

1EK33.01

Rifle Squads in the Beloved Community

74 | The "beloved community" occupied our thoughts one late spring night as five of us, all calling ourselves pacifists, all believers in nonviolence, brotherhood, and integration, talked about Mississippi, about America, about the world, about the Movement, and shared our souls. Jane Stembridge from the SNCC staff joined Jeannette and me with Matt and Jeannine Herron at their Jackson home. The children, Matthew and Melissa, stayed up to see us then went peacefully to sleep. We all knew each other well, knew each other's fears and dreams; we trusted each other. It was a quiet and a beautiful evening but it was a sad time. We no longer knew what we did believe but we knew what we wanted to believe. We no longer were sure we believed the same things but we knew we wanted to. We talked of life and death, of love and hate, of fear and peace, of violence and nonviolence. The Freedom Summer would soon start. We had all helped plan this. But the violence white Mississippi was increasing so rapidly, the failure of the federal government was so manifest, the bitterness and fear and tension were building so steadily in SNCC, that we were now afraid, not just afraid for our own lives, for we tried to talk of death and tried to accept that possibility, but afraid for the very life of the Movement.

Mostly we talked about SNCC and the people we admired and loved. We knew that many people saw the Freedom Summer as a final testing time for two important matters: the possibilities of democratic change in the present American political system, and the continued relevance of non-violence. Part of the testing of the system also involved the validity of

SNCC's concepts of community organizing at the grass roots level and joint decision making, consensus rather than simple obedience to orders and ideas from the top. Early in the winter there had also been significant opposition from some black staff members to bringing in so many white summer volunteers, but because this help was needed and could come from no other place, the matter of possible racial tension was put aside. But if the Freedom Summer was a failure, then it was possible that the very idea of integration itself might also be part of the testing.

Violence was the major thing our little group of pacifists and idealists talked about that night. How long could anyone in SNCC, black or white, keep going without breaking, without advocating first self defense then some kind of traditional armed deterrent? How long before we ourselves would break? What were our own motives? Had we joined the Movement to promote pacifism, love, and integration as more important than freedom? Did we have a right to judge the majority of SNCC or any lack people in the Movement whose primary objective was freedom, and who, for the moment, were hoping that nonviolence and political solutions would be sufficient instruments for that purpose?

SNCC had thought in terms of being a "band of brothers" and the "beloved community" almost from the start of the Movement. But what if some people decided the goal of freedom could not be achieved by any democratic political means within the present American society? That doubt we shared with all our friends. If the Movement should decide that some form of revolution was necessary we would agree, so long as this was a

nonviolent revolution. So the problem was violence -- for us.

What if some people decided freedom could not be achieved without violence? What would be the response of the Movement? What would be our own response? Would such people then be considered "outside" the circle, no longer part of the Movement? But that was unthinkable, for this would mean excluding many men and women we loved. And where was our own love in such self righteousness?

Matt and I talked about the reasonableness and logic of some of the new arguments in the Movement and assumed that the greater reasonableness and logic of nonviolence would prevail. Matt and I sort of enjoyed the discussion of revolutionary politics and romantic guerilla violence; the vicarious experience made our own nonviolence tolerable.

Jeannette talked of all the pressures, personal and social, on everyone and how some people were bound to think of turning to violence and what seemed like faster or easier solutions. She said we had to accept and understand our friends who sometimes shocked or frightened us with their thoughts. We should be glad people could still express some of their wilder thoughts to each other.

Jeannine, however, thought it was not good to even talk about violence in any romantic way, either with disapproving understanding as Matt and I were doing or with the bitterness and, sometimes, excitement that a few black men and women in SNCC were expressing.

Jane, who had always been a part of SNCC, insisted that SNCC and the Movement

Stevenson

4

had never been just freedom fighters or interested only in civil rights. The cause of the Movement was to live the kind of life we wanted for the world in the midst of the struggle to change the world -- for civil rights or anything else. Nonviolence was necessary in this. To abandon nonviolence would mean the ideas of organized self defense would lead to too much thinking about our fears. Our fear would soon make us hate the thing, the people, we feared. Once we began to hate we could no longer truly love anything, anyone, even each other.

To abandon nonviolence meant to abandon love. It was already very difficult to hold on to each other in the terrible tensions and frustrations of life in the Movement. When we lost love or tried to define love as something for the in group and hate for the rest of humanity, then we were bound to find that all love had disappeared. Soon we could never tolerate the weaknesses, the failures, the betrayals of each other, even inside the Movement. The brothers and sisters would turn the hate reserved for the enemy on the other brothers and sisters, the band would be broken, the "beloved community" would become just like the world we fought and sought to change. We would have nothing to offer any man or woman and nothing would change, whether we were defeated or we were victorious. To abandon nonviolence was to open the way for fear and hate and to lose love; it was to lose the Movement.

Jane had brought a copy of a new SNCC pamphlet to show us. This was Genocide in Mississippi, published that spring to arouse national opposition to the bills being considered

by the 1964 session of the Mississippi Legislature that provided for sterilization of mothers of illegitimate children, clearly intended to reduce the black population of the state. The bill did not pass and the SNCC opposition to the bill was not the thing that had Jane upset. It was the language of the pamphlet, the strongest statement ever yet issued by SNCC. It was almost a public threat by SNCC to turn away from nonviolence if America (chiefly through the Federal Government) failed to respond to the just demands of the civil rights Movement. SNCC was now suggesting that the issue might be far more than just gaining civil rights for black citizens; Mississippi had often set the pattern for race relations in America. Now that Mississippi had publicly considered genocide through means of law and order and now that actual genocide seemed to be the policy of the klan with the murder rate in Mississippi now running at almost one black victim a week while the Federal Government did nothing, the problem seen by some black men and women in SNCC was the very survival of the black people in America.

As some people in the Mississippi Movement now pointed out: Mississippi is changing from cotton production in the old plantation style that used methods similar to those of slavery times to technological agriculture. Now Mississippi has a surplus supply of mules and Darkies, the two major factors in the cotton plantation system. The mules might be put out to pasture, but not the surplus blacks. They would demand welfare; and the agitators wanted them to become voters. Mississippi had to get rid of some of its unwanted and threatening blacks. What would happen when the entire nation reached such a technological

point that unskilled black men could no longer find jobs, were now unneeded and unwanted by the whole society, but those blacks still demanded welfare and political power? Many SNCC friends reminded all of us that Mississippi was part of America, that Mississippi was not possible without America, that the same America which today did not find Mississippi intolerable could just as easily one day find Mississippi quite admirable.

It was a frightening thought, fit product of a mind chilled by the damp of the Delta winter, fit topic for silent meditation at midnight in a lonely shack when the lights were suddenly extinguished because of an ominous noise on the road outside. When a human is reduced to hiding in the dark, to crouching on the floor in the cold, dreading the sudden brilliant illumination of a fire bomb or the crack of a rifle, made even louder in the winter silence, any one can think any thoughts. For years all of us in the Movement had kept these thoughts repressed. But in Mississippi, in the Winter of the Closed Society, nothing could be long repressed.

The plans for the Freedom Summer Project of 1964 revealed the skills and high hopes of SNCC; the Genocide pamphlet of the spring of 1964 revealed the anger, the bitterness, the uncertainty, and the fears of SNCC after four years of struggle. It began with faith in America and confidence in each other. By the end of the spring of 1964 SNCC had learned too much, too rapidly. SNCC was learning: in the sit-ins, where the lesson was the unresolved tension between the rights of man or the rights of private property; in the freedom rides, where the lesson was the unresolved tension between the unconstitutional law

and order of a police state and the justice never defended by the American government; in frustrated voter registration drives; in unfulfilled Supreme Court school decisions and a thousand other fractured promises in the courts; and, from the people (black and white) all over the South --in Augusta, Georgia; Danville, Virginia; Cambridge, Maryland; Selma, Alabama; Greenwood, Mississippi. Above all SNCC was taught the meaning of modern America in two places: Liberty, Mississippi and Washington, D.C. Through the long nights of the Delta winter SNCC thought on these things. America was a good teacher, even when no one wanted to learn the lesson. In the late Spring SNCC spoke out.

The extremism of the Mississippi "genocide" laws was only the framework for this message from SNCC. It was assumed that Mississippi would not change; the issue is what force would accept the responsibility of changing Mississippi. So the target of the pamphlet really was not the absurdity of what the leaders of Mississippi were doing but the irresponsibility, the failures, the things that the leaders of America were not doing.

SNCC began with politics, voter registration, and pointed out that if -- only if -- America really had democratic politics at the local level in such a place as Mississippi there would be no need for appeal for outside help, because black citizens would have been registered voters and, so, a political power that would have guaranteed that such nonsense as this could never have been passed by the state Legislature. Thus there was need of help from the outside: the voter registration features of the current Civil Rights Bills needed to be strengthened.

SNCC did support the present Bill but a new law was not enough. The excesses of Mississippi that winter and spring clearly showed that

... there is no stronger argument for the speedy passage and rigorous enforcement of the civil rights bill which the Senate is "debating"... 129

The "rigorous enforcement" was of equal significance with the "speedy passage." For over a year SNCC had been trying to tell the nation that enforcement of present laws was the crucial issue. Here SNCC commented:

And the struggle for additional civil rights legislation must not be permitted to obscure the fact that the President and the Attorney General have legal weapons now which they have never used to protect the right to vote in the South. Section 594, Title 18, U.S. Code, provides: "Whoever intimidates, threatens, coerces, or attempts to intimidate, threaten or coerce, any other person for the purpose of interfering with the right of such other person to vote... shall be fined not more than \$1,000 or imprisoned not more than one year, or both." If the statute had been enforced in Mississippi (it has been on the book since 1948), we may be certain that the genocidal legislators presently

in power would long since have been retired to the political boneyard where they belong. 130

SNCC used Mississippi as a case study for the failures of both the federal administration and the federal courts.

The President and the Attorney General have refused to use the criminal statute quoted above, preferring to seek injunctions against officials who interfere with voting rights. The total bankruptcy of this policy should now be apparent to everyone. At the time the genocidal Mississippi House was elected last fall, 22 voting suits had been filed by the Attorney General against Mississippi registrars and other officials. Yet fewer Negroes were registered to vote than had been registered in the previous election.

The case of Forrest County registrar Therron Lynd is classic. An injunction ordering him to cease discrimination against Negroes was issued by a Federal court more than a year ago. He refused to comply and was cited for contempt. He has been under this citation for more than six months now (with no sanctions or fine or imprisonment imposed against him), and his discriminatory tactics continue. This piling of injunction upon injunction has been going on

since the 1957 and 1960 civil rights bills were enacted. Negroes still can't vote in Mississippi. 131

We five white members of the Movement discussing the future of SNCC and of the Movement that warm evening had no difficulty with this political portion of the SNCC pamphlet. We agreed and did not find the tone of hostility towards the President and the Attorney General too strong. The continuing farce of the federal government and Therron Lynd only increased our continuing disillusionment that Washington was concerned about justice. Obviously, to us, Washington cared only for Power.

It was the next section, the conclusion, of the SNCC pamphlet that marked the new dimension of things; the theme was that the final testing time for nonviolence and for America had now come. The threat to America, as we knew it, was explicit; the threat to the Movement, as we knew it, was implicit. Mississippi was now the testing ground for the American system and for the Movement dream. The Freedom Summer of 1964 was the time of testing.

Now they (Black Mississippians) are faced with action by Mississippi government which literally threatens their existence as a people.

If the President and the Attorney General were placed, themselves, under a similar threat, what could be their reaction? If they had used every conceivable stratagem, had faced police dogs and fire hoses

and billy clubs and prison for the right to vote, and if all their efforts resulted only in a worsening of their condition, would they, would Americans generally, react with a strengthened conviction of the efficacy of such peaceful persuasion; or would they begin to think in pure terms of self-defense, peaceful or no, violent or nonviolent?

This question the President and the Attorney General must ask themselves, as must all Americans. As they answer it for themselves, so must they answer it for Negroes in Mississippi. As they would act for themselves, so must they act for those Negroes.

Else let them not wring their hands and gnash their teeth and roll their eyes heavenward when Mississippi Negroes begin doing for themselves what their government has refused to do. 132

Even SNCC as it condemned Mississippi and America still returned to a Mississippi style Biblical imagery. But this reverse Golden Rule was frightening. The five of us read and re-read the paragraphs. Of course it was unfair for liberal Americans to insist the Movement remain nonviolent and use the proper channels of the political process when white Americans would not be non-violent in a similar situation and when SNCC had exhausted almost all the possibilities of the "proper channels" and discovered they were a polluted fraud, only convenient words to mask the realities of power. But we thought the Movement

had always aspired to something more this. Now it seemed that SNCC was threatening to become just like traditional white America, just as self centered, just as violent. If this did happen then the Movement was over; that very America we feared and resisted had won.

In our confusion, in our anguish that night we had to look at ourselves. What did we, as pacifist veterans of the Movement, have in common with our black brothers and sisters in SNCC? Or with some of our white brothers and sisters in SNCC who had more questions about violence? What did we have, as whites, in common with our brothers and sisters in America, even our brothers the President and the Attorney General? Were we using pacifism the same way the liberals were? Why were we so convinced that it was wrong for the Movement to use violence?

I spoke of something that I had long feared in myself, something I knew was shared and understood by Jeannette and Jane. I sometimes wondered if my Movement activities were not some profound expression of love and loyalty to the South. Was I urging non-violence on the movement just so black people would not respond in kind to white people, so that all the suffering, pain, and death would be on the Black side? As much as most white Mississippians despised people like us, were we still looking out more for the interests of our origins -- our homes, families, friends, even our old way of life? And in my Southern prejudice I did not realize how insulting such a remark was to Matt and Jeannine. For both quickly let us know that this was not just a problem for Southern whites in the Movement. They had the same doubts about themselves. Could it be that their advocacy of

nonviolence was just a way of protecting all white America? They understood our feelings as Southerners for they were common feelings for all Americans.

But there was no answer. All we could say was that, although our motives might be quite mixed or even quite bad, we did believe in nonviolence. All of us had expressed our pacifist concerns in other areas that had to do with national policy and not civil rights. Our pacifism in the Movement was consistent with what we believed, but that did not mean that our common identity with other white Americans did not also blind us to the depth of frustration and anguish felt by black Americans who had lived through the struggles of the Movement of these last few years. We just could not say. But the Movement itself had taught us to respect the highest aspirations and motives we did have. We could not use self analysis or contrived complications to avoid the thing before us at the moment. The Movement also had taught us not to hide from confrontations. And the suggestions that it might be time for the Movement, for SNCC, to give up nonviolence was something we had to confront --and even to judge.

We could reach no firm conclusions, about what SNCC should do or about what we should do. Our feelings were that we would understand any turn towards violence, but could not condone or participate in it. We could not personally reject those who did. We could continue to breach nonviolence, but now the time had come to "lay our bodies on the line" and "demonstrate" in some way the validity of nonviolence. Suddenly we realized how ignorant we really were. We knew so little of the history of nonviolence. We knew so

little about the history of our own country and how we had reached such an impasse where our own democratic political instruments were now demonstrably invalid. But as we bemoaned such things we realized we were again rationalizing. The truth of nonviolence, of the beloved community, of any of the things we believed, did not depend on how well we understood or fulfilled those beliefs. But here we were and we had to do something.

We talked of some symbolic demonstration to affirm non-violence. We did not need to talk of any thing like "sacrifice" for that was an uncomfortable word and we knew that, violent or nonviolent, many of us and our friends faced death that summer, or any time in Mississippi. Our conversation focused on some way to stand up to Fear. Almost instantly we thought of the perfect symbol of fear in Mississippi --the Tank, that awful steel-clad, barbed wire fringed, robin's egg blue and silver trimmed mastodon of death, that monster of hate. Almost all the Movement leaders had seen the thing on some visit to Jackson. The Mayor had boasted so much about the thing it bore his name, "Thompson's Tank." It was often displayed to the delight of white citizens, to increase their enjoyment and confidence. It was often displayed in black neighborhoods, to increase their intimidation and fear.

The Movement tried to handle the fear of the Tank, and its shot guns, its tear gas launchers, its machine guns, by joking and fantasy. People said that for every black person killed by the Tank crew there would be a white magnolia emblem painted on the side. We had heard a dozen versions of how the Tank might be halted or disabled. No one dared suggest a real Molotov cocktail. But the constant conversation about the Tank in the

Movement showed the real Terror seen in the Tank, as symbol and as actuality.

Yes, the five of us decided, if we could do something about the Tank, nonviolently, it would be a powerful demonstration to SNCC, to the people, and to the whole Movement of the validity of nonviolence.

But we could think of nothing we had the courage to do. We might put tacks in the road -- useless. We might place our faithful Rambler in the road -- useless. We might picket the Tank -- useless, arrest would be instant. We reached two possibilities. One was an idea I suggested. We sneak in at night and pour sugar in the gas tank or mess up the motor, something that often happened to SNCC cars. But to be caught doing that would mean prison and beating and that would only increase the fear in the people we were trying to inspire. No, any attack on the Tank had to be serious. The Tank had to be destroyed. The best thing would be a fire bomb, and I did not have the slightest idea how to make such a thing. I almost wished I had kept the instructions for molotov cocktails printed in that Birmingham newspaper.

Then Jeannine objected that as pacifists we could not do something so violent as firebombing of property. That was too destructive; we had to do something constructive if at all possible. If we could not find that, and we couldn't in terms of the Tank, then we still had no right to destroy property. Then Jane and Jeannette began to express fantasies about stealing the Tank and planting flowers and vines in it and using it for a playground, or sealing all the gun holes and using it for a swimming pool at some Freedom Summer

Community Center.

So we argued the finer points of nonviolence (as if one of us did have the courage and the skill to firebomb the damned thing, even should we be able to sneak past the police guards --and the police dogs.) I disagreed that it was against the principles of nonviolence to destroy property. But I was unsure of my own words. All I could think of was the thrill of hope -- and delight -- that would sweep through the Movement and the black people of Mississippi with the happy news that the Tank had been destroyed, as if some fire-breathing dragon, the terror of the village, had been slain. St. George or Siegfried would have found a way, but we did not think of ourselves as saints or heroes. We were just desperate men and women who wanted to help our friends, to confound our enemies, and be true to the beliefs that gave meaning to our lives.

We were surprised that we could disagree over something as little (if it was that little) as the violent destruction of the most evil, most violent piece of property we knew, the Tank. The pain of not agreeing with each other was great. It made us very sad. The pain of admitting we did not know what to do was awful. But we finally decided, but never quite agreed, that firebombing the tank was not the proper act, either because it was not possible or because it was not proper. One of the most distasteful things about the deed would be the secretive nature of the act and much of the strength we had found in nonviolence had been in the very openness of all our demonstrations. We could not see nonviolence as a valid underground or guerilla movement. We decided that our problems, again, might just be

ourselves and our fear of letting go of the clean, public demonstrations and nonviolent tactics which we knew for the dreadful uncertainty, anonymity, and loneliness of the underground.

Our discussion of tactics led us to examine much of the recent history of the Movement, in terms of practical campaigns and in some of the sources for our strategy and inspiration. We wondered about some of our heroes. If Bob Moses were with us he would have started by asking, "What would Camus do?" Well we knew there was no easy answer there, except that we must be neither victim nor executioner. Bob might have let our talks shift from Camus to Tolkien. All these would give us is no answers but the comfort that we were not alone, not even the first to wrestle with these ideas. What would Silone do or say? Surely fascism can be resisted with violence. What would Gandhi do? Well, he, we were sure, would have maintained nonviolence, but what about his disciples in India? Surely they talked about firebombing a tank.

To take up fire made us sound like villagers in Lycovrissi. Kazantzakis had his characters in The Greek Passion wonder if this was the purpose of gas, to miraculously turn into destructive, purifying fire -- or Molotov cocktails. Did we want to defer all to Moses, to force him to choose the violent, to carve the wood and reveal the savage face of Christ and of War? Jane, the Movement poet, was one of us in the discussion. But what of our sister at Tougaloo College, the poet Elizabeth Sewell and her poem that so frightened me, about kneeling before the Crucifix in prayer, meditating on the possibility that the message from the Christ was to take up the Spear, take up the Sword. How dare she write such a

poem. How dare she have such a vision. How dare she haunt me with her vision. Wasn't she just poetically feeling all our thoughts and expressing them? Or was she a mystic or a prophet, giving us the Words of God?

Such thoughts were painful and inconclusive. It was easier to look at specific battlefields. We examined the unsuccessful campaign to desegregate the white churches of Jackson. Perhaps we should have been more active here. We just knocked on the doors; we were very careful never to actually disrupt a worship service, although our very presence, and forced absence from the service, was disrupting to the consciences of the white people. This is what we wanted. But what if we had actually disrupted a worship service? Would not that possibly have had more impact than just knocking at the door? What if I had forced my way past the usher-guards and rushed into same church at Christmas or Easter and begun reading scripture to the people or preaching? So we would have offended most people, but was it possible that we might have reached a few more than by our patient year long unsuccessful effort at the church door? And what right did white Christians have to observe the great holy days and festivals of the faith as if the life of Mississippi was normal? But we refused to do this, out of an understanding of the philosophy of nonviolence and out of considerations of good strategy, so I told myself and others.

Perhaps the reasons we never pressed half this far, the reason we were "satisfied" with the almost fifty arrests at the church door, was that I, personally, was afraid, afraid, not of the violence but of the opinion of the white Christians of Mississippi. I did not want them

to think me mad. We could not say whether our tactics had been valid or not; all we could say was that we did as we thought best. And that any failure of nonviolence should not be laid to our lack of skills with the the instruments of nonviolence. But still, the failures of all the Movement, to show more power, more success, or even to be more consistent in the use of nonviolence was certainly a reason why SNCC and others were now questioning everything.

We talked of the times in the past year when we ourselves had thought that the Movement had made a dangerous error in refusing to use nonviolence or use anything else. At crucial time the Movement had done nothing; surely that was why so many people now felt that nonviolence had nothing to offer in the final crises. One such time was the murder of Medgar Evers. The nonviolent demonstrations which John Salter and I helped stage in Jackson to protest that assasination were stopped by the NAACP and Washington; Martin Luther King and others who advocated nonviolence were not willing, because of internal politics, to become involved in the Jackson situation. So there was no significant response to the death of a leader. White Mississippi, which must have been surprised, learned how effective killing a leader could be.

Another example immediately came to mind. After the slaughter of the Birmingham children there was no significant nonviolent response. A mass march by a nonviolent army across Alabama was mentioned but nothing was done then or since. Above all, were we tricked out of our greatest opportunity the previous year? The 1963 early summer discussion

within SNCC, CORE, and SCLC of massive nonviolent disruption of normal life in Washington (such as Indian type actions of placing our bodies on the airport runways, the rails, the roads, etc.,) until the nation accepted responsibility for securing civil rights, had quickly disappeared when President Kennedy seemed proposed a new civil rights law. It was a very mild law with no major help for voting, but we accepted even this with gratitude and praise instead of disappointment and disgust.

Instead of protest, civil-disobedience, and nonviolent action we had the Movement Picnic of the March on Washington; only the censored speech of John Lewis of SNCC touched on our reality that day when we needed both reality and the dream. Now that the civil rights bill was being stalled by a Southern filibuster, there was again talk of a massive campaign of civil disobedience to show that, just as the Senators were disrupting the business of the Congress, we could disrupt the business of the nation. We always backed down. Even our acts of civil disobedience were rare, usually explained as the violation of an evil Southern court or law and not the true law, and then we appealed our "innocence" to the courts. We filled the jails, only to get out on bail as soon as possible. Perhaps we had only just begun to learn about the possibilities of nonviolence; it had only been tried for a few years but the impatient Americans of SNCC (as Dr. Lohia, our Indian friend, had suggested) were full of doubt. If the Movement abandoned nonviolence then all of us were to blame, and all America which had refused to respond.

There did seem one thing we could do about Thompson's Tankin Jackson. If it was

ever used again against civil rights demonstrators or the black community we could place our bodies on the line in front of it. We could not know till the time came if any of us would have the sense, courage, or power to do it. Jane could see that even talk of placing our bodies in the road in front of the Tank was close to the talk of the terrorists in Camus' The Just Assassins, the dedicated, sincere, young Russians who at the start of this terrible twentieth century had not placed their own bodies in the streets but had used bombs on the royal carriages and on the horses, coachmen, and nobility.

There were no answers. All we had was each other and whatever brothers and sisters belonged in the beloved community. Our band of brothers and sisters was wide, our circle full, but we needed to feel the presence and the faith in that fellowship of all the men and women who held that dream who had ever lived, or ever would. The world was so much bigger than SNCC, or Mississippi, or the Movement.

The Herrons had just received an airmail package, their old cat from Philadelphia. Friends had sent the cat and a litter of kittens to Mississippi. Matt and Jeaninne gave two kittens to us, yellow lion like creatures. Jane named them Bayard and Philip for Rustin and Randolph; the other kitten, a fragile multicolored thing, she named Pietro Spina for the revolutionary priest in Silone's Bread and Wine, a book which greatly influenced many in the Movement. The cats were full of life and play and unconcerned with our sober thoughts.

(Early that summer, even before Neshoba, Pietro Spina died. In midsummer, on the very day of a "summit" meeting of national civil rights leaders at Tougaloo and in our house,

the leadership, led by Rustin, became divided over tactics for the MFDP at the Democratic Convention; that day Bayard, the kitten, just disappeared and was never with us again. Philip the lion grew strong and, by the end of the summer was part of our Tougaloo home and the pet of the Movement.)

We talked at the Herron home till very late. That was never a safe thing to do, for it meant Jeannette and I had to go back to Tougaloo in the dark. We would take the usual precautions, Jeannette would drive and we would call the Herrons when we arrived. If we did not call they would phone an alarm to the COFO office and Matt would start searching for us.

In our discussion that had almost become argument that evening we had lost something, our old certainty that we could understand each other, that we agreed on all important things. Now we knew that, despite this pain, we had to accept each other, to hold on to each other. We knew that we would soon feel more such separations from other friends in SNCC and the Movement.

SNCC had survived the terrible winter of the Delta but what was the price of that winter? What was lost? And, oh God, what had SNCC found? Had we really survived the gloom of winter? Could any of us survive the ferocity of the coming Freedom Summer? We five veterans that night had no answers; we did not even want to say "goodnight." Thoughts of the Winter, the Past frightened us, as did the Summer, the Future. Finally Jeannette and I left them for an uneventful trip back to Tougaloo.

Now it was a warm night in that time in the South when the days are full of summer but the nights are still spring. And five white movement veterans sat in judgment on their black brothers and sisters whose secret thoughts and dreads of midwinter had not disappeared, melting like the ice even to fertilize the black Delta earth, but now were rising from that earth in the warmth of the sun, a terrible, unknown weed whose blossom was fire and whose bitter fruit was death and whose thorny branches were fit only for the making of crowns. The smell was that of the primeval swamp. This dread seed must have lain dormant for years, for many, many years; it was carried to the swamp by a flying reptilian monster who ate some forbidden fruit and left the seed in his droppings as he flew over the swamp, seeking some bloodier meal. The seed was buried in the swamp under the silt of the Flood and a million later floods. But it slowly received the needed nourishment, from the blood of the victims of the Yazoo Indians, from the blood of the victims of Spanish, of the French who killed and were killed and could not tame the land; of the English and the Americans and the Choctaws who watered the land with blood and tears; of the black slaves used by everyone; of the blood of Union soldiers and their Rebel brothers; the blood from a hundred recent years of lynching. So the seed began to generate on the darkest night of winter in the Closed Society.

At dusk that evening two black children were burned to death as their mother tried too hard to keep the cabin warm. At midnight the hoot of a single owl was lost and merged with the wailing of a distant boat. And in that final awful hour before dawn an aged black

woman froze to death. Perhaps she was even born a slave, was taught the arts of conjury and folk medicine by an African grandmother on the banks of the Sunflower River, was baptized a Christian on the banks of the Tallahatchie River; this cold night she was just too weary to walk over the levee of the Mississippi River and find more fire wood in the swamp. When the sun finally rose above the ancient hills and cleared the morning mists of the Delta a thin gray cat stirred at the foot of the old woman's bed and howled because of the chill in the air.

The klan did not attack SNCC that night but other night-riders had surrounded the band of brothers and sisters. And a few months later, on a beautiful spring evening, with birds still singing, with lightening bugs filling the air with their sparkling, with the sweet smell of honeysuckle all around them, five white Christian Americans dared to judge SNCC, to judge the Movement, even to judge themselves.

But they could make such judgement only because of the strength, the love, the truth, they had known within the band of brothers and sisters.