

BELOVED COMMUNITY

Mississippi Revisited

by Susan Moon

"Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on freedom." [Negro spiritual]

I arrived in Moss Point, on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, by Greyhound Bus. My new friend Debbie and I stepped down into the sticky summer heat of the bus station and looked around. We were young white women from the North, and we were scared. But we were too old to hold hands: she was 19, and I was 21.

We had met the week before at our nonviolence training in Oxford, Ohio. We were volunteers for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and we were going to teach in a "freedom school" in Moss Point for the summer.

Just days before, three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner—had disappeared in Neshoba County, Mississippi, and were presumed dead. So we had good reason to be scared. In the bus station, the town sheriff—fat, white, slow-talking—ambled over to us and told us he didn't want any trouble in his town. We smiled, we trembled, we said we were visiting relatives, and pretty soon a brave black woman named Mrs. Grandison, who didn't look much like she was related to either one of us, came and got us, and took us to the SNCC office. That was in 1964.

The sheriff got just what he meant by trouble, and things changed. It wasn't exactly *my* doing, of course, but I was a part of it.

This summer I flew into Jackson for the thirtieth reunion of the "Mississippi Freedom Summer," and I saw a banner strung across the road outside the terminal building: "Mississippi Homecoming 1964-1994." It took me a minute to realize that the banner was talking to me, and to the other returning civil rights volun-

teers. A lot is implied by the word "homecoming."

If you had told us 30 years ago that one day an official banner would welcome us back to Jackson, we wouldn't have believed you.

One night in Moss Point in 1964, while we were holding hands in a circle and singing "We Shall Overcome" at the end of a mass meeting, a car of whites drove by and fired into the meeting hall. Nobody was killed, though someone easily could have been, and a young black woman was injured.

Thirty years later, an interracial group of us ate dinner at the Catfish Shack in Jackson. The white staff was friendly, the service was good, and when we pointed out to our waitress that she had neglected to charge us for dessert, she waved it away.

I'm a white northerner, the daughter of privilege, who was active in SNCC only for that one summer so long ago. How can I write about the civil rights movement? Or about the difference between then and now? I reassure myself with the thought that everybody has a piece of the truth. All our stories make up the fabric of history. The time I spent in Mississippi was short, but it changed my life.

I went to the reunion because I wanted to reconnect with the part of myself that had stepped off the bus in Moss Point, believing in the possibility of social justice. As Harry Bowie, a black minister, said at the reunion, "We came

to Mississippi because of the power of what we believed in. We were ordinary people, and coming together for what we believed in we became extraordinary." SNCC had called itself "the beloved community," and I wanted to find that feeling again.

I was afraid I would hardly know anybody there, but I was amazed to see many old friends, who turned up from all over the place. One of them was Debbie. We'd lost



Robbie Osman, Martha Honey, Eddie Carthan, and friend, at the old Mileston "freedom house," June 1994.
(Photo by Matt Herron)

track of each other about a year after Mississippi. Now she's a public interest lawyer in New York. We rediscovered how deep our connection was, ever since we stood together before the sheriff of Moss Point, shaking inside, barely more than girls, not letting him scare us away. Debbie told me she almost hadn't come to the reunion. She, too, was afraid she'd hardly know anybody, afraid she'd feel at the margin of the group. But the minute she got to the motel, she was warmly greeted. "I looked around and saw some of my lifelong heroes. I felt these people were such extraordinary people, and I'm really proud to have been part of this generation."

It felt good to be in an interracial group where we could assume respect, where black and white people were together in a loving way. I've missed that. Whether I knew them or not, these were people with whom I had shared passion and hope. It seemed a lucky stroke of fate that the trajectory of my life and the karma of American history had intersected in Mississippi in 1964. Now we're all fifty-ish—we were so young then! In fact we never would have done what we did if we *hadn't* been so young. And being together rekindled not just memories of the past but a kind of hope that can be brought to bear in the present. Now we may be gray-haired and our lives may be less dramatic, but I had the feeling people are still acting out of a concern for social justice: teaching, writing, advocating. Our beloved community is invisible and far-flung, but we're there, interconnected whether we know it or not, the seeds of Mississippi blown far and wide, growing in many places.

One day I visited Hattiesburg, not far from Moss Point, on a chartered bus, with a dozen other former volunteers. As my friend Robbie said, the landscape we drove through looked the same, yet strangely different now, with the fear removed. In 1964, the fear was part of the landscape.

At a little church on the outskirts of Hattiesburg, we were warmly greeted by local black people, and ushered inside. A buzz of voices: people sharing memories, recognizing each other. A white journalist from a local paper asked me why I had come to Mississippi in 1964. I said, "Because I thought it was the most important thing happening in America at the time and I wanted to be a part of it." I was surprised to hear my own voice breaking.

The local people had a whole program planned for us. A proclamation was read from the white mayor of Hattiesburg declaring that day "Freedom Summer Day" in Hattiesburg. Then 11 black women in their forties stood up at the front of the church. As little

girls they had all been students in the freedom school in that very room. And there were three in our group who had been their freedom school "teachers." Right there in that room. *That* was a reunion.

One by one the Hattiesburg women spoke about how being in the freedom school had changed the direction of their lives. One is now a civil rights lawyer, another is a professor of African American history. They asked one of the freedom school teachers to step forward and receive an award on behalf of all the returning volunteers. He was a man I didn't know, who had struck me as loud and awkward on the bus. Now his face was flushed and his eyes were full of tears. With tremendous grace, he accepted their gifts: a plaque, a framed painting, and a key to the city. That summer had changed his life, too, he said. And I could

see that he had been transformed 30 years ago, and was again transformed that day, in that place. And that's how it was for all of us—everyone said so: our lives had never been the same since.

I felt the Buddhist teaching of cause and effect. You don't know what your effect will be, but you do what you do any-

way, because it's what you need to do. You can't measure the effects, and you don't try.

We all sat down together to a huge Southern lunch, home-cooking for our homecoming. Fried chicken, all kinds of salads, catfish, greens, pies. I sat next to a young man of about 20, who said he didn't know much about the civil rights movement—they had hardly mentioned it in school. I asked if there were drugs and gangs in Hattiesburg, and he told me yes, and that a good friend of his had just been killed in a drive-by shooting.

But it's that way all over the country. In 1964 we believed that if black people got the civil rights that were promised them by our Constitution, we would see a just society. And black people did get their political rights. Finally, at great cost. Now there are more black elected officials in Mississippi than in any other state. And this *does* make a difference. A friend who revisited the town of Lexington, in Holmes County, said it seemed removed from time: the same Confederate Memorial stood on the courthouse square. But this time a black police chief came out and talked with them. He told them, "I don't have a doubt in my mind that if it weren't for you all I wouldn't have this job." But in Neshoba County, at the grave site of James Chaney (one of the murdered civil rights workers), no local black people showed up. They are still afraid. The image of James Chaney on the marble monument has been vandalized and replaced, and again is riddled with bullet holes. Neshoba County is

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still run by whites.

America never promised economic equality. Mississippi cotton is now picked by machine, and there is widespread unemployment in rural areas. In some of the poor black parts of the state, the water is so poisoned by pesticides that it's undrinkable. Whites still have the economic power in Mississippi. In South Africa, too, whites may be thinking: *Let Mandela be president. No problem, as long as we still own the diamond mines.* It turns out social justice isn't guaranteed by political power. Still, it's different now. A black person no longer risks her life just walking into a polling place.

When we left Hattiesburg, I noticed with a lurch of fear that a police car was driving in front of our bus. But my fear was replaced by amazement: this was an honorary escort sent by the mayor. After all, it was Freedom Summer Day in Hattiesburg.

That night at the motel in Jackson, Debbie and I talked to a young black journalist from New York who had come to Mississippi to cover the reunion. She cried, telling us about the memorial service at James Chaney's gravesite. It made her realize what civil rights workers had been up against. Her parents, she said, had grown up in a segregated society, and she had not. She had had opportunities they had not had, and she thanked us for what we had done.

And my friend Robbie told me about revisiting Mileston with three other people from his project, and finding the shack in the woods that had been the "freedom house" where the volunteers lived. Thirty years ago it was a deserted house in the woods, hidden from local whites. After Freedom Summer, the house was again abandoned, and this summer Robbie and his

friends had to hack their way through 30 years of growth to get to it. (In the photograph, it reminds me of Angkor Wat in Cambodia: an ancient holy site, overgrown by vines.) In spite of the poison ivy, Robbie was determined to go there because he knew it would give him a sense of closure to touch that spot. He told me, "It was a powerful place of remembrance for me. It was where we gathered at the end of the day. It was where we were when history was changing, when we were nearly children. I felt the power of what we'd accomplished, and the overwhelming weight of what we hadn't accomplished. I felt proud of all of us, that we did the right thing, at great risk and great cost. I felt honored to have touched that piece of history."

There's a difference between nostalgia and saving history. Part of the purpose of the 30th reunion was to set the historical record straight, to tell the real story of the Mississippi Summer Project, to correct the false story told in the Hollywood movie "Mississippi Burning," in which the helpless black victims of white racism are saved by white FBI agents. So we went to Mississippi this June partly to celebrate the early pioneers of the movement, the black people who started it, to reclaim the story and to pass it on. As one of the speakers said, "We have experienced the joy, and now we have to transmit that joy to the next generation." In Buddhism, too, we tell the stories of the ancestors, and we learn from these stories.

I went to a crowded workshop on retelling the history to the children. Some of the early SNCC workers told their stories. Curtis (Hayes) Muhammed said that when he was only three his father killed a Klansman in self-defense, and then fled Mississippi to escape a



Ben Moynihan looking for his birth parents (Photo by Matt Herron)

lynching. Curtis' last name was changed to protect him, and he never knew anything about his father until he graduated from high school. Then he was told who his father was and what had happened, and he went to Chicago, found him, and heard his story. Coming home in 1961, he ran into freedom riders in the Jackson bus station and joined SNCC.

Dorie Ladner, a movement pioneer who grew up in Mississippi, was the just same age as Emmet Till, only 14 when he was murdered in 1955 for supposedly whistling at a white woman. Dorie said she was so scared by the murder that she comforted herself by memorizing the 13th (abolition of slavery), 14th (equal protection), and 15th (right to vote) Amendments, and saying them to herself when she went to sleep at night.

Another movement vet from Mississippi said he learned about civil rights from his dad, and when the movement came along, he thought his dad had started it, because it was everything his father had taught him. Speaking more to the assembled parents than children he said, "Talk to your children now. You make the future now. You can't wait until the future comes to create the future you want." I thought of Thich Nhat Hanh: "The best way to take care of the future is to take care of the present." He went on: "Whenever young people want to embrace something, you've got to support them 100 percent. Even if we're scared for them, we've got to support them. Because we were supported in what we did. It was only 1000 people who came from all over the country that summer, and that's not very many people to make such a big difference."

One of the young people asked Bob Moses to tell his story. He had been the architect of the Mississippi Summer Project, and a hero of mine in 1964. His soft-spoken commitment to nonviolence inspired confidence and love in many people. But Bob Moses didn't tell his story. Instead, he suggested that all the people born since 1964 get into the middle of the circle and tell us *their* stories. It was time for the older people to listen to the younger people.

I was disappointed. I wanted to hear what he would say. But as I listened to the young people speak, my disappointment turned to exhilaration. They were young children, teenagers, and young adults of all colors—a truly interracial group. Most of them were the children of returning volunteers. Many were older than we had been in 1964. There was a group of black kids from D.C. who belonged to the "Freedom Fighters' Club." A foundation started by Andrew Goodman's parents had paid for their trip to Mississippi to participate in this weekend of saving history. And there were a number of black students from Jackson State and Tougaloo College.

Many said how proud they were of their parents and what they had done, that they had never really understood before how hard the struggle had been. I was surprised how moved I was, to hear them say they were

proud of us. I'm not used to that. I caught myself wishing that my own sons, now in their twenties, were there, feeling proud of me. But the point of course was not so personal as that—if you respect what an older generation has done before you, surely it makes it easier to step forward into history when your turn comes.

Three teenage sisters—one black, one white, one Asian—were there with their white parents. They said a family like theirs wouldn't have been possible 30 years ago.

A young black man spoke with gentle confidence: "I'm 27. I'm an African American man. I'm not a rapist. I'm not a murderer. I'm not a drug dealer. I'm not an addict. I'm not angry all the time. I'm not athletic. I'm not a musician. I don't hate white people. I don't think black women have a problem. [A rousing cheer from the listeners.] I think we have something that needs to be fixed and I want to help fix it."

A tall light-skinned man, Ben Moynihan, stepped forward, holding his baby in his arms. He said he was born in 1965, that he was adopted, had grown up in Connecticut and gone to Dartmouth College. He told us haltingly, through tears, rocking his own baby, that he was looking for his birth parents. He had learned that they were a black man and a white woman, volunteers in the Mississippi Summer Project. Did any of us know who they were? He stood before us as the very incarnation of our movement: the beauty, the lost history, the pain, the reunion. He said he hadn't found his parents yet, and maybe never would, but that he'd found a whole new family among us.

The meeting kept gathering momentum. Others spoke powerfully of their desire to take up the struggle. A young woman talked about the Ayers case, a lawsuit for equality in education, which seeks to prevent the closing of historically black colleges in the state. She said to us, "Give us your wisdom. Give us your learning. Give us your support. Give us the torch."

I'm sure I was not alone in thinking: *Yes, how wonderful that you are taking the torch from us. It's time indeed.* But it's harder for these young people than it was for us. The forces of injustice are more insidious, more complex. There are drive-by shootings in Hattiesburg. Thirty years ago our struggle may have been noble, but it was morally simple. There even seemed to be good guys and bad guys. Now we need a renewal of inspiration and hope. But where will it come from?

Coming home to our interconnectedness is a way to begin. Victoria Gray, a black movement veteran, spoke of the importance of the black church in the South as the cradle of the movement, saying that we never could have done what we did without a spiritual base. "We are a spirit people," she said. And she had us chant together: "Now is the time. We are the people." Over and over. And she meant *everybody*. All of us are the people—the spirit people—and now *is* the time to come home. ❖