

# LOUISIANA STORY

JEROME SMITH

*A FREEDOMWAYS interview with Jerome Smith, Field Secretary for the Congress of Racial Equality, (CORE), in Louisiana. Mr. Smith is a native Louisianian and has been active in the Freedom Movement for the past several years. He has kindly consented to give us some of his major views and insights in regards to the Freedom Movement in Louisiana out of some of the experiences that he has had during the past several years.*

(Q) *First we would like to ask Mr. Smith: When did you become an active member of the Movement, and what were the circumstances?*

(A) Officially in 1960, but I think one becomes a part of the Movement the day he is born in this country. However, in 1960, I was a student in the Southern University. I took part in the first major march in Louisiana; 5,000 students marched. My reason for taking part in this particular demonstration is somewhat complex. I guess many factors contributed to the reason I took part. When I started to read a lot about Africa, and Africa was on the move and I developed a great love for her, which has nothing to do with the fact that Africa is a black continent, but has to do with the fact that Africa reflected a spiritual frankness and unflinching dedication to manhood. This is extremely important to me, and my reading about Africa touched my own desire to hold on to my manhood. Also it had to do with my mother and father. Year after year my mother would insist, that when I would go to pay a bill for her the clerk should write "Mrs." before her name. My father would say, "if a white man hit you, punch him; and if a black man hit you punch him" and this gave birth to the desire to reject that which denied my dignity and it gave me the opportunity to battle the forces which are less than human. The Movement in Baton Rouge was really the turning point in my life, because it helped me to get a new definition of some of the vital terms of life.

(Q) *That was the sit-ins in Louisiana?*

(A) Yes. For the first time in my life, I was able to look at religion for what it really is. Being black, religion has a lot to do with our

survival in this country, and a lot to do with our defeat, and as I look at this and tell the truth about it, and seek to use religion as a creative force and to do something for man, I was able to look at education, when I left school, for what it really is. I was somewhat disturbed at first, because I was not firm in my decision, which was to withdraw from school. But afterward I was able to look back and see that I was *not* receiving an education at the University, in fact, very few students, if any, were getting an education in a southern school. This has to do with the fact that you are taught what to think; *and not taught how to think*, and to look into your own situation, and one is somewhat forced to be a servant for the system. The proof of that is the whole school is segregated and the reason that I left school has a lot to do with my becoming educated enough to challenge the system.

(Q) *The school had been officially opposed to that?*

(A) Yes—because it is supported by the state board of education, and the values that one gets with this type of education are not good. The only important thing that you get is a degree. It helps you to get a better job and to provide for a family or to get a home and some money in the bank, but in order to hold on to these things, in a segregated environment, you must surrender yourself to the system, which makes you become a living-dead. You have to adhere to the dictates of the white man and the white man is not concerned about you, because the white man's fortune depends on how much you surrender yourself to his desires. So, I was able to deal with religion and education, and really able to think about life. Before this, when my grandmother would say, "don't do this and don't do that," she said it for protection. So I was able to get out of that situation and search for new definitions.

(Q) *If I understand it correctly, it was a combination of demonstrations, taking place upon the background of earlier experiences with your family clinging to the church, which led you to the decision to drop out of school and become a full part of the Movement.*

(A) Yes, that is correct.

(Q) *Now what was the first demonstration or the first mass Movement in Baton Rouge in which you participated?*

(A) The first mass Movement was the "freedom rides." I served three months in jail in Jackson, Mississippi and then my return to Baton Rouge to begin demonstrations with five to six thousand students. Looking back at Baton Rouge, and the mass demonstrations, in that city, it's clear that mass demonstrations really have little to

do with mass movements. You can have mass demonstrations and not have a mass movement. The difference is that one can mobilize thousands to demonstrate against segregated lunch counters without awakening the people to the need of being daily involved in the destruction of their plight. This is the real test of leadership.

(Q) *Would you say that the demonstrations were the first in Baton Rouge to contribute towards the education of the whole community?*

(A) Yes, I think they did. The demonstrations announced the discontent with segregation; and with the voice of discontent emanating from the student body, in turn this spilled over into thousands and thousands of homes. For the first time the white's were forced to recognize that they no longer had control, and the fear they had instilled into the Negro for years and years had at that point turned against them. So it started the white people thinking and I hope the Negro started thinking, too.

(Q) *Would you describe the earliest demonstration in Baton Rouge, where several thousand students from Southern University took part.*

(A) As you know after the sit-ins in North Carolina the fever swept the country. At our campus, Marvin Robinson, President of the student body, and several students decided to become part of the struggle. Our target was the eating facilities in downtown Baton Rouge, which is about nine miles from our campus. Initially we were to sit-in at the lunch counters and the demonstrations were to stop. However, after the first nine people went down then the whole campus became involved, and everybody said NO to jim crow. After the initial arrest and the threat of several students being expelled from school, everybody wanted to register his discontent. So the effort was made to organize this mass demonstration at the city hall, and protest that we were against the arrest of students and against segregation; and that we would continue to demonstrate until segregation was destroyed. But what happened, after we went down, all the leadership was either expelled from school or they were forced to withdraw, and the University returned to its darkness.

This is one of the weaknesses of having mass demonstrations without detailed planning and secondary follow-through. Usually the first few leaders are automatically destroyed. In a setting like that, usually pressure is against you from all angles. The pressure is usually applied against you the student, at the home and at the community level. So this is why when we have a mass movement we must have the secondary leadership and plans. An example of this pressure point is Dr. Felton Clark, the president of Southern University. He

is forever against any type of progress where pain is involved, and because there is pain in *all* progress, he is in fact against progress; he is part of the system himself. Southern University makes Dr. Clark in his world, and he is so far removed from the passions of the students and removed from the passion of the people in general. In a way I have a kind of love for him because I know the price he had to pay to be where he is today. He had to give a lot, and he had to almost die, in effect, to hold on to the seat.

(Q) *You mean love or compassion?*

(A) I have a love for him, love has to do with this. I know my grandmother had to wash clothes to educate my mother, and my mother had to get up five o'clock in the morning to bring us children to someone's house and sleep when it was dark and cold. Many times she had to say "yes mam" when she did not want to say it, in order for her to keep a home for me. At one point in her life she had to swallow her pride and walk on her dignity to put bread in my mouth; and because she paid so much for me it really helped me to understand and love my mother and grandmother and all the mothers and grandmothers for "dues" that were paid. And so when I say I have a love for Dr. Clark I do realize that for him to develop the plant that he has at Southern University, he was forced to go through some of the same things that my grandmother went through, and my bitterness toward him today is based on the fact that now there is no longer a need to do that. There is no need for him to do that for times dictate, the whole universe, the tempo of our age, dictates that it is time for a man to be a man, regardless. If you are going to do anything for your country, or for your school, or for yourself, you have to take a stand; you have to be willing to live because, life is all about living. It is painful, and we have to stop dealing in comforts. Dr. Clark wants to be comfortable; but I want to *live* and that is the difference.

(Q) *You mentioned about certain pressures that come from the University even upon the community, not only the students but the community. Would you elaborate that as far as the Baton Rouge experience is concerned?*

(A) I recall after spending a month in jail in Baton Rouge we made an effort to have a printer print some leaflets for our rally, and the printer said "no I can't print it because I will loss customers that are closely associated with the University and plus I am going to violate a federal injunction." The State had the injunction issued against our organization which mean we were enjoined by the Federal

Government. This injunction enjoins the people from really being themselves, of being people. Many were afraid to do anything in fear of the injunction; which got it's substance from the voice of the University, the officials downtown, and emptiness of the Federal Judges. The printer feared that if he printed the leaflets that this would violate for one thing, the injunction for another thing it might irritate "the powers that be."

(Q) *Did the injunction effect him?*

(A) Yes. The injunction is so broad one could not spit. If you speak to me, the fact that you spoke to me, even if you didn't say anything about demonstrations, the fact that you spoke to me about *something* or just sympathize with my effort, that violates the present injunction.

(Q) *In your knowledge would you relate this harassment to the general situation in Louisiana?*

(A) Well I think any type of oppression is born out of the same thing. This has to do with the fact that if I am a member of this family I know how Louisiana and in fact the country treats me and I can somewhat envision what my country must look like to someone in Cuba or Panama or anywhere. It must seem to be a monster. Our horrors here are just as vicious as anything that happened in Germany, because it is just another type of genocide. It is more vicious, in fact, because when *one man* is murdered, and breath is snatched from his body, he is used as a symbol; with this symbol you are really murdering twenty million people because they cease to live, when you are able to move them around like you move a machine. And the reason that you don't take their life, physically, (from these twenty million people) is because you need them to keep your pockets lined. Instead you murder them through very sophisticated and vicious ways, and you take the life out of them; but living-dead is much more sinister and lewd and obscene. This is what America is all about. Now, this is what we must do. We must take the veneer away and let the people look at the country for what it really is. The Negro has yet to be in an arena where he can determine his own destiny, in New Orleans or anywhere else in the country, which means that we black people in America must determine just how far we want to go and how we want to get there. Now I must define what I mean.

I, Jerome Smith, want to be free, but I want a freedom that is much greater than the type of freedom that I can get from the White House; because if I accept the freedom that is going to be given to me from the White House I will not do anything that will

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save my country. In effect, I must want something that is better than what is being offered. I can't "integrate" into the situation as is, and I can't integrate into quicksand. I must use myself if the country is going to be saved. The black people in America must use themselves to save the country, and the only way they can do that is not to integrate into the country *as it is*. We must make this country recognize the fact that people are more important than dollars. This must be the real important thing in the country, because if the country does not recognize that people are more important than dollars (which has nothing to do with my being *black* but has to do with the fact that I am a human being), the country will ultimately be destroyed; and it is dying now, with the activities in Panama, South America, Vietnam and other parts of the world, saying "Amen." These are signs to watch, and it has a lot to do with the country's placing more value on *dollars* than value it has for *people*. We must make the country recognize this. The fact that I can eat at some lunch counter with some white fellow, is not *really* bringing any great change for the country or for me. We need some great changes in this country. We need changes in depth, and to get the country to do this we must stand on the outside and say that "these changes must be made." This is the only way America can become America. The America of today, as defined, is not the America we live in. If the words in the Constitution mean anything they mean that I must love my next door neighbor and that I must love or have real concern for some poor fellow who has no shoes on in other parts of the world; in Cuba or Panama, or Africa, and must be willing to tell the truth about my country's relationship with other countries.

(Q) *In an effort to assume some responsibility for the country recognizing this fact, we understand that you were in a meeting along with some other personalities with the Attorney General of the United States about the time of the Birmingham demonstrations. What was your impression of that meeting with respect to these various points that you have made?*

(A) That meeting with the Attorney General was a very beautiful and very ugly experience; and I think the beauty lies with the fact that for the first time the leadership of this country was able to hear what we black people of this country term as "kitchen talk." We told the truth about our situation, and that was the first time they had heard that. We tried to impress the Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, that the country has not really done anything for the Negro, and what they have done they were forced to do and that what

his Administration had made an effort to do is really not enough, because people are still dying, still being beaten daily and facing this sort of brutality. I, for one, pointed out that I could not fight for the country on any foreign soil. This has nothing to do with my belief in communism or any other ideology. It has to do with *my belief in people* and my wanting to be a man. I feel strongly that the seeds of America's destruction and of *my* destruction, resides within the boundaries of the United States. All the things that tantalize and could ultimately destroy this country has to do with the way that the country walks in its yard. Until we can do something about that walk, I have no reason, or no desire to fight overseas, because my grandfather and my father and all our people have proved their loyalty to this country and the country has yet to prove any loyalty to us. We are still dying in Vietnam and people are still being beaten and sent to jail in Canton, Mississippi. If the Attorney General had really listened to what was being said at that meeting, if he had really made an effort to read the passion on the lips of the people in the streets, and if he had recognized the fact that when a country becomes a moral cesspool, madness runs wild, no one is safe, black or white. If he would have recognized that fact he would not have been surprised, (he nor anyone else in the country) when President Kennedy was assassinated. This assassination was born out of a madness, and contempt for oneself and mankind, which had nothing to do with Oswald, who is just a poor cat that had been used. This has to do with the mood of the country, a very vicious madness. If we dare face the truth, we would cry "America, you are to blame."

And when one realizes that United States Steel, for example, is a symbol that controls the whole area of the *economic foundation* of this country, when one sees that many of these corporations have also "anti-communism" and right-wing committees and organizations within their structure, one really sees where the country is today. And when one listens to the President of the United States Steel stating that his only concern is profit, one really knows why the President of the United States died. When you tie all these factors together, if Oswald pulled the trigger, which he may have done, it is not important. The important thing is, given the situation as is, we all would be pulling triggers against each other, because the whole violent atmosphere of the country dictates that very thing which makes Kennedy's death no more important than those kids being bombed in Birmingham, or Medgar Evers being murdered in Mississippi, or some of my friends being beaten in jail in Alabama and other parts

of the country. But I know what ever happens to him, could happen to me; and the sad thing is that the majority of the white people don't know that. So when President Kennedy died he really didn't do anything for the Negro. Whatever he did to make conditions better for the Negroes in this country, before his death, was not really much because he achieved his greatness in death. When he died that's the moment he became great; and it was not through his relationship with the black people, but *his greatness came because he showed the white people what they could do to themselves.* If they recognize this fact, Kennedy, will be a white man's Abraham Lincoln. //

It's not to give Kennedy undue credit or pin medals on him, however, it is to say that if any human being must die in this country for something like that, or if any human being can't walk the streets anywhere in this land without the fear of losing his life because he may say a word or two about "rights," then the black people must remember that their freedom will not come from the White House because that's tied up with too many other things. It must come from themselves. Now as far as the mass movement is concerned I think that I know how the young people feel because many of us have walked the same road and been in the same jails, experienced the same type of pain, even though all black people in America know everything about pain. Our whole private life is constant protest and rebellion against this type of thing. We know that we have to "go for broke," and we must address ourselves to the situation in this country like there is no tomorrow. That is to say, if someone is murdered in Birmingham today, we can't call for a "cooling period."

The only thing that we do when we cool-off is to give "the man" time to cool-off and murder someone else. So to make an effort to "go for broke" we want the country to examine itself and we want the segregationists and everybody in America to rendezvous with reality. If we tell the truth about our situation we will see that we have been accepting peanuts for freedom and in a sense we have been accepting a desegregated lunch counter in exchange for six lives and thousands and thousands of beatings, and we cannot afford to let that happen again. We cannot stop at the lunch counter, because that is no basic change. We cannot really stop with voter registration, because there is a limit to the power of the vote even though the vote is extremely powerful, but the limitation resides with *time* in order to overcome all of the obstacles and the many problems that confront us. It takes a lot of time and this means that we are going to have to find some way and some situation in which to *keep the people in* |

*the street and force the whole country to look back at Dallas* and see what that really means. At that point the President of the United States Steel will stop saying "my only concern is profit," and he will come out of his office and say "I want to do something, I am willing to make the fundamental and basic changes that will give the Negro an effort to determine the nature of *my* life in America." Until the Negro can move the white man too, we don't really have anything.

This has to do with the Negro becoming the custodian of his own being, able to effect the changes that effect the lives of *everybody*; and the only way we can do that is we have to continue to point toward Mississippi, but more so Dallas because it has a special meaning to the whites and reflects the country's insanity. Until we can get Americans to accept what that death really means there will be no real change.

This brings us to another vital point. All America believes that the Negro people in America are nonviolent by nature; that all the Negro wants is to be polite and be "good Negroes." This is a lie, because the true passion of the people refutes this. Truth will prevail. Their feelings represent the truth and so at one point the civil rights leadership must take a position. *We must stand with the people*, in effect stand with ourselves because we are part of the people, come hell or high water. We must say to them "I have no desire to be a good Negro, I only want to be free," which has nothing to do with my wanting to be good, or bad or being nonviolent." In speaking about nonviolence and the mood of the masses of the country, I know, and the White House knows, (and I guess the churches in America know it too) this country was born in violence. My suppression had to do with violence and every time America made an effort to defend itself it was done with the trigger. And every-time this country goes to war, this country says it's always "right" when it's not. My country has been wrong on many occasions and the church went right along with it. History testifies to this. So, when we in the Movement go to the White House, we must go with this in mind. Going to the White House and taking pictures is one thing; but going to the White House and telling the politicians about the real situation is another. Must one go to the White House and say in effect, but honestly, regardless how friendly they seem to be, "you are still the slave masters and the fact that you are Attorney General or President of the United States and you didn't pull the trigger that murdered Medgar Evers, but you had a lot to do with nourishing the mentality that pulled the trigger."

What about their indifference to a very real and crude and criminal situation, and their refusal to recognize that Barnett or Wallace may be the glamour boys on stage in this vicious drama but that Chase Manhattan and Wall Street wrote the play, and the Wallaces just acted it out, proves where you stand. I think that the leadership strata in all organizations must approach government with this in mind. If they don't they will sell the people out, and if they are selling the people out I guess ultimately the people will have to remove all of us. We shouldn't go to Washington trying to be sophisticated or trying to impress anyone. Tell the man "give me what is mine or damn you" (and it wouldn't be that it would be much more cruel) and then we are representing the people. We will have to say what the people are saying. Unless that is done we are doing a great disservice to the people, both black and white. I must say that there are a lot of young people in the movement who do not meet the press and they are willing to tell the government to go-to-hell, "to shape up or ship out." They are willing to "go for broke," and there are only one or two people in the established leadership in the Movement that the young people have some faith in and even *they* must walk that line carefully before they become sucked in by the glamour of the Hollywood type that is to have them grinning for cameras while the terrible reality of our situation escapes them.

To put it bluntly, if we allow ourselves to be sucked in by the makers of our oppression, the Negro will never never move from where he is. Let's pray that it won't happen. I think that people are better than that, generally speaking, and I do think if too many "movie stars" come to the top the people will walk on them. That is why I say, to be a leader anywhere, you must stand with your people, and if there is a bombing in Birmingham or a murder anywhere in the land your place is not in Washington, but with your people and you are not supposed to go there to calm your people down. You are suppose to go there to make them as militant as possible, to "go for broke," so that such a thing won't happen again.