

The Freedom Movement and Ourselves Looking Back 50 Years Later Group G

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— MORNING SESSION —

Introductions

Joseph: My name is Joseph Tieger. I grew up in New Jersey. I went to Duke University in '59. I was 16. I was pretty inexperienced in the world. Sit-ins happened in February of '60. I wasn't really ready for it. They passed. I knew it was happening, but I wasn't ready.

In February of '63, my senior year, I was in the Null & Void coffeehouse, the only desegregated place of public accommodation in Durham except Woolworth's and Kress and the bus station. A group of six people came in from the picket line, and it was like my destiny walked in and found me. And I went over and said, "How do I get with you?" There was going to be picketing beginning on March 1st for fair employment in downtown Durham. I picketed all spring and became a part of the group of maybe 15 people who were the core. And it was NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] youth and CORE. Floyd McKissick in Durham, the advisor to the NAACP youth group, was also connected with CORE.

And for me, it was the equivalent of what the beloved community in Mississippi was. We all got very close with each other. It was crossing over into a world that I knew nothing about, but it felt like

home when I got there. And that spring after Birmingham, there were demonstrations all over the South. [In Durham](#) there was a silent march from the North Carolina College campus to City Hall, probably 1,000 people.

We broke up into about a dozen separate groups, staged sit-ins all over town, and I was asked to lead one of them, and it was kind of the beginning of my life in the Movement. From there, I worked with CORE from October '63 through May '64. Got out of jail and went to work for the SNCC office in Washington, came back south to work with the SNCC office in Atlanta, and then was a field worker in Eastern North Carolina through '65 and into June '66.

There's a story about how we happened to still be there in June '66, because nobody really knew we were there. We were two white people, and nobody returned our WATS calls, and Cleve Sellers didn't bother to come by and tell us to leave, so we just stayed on. And so on.

[WATS (Wide Area Telephone Service) was a precursor to 800 numbers and conference-calling.]

Joseph: There are a lot of stories off of that, but my life in the Movement really continued for another six years. I worked for Congressman John Conyers for a few months, staged the first public draft refusal in D.C. in the spring of '67, returned to North Carolina as an organizer for Vietnam Summer, went to Duke Law School to be a movement lawyer, and then practiced law in North Carolina for a couple years until July '72. So it was really about an almost 10-year stay.

Evaluating the Freedom Movement

Joseph: Well obviously, in some ways, the Movement succeeded magnificently. I mean, I'm glad that the bus came along and I got on it when I did in February of '63, before Birmingham. Something changed after Birmingham, but at that point, just desegregating places of public accommodation looked gigantic. It looked like,

“Yes, we’ve got spirit, and we’ve got determination, and we’ve got dedication, but this is one tough mountain.” And we scaled it. We did that.

It meant then, what’s the point of being able to get a hamburger if you can’t afford it? And all of that. So once that was accomplished, then we began to see what the mountain range looked like. And I guess whether it was a success or not depends on what’s the “it?” Other things happened that were tremendously important for me personally, and I think for the culture. When I went into it, I still kind of believed, even for the first year or so, that the federal government was an ally and that the problem was racists in the South.

Maria: Yeah, didn’t we all?

Joseph: We all did. It’s kind of hard to remember that, but we all did. So that changed. I’m really interested, not only in the external issues of desegregating this or opening up that, but the spirit that we brought to it and that sense of beloved community and what happened to that. So it’s kind of a two-track thing. And I think we did get crushed like bugs, as far as belief in — in the experience of beloved community. It did not survive long in the face of the repression, and the FBI. Discovering that the federal government was not our ally is kind of hard to take. Just beginning to experience the FBI’s indifference, much less its COINTELPRO later was hard to take.

[COINTELPRO was the FBI’s secret and illegal campaign to disrupt the Movement, personally destroy Dr. King, and maintain the racist status-quo. See [FBI's COINTELPRO Targets the Movement](#) for more information.]

Joseph: And what was really hard to take was the way that it disrupted the relationships between Blacks and whites in the Movement itself. That was a real blow. That was very hard for me. Coming in with that experience of the glory days of being absolutely dedicated, absolutely trusting one another, absolutely relying on one another, putting our lives in each other’s hands, and then coming to the place where I got verbally attacked by Willie Ricks in the SNCC office for being whatever it was that I was. It was really hard, and nobody else in the room — Jack Minnis or anybody else —

speaking up and saying, “Lay off of him. He’s okay. His heart’s in the right place.” Everybody was intimidated. And something terrible was lost there.

And I don’t know that it’s ever really been consciously healed. I mean, we’ve gone on beyond it, but we haven’t. Or maybe we *are*. Maybe this is the way that we’re doing it, but it was a pain that I carried with me for a long time, because I still felt committed. I still felt dedicated, but I felt that there was a wall now. And I understood why there was too. It wasn’t that I was naive about it. I understood why that assertion was necessary, at least I think I did. I think I’ve maintained that vision of beloved community regardless, improbable as it seems.

And it seems to me, fast-forwarding 40, 50 years forward to where we are now — going from being able to eat in a restaurant, to having the money to pay for the food, to what’s being served in the restaurant, to the destruction of our food sources, to global warming and mass starvation and what we are facing — I can’t see *how* we are going to, I don’t know *whether* we’re going to, survive it as a species. I think that’s very much an open question. The really interesting issue to me is, we might be on our way to being wiped out, to wiping ourselves out. That’s entirely possible.

Even if we are, what’s our spirit going to be as a species as we go into that? That’s the one variable that’s open to us. And in the extremity of facing mass extinction, can we come together with our hearts open and learn to cooperate with one another as a species, as a people? Never mind across racial and class lines, across *all* lines. It seems to me that *that’s* the test for humanity now that we’re facing. So, that intimation of beloved community that I had is very much alive in me.

It seems to me that, basically, we were not equipped psychologically, or in any other way, to deal with the shit that came down. And I think that maybe we didn’t realize how deep it went: that it wasn’t just evil racists; it wasn’t just Southern sheriffs; that, in fact, that capacity to not treat one another as allies lay within each of us. And so I think that this is a big topic, and I think it opens up great depths. And I think it’s, in some ways, significant for us at this moment, not

just in historical evaluation. How do we love one another? Including in the face of the brutalities that we have visited on each other? Our whole species basically is living off of eons of mistreating one another, and in every direction. The political liberation cannot be separate from the psychological liberation and the spiritual liberation, it seems to me. Maybe I'll stop there, because this is going pretty global.

Joseph: I think, again the question of whether it was successful depends on which “it” we're talking about. And as Hardy emphasizes on his own terms, in what we set out to do initially, we were immensely successful. We were so successful that we spawned all these other things that we saw needed to be — I mean, we saw more of the implications of what else needed to change. And I mean, all the other movements that got generated off of the Civil Rights Movement are astonishing. We couldn't have foreseen that at the time. So I totally agree with you, Hardy, about that.

I think the really interesting question right now is whether we can jump our national borders, and identify, as a species, with the rest of us all over the planet, and recognize that we're *all* expendable to the oligarchy. It's like the “house Negro” and “field Negro” kind of concept. White middle class people are so beguiled by our “house” status that we don't see that we're totally expendable. And as the concentration of power and wealth increases, middle class impoverishment is increasing too. And there needs to be an identity with the poor of the world, with the poor of the earth, and seeing that our fates are interconnected.

And as far as beloved community, I think you might as well think big. And I think it's that global perspective that may be the hidden legacy of the early days of the Movement. It's just a matter of making a conceptual leap and seeing that we're all perishing in the course that we're on and that there is something *of the spirit* that is called for in getting past our narrow economic interest of saying, “Okay, well we don't want any middle class tax hikes. That's our big issue, and we'll try to protect our piece.” There is a radically different gestalt that needs to come in, but it is all just one mind-

move away. So as well as celebrating the success of the Movement in its own initial terms, I'm not convinced that those deeper things are —let me say it differently. I still have hope that we might hit the big one.

Eleanor: I wish I had as much hope as you.

Joseph: Well, I don't have a lot, but I've got a little.

How Did the Movement Affect Us?

Joseph: When I was about 14, my father sat me down and told me who to read. Once I got past reading Perry Mason mysteries and things like that, it was time to read something real. He told me about Upton Sinclair and all the left liberal people of his generation. I'm kind of steeped in that, and I loved it. And Clarence Darrow became my hero.

When I left for Duke in the Fall of '59, my father said, "As a Jew in the South, don't get involved in anything." In February of '60, of course, North Carolina lit up with [sit-ins](#). It never occurred to me to get involved. I just turned 17. I had been very over-protected. I really wasn't ready for that, but in February '63 I was in the coffeehouse, as I said, and a group of people came in from the picket line, and it was just clear to me that that was my life.

I was involved all spring and got arrested a couple of times in the post-Birmingham demonstrations. There were, I think, 1400 arrests over the three days in Durham. It was one of the big, big places, and within three weeks, the city cracked, and 57 restaurants and movie theaters desegregated. It was huge, and I just loved it.

I graduated; I went home; I did not want to stay in New Jersey. My mother had a whole career path planned for me. I was going to marry a nice Jewish girl and live in the suburbs and have a nice house, and my parents would come over for dinner on Friday nights. It was the Movement that gave me the strength to get out of that. I mean, it saved my life, really. It saved me a lot of psychotherapy, and I had

something I was so totally committed to. During the summer I visited in Goldsboro. Floyd McKissick had a group called the NAACP Commandos who were organizing demonstrations all over eastern North Carolina.

North Carolina in the Summer of '63 was the most engaged state in the South. During the period from Birmingham to the March on Washington, I think there were 14,000 arrests, and over 4,000 were in North Carolina; 25 or 30 towns had mass demonstrations, and Floyd and the NAACP youth had a lot to do with it. There was a night march while I was in Goldsboro, and I was the only white person in it. There were hundreds of demonstrators and thousands of rednecks all around us, and I was singled out for verbal abuse, and got spit on, but I just knew that this was where I belonged.

I went back to New Jersey for a few days, then left home and hitchhiked down to Durham. I went to the [March on Washington](#) with the Durham group and when we got back, Floyd hired me to work with CORE.

At that point, I think I was the second white person on the CORE southern field staff, along with Mimi Feingold, who was in Louisiana. Eric Weinberger had worked with CORE earlier in Tennessee, and I remember reading about him being brutalized by the police and having a cattle prod put to his genitals, and then Zev Aelony was the CORE field worker, along with the three SNCC people, charged with insurrection, a capital offense, in [Americus](#) [GA].

And so I was just totally, totally engaged. I worked in Chapel Hill in the Movement there, which was an attempt to bring a public accommodations law to a city in the South. Louisville had one, but otherwise nobody did. And if we could crack Chapel Hill, and get one there, that would be great, and if we couldn't, it would be a demonstration for Congress that you couldn't do it municipality by municipality. You needed public accommodations as part of the Civil Rights bill. So that was a big deal. That was about a year in prison, and I got out on appeal.

Oh, a major thing, a major piece of my life was at the CORE staff conference in New Orleans, in February of that year, 1964. I should

mention first that among the people who came into the coffeehouse in Durham the night the Movement found me was Ginny, whom I later married, and that we had a Movement marriage for 9+ years, until 1972, when the Movement ended, for me, and the marriage ended right along with it. And in New Orleans, there was one other couple at the CORE staff conference, and that was Mickey and Rita Schwerner. And we hung out, and we spent one evening together, and rode around in the station wagon that wound up being Mickey's death car.

After working at the SNCC office in Washington during the summer of '64, I went to Brandeis on a scholarship in the fall to study with Abe Maslow. That's where I read William Bradford Huie's article about the Neshoba County murders in a *Ramparts* magazine. And after reading it, I went into the chapel on the Brandeis campus where I never otherwise would've gone and just had a sense of communion with Mickey, that he did not get to live his full life, and if I had a chance to live mine, I was going to live it for Mickey.

And if I hadn't gotten that year in jail and then gone through all that stuff in North Carolina, I probably would've been in Mississippi, and if I'd been at the summer training in Ohio, Ginny and I probably would've gone to Meridian with Mickey and Rita whom we knew, and I probably would've been in the station wagon. So I've always carried that with me. It's been kind of a consecration in my life. I guess that's enough.

Matt: Wow. I just finished putting a portfolio up on my website called Neshoba Murders. There's, of course, no photographs of that event, so I have an essay in the book on Ben Chaney, James Chaney's younger brother. And a photo of Ben taken right after the murders, as he tries to deal with his brother's death and what it means and what it means for him and so on.

Joseph: I should say that within a couple weeks after that experience in the chapel, I got a commutation from North Carolina's governor for the year I was facing. And there were 42 more years of stuff that could be opened up against me, but those got washed out too.

And so Ginny and I decided to leave Brandeis and return to the

South, and we wanted to go to North Carolina. And on the way, we stopped off in Washington at the SNCC office and heard about the Black Belt project that was going to be coming to North Carolina, among other places. So we worked in the research office in Atlanta for about three or four months, and most of the time I was working on getting us back to North Carolina. And then we became part of the project that picked up, and expanded upon, the work that John Salter had done as a SCEF organizer in [Halifax County](#). (John and I had initially met in jail in Chapel Hill). So Ginny and I were in Bertie and Northampton counties from the end of June '65 through July '66.

Originally Alma Bosley was with us, a Black woman from Mississippi, who had been a CORE organizer and SNCC organizer, and she was post-traumatically stressed, and it turned out she had a concussion, and she went off to get medical treatment. Ginny and I stayed in Bertie and Northampton, and it was a hugely successful project. 3,000 people were registered in three days, and Black registration went from 20 to 40% of the electorate in both counties. And a very powerful decentralized grassroots movement developed on the pattern that John Salter had set up. And this could go on forever, but among other things, we blocked a \$1.2 million OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] project, or the voter's movements did, and eventually they created a community action program of their own and got funding for the poverty program that was hugely successful.

At the height of it, Ginny began a sexual relationship with one of the Black community organizers that we were working most closely with who was our — we three were tight. We were close friends. And other people in the community made it clear that Ginny and I were going to have to leave, and I went through all kinds of stuff, including being concerned that if word of it got out the wrong way, Tim could get lynched. And there I was, crushed in my own marriage and all of that. It was sort of hell.

And we wound up going to Washington and somebody in the SNCC office told me that John Conyers' legislative assistant was looking for somebody to work in the office, and I started working in the office there. And it was clear that there was no more role for a

white person to be a Civil Rights organizer, and I decided to go to law school and become a Movement lawyer. I went to Duke Law School and organized a south-wide group called the Southern Legal Action Movement which amazingly grew to include 200 liberal to radical lawyers and law students and became a National Lawyer's Guild affiliate.

Matt: Is this the group that came into Mississippi and helped during the Summer of '64?

Joseph: No, that would be the Guild itself. So this was an indigenous group of southern lawyers and law students. And then I practiced law for two years. I was a member of the Haymarket Square Collective, which operated a GI Coffeehouse in Fayetteville, near Fort Bragg, working on anti-war things, and worked with the Black Panther Party, and then in the Summer of '72 realized that it was over. The Movement wasn't there anymore. I was burned out, and I headed West with my thumb in the air and wandered around for four years and then settled in California. And then ... to be continued. I'll pick up the rest later with what I've been doing since then. So that's what the Movement did for me. It basically changed my life and gave it meaning and direction, and it's never left me. And I still feel that consecration with Mickey.

How Has It Affected Our Lives Since?

Joseph: Actually, I think I can pick up from there for my concluding thing. I remember hearing Mario Savio when I was at Brandeis in the fall of '64. He went on a national tour at some point, maybe in October or November, and he talked about the feeling on the Berkeley campus among the people who were participating in the Free Speech Movement, and that where before there had been just a sort of alienation — people wouldn't look at each other particularly — there was now a feeling of we're *together* in something. And *that's* always been a profound metaphor for me.

And it's also, given what we are all facing — well, that Oscar Wilde thing, that “the noose is a powerful concentrator of attention” — that

we're all facing the same noose right now. And I think the challenge is, how can we recognize that we are, and not freak out about that, and maintain some degree of spaciousness around it, so that we can actually sustain the gaze at what we're facing? We do have a very powerful common denominator, if we can get the consciousness to recognize it.

So that's where I see that the beloved community may not be out of the question as a human transformation. And so the work that I've done since the Movement — so in '72, I hitchhiked away and spent about four years traveling around the country without any basic guiding light. The 9+ years of the Movement as a guiding light was gone, and I then ran into somebody who told me about transpersonal psychology, and I headed to the Bay Area to study transpersonal psychology and to pick up from what I'd been doing with Maslow.

And about a year later, I met Johanna Luther, the woman I've now been with for 36 years, and we began using video as an instrument for personal and social transformation. We recorded two 9-day retreats on conscious living/conscious dying with Stephen Levine and Ram Dass. And while those retreats were happening, Three-Mile Island also was happening. And the light went off in my mind that the consciousness that palpably can be there when we're facing our personal death could be there when we're facing planetary death.

["Three-Mile Island" refers to the partial melt-down in 1979 of a nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania.]

It just has not — it was not part of the Movement then, and it still isn't. But we then met Daniel Ellsberg, and introduced Dan and Ram Dass to each other, and recorded their first conversation, and incorporated it into a 9-hour PBS series we created called *How Then Shall We Live?* — with Helen Caldicott too — trying to bridge those two dimensions of personal mortality and planetary mortality. So we spent 10 years doing that — and living hand to mouth, I guess is a fair way to put it. It was the basic SNCC style.

And then we did another project with Ram Dass hosting a course in Oakland, which we created together, called *Reaching Out*, to deal with issues of racial healing, deep ecological awareness, and

compassionate social action. A thousand people attended 10 weekly classes to address the question of what keeps us separate — and what can we do about it? And that became another 10-year project, to turn that into a 7-part TV series, also called *Reaching Out*, which went out over PBS stations all around the country, and was the first TV production to be selected, as a recommended community resource, by Bill Clinton's Presidential Commission for a National Conversation on Race.

And now I'm working on a memoir. I'm hoping to bring this consciousness into my writing about my Movement days, as well as my post-Movement life. It's only through community that we can find the capacity to deal with what we're facing as a species. You can't find it by yourself because it's so overwhelming. That's my gamble, or at least that's how I'm running off this consecration to Mickey, basically. It seems so preposterous, that it's almost not worth discussing the possibility — that as a species we could change, that we could recover from our species history from the beginning until now — but I can't see any other way of making it through this. That's what my life is organized around.