



Say These Words With Me Donna Ladd, *Jackson Free Press* June 26, 2003

"How is everybody?" Bob Moses asked the congregation in his famous whisper. He paused and then added, *"Say these words with me:"*

"I hold these truths to be self-evident..."

Last Sunday, on June 22, I was tucked in a corner at Mt. Zion Methodist Church several miles east of my hometown in the Longdale community of Neshoba County. This was the church that had to be rebuilt after the Ku Klux Klan burned it in 1964. It had risen from the ashes that James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Mickey Schwerner had poked through on Fathers Day, exactly 39 years ago that Sunday. It was the last place they visited before Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price pulled them over, arrested them and hid them in the city jail until the lynch mob could gather and kill them.

The church was overflowing with Longdale residents, legendary civil- rights activists, black and white politicians from Neshoba County and Jackson and beyond, more reporters than last year. We were there to honor the memory of three men who helped pave the way for black Americans to get a piece of the American dream.

"...that all men are created equal..."

I've struggled with the idea of patriotism my entire life. As a child growing up in Neshoba County, a place that I then believed sucked more than anywhere on the planet, I openly scorned patriotism, especially in my rebellious, angry high school years. After I learned about the three murders when I was 14 — although they'd happened 11 years before; which says something about the ability of a community to clam up — the whole idea of pride in where I was from seemed to be squelched forever. Everyone knew who those murderers were. How could they be free among us, pumping gas, repairing birthstone rings, joining the country club? How could a people, a state, a country that claimed that it believed in justice allow those men their freedom?

I wore this burden of where I was born like a backpack filled with rocks. I wanted out of Neshoba County, out of Mississippi, never to look back. I wanted freedom, and I wanted to live somewhere where I could be proud. I wanted to be where people believed in the "justice for all" part.

So I went in search of my piece of the American puzzle, taking Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner along with me.

"...that they are endowed by their Creator ..."

Indeed, I found a lot. I learned that bigotry could take many different forms, including intense prejudice against the South. I learned that the rest of America had only paid attention to the black Mississippian Chaney because white New Yorkers Goodman and Schwerner died by his side. I also learned much more about Mississippi history than I ever had here — including the absolute fact that our institutionalized racism, enforced by every level of our society, was indeed worse than anywhere else. In effect, both the North and the South were right, and wrong, about each other.

I learned just enough to be really damned confused about the idea of patriotism. Hoping from afar for nearly 20 years after I left that my state and county would someday criminally prosecute at least one of that lynch mob, I continued to believe passionately in the American constitutional system. As I learned more about the Red Scare, and union-busting, and spying on protesters during the Vietnam era (including the staff of the Kudzu newspaper in Jackson), my belief grew stronger that the ideals that the U.S. is built on, even if we have not always honored them, can weather any storm.

Along the way, even as I faced squarely the painful honesty of the dark moments of U.S. history that I didn't learn or read about at Neshoba Central, my pride started to grow. And not only my pride in the constitutional principles of the country, but in where I came from, and how far it had come, despite its reticence to convict its own.

I returned two years ago in search of a home I could love. And I found it.

".. with certain unalienable Rights..."

The last two years have been interesting. It has felt almost surreal to watch so many of our civil liberties go under the knife, and to hear some frustrated Americans say they'd leave the country if they had somewhere else to go. I used to say that, too. Just as I couldn't wait to leave Mississippi in 1983, I used to romanticize the idea of being an expatriate somewhere like the Scott Fitzgerald crowd in Paris during the 1920s. I always thought that if the freedom tide ever turned, and our civil liberties were at stake again, that I'd be outta here in a snap.

The tide has turned, though, and I'm still here. Not only in the U.S., but back home in Mississippi, and loving it, near the place where they've never prosecuted that lynch mob and where state elected officials fear losing votes so much that they won't mothball a symbol of hatred and shame. Since Sept. 11, I've felt no need to publicly display a flag, any flag. Right now, that flag would say to most people that I publicly support military decisions that I believe in my heart are unwise. I can't do that.

But I've been thinking a lot about patriotism lately: It seems that love of your country matters more when other people try to take it away from you.

"...that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

Maybe I finally understood my brand of patriotism last Sunday listening to the quiet voice of Bob Moses recite from the Declaration of Independence behind the pulpit at Mount Zion. We live in a country built messily on amazing principles of equality formulated by slave-holders and apologists. It is a country with a foundation of freedom so strong that Mr. Moses, a black man beaten in Mississippi for trying to register blacks to vote, would move his family here to help the next generation, and the next, continue to fight for the freedom and education that our founding fathers promised us, even though they weren't ready to give it to us all. I now believe that the American ideals of equality, justice, pluralism, tolerance, freedom of and from religion and opportunity are worth staying here — in the state and in the U.S. — and fighting for.

Mr. Moses said Sunday, *"One of the best things about this country is that you can live a life in struggle."* The American dream is just that: a struggle. We must continue to fight to preserve our right to be patriotic, even in dissent, and to ensure that more and more of us, not fewer, can experience what is so special about the American way. That is, after all, the point.

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