

**“Let Him Down Easy”
A FUNERAL SERMON FOR
CHARLES FREDERICK McDEW**

at Massillon, Ohio, April 14, 2018

by Timothy L. Jenkins, © 2018

*Who can retell the things that befell us?
Who can count them?
In every age a hero or sage
Came to our aid*

—a Jewish Folk Song

To dear Eva, Eric, Mark, Beryl, and all other justifiable members of the Charles McDew family and friends.

This is more than a Home-Going. This is also an expression of Thanks-Giving,

*“Once in Persia reigned a king,
Who upon his signet ring
Graved a maxim true and wise,
Which, if held before his eyes,
Gave him counsel at a glance
Fit for every change and chance.
Solemn words, and these are they;
Even this shall pass away.”*

A little more than a decade ago this Maxim sufficiently reminded McDew of his mortality in a temporary world, that he set about the design for this ultimate farewell as a concomitant part of his retirement proceedings upon leaving Metropolitan State University in Minnesota after his long teaching career. Accordingly he reached out to several of us back then, to make it as a form of dress rehearsal for when this inevitable day should come. He specifically called on Chuck Neblitt, family members, and others close to him to be in attendance. And he specified that he wanted me to “preach”! When I demurred about coming to Minneapolis in sub zero temperatures, he emphasized that our silver tongued soul sister singer Bettie Mae Fikes was coming from the warmth of California to dispel any hint of my reluctance.

But in inviting me he made it clear that he didn’t want a lecture from me, nor a dissertation, or a mere chronicle of the civil rights events of his life, including the long-suffered arrests and abuses of his life with the usual shibboleths, palliatives, and platitudes. ‘Cause . . . while he had long ago converted to the practices of Judaism, he didn’t call for me to recite the rituals of Kaddish. He was well aware of the Hebrew traditions of spending seven days following a death and burial with the family in hushed and solemn prayers to be followed by a 30-day period of strict religious observances by family and friends, until the 11th month for final emergence from mourning.

But thank goodness by virtue of his adoption of the Hebrew faith, he did not see a funeral or its aftermath as an expression of extreme grief nor to convince those assembled that his life had been a crystal stair.

In a further amendment of tradition, he had enough epigenetic residue from his pentecostal and apostolical parents to believe that beyond the formulaic recitation of ancient prayers, his funeral could not and would not be complete without an honest to goodness soul rocking sermon. Such epigenetic roots run deep and while not traceable in genes or chromosomes, still they control our deepest feelings, thoughts and values. Thus he let it be known to family and friends, he wanted even me as an unorthodox vehicle for this sermon; having seen me more than once don that office in the rallies at churches throughout our crusading SNCC years all through the South to bind up the many losses of our Beloved Community in the face of tragedy.

Hence my adoption of appropriate purple and Kente vestments and a yamalka today to blend the worlds of our spiritual traditions – Now can I get an Amen from the believers among you?

And to have a sermon you have to have a biblical text. Hence I lift up for consideration the 37th Chapter of Ezekiel, which anticipates the ultimate arrival of the chosen one, the Messiah, who would finally allow God to do away with death by bringing back to life all of the deceased. And that text raises the primordial question: Can these dry bones live? – to which the scriptures then give an evasive answer—“Lord, you know?” by way of answering a question with a question. – Down through the ages that has remained the primordial question for us and God to answer.

Shakespeare tried giving his answer on the lips of Mark Antony in the theatrical drama of *Julius Caesar* saying that “The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.” – But believing people know that, at least in this instance, Shakespeare was a liar!

We can see the powerful proof that good lives on after death when we see the revolutionary good that oft-martyred “do-gooders” have been able to manifest not only throughout the South before and during the 60s and 70s and 80s but throughout the world though many of them now sleep and leave it to us to live their dreams for them.

The concrete proof of this comes whenever the South hears the loudsome giggles and laughter of children swimming and splashing in a desegregated swimming pool, or see an elderly black couple leaning on one another to walk to the polls without fear of intimidation to cast an unmolested vote for the candidate of their choice. Or when a black farmer successfully applies for a loan to plant or harvest his or her crops, or when eager students graduate from a school based on merit rather than melanin. These are the living fruits of the martyred or long-deceased. Hence the good left by their frozen hands lives on long after them to answer that primordial question, “can these dry bones live?”

Nationally everywhere we look abundant modern political proof is plain. The record shows that even in woebegone Mississippi there are more black elected officials now than in any other State of the Union. From the election of Kennedy in 1960 to the election of Barack

Obama in 2008 the early SNCC voter mobilization drives, along with those of others, in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Arkansas, Louisiana, the Carolinas, Virginia, and Tennessee delivered the primary and the Electoral College votes that made black hopes live anew. Don't tell me that the dreams and work of martyrs and deceased believers haven't and still aren't making a difference. Surely their dry bones will endure and stay alive forever! Our task is to offer veneration through our own acts of courage and conviction to honor those ashes forward. The song may have ended, but the melody lingers on

Now lest we forget, in spite of Chuck's monumental achievement in making public policy, it is residual folk wisdom that our Guest of Honor was characteristically a court jester. Even stalwarts like Julian Bond record that they would break out in laughter when they simply saw "Dews" coming, because of his legendary humor and wise cracking ways. But we must not forget that he was not just fun and games, but a uniquely cutting and insightful intellect.—To prove this I turned to the indexes of some three dozen books in my small library on Civil Rights and Black history and more specifically the accomplishments of the SNCC student movement to find words like these uttered directly from Chuck's mouth and to the historical scholar's pen when he said:

- "Militancy and wisdom must not become enemies. Spontaneous expressions of despair are no substitute for disciplined political movements for social justice. The psychological dynamic which manifests itself in apathy or sporadic outbursts of rage are both the products of oppression."
- "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there, so first either get a map or draw one of your own."
- "The most important stories from the past are often forgotten and when we forget that from obscure origins can emerge individuals with the power to change the world."
- "You are important not because of who you are in this world. You are important for who you can become."

McDew speaking to students, urged the following:

- "It is my hope to quicken the silent warrior within you."
- "You need to get on board and row hard, or the ship of state is going to drift or be towed backwards."
- "Get out of your rocking chairs; there's a war going on and you are its targets."
- "Reagan, of all people, was right when he said freedom is just one generation from extinction."
- "We can be civil without being silent!"
- "Silence is the face of evil; to not act is to act."
- "Whatever is morally wrong must not and should not be treated or excused as politically right."
- "Whites who stood firm with us were the biblical righteous among the nations."
- "The struggle for black equality the sit-ins have inspired was first and foremost to build a new image of ourselves in our own minds."
- "The role of the Civil Rights Movement is to promote a full-scale social revolution in the U.S. by activating people who feel freedom as a passion in their lives and be

willing to make it more than an abstract concept.”

- “We must not fight to make the world safe for democracy. We must fight to make democracy safe for the world.”
- We knew we were going to change the face of America within five years or we’d be dead or crazy. . . . Man we just plain jumped off a cliff blind-folded and we learned to fly on the way down. Ella Baker provided our metaphorical wings.”

Ella said Chuck was the right choice to become SNCC’s chairman after Marion Barry because he was the only nominee who didn’t want the job. Uniquely enough he was the only member of our team who in 2016 unflinchingly predicted a Trump victory beforehand in spite of the pundits and polls as well as universal opinion!

These are not the words and acts of a minstrel or jokester; these are the words and acts of a strategist and a warrior! His favorite rabbi, who had befriended him at Orangeburg State College in Orangeburg, South Carolina, in the 60s introduced him to Talmudic wisdom and inspired him to recite these words over and over:

*If I am not for myself, then for whom?
If I am not for myself, then who shall be for me?
But If I am only for myself, what am I?
If the time is not now, then when?*

And he took these words to heart for the rest of his days. While I am not much of a fan of Frank Sinatra, I must admit he must have been speaking the heart of Chuck McDew when he wrote the song, My Way:

*And now, the end is near
And so I face the final curtain
My friend, I’ll say it clear
I’ll state my case, of which I’m certain
I’ve lived a life that’s full
I’ve traveled each and every highway
But more, much more than this
I did it my way
Regrets, I’ve had a few
But then again, too few to mention
I did what I had to do
And saw it through without exemption
I planned each chartered course
Each careful step along the byway
And more, much more than this,
I did it my way.
Yes, there were times, I’m sure you knew
When I bit off more than I could chew
But through it all, when there was doubt
I ate it up and spit it out*

*I faced it all and I stood tall
And did it my way
I've loved, I've laughed and cried
I've had my fill my share of losing
And now, I still can say, I did it my way.*

Dews was able to walk with power and princes without losing his common bond born of his steel town roots right here in Massillon. He was the same guy whether sitting on the silk and mahogany furniture at Harry Belafonte's home on Riverside Drive in Manhattan, New York, or role playing at a formal dinner hosted by the scions of the Rothchilds in Paris, France, to raise movement cash, as well as when perched on wooden benches in a share-cropper's sparsely furnished shack in Greenwood, Mississippi, or listening at a pecan picker's kitchen table in Albany, Georgia. He was comfortable in himself which made him a comfort zone for others. He believed in miracles and in ***we the people!***

When I received this invitation from the family, I knew I would be preaching to a diverse audience today here in steel town Massillon to a mix of ethnicities and heritages variously attached to Chuck throughout his life. But I want to fold with a word addressed primarily to the core constituents of Chuck's life—his fellow travelers in the Movement, his fellow SNCC Warriors.

We can salute ourselves for having come this mighty long way with Chuck to reify what it has meant to try to be a "Beloved Community." And what more heroic words than these paraphrasing Shakespeare's *Henry V*:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers and sisters, . . . who first did on Saint Crispin's Day foreswear against all promises of passage to safe careers to go against the dragons in their lairs. And against all odds except for arrogant hopes, we bested every terror the beasts could throw and answered back in history's ear the whispers of the sweet Invictus that our fathers vowed fresh off the boat. And all alas the earth was churned beneath the weight of our words, songs, and feet, 'til freshened with the dew of martyrs' blood, the seeds of hope have issued forth first buds and now abundant fruit.

Such were those days with Chuck that men and women, who laid a-bed back then, now consider themselves accursed to have cheated themselves of their greatest honors of an apt rendezvous with the future's fate.

Now, for him who bore the lash of yesterday comes today's bidding of farewell. With less comely shoulders than before, but bearing greater a nobelman's repose, accept our fond adieux. We, who were among that happy few that claimed the stars, send kisses with consecrated wings to shepherd you to the retirement of Glory. We who believed in freedom with you will confidently continue the unfinished business of lifting the last burden from the shoulders of nature's last oppressed being among the world's despised of mankind. He slipped his mortal coil, but he left indelible footprints pointing onward and upward!

In defiance of the expectations that our enlightenment should allow us to accept McDew's death as but a seasonal event, our mothers taught us the blessing of mourning. Not just the sophisticated rhythms of measured speech, historical antidotes or poetic allusions, instead just plain old down-home moans and groans are far more eloquent now. The uttering worthy of motherless children, when nobody knows their sorrows, when over the road they've trod; we come having earned the right to weep even while we know that pharaoh's army got drowned beforehand. Our's is a grief without the burdens of despair. Surely this will not be the last time ***We All Sing Together.***

Our minds hark back to the hard wooden benches of those little white-washed chapels of the South where we listened to ebonic testimonies, sang the people's Zion hymns, lent our ears to soulful exhortation, and first saw the light.

All politics aside, all false modesty abandoned, all long-term strategies postponed, this is a moment of loss, of silence, and of knowing without the vocabulary of syntax. McDew's flight into immortality returns us all to a palpable recognition of the unique powers of relentless defiance, searching intelligence and fearless individuality that were his.

He must have been whispering to himself the closing words of Sterling Brown's ***Odyssey of Big Boy***, when his heart was struck on April 3rd:

*Lemme be wid Casey Jones,
Lemme be wid Stagolee,
Lemme be wid such like men
When Death takes hol' on me,
When Death takes hol' on me.*

So pallbearers, let him down easy and take your time to dust his coffin with the earth, as the scriptures require, but do take your time, take your blessed time.

What we can mournfully celebrate today is that we had the common privilege in our yester-years to collectively suffer with such meaning that it could outshine the sun.

Let his epitaph read: "Keep Fighting and Believing Until We Overcome!"

Oh be grateful, all ye people. Oh be grateful and clap your hands!

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Charles McDew, 79, Tactician for Student Civil Rights Group, Dies

By SAM ROBERTS, APRIL 13, 2018

Charles McDew joined a celebrity fund-raiser for SNCC hosted by the singer and actor Theodore Bikel in 1963. From left, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Mr. McDew, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, the singer Nina Simone, Mr. Bikel and the civil rights leader James Forman. *Photo Credit: Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust.*



Photo Credit: Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust.

Charles McDew, whose three arrests in two days as a college student for violating South Carolina's forbidding racial codes transformed him into a civil rights pioneer, died on April 3 in West Newton, Mass. He was 79.

The cause was a heart attack he had while visiting his longtime partner, Beryl Gilfix, for the Pass-over holiday, his daughter, Eva Goodman, said. Mr. McDew, who had converted to Judaism, lived in

St. Paul.

In 1960, just months after those three arrests, Mr. McDew, as a college freshman from Ohio, became a founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a civil rights group dedicated to direct action but nonviolent tactics in fighting for racial justice.

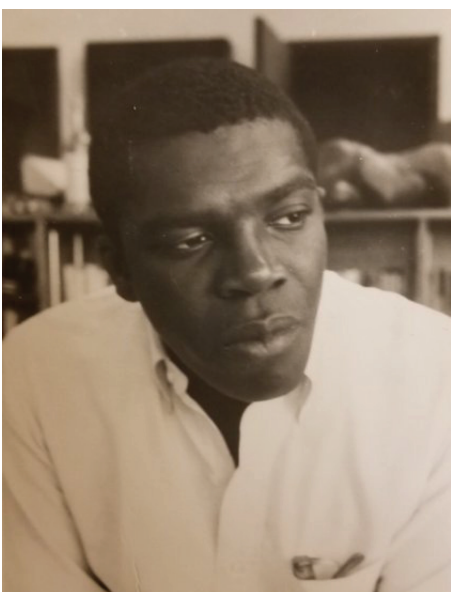
From later that fall until 1963, he was the organization's second chairman, serving between Marion Barry, who went on to become the mayor of Washington, D.C., and John Lewis, who was later elected to Congress from Georgia.

In the early 1960s, a growing number of audacious adolescents and young adults gravitated to S.N.C.C. (or Snick, as it was popularly called) because they were disenchanted with traditional rights groups.

Mr. McDew was instrumental in organizing these activists into vigorous grass-roots field operations in the Deep South.

They engaged in sit-ins and other protests, but also looked beyond desegregation to voting rights as the ultimate vehicle for achieving equal opportunity.

"Too many of the 'freedom riders' don't think beyond integration," Mr. McDew once lamented. "But men ought not to live and die for just washing machines and big television sets."



Mr. McDew in an undated family photograph. Tom Hayden described him as a "combination of intellectual and jock, possessed of an absolutely arrogant fearlessness."

In a statement issued after his death, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People credited Mr. McDew with having played "a central role in mobilizing young people across the South at the height of the Civil Rights Movement."

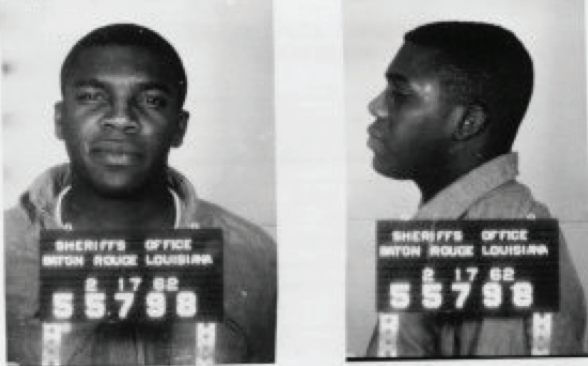
As an eighth-grader, he had demonstrated against restraints on the religious freedom of Amish students in his hometown, Massillon, Ohio, but he had never been south of Columbus and had no aspirations to civic engagement, he said. A standout athlete in high school, he figured on oneday playing football professionally and later retiring to run a liquor store or a used car lot.

That plan changed when his parents sent him to the historically black South Carolina State College in Orangeburg. Within months he had earned a reputation as a gutsy young Northerner who took no guff. After his first arrests, S.N.C.C. recruited him to be a tactician for the group.

He later recalled their impassioned internal debates. After a Mississippi sheriff had beaten a S.N.C.C. leader, Mr. McDew said, he and his colleagues contemplated making a citizens' arrest.

"The question of how we would do this — we had no arms — and where we would take him if we did arrest him was not easily answered," he told David Halberstam in "The Children" (1998), his book on the civil rights era. "Did we put him in his own jail? They were great philosophical discussions — Camus would have been proud."

Tom Hayden, the former California assemblyman who drafted the manifesto for the New Left activist group Students for a Democratic Society, met Mr. McDew at a retreat in 1962. Mr. Hayden described him as a "combination of intellectual and jock, possessed of an absolutely arrogant fearlessness."



In the summer of 1960, Mr. McDew and several other students were arrested trying to desegregate a five-and-dime Kress lunch counter and wound up in the Orangeburg jail.

Mr. McDew in a police mugshot taken after he was arrested during a protest in Baton Rouge, La., in 1962. *Photo Credit: Mississippi Department of Archives and History*

While fellow protesters outside sang the national anthem, he poured out his heart on brown paper towels.

"We who are in here do believe that we shall overcome and the truth will make us free," he wrote, as quoted in "Toward the Meeting of the

Waters" (2008), an anthology about the civil rights movement in South Carolina, "and I'm trying very, very hard also to believe that this is the home of the brave and the free."

Charles Frederick McDew was born in Massillon, about 55 miles south of Cleveland, on June 23, 1938. His father, James, had taught chemistry in South Carolina but as a black was unable to get a job in the Ohio schools; he went to work in the steel mills. His mother, the former Eva Stephens, was a nurse.

His parents persuaded Charles to attend South Carolina State College, his father's alma mater, instead of attending the University of Michigan, where he had hoped to play football.

His first semester in Orangeburg went well, until he was driving back to campus with a classmate after Thanksgiving. Stopped by a police officer, Mr. McDew failed to show proper deference (he neglected to say "sir," he said) and was struck by the officer. Mr. McDew hit him back, and a fight ensued. ("Mind you, this is before the nonviolent civil rights struggle," he said.) He wound up in jail with a broken arm and jaw.

Taking a train back to college, he was arrested again after refusing to sit in a baggage car designated for blacks.

"It seems that on every car, on every train in the South — this is in 1959 — there was one car on the train for black people, the car right behind the engines, where the soot and dust would come through," Mr. McDew told a Smithsonian Institution oral history project in 2011. "And when that was filled, you'd sit in the baggage car. I said: 'No, no, no, sport. Not for my little 10 dollars and 50 cents do I ride with suitcases and mangy dogs. I don't do baggage cars. And there are plenty of seats right here, and I'm having one of them,' and sat down."

When he arrived in Orangeburg, he was arrested yet again after taking a shortcut through a whites-only public park.

"So, I'd been arrested for the third time in two days," he said, "and that sort of started it."

By February 1960, civil rights sit-ins had begun at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C. Mr. McDew, whose reputation as a committed fighter for the cause preceded him, left college to become a full-time spokesman for S.N.C.C., which was organizing at Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C.

The group recruited local coordinators in an organic campaign that mounted a series of nonviolent "jail no bail" acts of civil disobedience. But by the early 1970s, S.N.C.C. had largely disbanded.

Mr. McDew earned a bachelor's degree in 1967 from Roosevelt University in Chicago. He later worked as a teacher, labor organizer, manager of antipoverty programs and community activist in Washington, Boston and San Francisco.

He had recently retired from Metropolitan State University in Minneapolis, where he taught African-American history.

His marriage to Deborah Francine Davidson ended in divorce. In addition to his partner, Ms. Gilfix, and his daughter, Eva, he is survived by two brothers, Eric and Mark.

Mr. McDew converted to Judaism after being denied admission to a white Christian church in the South in the 1960s, leading his fellow S.N.C.C. leader, Bob Moses, to describe him as "a black by birth, a Jew by choice and a revolutionary by necessity."