

Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Reverend Doctor Amos C. Brown
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Interviewer: Dr. David P. Cline
Videographer: John Bishop
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Reverend Amos Brown: Last week I was honored by the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Institute, and he was there. He was honored some years ago, and his wife and my wife's sister are very close friends. My wife's from Richmond, Virginia, and Dr. Forbes used to pastor St. John's Holiness Church in Richmond.

David Cline: Yep, yep.

AB: Yeah, I know Jim.

DC: He's a—for my doctoral dissertation project, he's a central character.

AB: Oh, really?

DC: And so, I got to know him quite well.

AB: Oh! Let me make sure I get this here on, because I'd like to, if you don't mind—

DC: Of course.

AB: Record this.

John Bishop: Eventually, they'll send you a DVD.

DC: Yeah, we'll send you a recording as well and a transcript.

AB: Okay.

DC: So, let me just make sure I know—today is March second, right? Okay. [Pause]

JB: Okay.

DC: Okay? I'm just going to introduce you—

AB: Sure.

DC: Just for the beginning of the tape so we know where we are. This is David Cline for the Smithsonian African American History and Culture Museum and the Library of Congress Civil Rights History Project. Today is Saturday, March the second, 2013, and I'm in the city of San Francisco, California, with the Reverend Doctor Amos C. Brown. Good afternoon.

AB: Good afternoon.

DC: Thank you so much for joining us and sharing your story with us today.

AB: It's my pleasure and a great privilege to share with you.

DC: And I am on Channel 2, and Reverend Brown is on Channel 1.

JB: Okay, now we've got it all covered.

DC: Okay! So, Reverend Brown, if we could just start, if you could tell us a little bit about where you were born, and your family, your people, and how that informed you growing up as a young person.

AB: I was born in Jackson, Mississippi, February 20th, 1941. And according to the U.S. Census, my great-great grandfather, Patrick Brown, was born a slave in Franklin County, Mississippi, in a community called Hamburg. It's east of Natchez, and that area was one great dropping off point for slaves from about 1820 to 1845-50. In fact, there was a terrific cholera

epidemic there around 1830 in Natchez, and these slaves who were shipped down the river, were quarantined out of a place called Forks in the Road, and that's east of Natchez. So, it was from that area that my great-great grandfather was a slave. And I have had that sense of history when I had occasion of my aunt, my father's sister, sharing this information with me.

Naturally, I was born in a segregated, apartheid South, [laughs] in Mississippi, when things were really difficult. In fact, it was commonplace for me to hear of the tales of lynchings, of blacks being mysteriously unaccounted for in the Mississippi Delta, where my father pastored rural churches. In fact, my father succeeded Reverend George Lee in Holmes County, Mississippi, in a Baptist church. Reverend George Lee was murdered in 1955, the month of April, the same year that Emmett Till was murdered. His body was found on August 28, 1955.

[0:05:00]

And I remember the instance in which a man named Eddie Noel, a sharpshooter who confronted a white man for having an affair with his wife, went to this honky-tonk and restaurant in Holmes County, Mississippi, to tell his wife that she had to come home and not work there anymore. And when this white man jumped him and beat him up, this 28-year-old man, a World War II veteran, went to his car, came back with his .22 rifle, and shot this white man dead with that .22 rifle. He fled from the scene of his wife, and for eighteen days, he was on the run. And about three to four hundred white men, some of them were drunk from moon shine liquor, this posse, tried to apprehend him. They couldn't find him.

But it was a woman named Arenia Mallory who was the first principal of the Saints Industrial School in Lexington, Mississippi. That was a school started as a high school sponsored by the Church of God in Christ. The Church of God in Christ was founded by Charles Mason at the turn of the last century, about 1906, after he had gone down to Los Angeles to witness the

Azusa Street Revivals. My point being, by giving all this background and history, is that this woman was so influential, and was the vice president of the National Council of Negro Women, that group that was founded by the great woman, Mary McLeod Bethune. Well, Dr. Mallory went to Eddie Noel and convinced him that he should turn himself in.

But before she met with him, she had learned that he had killed two other deputy sheriffs, and that meant that this black man murdered three white men and was on the run and did not turn himself in until this black woman convinced him to give up. The long-short of it is that when he went to court, the judge I'm sure in his mind felt that [laughs] any Negro who would kill three white men in Mississippi must have been crazy. So, he had an order for him to be examined over at the Whitfield mental institution. And the record is that he was never tried and convicted.

He was released later, and it was found out that he was [laughs] a descendant, a child of one of the governors of Mississippi from 1909 to 1913, Governor Noel. And I don't know if that had anything to do with his getting off, but he was never sent to trial and convicted. He died a natural death in Fort Wayne, Indiana. But I remember as a child the excitement, the serial reports of Eddie Noel killing these white men and what would happen if they caught him.

DC: How did you react to his story?

AB: Well, that story definitely was of great interest to me as a child. And another story that impacted me was the murder of Emmett Till, both happening around the same time. And then—

DC: And you would have been about eleven—?

AB: Yes.

DC: At that time, so—

AB: Sure.

DC: And here was a boy not much older than you—

AB: Yes, that's right.

DC: And so, how did you react to that story or—? [0:10:00]

AB: Well, I'll tell you how I reacted to those stories. My Sunday School teacher, Miss Essie Randall [Note: later identified as Miss Essie Collins], who was treasurer of the Jackson branch of the NAACP over thirty years, one Sunday morning at the Farish Street Baptist Church, which was one of the few churches that opened its doors to any civil rights activity—

DC: What's the name of it again?

AB: Farish, F-A-R-I-S-H, Farish Street Baptist Church. One Sunday morning, she asked me did I know what my name meant. I was eight years old then and I told her, "No." She said, "Your name means Amos. That's a Hebrew word, and it means 'the prophet who bears the burdens of the people.'" I never forgot that. So that when I became aware of Eddie Noel, I became aware of the lynching of Emmett Till and the Reverend George Lee, and when I became aware of a meeting that was held in Dallas, Texas, in 1954 that my sister attended, along with Medgar Evers. It was at that meeting in 1954 that Channing H. Tobias, who was chairman of the board of NAACP, coined the phrase "free by 1963."

And when Gloria came back from that meeting with Mr. Evers, and I heard her telling what happened, I was all intrigued about this conversation that I had with her. And she said, "You know, in 1963 there'll be no more segregation. We'll be able to vote. We won't have to sit at the back of the bus. But we're going to have to *work* to make sure that it really happens." And I was excited about this change that was going to come because of what this man said in Dallas that I got involved, and I organized the first youth council of NAACP in 1955.

And after I organized that youth council, that spring of 1956, Mr. Evers asked my mother if I could travel with him to San Francisco to the national convention of the NAACP, where I would have exposure with other young people from across the country who were in civil rights activity under the umbrella of the NAACP Youth Movement. That was my first time out west. Mr. Evers had just bought an old 1955 Oldsmobile. We called it the Blue Goose. It didn't have air conditioning in that day. In fact, you had use ice packs, bags of ice, to put on the hood of the car to cool the engine as you went through the desert coming westward.

So, that summer of 1956, the month of July, we came to San Francisco. I never shall forget when we approached that Bay Bridge, and I saw all of this water after we had come up through the Valley, you know, up to San Francisco. And I came to this great meeting. I didn't have money to stay in hotels. I stayed with a family who were friends of my mother, and their name is Hutchinson. They lived up on Fulton Street, near Fulton and Divisadero. And I walked from Fulton and Divisadero every day to the meetings, to the nightly-held mass meetings. And it was my fortune to first hear Martin Luther King on Youth Night. He had just won the victory in Montgomery.

DC: Right.

AB: And when he gave his panoramic treatment of history, you know, and talking about the times of the Greeks and Egyptians and all that good stuff, and he said, "But this is the greatest time for me and for all of us to be alive," and he spoke about the hope that he had for America and the eradication of racism. I never shall forget. He ended that great speech that night by saying, "I have a dream that the day will come when all of God's children [0:15:00], from bass black to treble white, will be significant on the Constitution's keyboard." And I have a copy of that speech in my possession now that I heard him deliver.

And on that Sunday morning of the convention, believe it or not, I worshipped at this church.

DC: Oh, you did? This very church?

AB: That I came back to be pastor of, little did I know.

DC: And the name of this church just—

AB: Third Baptist Church, which is the oldest predominately African American Baptist church in the western United States. It was founded in August, August the first of 1852, which was the centennial of the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean Islands. So, this church also had a great confluence with history. That's the same year that Harriet Beecher Stowe's book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was published. And I'm confident that there was agitation in the air, a move for self-determination on the part of blacks before the Civil War here in the West, and that's why Eliza Davis and her husband William and others moved out of White First Baptist. White First Baptist was founded in 1849. They moved out because they met discrimination in the church, and they decided that they wanted to worship God in dignity and not in humiliation.

And I've been pastor of this church since 1976. Now, how did I get here? I had some intermittent stops.

JB: One second. The Library of Congress don't like the files to get too big.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

DC: While we do have a pause, I'll go back and ask one question.

AB: Yeah.

DC: ... Mr. Evers as well, and your father was a pastor, and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about being raised in that family. Earlier before when we were talking, you talked

about books on your father's bookshelves, and I'm wondering if you could talk about how your family talked with you about race or race consciousness or involvement in movement to better the place of African Americans.

AB: Actually, I had very little conversation with my father, because he was very busy. He was a country itinerant preacher and he worked as a janitor. He was aware of the Movement. He was definitely aware of discrimination. But in terms of his telling me, "You must get involved and do this," he didn't operate that way. It was my choice and because of *my* exposure to people like Medgar Evers; John W. Dixon, who was superintendent of the Sunday School in Farish Street Baptist Church there in Jackson; Miss Essie Collins, as I mentioned earlier, who was the treasurer of the Jackson branch; Miss Mary Cox, who [0:18:38], never rode a bus—she walked every place she went because she said she would not ride any bus in segregated humiliation; and Carsey Hall, a letter carrier and was an attorney, went to night school and became an attorney. Samuel Bailey was the advisor of our youth council; he was a member of the College Hill Baptist Church.

Let me say parenthetically, back in the day, there were only about three or four churches that embraced the Civil Rights Movement. The other pastors and churches were A) theologically conservative and didn't want to become involved. They were only concerned about the saving of souls and getting people ready for heaven. Alright. However, there were these churches: Farish Street that I was reared in, baptized there by Reverend Chester Arthur Greer from Fort Worth, Texas. There was Pearl Street African Methodist Episcopal Church [0:20:00] pastored by Reverend G. R. Horton. There was College Hill Baptist Church pastored by Reverend W. L. Jones. And later, the New Mount Zion Baptist Church that Reverend Bell became pastor of

during the height of the student demonstrations of the '60s. Those were the only churches that would open their doors.

DC: Out of how many in Jackson?

AB: Oh, my God! Whew! We must have had about a hundred or more churches. People were afraid, you know. We were mavericks. And little did I know, also, that the State Sovereignty Commission, that watchdog spying group on all civil rights workers, had a ten-page file on me. When that file was opened in the 1980s, we knew that we were being watched, but we didn't think that they were that serious, in terms of spending money to spy on teenagers, *kids*.

But they even had a report in that file, and I will give you a copy of it, in which it was reported that I had opened a bank account at the Deposit Guaranty Bank. One of the vice-presidents broke the law, broke confidentiality, and reported to Mayor Thompson and to the chief of police that I had opened this bank account and the amount of money that we deposited. And it was a notation there that this name must be kept confidential, and they had blotted out the name. His name was Latham, L-A-T-H-A-M. I don't know if he's still alive or not, but he was a vice-president of the Deposit Guaranty Bank of Jackson.

They also had on file there any place that I spoke as president of the youth council or as, later, state president of youth councils in Mississippi, any conventions that I went to. In fact, it was in 1958, again with Mr. Evers, and Mr. Joseph Broadwater, who was a member of our branch—we went to the convention in Cleveland. That was the year that the Little Rock Nine won the Nobel Peace Prize. And I was in an interview with the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* paper about conditions of blacks in Mississippi and the double system of education we had, the fact that black teachers were not receiving salaries equal to whites.

And someone—I can give you a copy of that document—someone sent to the superintendent, the white superintendent, Mr. Kirby Walker, Kirby P. Walker, that article. And I was told when I got back home to enter school that fall, going into my senior year in 1959 at Jim Hill High School, that segregated school, I was told by my principal, Mr. Luther Marshall, that he had gotten orders from the white superintendent and the black superintendent of schools that I was to not be permitted to re-enroll in Jim Hill High School, because I didn't know how to keep my mouth shut and I was creating too much trouble.

Well, when Medgar Evers, again, my mentor, heard about this, he got with my mother and later contacted my father, who was by the way at the National Baptist Convention. It was the month of September when school opened up, and we threatened to file a lawsuit for the desegregation of Provine High School. It's a white high school near my home. [0:25:00] And all of this is written up in Mr. Evers' biography, that book by Manning Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*. Well, all of this is documented in that book.

And when Mr. Evers threatened to sue, they really started moving then. They didn't want to integrate the schools, and so, they rescinded my being prohibited from going to Jim Hill. They let me back in. But they abolished the student council that I was also president of, in order to break my influence. However, the students later elected me president of the senior class. Well, they withheld my holding that position. And I was valedictorian, but, again to break my spirit, they denied me that honor and only let me be salutatorian.

DC: Now, was your principal—were these his decisions, or was he being told what to do?

AB: He was being told. In fact, years later, after I had gone and finished Morehouse, Crozer Seminary, and become an accomplished pastor, I went back home. And he saw me and he broke down and started crying. He said to me, "Brown, you were a kid then and you didn't

understand that we were under a lot of pressure, under a lot of threats, and we were afraid of losing our jobs.” He said, “I didn’t mean any personal harm against you.” He said, “But I had to do what the people told me to do.”

And it was that kind of an atmosphere in Mississippi back then. In fact, in that State Sovereignty Commission report, there was an indication of how they had spies who would go to any mass meeting and would take down the license plate numbers of anybody’s car who was parked around the church. And they would find out who the car belonged to, and the next week, they would research where you worked, and you would get a notice that you were fired for being involved with civil rights activity.

I continued my involvement in the NAACP Youth Movement and was elected national chairman of the Youth Work Committee in 1959 in New York City. Again, Dr. King was at that meeting, and it was there that picture was taken of Roy Wilkins, then the executive secretary, and Dr. King, and myself, as chairman of the National Youth Work Committee. And it was at that meeting that I presided over the reportings of all youth units in the nation. And I was privileged to receive the report from Clara Luper, who was the advisor of the Oklahoma City Youth Council, and Barbara Posey, who was the president of the Youth Council in Oklahoma City, these two persons reporting on their successes in Oklahoma City, again that magic number, August 28.

August 28, 1958, was when there was the first sit-down movement in an organized mass way by young blacks under the umbrella of NAACP. You see, in this country, we have romanticized the student sit-in movement, or mis-stated it. The student sit-in movement did not begin in Greensboro, 1960. It started in Oklahoma City, August 28, 1958.

And at that meeting, back to my point about my presiding in New York: In 1959, according to the report of the credentials committee of the NAACP that's on record at the Library of Congress, there was a young man named Ezella Blair [0:30:00] who was an alternate youth delegate to the convention. He heard Barbara Posey and Clara Luper reporting about what they had done in Oklahoma City. And when he went back to Greensboro that fall of 1959, entering as a freshman at A&T College, he started telling his fellow classmates about this movement. And no one would move with him during the fall, but he got three others to go with him and *sit down* on February the first, 1960. And then, the movement began to spread like wildfire across the South to Nashville, to Tallahassee, to Baton Rouge, to Atlanta.

And that's the real accurate story. I'm working now to write a book entitled *Before 1960* to put it all in accurate historical perspective of when, what was then-called the student *sit-down*—it wasn't called sit-in—it was called sit-down movement. And this movement of 1958 was also replicated in Wichita, Kansas, Louisville, Kentucky—all youth units of NAACP. And we had laid, by the way, the groundwork for this here in San Francisco in 1956 under the leadership of Herbert Wright, who was then the national youth secretary. He's still alive; he lives up in Connecticut. He was reared in the Houston, Texas, branch, and he got us engaged in student youth activism. And this was written up in the *Tokyo Times*, the *London Times*, the *New York Times*, all the major papers around the world, but the American press sat on what happened and tried to wipe it out, forget about it, in 1958.

DC: I think it's such an important part of the story is that NAACP youth training that the Greensboro guys had.

AB: Yes.

DC: Also, that, you know, that Rosa Parks was—the training that Rosa Parks had. People get that story—

AB: Here's the thing about it, too. Ms. Parks worked as secretary of the Montgomery NAACP and she was advisor to the Youth Council. Now, here was the connection that brought me into the loop. I met Dr. King here in San Francisco in 1956. That was the year of the victory of the Montgomery movement. There were delegates from the Montgomery branch. But what happened? In 1956, the state of Alabama sought to wipe out the NAACP, and they made it illegal for the NAACP to function in Alabama. And that's why Dr. King and others had to organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. So, they went under the umbrella of the faith community. They were smart enough to say, "If you won't let us function as a civil rights advocacy organization in Alabama, you can't mess with our churches and our religion." And that's exactly how the Southern Christian Leadership Conference came into being.

But back to your point about Rosa Parks, her being involved was started under the umbrella of NAACP and serving as an advisor to the Youth Council in Montgomery, Alabama.

DC: Okay. Just a quick pause.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're rolling again.

DC: Okay. Could you tell us how you first got to know Mr. Evers and developed this relationship with him?

AB: As I alluded to earlier, I became aware of who he was through my sister, Gloria Holliday, who is still living. She lives in Denver, Colorado. [0:35:00] And Mr. Evers was a very humble, warm, engaging man. And he discovered my interests, my talents, and my ability, even as a lad. He encouraged me. He sort of was my surrogate father, [laughs] elder brother, and he

made sure that I had opportunities to go to meetings, wherever they were. And my mother, who was principally responsible for me, because my father, as I said, traveled a lot, but she never questioned Mr. Evers. She never expressed, if she did have any fear, she never expressed it. She would always say, "Well, if that's what you want to do, go ahead. I'm with you." And Mr. Evers took me to all these meetings. We even went up the Mississippi Delta. And there were points when we disguised ourselves as sharecroppers to hold mass meetings or to investigate cases. We were all over that state.

DC: You mentioned fear. Did you experience fear in situations like that?

AB: Not really. I guess I was too young or maybe too daring or too naive. I wasn't scared at all. But as I look back on what I know about what the State Sovereignty Commission was doing, my life was really in harm's way. The State Sovereignty Commission, in that file that I mentioned, gave a summation report after they had all of these details and documentation of what I had done: Amos Brown is a full-fledged agitator, and this is the report on him that we must keep active. Wherever I was arrested, they had a record of that, whether it was in Atlanta or Savannah, Georgia; I led a wade-in at Tybee Beach there. Also, I desegregated the First Baptist Church of Atlanta. Dr. Benjamin Mays wrote about that in his writings. That church is now pastored by Reverend Charles Stanley. Back in 1961, they did not admit black people there.

In fact, that's where I met my wife. She was a student at Spelman. Students at Spelman, white students at Georgia Tech, Morehouse students led a kneel-in one Sunday morning. And at that church, deacons and trustees literally picked up these students and threw them out of that church. And after the service was over, I saw my wife outside on the steps with a number of other—wives-to-be, that is—a number of other students from Spelman. So, every kind of demonstration [laughs] to break down barriers, I was a part of.

DC: And you were a Morehouse student then? You had graduated from high school and gone on to Morehouse.

AB: Yes. Yes, and I was a part of the leadership contingency of the sit-in movement in Atlanta, along with Marian Wright Edelman, who now is over the Children's Defense Fund. In fact, she wrote a book entitled *Lanterns*, and in that book, there is a chapter where she mentions me. She said there was a young bright NAACP'er named Amos Brown in the room when we met with the college presidents to let them know that we were going to sit in.

You see, when we decided to get involved in the Movement, all the college presidents of those black schools called us in, because they knew we were going to join with the other students throughout the South. And they said, "We're not going to try and discourage you or to block your activity. But [0:40:00] you ought to let the world know why you're doing what you're doing."

And it was Dr. Rufus Clement and Dr. Mays who suggested that we would write a document explaining why, our *raison d'être* for what we were doing. And they said, "We will raise the money to pay for your document to be published in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*." And I was a part of that committee. I was the youngest one in the room. The other persons in the room were Lonnie King, who is still alive; Charles Black, who is still alive; Herschelle Sullivan; Julian Bond; Marian Wright Edelman—

DC: [Laughs] That's quite a group.

AB: Don Clarke, AU, among others. We were in that room. And after we wrote that document—it was entitled "The Committee on Appeal for Human Rights." After it was published in the *Journal*, we sat in. And I spent time in jail with Dr. Martin Luther King; his brother A. D.; Otis Moss, who is still alive, pastor emeritus of the Olivet Baptist Church of

Cleveland, Ohio; and Lonnie King; and David Satcher—David Satcher, the former Surgeon General of the United States. We were schoolmates at Morehouse. In fact, we lived in the same dorm our junior year, Mays Hall. We entered Morehouse at the same time, too. So, that was my experience.

But my experience was not just relegated to civil rights in America. I became aware of world affairs. In 1957, when I met Rajmohan Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, he was here in the United States with an organization called Moral Re-Armament. It was founded by Dr. Buchman in England. It was called the Oxford Movement back in the '40s. And they had the—what I considered to be a bit naive, that the world would be made better if people would just commit themselves to some absolutes: absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute [0:43:05], all this. Well, I listened to it and I saw some good in it. But I felt, back then, that you needed some realistic legislative action to change the legal underpinnings of discrimination in this country, in addition to calling on the individual to change one's heart and try to live a higher standard of living.

And later, after I went to that World Affairs meeting up at Mackinac Island, Michigan, Mr. Gandhi invited me to be his guest. And there were about 87 countries represented there from around the world. That was the same year that Martin Luther King won the Spingarn Medal, which is the highest medal that can be bestowed upon an African American for achievement in previous years or in that particular calendar year, and Mr. Gandhi was there to be a part of that ceremony.

And then, from that international exposure, I also was invited in 1958 by the Quakers to attend a World Affairs camp up at Camp Danby near Cornell University. I spent a whole summer there. Here I was, a kid out of Mississippi. My parents weren't that affluent. Although we were

poor in things, we were rich [0:45:00] in ideas and academic pursuits and in commitment to social engineering and social justice. So, that's been basically a principle of my career, and since then, this has been my passion. I was given a scholarship when I finished Morehouse in 1964 to go to Africa. That was my first trip to Africa.

DC: 1950—?

AB: 1964.

DC: '64, yeah.

JB: Hold on just a second.

DC: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

AB: So, that was the year that I finished Morehouse and also the year of being admitted to Crozer Theological Seminary for my theological training. And by the way, one of my letters of recommendation was written by Dr. King.

DC: You actually studied with Dr. King at Morehouse, didn't you?

AB: Yes, I did, but when I went to graduate school, he wrote one of my letters of recommendation. He went to Crozer back in 1948. In fact, I have a picture of him at the Calvary Baptist Church with the church officers when he was nineteen years old when he entered Crozer. See, his father was a very close friend of Dr. J. Pius Barbour. Dr. Barbour was editor of the *National Baptist Voice*, a graduate of Morehouse, a native of Galveston, Texas. His father was a preacher there in Galveston, too. And he finished Morehouse around 1911 and he went to Crozer as the second black student to finish there.

And from the time that he finished, he was the unofficial dean of all black students at Crozer, and we spent many nights in his parlor, discussing politics, theology, you name it. And he was a mentor for many great preachers who were of the prophetic liberal tradition, such as William Augustus Jones from Kentucky. He's now deceased. He was the pastor of that great church in Brooklyn, New York, Bethany Baptist; Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor, who went to Crozer. Dr. Harold Carter, who is still alive; he's in Baltimore, Maryland. Dr. B. J. Whipper; he's from Alabama. Dr. Charles Booth is in Columbus, Ohio. Dr. Jesse Wendell Mapson is pastoring in Philadelphia. Reverend Doctor Archie LeMone, who served with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, with his having finished seminary.

And this tradition is what created African American preachers, prophets, who were on the cutting edge and never bifurcated the Gospel. It was never "either-or," personal salvation or social salvation. It was always "both-and." We could not see at all how one could talk about saving a soul and not dealing with a society that made it difficult for the soul to be honorable, just, and fair. You had to deal with both.

And that's why we got the blessing and the gift of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson. He, too, finished Morehouse College and went to Colgate Rochester, the sister school of Crozer. Dr. Mordecai Johnson, born in Paris, Tennessee. He studied at Harvard. He went to Chicago. But he was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Charleston, West Virginia, in 1926. [0:50:00]

Before 1926, the board of trustees did not have the confidence in any black who could be president of that school, but they decided that they would give an African American an opportunity. And when they sent out the search committee of people like Ralph Bunche, Sterling Brown, and others, they felt that they were scholars and they should have been considered. But

the prevailing wisdom was that they needed a personality like Dr. Mordecai Johnson to lead that school and take it to its next level. He was elected president in 1926.

When he got there, his first agenda item was to discover what could be done to bring that law school to first-class status. It was a night school when he got there. What did he do? He called on Justice Louis Brandeis, who was serving on the Supreme Court, and he asked him, “If you were to build a first-class law school, what would you advise the builder to do?” And on the condition that Justice—that Rev. Dr. Johnson would not tell anyone what he said until he died, he told him, “I wouldn’t build a law school that would teach young black lawyers how to become corporate lawyers to make money for themselves or even criminal lawyers.” He said, “I would build a great school that would teach young black minds how to master the art of constitutional law.”

And from that conversation, Dr. Johnson sought out Charles Hamilton Houston and gave him the green light to build that law school and make it first class. And in Charles Hamilton Houston’s first class, there were three young men: Thurgood Marshall from Baltimore, Maryland, who had been denied admission to the University of Maryland Law School; Oliver Hill from Richmond, Virginia; Robert Carter from Montclair, New Jersey. *And* there was the counsel and the mentorship of one James Nabritt. It was that team that went before the Supreme Court, beginning in 1953, got involved in developing the briefs, and they went and argued so persuasively against the backdrop and the buttress of the Fourteenth Amendment, equal protection under the law, making the case that segregated public education was not equal, and it denied black children equal protection under the law. That amendment brought us over and broke down the legal barriers for discrimination in this country, and it reversed *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

So, we owe it to Dr. Johnson and the foundation of the black church for all that we have achieved, not the total church, because not everybody was involved in the Movement. In fact, the Joint Center for Political Studies came out with a report some time ago that only about three percent of the black preachers were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. It is a romanticized statement to say that everybody was with Dr. King. They were not. For, as I mentioned to you earlier, there were only about three or four churches in my hometown of Jackson, Mississippi, who became in the Movement. And Dr. King was a remnant of this group. They were a new breed, just a handful. And in Florida, there was C. K. Steele [0:55:00] in Tallahassee; in Miami, Father Gibson; in Tampa, A. Leon Lowry. And in, of course, Tennessee, you had Benjamin Lawson Hooks and Dr. Owen at Metropolitan. In Georgia, you had Samuel Woodrow Williams, who was college minister, and he co-team taught that course, that seminar in social philosophy with Dr. King that I mentioned earlier. He was college minister at Morehouse and was pastor of the oldest black Baptist church in Atlanta, Friendship Baptist.

DC: Can you talk a little bit more about that class that you were in with them?

AB: Oh, that was an exciting class! It was small, only eight of us. And Dr. King was very down to earth. There was nothing arrogant about him. He was a regular brother, though he was a brilliant man. And it was just an incredible experience to sit at his feet.

And one thing I remember about that class is his talking about the theory of personalism that he acquired from Brightman at Boston University, when he was studying his Ph.D. degree where he got his Ph.D., we all know, in systematic theology. Personalism: that every human being is imbued with dignity and worth, and we should respect that worth and dignity, and not rate, not measure or judge people on the basis of where one was born, what was one's color,

what one's religion was. But we should respect every person, in spite of our uniquenesses and differences.

And that's why, even in my own time, it was not difficult for me to embrace women preachers, though about ninety-eight percent of black preachers, who are against white oppression, have been against women. In my church, I have women preachers. I ordained and licensed the first woman preacher in this city in this church in 1984. We have women deacons and women involved throughout the leadership team of this church. *And* when the issue came up regarding gay rights, I didn't have any problems, because I knew what my teacher would do if he were here today. And I felt that it was wrong for us to codify one's rights, the rights of a people who have been marginalized, for they too deserve equal protection under the law.

DC: Yet so many other churches didn't feel that way.

AB: They did not! They did not because they did not understand Dr. King and they do not know how we got over. You see, John Mercer Langston, back in 1866—this is the great-uncle of Langston Hughes—who was the first black to serve in Congress during Reconstruction in Virginia, and he and Charles Satchell, the first black pastor of Third Baptist, were in the leadership of the Abolitionist Movement in Ohio before 1850.

But back to my point, I have a copy of a speech that John Mercer Langston delivered in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1866, and do you know what the title of that speech was? "Equal Protection Before the Law." And he was fighting and arguing for blacks to have the *right to vote* back then. And he said, among other things, "If you feel that black folks must be educated, must be learned, know how to read and write, make sure that all white folks are required to do the same, because there are many of them who are enfranchised, who are voting." [1:00:00] And that

was something that really shook me, that way back then, here was this man, a preacher and a lawyer who labored along with my predecessor, Charles Satchell, for equality of opportunity.

So, I told all of my brothers who were not aware of this kind of history, who were not aware of this kind of reasoning, you know, you must not become that which you hate. And if you hate, just like the fact that white folks discriminated against you because of the color of your skin, don't discriminate against gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual people because they're different. And I pushed that idea and that notion that we're all different. As long as we're not violating the law or doing injury or harm to anyone, we should not *legislate* how people are to experience their own life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. And tried to impact upon them the fact that, impress upon them rather, that I'm a heterosexual. That's who I am. Gays and lesbians, transgender and bisexual people, that's who they are. And we must not generalize on them.

And I remind them often that the divorce rate in America is the highest, *not* in California, *not* in New England, where the Unitarians are and the liberals, *not* out here where they think we're kooky and crazy, but the divorce rate in America is the highest in the Bible Belt, where we sing the most, shout the most, preach the most, go to church the most. And I always raise the relevant question to them: How can you blame other people for not being able to keep your own relationship together? I say, "Why is it that in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, and up into Oklahoma the divorce rate in this nation is the *highest* amongst religious, church-going people?" Can't explain it.

And then, I remind them also, in terms of the worth and the dignity of all people, that King James, who gave us the King James translation of the Bible that many of them love to hear, the thees and the thous, the old Chaucerian English, you know—I said, "Did you know that King James was gay?" And I really had them then. [Laughter] They didn't know which way to run. I

said, “Now, because he was gay and he made this contribution, are you going to burn up all of the Bibles?” I think we should be aware. I said, “Now, that does not mean that you are not *entitled* to decide what you’re going to do about marriage equality in the context of your religious rites, R-I-T-E-S.” There’s a difference between religious rites and the rights that we are guaranteed under the Constitution and the laws of the state. And I said, “You cannot discriminate against people.”

And I reminded them also that we would not be *Baptists* if we did not have the freedom to interpret the Bible in the way that we are led to do. Because Roger Williams in 1638 was run out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony because the Puritans and the Congregationalists said, “We’re going to have a state church. We’re going to tell people what to believe.” And he said, “Oh, no. I’m going to have freedom of conscience. There’ll be separation of church and state, autonomy of the local congregation.” And I said, “Are you going to deny or are you going to spit on the principles that enable you to be a Baptist?”

I said, “We must not deny those persons, those congregations the right to perform same-sex marriage if they want to.” I said, “That may not be a part of my tradition, and I have that right as one living in a democratic society to follow the tradition that speaks to me.” And I said, “I do not perform same-sex marriage because of the tradition that I’m exposed to, where I am, here and now. But it is wrong, it is not just, it does not provide equal protection under the law, for you to go out and join with forces, whether it is the Catholic Church or the Mormons, to say we’re going to deny these persons equal protection [1:05:00] under the law by imposing our private religious persuasions and doctrines on them. This is a free country. It is not a theocracy. It is a democracy, government by the people, of the people, and for the people. And of those

people are gay and straight people, black and white, brown, yellow, red. We're all persons in God's sight."

And that's what I've stood on. And many didn't want to hear it, even some in this church. Finally they came around. One Sunday morning, a young man, who finally had to apologize to me and the whole church, tried to come up and take over the pulpit one Sunday morning when I said that I was not going to support Proposition 8. And right now, I believe I'm on the way to being vindicated because I think the change has come. And with even the position that Mr. Obama, the President, is taking, here again I was a prophet, as my Sunday School teacher told me to be, who bore the burdens of the people. And I think that I have humbly borne those burdens, not just for black people, not just for women, but also for gay people.

DC: You mentioned earlier the idea of not only civil rights but human rights.

AB: Yes.

DC: Can you talk about that in the context of what you're saying?

AB: In terms of human rights, it takes us into the global picture. I think we must see that in our Christian tradition at its best, the notion is there that Christ died for the world, not for America, but for the world. And in that world, there are people of different cultures, different backgrounds, different religions. So that I must be careful about my economics, my politics here at home, in terms of seeing how they impact people who are in Bangladesh, Central America, South America, Africa, poor people.

You see, we're about four percent of the—at one time, we were six, but maybe about four percent of the world's population—but we consume forty-five to fifty percent of the world's goods and resources. And yet, the Bible says, "The earth is the Lord's, the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein." So, it's not fair for me to support industries that are paying

these horrible wages to people in China or these other so-called Third World nations, who are working cheap labor to support our standard of living. What happens over in these countries does come back to impact us.

Dr. King also said, “Injustice *anywhere* gets around to affecting all of us *everywhere*.” And that’s the reason why he wrote the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Remember the white clergy of Birmingham said, “You don’t need to be coming here stirring up trouble. You don’t live here. You don’t pay taxes here. Get out of town, Dr. King! Stay in your own pulpit up there in Atlanta!” And he wrote that letter to let them know that we are in this garment, mutually impacted, and what affects one gets around to impacting us all throughout the world. That’s why we have to take this issue beyond just civil rights for us in America and look at the human rights of all peoples on the face of this earth.

And when you really go way, way back, get technical, we are members of the same family. According to Leakey, the paleontologist, our first home was in Africa [1:10:00] in the Rift Valley. And I tell many people when we’re unkind to people of different races, we’re messing with our kinfolk. And the only reason why we’ve got these distinctions, you know, in terms of human features, is because we migrated from one place to the other and we adjusted to the environmental conditions, where we must remember what my mother told me when I left home: “Amos, behave!”

Unfortunately, when we left our home in Africa, we failed to behave. Wherever we established cultures and civilizations, we became arrogant and developed this dichotomy of “them against us, us against them,” instead of getting that one little pronoun, “we.” *We* are family. *We* are part of this world community. And *we* are going to *share* this earth’s resources and not be greedy and hoard unto us *over* our fair share of the world’s resources.

JB: You know, if I had some time and could use these tapes, I'd put that on YouTube this afternoon. [Laughter] Could I just—I found this extremely moving. But another thing that was very moving was seeing and hearing you talk to the youth when we were first here waiting. Could you say something about what message—what you're trying to convey to young people now in these times?

AB: Well, this was a group of young men and students at Stanford, at UC-Berkeley, the University of San Francisco, UCLA, who were pledging to be members of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. That's also the fraternity of Dr. King. It's my fraternity, too, and W. E. B. Du Bois, and Andrew Young, Joseph Lowery, and others. Well, I was trying to impress upon them that, in the spirit of Alpha, we would be men of scholarship, manly deeds, and love for all humankind. And this is what Dr. King epitomized.

First of all, he was a scholar. He entered Morehouse at the age of fifteen, an early admission student, though at Morehouse his average, and I have a copy of his transcript, he was a C-plus student. However, at Morehouse, those professors were hard taskmasters. When he finished Morehouse, he went on to Crozer, and he was an A student. He was president of the student body. He went on to Boston University and got his Ph.D. degree. He was a scholar, and that's the reason why I worked here in my ministry to clone, to create more young King Scholars.

Right now, we are involved in a program over at Martin Luther King Middle School called Students of Promise. We're working with Latino and African American males who are underachieving. You see, the mean average for all black students at the middle and high school levels in this city, believe it or not, is D-plus. And only thirty percent of black students in this school district finish—*thirty percent* finish high school. And when you look at the higher

education level, the same percentage obtain. Of those who enter school, for whatever reasons, drop out; only about thirty to forty percent finish. That's tragic.

So, I was trying to let these young men know, I repeat, that they have a responsibility that once they get their sheepskin, don't forget that Mary McLeod Bethune said, "When you become the first black here, or the first black there, and the first black there, you know, make sure you are not the last one. And as you climb up, reach back and pull someone along with you." And I was challenging them to really work to be role models [1:15:00] or models for young men in inner city communities.

Secondly, I was appealing to them to be involved in the culture and the communities of the black people, for many times middle-class blacks go unto themselves and forget about the community. I was reminding them that they were needed *now* to be what W. E. B. Du Bois called "missionaries of culture and self-help."

And then, thirdly, I was trying to remind them that they need to be world citizens and not be provincial, the same as I was tutored and taught to do so through the experiences that I had with Operation Crossroads Africa when I first went to Africa in 1964. The other thing that I did I mentioned earlier is that that program was started by a black Presbyterian pastor named James Robinson, who was pastor of the Church of the Master in Harlem, in 1958, the same year I got in trouble with that article in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* about conditions of education in Mississippi. Dr. Robinson started this program, and what was the program about? Engaging American and African students in summer programs of study, travel, and community development programs. This is where John Kennedy got the idea of the Peace Corps from.

DC: Right. And where did you go?

AB: I went to Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Ghana. I spent two and a half months on the west coast of Africa. That was my first exposure, I repeat, to Africa, and I've been to Africa since then, oh, twenty-two times, all over. And I was one of the founders, along with Dr. Leon Howard Sullivan of that program called the African-African American Summit. The first Summit was held in Côte d'Ivoire, in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, back in the '90s, '91, I believe it was. And I never shall forget that night that we met in the home of Dr. Sullivan in 1990, and he shared with us this vision of pulling African American leaders and scholars and businesspersons together to build relationships across the Atlantic, so to speak, to really help Africa go to the next level in terms of development in areas of education, economic empowerment, and community development. I went to many of the Summits.

DC: How influential do you think that first experience with Operation Crossroads Africa was for you in how you view the world and your career path?

AB: Well, it gave me a practical experience of putting into action what I learned in 1958 at Camp Danby up at Cornell University. You know, Tennyson was right in his work, "Ulysses," when he said, "I am a part of all that I have met." We become what we've met. Our environment, our exposure, does create for us impressions, mirrors—to use the words of Charles Cooley, sociologist, "looking-glass selves." Our young people need more reflections in the mirror of them doing, achieving—seeing their counterparts doing, achieving. And unfortunately, in many of our inner city communities, we don't have enough of those models. And Crossroads was that exposure, that reflection, [1:20:00] that I began to put into action in later years with Dr. Sullivan.

And then, here recently, in the 1970s, when there was a great carnage and war going on in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and there were a lot of refugees from that country, and the United States government was not fair in terms of admitting African refugees here, even though fifty percent of

the world's refugee population was on the continent of Africa. But back then, the quota for all of Africa was 790. But for other countries, you're talking about a minimum of at least 10,000, and later on, it mushroomed into about 50,000 for Soviet immigrants/Jewish immigrants, 125,000 for Cubans, another 45,000 Southeast Asians. So, our immigration department was not just and fair, in terms of Africa. But when they were challenged on it, they said, "Oh, we don't want to cause a *brain drain* on Africa." But they didn't say that about India. They didn't say it about these other countries. They admitted them to the country.

So, I was involved in that effort, and this congregation, through my leadership, sponsored about 3,000 refugees from Africa and the Caribbean Islands. In fact, the first home or haven that they received when other churches, even black churches, wouldn't receive them from Ethiopia or Eritrea, was my home. My wife and I took them into our house and turned our family room into a room for refugees until we were able to get some funds to lease a two-flat Victorian house four blocks away from the church—four doors, rather. And then later, we turned it into a resettlement program. So, here again, because of the exposure through World Affairs Camp and Crossroads, when they needed somebody to advocate for African refugees, I was there and did what I could to work for their betterment and good.

And here, recently, I happened to have been invited to the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of Ghana. And while I was there in Accra, on the last night of their celebration, just before Stevie Wonder came on the stage to perform, there was a young kid who performed, who was thirteen years old then, at the keyboard. And, boy, he really got the house, as they say. And after his rendition, I asked one of the ushers to point out the parents or the sponsor of this young man. And I met his mentor and I told her, "This young man needs to come to the United

States and finish high school, because somebody who is that gifted needs to have greater exposure.”

And she said, “Well, he had been on tour with other groups and gone to Juilliard School of Music and Peabody School of Music, and everybody that heard him, they said, ‘Without a question, he’s a genius.’ They made all kinds of promises,” she said, “but they didn’t follow through to give him an opportunity to come to America.” I said, “Don’t you worry. You let me get back home and give me about a month or two months, and we’re going to work something out to get this young man here.”

So, I came back, went to the headmaster at the Stuart Hall High School, this upscale school, Catholic school here, and told him about this young man. And I convinced him to give Kofi Vordzorgbe a scholarship, eighty percent scholarship. And he maintained a straight-A average. And he was, two years ago, going on two years now, after he finished Stuart Hall, admitted to Morehouse, and he’s maintained a straight-A average there. And here at the Conservatory of Music, he never made under A or A-plus. He just mesmerized the teachers there. He has written himself, composed himself, nine symphonies, seven or eight sonatas, [1:25:00] two operas, and believe it or not, he’s interested in going into medicine and not music as his major. So, here we have, out of Africa, a Mozart, another Albert Schweitzer, if you please. Schweitzer was a master on Bach and a medical missionary to Africa.

And since I brought him here, made him a part of our family, treated him as if he were one of our own children, we have been very pleased that he’s been a blessing to himself and to others and has shown that if a child is exposed to great things and utilizes his innate gifts, there’s no telling what that person can become. And Kofi is a great testament to that. He came here for the Christmas break and he played one of Chopin’s pieces and just, I mean, wrecked the house.

No music! He's got it! And writes music on the computer, you know, he'll be riding, or wherever he is. And another thing that's great: he's well-balanced. He plays soccer, basketball. We never had one problem out of him the four years that he was here in our home when he was in high school; the same thing down at Morehouse.

So, this is rewarding: to just be of help, asking for nothing back. But as Dr. Mays often said to me at Morehouse, and many of the students, but it haunts me that he said to me one day, "Mr. Brown, I've had many breaks in my life. Many awards and honors have come my way. I didn't deserve it all." He said, "I can't pay those people back. However, the least that I can do is just pass it on to somebody else." So, whatever I do is a matter, is an exercise of passing it on to show my gratitude to God and to others for what they did for me.

For when I went to Morehouse in 1959, I had only eighty-seven dollars in my pocket, and room and board back then cost about eight hundred and ninety-five dollars then. But I met friends along the way. My home church sent me money. I stayed with Dr. Mays and did housework and chauffeured. I worked for Dr. Rufus Clement, the president of Atlanta University. His wife was from Mississippi, Mrs. Pearl Johnson Clement; took a liking to me, I'm sure because I was from Mississippi. But those people were kind to me. In fact, it was at Dr. Clement's house that I first laid eyes on Eleanor Roosevelt, when she spoke for the graduation of Atlanta University back in the '60s. And these experiences have come my way because I hung out with people who were great models and who were just a terrific inspiration for me and many young people.

DC: In many ways that began with your relationship with Medgar Evers?

AB: That was it!

DC: Yeah. And can you—can I ask you about the loss of Medgar Evers and how you experienced that?

AB: You know, at Morehouse, they often teased me because I was from Mississippi, and they always reminded me that I was from a foreign country. [Laughter] And they would say to me at break time, “Well, Amos, you better go and apply for your visa to get back to Mississippi [1:30:00], because you’re going back to a different country. You’re going back down there.”

And it was that summer of 1963 that I was in summer school. See, I missed a semester because I was out in the student demonstrations, the Civil Rights Movement, you know, and I had to do these courses so I’d make sure that I finished my work in ’64. And this brother from Alabama said to me, “Amos, you better not go apply for your visa this time. You better stay here, because things are getting rough down there in Mississippi.” I said, “What are you talking about?” He said, “I heard on the news this morning that a civil rights worker was killed in Jackson.”

And when he said that I knew it was Medgar. And I had just spoken with him a few days before, asking me if I would come and work that summer again, as I had done previous summers, doing organizing and youth work. But I told him that I would have to pass because I wanted to finish school on time and I would catch him later, you know. But I was not shocked because I realized how tense it was.

And he—I don’t know. He had this premonition that something would happen, because he was too vocal and people were rallying around the cause. There was great protest with students from Tougaloo College and Jackson State, and then the Freedom Riders were coming later, including myself. The previous summer in 1961, though I was not with the group that went

to Montgomery, I went on myself on my way to Jackson and did my protest. And I joined up with them there, but they had sent most of them up to Parchman, to the prison there.

And so, when I got there, Medgar told me that since they had already gone up to Parchman, for me to just stay and engage the young people in protest for some of the public facilities there in Jackson. And the one that we chose was the Municipal Park. You couldn't sit on the same bench and look at the monkeys or the elephants together with whites. And I was arrested at the Livingston Zoo, along with several other members of the Youth Movement of the NAACP.

And that same summer, I was arrested because I insisted that a young doctor would not call my 85-year-old neighbor "boy" when I took him to the University of Mississippi Hospital. And they knew who I was, because I had already been involved in demonstrations, including the Livingston and Freedom Rides, you know. And when Chief Ray came out there and saw [laughs] it was Amos Brown again, and the doctor told him that I had taken him on because he called my neighbor "boy," and not a man or by his name, he said, "Well, what are we going to get him on now?"

And one of his lieutenants said, "Well, we'll arrest him on using profane language in public." And I spent two nights in jail until Medgar bailed me out. And there's an article that ended up in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, in which Mr. Evers said that all you have to do is open your mouth in Mississippi, and it's profane. That is in that State Sovereignty Commission report.

So, that was my connection with Mr. Evers during his final days, and I really was touched by it. I was at the funeral. And I remember after the funeral was over [1:35:00], there was a march, and we were marching about two or three abreast behind the body before it was shipped up to Washington for burial at Arlington. And these whites were so infuriated over the

fact that we were there in such large numbers, with Medgar Evers and Roy Wilkins and others, that these police officers were using billy clubs, hitting children and women, and horses were galloping over people—

DC: At the funeral?

AB: Yes, at the funeral! At the funeral! And you were just defenseless. You couldn't do anything. If you raised a hand to do anything, they would have struck you down. But that was a horrifying experience that day there in Jackson. So, I've kept in touch with Mrs. Evers. In fact, I saw her two weeks ago in New York at the National Board Meeting of NAACP. I'm still on the National Board. And I will be speaking this May, on May the eleventh, in Jackson for the Freedom Fund dinner of the Jackson branch, and also for the commemorative service in Jackson marking the fiftieth year of the assassination of Medgar Evers.

DC: So, was that a moment of despair for you, or quickly translated into galvanizing you to carry forward?

AB: Well, I never had these moments of despair. If anything, these detours made me more determined to continue the fight. And Mr. Evers would not want me to stop or to be dejected, but to get up, move on, and that's what we must do. For this problem of race in America is still with us. And as one scholar, Cornel West, said, "Race matters." It really does, still, unfortunately. And we have built a nation over an "ism" that should not be.

As we well know, whatever is in your DNA, unless you accept treatment or therapy or change your lifestyle, can cause your discomfort or your demise. The same thing obtains for America in a sense. If we don't come to deal with this issue of race, we're going to destroy this nation. And we ought to move to get over it. We ought to go through the therapeutic process.

President Bill Clinton tried to do it with his Commission on Race that Dr. John Hope Franklin was chair of, but that commission was derailed. People didn't want to talk about it. And even though we have Mr. Barack Obama, the first African American to be President, we're not in a post-racial society at all. It's still here. A case in point—let me say this right so that I won't appear to be heartless, but I must state the facts. Black youth and children have lived every day in a climate of violence. There's more violence for an African American male between fifteen and thirty than there was for a soldier in the Desert Storm, the Persian Gulf, or in Afghanistan, or Vietnam. At this church, I'm leading funerals practically every month, sometimes, for young African American males. It's not happening [1:40:00] in other communities at all, as often as happens for us per capita.

However, we did not get that excited about this issue of *guns* until twenty, unfortunately, babies who happened to have been principally white—one was biracial, the little Latina-black girl, Ana Greene. There was on CNN a clip of her sitting at the piano with her little brother, because her parents said they wanted the world to remember her as she was, a bright child with hope and possibilities. And do you know what that little girl was singing and her brother was playing? Neither one missed a note. “Come Thou, Almighty King. Help us Thy name to sing. Father, all glorious, over all victorious, come and reign over us, Ancient of Days.”

If we were to take to heart the lyrics of that song, we would see that in this nation there should reign supreme a universal spirit and practice that whether a child is in violence in Newtown, my town, or whatever town, we should show concern and show as great passion for all as we do for one. And I think that, though Newtown maybe was the tipping point, we have the occasion now to deal with this culture of violence in America.

I just got back from a meeting on Friday with the senior staff, the chief of staff of Vice President Biden, with Franklin Graham and Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, who is over the Public Policy and Social Justice Commission of the Southern Baptists. That's the largest Protestant denomination in the nation.

Out of that meeting, it was the agreement that we're going to call faith leaders together at the White House, possibly around the time of the anniversary of the assassination of Dr. King, April the fourth—evangelicals of the white community, traditional civil rights leaders, black faith leaders, people of all faith communities—to pledge our support for this president as he seeks to come up with sensible measures to get us beyond this culture of violence. And already we've agreed upon universal background checks, expansion of the mental health programs, addressing the issue of the exposure of children to this culture of violence that's in these video games and many of these real violent movies that are coming out of Hollywood.

So, I think that's a beginning point, even though we still have miles to go and more to do and promises to keep to address the semiautomatic weapons. But I feel that we're on our way, for it's ridiculous that we have 11-12,000 homicides a year in this country, and other countries, you know, thirty or forty, maybe fifty. We're a violent culture, and it should not be, with all the power and all the money that we have and all of the greatness that we brag about. [1:45:00] I feel that we must check ourselves and raise the question: Is this really America at its best?

And I hope that is not a fallacious assumption that we've got to arm ourselves, to re-do, re-enact the Civil War. Remember, if you look at the demographics, the states where they're talking the loudest and shouting the loudest about wanting to have their guns, it's the old red states, the Confederacy, and those up in Idaho and Montana, those who left the South, where they're commiserating with themselves up there. And basically it is Republicans who are

pushing this agenda of having these *guns*. Who are we afraid of? What boogeyman are we fighting? This ought to be one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.

And John Winthrop, in that sermon that he preached from that ship, *Arbella*, in which he envisioned that city on the hill, remember he pushed the notion that this was to be a community of mutual responsibility and mutual help, and that we should look out for each other and be an example to the world of how you can maintain a new and democratic society. We must not forfeit that vision. We can't fulfill it by being against each other. We must not turn on each other. We must turn *to* each other and create what Dr. King envisioned, a beloved community, a community in which we would recognize and respect our differences, one where we have respect for each other and see that out of one comes many, and not the other way around, many creating one.

We talk about making America the melting pot, but in a melting pot, the ingredients lose their distinctions or uniquenesses. But in a salad bowl, a *salad bowl*, the entities, the ingredients, are still visible, but it's more nutritious. We are told that a salad can be more nutritious than just eating meat or a pot of stew. And I think that America will be healthier when we become one nation, but in our oneness, see that there are many strands, many cultures, and to be a multicultural, multiethnic nation doesn't mean that we are deficient. It means that we are more enriched.

And when we're enriched, we'll be able to say: I'm black and I'm proud, I'm yellow and I'm mellow, I'm red but I ain't dead, I'm brown and I'm sound, I'm white and I'm alright, I am gay but I'm godly, I'm straight but I'm sensible. That's the kind of antiphonal united chorus that ought to be coming from America, and not this dissonance of hate, of division [1:50:00] and destruction of human life.

DC: Thank you.

JB: I think we could put a line under that.

DC: Yeah, I think so, too, and I'm tempted to just end there it's so beautiful, but I—

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

AB: I would hope that as we tell the story of the Movement that there will be a support system and resources provided for a treatment of the many, many unsung heroes and she-roes whose names never got into the paper, but who worked in the heat of the day, who went through great challenge, hardship, and tragic moments. Case in point: In Mississippi, Mr. C. C. Bryant, a railroad man in McComb, was a great warrior, peaceful warrior. Doc Owens, also in McComb, Amzie Moore in Clarksdale, Mary Pigeo, Dr. B. E. Murph, Samuel Bailey, Joseph Broadwater, Carsey Hall, Randolph Darden from Meridian, J. A. Noel, Reverend William A. Bender, who really laid the groundwork for the Student Movement and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi in the '50s.

Back in 1946, Reverend Bender, who was college pastor at Tougaloo College, that congregational related school, wrote letters to Walter White—these letters are on file—about his efforts to get equal pay for black teachers in Mississippi. And he also fought the white primaries in Mississippi. This is before Fannie Lou Hamer in Atlantic City. This man, who was courageous, he walked all over Jackson. Everywhere he went, whether it was rain, shine, sleet or snow, he had an umbrella under his arm.

And here again, it goes back to this thing of exposure, in terms of what it does to make us who we are. His daughter, Luella Bender, was one of the persons who was in that car with me in 1956, and Mr. Evers, and Miss Della Irving, who was the advisor to the Grambling College

chapter in Grambling, Louisiana. When we came west in 1956, we left Jackson and went to Grambling and picked her up, and we came out here together. But it was her father who pioneered. He was a pioneer in Mississippi, another preacher who was a new breed, who even many times walked alone.

And there also was Gladys Bates, who filed the first suit, along with her husband, John Bates. And her father, Mr. Noel, was another champion. You see, the people who were in the vanguard of the Movement were independent, because they worked for the U.S. Government as postal workers, [1:55:00] or they were insurance sales persons. Any other black who had to depend on whites for their livelihood would have be done in immediately.

DC: Or barbershop owners.

AB: Barbers, yes.

DC: Or funeral parlor directors.

AB: Funeral parlors, yes. That's right. And another person was Reverend R. L. T. Smith. He was one of the first blacks to run for Congress. He lived right down the street from my home house. He owned a grocery store *and* was a letter carrier. Reverend L. C. Wilcher, he also came to this meeting in 1956 in San Francisco, at the National Convention. He was a letter carrier. Carsey Hall, the attorney that I mentioned earlier, was a letter carrier. John W. Dixon was a letter carrier.

So, you see, many segregationists in the South talk about maintaining their state's rights because they knew that they could do whatever they wanted to do to do blacks in and to oppress black people and keep them down. And when they talk about, "We don't want the government interfering," what government are they talking about? The U.S. government, the federal government. And it's another coded message of being against blacks when they say, "We've got

to protect ourselves against the tyranny of the government.” When they’re referring to the government, it’s not about their state government. It’s not about the state government of Mississippi, or like South Carolina, where they still want to hoist the Confederate flag. They’re talking about the federal government, because they don’t want to do right. They don’t want equal protection under the law and they don’t want justice for everybody. They want to maintain their old Southern way of life.

JB: Can I ask you a question? I saw an article that came out with *Truthout* that argued with a lot of citations and quotations from the Constitutional Convention that the Second Amendment is in the Constitution because they were protecting the paddyrollers and the Southern militias that kept slaves suppressed, and it was a revelation to me. And I would think you could argue that.

AB: Sure! Definitely. They needed these guns to go after *us*. Even Abraham Lincoln mentioned—there’s a book. You know the fellow up at—I think it’s at Columbia—Andrew Delbanco. You should read it. It’s called *The Real American Dream: Meditations on Hope*. And he cites how even President Lincoln mentions how blacks were hounded and how we were kept from escaping the cruelty of slavery because of the weapons and the bounty hunters, to go back to your point.

DC: Um-hmm.

AB: And that’s what came out in that movie, *Django*.

DC: Right.

AB: Alright. Okay.

DC: Thank you so much.

AB: Let me run down here.

END OF INTERVIEW

[Recording ends at 1:58:49]

Transcribed by Sally C. Council