

An Epitaph That Keeps Giving

© By Timothy L. Jenkins,

delivered at Mississippi's 50th Anniversary of Freedom Summer

Tougaloo College, June 27, 2014

I have worn many titles over the years — counselor, professor, trustee, university president, governor of the Postal Service, and erstwhile radical emeritus. But none is greater than that of a SNCC organizer in Mississippi. I thank you, Judy Richardson, for reminding me of who I once had the honor of being.

Go Tell It On A Mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumbling down. O' Mary, Don't Cha Weep, Don't Cha Moan, pharaoh's army got drowned. We've Been 'Buked And We've Been Scorned, we've been talked about sure's we born. But We'll Never Turn Back, we will go, we shall go to see what the end will be. We've Been In The Storm So Long, but The Storm Is Passing Over. This May Be The Last Time, we don't know. Let us earn the right to sing — Lord We Done Done What Cha Told Us to Do. — These are the hymns of the Movement from the souls of black folk.

This week's commemorative coming together in Jackson, Mississippi, is to acquaint the larger world with living men and women of whom it may read, but soon will no longer hear or see and to remind us all of those who paid the ultimate price for engaging themselves in this struggle for equality. In Freedom Summer, we moved beyond human rights as sentiment to translate those rights into moral action. While some warned my brother, Charlie Cobb, "This nonviolent stuff'll get you killed," we ceased to view disciplined morality as a parallel universe to politics and commerce. Our triumph was to have successfully entered into the sufferings of others as though they were our own. Our pledge was to end white ignorance concerning all that was everyday black knowledge. --And that struggle continues fiercely in the high and low courts of our land as well as in the hearts and minds of the people.

Freedom Summer invoked not only the fears of pain, injury, starvation, and predictable danger but embedded the profound awareness of our own mortality and that of our brothers and sisters. That both dreads were overcome was a testament of the durability of hope, and the strength of the songs that carried us through on their waves of light. That summer was a collective moment when a small band of converts viewed the legacy of their acts as equally important as their lives. This work experience provided proof that all energy is, as the scientist had promised, truly indestructible! And it proved what had been prophesied that everywhere that love has gone, is still and ever lit with light.

We invested our gift of youth in the wager that what we ought to be, goes beyond our knowledge of what we are. There is neither the beginning or an end of Freedom Summer. The changes going on then were similar to those that had occurred in the past. And forces, social and political, still at work in the present are exactly the same as those immemorial. Freedom Summer like abolition and the Civil War before simply laid another axe at the root of the inequality tree.

The revealing time we spent in Mississippi taught us that legalisms encourage fictions under which injustice breeds, selectively allowing the law to be made a cloak for malice. Our mission was to convert people from subjects to citizens. The former are governed by a superior's will, the latter by a superior law. We urged against the people's fear of political rulers to instead have political rulers come to fear the people.

Freedom Summer was not political form over substance, it was political form transformed into substance. This made it the summer that must not be forgotten. Those who shared our season expressly rejected the unwisdom of Ayn Rand's "never live for the sake of another man" in favor of Mandela's, "now is the time to stand together against those from any quarter who wish to destroy the freedom of all of us."

This is an occasion of remembering for the future symbolized in the Adinkra emblem of Sankofa -- a ceremonial design depicting a bird in full forward flight with its head turned back to never forget from whence it came as a guide to tomorrow's youth. This intergenerational conference is our collective Sankofa moment.

Lest we forget, it is easy to glorify the uniqueness of the sun, when one's eyes remain ignorant of the larger constellations of which it is but a minor player. So let this be an occasion for a more honest perspective than the narrow lens of popular history which only gives focus to a few faces and names, while ignoring the broader universe in which they were at best a minor part and but an abbreviated moment. Let this be a time to allow we few, we seldom known and happy few, who early answered the summons into the breach to have the larger community, at long last, reflect mindfully and soulfully on those who once were party to our ranks, who remain still and ever keepers of the flame, wholly worthy of the nation's praise as any of its bemedaled soldiers in arms.

Sprung by and large from the nurturing soil of the social strength which is the South, their entitlement to freedom was innate and not to be denied or held hostage by the threat of opposition or even death. Their insight was stronger than their eyesight. They saw beyond the narrow Now to perceive a wide Tomorrow. They knew life should be made more than they had been allotted even at the price of ultimate sacrifice and they understand that tomorrow never dies!

Shakespeare lied when he said, "The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones." The good of our silent comrades remains incarnate in the happy giggles of youngsters swimming in a welcoming public pool, in the pride of elders repeatedly casting ballots without intimidation or molestation, and in common citizens fearlessly and loudly denouncing hypocrisy and public theft of any and all colors, against any and all odds and in the face of any and all pretense of power. Even without knowing their names, the nation must remember the good which was accomplished by their lives and not extinguished with their last farewells.

The ancient Egyptians prophesied that the recitation of a departed's name would invoke their life anew. In keeping with that time-honored precept it is fitting that we call the roll of our separated during this gathering that may well be the last time we can all do so together. Befittingly we now project and enlarge their images before our eyes and in our hearts on the theater screens here at Tougaloo to underscore the immensity of their gifts. As the cameras roll, look on with wonder this one more time at the 'sheroes' and heroes it was our honor to know

We can never forget their work, their cheerful camaraderie, and their faith in things larger than themselves. We tell them rest not in peace, but rest in triumph. Shame be to us, if while we still know life we ever abandon the sacred trust of your remembrance. You will not sleep alone, nor without special honor from we, your spared sisters and brothers in the struggle.

There is a stubborn mythology, dare I say, theology, that all of the historic giants have been ten feet tall. But as Howard University's Mordicai Wyatt Johnson would remind, "T'is not so." This is our occasion to lift up the faded little giants to their deserved stature as paragons of courage, humility and silent sacrifice worthy of the big screen and the Broadway stage, or better still, hymns of praise in quiet, heartfelt moments of reflection, admiration and sobriety by all who believe in freedom. The lemon juice collecting in our eyes on this occasion is not of mourning, but celebration of how our hearts did burn within us as we walked with them along the way.

Let this be the counter-memorial day to that of the World Wars against the so-called "greatest tyranny the world has ever known." We stage this tribute without any perverse theatrical fanfare of military drills and the ceremonial awards of purple hearts to sing and extoll unspeakably violent exploits against those with other flags. On the contrary, our warriors came only in peace and refused enemy status even to their foes.

This coming together at this time and this place is when we get to stand up in anthem to our combat corps, who did not just dream dreams for themselves, but protected and realized the dreams of others. Who better to play Taps for such warriors, if not we ourselves, who walked with them along the way during that Summer that must not be forgotten? Let freedom ring as long as we have tongues to teach and hearts to hear and feel the honest gift of their lives.

That concludes the previously-approved King James version of my eulogy to the past.

Now I hear the whispering voices of my elder brothers, Vincent Harding and Martin King saying, "But Timothy, you mus'nt stop there without a Revised Standard Version of a eulogy for the future to ask the primordial biblical question raised in Ezekiel 37 — 'Can These Dry Bones Live?'" To not say more in response would only lay a verbal wreath at the foot of our venerable heroes' names and walk away. To avoid such criticism, we must do more than craft a rhetorical wax museum like that of Madame Tussauds — exact in detail and utterly without the breath of

life. Instead the dry bones of our departed must be given life anew through us as a living eulogy for the future.

That can only be done if we and each and every one of those coming after us with similar beliefs picks up at least one project of a departed hero to make it our own.—And in keeping with the credo of SNCC, one can never ask of others what one will not do one's self.—I share with you then, my pledge upon hearing that Lawrence Guyot was no longer with us. — That unwelcome news didn't surprise me in and of itself, rather the surprise to me, as well as Dick Gregory, was that a person of his fierce and outspoken antagonism to perverted power had died a natural death and of natural causes.

Guyot was especially endeared to me after my suffering an, albeit benign, form of extraordinary rendition at his hands one summer day when he bundled me into the back seat of a car in front of my home and drove me straightaway to Orangeburg, South Carolina to join in the first Obama presidential campaign. There we were walking the steamy streets of Orangeburg and knocking on doors the same as we had done decades before as little more than boys on the streets of Greenwood, Mississippi. Have mercy, it was one thing to follow a seven AM to eleven PM workday in the sixties, but it is quite another having to do so in your own sixties! However, we couldn't help being motivated to push on when we learned that the HBCU students of Orangeburg State and Voorhees Universities knew nothing of the Orangeburg State Massacre of yesteryear that had shocked the nation during the height of the original student movement. “Old sheep they know the way, young lambs they got to learn.”

That dramatic discovery led Guyot to redouble his educational commitment by inspiring and relentlessly devoting himself to liberate subsequent generations of young people from their innocence on the requirements of history and liberation struggles. Once I learned he was gone, I vowed to pick up his advocacy of the textbook, *Putting the Movement Back Into Civil Rights Teaching* and I joined the sponsoring board of Teaching For Change (teachingforchange.org) to continue his outspoken advocacy. I could do no less.

And you should do no less by committing yourself to some unfinished task of at least one of the heroes we have lionized here as your personal oath. We each owe this as our affirmative answer to the divine question, “Can These Dry Bones Live?” Let us each take the baton from a frozen hand to answer that searching question by continuing their race as in an everlasting relay. Then when the final chapter of our lives is written, perhaps we will be able to join them in saying, Lord, I Too Done Done What Cha Told Me To Do!

Let all who believe in freedom and are committed to abundantly fulfilling the future through these heroic names join in a resounding and collective, Amen!