

July 11, 1964

Letter #4
#4 five pages

c/o Charles McLaurin
P.O. Box 275
Ruleville, Miss.

Dear Friends:

Hey Yawl, thanks so much for the letters! Its really swinging to hear from you. Trouble is you talk about showing them to every Jo on the streets. Man that's sort of inhibiting! Like my writing leaves a lot to be desired but somehow I don't much have the stomach for patching up sentences or looking up words when writing these things. All I can ask is just don't introduce me to all those cats you've shown it to when I get back.

I think when the last letter died I was reporting the conversation I had last Sunday with the white man down at the church. Let me tell you about another "dialogue" with the "enemy" and then I'll hazard a bit of analysis. In the past week or so I have been thinking about ways to get the teachers to get into the struggle. As far as we know there are no colored teachers from Ruleville registered to vote (Ruleville has about 40 of them). I have talked to a couple who were very cautious. They were afraid of losing their jobs which are about the highest paying in the Negro community. You can easily pick out the teachers' homes because they are new well-kept bungalows. Like Middleclassville, U.S.A. Well it turns out that they are very much isolated from the rest of the community. This is of course partially due to the class barrier. They are almost the only middle class types in town but it is also and probably more so because of their refusal to risk their advantageous positions by joining the movement. They are resented by parents and students alike. So these teachers who in most American communities would be on the top of the prestige ladder due to their salaries and education are instead on the bottom of the heap. Well I hypothesized that they might be smarting and thus ready for some project that might increase their "weight" in the community. I also thought that if the teachers were to move they might give everybody else a boost. Thirdly, it seemed a shame that the people who might be able to give the kind of education so desperately needed by a people on the way up are in a position which makes this task impossible.

Well, on the suggestion of one of the teachers who said if the principal would call a meeting or give some encouragement the teachers would move, I went to talk to him. Not being able to find him at home I went on over to the school to see him (a tactical blunder). He was extremely evasive. I asked him why the teachers didn't vote. He said that if he was trying to find out what my brother was thinking he would go to my brother not to me. I said I had talked to some teachers and they were very much afraid of being fired if they went down to register. He said he couldn't tell me anything about that. For such information I should talk to the county superintendent (white). I asked further if I could sit in on classes. He said I'd have to talk to the superintendent about that also.

That afternoon when in Indianola I tried to get to see the super. His secretary informed me that he was out for the afternoon on personal business. I tried again a few days later and found the super in.

I talked for about 1 1/2 hours with him and his secretary, an elderly type. The tone of the conversation was friendly. I fear I

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So what can one deduce from these various encounters with whites? I am not yet sure about this point but it seems that these people really can't sense what they are doing to Negroes or what the system they have the upperhand in is doing to Negroes. Time and again they talk about how we are just spoiling a beautiful relationship. They take great pride in their solicitude for Negroes. But what about all the ugly killings and lesser things which they and their friends commit against Negroes. When I asked Negroes about whether whites are just lying or really think they are good to the colored, Negroes always answer that they are lying. They can cite cases where the very man I was talking with beat up a Negro. My present inclination is to guess that these whites are so caught up in the system (as we all are) that they can't see through it. Their way of life provides a moral code which justifies their present type of relationships with Negroes. It justifies keeping power out of the hands of ignorant backward, immoral people. It dictates a social distance which makes it almost impossible for a white to believe anything but the white side of a story: one believes his close friends before he believes any old body from the wrong side of the tracks. What's more the lopsided power relationship in this system makes the Negro lie to whites in order to stay alive. This lying reinforces the whites' illusion and destroys self-respect.

In this context what can my conversations with whites hope to achieve. It would take someone with a good deal more skill than I to make them "see the light". It will be the real exception where these discussions will provide any real two way communication on the issue at hand. Two more realistic goals are: 1) to communicate my humanity to the enemy, and 2) to communicate the conviction with which I hold my beliefs. (I am not satisfied with my efforts toward the latter goal. It is too easy to try not to alienate by skirting issues which should be brought up). If these two goals are attained the result is the creation of a tension within the cat. He sees you as an all right cat but hates your ideas. If this tension is acute enough it may set the stage for significant change. On the other hand it is pretty easy for the cat to brush you aside as a good-willed but misled type.

In the ideology of nonviolence we talk about being against the system, not the man. However, this is damn hard to practice for the man is so implicated in the system that any attack on it is a real threat to him. At the same time, I don't think you'll be able to really communicate the wrongs of the system to the man on top without attacking it. The system has numerous mechanisms for dealing with challenges from within. One must find a very direct and compelling, even coercive means of cutting through these mechanisms and reaching the man. Sometimes he must be forced to change before he can realize the merits of the new condition. In other words when it gets down to the real nitty gritty talk is cheap change is dear.

Back to the narrative - The week was a good one, full of work problems and progress. I have already mentioned one of the major problems in Drew. A number of people up there seem to resent our forays. We are increasing the danger to them and they can't see the point. It is crucial that we get a place for meetings there and have some people stay there for a week or two. Now we are planning an open-air meeting for next week. I hope it will get things off the ground. I have talked to two people who are thoroughly

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committed. One woman called me to her house as I was going up the street and said she wanted to sign the freedom registration form. She has a batch of small children who show the marks of serious poverty- skimpy rags, filth, disease. She agreed to take some extra forms and try to sign up her neighbors. There are about 10 people in Drew who have made such a commitment but they are quite vulnerable until they are backed up by many others. This job involves a real responsibility to the folks you are coaxing out on a limb. I am afraid we haven't met it well enough yet.

The work in Indianola has been exciting. The first day we were met with a throng of youths who wanted to know how they could join the freedom riders. Though many adults fear the loss of jobs and aren't ready to make the crucial step yet, they are usually willing to talk and quite happy that we have come at last. A number have gone down to the court house to register after only one week's work. We have divided the city into areas and each taken responsibility for one. This allows us to get to know the folks on our beat and should increase our effectiveness. The first person I talked to on my street was a gnarled old lady of 88 years. She worked in the cotton fields until three years ago!! She told me that she had learned to hate white folks when at the age of 14 she saw a Negro boy dragged through the streets with a rope around his neck until dead. In 1919 she received the revelation that she should love all men equally and the power of the Lord has helped her to do this. She told of cases where she went out of her way to help white folks and refused any money saying she had already been paid. In 1921 she had a dream in which it was revealed to her how to cure people with the use of special sands. She has performed some miracles of healing in her day, but the power seems to have left her in her old age. When I asked her if she would sign her name to a freedom form she talked about how He worked things out in the end. This sort of religious fatalism is quite strong among the older generations down here and is hard to work with. I gently suggested that maybe we needed to help Him see that His work was done. Certainly He intended all his children to be free. She finally agreed to pray for guidance on the matter.

Remember I told you about Mrs. Anderson across the street who went to Morehouse in Atlanta? She told me the other day that the night before she had been talking to her father (long dead) and he thought it would be good for her to go down to Indianola to register.

Thursday night we had a mass meeting in the yard of a church in Indianola. It was raining but we still had a good crowd of maybe 75, mostly in the age group 16-25. We sang and MacLaurin gave a hard-hitting street talk. In the middle of the talk a cop said "Charles can I talk to you a minute.". He said "Just a minute", and finished his thought before going to talk to the cop. This sort of standing up to "the man" is very important for morale. Shouting out "Black and white together" or "Ain't going to let no policeman turn me 'round" with angry whites and cops all around took spunk and we have hopes that a strong student movement will get underway in Indianola. This weeks' voter registration efforts have been very enjoyable. It will be hard to leave.

much love, mike

Please turn over



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FOOT NOTE
added by typist
in Phila. PA.

(page 5 / footnote added after July 16, 1964)
& news of Mike's arrests (2)

According to an Ass. Press despatch printed in the Gazette and Daily, York, Pa., Thursday Morning, July 16, 64, Mike and 6 other workers have been arrested.

The charges included distributing literature without a permit and obstructing sidewalks. The state adopted legislation recently against demonstrators impeding traffic near public buildings.

Through a telephone call it was found out that Mike got out on bail but that he was rearrested on July 16. The students were taken from Drew to Indianola.