that, in turn, effected a coalition of political figures, blacks, poor, women, civil rights organizations, churches, labor unions, student groups all across the country. As a consequence of that coalition, the Congress passed the most progressive legislation that the nation has ever known. Including, for an example, what is forgotten, also, we have, we have child care centers and emphasis because of the '60s. Public schools did not start children in

fourth—at, at age four or five. That's a consequence of the Head Start Program that in large measure came out of black folk in Mississippi. It became a part of the anti-poverty program of the '60s. The most far reaching and progressive legislation the nation has ever known in affirmative action, in the elimination of segregation, sexism, ageism, right straight across the board. Those bills were written in Congress in the '60s and passed in the '60s. Health care, medical care and the like.

00:45:17:00

INTERVIEWER: AND CAN YOU SAY JUST A, A COUPLE SENTENCES IN THE SAME VEIN ON THE CIVIL RIGHTS BILL OF '64?

Lawson: Civil rights, the, we, we often, we often do not—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: START, START AGAIN. I HAD A—

Lawson: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: —BUNCH OF A—BALL POINTED ERROR. SORRY. OK.
[?]

Lawson: We often do not realize that while there were civil rights bills systematically passed, '57, '64, those bills, while they dealt with the whole issue of discrimination and especially in personal way—in personal ways in the market place, public accommodations, and the job market, nevertheless also with those were these many other bills that gave them strength. So that, as an example, by the beginning of the '70s the econ— the economic family income gap between black families and white families had begun to close. It did not start to go back this way again until the im—impact of then, as, as an example, the Nixon administration.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT. THANK YOU.

[cut]

00:46:24:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKING. TEN.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK. SO CAN, CAN YOU GIVE ME IN A FEW, BRIEFLY AS YOU CAN, THE PHILOSOPHICAL—HOW THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDING OF NONVIOLENCE GAVE PEOPLE POWER TO DO, UNDERTAKE THESE THINGS?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, PRU.

Lawson: Well, nonviolence in many ways was an effort to help people see that they were of

infinite worth and dignity. That their very life, in fact, was a center of the life of the universe; that the full power of what life is all about is located in every single human being. And no matter how tortuous that person's life is, they still have certain power if they're willing to exercise it and cultivate it and use it. And it may be risky, but it can be done. So the whole notion of nonviolence, philosophically, is that you are a person of infinite worth and as such you can exercise influence all around you. That, in fact, you do this in a variety of ways that maybe you don't think about. For an example, when you are accosted with an angry word most of the time you don't necessarily become angry at the same moment and try to retaliate with anger. You may turn a soft word. You will get angry only in certain kinds of experiences and not each time. Well, now, nonviolence suggests to you that you are at your best when you determine that in a hostile situation that you can diffuse and change that situation by continuing not only to respect your own life, but to respect the person who's doing the accosting.

00:48:32:00

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU GIVE THAT TO ME USE—USING THE EXAMPLE OF THE LOOBY BOMBING? HOW, HOW DID THE MOVEMENT USE THAT ACT OF VIOLENCE TO ITS OWN ADVANTAGE?

Lawson: Well, the Looby bombing came in the middle of, of the Nashville campaign and what we said immediately was there will be, we will not exercise our anger by trying to do outrageous things against somebody else, but we will direct our energy and anger in how we strengthen this movement. And so we asked people who were mad about this, and there were many, to join us in a massive march to downtown city hall and to confront the mayor with what he was doing in his own statements that in fact encouraged the rabble rousers to do this sort of thing. And what he in turn could do to make certain that the police understood that it was their task to defend the right of every citizen of Nashville to publicly protest. So that meant that we had one of the largest marches, up till that time, the South had seen or that even the nation had seen. And it was a nonviolent, orderly march and people came away from it with a real sense that they had done something that would help make the difference in Nashville. And I think, I think the, the whole march was felt to be highly successful in the mass meetings afterwards. This was the attitude of just ordinary people.

INTERVIEWER: OK THANKS. THAT'S GOOD.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S FINE.

[cut]

00:50:07:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, PRU.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Lawson: I am faced with a hostile assailant who wants to break up the march and who wants to do me in. Do—what do I do? Well my practice has been to obey Jesus at that point turn the other cheek. Well, people say well that's passive but it's not passive, it's a very—it's psychologically it is an extreme weapon. I turn the other cheek. Now it's true the assailant may then sock me on that cheek as well. But it may also happen that the assailant does something else. That he is upset that instead of my using the fist against him I turn the other cheek. I have actually seen this happen in the midst of our desegregation of—in the Nashville movement the desegregation of theaters, I was at the back of the march, because at the back of the march the rabble-rousers would gather and throw Coke bottles at us, spit on us, and hit and kick as we would be moving away from the theaters back to the church. So I accosted a young man who was doing this. I was at the very last rank and I would try to turn around and I, face him as often as I could. He was cussing me out. I turned once and I said to him, did your church teach you to talk like this? He said, they taught us segregation, though. But I said, did they teach you to hit and spit and kick and cuss other human beings? And he acted as though I was hitting him over the head with my fist. He stopped. I turned around to find where I was to keep moving in the right direction. I turned back around and he had disappeared through the crowd and I never saw him again in a theater demonstrations. So nonviolence does what Richard Gregg said, wrote, rather it causes people to do, be engaged in moral jiu-jitsu. They expect from you the hostile response that is conventional. They don't get that, they get respect and they get resistance and that turns them upside down. It is like the art of more—of jiu-jitsu, where you use the opponent's strength against him, himself. He rushes at you and instead of you putting up your resistance to stop him, you let him rush, and you stick your foot out in front of him as he rushes by. So the nonviolence has that same practical capacity.

INTERVIEWER: OK LET'S CUT. THAT'S GOOD.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT'S GOOD.

[cut]

[end interview]

00:53:09:00

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