

1622 Kenwood Road
Charleston, WV 25314

March 5, 1991

Dear Ms. Kletkotka

I don't know if you can use a written addition from me, but I have thought a great deal about some of your questions, since our interview. Your questions gave me a chance to frame thoughts I have mulled over for years. So, whether you can use it or not, here is an addition.

My thoughts are colored, literally, by the fact that I have just returned from the funeral of a friend, Candy Keeling, whom I met as a high school junior while working on housing issues in Harlem. Of all of the millions of street corners in New York City, her funeral occurred almost 30 years later immediately across the street from St. James Parish House in Harlem, where Candy and I had first worked together.

I was fortunate to have grown up in an interracial household, not because my parents were of two races (though their being of two religions was considered controversial in the 1940's), but because a family friend, Charity Bailey, lived with us from the time I was five years old, until late in my high school years. Charity came to live with us because she taught music at Little Red School House, which I attended. At four years old, I became infatuated by Charity, as four year olds frequently do, when they meet an adult who is lively and kind. When my parents told her, at their first PTA meeting, "Faith talks about you constantly. She wishes you lived with us," Charity responded, "I've been commuting from Harlem. No one down here will rent to me. Do you have a room?" And they did.

This is the short version of a story that includes a year in pre-Duvalier Haiti. Our Italian neighbors slashed the family car's tires, and wrote stuff about "Ethiopians", and worse, on our stoop. I can remember in the late 1940's, stories of my mother and Charity being ignored (not served) at lunch counters on Long Island, as they drove home from the beach. Pervading our perceptions of ourselves as a household was not only the fact that we were women, the fact that Charity was Black, but also the fact that being Jewish was still a stigma of sorts (in my interview for Oberlin College, I was informed that although I met all the criteria for admission, I would probably not get in, due to the Jewish quota, in 1961). Etc.

Although the Haitian experience is remote, 1949-1950, there is no question that my experience as a young (8 year old) white child in a female household (my parents had been divorced) of mixed race in a nation which was male controlled and of color, opened my eyes to what powerlessness could be. The positive side is that my sister and I learned creole, lived in the countryside, and learned to cross boundaries. In preparation for the trip through Florida to Haiti, my mother told us her version of segregation. What I remember is, that legally, Charity might be expected to walk in the street while we

could walk on the sidewalk. Muddying the water, my mother suggested that with our dusky semitic coloring, we three Holsaerts could probably pass. All I knew was, I would not let anyone separate me from Charity, who had become the adult I most cared about. Even in Georgia, by the way, I passed when I felt like it, and in fact, what stopped Sherrod from insisting that I get my driver's license was that I obtained a "colored" learner's permit, and the practical implications of my using it were too much of a nightmare, even for Sherrod to imagine.

As an aside, I came to think of the femaleness of my growing-up household as important not so much because of any innate inclination on my part, or that of my mother, but because my father chose, or accepted, a marginal role in my life. I remember asking him to attend parent/teacher night at my junior high school, and being hurt when he told me that was my mother's job.

In high school, I became involved with something called The Harlem Brotherhood Group (HBG), which was associated with the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Through the NCCJ, I met Dr. Robert Johnson, and through him, SNCCs Charles Jones, Chuck McDew, and Diane Nash.

I remember in particular an evening in Dr. Bob's apartment with some of my HBG cohorts, listening to Diane Nash's stories of McComb, Mississippi. Late that night on West Fourth Street, or a similar night, we ended by singing We Shall Overcome so loud, the police were called. Christmas break, 1961, one of the group members, Peg Dammond, and I were arrested in a sit-in in Chrisfield, Md., the precursor to the massive Cambridge Movement, and spent Christmas in jail. At this time, HBG was moving away from the idea that meeting together across racial lines was reason enough for existence, and toward work in the community. In the next year and a half, as part of a small group who became so close we called one another brother and sister, slept on one another's family's floors, suffered and gloried in one another's Romances and family feuds, spent time with a group of African students, surveyed hell hole after hell hole apartment in Harlem, we developed a belief and understanding of social change at the grassroots level. In the summer of 1962 Peg, along with several of her friends from New York, went south to Albany Georgia. After several churches were burned late in the summer, I left Barnard for a year, and went south. I thought, I would return to work at the grassroots level in New York. I thought of myself as an urban activist. Except for SNCC support work, and the things any New Yorker might be involved in, I never really did return to community work in the city, and ended up, as a result of my work in SNCC as much as any other influence, settling in the industrial-rural coal bearing mountains of West Virginia.

Of that group of people, my strongest friendships were with people from Harlem or the Bronx, who were all Black. The friendships that persisted past the 1960's have been with two women. One, my friend Candy, never saw herself as anything but an urban activist, and never went south, although, ironically, she spent her last decade or so in Lorain, Ohio. Candy never saw herself as being

nonviolent, her biggest quarrel with the civil rights movement. The second woman was younger, in junior high school when I was in early college. She became active in the mosque where Minister Malcolm presided, and went through the politics of his final year. She was involved with the participatory study of Harlem which led to the monograph YOUTH IN THE GHETTO. She helped establish the Urban League's Street Academies, and is still in New York. In spite of separatism, when she heard my mother had died in 1974, this friend wrote, and we have stayed in close touch since then.

All this is by way of saying that when I arrived in Albany, Georgia, I had some sense of the complexity, the historicity if you will, of interracial friendships and dealings. I had some sense, deepened by the end of the 1960's, of how inescapable is the weight of a history in which one race (to which I belonged, except in moments of delusion) had oppressed another. I remember the moment in Santa Fe, following the 1967 invasion by Israel, when I realized that I had been removed from the SNCC mailing list, although in fact I supported SNCC's stance, and am grateful that I had enough understanding to feel this schism was manipulated by the government. Because my relationships and work across cultural lines had occurred prior to my year in Georgia, I not only benefited from the experience in Georgia (as did all staff), but I think this made it impossible for me to break ties, made it impossible for me to blame the difficulty of crossing barriers on my co-workers.

I came away from my year in SNCC and the great broth of those political friendships -- idealism, exhilaration, near-crippling terror, and yes, those hormones with which we each fairly oozed -- with certain political beliefs which I think apply to dealing among or across race or gender today. I believed what Ella Baker told us, that in order to lead, we must ask people to teach us how to lead. That power, which was the underpinning of racial oppression, must be dealt with, if not with moral authority, with some other authority. That class was an issue, and might be an issue which could unite oppressed white and black. That race functioned as a litmus test for justice in America at that time (no, I don't think things have changed). That the government was duplicitous (Albany was the site of the government's persecution/prosecution of the Albany Nine, and the place where the "Justice" Department was ineffectual, at best, in defending voting and other civil rights). That the history of struggle is long, infinite, and unsung, and that I could either join that struggle, or get off the train (and for whites, it was possible to get off the train. That the narrow gains made by the Black middle class in the last twenty years has made it possible for a few, very few, Black people to get off the train and pursue individual success, but that the figures on prisons, education, housing, etc in the US make it clear -- there is no way off the train for most Black people, and for increasing numbers of whites).

Statistical