

CHAPTER 2

One Common Humanity: Meeting Dr. King and a Lunch Counter Showdown

A number of other experiences and decisions had led me to that moment in June of 1960, when a man with a knife was threatening to put it through my heart.

Part of my dad's job as the American Friends Service Committee's college secretary, and then peace education secretary, was taking speakers around to various college campuses, churches, and summer institutes. As a kid, I sometimes went along and got to meet such spiritual giants as peace activist A.J. Muste and civil rights leaders Bayard Rustin and Ralph Abernathy.

Often when they finished a speaking tour, they would come back to our home on the last night. Just hearing their stories inspired me and made an indelible impression.

Ralph Abernathy told our family after his speaking tour that ours was the first white home in which he had slept. He invited us to visit him in Alabama. During spring vacation in 1956, my dad decided to accept Ralph's invitation. He took Paul and me to Montgomery, where the bus boycott was four months old.

On the way, we stopped overnight at Koinonia Partners, an interracial Christian community in rural Americus, Georgia. I had never before been in the South, and I knew of Koinonia only because we bought pecans by mail order from their farm. We slept in the guest house, which was across the road from the main community houses.

The week before we were there, members of the local Ku Klux Klan had driven by one night and shot a gun through the wall of the guest house. My clearest recollection is of sleeping on a bed with a hole in

the wall about a foot above me. It was a little unnerving, especially for a fifteen-year-old.

Koinonia offered quite an introduction to segregation in the South and to the hatred and violence faced by people who were challenging the established order. We met with Clarence Jordan—Koinonia founder, theologian, and author of the “Cotton Patch version” of scripture—as well as other community members. But that bullet through the wall left the biggest impression.

Driving on to Montgomery, we saw the comfortable, often fancy, homes of white people, contrasted with the shacks where African Americans lived. It was very eye-opening to this already wide-eyed high school student from the North.

Ralph Abernathy welcomed us warmly and drove us around Montgomery, so we could see for ourselves the total segregation of neighborhoods and churches, swimming pools and buses. We visited a church that had been bombed less than a month before we arrived. I remember noting that it had not been boarded up or marked with police tape—no sign of any official acknowledgment that this tragedy had happened.

Even more clearly emblazoned in my memory is the image of the cross at the front of the church’s sanctuary. Once hanging centered from two chains, it hung from just one, sideways and shattered. The board out front listing the pastor and sermon topic was also destroyed, and the pews were piles of splinters.

I simply could not understand how white Christians could do this to black Christians. I was stunned by the lengths to which some white folks were willing to go to try to destroy the movement for equality.

I was even more stunned that the victims of the violence were persistently saying that they were not going to give up their struggle for justice—and that they were committed to trying to love their enemies. I was deeply moved by so many people choosing to walk with dignity rather than ride the buses as second-class citizens. Seeing them get up an hour early to walk to work and get home an hour later than usual at night—refusing to hate the people who were imposing the hated system of segregation and creating this hardship—was profoundly inspiring and life-changing for me.

We would never have had the Montgomery movement if they had decided to practice “an eye for an eye.” Bombing a white church in retaliation would have launched another vicious cycle in the endless pursuit of vengeance. It all would have ended right there with a lot of

violence and death, rather than becoming a beacon of hope and the spark that would kindle the civil rights movement.

In Montgomery, we frequently stopped and greeted people on their front stoops. I remember an older black gentleman who said out of earshot of Ralph, “Before King came, things were very peaceful here.” He had grown accustomed to being a second-class citizen, and on the surface everything was peaceful. He felt that Martin Luther King Jr. and others challenging the status quo were causing commotion, which was true.

King said that if you have a boil, you have to excise it and get the pus out before you can really be healthy. But some blacks felt it was better to live with the oppression, and rest in the knowledge that their churches wouldn’t be bombed and they wouldn’t have to walk to work. I understood their fear.

I remember going to Ralph’s church after visiting the bombed one and wondering if it would be next. My family ate dinner in his home and then went to a hotel, because Ralph felt it was too dangerous for us to stay there overnight. A few months earlier, Martin Luther King’s home had been bombed.

I still have a photograph of Ralph’s daughter, Juandalynn, then four years old, and myself. I carried it in my wallet for many years, until it got so full of wrinkles that the picture was barely discernible. Unlike her, I had been brought up to believe that the police are the people who protect us. In Montgomery, police were routinely beating up, arresting, and ticketing people who challenged segregation.

Ralph had been issued a ticket for driving one mile over the speed limit. Montgomery’s City Council had declared it illegal for drivers to offer rides in the carpools that had been organized to facilitate the bus boycott—ostensibly for lack of taxi licenses. New ways were always being invented to harass people in the movement. I was heartened to hear that some of the white women picked up their maids so they didn’t have to walk to work, even though this upset their husbands.

I realized when we were in Montgomery that we were hearing and witnessing things the rest of the country barely knew were happening. The boycott wasn’t yet big news, and “nonviolent direct action” hadn’t become a common term in our national lexicon.

My dad, who gave me a copy of Mahatma Gandhi’s *All Men Are Brothers* when I was in high school, had studied Gandhi and written papers on nonviolence in his years at seminary. But here was non-violence being put into practice in a political struggle in the United

States from a Christian faith perspective. Witnessing its power was an important next step in my life journey.

We attended a Montgomery Improvement Association meeting, amid a crowd of black clergy and one white pastor, who worked closely with the black pastors to organize the carpools. Martin Luther King greeted us and warmly welcomed our family to the meeting: “these young people from the North have come to see the freedom struggle.” He was young, though twenty-six seemed old to me at fifteen. With serious intent, he conducted the meeting and played a positive role by getting everyone’s input and engagement.

I was impressed with King as a human being, and for the key role he was playing in the movement. But I had no idea that he was going to be one of my heroes for life—and a prominent figure in history. He was starting to do some speaking and fundraising away from Montgomery. But we had no sense that this was the beginning of a very historic period in which African Americans were going to rise up and demand justice all over this country, or that the nonviolent methods employed in Montgomery would influence a whole movement.

Bayard Rustin, who had been part of the first Freedom Ride to desegregate public buses back in 1947, told us many stories of his early meetings with King. Bayard was sitting with King one day at his dining room table and saw a gun on one of the chairs. According to Bayard, the two of them had a heart-to-heart conversation. He understood King’s desire to defend himself and his family, but he knew that if King used that gun on his enemies, it would be contrary to the spirit of what they were trying to do and would eventually destroy the movement.

Bayard and Glen Smiley, a pastor from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, spent significant time with King, helping him deepen his understanding of, and commitment to, nonviolence, both personally and for the struggle. Later the AFSC’s Jim Bristol, a colleague of my dad who was living in India, arranged for King and his wife, Coretta Scott King, to tour that country and learn more about Gandhi and the power of nonviolent direct action to create change. King’s conversion was very crucial for the movement.

Perhaps nothing had more of an impact on me as a teenager than my visit to Montgomery and my brief encounter with Martin Luther King. I was moved by the determination and forgiving spirit of the people I had met in the movement and, painful as it was, I wanted to keep opening myself to understanding segregation and other forms of

injustice and the struggle to create change. That was very much on my mind as I pondered where I should go to college.

On August 6, 1958, Hiroshima Day, I participated in a peace vigil of silent prayer and fasting at the White House—an all-day plea for an end to nuclear weapons testing and the nuclear arms race on the anniversary of the bombing of Japan. At the end of that day, I went to Washington, DC’s Florida Avenue Friends Meeting for a period of silent meditation. There I received the closest thing to a leading that I had ever experienced. I felt a deep clarity, as if the Great Spirit were speaking directly to me: “You should go to Howard University.”

The next day I walked across town to Howard to find out how to apply. Bayard Rustin was one of the first people to encourage me to do what my heart was telling me to do and go to Howard. But when I went home to share this news with my parents, my mother was heartbroken. I had already been accepted at prestigious Swarthmore College, and she had her heart set on me going there.

I still had enough in me of the nine-year-old who wanted to please his mother that I agreed to a compromise. I started college at Swarthmore and spent one year there trying to get more people of color admitted. My sophomore year, I transferred to Howard University, with the hope of helping that predominantly African American institution integrate from the other direction.

Five months after I entered Howard, on February 1, 1960, four students from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in Greensboro sat down at the lunch counter inside a Woolworth’s store, and launched the student sit-in movement. By the next weekend, my friends from Howard and I had set up a picket line at the Woolworth’s store in Washington, DC. I was convinced that my leading to go to Howard had to do with being part of that struggle and embracing the opportunity to practice active nonviolence in the movement for racial equality.

Most of the restaurants, hotels, and movie theaters in Washington were already integrated, but in Maryland and Virginia almost everything was segregated. Even African ambassadors to the United Nations could not eat in public facilities in Maryland when traveling between DC and New York. So my African American friends and I began going to Maryland on Saturday mornings.

We would show up at a drugstore and try to get something to eat. Invariably, the lunch counter would be closed and we would be arrested. Unlike most of my peers in college, who spent their weekends at parties,

I spent many of my weekends my sophomore year in jail. We sang freedom songs and shared stories to enliven our spirits behind bars. First thing Monday morning, we would be in court, and back in classes not long after that—until the following Saturday morning, when it happened all over again.

We went to Maryland because the American Nazi Party was active in Virginia. George Lincoln Rockwell, the founder and commander of the militant hate group, lived in Arlington. He was threatening to lynch anyone who challenged Virginia's segregation laws, which imposed a \$500 fine and a six-month jail sentence on anyone who tried to integrate a public facility. So, we kept going to Maryland.

We finished our college exams in June, and still nobody had challenged Virginia's unjust laws. We felt that we had to. By then there were sit-ins by students all over the South, and lots of young people were going to jail.

We undertook additional nonviolence training, knowing we were going to face far more physical violence and verbal abuse in Virginia than we had in Maryland. We participated in role plays to strengthen our courage and practice nonviolence in response to the expected violence. Several people decided during those exercises in self-discipline not to go to Virginia. We were only nineteen, twenty years old, and some students knew they weren't up for facing the inevitable danger.

On June 10, ten African American students from Howard, a white woman from another college, and I walked into the heart of the hatred and sat down at the lunch counter at the People's Drug Store in Arlington. Within minutes we heard sirens coming from several directions. We steeled ourselves for the worst. But the store owner informed the police he didn't want us arrested; apparently he didn't want the negative publicity. But he put up "Closed" signs on the counter and refused to serve us food.

We stayed until the store closed that night and then went back the next morning. Those two days were probably the most challenging of my life. We grew very hungry as that first sixteen-hour day stretched on. All sorts of racist epithets and chants of "Go back to Russia" were hurled at us. We worked at remaining calm and peaceful, which became more of a challenge as the harassment escalated to physical attacks.

People spat on us. They shoved lit cigarettes down our shirts, and one angry man threw a firecracker at us. They kicked us off the stools and punched us in our chests and stomachs so violently that we fell to the floor. A young African American woman sitting next to me got hit, which



Sit-in at People's Drug Store in Arlington, VA, June 1960. I am on the far right.
[Photo: Virginia Historical Society]

I found particularly difficult to watch. American Nazi Party “storm troopers” showed up with their swastikas and pictures of apes, which they waved around, taunting us, shouting, “Is we, or is we ain’t equals?”

Late in the evening of the second day, I was reading from a pocket New Testament I had with me. I had turned to Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, to the same passage that I had remembered as a seven-year-old being pelted with ice balls: “Love your enemies . . . Do good to those who hate you.”

I was meditating on those words when I heard a voice behind me say, “You nigger lover. Get out of this store in two seconds, or I’m going to stab this through your heart.” I glanced behind me at a man with the most terrible look of hatred I had ever seen. His eyes blazed, his jaw quivered, and his shaking hand held a switchblade—about half an inch from my heart.

Loving my enemy was suddenly more than just a discussion in Sunday school or a confrontation among schoolboys over ice balls. For a fleeting moment I doubted that Jesus meant to include a man so hateful among those who deserved to be loved. I had just seconds to respond to him, and I was grateful for those many hours of role playing and practice the previous two days.

I turned around and tried my best to smile. Looking him in the eye, I said to him, “Friend, do what you believe is right, and I will still try to love you.” Both his jaw and his hand dropped. Miraculously, he turned away and walked out of the store.

That was the most powerful experience of my twenty years of life. It confirmed my belief in the power of love, the power of goodness, the power of God working through us to overcome hatred and violence. I had a profound sense that nonviolence really works. At that moment, nonviolence became much more to me than a philosophical idea or a tactic that had once made a difference in Gandhi’s India. It became the way I wanted to relate to other human beings, a way of life, a way of working for change.

My response had touched something in my accuser. He had seen me as an enemy. But through my response, I believe I became a human being to him. The humanity in each of us touched. If we treat our opponents as human beings, there’s a reasonably good chance that they will respond in kind. What better way could there be to disarm the world’s violence?

I reflected a lot on that experience later. I came to realize that I had done not only the right thing but also the most effective thing I could have done to protect myself. If I had tried to fight back, I probably would have been stabbed. Even if I had won the fight, my accuser’s hatred and anger would only have grown stronger, and we both would have come out of the confrontation wounded. I hoped that by doing what I did, I opened an opportunity for him to rethink whether hating a person with whom he disagrees is better than trying to find common humanity with someone he saw as “other.”

That morning the *Northern Virginia Sun* had published a front-page feature about the first day of our sit-in. And that night a mob of five hundred people was waiting outside, jeering at us and spewing death threats. Some had rocks in their hands. I really didn’t know if we were going to get out of that drugstore alive.

Scared, hungry, and exhausted, we decided to write a statement appealing to the religious and community leaders of Arlington to use their influence to get public facilities open to everyone. Behind a flimsy barricade of beach chairs, we stood at the front door and read it aloud. We ended our appeal by declaring, “If nothing has changed in a week, we will be back.” After all that we had endured, those words were very hard to utter.

Some supportive media people who were covering the story had cars right outside the drugstore. They hustled us out of there and got

us safely back into Washington. Then we shook for six days, trying to decide if we had the courage to go back.

We were inspired by students in other parts of the country who were facing even worse dangers. We felt their moral support and took comfort in knowing that we weren't acting alone. But, still, we weren't sure we were strong enough to go through it all again.

On the sixth day, we got a phone call telling us that the restaurants and lunch counters in Arlington would be desegregated by the end of June. It was one of the happiest moments of my life!

We learned that the religious leaders in Arlington had met after our sit-in, and then talked with the business leaders of the community. Twelve students with some courage had touched something in the hearts and consciences of these community leaders. We had called upon them to reflect on what was happening in their community, and to use their influence to try to change things. And they did.

We were part of a much larger movement that was transforming communities all across the South. We were challenging segregation laws head-on. Together we were bringing that issue into the light so that the cities and the entire country had to deal with it.

I learned the most important lesson in my life up to that point—and maybe still: that a few people with some courage and commitment to nonviolence don't have to just sit and curse and feel powerless when terrible things are happening. We can challenge and transform injustice, violence, and oppression to achieve a more just society. We can change the course of history!

Among my fellow students who participated in the sit-ins was Stokely Carmichael, who emerged as a leader of the Nonviolent Action Group at Howard. A year after our sit-in, in June 1961, he was arrested after a Freedom Ride in Jackson, Mississippi, and spent fifty-three days in a six-by-nine-foot cell at Parchman State Prison Farm, where at nineteen years old he was the youngest detainee among the hundreds of other Freedom Riders from all around the country who had come to Mississippi to challenge segregation in the heart of the south.

One night the sheriff ran an air conditioner and fans until the temperature dropped to thirty-eight degrees. When Stokely was being strong-armed by guards, he began singing "I'm gonna tell God how you treat me"; soon other prisoners joined in the song. Stokely was notorious for keeping up morale in the brutal prison by telling jokes.

Stokely was very active in SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), eventually becoming the group's chair. He spent a year

in Mississippi after his release from Parchman, where he witnessed white racists regularly driving by and shooting into the houses where SNCC members were staying. By the time he returned to Howard, he was preaching that the white race was the devil and that hope lay only in total separation of the races, which grieved me greatly. One evening, the two of us had a conversation that went long into the night, about the effectiveness of nonviolence in the struggle for justice and the future of our country.

Many years later, when I was living in San Francisco, I heard that Stokely, by then having taken the name Kwame Ture, was coming to be part of an event at La Peña, a local cultural center. I'll never forget the warm hug this old friend gave me after his talk. The two of us sat for a while in the back row of the auditorium with our arms around each other, listening to live music from the stage.

I will always be grateful for that moment. There's politics, and then there's the human dimension. His knowledge that I had committed my life to the struggle for justice was stronger between us than the political hurt he had suffered from so many other white people.

During college I had the rare blessing of hearing Martin Luther King preach almost every month at the Howard University Chapel. I began to feel King's spirit even more deeply, with hope and tremendous gratitude for his life. In August 1963, I joined the hundreds of thousands of people who converged on the city for the March on Washington. Bayard Rustin was the main organizer. I can still remember exactly where I was standing amid that huge sea of humanity when I heard King's "I Have a Dream" speech—and the tremendous hope I felt for our country turning away from segregation and injustice and living up to its highest ideals of freedom and justice for all.

I was deeply moved when I learned that in 1964, when King came back from accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Norway, he went directly back to Washington to speak with President Lyndon Johnson about the need for a voting rights bill. Johnson respected King, but he felt that such legislation would be impossible to get through Congress. He counseled King to wait a few years and then bring it up again.

Wasting no time, King went back to the South and organized with others the voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama. Images of African Americans lined up at the Selma courthouse being beaten and arrested day after day after day for attempting to vote spread out over our newspapers and television screens. Those brave souls aroused the conscience of the nation, and within months Congress passed the Voting Rights Act.

I was heartened when King took the great risk of confronting not only racism and violence at home, but also our nation's militarism and violence around the globe, particularly in Vietnam when on April 4, 1967, he began speaking out clearly and strongly against the war in Vietnam.

In November 1967, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference planned the Poor People's Campaign, focused on economic justice, jobs, and housing. Those of us in DC were anticipating with great excitement the thousands of people who would again converge on the city in the spring of 1968, to build a powerful nonviolent movement to demand justice for poor people in this country. The organizers had drawn up an "Economic Bill of Rights," which they hoped would be passed by Congress. I was ready to follow wherever King led, anxious to be a part of transforming America according to his dream.

On April 4, 1968, I was returning from a conference on World Law and Disarmament at Princeton University. My ride stopped to let me out on Connecticut Avenue at the edge of DC, where I planned to catch a bus to the southeast section of the city where I lived. Just before I got out of the car, the news of King's assassination came on the radio.

When King was killed, I was devastated and in a state of shock and depression. Losing that beautiful and powerful spiritual leader was a terrible setback. It felt like the possibility for transformation of our country had been irretrievably shattered.

I got on my bike the next day and rode up Fourteenth Street, where distraught and desperate people had set blocks of buildings on fire. I understood their grief and rage, but I felt that they were killing the dream. People were firebombing stores, throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails, while fire trucks raced up and down the street. Feeling lost amid the chaos and smoke, I tried to figure out what to do.

I eventually realized that I was faced with a choice—to stay in a depression, or to commit myself to continue the work that King had begun. Fortunately, the people closest to King decided to go forward with the Poor People's Campaign, to honor his memory and help realize the dream.

I agreed to help lead nonviolence training workshops in local churches for people who wanted to be involved with the Poor People's Campaign. I also pitched in to build plywood shanties and set them up on Washington's National Mall. It was a very rainy spring and summer, and water sometimes two and three feet deep pooled around the shanties. But despite the downpours and the mud, people stayed for six

weeks, until the police arrested them and destroyed their encampment for equality.

One afternoon, five hundred people from the campaign attempted to deliver their petition for economic justice to Congress. They were stopped at the edge of the Capitol grounds, and those who refused to disperse were arrested. In solidarity, a group of Quakers tried to pick up the march where they had left off. We too were stopped by the police. We knelt and held an impromptu worship service until we also were arrested.

We spent two weeks on the top floor of the sweltering DC jail in the middle of summer, without air conditioning or fans. What a group we were—African American, Latino, Native American, and a few of us pale ones—trying to fulfill Martin Luther King’s dream. Though we were physically uncomfortable due to the stifling heat and lack of movement, we were animated in our discussions about America’s future and our commitments to bring about fundamental change in our society.

Nothing we would do could bring King back. But we understood that his spirit and his dream lived on in our efforts. Death didn’t have the final word. The people who endured the rain and the arrests on the mall were right to name their courageous presence “Resurrection City.”