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Interviewee: James Robinson

Session #8

Interviewer: Sheila Michaels

Date: March 5, 1999

Q: It's the ninth, I think, taped interview with Jim Robinson. This is kind of questions, odds and ends and such.

I had wondered about, coming from my own point of view when I was young, which was how you—that everything that had anything to do with integration was associated with Communism in the popular mind, so that not only were you dealing with racism, but you were dealing with the fear of Communism at the same time, that if you were seen at a demonstration or something, that you had become a Communist, you had become tainted by Communism, which was not a thing that you wanted to do in the Fifties, or wanted to be known as, unless you were a kid who wanted to go to New York and become a Communist or something. [Laughs]

Robinson: Well, I think that that's the difference in the time frame, that for people like me who went to college in the Thirties and first got involved at a time when the Communists infiltrated organizations like the American Student Union, and at a time when the party line, the United States Communist Party, kept changing depending on whether the Soviet Union was favoring the popular front or whether they had just made an approach to Hitler Germany, a non-aggression pact. So that the late Thirties and up to World War II, the

radicals who were not in favor of the Soviet Union made every effort to distinguish themselves.

Now, that didn't mean that most people didn't think that they were beyond the pale. So we brought that into the early days of CORE, it was clearly designed to exclude people who might be fellow travelers or Communist Party members. For the interviews, we had interview sheets, questionnaires that went out before the interview and came back, and we had listed a large number of organizations of various types and asked people to check whether they had ever been members of or interested in. Then it was the duty of the interviewing committee to establish if there were front groups listed there, whether that would indicate anything about Communist Party sympathies.

Well, in some cases with black people, it didn't indicate any sympathy with the Communist Party at all; it indicated sympathy with some of the things that they said they were in favor of. When you get to the Fifties and you're getting people like Helen Gahagan Douglas denounced as a Communist, when she clearly was only a liberal, the reaction of people was different, I think, but I think the reaction of our people was different. They were less opposed to the Communists. The Communists, of course, were no longer the same kind of threat that they had been either. They no longer were very important in most unions. The power that they'd gotten out of the Depression dissipated during the war.

So the situations, the objective situations were different and the perceptions of those of us who were inside were different. The perceptions of people who went along with mass viewpoints may not have been really that different. A lot of those people thought that we

were--these people who wanted to change things were bad, regardless of whether they were Communists or something else.

And many people on the black-white issue, many white people, I think, had never thought very much about it and didn't want to disturb themselves about something that if they felt about it at all, they realized it wasn't quite just. There were significant numbers of well-educated people in the South who were forced, I think, to think about it a little bit, and tended to be opposed to what was going on. And that's why that you had plenty of instances of people of influence getting on the telephones and trying to stop a lynching once they knew it was--but usually it wasn't fast enough, and the connection between them and the people who did the lynchings wasn't very great anyway.

I guess I've gone on long enough about that topic.

Q: No. No, I mean, how did you, in your approach to people who were--since you were doing fundraising and Jim Peck, let's say, was doing public relations, or whoever was doing public relations, how did you get to people? Because you wanted people to be active, you wanted people to contribute, and yet they would have been frightened to do either one because it would have been a Left connection. I'm talking about pre-'60, pre-'57, even.

Robinson: Oh yes. Well, before the 1954 school desegregation decision [*Brown v. Board of Education*] and the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, there was no possibility of our attracting very many people from the general public either as contributors or as activists. Our activists were largely college-age and post-college-age up until about thirty, and they were largely single people. Now, when I say this, you know, I'm saying it on the basis of my

experience in Chicago CORE, the first group, and then in New York CORE. Some of the other groups were different in their membership.

So we attracted--a great many of the white people who joined CORE groups were pacifists, and in some cases they were more interested, probably more interested, in how they could use nonviolent direct action than they were actually in integration. Sometimes there was a little bit of irritation about that. I was very much interested in how you used nonviolent direct action, but I'd lived two years in Harlem and my identification was certainly as strong with that as with anything. But the people who stayed in and became active then became associated, of course, with the black members, and so you could move from being primarily interested in nonviolent direct action as a technique, over to being equally or even more interested in achieving integration, breaking down segregation.

A significant minority of black people who joined CORE groups were also pacifists. Most were not, certainly, and they were interested in belonging to a small group which exposed whites and blacks together to situations like the sit-ins, and in Chicago the inter-racial housing co-op that we had. Most black people didn't think this was possible. I mean, I think that was true; they didn't think that it was possible to make that kind of progress and they didn't think it was possible that there would be any significant number of white people who would want to help in the first place.

So these small CORE groups demonstrated that it was possible, at least for a select elite group, and the stories of what they did in the ~~Correlator~~ <sup>CORElator</sup> and in our appeal letters reached people whose points of view, I think, changed. They had to be well-intentioned people in the first place. They had to be people who were skeptical of the powers-that-be. Of course,

with pacifists that was generally true, because what goes on in a nation that conducts a war, if you don't believe in that, and then you find out all kinds of things that are handed out to the general public that are at best only partially true. So you had that, but you had a gradually changing climate of opinion, too.

[Franklin D.] Roosevelt had that fair employment thing way, way back in the Forties, early, during the war, and then [Harry S] Truman--

Q: Integrated the armed forces.

Robinson: When was that? The Fifties?

Q: I think that was--oh, was it?

Robinson: Late Forties?

Q: I guess I don't know. I had thought that it was like '46 or '47.

Robinson: It may be. It may be. I'm sure it's in the late Forties, come to think of it. While there was a lot of resistance to it, I think there was a general feeling, in the North at least, that it didn't make too much sense to ask people to fight abroad to defend this country and then keep them penned up separately. Of course, during World War II, in many cases they were used as servants. But the late Forties right on until '57, there were shifts in public opinion that were exterior to anything that the civil rights work did.



But '55, it was the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the NAACP achieved that school desegregation decision, and then the bus boycott in Montgomery. That got support of the news magazines and Edward R. Murrow and so on, so that it became, I think, difficult to say that all these people who were in favor of integration are Communists. It had been sure in the early Fifties, but McCarthy was over by that time, by '57, pretty much. There were certainly still people who felt that way, but the great majority of white people in the Northern areas, they weren't paying much attention one way or the other. If it changed, it changed; if it didn't change, it didn't. The way a great many people are today.

One of my neighbors here wanted to go up to hear the author of--Peter Jennings, about the greatest generation is the World War II generation. Some friend of hers from across the street went with her.

Q: Oh, that was Tom Brokaw.

Robinson: Yes. When they came back, Peg said she really couldn't wait for it to be over; she wasn't interested. She said it came out that she wanted to get back to her television programs. And there are a lot of people like that. What goes on in the world goes on without their paying any attention to it.

Q: Right.

Robinson: And it's a minority of people who are active in anything, and they are the ones who make things change, and by the late Fifties there were more of them. They were holdovers from the radicals of the Thirties, many of whom, I think, had been in front groups

of one sort of another. They were no longer in such groups, but they were thinking about the evils of segregation. And that would be truer of people who had felt some sort of discrimination themselves. So that when we did that demonstration for fair housing in 1957, we got some help from the churches. We got a lot of help from the American Jewish Congress and the women who came there. Many of those women had been college students about the time I was a college student. Some of them said, "You know, it's great to do this. We haven't walked on a picket line for twenty years."

Q: But they hadn't walked a picket line partially because of McCarthyism, partially because they grew up.

Robinson: Partially because they grew up and partially because of McCarthyism. The Depression produced genuine radicals, but there also was an element in it, in the radicalism on campus, of just adolescent revolt. It was not all something that was going to stick. But there were people who were involved in the peace strike on campuses, who were more likely to participate in something like that, that walk. But, you know, at least in New York City, that walk was very respectable. What happened in New York is not typical, but in a way no place is typical. What went on in Nashville, it was partly Southern and partly almost like Chicago, and it wasn't consistent. And the same with St. Louis, and even in the South we went to places like New Orleans and Miami that were certainly not like Montgomery.

Politics of all sorts impinged on civil rights. The legislative politics in the late Forties and very early Fifties, things like education bills, the NAACP sometimes supported education bills that didn't do anything about segregation at all, just provided money for more

education, and there were debates about that, but that's what they did. They went along with the politically liberal agenda at a time when civil rights was fairly far down on the liberals' agenda, and then later on, of course, the political issues when people began to question nonviolent direct action in favor of some sort of political activity.

In that confused area of voter registration, which was a form of direct action in areas in the South, where it was dangerous to try to do it, but which would lead into--if it was going to be effective, it would lead into political action, and political action is not direct action. It's almost the antithesis, it seems to me in some ways, of direct action, because you organize people into political parties, the parties compromise on what they're for in order to get elected, and then you campaign and you have to raise the money, and the people who give the money give <sup>for</sup> what they think is more important than what a lot of other people think, and the whole thing is very confused. It doesn't mean that it won't--it doesn't mean that it's wholly evil, but it does mean that it can't be kept as pristine as direct action can.

I think I've gotten kind of off the point at this point.

Q: No. I guess maybe the answer was that a lot of people simply were afraid of integration during the Fifties because they were afraid of everything.

Robinson: Yes. Well, the people who were most in favor of integration after the bus boycott were Northerners who were in favor of integration in the South. When CORE did something about the schools in New Rochelle--I guess I've said this before--and immediately revealed that we had people on our contributors' list who didn't want us to fiddle around in New Rochelle; that's where they lived.



And the contributors, the group of contributors, by and large, was almost wholly different from the activists, the members. Up until the time of the student sit-ins in 1960, most of our groups, active groups, were quite small, but we were building a mailing list that got bigger and bigger. And certainly during my period of '57 to '60, we built up not only our contributors' list, but also a list of holiday card buyers. We used that, we asked those people for money, too.

CORRELATOR

After Marvin Rich came, there was a public information list which was largely newspapers and molders of public opinion, who got press releases, and some of them I think got the ~~Correlator~~, too. All of those things were helpful in building kind of a penumbra of acceptance around what we were doing, but certainly the student sit-ins appealed to people all across the country. They were largely photographed and put in the newspapers and printed media. There was some stuff on television, but mostly it was printed. And the pictures of students sometimes mixed white and black students, and sometimes mostly black students, sitting at the counters were so sympathetic. I mean, these looked--you know, why would anybody not want to sit with them, you know? And that was extremely useful. I don't think there was any extensive coverage on television of the sit-ins.

Barbara Robinson: You wouldn't know. . You didn't have one.

Robinson: No, I didn't have one, but I know that there was a lot of coverage on television. There was talk about it, a lot of talks of stuff. The *Open End* program I think I talked about before on Channel 13, where Len Holt talked about CORE and Dr. King talked about--it was Dr. King and Leonard Holt. But Leonard Holt, it was during his brief period with

didn't

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CORE, he worked for us, and he kept mentioning CORE, and Dr. King ~~did~~ keep mentioning Southern Christian Leadership Conference. But we had that kind of thing. And there must have been some photographs, but most of it was because the newspapers and the magazines and the news magazines and so on, there was a lot of material that was then getting into the general distribution channels. We still had mass magazines that were sent that we don't have now.

Q: Like the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Robinson: Right. We still have news magazines, but a lot of them, *Life* and *Saturday Life*, of course, and *Look*, they had great picture stories. And then *Ebony* was copied from *Life* and they covered some things, but lots and lots of pictures. So that was very, very useful because that was widely seen in the black areas, even though the subscription list was not enormous.

Q: No, they bought it off the stands.

Robinson: Yes, and it was in the libraries in black schools sometimes. So all those things were important.

Q: How many people were on the contributors' list?

Robinson: I've got that book. We could look that up, because it's got quite a lot of information.

Q: Okay. I'll hold this a second.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Robinson: National CORE's budget was miniscule.

Q: 1945-46, right?

Robinson: Right. Office expenses ran about 100 a month.

Q: Oh, that sounds large for then.

Robinson: Right. The organization's fall income came mainly from sporadic contributions to direct mail appeals. And then there's a lot about Houser asking our locals to support by agreeing to enroll members of the national, and that never went through.

A few months after the 1946 convention, the executive committee decided to develop a project attacking Southern transportation segregation and to raise \$7,000 to staff an office and hire a full-time executive secretary. Well, that didn't happen. Okay. Now, that's '45-46. '49-50--

Q: So each CORE group is completely independent of the national. So what purpose did the national serve? I mean, if they were receiving dues from the constituent parts, they were receiving dues from the locals?

Robinson: They were receiving a little bit of dues from the local, but not very much. The national existed to coordinate the local groups and to try to get new ones and spread the word about what CORE was doing. But there was a lot of activity and almost no money. It says, "In 1949 and '50, the national office continued to depend primarily on outside donors. Thus, in 1949-50, chapter payments were \$437, while individual donations amounted to \$1528."

So that's just about enough to cover \$100-a-month office expenses. And the offices expenses were paper and postage, because neither George Houser or Cathy Raymond were getting paid, except by the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

*Meier*  
Q: August ~~Myer~~ [phonetic] was saying that when you took over the organization was close to its demise.

Robinson: Well, it was close to its demise from the period before--in 1954, after Wally Nelson was defeated, and one or two CORE groups that had been active became inactive--

Q: Because they were upset that Wally Nelson had been fired?

Robinson: Partly because of that and partly because the groups got stronger and weaker for various things. They got stronger when they were doing a project that had appeal, the Action Project, and then a victory often made them weaker instead of stronger.

Q: Yes, right.

Robinson: So it was partly that, but from 1954 until, I think it was--or was it? Along in there somewhere that I started to do fundraising part-time, well before 1957, and I was pushing for a professional fundraiser. I had no idea that I would ever work full-time for CORE. I had had some experience at the War Resisters League with direct mail, but not with writing it. You know, I learned all this stuff as I went along. So that's what went on.

But let me see if we can get some specific figures. I think we can in here, about the numbers of contributors. You'd better take it off--

Q: I'll pause it again.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Robinson: It was close to its demise. It was '54. The income began to rise, and that was primarily because of me, but it was--I was pushing for all these things. I was not writing the ~~Correlator~~. One person doesn't turn it around. It was Lula Farmer and Jim Peck and Charlie Oldham. LeRoy Carter stayed active with us for a while. Tom Roberts from New York CORE was active on national things. There were several people in St. Louis who were active, more or less active on national things, in addition to Charlie Oldham. So there were both blacks and whites, but predominantly whites were doing it at that point.

Let's see. "The number of individual contributors--" I started fundraising in 1954. "Nearly doubled between 1954 and 1957, rising from about 1,900 to about 3,400."

Q: Oh, okay.

CORElator



Robinson: Okay. "At the same time, the total receipts showed a gratifying rise during the fiscal year ended May 31, 1955. CORE's income was \$8,200, while expenses were \$6,700. A year later, income was \$12,000, expenditures \$7,500. At that point, Robinson, heretofore an advocate of giving priority to building a financial reserve as a prerequisite for developing a program, now shifted gears. He was the ~~storm~~<sup>strong</sup> force in persuading the 1956 convention to spend some of the surplus and adopt a budget for the next year that included a planned deficit of \$2,100 in order to subsidize the expansion of field work. Accordingly, because of the employment of field organizers, expenditures more than doubled during the fiscal year ending May 1957, to over \$16,100, yet the appeals were so productive that income rose to \$16,000 and the deficit was only slightly more than \$100."

So that gives you that. Now you're talking about structure. Okay.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Q: Now we're recording.

Robinson: Okay. So, between 1954 and 1956, we had expanded the money that much. There were still very few groups and they were not very strong, and the national meetings cost money, and were often not very well attended because the local groups had to provide some of their own transportation.

So it was at that point that we created an executive committee in New York, and that was with Houser and Lula Farmer and James Farmer, Peck, and Carter and myself, and at

some point Tom Roberts was right around then, and it became the National Action Committee. During that period, Lula Farmer became the national coordinator.

George Houser had been executive secretary, and when he resigned, Billie ~~Carlene~~ Ames from St. Louis became the national coordinator and she wasn't able to do it anymore.

Someone else in St. Louis tried to do it for a little while, filled in, but it didn't really work.

It did work with Billie ~~Carlene~~ Ames [phonetic] and then it came through to Lula, who really did the basic coordination stuff, but she was primarily--she and I agreed on the finances. We agreed on the importance of the field staff and she did the bookkeeping. She was a volunteer.

Q: She was completely volunteer.

Robinson: I think she may have been paid for a while as coordinator, but I think she was mostly a volunteer, and I wouldn't be sure at this point. I'm a little vague about the money stuff.

Hold it a minute now.

Q: But that also meant that the emphasis had shifted from the groups to the central group.

Robinson: That's right, it certainly had. And it developed because the state of the affiliates was more or less moribund, and in 1957 the CORE national convention, there were four national officers and three people who were affiliates.

from

Q: Three groups?

Robinson: Three people. Some of the national officers were from groups, too, but it was--

Q: They just weren't sending anybody and they weren't very active.

Robinson: It was a very timely meeting, right?

Q: Yes. Was this because of the political climate or was this because--why couldn't--I'm asking why it wasn't very vital at that point.

Robinson: Well, I think the McCarthy period had had something to do with it. The other thing that had happened was that CORE always did best with young people, and a few of us stuck with it till we were no longer in our twenties. We were the people who held it together. But there was not that much interest and there wasn't that much creativity in developing projects. There were projects going on to some extent in New York and St. Louis and one or two other places, but there wasn't a lot going on.

So that 1957 convention took the executive committee and changed it into the National Action Committee, and Charles Oldham was influential in that. It was at that convention that they wanted the funds solicited for projects, including national projects, and to stimulate new chapters, and that convention asked me to draft a new constitution which would spell out the National Action Committee's responsibilities. That committee was required to meet at least ten times a year, and it was made up of people who were living in or near New York City. But it was authorized in the constitution to "handle day-to-day

*between* *C*  
decisions ~~of the Freedom~~ Councils and conventions, including matters of personnel and policy; to initiate and develop action programs and projects in the name of the national organization."

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Q: That meant that everybody did not any longer have an investment in who was going to be the field secretary?

Robinson: That's right.

Q: So you wouldn't have them dropping out if Wally Nelson was--

Robinson: Right. You wouldn't have--well, you still could have that, no matter who did the hiring and the firing. But the fact was, it was very hard to find anybody who was any good as a field secretary. Roy Carter had worked at it. Black--what was his name? Blackburn *one* had worked at it. Blackburn was a pacifist that had been successful with ~~our~~ local CORE group. But neither one of these people worked out really. They were *in* effective as field staff. So it was up to us to get a hold of people as we could and to try them out.

Now, I think the thing that is interesting, that I never seemed to get discouraged about wasting money on field secretaries who didn't work out, I suppose in part because we could publicize that we were hiring them and what they were trying to do, etc., which may have helped us to raise money a little bit, but it was also that there was no alternative. We just had to get an adequate field staff to get anywhere, and if one person didn't work out, certainly there were other people who could work out.

So it was in that framework in 1957 that we found James T. McCain, and I've already said a lot about that. He was not, by any means, a natural fit, but he did work out. In the long run he worked out. I was, in hindsight, I think, remarkably patient, because our points of view were really not the same. But he, of course, was remarkably patient, and even though he was older than I was, willing to learn from what was going on in the CORE groups. As time went on, he became more and more convinced, I think, probably not thoroughly convinced--

[Begin Tape 9, Side B]

Q: . . . that he was doing something?

Robinson: What?

Q: Jim McCain had to be convinced that he was doing something?

Robinson: No, James McCain, I think, had to be--it took him a while to assimilate nonviolent direct action. He was a product of the Deep South. He was a successful person who had been to college and was principal of a high school in Sumter, interested enough in the NAACP and active enough in it so that he lost his job. Then he was in the South Carolina Council on Human Relations, which was basically an organization of active white liberals and blacks who worked together, but were quite careful in their approach to things, which would have fitted him very well. He was out of that job because the council didn't have enough money to pay him, and it was through the American Friends Service Committee that we found him.



Anyway, at this convention where there were so few people. That was when I was asked to become executive secretary, so that I had to open an office. That convention was in June or July. I didn't do that until the fall, September sometime. And it was right after that, that McCain came on staff and that we had the Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs Law.

Now, hold it a minute and let me see what the next little bit is.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Q: At the end of 1957?

Robinson: "CORE's monthly expenses have jumped from about 350 to 2,850 a month." And it says I was "overwhelmed by the fundraising aspect, being slightly worried about the risky expansion that CORE had undertaken, and finding that promotional fundraising often pushes all the other work into the background for days at a time. Between June 1957 and March 1958, 39,000 letters went to members of other liberal organizations and 1,131 new donors were added to the CORE list."

Q: My goodness. Was this from that automatic typewriter thing that you were--

Robinson: No. Those were only done for people who could give us larger amounts of money, and that probably was a little bit later on.

Barbara Robinson: I remember this. [Laughs]

Robinson: And it quotes "an expensive two-color printing." He puts "two-color printing" in quotes. "Tens of thousands of copies of 'This is CORE' and 'CORE Rules for Action,' a re-titling of the 'CORE Action Discipline for Wider Appeal' was circulated."

It was then that King signed an appeal letter accompanied by a first step toward school integration and <sup>told the story of</sup> ~~unclear~~ Nashville CORE.

"Between mid-1958 and mid-1959, CORE doubled its list of contributors from 4,500 to more than 9,000." Okay.

Q: Let me turn this off. That's quite a jump from--

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Robinson: In 1954, when I first started to do the fundraising--you've got it off now.

Q: I've got it on.

Robinson: Oh, okay. You want to leave it on? Yes.

In 1954, when I started doing fundraising, trying not only to get renewals from people who were on our list, but to get new people to contribute, each time that I did it I tried to use at least one liberal list, like Americans for Democratic Action [ADA]. In 1954 those lists consistently lost money, but the lists that made money were lists of pacifists of one sort of

another. As time went on, that became less and less true. The pacifist lists were relatively small, anyway.

But over this period of time, '54 to '57, we moved from losing money on the ADA, to making a good deal of money on the lists like the American Civil Liberties Union and so on and so forth. So in that period of the bus boycott up to the school desegregation decision, and the bus boycott and the beginning of campus school integration, the potential for raising monies from the general liberal public, which was a small public relatively, but it had really become real. It wasn't before that. It was very, very difficult.

Here's something else. This is about labor unions. On the advisory committee we tried to get labor unions on them, and Walter Reuther declined to serve in the mid-1950s, and James Carey, secretary/treasurer of the AFL-CIO, refused to serve. So when Jerry Wurf of the American Federation State and County Municipal Workers, Charles Zimmerman, of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union [ILGWU], and so on and so forth, and many of these things from 1959 on they were handled by Marvin. But the money initially was very little. During 1959, labor contributions got up to 1,347, which is about double from 695 from the previous year. But most of that money came from District Council 37 and the ILGWU, and it's very little money anyway. [Laughs]

Okay. You might turn that off a minute.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Robinson: "During the fiscal year which ended May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1958, income had increased by 50 percent, but expenses had risen even faster. CORE had collected \$24,700, but it spent \$25,200."

You can stop it there for a minute.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Robinson: "During the fiscal year ending May 31, 1959, a year later, the total income of \$62,000 only slightly exceeded expenses. Nevertheless, CORE optimistically set its '59-'60 budget at \$103,500, and began spending commensurately."

Q: Well, I remember that the office was just--there were more people than desks when I first started coming around in '61. I mean, the place was--things were stored everywhere and people were sharing desks in shifts so that they could use the typewriter.

Robinson: Yes. One of the things that--I was very stingy with lots of things, but I was not stingy with equipment. I wanted to get good equipment as cheaply as possible, but I wanted equipment that meant that the people who were working could produce at their fullest capacity, and that's the reason for the IBM electrics and the Norelco dictating machines. I wanted anybody who was going to dictate to use a dictating machine, and I didn't want to have to hire any people who were stenographers, who had to listen--that you had to dictate to. I didn't want anybody to have a full-blown secretary; they were expensive. Not only were they expensive, but full-blown secretaries, if you had somebody

that was in and out of the office, the secretaries were very busy and then they weren't busy enough.

Is that on the tape? No.

Q: Yes.

Robinson: Oh, it is. Okay. That's all right. That's okay. So I think that we might stop there, and I have to go through some of this for the next time, and then I ought to get to the irritations in the office and so on and so forth. I need to look back at some of this, too.

Q: Okay.

Robinson: Now, I'll walk with you to the car and take Lucy.

Q: Thank you.

[END OF SESSION]

[Lucy was our  
dog - mixed ~~shepherd~~,  
German shepherd,  
collie + golden  
retriever.]