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Rev. James Lawson, SCLC and COME, January 1969

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This is tape #2 of January 21, 1969 with Rev. James M. Lawson.

David Yellin: Can we, at this point perhaps what we want to do is instead of talking about Martin Luther King, which I think we can do in another session, along with the chronological activities. And you met Martin Luther King at Overland, which is where we left off.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: So, we met for the first time in Overland. Of course, by this time also I felt that I knew him because I, by this time I persistently read everything that was being printed, both (muffled), and I've always been a fairly avid reader, so when (muffled) went to the library, looked in Reader's Guide, and magazines, and got a fair cross section of materials and reviews. And, I think I've mentioned the two most important things about the Overland experience for me, I found the period of looking in, in a period in the theological school a very exhilarating one in subject after subject.

Joan Beifuss: Was Overland, later on was Overland used as a training area for people of, from the south? Students that were from the south?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It was one of the most supportive centers (muffled).

Joan Beifuss: But that was not true was it?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No. There was a lot of support around there for this. Overland was one of those test places where a fair number of soul force demonstrations have gone on back in the '30s and '40s when in most college towns you found a community that looked with some hesitation upon blacks and international students. Overland was one of the few places where a black could get his hair cut anywhere. Places where already open, and the students and faculty of Oakland, in the city had worked with this over the years. They had worked to see to it that there was a kind of an openness.

Joan Beifuss: There was -- it was very -- openness.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, there was always a great openness.

Joan Beifuss: Very open to ideas, too, you know.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Very much so.

David Yellin: Now, can we set the degree that you were getting at Overland? Was that a continuation of what?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It was a theological degree -- (muffled) theological degree. But of course, I didn't get it there.

David Yellin: That's what I'm trying to...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Because the year of '57 was a very pivotal year. You had the Montgomery boycott come to a conclusion, and this produced violence; 1957 was the year that schools in Nashville and Little Rock desegregated if you recall, and Clinton, Tennessee, and in Kentucky several places. In several places there was violence, so that while I had thought I would liked Overland so well I thought I would go ahead and stay there for 6 semesters. Because of this violence that I saw going on, and my feeling that if I were really committed the whole approach of soul force, I needed to go on and move south and get involved, and preach in that arena. So, in the fall of '57 I made the decision that I would go on and move south immediately. And the result of this was that I took a job at the Fellowship of Reconciliation as the Southern Secretary working out of Nashville. This Fellowship of Reconciliation of course, was an interdenominational, interfaith group that believed in the love ethic as it applied to all areas of life, and I have been a member of it since my student days. And, it was very instrumental in Montgomery, because while King and others were the leaders for this effort, they did not have very much awareness of techniques, training processes, so King in fact called the National Council of Churches to find out what resources they could obtain to help them with the problems of learning techniques, training people, and Oscar Lee, at the department who was in charge at that time was the Department of Racial Justice of the National Council, referred him to the Fellowship of Reconciliation. So that very early in the Montgomery boycott, a good friend of mine, Glenn Smiley, began to move in and out of Montgomery as did Bayard Rustin on behalf of the FOR.

David Yellin: Now could you just rather quickly give some background on the Fellowship?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, as I said the Fellowship of Reconciliation was founded in about 1914 in Great Britain. It really is a kind of a simple, ordinary story. A British and German Christian met in a summer.

David Yellin: These are two people, one British and one...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, one British, one German. They found such a common sense of friendship that they declared to each other, if our nations get into war, we will not fight, and that was the basis of it. They found that their own communication, and their own reconciliation with each other was such that they said if our nations do go to war this year, we will absolutely not take up arms against each other (muffled). So, out of that pledge then the British -- I would have to look up his name now -- went back to Great Britain and found other people who had the same mood, and they organized the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which committed to, as I have said, that love is preeminently seen in the life of Jesus, is the law of life, and that men must practice and apply it to all areas -- family life, economic life, international affairs, and also further, because of this love ethic they will not participate in war, and in the years later it jumped to the United States. (muffled) was one of the early members of the Fellowship of

Reconciliation, as was a great host of other men like that, (muffled) probably one of the outstanding preachers.

David Yellin: Not exclusively, this was sort of an auxiliary organization that they belonged to wasn't it?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, what do you mean by that now?

David Yellin: I mean that (muffled) they'd have had their own...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, they all joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation. They were always in the Fellowship. They became members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Joan Beifuss: It's not the church.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It's not the church.

David Yellin: Not the church, no.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It's an interdenominational, interfaith group, and has remained so. They essentially committed in other words to the love approach without qualification. Well, therefore, I was -- it has been a very important influence on my life over the years, because in college -- early I knew that at least I was a conscientious objector to the war. I joined therefore because (muffled). I became aware of its statement of purpose and what not, so I became a student member very early. Well, in any case I took this job and moved south. You might be interested in the incident that caused me to say the gig is up and you've got to move, you've got to go now.

David Yellin: This was in Overland?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: This was the fall of '57. With desegregation of the national schools there was a Negro preacher in Nashville itself. This happened elsewhere that fall, but in Nashville itself a meeting of ministers carried a gun, and at one point in the midst of a white mob, a threatening mob, he pulled this gun and waved it at them. And this picture went all across the country, and as I saw this picture, and thought about it, I said to myself, you know, it's all well and good for you to be in this protected climate of Overland talking about that's not the way -- if this is really true, the only place you can really say it is if you're there in the midst of it. So, on that basis then I decided to go, to move then and not wait, which I did, and then when I informed Glenn Smiley of this fact, he was quite elated and encouraged me then to become the Southern Secretary of the FOR. So this meant, therefore, that I moved to Nashville and immediately was in the midst of moving into various crisis situations that were then going on in the south.

David Yellin: Was this a paid job?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, it was a paid job.

David Yellin: But you didn't go to school in Nashville?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, so I stopped full time and traveled extensively in and out of Little Rock, and Alabama, and Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi, all through Tennessee.

Joan Beifuss: This was really the first time you lived in the south.

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

Joan Beifuss: Was it the way you pictured it before you...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I had traveled in the south before, and I had pastored people in the north who had come from the south, and you know, so -- but this was really the first time over any period of time I was living there.

David Yellin: And did you run into (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, yes great violence and (muffled).

David Yellin: (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: All kinds, you could fill a book.

David Yellin: And that's our hope -- many, many, many stories. All kinds.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Many stories. So, in any case, you know, this is my introduction to the south was as the Southern Secretary of the FOR, and as one who was seeking to encourage people, and the whole idea was essentially a soul force approach (muffled).

David Yellin: One question I think is appropriate here at this point -- now you say these incidents, and of course the energy levels -- not a time to detail them, but did you ever, or can you recall, or how did you stop having the feeling of such personal frustration and even anger at what was happening to you as a person? Did you ever feel that you wanted to punch somebody in the mouth? Did you do something that was violent, I mean? I just wonder how you go about this?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, I'm not really sure about this. Let's say that I have been in numerous situations that were fearful, and I have been in it many number of times quite indignant and outraged, but generally this has not really been in situations where I was personally being threatened. And I think the reason is that most of my days I have -- well I have a fairly deep sense of personal identity and security, (muffled) and a sense of who I am and what I am, and very few things on the outside threaten that, threaten me.

David Yellin: Even in your 20s?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That's right. But, I get angry and outraged over the treatment of others far more so. For example, I remember my younger brother Bill, in his junior year in high school -- I told you this.

David Yellin: Yes.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That's outraged -- that outraged me then, and ever since much more so than some things that ever happened to me. For example, some of my, the year I became the Ohio intercollegiate champion in the regional oratory, I went to the national and it was at Northwestern. And I had a very good friend there, a very good faculty friend there and a student friend there, and they were elated in the finals of this thing because they were sure that I had won. And, to all of our astonishment I placed third instead of first. And they went back and talked to a couple of the judges about this, and got some very picayunish reasons, not based upon content, or based upon style. But one man said for example, he was sitting, it was a wide auditorium, and he was sitting way over here -- one man said I didn't talk directly to him, because you see he was way over there. I remember this very clearly -- and that kind of...

David Yellin: Way over on the side...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: He was way over in the last row on the last row, on the side, in about the middle rather, he was in about the middle of the auditorium, but over in the last row. It was one of these circular auditoriums with about four sections, so that, and of course -- you know, I knew better than this because in my speaking to audiences, I always look directly at people, and I try to look at their eyes and faces and I speak directly to them, and I never look this way or over here, I -- you know. And, I have always done this -- I was taught this since high school. But, that didn't, you know, that didn't excite me, or outrage me, or when I've been out of barber shops violently. That's never enraged me anywhere near as much, or angered me when it's been myself nearly as much as when I see it happening to other people. So...

Joan Beifuss: Has anyone ever hit you?

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

Joan Beifuss: Have you been injured?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, in barber shops. I have been spat upon, of course. (muffled) cussed.

David Yellin: You mean you've been provoked.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yeah, sure. Plenty of times. But, as I say, you know, I

in all these -- for an example, of course here again you see all through high school and since, you know, when I was, when someone refused me service as an example, I have never let it end there. I would always either sit while I'm trying to talk to the manager -- I try to take action right then and there on the spot.

David Yellin: But you don't remember any case where it was...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Where something happened to me that just... About the only thing that ever really stirred me would be fear at one time or another, but not outrage or anger.

Joan Beifuss: Can't fear provoke people to (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Maybe so, but (muffled). Fear is always, of course, a major form of conquest anyway. But for example, you know, I named several incidents where I don't remember feeling any anger or hurt because I have really not felt threatened by this. I think it sometimes (muffled) -- people sometimes my members have said to me that you need to get mad and angry, and you know, cuss a few times -- but that's really never been my, anything that's been a part of my way of thinking of people. And people in meetings, even in my parish here get angry and critical. It doesn't -- this doesn't really bother me. (muffled). I know (muffled) as well as I should, or something else. You know, it's never -- you know, it's just really not been a threat to me, at least. So that when I see it from that, when I get into a situation that there is hostility and effort to uprouse and/or reject, it's more of a challenge, and an opportunity to see what can happen, rather than my being angry or threatened by it. No, it just happens to be the way (muffled). For example, I remember driving with Glenn Smiley somewhere in Maryland mid morning, we had been up to New York for something, and we were on our way back to, well somewhere in the south, I am not sure where we were going. We were going back to -- oh yes, that's right, we had had a meeting in Baltimore. That was it, and then from Baltimore we were going to go back to Nashville. And, so we were driving along. We started out in New York that morning, and mid morning of course we were going to stop for coffees. And we said, you know, the first place that we see that looks decent we'll stop there. Well, it turned out to be a Howard Johnson, so we went in, and we sat for a few minutes and no one came. Finally, you know, a waitress came up and said that she couldn't serve us. And, we asked why, she said something about some books, Maryland law. It was some law about a facility, a public restaurant or something having to have two restrooms, one for white and one for black. Well, we said, let's talk to the manager. It turned out to be a youngish guy, probably in his 30s. And, a few minutes later he came out carrying a plaque, and he looked, and he showed it to us. And he said, "They tell me that according to this law, I can't serve you here." So, we looked at this plaque and it was something about the need to having double restrooms. And, so of course we sort of jokingly pointed out to him, you know, this doesn't refer to us, we haven't asked for a restroom, we wanted coffee. Well, he sort of smiled at this, too you know, he could see the point. This apparently had gotten to him, and so along the line we suggested to him, you know, "Well, you know, this doesn't seem to us that no one has walked out since we have been standing

here talking to you. What do you think would happen if we had went ahead and sat down and you served us?" He said, "I don't know." We said, "Why don't you try." He said, "Well, I'll try anything once." And when this happened, the waitress who had refused us the first time, said, "Well, I won't serve you." But another waitress spoke up and said, "Well, I will." So, we went and sat down and had coffee, and you know, of course the manager said good-bye afterwards. You know, it went without incident. But, I don't remember any rage with that. Or another time, and this is fairly interesting, in a Little Rock waiting room in the bus station -- I was in Little Rock, in and out of there all the time -- in a Little Rock waiting room in the Continental bus station I think it was. I was waiting to catch a bus back to Nashville. Now, of course I never used the waiting rooms marked "colored" as a matter of principle. So, sometimes things would happen in the waiting rooms, but on this particular instance, I was in the regular waiting room, waiting for a bus, and I went up to the magazine counter. And the man behind the counter said I want to buy something, a package of gum or something. I was looking for a magazine as well. He said, I won't serve you unless you walk around, you know, unless you come (muffled). And, so when he finished with a customer I stood there. He said, you know, I'm not going to serve you, or something like that. I finally asked him, I changed the subject on him. I never felt any rage during this period. Eventually he talked to me, and we had a good conversation, and he served me, and when I came back through there, we remained that way. But on another occasion, in the same place real late at night, early in the morning, the same thing took place and this time it was an older man who just cussed and raged at me, and nothing I said ever broke him away from that so that he could talk rationally and we could talk, you know, but here again I didn't feel any rage. In fact, I laughed at him quietly because he was real white-haired, not that strong, but the kinds of things he said to me were not (muffled), about what he would do to me. So, here again, (muffled). (muffled) in Augusta, Georgia, I remember a real redneck looking man, big, stood with his foot on the bumper of the car, cussing me up and down and threatening me with murder and death (muffled). And, I started talking back to him. You know, every time I went by he'd say something to me, but here again, I didn't feel any rage or fear either.

David Yellin: Were you alone indeed?

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

David Yellin: The two of you alone?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes. There was no one there. This wasn't about, that may have been '59.

Joan Beifuss: Who do you reckon this is? Were you thinking (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I was then, even then I was (muffled). I was even then speaking for SCLC at various staff retreats and everything (muffled).

Joan Beifuss: Would that make you kind of a liaison man with SCLC?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, uh huh. I spoke on (muffled).

David Yellin: All right, let's...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I spoke at my first national convention for SCLC in February of 1950...

Joan Beifuss: Where was that?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It was in either Richmond, Virginia, or -- it was Richmond, Virginia.

(muffled)

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That same winter, Martin King and Ralph Abernathy and I were a team in a number of workshops on nonviolence in South Carolina.

David Yellin: This is '58.

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

David Yellin: Now, if I can interrupt here a second. SCLC was founded when?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: In about November of 1957.

David Yellin: Now, I have heard that the idea for SCLC was instigated in Memphis. Is this true?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No.

David Yellin: There was a meeting with, was Bayard Rustin involved in?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Bayard Rustin was involved when they founded SCLC, as of course was Martin King and it was then, I think the initial meeting was in Montgomery, and in November of '57 meeting in Atlanta at the time of the bombing of Martin's home in Montgomery in fact.

David Yellin: He was away.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, at the bombing of Ralph's home they were in Atlanta for a meeting.

David Yellin: To organize.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, meetings of people from small (muffled), resolving

the organizing of SCLC, and they rushed back to Montgomery when, as I recall, when Ralph's home was bombed.

David Yellin: Now we have you a secretary for the organization.

Joan Beifuss: So you were seeing Dr. King frequently through that.

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

David Yellin: Are we going to be able to get you to Vanderbilt?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, let's see. What else was very important I remember. There were so many things that were going on those days. We did -- I think I did my first workshop in Memphis in those days, (muffled).

Joan Beifuss: (muffled) NAACP.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, as I recall, very few of us came. We opened at LeMoyne in the gym, and the evening meetings were at the Second Congregational Church.

Joan Beifuss: (muffled) church.

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

Joan Beifuss: Were you working for the church you said?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, we were working through a couple of people from LeMoyne as I recall.

David Yellin: Just, do you remember who they were?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I think, of course John Nichols' church, but I think it was Peter Cooper was there, and who else? I have forgotten now.

David Yellin: And again, just for the record, Peter Cooper, we spoke to him didn't we?

Joan Beifuss: Is that the same Peter Cooper?

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

David Yellin: Yeah, that's the white...

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

David Yellin: Historian, yeah. Now, under whose auspices were doing this?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, (muffled) FOR. I was being paid by FOR, and of course part of the things that we did was to do workshops on...

Joan Beifuss: When did SNCC start?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: (muffled) since 1960.

Joan Beifuss: So before that?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, before that yeah.

David Yellin: So, is this your first time into Memphis?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah. I was through here by that time, but that was the first time I stopped. Um, let me see. We did various kinds of workshops. We went into situations with students to try to help them, you know, counsel with them, particularly the high school students. We counseled them on ways of defending themselves against (muffled).

David Yellin: Could we then, perhaps this might be all we would require of you, could you give us a little summary of what you did in these workshops, and the kind of thing that you...?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, generally the workshops were we -- in the workshops we generally talked about the history of the whole satyagraha approach, and the historical analysis of it. Giving illustrations on different periods of history, stretching usually way back, and then...

David Yellin: Way back to when?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, to things like the time when Pilot desecrated the temple and 4000 Jews buried there next to him when he wouldn't get out, and told them you can kill all of us. You know, some thousands of Jews surrounded him, and Pilot put the troops there when he first entered Jerusalem to become the, what's the term, Rome consulate (muffled). I think that's what it was.

David Yellin: (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Of course the Sanhedrin then led a civil disobedience against him. We use things like that, and we use the Hungarian efforts in the 18th century, the 19th century against the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The John Huss movement that took on at various forms of creative satyagraha forces, and of course South Africa, India, the experiences of CORE in the United States in the '40s, religious liberty efforts, and (muffled). We try to give a historical basis of it. So, we try to point out that it wasn't something new, and it wasn't something that was foreign to the

Americans. But, that really it's possibility for social change, for establishing justice hadn't been really tapped or studied or explored. Of course then we also used Montgomery as an illustration of it. Then, generally we'd talk about the psychological, theological sources for satyagraha, love, the inner freedom that helped (muffled).

David Yellin: How many sessions did you have, and how long did they last?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, they varied. They varied from two days to as long as four or five days.

David Yellin: Now when you say two days, complete days?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, two complete days, so yeah. Now, some of the typical ones that we tried to set up would generally run something like, we would begin them generally say, maybe 10:00 in the morning, have two mass meetings, two nights, have sessions in the morning and afternoon, and mass meetings at night. And the next morning and the next afternoon and that night, and then conclude meeting the next morning.

Joan Beifuss: Now, (muffled), do this almost on a theoretical level? (muffled) moving in Memphis.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, well they were always, they were all chiefly almost always on a theoretical basis. They were trying to introduce people.

Joan Beifuss: So you weren't directly going in as later where something was happening, training your people.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, this is correct. It was trying to introduce people to the meaning of Montgomery, to what this meant in terms of trying (muffled).

David Yellin: And these were young people.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: All kinds of people, young and old, preachers. Many ministers came and sat in on this.

Joan Beifuss: Get down (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh no, this (muffled) stuff is a later addition of SNCC, and it's an addition, which I never accepted. I never agreed to that. In fact, I used to resist this (muffled) when it began to develop around (muffled).

David Yellin: Did you personally go for any kind of defense mechanism?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes, but not that kind of thing. Of course, I have always, I was always, I have always been an athlete, and of course in India I was a coach.

Therefore, I knew that if I received a blow, I wouldn't want to be laying on the ground curled up, because you could be severely injured that way. There's not very much you can do to protect yourself that way, because people can bend over you and strike at will, or they can use their feet on you, or clubs. When you're standing up -- this is one of the reasons why when police use clubs, it's remarkable how little fatal injuries, few fatal injuries going on, because if a man pulls his club out, you see if he pulls it down and you're standing up here, he can't do the force as if you're over here or down here you see. He can't really smash you with the force that he can if you're standing with your height, and he's standing with his height, he can't really muster all of his might on you. So this is one reason some of these sprees around the country there's not more fatal injuries than what there have been.

David Yellin: So one of the tools of nonviolence would be a pogo stick?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, that's possible.

David Yellin: Get higher, you see?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, of course my whole point though has always been that the self defense mechanism is not one of covering up, or hiding. But, my own thesis has been to try to face the opponent. It is my contention it is much more difficult for the average human being to do evil against you if he is looking at you in your face and in your eyes.

David Yellin: And also, the very fact that you're cowering...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Cowering edges it on, because usually even the sadistic person, the criminologists tell us that the man who, the criminal who is extremely violent, or other (muffled), specifically the man who is a sexual assaulter -- generally it's not the sex that he's after as it is the submission and the conquest of the victim. So that the victim who cringes in fear, and hysteria, is really the victim he needs. The victim who resists, even if that resistance is only a fierce screaming, upsets his (muffled). It strikes fear in him because what he really has to have in terms of his own inner hungers, is the sense of domination and conquest. Um, and when he gets the resistance, then -- and I know from example of illustrations of women who have talked men out of raping them. And there are probably more of these than what anyone knows about, but I know of, for example, a wife of a good friend of mine in Central Park in New York.

David Yellin: Of course, it is probably also the theory of the British, and that's where, just -- forming, just, it sort of does something to them.

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

David Yellin: You just standing up there and forming (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, you read the papers around Memphis and every, all

the time incidents of robberies, efforts at robbery attempts go awry because of, essentially, satyagraha resistance. You know, most of the time if a gun someone gets hurt, and usually it's the wimpy victim.

David Yellin: Yes.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I mean, if you just watch the papers on this, but very frequently you get incidences in our own Memphis papers of a guy won't be robbed, talks the robber out of it. So I mean, that's defense as far as I'm concerned. It's self-defense. You know, I'm not opposed to self defense at all, but I maintain you see, I have always maintained that when people talk about self-defense, they ignore the fact that we have built-in mechanisms by which we defend ourselves.

David Yellin: So that the thing that you've taught...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: And what you're really talking about is not violence, but developing that form that best preserves one's life.

David Yellin: I see, so that you did not rule out any physical...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, I have never.

David Yellin: That would be possible.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I remember a situation once in Detroit where a friend of mine who had been coming through a couple times, was trying to persuade a barber shop in a Greyhound bus station in fact, to serve everyone who came through. And, so I went down in (muffled) '57. I went to test it. It was in the summer of '57 when I worked in Detroit. So I went to test it and I sat for a time, and then a relatively small man came in, and very angry. He was the barber, the owner apparently, the manager. And after some angry shots, he just simply attacked me, and dragged me out. Well, afterwards I said to myself, you know another form of resistance might have been to, rather than sit there and let him do it, might have been simply to run around the chairs and stay of his way and not let him touch you. Since, you know since you knew that you could move pretty fast, and chances are he couldn't because he was kind of heavysset.

David Yellin: But in other words now you let him forcibly, but you did not resist?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: (muffled)Not in that respect, yeah. I let him forcibly reject me. So, I said, you know, afterwards as I was analyzing it, said you know it might have been real funny if you had just gotten up and moved around the chairs and stayed out of his reach and not let him touch you and laughed at him as you were doing it. So I mean -- so we talked. You know this was another topic incidentally in these workshops. We talked also about how the nonviolent approach in terms of how you would proceed to get involved, the steps towards developing action.

David Yellin: Now, this may be a good point in which to pursue this a little further -- the idea of nonviolent way of handling it, and the resistance, the nonviolent resistance, whatever you would call it. I want to be real clear -- you did not indicate that all you would do would be just let them do whatever they had to do.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, of course not.

David Yellin: Well, could you explain how you handle this? Well, what did you say to people?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, in a great variety of ways. Of course in the first instances of course we tried to show many illustrations of resistance that were satyagraha forms of resistance, both personal, as well as social. I mean both in terms of a single person, but many people. We showed how Montgomery was a resistance movement. It was a resistance to segregation, to the whole historic processes.

David Yellin: So that Mrs. Parks really was resistant. She didn't move.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: We use individual cases. For example, by this time I had been in and out of Little Rock, and the nine Negro kids who were at Central High School in Little Rock were terribly frustrated, because they were told by their parents and by the NAACP, Daisy Bates, you know. You sort of sit still, you don't do anything. You turn the other cheek. That means that you just take it. While these kids were being -- the efforts were being made to brutalize them, because the white sitting on the council, and joined forces with a small rabid group of white students in that school, and they were committed to, with violence, get these kids out of that school. So they were taking everything. They were being bombed, which was throwing, wrapping something hard in a piece of paper or something and throwing it. They were being beaten in gym classes. They were being mobbed by a charge of boys and jammed into their lockers. They were being squirted with ink and water.

Joan Beifuss: This is all once they get into the school?

David Yellin: Yeah.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I mean this was going on all around. And when they would talk to the teachers about it, the teachers were all scared to death because the superintendent was ambivalent. So discipline was breaking down. Well of course, I will never forget the joy with which the parents of these kids met and greeted me in Little Rock. We were -- one parent (muffled) was saying, you know where have you been, why has it taken you this long to get here. Because these kids you know they were just being twisted and torn so that -- I remember sitting in Daisy Bates's living room the first time and meeting with all of them, simply trying to show them that for them to continue this process could be to their detriment in terms of their emotional and spiritual health, as well as their physical. And that really, in actual fact, nonviolence did not mean doing nothing. It meant trying to find superior skills in resisting. So...

David Yellin: Not to provoke the person, but somehow by a show of some kind of strength...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Ability, and -- so for example the most dramatic form of this was that we -- I asked them at one point, you know, what's the worst thing that happens to you? The girls all said "bombing." This, taking a stone or something and wrapping it in paper and...

David Yellin: Throwing it...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Throwing it at them. So, you know, after they described it and telling me how it hurt, I said to them, well what do you think would happen, I said if one time when some fellow threw a bomb at you, you went and picked it up and gave it back them and maybe smiled at them? And I'll never forget Carlotta Walls, who was a very attractive, intelligent girl, when I asked this question, her mouth just -- boom, like that, and she could hardly speak and she said yes, that would be something. Almost the very next day she tried that, and it happened in English class as I remember, and it always happened in that class, too, and this bomb went past her shoulder and hit against the wall and fell and she went up to the front and picked it up, and carried it back, shaking to the fellow who threw it back in the back, and smiled. And he turned red, and the kids around him started laughing at him, but the next morning when she walked in that class he greeted her with a smile, and to their knowledge he was never again involved in any incident against any of them, because they tried to keep a record, every youngster who did anything to them, every incident, they tried to keep this kind of count.

David Yellin: He was probably just looking (muffled).

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

David Yellin: Yeah. I've got ask you -- do you know Dave (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Dave who?

David Yellin: Reverend Dave (muffled) you would even know him (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: (muffled). Then she did something else. A girl who did a lot of cussing at her, she noticed that this girl -- you know, putting now her mind, putting her energies to work on how do we resist this business, you know -- a white girl who was very shrill in her enunciations and shovings, and cussings, and she noticed that this girl had a hard time in a subject, I have forgotten what subject. Carla was very smart, she got, pulled down A's and B's always. So one day when a paper was handed back, she found out that this girl got a D or something like that. And, in the hall later, she approached the girl and said, you know, would you want me to help you? And this girl accepted because she knew Carla got good grades in that class, and they became fast friends.

David Yellin: Hmm, kind of amazing.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah. I mean there are a lot of illustrations like this out of that period, so we used illustrations like these constantly to show resistance. Of course other ways we did it, too. You see various people have been in mobs. John Wesley, for an example was often dragged through by mobs, and there are a number of illustrations out of his life where he turned back mobs.

David Yellin: I am trying to get your rhetoric of how you handled this -- was it something such as, well these people -- like if you handle a sick child, or is that how they would? I mean how did you (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, see one of the ways, one of the things we constantly talk about is we talk about -- well, Richard Greg (muffled) wrote the book, *The Power of Nonviolence*, calls nonviolence moral jujitsu.

David Yellin: Yes.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: And the term jujitsu of course, the Japanese, it's the art of the superior way. So, we try to stress again and again that when we talk about satyagraha, or nonviolent resistance, we are talking about men putting their wits, their minds, their spirits to work at developing superior ways of overcoming enmity and the enemy. And of course one of the key things that I constantly use, and still do, is that this is really an area where people -- where we really don't know that much about it, but where we have to try to experiment, like a scientist in a laboratory. And you have to be committed to it, and then you have to go in and try to learn by -- in the laboratory, trying. You have successes and failures, frustrations, but by persistent experimentation and effort you begin to see some possibilities, and that this is very crucial. So that -- of course that's a very important discussion because in the American scene, well not just in the American scene, but certainly I think the American scene probably more than other places, we interpret the will to life as the survival of the fittest, and we equate the fittest also in terms of force, brute force and physical. We do not recognize the extent to which the Darwinian thesis of the survival of the fittest was related to adaptation to the environment, and the understanding and adjustments that were necessary to (muffled). The dinosaur went out of existence, even though it was the most powerful creature that walked the earth at one time, because it did not have the ability to adapt to the environment. So, we interpret this in terms of boom-boom, where in reality it really doesn't mean that at all, it means the capacity of life to adapt and to adjust, and bounce and respond, and of course one of the things that I have often referred to (muffled) again is the whole resiliency of women. The way in which, while we talk about the males being the stronger sex, there is a whole lot of evidence that women in quieter ways gain a fair amount of power. Would you agree with that?

David Yellin: Now, I think on that note -- the note of sex, religion, and politics...

END OF RECORDING