

December 1964

When I was in jail with Free, the jailor came to release me. I refused to leave Freeman, who was being held on a false charge of Grand Larceny. I couldn't leave him alone in a jail cell with white segregationists, especially since we were expecting the murderers of Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman. While I was explaining this to the jailor the phone rang and it was the Sheriff calling to say that there had been a mistake. The Grand Larceny charge was for a guy named Crawford--not Cocroft--so Free and I were released. Freeman said that it was a jail within a jail but I was happy to leave the dark iron world and return to the sunshine and fresh air of the great jail of Mississippi. While I was in jail I read Thoreau's essay on Civil Disobedience and I thought about his statement that "under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also prison." I was surprised that although my cellmates were criminals and segregationists, they were just men. They hated Joe because he was a civil rights worker but they came to his defense when someone tried to beat him.

I have heard a lot of talk about freedom of the mind in prison but I really must admit that my thoughts in jail did not fly far beyond a wish to stretch my legs, to see the sunshine, to protect myself from the other prisoners, to get back to the Freedom School and see the kids. It's sort of a psychosomatic thing--when the body is cramped, the mind dreams of freedom but it dwells on freedom of motion and in this way it is cramped.

The trial of the 21 men arrested in connection with the murders of Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman was held in Meridian on Thursday. On Wednesday night we had a meeting at Mt. Olive Church. The invocation was made by Rev. J.R. Porter. He said, "No matter what happens at the hearing tomorrow--whether or not you agree with it--it is God's will." In the background, the organ moaned and groaned the strains of a hymn and I groaned silently to myself. Then Rev. Witherspoon, tall and preacherlike, read a wonderful letter from the citizens of Meridian to the Dept. of Justice (enclosed), asking that justice be done. To kill a Negro is not considered to be a crime in the state of Miss. DeLa Beckwith became a hero after he murdered Medgar Evers. In my silent prayer I wondered whether justice would be done. I half believed that the answer would be yes because two white men died with James Chaney. I hate capital punishment but I talked with Negro children at the Freedom School and they were more or maybe less merciful--they said, "Give him life in prison and let him suffer with his guilt. Feed him almost nothing. Make him do hard labor." I asked Freeman what he thought about during the silent prayer. He thought about the foolish Rev. Porter who suggested that Mississippi justice is God's will and then worshipped this monster of a God. Most of the Negroes at the church had lived in Miss. too long to expect any justice from the white man, but they prayed anyway.

After the prayer Dave Dennis, assistant program director of COFO, made a speech about justice. He talked about how Sheriff Rainey was back on the job and read from an article in the Meridian Star, "If you love segregation, don't attack the newsmen." He mentioned the 2 bodies that were fished out of the river this summer--the bodies of 2 Negro students from Alcorn College. A friend had said, "Thank God it's not Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman," and Dave Dennis said something to the effect of "ask not for whom the bell tolls." He said the trial of the murderers of these boys is coming up soon and nobody cares whether justice is done. It was a rambling speech but an honest and thoughtful one. When he heard a baby in the audience cry, he said something like "Go ahead and cry, baby, you haven't begun to taste the cruelty that life will offer you."

Afterward there was a press conference with Mrs. Chaney. I served as moderator and called on members of the press who asked rather foolish questions that required yes or no answers. "Yes, she would continue to work in the Movement," "Yes, she would go to the hearing tomorrow," and so on.

On Thursday morning, I went to the Courthouse for the preliminary hearing. Maybe I'm biased but when I looked at the 21 men, I thought I was looking at the world's ugliest creatures. Deputy Price was the ugliest of the uglies with his red dumb face and thin lips. I looked hard at each face for a sign of guilt or a trace of humanity. But the faces were dumb and they were smiling, perhaps nervously, but malignantly with apparent confidence, swaggering, cocky, painful smiles. The hearing was sickening; 19 of the 21 men were introduced. Then a tall, thin, elegant fellow named Rask came to the witness stand. He was an FBI agent and he had obtained a confession from one of the 2 missing men. The defense attorneys started screaming about hearsay evidence and wanted to see the confession. The attorney for the United States referred to a Supreme Court ruling that hearsay evidence was legitimate in a preliminary hearing and he refused to show the confession.

There was a recess for lunch and when we returned to the courthouse, only segregationists ("friends and relatives of the defendants") were admitted to the courtroom. Even Mrs. Chaney was barred from the hearing. After 15 minutes, a newspaperman came out and announced "It's all over. They've been released." Mrs. H--an old Negro woman--a brave old freedom fighter--began to cry and she screamed

something about judgment and the lord; and Mrs. Chaney cried--but quietly so nobody could see. Judy and I walked with Mrs. Chaney and we felt sick at heart. Barbara Chaney was furious and she wanted to demonstrate her anger and concern by a "prayer" on the steps of the courthouse. But people were frightened and they hesitated to join her. TV cameras focused in on the Chaney's in their grief and fury. Flashbulbs were popping and we walked through a crowd of happy segregationists and back to the COFO office singing Oh Freedom and We Shall Overcome. Later I learned that our lawyer had made a strategic move in an effort to preserve his evidence for a Grand Jury. But to the Negro people in Meridian and the State of Mississippi, this was a bitter experience--further proof that murder is legal when a Negro is killed.

That evening I spoke with a Negro man in a bar. He was bitter and said, "There is nothing for us now but violence." I tried to talk to him about nonviolence. I said that nonviolence is a way of fighting and not really a passive thing, and I asked him to help the Freedom Democratic Party in its congressional challenge or work on electing a Negro to the city council in Meridian. He asked how long it would take for such political action to help him and I realized that generations of men may die in this prison of segregation before there is democracy in Mississippi--and generations more may die before humane men make a democratic majority. He felt that a band of Negro vigilantes could make justice by taking the life of Sheriff Rainey and showing the white man that Negroes will no longer be rebuked and scorned. It was hard for me to argue with him. He may be right.

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"I HAVE A DREAM..."

Like Martin Luther King, every Negro has a dream for a better tomorrow. At Freedom School, some Meridian students wrote about their hopes and dreams for the future:

I had a dream that one day the Negro can really have the feeling of freedom in their hearts and soul and really know it is true. I dream that one day I can walk down the street knowing that I can stop in any place if I get hungry. I dreamed I can wake one morning and everyone would be happy and every race love and are glad to see others. I dream I wake up one Sunday and can go to worship God in any house of God. I dream that one day the whole world can walk hand in hand together through life and live in peace. --Artie

I have a dream that Negroes will one day be really free. Free to go to schools, not to be going to be with whites, but to be going to get an education, to learn something, not just to be sitting in class like an ape but to learn to study and act like you really have freedom in this world. --Patsy

I had a dream that everyone in the world was free to go where they wanted. And when elections came everyone could vote, black and white. Some people have the wrong meaning about freedom. Some people think that freedom is to run around the street without being put in jail, but as long as you live in Mississippi you will get put in jail even if you break your own window. I think that freedom means to live in any part of the neighborhood you want and not like we live now, the white people have one part and the black people have the other. They put us in the basement of the hospital with all the pipes and ants, rats and everything else you can name. That's what I think about freedom and I think that these things and many more could be stopped. --Rose

I had a dream that one day the people will be as lovely as the world. I had a dream that one day the words freedom, love for each other, and peace, will stop letting people take their names in vain, and will come to life and walk the dark alleys of hate and discrimination, of Negroes and Whites. They say the north is free but in my dream no men are free until you can really accept the people of this world as they are, no more no less. --Willie

I would like everyone, black or white, to see me as an individual--not just as a person, who, being white, must be feared, pleased, yes mam'd, respected, or hated. --Judy

And when I go to bed, my dreams are about me joining the Air Force and going to Paris, France, and getting married and sending for my mother and brother and father. The atmosphere of racial difficulty may have cleared by then but if so I'll send them money all the time so they can have all the clothes they want, shoes and just anything they want and not work for it either. And I also dream about leaving this summer and going to New York. --Deloris