

ABSTRACT

MCDUFFIE, SCOTT PATTERSON. James Lawson: Leading Architect and Educator of Nonviolence and Nonviolent Direct Action Protest Strategies During the Student Sit-in Movement of 1960. (Under the direction of Walter Jackson.)

James Morris Lawson, Jr. grew up in Massillion, Ohio, in a loving Christian home. He became a pacifist at an early age after a memorable encounter with racism. As he matured, he studied nonviolence from the perspectives of Jesus Christ and the great Indian revolutionary, Mohandas Gandhi. After meeting the famous Christian pacifist, A. J. Muste, Lawson became a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and a conscientious objector to war. He spent fourteen months in a federal prison after refusing to be drafted into the U.S. military.

After prison, Lawson worked in India as a missionary and learned nonviolent direct action strategies from Gandhi's followers. Inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Lawson left India and returned to America in 1956 to join the struggle to end racial segregation in America.

That same year, Lawson met Martin Luther King, Jr. and upon King's request, moved to the South to teach nonviolence. Lawson eventually settled in Nashville, Tennessee, to teach nonviolence to a group of young men and women who would become some of the most important "leaders" in the American Civil Rights Movement.

James Lawson made a significant contribution to the student sit-in movement of 1960 by teaching a new idea—nonviolent direct action—to an elite group of student activists. However, his influence has been ignored by most histories of the movement. The following essay brings this elusive figure to the forefront and highlights his impact on the first wave of student activists who spearheaded the nonviolent campaign to overturn segregation.

James Lawson: Leading Architect and Educator of Nonviolence and
Nonviolent Direct Action Protest Strategies
During the Student Sit-in Movement of 1960

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INTRODUCTION: “For whatever reason, from early on I knew I was somebody.”

It is ironic that a violent reaction to racism led the Rev. James Morris Lawson Jr. to commit himself to a life of love and nonviolence, but it is nonetheless true.

James Lawson was born on September 22, 1928 into a loving Christian family. His parents, Philane and James Sr., strongly believed in God’s universal love of Man. As a child, Lawson learned by his parents’ example to love God and others regardless of race or sex. They taught him to treat others with dignity and respect. Lawson explained to Tom McAnally from *News Desk* that racial slurs and other insults weren’t allowed in his home because “they were not the language of love and respect.” His parents and their friends did not participate in “name calling” and other forms of bigotry. “Words designating any kind of person, such words as curse words,” he continued, “I never heard as a child in my own home . . . in my congregation . . . even in my own school.”¹

When Lawson was four, his family moved from Uniontown, Pennsylvania to Massillon, Ohio after his father accepted a job there. Massillon, like many northern towns in the 1930's, practiced neighborhood segregation: whites lived in one part of town and blacks in another. In Massillon, Lawson learned that the color of his skin bothered some whites. In *The Wounds We Hide*, Lawson explained that through the thick blanket of love inside his home he could see the specter of hate that walked the streets outside. “Ours was a home full of love,” he recalled, “yet outside our door, in the parks and schools, I discovered an unexplained hostility based on the fact that I was a Black boy in America. Strangers called me insulting terms that were not allowed in our home. As young as four years old, I already

¹Tom McAnally. “Profile: James Lawson, civil rights advocate.” [Worldwide Faith News Archives](http://www.wfn.org/2003/02/msg00131.html). 11 February 2003. <[Http://www.wfn.org/2003/02/msg00131.html](http://www.wfn.org/2003/02/msg00131.html)> (11 February 2003) .

had a deep sense that such language must be countered with my fists and my rage.”²

Through the misdeeds of others Lawson learned to combat intolerance with the weapons of the enemy: hatred and violence.

A few years later, his desire to hit back was washed away by what he describes as “one of the most pivotal experiences” of his life. In an interview with Juan Williams entitled, *American Gandhi*, Lawson tells the story of how by fighting racism with his fists, he learned, instead, to fight hatred and injustice with his heart.³ One spring day, when he was 10 or 11 years old, his mother asked him to run an errand for her in town. On his way home, a small white child yelled, “Nigger!” at him from a parked car. Lawson’s parents taught him to love others, but his father also encouraged him to stand up for himself. So when the boy insulted him, he walked straight over to the car and smacked the child in the face as hard as he could. Proud of what he had done, young Lawson ran home to tell his mother what had happened. Her response changed his life forever. Displeased, she turned from her cooking and quietly asked, “Jimmy, what good did that do?” He had no answer. She continued, explaining to him that his actions hadn’t really changed anything. “We all love you,” she said, “and God loves you, and we believe in you and how good and intelligent you are.” She told him the boy’s insult was “empty,” and that the word, “nigger,” and other words of hate are, “Just ignorant words from an ignorant child.”⁴ Lawson recalled, “She proceeded to tell

²James M. Lawson, Jr., “The Wounds We Hide.” [The Other Side Online](http://theotherside.org/archive/mar-apr03/lawson.html). March-April 2003. <<http://theotherside.org/archive/mar-apr03/lawson.html>> (March-April 2003)

³ Juan Williams, [My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience](#). (New York: Sterling Publishing Co. 2004), 48-49.

⁴David Halberstam, [The Children](#) (New York: Random House Publishing Co. 1998) , 31.

me about who I was to remind me of the family and the church and the community and the love of my father and mother. She reasserted that Jesus is love and God is love.” Finally, she told him, “There must be a better way.” Lawson calls the experience a “sanctification,” or a “conversion of spirit.” He claims he heard a voice inside himself say, “You will never again use your fists in anger. You will never strike back in that fashion when you get insulted in some way.”⁵

With his mother’s wisdom echoing in his heart, Lawson decided that the best way to fight back was the way of the love of Jesus Christ. In high school, he began to tell others that he planned to follow Jesus. He decided to he wanted to grow up to be a minister, like his father. Although he was no pacifist,⁶ Lawson’s father was an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion pastor and politically active man. James Sr. used the influence his occupation afforded him within the black community to organize chapters of both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)⁷ and the Urban League in every town the family moved to. “My parents,” Lawson claims, “were not willing to take the prejudice and the fears and the segregations [sic] they had. So as a consequence, my father organized (at) every place he pastored in New York and Pennsylvania. . . either an Urban

⁵ Williams, 48-49.

⁶Taylor Branch, Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63. (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc. 1988), 204. James Lawson Sr believed in self-defense and wore a .38 caliber handgun on his hip as a precaution against white harassment.

⁷From its founding in May 1910, the NAACP has focused on securing civil rights for African Americans. John Haynes Holmes, one of the group’s founding members, urged clergymen to speak up for black enfranchisement. Holmes declared that “any man who is silent in the face of oppression is himself a partner to the crime which is being committed” and that to do “the work of God. . .we must lift up our voices and spare not.” John Haynes Holmes, The Disfranchisement of Negroes. (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1910) , 4, 16.

League or an NAACP.”⁸ James Sr.’s affiliation with these early civil rights organizations led young Lawson to understand the role of the minister to be twofold. As minister, he would have to be a spiritual *and* a social leader. Lawson claims that his parents’ activism caused him to understand very early that the “essential responsibility” of his life was to “resist the evil;” to fight racial oppression.

It seems that even as a teenager James Lawson Jr. was ready for civic responsibility; he organized his first “sit-in” when he was only sixteen years old. Accompanied by a high school classmate, he attempted to order a hamburger from a “white only” lunch-counter in Massillon. In protest of the unjust, racist policy, James and his friend sat down at the counter and demanded service. In the end, the restaurant agreed to serve the two young activists. However, the owner made it clear to Lawson and his accomplice that they should never try it again.⁹

Fortunately for America, the nameless merchant’s warning would go unheeded, for James Lawson had already begun what would become a lifelong battle with legal and cultural intolerance. During his fight, he has faced countless pitfalls: prison, expulsion, threats of violence. His journey to find a “better way” has made him many important friends, and enemies. However, through it all, he has remained steadfast. In an interview with Juan Williams, Lawson humbly admitted, “For whatever reason, from early on I knew I was somebody.”¹⁰ James Lawson is somebody, a big somebody.

⁸Tom McAnally, “Profile: James Lawson, civil rights advocate.” Worldwide Faith News Archives. 11 February 2003. <[Http://www.wfn.org/2003/02/msg00131.html](http://www.wfn.org/2003/02/msg00131.html)> (11 February 2003) .

⁹Halberstam, 36.

¹⁰Williams, 48.

Unfortunately for students of American history, James Lawson's selfless contribution to the 1960's Civil Rights Movement has been largely ignored and unappreciated. His name does not even appear in many early histories of the movement. He has not written an autobiography, and no one has written a significant biography of his life and work. Although he has recently emerged in a few accounts of the 1960's student sit-in movement, to this date, James Lawson remains unknown to most Americans. His historical obscurity is unfortunate because Lawson grew up to become one of the most important teachers of nonviolence during the student sit-in movement of 1960.

CHAPTER 1: Learning to be Nonviolent.

Jesus and Gandhi

Lawson's morals, and his parents' morals, were forged by their faith in Jesus Christ. So like many other Christians, they look to the Bible for guidance when confronted with life's problems. When James hit the unknown boy and bragged about it, his mother explained to him that he was wrong because hate is wrong. Their God is a god of love and forgiveness. His parents taught him to follow Jesus. Therefore, when Lawson decided that it was morally wrong for Blacks to live as "second-class citizens" in America, he looked to the life of Jesus for answers to the social problems he and other blacks were facing.

Although all four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—chronicle the life and death of Jesus Christ, the Book of Matthew reveals the most about Jesus's pacifist stance. As in the other Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as a benevolent leader and teacher who traveled around healing the sick and ministering to social outcasts. However, the Book of Matthew stands out because Matthew documented many instances of Jesus teaching peace and tolerance to his disciples and to crowds of people. In the fifth chapter, Matthew gives an account of Jesus preaching peace to a crowd who had gathered as a result of his miracles. Jesus said:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,

for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers,

for they will be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”¹¹

Many Christians believe that those who are “Blessed,” are graced by God to have good things happen to them in this life and after death. In the Book of Matthew, Jesus teaches that if one wants to receive God’s blessings, he needs to “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” and to be “merciful.” Lawson already had a “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” It led him to his first sit-in at sixteen years old. Lawson knew to be merciful, for his mother had taught him to forgive and not to retaliate with violence when provoked. Lawson decided in high school to follow Jesus, the Son of God. In the Book of Matthew, Jesus calls the “peacemakers,” the “sons of God.” In order to live his life in Christ’s footsteps, Lawson would struggle to become a peacemaker.

Before entering college at Baldwin-Wallace, Lawson began reading about Mahatma Gandhi, a great man who spearheaded a successful nonviolent revolution in India. The “Negro Press” admired Gandhi and wrote about him often. His nonviolent campaign for Indian independence gave many African Americans hope that social change was possible without violent revolution. In *A Force More Powerful*, Lawson explained that while he was growing up his home always had a copy of the Cleveland Call-In Post or the Pittsburgh Courier in it at all times. “That’s when I first began to really come to know about Mahatma Gandhi,” he explained. When Lawson started college, he studied speeches and books by Gandhi including his autobiography entitled, *The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, to

¹¹Matt. 5.3-10 New International Version.

further his understanding of the man and his mission.¹²

Lawson's attraction to Gandhi is not unusual, because although he was not a Christian, Gandhi was Christlike in many ways. Jesus Christ was a religious pacifist who taught others that it was morally superior to "turn the other cheek" when attacked. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."¹³ In college, Lawson began to understand what Christ meant. "It was a form of resistance," Lawson urged. "It was a call to find a better way to fight back."¹⁴ Gandhi taught *satyagraha*, a form of nonviolent resistance that also rejected physical retaliation. *Satyagraha* is composed of two Sanskrit words: *satyam*, truth and *aagrahah*, determination or insistence. Loosely translated, it means "soul force." Gandhi, like many other Hindus, believed it was wrong to harm Man or animal. As a result, Gandhi taught *satyagraha*, a spiritual form of self-defense that empowers the victim, not the aggressor. He wrote:

It [*satyagraha*] uncovers concealed motives and reveals the truth.

It puts the best possible interpretation

on the opponent's intentions and thereby

gives him another chance to discard baser impulses.

If he fails to do so,

his victims see more clearly and feel more intensely,

¹²James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

¹³Matt. 5.38-39 New International Version.

¹⁴Williams, 49.

while outsiders realize who is wrong.¹⁵

Like “turning the other cheek,” *satyagraha* gives the aggressor “another chance to discard baser impulses;” another chance to make peace. It allows neutral witnesses a second chance to judge who is morally right. *Satyagraha*, translated as insistence of truth, suggests that the one who practices it demands that the truth should be known to all. Through their ability to remain nonviolent, they are insisting that they believe that they are right and that they willing to endure physical pain to reveal the truth to others. Gandhi said, “Non-violence is the greatest force man has been endowed with. Truth is the only goal he has. For God is none other than Truth. But Truth cannot be, never will be reached except through non-violence.”¹⁶

Gandhi insisted that *satyagraha* differed from *passive resistance* because those who practiced *satyagraha* were not weak or passive, but strong and assertive individuals who bravely battled injustice without resorting to violence. In *The Theory and Practice of Satyagraha*, Gandhi professed, “It is totally untrue to say that it is a force to be used by the weak so long as they are not capable of meeting violence with violence. This superstition arises from the incompleteness of the English expression, *passive resistance*. It is impossible for those who consider themselves to be weak to apply this force.” For Gandhi claimed that, “Only those who realize that there is something in man which is superior to the brute nature in him and that the latter always yields to it, can effectively be Satyagrahis.”¹⁷ In other

¹⁵Mahatmas K. Gandhi, An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957.) , 100.

¹⁶Mohandas K. Gandhi, “Peace is the Way,” The World Tomorrow 9 (October 1926) 143.

¹⁷Mohandas K. Gandhi, Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha). (New York: Schocken Books, 1951.) , 34-35.

words, to effectively practice Gandhian nonviolence, or *satyagraha*, one has to truly believe in mankind's natural goodness. According to Gandhi, a Satyagrahi not only refuses the "baser impulse" of physical retaliation, he or she does so because of a moral obligation to that "something" in man that is "superior to the brute nature in him." Therefore, *satyagraha* is more than a political tactic—it is form of active nonviolence that rejects violence out of love for all humanity and its inherent morality. Gandhi believed, "A Satyagrahi obeys the laws of society intelligently and of his own free will, because he considers it to be his sacred duty to do so."¹⁸

Gandhi taught *satyagraha* because he believed that without love and peace, the world was doomed to chaos, brutality, and war. The Indian independence movement began in the wake of World War I, a global war characterized by violent deaths from aerial assaults, poison gas attacks, and machine guns. The calm at the end of the storm allowed Gandhi and other Indian protesters the opportunity to rebel against the British who were left punch-drunk by the war. But, their success was not merely a matter of good timing. Many believe that their use of *satyagraha*, of soul force, largely contributed to their victory over the British. For, theirs was a moral victory. Gandhi wrote, "Non-violence is the greatest force man has been endowed with. . . He has no doubt many other gifts. But if they do not subserve the main purpose—the development of the spirit of non-violence—they but drag him down lower than the brute, a status from which he has only just emerged."¹⁹ In WWI, Man used his gifts of science and technology to build weapons of warfare that were more destructive than any in

¹⁸Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, 470.

¹⁹Gandhi, "Peace is the Way," 143.

all human history. Gandhi taught that if Man did not use his talents to develop the “spirit of non-violence” within himself, his pride, ambition, and ego would drive him to become a “brute;” to use violence to achieve his wants.

Gandhi’s use of *satyagraha* as a protest method found success in India because it conformed to the faiths of millions of Indian Hindus.²⁰ Many Hindu sects believe in reincarnation, or the soul’s ability to be reborn into another body after death. Those who believe in reincarnation often take into account that everyone they meet could have been their father, mother, sister, brother, or friend in a previous life. With this in mind, many believe resist violence in order to avoid the possibility of striking ancestors or friends who have passed on to another life. Hinduism’s dominance in India allowed Gandhi to sell the idea that violence against the English was wrong and that nonviolent organized resistance was the answer to their plight.

Gandhi and his followers understood that independence for their people would come only after the nonviolent movement in India grew too large for the British to control. “The cry for peace will be a cry in the wilderness,” Gandhi wrote, “so long as the spirit of non-violence does not dominate millions of men and women.”²¹ As Gandhi’s influence spread throughout the country, millions of Indian men and women began to follow his teachings. Their unified voice cried out to the British, “We will not be ruled!”

However, Gandhi and the peace protesters who idolized him, attributed the success of the Indian revolution to the power of love, the soul force behind *satyagraha*. Gandhian

²⁰Hinduism is a catch-all term for the religions in India that grew out of the Vedic culture. Although many share the same canons and gods, there are many different types of “Hindus” in India.

²¹Gandhi, “Peace is the Way,” 143.

nonviolence was more than a mere political tactic. It was a practical model for achieving peace through nonviolent direct action based on the philosophical or spiritual assumption of the power of love over hate; good over evil. Gandhi wanted people to love one another unconditionally. He taught his followers that the key to freedom was to have true, all-encompassing love in their hearts. “I observe,” he wrote, “in the limited field in which I find myself, that unless I can reach the hearts of men and women, I am able to do nothing. I observe further that so long as the spirit of hate persists in some shape or other, it is impossible to establish peace or to gain our freedom by peaceful effort. We cannot love one another, if we hate Englishmen. . . We must either let the law of love rule us through and through or not at all. Love amongst ourselves based on hatred of others breaks down under the slightest pressure. The fact is, such love is never real love. It is an armed peace.”²²

Like Christ, Gandhi instructed his followers to love their enemy. For it is harder to remain nonviolent if one’s heart is full of hate and anger. In time, the negativity can manifest itself in violence. But true love for one’s enemy gives the victim of violence the spiritual strength to resist the natural impulse to hit back. Gandhi taught, “That which distinguishes man from all other animals is his capacity to be non-violent.” In order to be treated like human beings, he argued that one must first act like a human being. In other words, if the Indian protesters wanted the English to grant them their independence, they must first prove to their colonizers that Indians deserved the same rights they enjoyed.

It is also important to note that both Christ and Gandhi were religious reformers who reached out to the poor, the sick, and to social outcasts. Christ healed lepers, who in his

²²Gandhi, “Peace is the Way,” 143.

time, were largely banished and feared. He befriended prostitutes. He taught the poor, “sinful” masses who he believed needed his guidance the most. “Is it not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick,” Jesus said.²³ He took his mission to the men, women, and children who were abandoned by the temple elders. Jesus overturned the moneychangers’ tables in direct opposition to what he believed was a desecration of His father’s temple.²⁴ Gandhi also rejected the religious mainstream when he thought they were acting unjustly. He rebelled against India’s oppressive caste system by leading “untouchables” by the hand into temples where they had been excluded. Lawson, who wanted to follow Christ, realized that what Gandhi had been doing and saying had been happening to him on a personal level.²⁵ Gandhi battled social and religious injustices with the weapons of nonviolence. He stood up for himself and others without resorting to barbarism. Lawson had been looking for a “better way” to fight social injustices—racism and segregation—and now he had found it. For Lawson, *satyagraha* was the answer. He believed the “peace churches” and Christian pacifists were too passive. In the late 1940’s, Lawson began to prefer the Gandhian term *satyagraha* because it had a “militant aggressiveness about looking at life and going forward and going towards it.”²⁶ Like Christ and Gandhi before him, Lawson wanted to teach others how love and nonviolence can unlock the Kingdom of Heaven on earth; “The Beloved Community.”

²³Matt. 9.12 New International Version.

²⁴Matt. 21.12 New International Version.

²⁵Williams, 49.

²⁶James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

A. J. Muste and the Fellowship of Reconciliation

In 1948, during his first year at Baldwin-Wallace College, Lawson joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation, or FOR. FOR is a Christian pacifist organization co-founded by A. J. Muste, one of the most influential Christian activists during the 1940's and 50's. Muste became an important mentor to Lawson after visiting Baldwin-Wallace to speak. In Peace Agitator: The Story of A. J. Muste, Nat Hentoff claimed that Muste was “among the first to awaken [Lawson’s] interest in nonviolence.” “He handled a violent heckler easily and gently,” Lawson explained to Hentoff, “and besides, he made excellent sense.”²⁷ Lawson remembers meeting Muste as another “sanctifying moment” of his life. “He came to lecture on the campus,” Lawson recalls. “It was a sanctifying moment for my life because then I realized there was a Christian history, a long tradition, of some people (though not oftentimes the hierarchy and the theologians, and often not the pastors preaching and teaching it), but that there was based on the life of Jesus that edge of people who insisted that love was . . . all embracing and all compelling, that therefore in the spirit of love and the spirit of Jesus one could not resist evil by imitating the evil, but by seeking to overcome the evil with good.”²⁸ The Fellowship of Reconciliation gave Lawson a home amongst friends who shared his Christian world view. But, perhaps more important than that FOR gave Lawson another role model, A. J. Muste.

²⁷Nat Hentoff, Peace Agitator: The Story of A.J. Muste. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963), 110.

²⁸ From “Rev. James Lawson,” African-American News and Issues. 14 January 2004, <<http://www.afamnews.com/html/2004-01-14/histo.htm>> (14 January 2004) .

In *Not by Might*, Muste argued that if several million Americans stood in united opposition to war, the United States would have to make the “radical adaptation” to renounce war-making as a practice. “They [the US government] will not be stopped and deprived of their diabolical power to do evil,” he argued, “until men stop obeying them, say a final no to them. We need above all else a few million conscientious objectors who will not bow to the knee of Caesar, to the modern Anti-Christ. . . . It is when that tiny minority becomes too big to be ignored that the political and military leaders . . . will know they have indeed a mandate to abandon war, [and] that they must find an alternative.”²⁹ For Muste believed that government rested on the “consent, not the subjugation of the governed.”³⁰ Tacit consent to law and order *is* the glue that holds American society together, not some mass phobia of the policeman’s club. According to Muste, “every American knows how few the police are compared to the population and how ridiculous they make themselves when they try to enforce an unpopular law.”³¹ He insisted that several million strongly committed conscientious objectors would make it hard for the U.S. government to enforce the “unpopular law” of sending Americans to kill and die in war.

Muste based his radical argument on the idea that societies were held together by men and women conforming to the “human and social reality, i.e., to the moral law,” and not to secular laws invented by man.³² “The human being,” he wrote, “is a being of moral dignity

²⁹A. J. Muste, *Not by Might: Christianity, the Way to Human Decency*. (New York: Harper Publishing Co., 1947), 152, 135.

³⁰Muste, *Not by Might*, 101.

³¹Muste, *Not by Might*, 98.

³²Muste, *Not by Might*, 98.

and worth, and subject to the moral law.” And for Muste, “the command to obey the moral law [was]. . . ultimately the command to love.”³³ He wanted America to act as a “savior-nation,” paving the road to international peace by following the path of Christ’s love. As a devout Christian, Muste was a strong supporter of the power of love and its ability overcome evil. “Evil will not overcome evil,” he said. “Only by good, by love, can evil be overcome and the world redeemed.”³⁴ Like Gandhi, Muste believed in his heart that love would always triumph over evil.

Muste urged Americans, especially American Christians, to be “pioneers, leading mankind into the day of peace and brotherhood.”³⁵ Although Muste wanted all Americans to renounce war, he especially wanted Christians to hear his message and “take up the Cross” for peace. He lamented some Christians, “take up the sword because they feel that they can not stand by and see the weak and innocent struck down and that, if they were to do so, they would lose their moral integrity and violate the command of their Master as it comes to them.”³⁶ Muste confessed that some Christians understood war as an exception to the rule, and therefore were able to separate violent acts of warfare from their ethical position. But, in the (atomic) post-WWII world, Muste viewed war as no longer “acceptable on Christian principles.”³⁷ The phrase, “War must go,” echoed throughout *Not by Might*. He likened the

³³Muste, *Not by Might*, 94.

³⁴Muste, *Not by Might*, 87.

³⁵Muste, *Not by Might*, 21.

³⁶Muste, *Not by Might*, 80.

³⁷Muste was reacting to Reinhold Niebuhr’s support of Allied blockades of foodstuffs and obliteration bombing of civilian areas in Japan during WWII.

atomic bomb to Frankenstein's monster—an immoral threat to peaceful society that should never had been created. Muste argued that war must go because the next war will most likely be a nuclear war, and therefore more evil than any other war in history.³⁸ Based on this rational prediction, he concluded that Christians could no longer support what they believe to be “just” wars. “Violence and the struggle for power are indubitable facts,” he confessed, “but it is the contention of [*Not by Might*] that they are the great taproot of evil and must be radically dealt with, not accepted by Christian teachers as normative for Christian thought and practice.”³⁹ Muste reinforced this idea in an essay entitled, *Who is Now the Absolutist?* “If the Christian church does not make a total break with war as it is conducted in our time,” he wrote, “its whole message and mission will be corrupted with impossible ethical contradictions.”⁴⁰ Christ's mission was a mission of love and “turning the other cheek,” not of war and retribution. Muste worried that the “ethical contradiction” of Christian support of war could cause some to question the integrity of the Church and its teachings.

Lawson adopted A. J. Muste's stance on conscientious objection because he also believed war to be immoral and wrong. Jesus taught people to love their enemies and to forgive any trespasses. Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on

³⁸Muste, *Not by Might*, 159.

³⁹Muste, *Not by Might*, 109.

⁴⁰A. J. Muste, “Who is Now the Absolutist,” *Christian Century* (July-December 1947.): 1517.

the righteous and the unrighteous.”⁴¹ If Christians are supposed to love their enemies, then going overseas to kill them would be, as Muste claimed, an “ethical contradiction.”

All of Lawson’s mentors—Christ, Gandhi, and now A. J. Muste—felt the same way about the immorality of violence and war and the power of love. Lawson learned, through their words and actions, how nonviolence was the moral path to earthly and heavenly freedom. But Lawson’s philosophy of nonviolence was not merely a bi-product of their collective genius. In time, Lawson’s understanding of their views will allow him to construct a militant philosophy of nonviolence that was all his own.

In the spring of 1951, James Lawson refused the draft and went to prison. When Uncle Sam demanded that he participate in Korea’s Civil War, Lawson respectfully declined. In July 1950, during his third year at Baldwin-Wallace, he received his first draft notice. He sent it in, registering with the reservations that he did not believe in the draft, and that his Christian values prevented him from fighting. The U.S. government responded by sending him a second classification form. He refused to fill it out; to “bow to the knee of Caesar.” Unlike many other passionate war protesters of his day, Lawson refused to accept, or even try for, legal deferment. In The Children, David Halberstam explained why Lawson refused to “worm” his way out of prison. According to Halberstam, “He could have easily gotten a deferment as a student by continuing his graduate studies, he could have gotten a ministerial deferment, and he could have tried for a conscientious objector’s deferment.” However, Lawson refused all three options because he believed he had no “moral right” to take a deferment, especially a ministerial deferment. “For nothing outraged him more than the

⁴¹Matt. 5:43-45.

concept of ministerial deferment. To Lawson it was a moral and ethical sellout. As far as he was concerned, the government, by offering deferments to young ministers, was effectively buying off both them and their churches.”⁴² Lawson’s trail lasted three days. Despite the best efforts of FOR appointed attorneys, Lawson entered a federal prison in Ashland City, Kentucky on April 25, 1951 where his commitment to nonviolence would be put to the test.

In prison, Lawson had to make a difficult moral decision. He had to choose whether or not to defend himself when threatened with physical harm. In the relative safety of high school and college, nonviolence is a beautiful theory. But in prison, violence is a reality. Even today, inmates are subject to being beaten, raped, and even killed by other inmates (and guards) while serving their sentences. Sometimes, the violence is unprovoked. Lawson still remembers how his prison experience solidified his dedication to nonviolence. “I was frightened,” he admits. “I was threatened with gang rape. One night, I was so terrified I paced the floor of my cell, swinging a lightweight steel chair that I planned to use as a weapon. Then, somewhere in the early morning, I heard a voice: “Jim? What is this? What’s going on? Why are you afraid? You are not here by your own choice. I sent you here.”⁴³ Lawson felt the fear immediately drain out of his system. He claims it was replaced by “enormous confidence and peace.” He was never harmed. Later, he learned that a fellow inmate, ironically named Liberty, may have ensured his safety by telling everyone in the cell house to leave him alone. “He was a mugger from Washington, D.C.,” Lawson recalled, “but I treated him with dignity and respect.”⁴⁴ Lawson’s trust in God, and his kindness to

⁴²Halberstam, 40.

⁴³Williams, 50.

⁴⁴Williams, 50.

Liberty, helped to save his humanity.

Liberty wasn't the only inmate Lawson reached out to. After talking with a number of FOR people on how to endure the hardships of prison life, Lawson began to use his prison time to further his faith in God and to minister to other prisoners. He held group meetings, discussing topics like religion and politics. From these informal prison meetings Lawson developed important leadership skills—skills that helped him lead a “non-violent army” against racial segregation.

Lawson's Mission to India

The federal government paroled James Lawson to the Methodist Board of Missions in June of 1952.⁴⁵ After finishing his undergraduate degree at Baldwin-Wallace, Lawson moved to India in 1953 to work as a missionary. While living in Nagpur, India, he embraced the culture of Gandhi and his people. Lawson's time in India opened his eyes to many things. “My three years there were an awakening,” he explained. “I lived in a Hindu culture, wore Hindu garb, and grew as a human being. Most important, I came face-to-face with America's Cold War policies. I had to stand up and say, ‘My country is wrong. I am a critic of that policy.’”⁴⁶

As a pacifist, Lawson's criticism of America's foreign policy in the 1950's is not without warrant. President Dwight Eisenhower's “New Look” policy focused on three things: massive retaliation, making allies (or puppets), and CIA covert operations. Instead of seizing the opportunity to make peace with the U.S.S.R. after Joseph Stalin's death in 1953,

⁴⁵He served fourteen months of his three year sentence.

⁴⁶Williams, 50.

the Eisenhower administration expanded its war machine by building more and more atomic weapons with hopes of intimidating the “Reds.” Unlike his predecessor, President Truman, Eisenhower was not satisfied with “containing” communism. Determined to “rollback”⁴⁷ Soviet communism, his administration commissioned tremendously lethal weapons and established puppet governments in smaller nation-states (i.e.: Iran and Guatemala) outside of the European mainland to do America’s dirty work.

In India, Lawson also learned that some Indian Christians did not admire Gandhi at all. At first, Lawson believed they disliked him because he was a Hindu. He would hear things like “he really wasn’t the best figure in terms of understanding Christianity.” But Lawson disagreed. He revered Gandhi as “a fellow spiritual sojourner” who just happened to call himself a Hindu. Fortunately, Lawson’s ties to the Fellowship of Reconciliation granted him the opportunity to meet some Indian Christians who considered themselves “disciples of Gandhi in the Christian church.” They explained to him that many of the Christians in India feared Gandhi as a rival.⁴⁸ Lawson, on the other hand, embraced the teachings of Gandhi and the man himself as a spiritual mentor despite his Hindu background.

Lawson returned to America in 1956 eager to fight social injustice in America after reading about a young black preacher in Montgomery, Alabama who was leading tens of thousands in a nonviolent protest of the city’s segregated bus system. Although many historians credit the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with the development of the

⁴⁷Coined by Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, the term “Rollback” implied pushing communism’s influence inside the Iron Curtain; its post-WWII status.

⁴⁸James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

nonviolent direct action strategies associated with the American Civil Rights Movement, I agree with Lawson's student and former Washington, D.C. mayor Marion Berry that James Lawson was "the foremost proponent of the philosophical construct around nonviolence" in the late 1950's.⁴⁹ I offer the following essay as defense of this position.

⁴⁹Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, Voices of Freedom (New York: Bantom Books, 1990.), 62.

CHAPTER 2: “There comes a time when people get tired.”

The Montgomery Bus Boycott

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a Black seamstress from Montgomery, Alabama, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man. Although the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown V. Board of Education outlawed segregation in public schools and denied the promise that separate could be equal, public racial segregation was still widely practiced throughout America. This was particularly true in the South. These state and local laws demanded that blacks and whites in the South should not take part in any integrated public or private activity. Blacks and whites were not to eat together, play together, or share common facilities. They had separate bathrooms and water fountains. Since Reconstruction, the white power structure in the South—politicians, police, wealthy businessmen, even clergymen—worked to establish and maintain a system of racial separation that dominated both the public and private spheres. Segregation on public buses was strictly enforced by law and custom in Montgomery and in other southern cities. Under the laws of segregation, whites sat in the front of the bus and blacks sat in the back or stood in the aisle. But on that historic day Mrs. Parks, bravely broke the rules. A white man boarded the bus, and there were no seats left. After noticing that the man had no seat, the bus driver demanded that Mrs. Parks and three other black passengers give up theirs because they were sitting closest to the front. When none of them moved right away he said, “You’d better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats.” The others moved, but Mrs. Parks sat firm. The driver warned her again. “Well if you don’t stand up,” he said, “I’m going to have you arrested.” She refused to move, and the police arrested her on “suspicion” and took

her to jail.⁵⁰

Rosa Parks, in addition to working as a seamstress, also worked with E.D. Nixon, the president of the Alabama NAACP. She had recently attended an NAACP leadership training session at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. The driver probably had no idea at the time that the woman he had arrested was an active member in the NAACP. As an agent of the segregation system, the driver *had* to ask her to move. Unfortunately for the city of Montgomery, the driver's commitment to duty resulted in the arrest of a very well connected woman. In The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941-1960, John Patrick Diggins recounts the chain of events that followed her arrest. According to the book, Parks called E.D. Nixon the night of her arrest. She wanted to know how she should handle her situation. Seeking advice, Nixon called Clifford Durr, a white liberal attorney who worked with black leaders in Alabama on ways to improve race relations. Durr suggested that the group should use Park's arrest to challenge the constitutionality of segregated public transportation in the state of Alabama. Nixon agreed. He realized that to do so would require support from the black community. With this in mind, he asked a local black minister named Rev. Ralph Abernathy to help him plan a city-wide bus boycott. "It was a risky tactic," Diggins explains, "for almost all black workers in the city had to use public transportation to get to their jobs."⁵¹ Nevertheless, Abernathy agreed that something had to be done. In order to reach as many members of Montgomery's black community, Abernathy called on another young minister to join the boycott. He was the new pastor of the Dexter

⁵⁰Clayborne Carson, et al., The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) , 45-47.

⁵¹John Patrick Diggins, The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941-1960. (New York: Norton and Co., 1988), 290.

Avenue Baptist Church and his name was Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Four days later, Montgomery's newest black clergyman, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), a group determined to force desegregation of the city's buses through economic withdrawal, or boycott. The MIA brought together men and women from the NAACP, the Women's Political Council, and unaffiliated black activists from the local churches. That evening, December 5, 1955, King spoke to a crowd of three to four thousand at the Holt Street Baptist Church about the upcoming boycott. Word of Mrs. Parks's arrest spread quickly within the black community. The men and women that gathered that night were ready for a change. Like her, they too were sick and tired of having to suffer the humiliation of being told where, and where not, to sit on *their* city's buses. Without political power, Montgomery's black citizens would have to rely on the one thing they had that mattered to whites with power: Money.

A. J. Muste and the Fellowship of Reconciliation also assisted the Montgomery Improvement Association and its leader, Dr. King, during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A. J. Muste, Jo Ann Robinson claimed that the aid Muste and other FOR members offered King during the boycott was "important" to the protest's success. "The influence of A. J. Muste," she argued, "was by most accounts important and real, yet not entirely easy either to document or measure."⁵² In 1956, two of Muste's associates, Bayard Rustin and FOR National Field Secretary Glenn Smiley went to Montgomery to work with King and the MIA. Smiley agrees with Robinson that FOR's

⁵²Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson, Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A. J. Muste. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981) , 117.

influence on King and the Montgomery Bus Boycott is “hard to access.” Smiley believes “no one had as great an impact on King personally” as Bayard Rustin.⁵³ Rustin continued to serve as one of King’s close personal advisors for the rest of his life. Rustin supports Robinson’s claim that A. J. Muste influenced King. “During all my work with Martin King,” Rustin recalled, “I never made a difficult decision without talking the problem over with A. J. first.”⁵⁴ However, Smiley’s influence on King may have been just as significant as that of Muste and Rustin. In “How Nonviolence Works,” Glenn Smiley explained his relationship with King in 1956. Smiley wrote:

“I spent all of 1956 working in Montgomery and other parts of the South, supported by the Fellowship of Reconciliation. At our first meeting, Dr. King had a fair idea of what he wanted me to do for him in the form of a four-part portfolio. He and I agreed on the following: 1) I would teach him everything I knew about nonviolence, since, by his own admission, he had only been casually acquainted with Gandhi and his methods; 2) we would work with the churches and the leadership of Montgomery on the subject of nonviolence, and in support of the bus protest; 3) we would seek out the other leadership in black communities in the South and build a support system, as well as service their protests and demonstrations. (I had already been doing this in the South, but prior to Montgomery there had not been a mass movement anywhere to relate them all); and 4) that I would try to build bridges and connections with the white community in Montgomery, as well as serve as an open and above-board

⁵³Robinson, 117.

⁵⁴Hentoff, 17.

intelligence by which Dr. King could be kept informed about white thinking and, where possible, keep watch on the White Citizens Council, and even the KKK.”⁵⁵

King commended FOR on several occasions for being the only organization to help the boycott without bringing a “ready-made solution” to the problem.⁵⁶ According to Smiley, King wanted help and he and other FOR members were willing to help “without attempting to run the movement or pretend we know it at all.”⁵⁷ But FOR did more than offer a sympathetic ear and unbiased aid. The pacifist organization provided King and the MIA with two knowledgeable advisors who understood how to harness the power of nonviolence: Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley. In The Struggle for Black Equality, Harvard Sitkoff acknowledges Rustin and Smiley’s influence on “furthering” King’s understanding of Gandhian nonviolence. He insists that “both [Rustin and Smiley] were pacifist disciples of the Mahatma and of A. J. Muste, and they took every opportunity to reinforce King’s understanding of *Satyagraha*.”⁵⁸ Nonviolence as practiced and endorsed by FOR continued to influence King throughout the rest of his life through Muste, Rustin, Smiley, and later, Lawson.

From its beginning to end, the men and women who participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott (as it would come to be called) remained nonviolent. In his speech at the Holt Street Baptist Church, King stressed that the protesters should only use the “weapon of

⁵⁵Glenn Smiley, “How Nonviolence Works,” Fellowship 56, (October-November 1990) : 18-19.

⁵⁶Smiley, 18.

⁵⁷Adam Fairclough, Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality 1890-2000. (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001) , 235.

⁵⁸Harvard Sitkoff, The Struggle for Black Equality: 1954-1992. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993) , 54.

protest.” “The great glory of American democracy,” he claimed, “is the right to protest for right.” He urged them to “stick together,” to “work together,” and to practice love and nonviolence. “In all our doings, in all of our deliberations. . . whatever we do, we must keep God in our forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our action.”⁵⁹ After 381 days of peaceful protest, city agreed to ban segregation by race on public busses. The boycott was a success.

Lawson meets King

As Blacks in Montgomery were walking and/or car-pooling to work, school, church, and play, Lawson studied Gandhian nonviolence and worked to spread Christianity in India. Despite his busy schedule, he managed to keep up with current events in India and abroad. He subscribed to the Nagpur Times, an Indian newspaper printed in English. A day or two after the Montgomery Bus Boycott began on December 5th, the cover of the *Nagpur Times* read something like, "Bus Boycott, Negroes Use Non-Violence in United States."⁶⁰ The article covered the protest and mentioned Martin Luther King, Jr. The news of a nonviolent protest in America excited Lawson. Finally, American blacks were beginning to stand up together to fight the injustice of racial segregation. By 1953, Lawson had already made up his mind to work in the South as a “mission field for non-violence, as a kind of way of trying to apply. . .the Christian gospel to the practical issues.”⁶¹ Segregation was the issue, and Lawson longed for the day when Southern Blacks would band together under Christ’s love to

⁵⁹King, Martin Luther Jr. *Speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., at Holt Street Baptist Church*. In Clayborne Carson, et al., The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) , 48-51.

⁶⁰James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

⁶¹James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

force integration. He was impressed by their courage, and by their leader. King's use of nonviolence impressed him. Here was someone else who understood how to use nonviolence for social change. Throughout the boycott, Lawson kept up with what was going on and with what King was doing. He decided that after finishing his mission in India he would return to America to join the "King Movement"⁶² that started in Montgomery, Alabama.

When Lawson returned to America he enrolled in Oberlin College's School of Divinity in Ohio to continue his path to ministry. While at Oberlin, he befriended Harvey Cox, the campus director of the YMCA. Lawson's friendship with Cox granted him the opportunity to attend exclusive functions at Oberlin and to meet interesting people, including Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lawson met King for the first time on February 6, 1957. Two months after the victory in Montgomery, King traveled to Oberlin to speak to the students and faculty. By that time, Lawson and Cox were close friends. In *A Force More Powerful*, Lawson described how his relationship with Harvey Cox allowed him the opportunity of a lifetime. "He would invite me to special things that he was sponsoring," Lawson explained, "and he made certain that I knew about King's coming and then made certain also I knew that after the assembly there would be a gathering in one of the private dining rooms."⁶³ Cox invited Lawson to attend a private dinner with King that followed the speech. Fortunately for Lawson, he and King arrived early for the meal at about the same time. King sat down by

⁶²Lawson respectfully considers the 1960's civil rights movement the "King Movement."

⁶³James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

himself at a table in one of the two small dining halls reserved for his private meal. Lawson noticed that no one else was sitting with King, so he boldly sat down at King's table and introduced himself. Seizing the opportunity of a lifetime, Lawson explained to his idol that he also understood how important it was to be nonviolent. He told King about his studies of Christian pacifism and Gandhian *satyagraha*, of his time in prison, and his mission in India. "It was a critical moment in my life," Lawson recalled in *Walking With King*, "because I had been thinking I would one day be a minister in the South because of the issue of segregation. When I shared this with him personally, privately and confidentially, Martin said very quietly, 'Don't wait. Come now. We don't have anyone like you in the South'"⁶⁴

There wasn't anyone like Lawson in the South. He was years ahead of most Americans in his understanding of what it means to be nonviolent, and how to use nonviolence as a political weapon. Lawson admitted in the interview for *A Force More Powerful* that King had found the right man to go South and teach nonviolence. "Well he meant the fact that I," Lawson recalled, "by this time, '57—I had had what, maybe ten, eleven years of study of nonviolence, experimenting with nonviolence, that I had come into nonviolence from the point of view of Jesus and the Christian church and the New Testament and Biblical understanding."⁶⁵ Lawson's affiliation with FOR most certainly won him points with Dr. King. After all, FOR offered aid to King during the Montgomery Bus Boycott without expecting anything in return. FOR sent Glenn Smiley to teach King about Gandhian

⁶⁴James M. Lawson, Jr., "Walking with King: Friends Still on Journey 50 Years Later," United Methodist News Service. 26 January 2004, <<http://www.milwaukeecourier.org/news/Article/Article.asp?NewsID=37789&sID=36>> (26 January 2004)

⁶⁵James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

nonviolence, an ideology Lawson passionately believed in. King and the SCLC needed someone committed to nonviolence and righteousness to teach Southern blacks to use the weapons of Christ against Southern segregationists. Upon King's request, Lawson began making preparations to leave Oberlin to move South, the heart of segregated America, to build a nonviolent army for change.

Making friends in the South

By the fall of the year, Lawson had made up his mind to move to Atlanta, Georgia, to teach nonviolence. He chose Atlanta for two reasons. First, Atlanta was close to Montgomery and his new friend Martin. Second, there are theological schools there that Lawson could re-enter to finish his degree. When Lawson told A. J. Muste of his plan to move to the South, Muste offered him the job of southern secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. This gave Lawson a job and income he desperately needed as a young man who would leave everything to work for peace and justice. Lawson saw this as a sign from God that he was on the right path. "I recognize," he recalls, "this was the way in which God was working in my life. Because I was going on my own without any kinds of commitments ahead of time. But this provided me with a specific position, so I could go into the South with a job."⁶⁶ Prior to Muste's offer, Lawson had no idea of what exactly he would do when he got to Atlanta. He only knew he wanted to help the "King Movement." But, fate would not see Lawson to Atlanta. After talking with Glenn Smiley, the two decided Lawson's talents would best be used in Nashville, Tennessee.

⁶⁶James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

One of the reasons Lawson and Smiley decided to work in Nashville was although the city had segregation, there were no written laws sustaining segregation. Nashville police had the power to arrest those who broke the *custom* of segregation, but there were no laws. Segregation in Nashville, as in many southern cities, was enforced largely by fear and intimidation by local whites. Many in Nashville's black community followed the rules of segregation to avoid violence from white mobs who acted under police protection. Despite the danger, Nashville was a perfect starting point for Lawson and Smiley because it was a city where it was possible to break the back of Jim Crow without launching an expensive and time-consuming legal battle.

One main advantage of working in Nashville was that in February of 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Congress organized itself there. By the fall of 1958, the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC), the local branch of the SCLC, was already functioning and working to make things happen. Their first president, Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, wrote the chapter's first Statement of Purpose and Principles. It reads:

If we are to see the real downfall of segregation and discrimination it will be because of a disciplined Negro Christian movement which breaks the antiquated methods of resolving our fears and tensions and dramatically applies the gospel we profess.⁶⁷

As Lawson and Smiley traveled through the South, they stopped in towns along the way to teach workshops on nonviolence. They had already passed through Nashville earlier that year. When they returned in the fall of '58, the NCLC led by Rev. Smith, C. T. Vivian, Alexander Anderson, Andrew White and others, welcomed Lawson and Smiley with open

⁶⁷John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.) 82.

arms. “They wanted something to happen and they wanted to help make something happen,” Lawson recalled. Smith, who was also a professor at nearby American Baptist College, offered Lawson the title of social action leader for their local SCLC affiliate and invited him to host weekly workshops on nonviolence. He also gave Lawson access to the basement of his church, the First Colored Baptist Church in Nashville, to use as a meeting place for formal training sessions on the philosophy and application of nonviolence. The workshops were designed to help the NCLC answer the question, “Where to begin?.” The group knew it wanted to take action against racial segregation, but they did not know where to start. They hoped Lawson’s workshops would help them find their first action issue.

Lawson accepted the NCLC’s offer and settled in Nashville the fall of 1958 to attend Vanderbilt Divinity School and to teach workshops on nonviolence. Soon after arriving in Nashville he visited a white minister named Will Campbell, the field representative for the National Council of Churches. Campbell was a unique man, a “radical” by 1950's standards. Although he was white, Campbell attended Kelly Miller Smith’s church, the First Colored Baptist Church. He kept his money in the only black bank in Nashville and had a black secretary. His rejection of all forms of segregation set him apart from most of Nashville’s whites and endeared him to many of Nashville’s black leaders. Lawson’s visit with Campbell was a very important moment in his personal life. Campbell’s secretary, Dorothy Wood, caught Lawson’s eye and they soon married.⁶⁸

⁶⁸Halberstam, 122-123.

CHAPTER 3: “The Teacher.”

Tensions in Nashville

Nashville had many universities that would serve as breeding-grounds for new recruits. Fisk, Vanderbilt, American Baptist, Tennessee State, and Meharry Medical School were nearby and had students who hungered for social change. John Lewis, a black divinity student from American Baptist College, remembers that there was a “sense of urgency and awareness” among his classmates, friends, and other students in Nashville that the “movement for civil rights needed—no, *demand*ed—[their] involvement.” As black Africans liberated themselves from their colonial powers in Ghana and other parts of Africa, many black Americans were doing nothing to change things in America for themselves. Lewis claimed in his autobiography, *Walking With the Wind*, that he and other black students couldn’t help being thrilled by the news of African decolonization. However, he wrote that at the same time many were “also a little ashamed.” Lewis recalled, “Here were black people thousands of miles away achieving liberation and independence from nations that ruled them for centuries, and we still didn’t have those rights in a country that is supposed to be free. Black Africans on their native continent were raising their own national flags for the first time in history, and we couldn’t even get a hamburger and a Coke at a soda fountain.”⁶⁹ The schools not only provided men and women who were eager for action, they gave Lawson and other activists areas where their multi-racial groups could meet and organize without alerting the local white power-structure.

⁶⁹Lewis, 80.

In “1960: Origins of a Decade of Disruption,” Aldon Morris explained how the college students’ economic freedom allowed them to take part in the budding movement. “Students,” he concluded, “are ideal candidates for protest activities. Usually they do not have families to support, employers’ rules and dictates to follow, or crystallized notions of what is ‘impossible’ and ‘unrealistic.’” They enjoyed more freedom from white control than many of their parents who worked in, and for, white businesses. Having only themselves to fend for, student activists did not have to worry about what would happen to their families if they went to jail. Furthermore, many were unemployed and did not have to worry about their actions offending white bosses. Beyond all else, Morris argued that the students were available for protest because they, “like the ministers, were an organized group within the black community who were relatively independent of white economic control.” Their economic freedom allowed them to participate in social action and to believe that anything was possible. There was nothing stopping them from throwing themselves into the racial firestorm.⁷⁰

Nashville’s black students were also ideal because many of the city’s nominally integrated colleges and universities still harbored segregationists among their students and faculty. Vanderbilt, for instance, had only one other black student when Lawson applied. His acceptance came largely through his strong Methodist connections. The school *was* “integrated”--there *were* blacks and whites learning together--and many of the white students and faculty members loathed it. The bigots wanted Vanderbilt’s two black students to remain invisible outside of the classroom. Many disliked the idea that blacks could eat in

⁷⁰Aldon D. Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change. (New York: The Free Press, 1986) , 196.

their school cafeteria or play on *their* intermural sports teams.⁷¹ Lawson, however, did both. His refusal to accept his role as an “invisible man” angered many of the students and higher-ups in Vanderbilt’s administration. He was a marked man.

Many of the young black men and women that attended Lawson’s early workshops also felt the sting of racism while attending college in Nashville. As they walked through Nashville’s downtown business district, they felt the eyes of angry whites marking their every move. The 1954 *Brown* decision produced little to no change in the city’s social and economic structure. Token integration began to occur in the city’s schools in 1957, but segregation by race in public stores and restaurants continued. As in many southern cities, Nashville’s whites had a firm grip on the city’s economic center. Whites owned many of the popular department and dime stores in the downtown area known locally as Crosstown. Their control of the marketplace protected the continuation of segregation or Jim Crow within the city limits. Lawson’s first students in Nashville came to his workshops out of their anger and frustration with the segregation system. They were ready to make a difference—to make a change. In time, they would learn from Lawson to trade in their millstone of anger for shields of love and courage.

Recruiting and Training Nonviolent Soldiers in Nashville

At the advise of his teacher, Rev. Smith, young John Lewis attended the first workshop Lawson hosted on nonviolence for the NCLC. Lewis became familiar with Lawson’s group, FOR, through a popular pamphlet they published titled *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*. The pamphlet explained the basis of nonviolence as a way to

⁷¹Halberstam, 124.

fight racial injustice. He knew that FOR was rooted in nonviolent direct action and protested segregation, nuclear weapons, and war. That Sunday evening, Lewis and seven or eight other young men and women assembled in a small room in the basement of the First Colored Baptist Church of Nashville to listen to Lawson explain nonviolence. All were college students. “Even before he began speaking,” Lewis recalled, “I could see that there was something special about this man. He just had a way about him, an aura of inner peace and wisdom that you could sense immediately upon seeing him.” That night, Lawson gave an overview of the world’s great religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. He explained that all shared the concept of justice. Lawson concluded by stressing that justice would be the central theme of the workshop he would continue to host that Tuesday and every Tuesday night thereafter at the Clark Memorial United Methodist Church near Fisk’s campus. “There are no plaques, no monuments, nothing to suggest that anything historic happened there,” lamented Lewis. “But from the autumn of 1958 into the following fall, that building played a major role in educating, preparing and shaping a group of young men and women who would lead the way for years to come in the nonviolent struggle for civil rights in America.”⁷²

With a group of less than ten students, Lawson began building his nonviolent army. He started their training with the history of nonviolence. The group discussed nonviolence from the perspectives of great American thinkers like Henry David Thoreau, Reinhold Niebuhr and A. J. Muste. They also studied Gandhi’s concept of *satyagraha*, considered by Lewis to be “a grounding foundation of nonviolent civil disobedience, of active pacifism.”

⁷²Lewis, 82-84.

But above all else, Lawson taught them that the heart of nonviolence was love. Like Christ and Gandhi, he urged them to work on loving those who would hate them. He told them that nonviolence would work only if those who practiced it had no malice in their hearts towards their oppressors. “This is a difficult concept to understand,” Lewis admits, “and it is an even more difficult concept to internalize, but it has everything to do with nonviolence.” Lawson helped Lewis and the others that in order to practice nonviolence they must have true love in their hearts for all of God’s children—especially the “hateful and the hurtful.” As Lawson outlined his nonviolent philosophy, his students began to struggle with the idea of loving the very people who labor to preserve or tacitly consent to an antiquated system of racial oppression.

Above all else, Lawson taught his students nonviolence as a Christian principle. All of Lawson’s students were raised by Christian parents. Growing up, they learned many of the same values Lawson learned from his loving Christian parents. Their shared faith and sense of truth and morality allowed Lawson to teach nonviolence as an application of their deeply seeded Christian beliefs. Although he borrowed many of his ideas from Gandhi, Lawson claims his approach was, and has always been, out of a “Christian ethos.” Lawson described in *A Force More Powerful* how he has always taught the concept of Jesus as *the* nonviolent warrior. “In the workshops in Nashville, as in the workshops I still do, I spend a certain amount of time on the person of Jesus as a non-violent athlete. . . In that particular series of workshops, you had a Catholic, sensitive Catholic woman, Diane [Nash.] You had someone wanting to be a Baptist preacher in John Lewis. You had Andrew White, an AME preacher. . . you had an entire group that came out of Christian churches.” He taught them to remember Christ’s teachings. To remember his Sermon on the Mount where Christ taught

his followers to love their enemies and to turn the other cheek. Lawson insisted that those two concepts were the “cutting edge for Christian spirituality” because they say “that in our kind of world, there are enemies of life, there are folk who love death, there are folk who deny you your humanity,. . .And, yet, the insistence is that you can see your enemy not as someone to whom you pour out your anger and venom, but you can see your enemy as another human being.”⁷³

Although some people claim that Lawson, King, and other proponents of nonviolence in the late 1950's were interested in nonviolence only as a political tool, Lewis insisted that “it *is* a way of life.” “This is something Lawson stressed over and over again,” Lewis wrote, “that this is not simply a technique or a tactic or a strategy or a tool to be pulled out when needed. It is not something you turn on or off like a faucet. This sense of love, this sense of peace, this capacity for compassion, is something you carry inside yourself every waking minute of the day.” He taught them different techniques for dealing with angry, aggressive people. For example, Lawson explained that one way to deal with an attacker is to visualize him as an infant. He explained that if they could see the person as if they were as an innocent child, it would be easier to have compassion for them and to remain nonviolent.⁷⁴ The love they feel for their attackers, he taught them, was one of their most powerful and effective weapons against those “folk who love death.”

But not all of Lawson's students accepted the idea of love and nonviolence at first. Lewis's friend and roommate at American Baptist, James Bevel, attended Lawson's meetings

⁷³James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

⁷⁴Lewis, 85-86.

from the start. Bevel, however, dismissed Lawson's notion of nonviolence as a way of life. Although he was studying to become a Baptist preacher, he believed self-defense was acceptable Christian behavior. Because of his distaste for Lawson's teachings, he missed many of the groups early meetings, acting only as Lewis's chauffeur and disinterested companion. Often times, he would turn away when Lawson began talking about nonviolence. He ignored Lawson's lectures on love and redemption because he believed Lawson was a coward and afraid to fight back. "I don't need lessons from a man like that," he would think to himself. Bevel quickly changed his attitude after Lawson connected Gandhi's concept of *satygraha* to Christian pacifism. Ironically, when Bevel skipped the early meetings, he spent the time reading about Gandhi in Fisk's student library. As he learned more about the man and his struggle, he drew parallels between colonial India and the segregated South. He identified with Gandhi, a spiritual man who labored to improve the lives of the people around him. Bevel, a divinity student, wanted to save souls—to improve the lives and afterlives of the people around him. As he learned more and more about Gandhi's life and teachings, Bevel began listening to Lawson's message of nonviolence with an open mind. Halberstam reported, "No longer was Lawson the man who spoke of nonviolence because he was afraid of physical confrontation: He was a man, like Gandhi, who had been willing to go to prison for his beliefs . . . Lawson, he decided, was not a fearful phoney at all; rather, he was a great teacher, a man who took you beyond the easy emotional response to oppression and pushed you to find your true, better self."⁷⁵

⁷⁵Halberstam,94-101.

Bernard Lafayette, another one of Lawson's students, also had a hard time accepting all of his views on nonviolence. At first, he disagreed with Lawson that those who practiced nonviolence must love their attackers. He believed nonviolence was a good political tactic. But he did not think he could truly feel love for someone who was attacking him. "We were talking about a whole new relationship," recalled Lafayette, "about winning our opponents over as our friends. We would provide the example of how to behave. But when the time really came to turn the other cheek, I wanted to know if I could do that. Could I turn the other cheek *on the inside*? Could I actually feel love for someone who was abusing me? Those questions I had to face."⁷⁶

Lawson began his workshops with the basis of Christian nonviolence and Gandhian nonviolence, or *satyagraha*, because he, like Gandhi, believed that in order to practice nonviolence one must first "understand its deeper implications." Gandhi wrote in his autobiography: "I realized that before a people could be fit for offering civil disobedience, they should thoroughly understand its deeper implications." He continued by claiming that before taking such action on a mass scale, "it would be necessary to create a band of well-trained, pure-hearted volunteers who thoroughly understood the strict conditions of Satyagraha."⁷⁷ Following Gandhi's guidelines, Lawson started his students' training by mentally preparing them to practice *satyagraha*.

By the fall of 1959 word of Lawson's workshops had spread. The co-ed, multi-racial group had grown to about twenty. He had students from most of the local colleges—Fisk,

⁷⁶Frye Gaillard, Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 70.

⁷⁷Gandhi, An Autobiography, 470.

Vanderbilt, American Baptist, Tennessee State, and Meharry Medical School—and they were very loyal. Many never missed a workshop. The students referred to Lawson as “the teacher,” but he was unlike any teacher they had ever had. Lewis wrote:

“I couldn’t have found a better teacher than Jim Lawson. I truly felt—and still feel today—that he was God-sent. There was something mystic about him, something holy, so gathered, about his manner, the way he had of leaning back in his chair and listening—really *listening*, nodding his head, saying, “Yes, go ahead,” taking everything in before he would respond. Very patient. Very attentive. Very calm.

The man was a born teacher, in the truest sense of the word.”⁷⁸

Lawson’s students adored his teaching style. Unlike many of their professors, Lawson *listened* to their opinions. He did not impose his ideas as if he held a monopoly on the truth. Instead, he sat back and let his students learn for themselves what he discovered at an early age: Nonviolence makes sense. Violence is *not* the answer. There *must* be a better way.

However, Lawson learned as much from them as they did from him. Being born and raised in Ohio, he did not experience the strict codes and daily terrors of southern segregation. This is why he did not “know his place” at Vanderbilt. To gain a better understanding about the physical and emotional damages of segregation, Lawson and his students talked to each other about the humiliations they had experienced under Jim Crow. One of Lawson’s students, Endesha Holland, told the group that she was raped by a white man she babysat for when she was eleven years old. The crime was never reported and the man was never punished. Sadly, Holland claimed that sexual assaults on black girls by white

⁷⁸Lewis, 84-85.

men were rather common in the South. She explained, “There was no reason for us to run and tell our mothers or our fathers because they couldn’t do anything about it except get killed if they said anything. Many times we girls would talk in the bathroom about it, never telling our parents. It happened very very frequently.”⁷⁹

Their stories ranged from things as serious as child molestation and rape to the daily humiliation of being refused service at white-owned lunch counters. However trivial it may sound to some, lunch counter segregation offended many of Lawson’s students more than most of the indignities they had to deal with day after day. Another female student, Angeline Butler, told the group that she was humiliated on the day she left her home in Columbia, SC to go to Fisk. As she boarded the bus to Nashville, the driver told her to sit in the back. To add insult to injury, her father boarded the bus and demanded that she comply with the driver’s demand.⁸⁰ Segregation was so ingrained in her father, he took the driver’s side as if it were by instinct. By sharing their stories, Lawson and his students concluded that racial segregation was oppressive and immoral based on Christian principles. They learned from one another that “separate but equal” denied them more than accommodations and concessions. The institution sought to break down their sense of self-worth. However, they were determined to silence segregation with the power of their unified voice. In Lawson’s workshops, the young men and women learned that they were not alone. They were “brothers and sisters,” united by the chance to change things for the better. For many of his students, the bonds of friendship formed at Lawson’s meetings would last the rest of their

⁷⁹Endesha Ida Mae Holland, *Freedom on My Mind*, produced and directed by Connie Field and Marilyn Mulford, 110 min., California Newsreel 1994, videocassette.

⁸⁰Halberstam, 75.

lives.

By the fall of 1959, Lawson's group was composed of many men and women who would soon be regarded as "civil rights leaders." John Lewis and James Bevel both emerged as noted leaders in their own right. Paul LaPrad, a white student from Fisk, was another important student activist who studied nonviolence under Lawson. LaPrad moved to Nashville from Indiana. He heard about Lawson's workshop the same way many of the other students had, through the church. Although the church brought in many new activists, LaPrad was responsible for bringing another key "leader" to Lawson's workshops: Diane Nash (Bevel).

Diane Nash is one of the many important civil rights figures who cut her teeth in Lawson's workshops. She was born and raised in Chicago in a middle-class family. Although she experienced segregation in south side Chicago, it was nothing like the hatred she felt in the South. In an interview with *Iris—A Journal About Women*, Nash explained that she did not experience overt segregation until she moved to Nashville to attend college. "Although I knew that segregation existed," she admitted, "it was the first time I encountered it emotionally. When I went to the downtown area, the blacks who worked downtown would frequently be sitting on the curb at lunchtime eating a sandwich that they had brought from home. Although it was possible to purchase food from take-out places, you could not sit down and eat it . . . that was humiliating."⁸¹ All of the students in Lawson's workshops agreed that lunch counter segregation was an issue that really mattered to them and others in Nashville's black community. They could not sit and eat a hamburger just because their skin

⁸¹ "Interview with Diane Nash" *Iris—A Journal About Women* 22, March 2003.

was black. Nash and others in the group expressed the need to fight lunch counter segregation through nonviolent direct action.

Although Nash had only been with the group for a short while, she quickly emerged as the leader of the group. She was smart and beautiful. “The first thing anyone who encountered her noticed,” according to Lewis, “is that she was one of God’s beautiful creatures, just about the most gorgeous woman any of us had ever seen.” But it was her mind that the men in the group most admired. She was very serious about what they were doing and absorbed Lawson’s teachings very quickly. In time, the group adored her as a sister. Lewis recalls, “We all became brothers and sisters, a family. In the years to come, as the young arm of the movement took shape in the form of SNCC, there would be bickering, head-butting, clashes of ideology and tactics among competing factions. But there in Nashville, in the beginning, we were completely together, totally solid, a unit bound by trust and devotion. We really were our own Beloved Community.”⁸²

The Nashville group’s acceptance of female leadership is quite extraordinary considering the archaic perception of a woman’s role in society widely held in the late 1950’s. Lawson and the other men in the group listened to and debated the ideas and opinions of Nash and other women in the group as they would their own. Gandhi believed that all people—men, women, and children—could use *satyagraha*.⁸³ In an article entitled, “To the Women of India,” Gandhi expressed his views on the importance of women to social movements.

⁸²Lewis, 91-92.

⁸³Gandhi, Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha), 34.

“In this non-violent warfare, their contribution should be much greater than men’s.

To call a woman the weaker sex is libel: it is a man’s injustice to women. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed is woman less brute than man. If by strength, is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women.”⁸⁴

Like Gandhi, Lawson and the others refused to let the concept of male supremacy poison their group. Instead, they allowed women like Nash to become leaders because they were intelligent, dedicated, and best suited for the job.

As Lawson’s group explored justice and nonviolence, they came to realize that they all disliked the way Blacks were treated in the stores downtown. The white owners were happy to take their money, but many of them refused to treat blacks equally. Of all those who lobbied for the group to desegregate downtown Nashville, Lawson claimed that it was the women who were the most persuasive. “It was the women who impressed me and I think everyone else,” he remembered, “with the notion that ‘You men don’t do the shopping for our families, we do.’” They explained that there were no places to stop and rest. For the women with children, this was a huge problem. The segregation system denied them equal accommodations and provided many indignities. They could spend money in white-owned stores, but they could not sit down with their children to enjoy a Coke or ice cream at the lunch counter. Lawson understood. He staged his first sit-in at a lunch counter when he was

⁸⁴Gandhi, Non-Violent Resistance (Satyagraha), 325.

sixteen because he wanted to enjoy the same freedom white children had. Hearing the women's stories of humiliation led Lawson and the others to conclude that their calling was to desegregate downtown Nashville.⁸⁵

Lawson knew that any multi-racial group that attempted to desegregate Nashville's business district would most likely face violence from white bigots and arrest from white policemen. Once the group chose its target, they began to work on how to handle the pain and stress of physical attack and the insult of arrest. The group began to think up and act out various scenarios of what may occur during a demonstration such as a sit-in. The students role-played, taking turns acting as demonstrators and attackers. For example, Lewis explained, "Several of us would sit in folding chairs, acting out a sit-in, while the others played waitresses or angry bystanders, calling us niggers, cursing in our faces, pushing and shoving us to the floor." Despite any abuse thrown at them, Lawson taught them to remain nonviolent and to concentrate on loving their abusers. He explained to them that it was not enough to just learn how to take punishment. The students were taking part in these "sociodramas" in order to lose their instinct to hate. "The urge can't *be* there," he would tell them. "You have to do more than just not hit back. You have to have no *desire* to hit back. You have to *love* that person who's hitting you. You're *going* to love him." Through these intense sessions, Lawson's students gained the courage and spiritual strength needed to practice nonviolence.⁸⁶

⁸⁵James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

⁸⁶Lewis, 93.

Lawson taught his students to ignore verbal abuse by remembering to love themselves as well as their antagonizes. Segregated America had suppressed its black citizens for generations. White racists used words like *nigger* to frighten and dehumanize blacks. Whites were discouraged from integrated activities out of fear of bearing the mark of *nigger-lover*. Lawson had to teach his students that they were not inferior as the labels, the laws, and customs suggested. In *The Children*, David Halberstam explains that segregation not only denied blacks equal access and freedom of movement, it created a “philosophy of shame and vulnerability among the very people whom it had suppressed and exploited.”⁸⁷ Lawson wanted his students to be proud of being black. He taught them, like his mother taught him, that the word “nigger” meant nothing. “Just ignorant words from an ignorant child.” In order for white Americans to respect the students, Lawson argued they must first respect themselves. Lawson knew that teaching his students to love themselves and to respect themselves as honorable men and women would help them to conquer the urge to lash out when verbally provoked. If they believed in their hearts that they were not “niggers,” but men and women who deserved equal treatment, they could withstand any “childish” words thrown at them by bigoted whites.

Lawson’s students also learned specific tactics to protect themselves and their friends from taking too much punishment if a demonstration were to turn violent. Although learning to turn the other cheek and to love others was psychologically necessary, they also needed to know how to physically avoid having their cheeks broken. The students learned defensive techniques like how to curl their bodies in a ball to protect themselves from internal injuries.

⁸⁷Halberstam, 77.

Lawson taught them to help each other when they saw that one of theirs was taking a severe beating. For example, if one person is taking too much abuse, someone else must protect them with their body. This will dilute the force of the attack and increase the chance that no one gets hospitalized. Another part of Lawson's defense strategy was to remember to maintain eye contact with one's assailant at all times. Through eye contact, Lawson argued, the attacker may begin to feel compassion for the victim and remorse for his or her actions.

To deal with arrest, Lawson instructed the students to remain calm and follow orders. Arguing or fighting with the police would not garner them any sympathy from the white community. Their total compliance with authority will hopefully prove to the people of Nashville that the students are not criminals, but freedom fighters. When and if arrest occurred, Lawson instructed the students to have "floor walkers" available to take the place of the arrested students. The "floor walkers" were necessary to keep the demonstration going. Different students were assigned different jobs because Lawson understood that not all of the workshop students were capable of remaining nonviolent. Those who could not, ran errands, made phone calls, typed letters, and performed other necessary functions.

The students with the discipline to remain nonviolent were taught how to handle the stress of being locked up. Lawson understood what it meant to be incarcerated; he had over fourteen months of personal experience behind bars. He knew the dangers firsthand. Diane Nash recalls, "One night (Lawson) was preparing us to go to jail at a workshop. I wanted him to tell me it would be alright, but he couldn't." However, Lawson reminded Nash and the others that it was important to stand up for what they believed in. "I was so afraid of

jail,” Nash admits, “but sometimes the road to liberation comes through the jailhouse.”⁸⁸

Throughout their training, Lawson urged them to work together. By the end of October 1959, the group began to formally call itself the Nashville Student Movement. Unlike other civil rights organizations, the NSM decided that “leadership” of their group would be group-centered. In other words, no one person would make the decisions for the group. There would be a core group of students who would represent the others in decision-making and, later, public speaking. However, the chair of the committee would constantly rotate in order to avoid any one person taking control of the group. Lewis attributes this concept to Myles Horton, a liberal white activist who had been working to improve labor and racial conditions for decades. Lawson, Lewis, Lafayette, Bevel, and others attended a Christian retreat with Horton in late autumn of 1959. Besides the workshops, meetings, and formal discussions the retreat gave Lawson and the others the opportunity to talk privately with great men like Horton. He told the group to never let any established civil rights organization capture their spirit. He urged them to remain independent of any other group and to stay hopeful that they were on the right path. The group took his advice and remained independent and steadfast in their search for justice.

With Lawson’s influence, the Nashville Student Movement developed a strict code of conduct to be followed by all members during a nonviolent demonstration. The code read:

Don’t strike back or curse if abused.

Don’t laugh out.

⁸⁸Evan Mayor, “A Legacy Not Forgotten,” Vanderbilt Hustler 17 February 2004
<http://www.vanderbilthustler.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2004/02/17/403243a09036c?in_archive=1>
(29 January 2005)

Don't hold conversations with floor walkers.

Don't block entrances to the store or aisles.

Show yourself courteous and friendly at all times.

Sit straight and always face the counter.

Remember love and nonviolence.

May God bless each of you.⁸⁹

Although it sounds elementary, these seven rules encompassed everything Lawson worked to teach his workshop students. It highlighted the physical and psychological tactics the students must adopt in order to stage a successful nonviolent protest. This list *is* the legacy of the Nashville Student Movement.

Targeting Downtown Nashville

By November, Lawson's group had made up its mind to wage a nonviolent war on Nashville's downtown department stores and "five-and-dimes." Through their discussions in Lawson's workshops, the students discovered that they truly despised the way they were treated downtown. Lawson took their advice, and the advice of the black community, and decided that the stores were going to be targeted first. Lawson believed that the lunch counters were the perfect target because "they were visible, they were within reach, they seemed to unite the entire black community, and the desire—and right—to use them was something any fair-minded white person in the city would probably sympathize with."⁹⁰

⁸⁹Blumberg, Rhonda. Civil Rights: The 1960's Freedom Struggle. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991) , 75.

⁹⁰Halberstam, 91.

Therefore, the group decided in late November that the time for mobilization had arrived.

On the last Saturday of the month, November 28th, Lawson and about a dozen of his students met at the First Colored Baptist Church of Nashville to test what they had learned. Although many in the group felt that they were ready to start the nonviolent war, Lawson and the other “leaders” decided that the day’s activity would be only a test. Lawson wanted his students to see firsthand what might occur during the real sit-in demonstrations to come. The test would give the students the “practical experience” of actually sitting down and asking for service.⁹¹ Furthermore, it would help them to conquer their deep seated fears of challenging the rules of southern segregation. The “sociodramas” they conducted that fall could not prepare them as well as actually walking into a store and asking for service at an all-white soda fountain. To take their training to the next level, Lawson decided to send a hand-full of students downtown to conduct an experimental sit-in at a store named Harvey’s. The store was very popular and had a reputation of treating blacks and whites with respect and courtesy. However, many in the group did not see it this way. “I had been in Harvey’s many times,” Lewis recalled, “and I always felt that familiar sting each time I walked past the lunch counters . . . I was always reminded of having to carry my combination outside Byrd’s drugstore to drink it.”⁹² Harvey’s employees did not have to shout “nigger” at black customers to let them know how the store felt about blacks. The store’s firm policy of unequal treatment of darker skinned customers said it loud and clear.

⁹¹James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

⁹²Lewis, 94.

Although Lawson did not attend that first test run, Lewis, Nash and the others who did took Lawson's teachings with them in their hearts. The plan was for the group to walk in, purchase something, and then sit down at the lunch counter. Buying something established them as paying customers. However, their purchases did not gain them the same respect as *white* paying customers. After making their purchases, the group sat down at the "Monkey Bar," the fast-food section of the Harvey's that sold sandwiches and sodas. After a minute or two, the waitress noticed the racially-mixed group and politely explained, "I'm sorry. We can't serve you here." Nash immediately asked her to speak with a manager. "We quite specifically had people geared to try to talk to the manager," Lawson explained, to "feel them out, see where they were, why they were refusing us service and a whole variety of things like that."⁹³ That day, the group chose Nash to do the talking. When he approached, the manager calmly explained that it was the store's policy not to serve blacks at the lunch counter. Nash then asked if the white students in the group could order. The manager explained that they could not be served because they were with a group of blacks. Nash politely thanked the man and the group left without violent confrontation.

In the winter of 1959, Lawson's students conducted many more tests like this one to prepare themselves for the upcoming movement. In small groups of five or six people, the Nashville Student Movement conducted tests at Harvey's, a Cain-Sloan, and two or three "five-and dime" stores. Through these tests, the students gained much needed experience in how to conduct themselves during an actual sit-in demonstration. Furthermore, the information reported to Lawson and the other group leaders by these reconnaissance teams

⁹³James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. [A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict](#). Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

was extremely important to the formulation of a war strategy. By conducting test sit-ins, the NSM learned that some stores, like Harvey's, were friendlier than others. In contrast, the employees at Harvey's rival, Cain-Sloan, treated the students more coldly and with more contempt.⁹⁴ The tests helped Lawson and his student activists discover what stores would meet them with the most, and least resistance. "These tests," Lewis explained, "were a prelude to a massive assault, a series of sit-ins that would involve hundreds of students. How many sit-ins for how long a time would depend on the response of the stores and the city. We would not stop until the policy of segregation at those counters was ended. It was that simple."⁹⁵

⁹⁴Halberstam, 92.

⁹⁵Lewis, 94-95.

CHAPTER 4: The War Begins

The Greensboro Four and the Surge of Student Support

Before Lawson and his troops could act, they were beaten to the punch by four brave young men from North Carolina. On February 1, 1960, four students from North Carolina A&T staged the first successful sit-in of the 1960's civil rights movement in Greensboro, NC. Without the benefit of Lawson's intense training on nonviolence, David Richmond, Joseph McNeill, Ezell Blair, and Franklin McCain sat down and demanded service at a Woolworth's department store in downtown Greensboro. The news excited Lawson, his student activists, and thousands of other college and high school students throughout the nation. That one single act of civil disobedience did as much to set fire to black Americans in 1960 as Rosa Park's refusal to give up her seat had done in Montgomery a little more than four years before. The Sit-in Movement that started with the Greensboro Four brought an unprecedented amount of student support for civil rights. Hundreds of students—black and white—began staging sit-ins throughout the South. Ready or not, the next stage of the Civil Rights Movement had begun.

The wave of nonviolent direct action that followed the February 1st sit-in changed the way civil rights battles were fought in the South for many years to come. Prior to the sit-in campaign, established civil rights organizations like the NAACP spent a great deal of time and money fighting segregation in America's southern courts. Despite the risk of white violence, members of local and state NAACP chapters labored to raise awareness and money to combat legal segregation in many southern cities. Unfortunately, they would often find that their efforts were in vain due to white control of the southern court system. Crimes of

violence and injustice towards blacks at the hands of whites were investigated by white cops and tried by all-white juries. The unjust racial imbalance allowed countless numbers of crimes in the South to go unpunished. Twelve white jurymen had the power to acquit any one of any crime, regardless of the evidence. Legal segregation and forced segregation by custom would continue to exist as long as whites had the power of the court system. However, the actions of the Greensboro Four changed the rules of the game. Their successful sit-in showed thousands of American students in one day what Lawson had been working for one year to teach his workshop students. Nonviolent direct action *could* produce social change. The time for action had come. The new student activists would not wait for the adults in the NAACP to lobby the courts to reshuffle a stacked deck. They would follow the example of the four selfless students from Greensboro by fighting systematic segregation head-on.

The Outbreak of the Nashville Movement

The Greensboro sit-in on February 1st was the catalyst the Nashville Student Movement had been waiting for. For there were many in the group who were tired of waiting. James Bevel was especially impatient. Following the test sit-in's in November 1959, Bevel and a few others voiced their readiness for action. It seemed to them that the adult leaders in Nashville's black community always found some reason to wait. During December 1959, Nashville's black leaders urged the group to wait until after Christmas. They believed that the movement would gain little support from whites if they were prevented from Christmas shopping. After the Greensboro Four broke the ice, Bevel insisted that the Nashville Student Movement dive into the struggle. "If you asked us to wait until next week," he lamented, "then next week something will come up, and you'd say wait until

the next week, and maybe we'd never get our freedom."⁹⁶ They had waited all through the fall, through Christmas, and most of the winter to get started. Bevel argued that they were ready because they, unlike the Greensboro students, were trained by Lawson to remain nonviolent. In the end, the group agreed. The time for action had arrived.⁹⁷

The Nashville Sit-in Movement began on Saturday, February 13, 1960 when a river of nonviolent student activists flooded the city's downtown department stores. The night before, Lawson addressed a crowd of about five hundred at Smith's First Colored Baptist Church. Although Lawson asked the crowd to delay their protests, he could see by the eagerness in their faces that it wasn't going to happen. Whether he liked it or not, the group was going to act. So he proceeded with a "crash-course" on nonviolence and proper behavior at demonstrations. He instructed them to come back tomorrow dressed nicely—stockings and heels for the ladies and coats and ties for the men. In conclusion, he told them when in doubt, to follow the lead of his workshop students.

That next day a racially integrated group (mostly Black) of one hundred and twenty-four young men and women left First Colored Baptist and headed downtown to take part in one of the first large-scale nonviolent direct action protests of the Civil Rights Movement. In an orderly, military-style fashion, the group composed of mostly student activists walked down the streets of Nashville and into several of its dime and department stores including Kress, Woolworth's and McLellan's.⁹⁸ Even before infiltrating the stores, the group faced verbal assault from local white hoodlums who began to gather along the sidewalks.

⁹⁶Morris, 206.

⁹⁷Halberstam, 102.

⁹⁸Branch, 274.

Unimpressed, the marchers continued on, holding their heads high as the racists taunted them with familiar slurs: nigger, nigger-lover, etc. The students would not be stopped. For the Nashville Student Movement's tests sit-ins had gone unnoticed by the white community. Local whites were taken completely by surprise as black and white student activists sat down one-by-one at White-only lunch counters and demanded service. In his celebrated book, The Children, David Halberstam eloquently memorialized their historical act of defiance when he wrote the following:

“If it was not technically the first major act of social and civil disobedience taking place in this new decade, following as it did the protest in Greensboro, it was one of the first, and it and the demonstrations which now followed, wherein people went into the streets to protest their conditions and the perceived lack of justice in their lives, were to mark the new decade as being far different and infinitely more volatile than the rather passive decade which had preceded it.”⁹⁹

In the 1950's, civil rights battles were waged largely in America's courtrooms.¹⁰⁰ As I have said, members of the NAACP had worked throughout the previous five decades fighting for the rights of America's black citizens. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was a mass protest, not a “major act” of civil disobedience. I agree with Halberstam that civil rights activities in the 1950's were “rather passive.” Taking part in an economic withdrawal, or boycott, is not a direct challenge of the segregation system. It is a *refusal* to take part in it—passive resistance. But with the outbreak of the Sit-in Movement in 1960, the battlefield

⁹⁹Halberstam, 104.

¹⁰⁰Although there were instances in America's history before 1960 where blacks marched in the streets to raise awareness for racial and labor issues, the majority of black “civil rights” activity took place in the courtroom prior to the sit-in movement.

moved from inside the courtroom to the streets and stores. By directly challenging the system—physically sitting down somewhere they were not supposed to—the student activists in the Sit-in Movement were taking part in nonviolent direct action protests.

The white community had no idea how to handle the demonstrators. Unaware that anything like this would ever happen, the business owners frantically called one another with the news that blacks were coming into their stores and demanding service. Some whites shouted racial slurs, while others watched with mouths agape as young, neatly dressed students converged on *their* stores. Hoping to defuse the situation, the business owners began closing down their lunch counters. For Lawson, and the other student activists, shutting down the stores equaled success. Their voice had been heard. The protest had worked and all the students remained nonviolent. However, the abuse they encountered that day was primarily verbal. Their next assault would prove otherwise.

That Saturday and the next two Saturdays in February, Lawson met with student activists as well as members of the Nashville police force and white store managers. He wanted to know how all parties felt about the demonstrations that were now occurring every Saturday.¹⁰¹ The students were excited, and eager to keep the movement going forward. But the representatives from Nashville’s white community showed little concern for their attempts to desegregate the downtown lunch counters. “Their attitude about it,” Lawson recalled, “was this will not last. And as long [as] we were well behaved and peaceful, they were not going to let anything happen. And that’s exactly what did happen.” During the first two weeks of the Nashville Sit-in campaign, store managers prevented young white men

¹⁰¹ Lawson claims that the protests took part on Saturdays because that is when the students, the “chief force,” were free from classes.

from congregating in their stores to thwart potential violence against the protesters. Their actions protected their merchandise as much as it did the student activists. Like the merchants, the police also worked to keep crowds moving and to maintain visibility in order to discourage violent outbursts. “It went very well,” Lawson reported. “The police were orderly, the managers kept people from congregating without shopping. . . there were plainclothes detectives, so for those first two weeks the demonstrations went on without a hitch.”¹⁰² “They were very good in my judgement in those first couple of weeks in seeing to it that no crowds, unruly crowds, threatening crowds could congregate anywhere. But as [the movement] did not go away, then they took it with more seriousness. . . so that by the last Saturday in February they were threatening mayhem and arrests and what not for us.” The steadfastness of the student protesters tested the patience of the white store owners and policemen. The police and store owners decided that on February 28th—“Big Saturday”—that the students were on their own. With this in mind, Lawson planned the strategy for that day around their threats.¹⁰³

The preparations made before Big Saturday’s protest became a model for future protests in Nashville and other cities throughout the South. Anticipating that there would be violence and arrests, Lawson tried to make sure that the group’s “strongest and best leaders” were leading each of the small groups assigned to certain lunch counters. Above all, he made sure all who participated in that Saturday’s protest agreed to follow the Nashville Student Movement code of conduct. The group passed out a leaflet to all those who

¹⁰²Bobby L. Lovett, The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005) , 125.

¹⁰³James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict. Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

demonstrated outlining the code of conduct and asking them to agree to its terms. Lawson and the other leaders also agreed that they would have a very disciplined group sit-in at each location. Those groups would be accompanied by a second group of students whose job was wait in the crowd outside ready, if needed, to replace any group forced out of the stores by mob violence or arrest. On the day of the protest, screeners thinned out any person that looked liked trouble. Anything that could be considered a weapon—pocket knives, fingernail files, hat pins—had to be left at the First Colored Baptist Church before they left for the demonstration. In the end, over six hundred men and women were screened and given a specific task to follow.

On Big Saturday the Nashville Student Movement faced physical violence and unwarrented arrests from Nashville's bitter white community. It was the third consecutive Saturday of having *their* streets filled with protesters, and many whites had had enough. With store owners and policemen turning a blind-eye to the actions of the gathering white mob, many hoodlums took advantage of the chance to “kick some ass.” Despite verbal and physical attacks, the large group remained nonviolent. “All of our people were magnificent,” rejoiced Lawson in *A Force More Powerful*. “The young white men were in the stores, taunting, spitting, putting cigarettes on people, knocking two or three people off the stools and on to the floor. And our group, they were just really excellent. They sat through the discipline [sic] until the police came in and chased the guys out and then arrested everybody.”

Although many of Nashville's student leaders were arrested early that day, the demonstration continued due to careful planning by James Lawson and his comrades. For example, if a group of activists was arrested at Woolworth's, another group of students

emerged from the crowd ready to strike. When the police left the scene to arrest another group at another lunch counter, the second wave of student protesters took the opportunity to move in and take their places. According to Lawson, this happened at least five times that day. “And after some 80 folk had been arrested,” he concluded, “the police asked the stores to close down and no longer serve.”¹⁰⁴

The demonstration was a success on many levels. First and foremost, the students’ actions forced the white power structure to fold under their weight. The protests shut down downtown. Secondly, over six hundred protesters remained nonviolent in the face of brutal violence and ridiculous arrest. But above all, they proved to the white community that they were a force to be reckoned with. Their dress code, their overall calmness and discipline told whites that the protesters were organized and united. The police and other white observers watched in awe as one group of activists suffered the pain of a beating and the humiliation of arrest only to be replaced by another group unafraid to be subjected to the same indignity. Lawson claims, “They had anticipated that once arrests began, once the violence took place . . . our movement would dissipate, would be chased away. Because that’s the purpose, after all, of doing the violence of doing the arresting. It’s hopeful that then whatever this is will vanish and that’s the end of it. That didn’t happen.” Instead, Big Saturday reinforced to the student protesters that what men like Lawson had been preaching and teaching was right. Nonviolent direct action could effectively dismantle the iron maiden of southern segregation.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. [A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict](#). Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

¹⁰⁵James M. Lawson, Jr., Interview by Steve York. [A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict](#). Public Broadcasting System, 1999.

Many of Lawson's students remember Big Saturday as the day Lawson proved his commitment to nonviolence by standing up to a white "tough." At one of the stores during the demonstration, Bernard Lafayette, another student of Lawson's from American Baptist, witnessed a potentially hostile confrontation between James and a young white man. A group of whites were attacking another student named Solomon Gort. In accordance with Lawson's training, Lafayette quickly covered Gort's body with his to absorb some of their punishment. As they were being attacked, Lawson calmly and quietly walked over to observe his students in action. His quiet confidence angered the men and they turned their attention onto him. Enraged, one of the attackers spit on him. Lawson reacted by calmly asking the man for a handkerchief. To Lafayette's surprise, the man handed one over. Lawson wiped the spit off and handed the man his handkerchief back. Lawson then asked the "tough" if he had a motorcycle or a hot-rod. "A motorcycle," the man replied and the two continued talking about bikes instead of fighting. Lafayette had a revelation that day. He understood then why he was working to be nonviolent. Like Bevel, Lafayette was uneasy about the idea of nonviolence at first. He wasn't afraid of taking a beating. He *was* afraid of looking like a "sissy." Lawson's courage and ability to remain nonviolent that day proved to Lafayette that what he and the others were doing was an "act of courage, not an act of fear."¹⁰⁶

By the third week in April, the "Don't Buy Downtown" campaign against white businesses forced Nashville's white leaders to agree to reach a compromise with the protesting students. The boycott that followed the initial sit-ins hurt the profits of the white

¹⁰⁶Halberstam, 138.

business owners. Despite weeks of violence and arrest, the students continued to carry on the protest. Whether they liked it or not, the white business owners had little choice but to open their lunch counters to black customers. More than one hundred and fifty protesters, including Lawson, were arrested and jailed for taking part in the early demonstrations aimed to integrate downtown Nashville. An undocumented number of beatings were endured. But lunch counters were only the beginning. Lawson and the other students were not going to quit until they integrated every public place in Nashville. Over the next four years, Lawson, the students he trained, and the students they would train continued to wage a nonviolent war on Nashville's segregated downtown stores, restaurants, train stations and every public area in between.

Despite the fact that he was a good student and well-liked by many of the divinity school's faculty, Vanderbilt University expelled James Lawson after he refused to abandon the Sit-in Movement. The school may have been trying to break his will—to subdue his desire to rebel. However, their rejection of James Lawson only worked to further endear him to his students, and other student activists throughout the South. They were making a martyr out of him.

CHAPTER 5: The founding of SNCC: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

On April 15, 1960, James Lawson stood before a crowd of more than two hundred student activists at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, and delivered “We Have to Raise the Moral Issue,” a powerful speech that encouraged the protesters to continue to use nonviolent protest as their weapon for change. To warm up the crowd, Lawson began by honoring his peers for their selfless commitment to the sit-in movement. “The witness,” he declared, “of enthusiastic, but mature men and women, audacious enough to dare the intimidations and violence of racial injustice, [is] a witness not to be matched by any social effort in the history of the Negro or in the history of the nation.”¹⁰⁷ Foils of the “silent,” “uncommitted,” or “beatnik” college students of the early 1960’s, Lawson and many of the other motivated students in attendance had already faced fists and handcuffs for their cause. Some, like Ed King, carried around bloody shirts like war trophies.¹⁰⁸ But by mid-April, two months into a Sit-in movement that engulfed most of the major cities in Tennessee, Georgia, and North and South Carolina, some students were war weary. Lawson urged them to stay focused, and to ignore anyone and anything that would cause them to lose their drive for justice. “Already the paralysis of talk,” he explained, “the disobedience of piety, the frustration of false ambition, and the insensitiveness of an affluent society yearn to diffuse the meaning and flatten the thrust of America’s first major nonviolent campaign.” The student activists, he insisted, could not let anything slow them down. They had to listen to

¹⁰⁷James M. Lawson, Jr., *Speech at SNCC Founding Conference*, in Towns, W. Stuart, “We Want Our Freedom”: Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002) , 126.

¹⁰⁸Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1973.) , 38.

their own hearts, and not to parents, friends, teachers, religious leaders, or anyone else who would lead them to doubt the importance, the necessity, and the impact of the sit in movement. For this was not another “student fad” he explained, it was an organized strategy to destroy southern segregation and the student activists were making real progress. “Certainly no southern white person and a few Negroes,” he proclaimed, “expected the collegiates to face the hoses, jails, mobs and tear gas with such dignity, fearlessness, and nonviolence.”

Lawson continued explaining to the crowd what he was fighting for. Many student activists in attendance suffered brutal racial violence for the right to eat at lunch-counters labeled “White’s Only” in dime-stores. Sadly, some of those students did not understand that they should view their battle with lunch-counter segregation as the first strike in the war they started with America’s shameful institution of racial oppression. Lawson wanted the young activists to accept the idea that their cause was, as Ella Baker would later say, “bigger than a hamburger.” In *The River of No Return*, Cleveland Sellers admitted that he and many of the other students in attendance were only concerned with the hamburger. “Aw ain’t nothing more to it than a hamburger,” Sellers wrote. “If we can have this hamburger, everything will be straight.”¹⁰⁹ In response to this attitude, Lawson used part of his time to explain to them why “the hamburger” was only a symbol of segregation’s impact on their lives. “So the Christian student who has not yet given his support or mind to the movement might well want to know what the issue is all about,” postulated Lawson. “It is [sic] just a lot of nonsense over a hamburger? Or is it far more.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹Sellers, 36.

¹¹⁰Lawson, *Speech at SNCC Founding Conference*, 127.

Lawson stressed that the student activists were not working to point out issues such as police partiality to whites or the legal hurdles blacks have to overcome in the South. To Lawson, the issue at hand was the need to *destroy* all racial barriers in the South. By confronting legal and social segregation head on through nonviolent protest, Lawson sought to reunite blacks and whites under God's love. "The Kingdom of God, as in heaven so on earth," he demanded, "is the distant goal of the Christian. That Kingdom is far more than the immediate need for integration."¹¹¹ There needed to be a real change in racial relations in all of America, especially in the South. Lawson hoped to inspire the students to look beyond the simple pleasure of eating a hamburger to a beautiful future where blacks could not only eat where they choose to, they could live, work, and play anywhere without fear of racial injustice.

To fulfill this aim, Lawson argued that the activists needed to accomplish two important goals. First, he believed they must raise the "moral issue" of segregation. According to Lawson, the student activists had to demonstrate to America through their blood, sweat, and tears, that racial segregation was evil, immoral, and sinful. Lawson insisted that the matter was not legal, but moral. Like his mentor A. J. Muste, Lawson believed that human beings were morally good by nature. By raising the moral issue, the students would appeal to the natural goodness that all humans share. "Until America (South and North) honestly accepts the sinful nature of racism," he proclaimed, "this cancerous disease will continue to rape us all."¹¹² He continued by acknowledging that the sit-in movement had already caused some southern whites to reexamine their social customs. He

¹¹¹Lawson, *Speech at SNCC Founding Conference*, 128.

¹¹²Lawson, *Speech at SNCC Founding Conference*, 129.

said, “Witness further the many white people who say, ‘*I never thought the problem was so serious. I feel so ashamed.*’” The students, he urged, must continue to endure racial violence and the possibility of imprisonment or expulsion from school in order to prove to the entire nation that without mutual love and respect, there will never be good race relations in America.

Secondly, Lawson urged the students to “get moving,” because their nonviolent protests were helping to bring about real social changes in the South. Lawson, like many of the students in attendance that day, felt that the tactics of groups like the NAACP and black politicians resulted in little or no change in the white political and economic power structure. Despite Lawson’s father’s affiliation with the group, he like many of the eager young activists, felt the NAACP’s method of using the law to achieve change was taking too long. To reinforce the movement’s need to “get moving,” Lawson delivered this passionate statement: “The pace of social change is too slow. At this rate it will be at least another generation before the major forms of segregation disappear. All of Africa will be free before the American Negro attains first-class citizenship. Most of us will be grandparents before we can live normal human lives.”¹¹³ With the genie out of the bottle, the students could not stop. Their tactic—the sit in—was working. White America was beginning to take notice. Some “ashamed” whites were joining the movement. “The sit-in,” he told them, “symbolizes both judgement and promise. It is a judgement upon middle-class conventional, half-way efforts to deal with radical social evil. It is specifically a judgement upon contemporary civil rights attempts.”¹¹⁴ Where the NAACP hoped to use the court to show black Americans that the

¹¹³Lawson, *Speech at SNCC Founding Conference*, 129.

¹¹⁴Lawson, *Speech at SNCC Founding Conference*, 129-30.

law can work for them; the students, through their radical act of civil disobedience, wanted all of America to see that many young blacks were willing to fight segregation with or without the law's aid. Their bravery and selflessness brought in many new white student activists who rejected their parents' dirty habit of racial segregation. Lawson applauded their efforts.

To inspire his audience to work harder to expose the evil nature of segregation, Lawson concluded his speech by explaining how through nonviolent protest the students truly have the power to destroy the immoral institution. According to Lawson, their selfless bravery in the face of fear, their willingness to go to jail, and their vow to stay nonviolent when attacked, would prove to the nation that change is coming soon. "Nonviolence," he proclaimed, "strips the segregationist power structure of its major weapon: the manipulation of law or law enforcement to keep the Negro in his place." If the students continued to face segregation without fear of physical or legal reprimand, Lawson believed that the social custom of public segregation would crumble and bury police-enforced legal segregation in its ruins.

Lawson's "aggressive" speech received a standing ovation. According to Sellers, "the cheering, clapping students were in complete accord with his insistent militance."¹¹⁵ Lawson's passionate speech left many students questioning if Lawson was in fact challenging King for leadership of the sit-in movement. In an interview published in Howell Raines' My Soul is Rested, Julian Bond explained why he and many of the other eager young activists embraced Lawson's "dynamite" speech and its militant nonviolent stance. "There

¹¹⁵Sellers, 36.

was a feeling among many of us that James Lawson was challenging King for leadership of this group of young people,” he admitted. In Bond’s opinion, the crowd identified more with Lawson because he was younger than King, he was a fellow student and, “he was in his definition of nonviolence more militant than King.” Also, Bond remembered Lawson’s speech as “very aggressive.” According to Bond, Lawson’s militant speech “stirred people up” in a way King’s speech did not. “And then King made a speech,” he recalled. “Whatever it was, it left no real impression, except that this was Martin Luther King.”¹¹⁶ Lawson’s speech, on the other hand, is remembered by many in attendance as the highlight of the event.

There are many other reasons why, on that particular day, that James M. Lawson, Jr. was more well received by some students than Martin Luther King, Jr. Although he was only thirty-one years old, Lawson’s political resume was quite impressive. He had served time in a federal prison as a conscientious objector to war. He had studied Gandhian nonviolence during his Christian mission in India. He had hosted countless workshops on nonviolent direct action protest tactics before the sit-in movement began. He had been expelled from divinity school for refusing to abandon his leadership role in the Nashville sit-in movement. But, perhaps most importantly, he was an outsider. Lawson had left Ohio and moved to the South—the seat of racial hatred in America—to teach nonviolence and love to men and women bearing the scars of that hatred. Mary King, a white student activist in attendance, agreed with Bond that many students in attendance felt Lawson was challenging Martin Luther King, Jr. for leadership of the student movement. In her book, Freedom Song,

¹¹⁶Howell Raines, My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered. (New York: Penguin Books, 1977) , 102.

she claimed, “This reflected the relative modesty of Dr. King’s role in 1960. He was neither a dominant force nor the figurehead of the civil rights movement, although he was clearly the symbolic personality of the Montgomery bus boycott. He attended the Raleigh meeting as one of three SCLC representatives, and, particularly to those delegates who were from Dr. King’s hometown in Atlanta, he was but one more talented minister.”¹¹⁷ Bond backs Mary King’s claim. “We used to joke about [Martin Luther] King,” Bond admits. “He was a hometown boy . . . so it was hard for us to look at him as *Martin Luther King, Jr.* We used to joke and call him The Lord . . . You know, no man is a prophet in his own hometown.”¹¹⁸ John Lewis admitted in his autobiography that many of his fellow students at American Baptist were “lukewarm” to King at best.¹¹⁹

Despite his popularity amongst the student activists, Lawson would never become as famous as Martin Luther King, Jr. The reason for Lawson’s elusiveness is two-fold. First and foremost, Lawson never sought fame. Second, Lawson alienated himself from many African-Americans by his comments about the NAACP in his speech and later in the New York Times. On April 17, 1960, in an article titled “Negro Criticizes NAACP Tactics,” the Times revealed Lawson’s impatience with the NAACP. “The NAACP,” he insisted, was “a fund-raising agency, a legal agency, [that] has by and large neglected the major resource that we have—a disciplined, free people who would be able to work unanimously to implement the

¹¹⁷Mary King, Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. (New York: William Morrow and Co, Inc., 1987) , 45.

¹¹⁸Raines, 102.

¹¹⁹Lewis, 74.

ideals of justice and freedom.”¹²⁰ Lawson had planned to join the SCLC staff. But after his comments about the NAACP appeared in a national newspaper, the SCLC withdrew the offer. The NAACP provided the SCLC with legal assistance. King and the SCLC feared the NAACP would cut off ties with their organization if Lawson was appointed to a staff position. In Abraham Went Out, Jo Ann Robinson explains that A. J. Muste was asked to explain to Lawson why he could not work for the SCLC after publically criticizing the NAACP. According to Lawson, Muste “was very clear that [not appointing him] was not what he would have done but he was very understanding of King’s position.” In the end, the two agreed that “in potential and in power. . .and in the eyes of the world,” Martin Luther King was the “real leader” of the movement.¹²¹

At the first SNCC conference, the group decided to hold a second meeting a month later in Atlanta, GA. There, they established an office to act as the headquarters for the new student organization that grew out of the Raleigh conference. They elected one of Lawson’s students, Marion Barry, as their first chairperson. Most importantly, they asked James Lawson to draft a statement of purpose that identified the group as a nonviolent organization. Adam Fairclough accurately assesses Lawson and the Nashville student’s influence on SNCC’s embracing nonviolence as a political tactic and as a way of life. “Idealistic and religious, admirers of Lawson such as John Lewis, James Bevel, and Diane Nash made sure that SNCC adopted nonviolence as both a method and a philosophy.”¹²²

¹²⁰Claude Sitton, “Negro Criticizes NAACP Tactics” New York Times 17 April 1960.

¹²¹Robinson, 121.

¹²²Fairclough, 246.

SNCC circulated Lawson's one-page declaration throughout the South with the message: "We urge all local, state or regional groups to examine it closely. Each member of our movement must work diligently to understand the depths of nonviolence." Lawson's historic statement reads:

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from the Judaeo-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overcomes injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.

By appealing to the conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice

become actual possibilities.¹²³

Lawson's statement laid out his philosophical argument of why nonviolence would eventually make "reconciliation and justice" possible for all Americans. Drawing on Muste, Lawson urged the new student activists to remember the power of love over evil and man's inherent morality. For the power of the nonviolent activist comes from his/her ability to love their enemies. Through love, "the central motif of nonviolence," they have the power to displace fear, dissipate prejudice, and overcome injustice. As he did in his speech at SNCC's founding, Lawson insisted that through nonviolent direct action the students would continue their fight. They would not stop until they helped America establish a "social order of justice permeated by love." "Integration," he declared, "represents the first crucial step towards such a society." Many student activists throughout the South read Lawson's statement of purpose and adopted its message of hope and reconciliation. It is his greatest literary contribution to the Civil Rights Movement.

Later that year, after asking Lawson to "explain the philosophy of non-violent resistance which guides the protesters," the Southern Patriot published an article Lawson wrote entitled "Non-Violent Way." The newspaper article provides an important window into Lawson's views on the use of Christian nonviolence as a tool for social change at the start of the "Civil Rights Movement." Like his speech at the founding of SNCC, the article gave Lawson the opportunity to explain how to use nonviolent direct action to break the back of southern segregation. According to Lawson, Christian nonviolence is, "a basic religious faith that God operates in human history, that evil can be transformed only by good, that love

¹²³Sellers, 39.

must remain love even in the presence of hatred, that forgiveness is the only mode of retaliation, that it is better to suffer obediently before God than to inflict suffering on others, that evil is not met successfully with evil but only with radical good, the weapon of God himself.” The article shows how much influence A. J. Muste had on Lawson. In *Not by Might*, Muste wrote, “Evil will not overcome evil. Only by good, by love, can evil be overcome and the world redeemed.” Lawson echoed this sentiment in his article because he, like Muste, believed in the power of love to overcome evil. He taught this “radical” concept to his workshop students, and he continues to teach it today.

CONCLUSION: Out of the Shadow.

From the fall of 1958 to the end of 1960, James Morris Lawson, Jr. had more influence on the student activists that formed SNCC than Martin Luther King, Jr. In the years to come, SNCC became the major force in the war against southern segregation. In time, the group would fragment into smaller factions who waged internal battles over strategies and tactics. The movement continued, but the students were not united under the principles of nonviolence as they were at the start. Years of punishment at the hands of whites caused many to reject nonviolence as a way of life. Some continued using nonviolence as a tactic, and others abandoned the idea completely. But during the movement's gestation period, the group of men and women who united under Lawson learned from him how to be nonviolent. He taught them how to physically and psychologically resist the onslaught of racial hatred they would face throughout the 1960's and 70's. Many of his students grew to become leaders themselves. Stories of their courage have been documented in countless biographical sketches and narratives of the movement.

However, Lawson's story has never been told. There are no books written about him. He is one of the thousands of unsung heroes of the Civil Rights Movement. Unlike King, he never became a key figure. But he was important to the movement's success. In his last speech before his assassination, King acknowledged his friend Lawson's deep commitment to nonviolence. "And I want to commend the preachers," spoke King, "James Lawson, one who has been in this struggle for many years; he's been to jail for struggling; but he's still going on, fighting for the rights of his people."¹²⁴ To this day, Lawson continues to struggle

¹²⁴Martin Luther King, Jr., From *I See the Promised Land*, taken from James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper and Row

for the rights of oppressed Americans and other persecuted people around the world by teaching nonviolence and organizing demonstrations. Although Lawson's fame may never, and probably will never, reach that of Martin Luther King, his contributions to the 1960's Civil Rights Movement should not be lost in the shadow of King's legacy.

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