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This is January 21, 1969. Joan Beifuss, David Yellin, about to interview James Lawson in the office of his church.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: And when I saw all the front pages of the newspapers in India carried the story of the Montgomery boycott in '55. I'll never forget I was reading the English addition of The Northport Time, which was the city where I lived. I had always been on the -- I had already been on the field. I have forgotten now in what connection either with athletics or football. That morning early when I came in, as I usually did, and showered and had my breakfast, and was looking at the paper on my desk, and the first thing that hit me was a headline that spoke about a new movement in the United States among Negroes. So, of course the reference was to Montgomery, and Martin Luther King was mentioned, and I was so elated by this that I started clapping my hands and jumping, and shouting.

David Yellin: You were alone?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I was alone. My next door neighbor, another professor at the school, Chris Theofilos came running out and opened my door to find out what was wrong. So, I showed him the paper and told him that, how important this was, because I had been hoping and dreaming that this could be possible in America, and that it would start one day.

David Yellin: Now, had you met Martin Luther King?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, up to this time I had not met him.

David Yellin: Had you ever heard of him?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, nobody had, you know?

David Yellin: Of course nobody had.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Because he was fresh out of BU, and took up that pastoring over about 3 months before -- before this happened. So, but of course then, from then on I tried to follow the Montgomery boycott in various periodicals. Of course I was getting the New York Times International Edition, and The Christian Century, the International Edition of Time Magazine, and one or two other things if I recall. So, Reporter Magazine; The Progressive.

David Yellin: Could you talk with anyone there about it? In India or at the school?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, I'm sure that I did talk to people, friends and others about its importance and, you know, I'm more than sure about it. Of course, you know, I should say again that from my college days until the present movement, studied social

change, particularly from the perspective of satyagraha soul force has been a main preoccupation of mine. So, I often spoke on this subject in India to student groups and what not.

David Yellin: This was before Birmingham?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, yes. This was before Montgomery. I was speaking on this theme frequently whenever people asked me to lecture and what not. I very often came back to the importance of this, because of course it is my contention, that in this vast revolutionary age, the human race either has to learn to deal with injustice and conflict in terms of essentially pacifists, soulful satyagraha ways, or the human race is going to commit suicide. It is my contention that just as we can either feed all the people in the world -- we can use our knowledge to feed all the people in the world, or we can use our knowledge to destroy all the people in the world, and we will make the choice according to the methods that we use, not according to the ends we seek.

David Yellin: Now was the atomic bomb instrumental, say in directing your thinking about this?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes, very clearly so. And, I should point out that my senior year in high school was the year after Hiroshima, and the debate topic for that year was something about atomic energy makes obsolete large mass armies. And, we were the championship debate team of the state in that school, you know, regularly we were one of speech and debate powers. So we did thorough research, and I think I read probably just about every document up to that time that had been written about atomic energy and the Manhattan Project in preparation debate. And, which meant therefore that I read a great amount of speculation on things like the scientific Americans and some of the leading scientists at that time (muffled) just met. So, all of this was very influential in my whole, you know, the shaping of my own philosophy and all.

David Yellin: Do have any of those speeches that you made, copies? Did you ever write them out? I think it would be fascinating for you…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I used to have them, but I think they're at home, I mean the homestead in Ohio. Um, certainly one original speech that I made at that time was in college, it became the, one of these organizations for Prince of Peace because it was (muffled). I won the intercollegiate oratorical contest. (muffled). And it was essentially the applications of nonviolent forms to problems, Negro problems, as well as (muffled).

David Yellin: This was about '48 and '49 I think.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, this was about -- no, this was the year '49-50 I think that's right. And I have copies of that somewhere, too. But, so, in other words, what I'm saying is that in India this was already a major part of my main thought. And, I read thoroughly, avidly while in India on the Indian scene, the locals (muffled) Vinoba Bhave,

who was the spiritual heir of Gandhi, and this whole (muffled) movement, which was a land reform, a volunteer, nonviolent land reform, and I read carefully on the whole socialist groups who were Gandhians. In fact, it was quite critical, and I still am, because the Gandhian movements lost it's opportunities in the post-Gandhi world, in the post-independence world in India where -- of course this is natural in a way because they'd had a very strong leader, and the whole movement operating around Gandhi, and his death scattered the people in various ways, and I suppose having fought for so long for independence, they really had not given enough thought to what happens after independence.

(muffled)

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: New forms of social movement.

David Yellin: And social movements are the best kind -- the (muffled) of a personality is almost a necessity in a way.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No matter how much you fight it. And of course, maybe though, Gandhi too made a mistake -- well, I think this can be said this way, I don't know, maybe not say it that way. But I think probably Gandhi made a mistake, too, in that on some of his writings he refers to the change over of power. He did not plan for where he went immediately after independence. You know, in one respect perhaps he had, and we don't know about it because it became impossible because of the great Hindu/Muslim riots that broke out. And, of course, it was -- he committed himself to healing those, of getting those stopped, of course succeeded in doing that. And, the last time in New Delhi of course this meant his death. That's when he was killed. He was on the scene for the purpose of healing these riots, this strike; but, so perhaps he didn't have time then really to turn the attention on the people. But that is one, well just any number of issues, the whole problem with The Untouchables, the problem of the languages. These are concerns now, particularly the languages has India in a real bind, and perhaps if the Gandhi movement had had some direction it could have continued to lead people in ways that were (muffled).

David Yellin: Well now, to kind of get back, it strikes me as a lesson to you that you and Dr. King sort of arrived separately together.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes, sure, in different places and different times.

David Yellin: Had you ever discussed this with him?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Not that I remember.

Joan Beifuss: What's the age variable? Was Dr. King a year or two older?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: We were the same age.

Joan Beifuss: Same?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah.

David Yellin: You just turned 40 just the other day?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That's right, the 15th of January. Now also, I can say for example a lot of Africans were studying in India at the behest of maybe the Indian government. And, I was regularly invited to their Indian/African students association or African Students Association in India.

David Yellin: Was this any particular part of Africa?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, from all over.

David Yellin: All over.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: All wherever they could get them, you know where they could come, East Africa, West Africa, wherever, but chiefly from East Africa, which was British colonies. But, they were able to move out to study.

David Yellin: And now, why (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, because here again I was in debate conversation constantly for a number of years fellows about the revolution in Africa, about independence, and the whole nonviolent approach to it, so.

David Yellin: Now, was there any relationship between the African potential for revolution, or a move towards to what was happening here?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes, because of course at that time you had Nacruma in Ghana, who organized essentially in nonviolent forms in the gold coast rather, which is what it was called then. Nacruma moved in this direction. You had the whole African National Congress in South Africa, which was community run by various kinds of demonstrations like what's going on, organizing efforts. And, Rhodesia, northern Rhodesia you had Kenneth Kaunda, who deeply committed to nonviolent groups for independence.

David Yellin: Was it called nonviolence?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, they -- I'm trying to think. I don't know if they called it specifically that, or if they used a more British term, passive resistance. In South Africa they tended to call it the Gandhi interim of satyagraha, which the term was invented in South Africa.

Joan Beifuss: Can you spell that?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: S-A-T-Y-A-G-R-A-H-A.

Joan Beifuss: For whoever transcribes the tape.

David Yellin: Yeah, I don't remember the term nonviolence, or the non-aggression or --passive resistance is the phrase that I.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well that was the British phrase that grew out of the women's suffrage movements of Great Britain.

David Yellin: Yeah, that is so British isn't it?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, so it was used frequently to refer to Gandhi, and Gandhi of course resisted it. And, of course went about trying to invent the new term, satyagraha was the term he invented, meaning essentially translated, meaning soul power.

David Yellin: Really?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That's right, or love power, or truth power, or God power. Satya means truth or God or love. I am speaking now in Gandhian terms.

David Yellin: Now what language is that, Hindu?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: This is Sanskrit.

David Yellin: Sanskrit.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It's a combination of two Sanskrit words, graha meaning tenacity, hanging on.

David Yellin: So that's a different use of power isn't it? The tenacity.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: This is right. So, and I think really nonviolence has only come into its own in America where the press has used it so frequently.

David Yellin: Almost as opposed to violence.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That's right, it is. The definition that most Americans have of nonviolence is that if you get hit in the face then you take it, you don't do anything.

Joan Beifuss: It's not too positive.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No. That's the attitude. That's, you know, it's laying down.

David Yellin: That says so much, doesn't it.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right. This is the only -- this is the popular concept between blacks and whites, and nonviolence. They do not know what the whole history of soul force because actually of course in the western world there have been many, many excellent illustrations. We have religious liberty in America primarily because of the aggressive action of people like Roger Williams, and Mary Dyer, and Baptist preachers in Virginia. In fact, the first religious liberty ordinance of the first religious liberty rite or resolution was passed by the Virginia Assembly -- it was proposed by Patrick Henry. And, Patrick, Henry is supposed to have come to that position because he heard a Baptist preacher in Virginia preaching in jail, because of course with established religion, you had an established religion in every colony. And, in Virginia the Baptists went in preaching in New England and were thrown in jail. And, it is said that he heard a number of these preachers speaking out of the jail windows at passer-bys, and of course they were very strong in the point of freedom of religion, and the right of every man to worship as they wanted. So, he wrote the model for the Constitution for the Bill of Rights. In Massachusetts of course it was the Quakers who several of them were lynched, hung rather, on the Boston Common -- Mary Dyer, I think she was the -- no I'm not going to say she was the first woman hung in America, because I am not sure about the witches, but Massachusetts colony hung her because she refused to leave the colony. Each time they kicked her out she came back, and she refused not to practice her religion, which was the Quaker faith. So they hung her and several others in the Boston Commons. Well you see now, people don't realize the extent to which in actual fact many patterns of law in the United States came about by virtue of people who acted in creative, civil disobedience and/or creative demonstrations that weren't commonly known. The whole labor, for example, the whole labor development, essentially women's suffrage. I mean, you have to point out the point which American society has been shaped by, essentially, civil disobedience.

David Yellin: Because change comes out of something that exists.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Of course, of course. And, civil disobedience and the whole idea of septyagaha has been the way in which ordinary citizens have affected, and stimulated those elements that could finally produce the necessary change.

David Yellin: So that our revolution is a case of not civil disobedience, it's a case of armed rebellion.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right. That's right.

David Yellin: And that's the difference.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: but, what we've tended to see primarily is the history of America in terms of the pushing of the Indians back, the taming of the wilderness, the wars against those nations of people that we thought were threats to us, you know. But, we write it primarily in those terms, and not in terms of the total process by which certain

forms have come about. So when, you know, when popular people say, well you know -- and as Negroes have often said too -- you know with the King approach is Indian, it shows an appalling kind of ambiguance in the whole…

David Yellin: You mean it's not American, it's black or (murmur).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: And also where when certain folks in the south, particularly whites accuse me of being subversive because they say I went to India and I studied Gandhiism or something like that, and men brought it back to import it into America, this whole attitude. You know, they say that it real ignorance in true form.

David Yellin: Something that's occurred to me, and maybe we can talk about this later, but what you just said, that the irony, if we can use that word, that the militant blacks are taking their (muffled) from the whites.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Sure. Well, and of course what I maintain about this is that the whole American process conditions everyone, and in actual fact the blacks are essentially well-conditioned Americans. They are really no more than this.

David Yellin: Well, I think we left you jumping up and down.

Joan Beifuss: What about the Indian (muffled) that -- what am I trying to say? You know, the Indian mystics. Would you go into that at all (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Not too much. I read historical stuff chiefly, and Hindu scriptures. But, and poetry and literature. But my chief interest was in the whole social/political area, the whole Gandhi movement, and of course, the church, too. So, I would look at this, except as in this activist form, to alike it, to go off, and we were, of course, quite active (muffled) quite mystical approach.

David Yellin: I would like to, I won't get you off, but at this time what was your intention in life? What were you preparing yourself for?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, well I was preparing myself to return to the States, and go to seminary or theological school, and prepare to go into the local parish.

David Yellin: Now when had you determined this?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, this was in college some time, although you know I started wrestling with it in high school. Um, also I was determined too that eventually I would be in the south working, in preferably a city. So that, this is where I was moving even then.

David Yellin: All right, now we have you jumping up and down.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Okay, so let's see then, so this was at the early part of

December, and I would image it must've been around December the 5th or 6th. Um, in any case, I then of course followed the whole scene with a great deal of interest, and saw any number of articles on Montgomery, and on Martin King. And of course, I began looking forward to meeting him when I got back to the States. Now, I uh, I -- well, let's see I'm not sure where else we should go. I went on -- I finished of course my tour of duty in India, and in June of '56, went home way of Africa.

Joan Beifuss: How long had you been in India then?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Three years. Three years, '53 to '56. Um, I spent the summer of '56 traveling around Africa, and of course all over Africa. I spent about 5 weeks in East Africa, Kenya.

Joan Beifuss: Is this under the auspices of the church?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, it was on my own.

David Yellin: With some of the people you had met in India perhaps, or?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, some people I met in India. I used student contacts, church contacts. I wrote ahead of time to various people whose names I had gotten from someone, some source, to indicate I was coming (muffled).

David Yellin: Just a few details…you wrote ahead in English.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes.

David Yellin: And wherever you went you were able to speak English?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Of course.

David Yellin: What was your -- how did they receive you as obviously an American?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Very, very well. I was received very well by Africans. They had great joy, because at that time there were not very many American Negroes that made their way to Africa at all. And, particularly to East Africa and Central Africa where I went. At that time I also was toying with the possibility that I may want to return to the East/Central, or the Central/East part of Africa one day (muffled).

David Yellin/Joan Beifuss: Why?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Hmm? Why? Well, because that section is where Swahili was spoken in East Africa down through the eastern section of the Congo, northern Rhodesia, southern Rhodesia. Um, so it was kind of a larger melting pot where you could do a common language. This was much -- well, it's not very easy to do this in Africa, except, unless you speak in some sections French, you could speak now in other

places English, but in terms of an African language, Swahili I suspect is probably the largest language where, in terms of the numbers you can speak it in different sections and different parts of the country.

David Yellin: Did you feel any kind of emotional affinity with Africa?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, yes. Very deeply -- this was of course one of the reasons for my lone interest. I felt very deep emotional affinity towards Africa, and always had in fact. And, was one of the reasons for travel and wanting to see, and everywhere I was received as an American brother. And I, everywhere accepted Africans as men, very important. like brothers.

Joan Beifuss: Do you still feel that way?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes.

David Yellin: Not many do, I mean I just wonder.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I realize this. You know, but here again though, you see because black people have been taught in America that they had no past. Of course, probably one of the things that affected me, was the fact in our home this was not felt. We didn't have this rejection of our past. We took a certain amount of pride that on my father's side, my great-great-grandfather was a slave, and that on my father's mother's side there was a whole history of involvement in the Underground Railroad, (muffled) in Philadelphia. For us this was a point -- a frame of reference in which we were quite…

David Yellin: You could trace back much further than (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, we could trace back to, let's see, on my dad's side to slavery in Hagerstown, Maryland and where, as I said, my great-great-grandfather stole a horse and ran.

David Yellin: Great-great-grandfather. Do you remember the dates on that?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, I don't know the dates on this any more. I need to uh.

Joan Beifuss: Could you go back any further than that?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Um, we probably could on my father's great-grandmother's side. But not farther back on (muffled) work this up, I am trying to see because there was a fairly well known family in Philadelphia named Still, William Still.

David Yellin: Is that a white family?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: A free Negro. No, a free Negro. Yeah, and he was, I have forgotten, a small business man or something. And, my great-great-grandmother

came from that family.

David Yellin: So there probably might be a genealogy from this available.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, there's genealogy available, I know this. I have never…

David Yellin: It's time to go to Philadelphia. It's my hometown.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Is that right?

David Yellin: Yeah. I go back (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I've seen William Still referred to in various histories of Negroes and documents.

Joan Beifuss: Well, it's part of the documentation of free Negro culture.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yeah, sure. That's right, so. So here again you see, I suspect that we, therefore, part of this is my past, so we never, there wasn't any rejection. Our family never moved through the period rejecting the Negro spiritual. We were always a singing family, a musical family. And the spirituals were among our favorite songs. Always they were a part of (muffled). Many Negroes have gone through this period where they, you know, passed off the spiritual.

Joan Beifuss: (muffled) you chumming, to use the expression (muffled) if you're Negro and you're -- there's that whole period there of slavery? (muffled)

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I think that you have to, you look at it, and you actually reach the place where you can say that my parents were slaves, but now I'm free. I think you can't feel (muffled) in a very real way if people are ruthlessly honest with themselves, this is not something unique only to the Negro American. It's not something unique only to the Negro American.

David Yellin: Right, yes, yes. Definitely not.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Of course. If you --

David Yellin: The Jews, Christians, yes.

Joan Beifuss: Although the form of slavery here is somewhat unique.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I don't mean, certainly I don't mean in the sense that the slavery in America was not unique. No, I don't mean that, it certainly was unique in its own respect. The idea of a people having to look upon their past, and recognizing the past for what it was, or is. It is not foreign to the Negro. Certainly…

David Yellin: Even the Greeks were slaves.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Even the Greeks were slaves before. And, also what do you do about the fact that at the time that the Germans were barbaric tribes, you had these massive civilizations in Africa and what is now the Mediterranean area.

Joan Beifuss: It seems to me that the slavery system here was rather more degrading than.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, certainly -- certainly the slavery here…

David Yellin: Well, I just wondered if it was.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, let's not say it was more degrading than anywhere else, because I don't know if you can make that kind of analysis.

Joan Beifuss: By the point in time it shouldn't have been as degrading as it was. I think is…

David Yellin: Also it's closer to us than (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well color, and yeah, but I think the whole input of inherent inferiority of color, the whole idea that these were savages from the wilderness and therefore they weren't really up to par as human beings. I mean all of this I think. And then the whole break up of the family patterns, the music, the language, the religion, the effort to annihilate the past. Certainly in this respect, slavery was exceedingly harsh, and…

David Yellin: It just occurs to me I have never seen a study on slavery in various civilizations. I can't imagine though slavery not breaking up the family. Once you do that…

Joan Beifuss: No (muffled) South America, but at the same time, so.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, but for an example, in Roman days, the Romans put slaves in, but very often of course the slaves they were all kinds of people they captured. They captured the rulers.

David Yellin: They were sometimes scholars and they used them to their advantage.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: And they often used them, and then they also used, they captured whole families and they used the whole families.

David Yellin: Of course it was a different civilization here. We used slaves because we needed physical labor. We didn't need the other things.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, right. This is true in many respects.

David Yellin: And another thing, I guess…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Roman slavery was more based upon affluence and conquering.

David Yellin: And it was the spoils of war.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Spoils, yeah. Yes, this is the word.

David Yellin: And this does make it unique. We didn't win a war with that (muffled). But that's funny, I had the same question, I was wondering about it -- how to put it.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well you know, in the Old Testament for an example, the prophets in particular say over and over again to the Hebrew people, remember you were once slaves.

David Yellin: Yes. The whole Passover service is a reminder.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, that's right. It's a reminder you were once slaves. Also they keep saying to them, deal justly with the stranger in your gates. Remember you were once a stranger. And that becomes a frame of reference, it becomes a mental frame of reference, that gave the Hebrews identity. And it became a redeem note. And of course in my own judgment at least, I for example look back upon the slavery period without, you know, without shame for a great variety of reasons, one because I think that the whole heroic struggle that I knew in my own family, and another one because I know that in spite of slavery, a remarkable thing about black people in America is that had to endure -- and not simply enduring, but that we produced people who the world recognizes (muffled) the outstanding people that America has produced, period. So, it hasn't been simply an endurance, it's been more than that. Also, I think that there is a tremendous empathy among Negroes for human life, for life itself that could turn our society in ways that it needs desperately. There is an openness among Negroes still, in spite of black power now, there is an openness in the Negroes towards human life that I think is really something miraculous. As an illustration of this, the way most black people deal with a wrongdoer, as (muffled) the white society does it, the society in general tends to try to punish, ostracize, reject, humiliate the wrongdoer. In the black community there is a persistent embracing of the wrongdoer, while rejecting his wrongdoing, which I think is a very healthy kind of attitude.

David Yellin: You make the punishment fit the crime, not the criminals?

Joan Beifuss: That's kind of a sweeping statement.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I know, but it's true. It's sweeping, but it's true. And you

take away, for example, black people -- the way in which black people tend to accept, let's say the girl who has an illegitimate baby. I find this again in this church where it has happened, and it has happened in my six years, I guess three times, four times, and among the young and the old there is a kind of forgiveness and acceptance. The white community often times seems this as a kind of tolerance of people. It's not that at all, it's a caring for life, and this is precisely a Christian message instead of a…

David Yellin: Albert Schweitzer (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, because I mean if the Bible -- if the prophetic traditions of the Bible have any value or teaching at all, it is that do not judge people by their failures or weaknesses, their sins, their strengths, whatnot, you judge them by the fact that they're people, and you care for them first.

David Yellin: (muffled) agree with them.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: You know, whether you agree with them, (muffled). And the key question in the New Testament is not why are people poor, why are people bad, why are people black or white, but what the key question is is do you care for them? This is going to be -- Jesus doesn't say we are judged by how we analyze poverty, he said if you saw anything, (muffled). The Good Samaritan story does not analyze why the man was in his plight, it simply says the good Samaritan, the good neighbor was the man who saw the need and cared for him, or at least tried to care for him. The question is never asked why are people diseased, or, it is asked. I shouldn't say it is never asked, but it is never seen as a legitimate question.

David Yellin: Or pursued.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, or pursued. This is right. I mean the disciples asked this of Jesus once when they saw a man blind, and he rejected their questions. He said no -- it gives -- what did he say. He said this man is blind because it gives you an opportunity to see (muffled).

David Yellin: Now…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Which is really a very beautiful thing.

David Yellin: It's interesting, and of course you can talk about this; however, this is not the prime purpose of (muffled), but how come that Jesus's disciples, or whomever wrote this presumably for all intense and purposes we have known to white people, how did they come about it? Or I think…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: But they weren't white people.

David Yellin: All right.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: They weren't white people.

David Yellin: Or a correlative question. How did the Negroes, the blacks -- how do the Negroes, blacks of today, come around to this? And, I believe they do. I mean, is it something inherent?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, no. It's a -- I think it's because most Negroes have had some degree of suffering. Most Negroes have had to wrestle with their own hurt in terms of being rejected, that are bruised in one way or another. And, because of this, therefore, I think it has tended to make them more sympathetic with hurt, wherever it is. Now of course, one can see some evidences today of bitterness in ways that we never saw before, and anger. This may be…

David Yellin: You're talking about the black community?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, but certainly the black community has had, or has developed at least, a kind of feeling for life, which I think is very much akin to what some psychologists and others talk about today. Where they increase their movement away from talking about emotions and (muffled) thought, instincts, and what not. I think in terms of a whole kind of engagement in life. And some of them like Carl Rogers. Carl (muffled), which is not pure -- it is not of any means pure emotion, or pure intellect. It is more like all these. It is kind of an embracing of life, kind of an acceptance of life, kind of a caring of life.

David Yellin: It's soap. It really is. (muffled) You were coming to Africa, your six weeks. If you could move a little closer, Jim, I think we're losing you some. Well now, did anything particularly eventful happen during your six months in Africa before you came back here? In the summer of '56 or so?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I got a feeling of the isolation of the white man in Africa. By this I mean that I saw in Kenya, Uganda, and the Congo especially, the ghettos of white missionaries, businessmen, living in compounds and really often I found, unaware even then of the great agitation of the spirit that was going in the breast of Africans. In the Congo for example, at that time the Europeans to whom I talked, were pointing to Kenya, and (muffled) Kenya, and saying that this can't happen and won't happen in the Congo, but here we have a higher standard that is really impossible for the black (muffled) because of the (muffled), and that they are satisfied.

David Yellin: That's familiar isn't it?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, and the thing that was very interesting to me was that the -- on several days I would be in a meeting with Europeans, and I would hear this, and on the very same day I could move into an African home, or a café, and hear exactly the opposite.

David Yellin: Now just to clarify, when you say the whites were in the ghetto, you

meant they were segregated.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, they lived in their own compounds.

David Yellin: Not that they were slums, or the usual.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Most Africans did not …

Joan Beifuss: Like we are in East Memphis.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: There is no compound. They were surrounded by themselves, you know? And this was true out in the bush or (muffled) as well as in the cities, which meant that they really did not have a feel like -- for example on a Sunday afternoon I was in Leopoldville. I think I was only there about 4 or 5 days, but one Sunday afternoon I was there, and it just so happened there was, someone (muffled) of a tea being given at a school where there were a fair number of westerners. I was invited there, and on the way there, my host, who I've not remembered now, who I've forgotten who this was, stopped at a little café for some reason, and I just walked in the place and I was immediately seized by a couple of apparently civil servants. I mean Africans, Congolese, who were working in some kind of menial, not menial, but workings of the courts or something. And they took me off to the corner and proceeded to talk to me about their efforts to organize the union, and the things that they were trying to do in terms of getting people out of the country and (muffled) for education, which (muffled). So it became very, very clear, but then in the Congo even, the forces were already at work among the Africans; agitation, expectations, all were there. But, you did not find an awareness of this on the part of either the western missionaries or the American missionaries, or the businessmen, which you could meet also.

David Yellin: Well now, something occurs to me, particularly with your experience here. Say the words, not awareness. I would say, last year up until this date of January 21, if you spoke to anybody in Memphis, there would not have been an awareness of what, in less than a month, the situation really was. Do you think there is any kind of analogy there?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes. I don't think there's any doubt, but that the same moral blindness, or insensitivity to the arena of history. It was quite apparent to me then, there was no doubt that the same thing is true in America. And you come across illustrations of it again and again. For example, on Thursday the general board of the NCC, this is Thursday, January 23, the general board is going to hear a report on the crisis in the nation by a special NCC task force. When that task force, having heard that we did a TV film for 40% (muffled) looked at, and having incorporated in their report, kind of showing it, I was told today by one of the staff people who serve this task force that they showed it to a group of NCC officials last week in New York as a preview of he report, and the people were astonished. The NCC officials were astonished at this kind of film, and surprised that this went on in America. And, the black guys told them that this film could be made of almost the identical cases in any city in America.

David Yellin: And this was, as you know, a particularly mild film.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: A mild film, and not only that, but the (muffled) these are men, high officials of the denominations in this country who are concerned for the crisis of the nation, and this is post-(muffled) report.

David Yellin: Even today?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: This is post-crime commission report. This is post-conflictive rights, The Walker Report of Chicago. This is post the assassination of Kennedy and King. You know, the point is you see, that perhaps there's a built-in apparatus here that tends to insulate us from reality.

Joan Beifuss: (muffled) with the guys that are like trying.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, they're trying.

David Yellin: National Council of Churches, just again for the record. That amazes me that even to this day that they have that kind of response, you know.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It's remarkable. But apparently this is the case. Of course, I think it's still true that certain tough issues, like police brutality as you well know, there is still a massive sense on the part of the white people that it is not really that bad, or it doesn't really go on, and that probably blacks or Puerto Ricans, or Spanish-speaking Americans instigate it. Therefore, perhaps sort of deserve it. There is not the recognition, you know, I think it is really something that violates the whole (muffled) practice of the constitution, human rights.

David Yellin: It's been put some ways that you see only what you want to see, but I think this is even better put as you don't see what you don't want to see.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah right.

David Yellin: And I think that's an important distinction. Well, I think then there is a parallel to…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, very definitely. Very clearly.

David Yellin: They just didn't see it, and of course when it, as in Memphis when it did happen, some enlightened people said, "Oh my God, it really was there all the time."

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Exactly.

David Yellin: I guess it's somewhat like, of course none of us know about this, but if you're married to someone and then 30 years you discover something, and then you turn

around and your whole life, he or she really didn't love me.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It causes a real shock. And, in some sense -- in some sense I suspect right now in America, a part of our problem is because a lot of people suffer from this shock.

David Yellin: Yes. Yeah, I found this and I will say that the good, I don't know how you would describe it any further, but good white people in this town were so truly shocked that such conditions existed and that they were part of it unwillingly, or perhaps, and they sometimes took (muffled) refused to believe it.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes.

David Yellin: Or became so involved that they have to do something, and you know.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, that's certainly a fairly common reaction of us today.

David Yellin: Well, let's, if we could, we're…

Joan Beifuss: Back to Africa?

David Yellin: Yeah, back to Africa.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: There are a number of different incidental experiences. I am not sure how important they were or are.

Joan Beifuss: Have you been back (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, I have been back since then, but only very briefly.

David Yellin: Did you meet any of the leaders? Perhaps we can…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, I met (muffled). In fact, I stayed in the home of Odinga Odinga, who is the Prime Minister of Kenya today.

David Yellin: What was he then, when you stayed?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: He was a labor man and a small contractor in business. Even then of course this was during the (muffled) emergency that I met him, but even then he was actively engaged in politics, and the effort to get the British out. And, I went out into the highlands and near Lake Victoria, now what's it called? Priscilla Lake? No. Well, anyway, on the shores of this lake there lived an African parson, who was the father of one of my students in India. So, of course, their son and I had become very close friends in (muffled), and of course John wanted me to go into Kenya, to of course go to his home so I went out to his home to spend 3 or 4 days. And, this was not too far away from Odinga Odinga's home. And he, at that time, just started

experimenting with concrete houses built in the traditional African village form, East African village -- traditional form in East Africa in Kenya. And, he had just finished building his own house out of (muffled).

David Yellin: This is the father of the?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, no. This is the Prime Minister of Kenya, Odinga Odinga. So, he was quite insistent that I come and spend a couple of days with him, which I did. I (muffled) in the village area in this very, actually very modern, very lovely home, concrete house build in the round with (muffled) top and all. Built as a replica in fact, of the village, of the mud cow dung house and thatched roofs. But, a house of course that was built for permanency, you know, as well. And then of course he took me into (muffled).

David Yellin: Was it a low-cost housing project?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, this was just, this was his house.

David Yellin: Just one house.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes. Well, there were about four there (muffled).

(all talking, muffled)

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, this is right. And of course we visited and talked politics and (muffled) and whatnot. So, I met him. On the first -- I stayed in the home of Albert Venn Dicey, who was the first -- who became the first labor officer, the first African labor officer rather (muffled) and think I stayed with him, for about three weeks in fact. So, I met a number of people like this, and later (muffled).

David Yellin: And then you came back.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I returned to the States the first of September (muffled).

David Yellin: This would be then ‘56?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: ‘56, in time to get enrolled at Oberlin Graduate School of Theology. And, after two or three weeks I guess at home while I was (muffled) school.

David Yellin: And you went to Oberlin?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oberlin.

David Yellin: For how long?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I was there for three semesters.

David Yellin: That would be a year and a half?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right. I was there for '56-57 academic year, and in the fall of '57, and Oberlin was important for a number of reasons; one because it is a very fine experience of study and academic climate, and a kind of community climate. Of course I was probably ready for this kind of discipline because I had been away for three years, working, and this was again towards my goal of theological implication. So, I suspect all that accentuated it. It was also quite important, though, because I met (muffled). Because, in the winter of '56, he came to Oberlin to speak in a convocation, and I heard him speak in a packed congregation, and that evening I had dinner with him.

David Yellin: How did you arrange that?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, he was on campus the whole day, and I have forgotten. I think Harvey Cox, and Harvey (muffled) had helped to arrange his coming. Harvey was the YMCA/YW secretary of the campus. He was fresh out of seminary, and had been over a couple of years by the time I got there. So, Harley, I think he did that, and of course Harvey told me he was coming. As I recall, he called me and said that I should plan to eat dinner with them that night, which I did, and there is a special group of people who had dinner with King, and it just so happens I sat across from him here, like this at the table where we were. So we got a chance to discover, talk to each other, and (muffled) our common bonds.

David Yellin: Was he interested in the fact that you had been to India.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, very much so, and also by this time I told him I planned to move south eventually and work. So, of course he was quite interested in that.

David Yellin: Did he make any suggestions as to where you might go?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I don't recall him doing this, no.

David Yellin: Because he was a Baptist and you were a Methodist.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I don't recall him making any suggestions. Of course the common rapport was -- the place of our rapport of course was that he was then still of course in the midst of the Montgomery boycott, and I was, or felt, counted myself as an ardent supporter of this kind of venture, and so we talked, as I recall, very frequently (muffled) concerns.

Joan Beifuss: This sounds ridiculous also, but was Martin King ever young? You know?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Young?

Joan Beifuss: I mean, did he ever -- the only Martin King I ever knew from television and (muffled), he was always kind of, he seemed older, and uh…

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, because you mean you only see him in the public places, you don't see him (muffled).

Joan Beifuss: Yeah, right. I can't even visualize him relaxing at 24 or 26, or (muffled).

David Yellin: Well, he was 28 when you met him.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: We used to play basketball and football together. Oh yeah. In retreats and up in our hotels, we would hold our meetings (muffled) and there was always the -- Martin was a very relaxed person, the same as (muffled).

David Yellin: Can we stop here on account we are out of tape?

END OF RECORDING