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Location: Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University

Q: It's 2007 and we are here at the Dr. Martin Luther King Institute and Research Center at Stanford, and we are interviewing Dr. Clayborne Carson for the Journeys of Reconciliation Project.

A: It's actually the King Research and Education Institute.

Q: Okay, okay, my mistake. Dr. Carson, could you tell us a little bit about where and when you were born, and some of your childhood experiences?

A: I was born in June of 1944 and in Buffalo, NY. My mother was, at the time, moving around the United States because my father was in Europe, I guess as part of the invasion, [the] Normandy Invasion, so I kind of grew up as a war baby. [I was] part of the beginning of the baby boom. I didn't see my father until probably a couple years later.

Q: What was the social situation where you grew up?

A: Well as I said, [during] my early life we were moving around a bit until we settled [for] a little time in Seattle. That's the first city I have any memory of, and I spent maybe four years there. Then we moved to Los Alamos, NM, which was at that time moving from military to civilian control; that was the military establishment where they built the first atomic bomb. After my dad got out of the military his first job was to come there as a security inspector, so he went there initially and then a couple of years later, probably about 1949 or so, we came and joined him. That's where I started kindergarten and went straight through high school in Los Alamos. And as far as what it was like growing up there, it was kind of like growing up on a military base. For part of my childhood it had a fence around it, and you had to show a pass to get in. Gradually they took down the fence, but it was still a very protected community. There was no other town within 30 miles of Los Alamos, so you were kind of up there on a mountain. We lived on the edge of town, so I grew up walking out my front door, and there was a canyon and a mountain, no other houses for miles and miles and miles. You know, I didn't have to worry about things 'cause there was no crime to speak of. We were one of three black families in Los Alamos, so there wasn't really a racial problem. I mean it was kind of like being in the military, in some respects. It was a government owned town and the schools were very good. Most of my classmates' parents were scientists, so I was always exposed to science. I thought about being a scientist myself before going to college, taking calculus at the college level, and decided maybe that's not for me. But that was really the background.

Q: So how did you feel about being a member of one of only three black families in the area? Did you feel isolated at all?

A: Yeah, and that had a lot to do with the way I looked at the world. I kind of felt like I was separated from things that were going on at that time during the late 1950's, early 1960's. Things like Little Rock and the sit-ins and all these exciting things were going on, and I knew that they had something to do with my life, but they were way out there, and I definitely felt politically isolated. When I went off to college, I felt a real desire to kind of get out of that small-town life and kind of explore the world. I really had a wanderlust, I guess. And that explains a lot of the things I did during my college years. I tried to travel and really wanted to get out and see the world.

Q: So when and how did you first become aware of these things that were going on, the civil rights...?

A: Oh, from the newspapers and radio and television...the media, basically.

Q: So, what's your first memory of it?

A: Well, I think Little Rock was probably my first memory of anything that really had to do with race, and the fact that they were kids not that much older than I was. I was probably, I guess by that time, in junior high school maybe. And these were kids not much older [than I was] and they were right at the center of all of this activity that was going on. I felt that they were really brave, and then when the sit-ins happened a few years later, you know...by the time I went to college I really wanted to make [a] connection with some of that. I felt that that was the kind of excitement that I wanted.

Q: Did this aspiration that you had to kind of get involved or link up with the civil rights movement influence your choice of college? And along with that, could you tell us where you went to college?

A: Well I started at the University of New Mexico, so it was just kind of like I went to the state college, but once I got there I found ways to travel. That brought me in because I started identifying with the few people on campus who were civil rights activists, most of them white. I think I remember one, Ed Louis, who later became publisher of "Essence" magazine, was another student, probably the only black student who was really active at that time. I talked to them a lot, tried to find out what was going on, and I became active in student government so I would get [to] go to conferences. It was finally [at] one of the conferences, the National Student Association Conference in the Summer of 1963, where I first met people in the civil rights movement. People like Stokely Carmichael (a Civil Rights leader who coined "Black Power") and some of the others who were there. That was right before the march on Washington, so I was determined to get to the march and finally was able to hitch a ride with a group. The conference was in Indiana at University of Indiana, Bloomington. I got a ride to the march, and that was the most exciting thing I'd ever done in my life up to that point. I didn't tell my parents I was going, I just kind of went and showed up on the morning of the march and participated, saw more black

people than I had ever seen in...in all my life put together, at that point. And [I] saw Martin Luther King, and saw students who were the SNICK workers in their overalls in the march, and they seemed very spirited. And I remember talking to Stokely Carmichael. When I told him I really wanted to go to the march, he kind of put it down [saying], “why do you want to go to that picnic?” and, “why don’t you join us in Mississippi?” and so, even though it was the most radical thing that I had ever done, I knew that there was this other category of people who were doing something much more substantial, going to places like Albany, GA or Greenwood, MI. I greatly admired them, but at that point I really wasn’t ready to give up school and join the movement.

Q: Could you tell us about the feel of the march? Could you go into a little bit more detail of the emotion and the kind of spirit of the march when you were there?

A: Yeah, I mean I had never been involved in any demonstration before, so something this big, you can imagine, [me] coming from a small town with maybe 15000 people and suddenly seeing a quarter of a million people, it was just overwhelming, and to see that most of them were black was just something that was beyond my experience. I remember it was very hot; I’d never experienced that kind of humid heat that you get in Washington in August. So first of all, part of it was just kind of keeping cool and being around the pool. I didn’t know a soul at the march. I was completely by myself, so I just kind of wandered around the crowd and talked to some people and tried to get up close to the speakers, stand, and just [had] lots of experiences, just lots of taking it all in, just taking the scene in. At the back of my mind [I was] wondering how I was gonna get home, because I had no clue...I had a round trip ticket to Indiana, and maybe about thirty dollars in my pocket, so I wasn’t sure how I was going to get back. And you know, I remember anticipating seeing King, ‘cause I had obviously heard a lot about him and everyone knew that he was going to be speaking at the end, but I don’t have a vivid memory of his speech. After the fact, everyone kind of looks upon it as “the great speech,” but at the time, I was probably just exhausted after a day in the sun, and of course, really wondering about well, you know...this event’s gonna end, and what am I gonna do? I’m here in Washington D.C.

So it was just a great day, and I wish I had taken pictures and done something that could jar my memory of different things, the people I met and scenes that I saw, but I didn’t do any of that. I didn’t know that it was going to be historical; I just thought that I should be there. At the end of the day I actually ran into some people from New York, and they offered [to give me a ride]. They came down on a bus and they said, “Well, we’ve got some extra seats on the bus if you want to come back with us.” I kind of lost track of where the people from Indiana were, so I decided okay...seen Washington, might as well go to New York. I got there, I guess I maybe arrived at Penn station at about 11 o’clock at night, and took the subway up to Harlem. I kind of knew that Harlem was up there, cause I had maybe read Langston Hughes and had some notion about that. [I] got off the subway in Harlem close to midnight, and started walking around asking where I could spend the night. I was lucky I didn’t get hit over the head or something, but I found somebody who put me up for the night and told them I was from the march, so that probably impressed them. The next day [I] spent some time wandering around New York and seeing the big city, and then I went over to the bus station ‘cause I had a bus

ticket to Indiana, and exchanged my ticket from Indiana back to New Mexico for a ticket from New York to Indiana 'cause I figured hitchhiking out of New York was not going to be a great deal. So I then had a bus ride from New York to Indiana, got out in Indianapolis, and hitchhiked to New Mexico. I basically walked to the outskirts of Indianapolis and managed to get back; that was another excitement. It's kind of like someone must have been looking over me because I hitchhiked through Indiana, and that's not really a safe area for a young black kid to be hitchhiking through, but I managed to get rides and get back home. I didn't tell my parents until many years later that I had done this.

Q: What do you think you drew from this experience?

A: I think it was mainly that I proved that I could do it, that I could do something really exciting on my own. It was my first assertion of real independence. I kind of made a vow to myself that my life was gonna be exciting...growing up in a small town, at least for me...I never wanted to live that kind of a life. It was boring, and it was culturally boring, it was intellectually boring, and I felt that my life was going to be something more than that. So it was kind of like, okay, I knew this intellectually: I wanted to do something distinctive with my life. This was the first time I had actually turned that into action and just said, "Yeah, I can do this," and, "I can survive on my own." Even more than whatever happened at the march, the act of going there, I think, changed my life and put it on a different course because from that point on...if you're willing to do that, then lots of other decisions become much easier to make, like leaving New Mexico, coming to Los Angeles, and going to UCLA. I mean, those decisions I just made on my own. I didn't consult with my parents, I just decided that I needed to transfer out of New Mexico and get to a bigger place. My sister was living in Los Angeles, so I just on the spur of the moment...I actually went through a process of, at that time, volunteering for the Peace Corps and getting deselected from the Peace Corps after going through the training...so after I came back from that I really determined I did not want to go back to [the] University of New Mexico, so I just told my sister that. You know, asked her if I could come out and stay with her for a while and came out and enrolled at UCLA [and] got a job. I was completely financially independent from my parents at that time. I mean, certainly even when I went off to college I was pretty much financially independent.

[Q: Let's just cut for a minute, I need to move that Windex bottle because when your panning over, I don't want the Windex bottle in the picture, sorry...]

A: So that was 1965. I started at UCLA and quickly got acquainted with people in the movement in Los Angeles. I met a person by the name of Charlie Samuelson who was involved with a group called INVAC: nonviolent action committee. And so I started relating to that group and also started writing for the Los Angeles free press...started writing articles mainly about the movement. It was a way for me, really, to have an excuse to go up to people and interview them and find out because I was from a small town. I mean, they knew a lot more about things than I did. But I knew that I wanted to be a writer, so it made a lot of sense to kind of have this occupation of being a reporter for the LA free press, which was kind of a small underground newspaper at the time. So

that allowed me to interview people, talk to different people and become kind of a participant observer. I would sometimes participate in activism...get arrested a few times, but also write about the movement, so that kind of dual role of activist and journalist occupied my time. When I wasn't working I had a job at audience studies, which was an advertising research part of Columbia Pictures, so I worked a full time job, was a full time student, and was also an activist...so I didn't sleep very much.

Q: Could you tell us about one of your most memorable interviews?

A: Boy, I had a lot of them. I interviewed Stokely Carmichael a number of times 'cause I had known him from before, and when he became more famous after he started talking about Black Power there was some cache to get an interview with Stokely Carmichael, so I had that connection and I published some pieces about him. I did an interview with a guy named Ron Karenga, who was a black nationalist, still is a very active guy, who basically invented Kwanza. I think I did the first major interview that had ever been published about him back in 1966 so, you know, [I did] those kinds of interviews. Also, being a journalist, I could get into things. I went, for example, to the first Beatles concert in Los Angeles...I just [went] out of curiosity. I could get in, so [I] decided to see what that phenomenon was all about. And I remember not hearing very much because all you hear are the screams of all of these young girls, but you know I could say I saw the Beatles, at least. [I] went to...just lots of things, part of the cultural awakening I saw, the beginnings of the counterculture, [I] lived in Van Ness, Venice Beach...I guess what people would do during that time [was] just participate in the counterculture. Go to love-ins and rock concerts and, you know...sex, drugs, and rock and roll. That's what it was. Again it was, for me, such a contrast to what I had grown up with. I mean, I just loved LA, I still do. People can put it down with all the smog and that kind of stuff, but for me it was just like I'd gone to heaven because all these things were going on. I had a wonderful job, even. Because I worked on the Columbia Pictures lot, I could see Jane Fonda during the day...all of it was just like a dream to me. I felt that this was what life is all about, is seeing and doing things, interesting things, and taking chances and riding a motorcycle without a helmet and doing all the stuff I guess you do when you're twenty-one years old and think that life goes on forever.

Q: So, after you graduated from UCLA, did you continue to work at Columbia Pictures or did you stay in the city?

A: No, actually what happened there is I finally just kind of crashed and burned in my senior year of UCLA because I had been really burning the candle at both ends. I had been working, sometimes I would work sixty hours a week because there was so much work to get done and the more money I earned, the more I could spend, so...I don't know about you, but at a certain time in your life you feel like you can get by without sleep, and especially during the summers I would just work all the time and just earn more money, and so somewhere along the way I just started crashing out. I mean it was quite clear that my health was being affected. So by mutual agreement, I left my job. You know, I wasn't doing as good a job and I knew I needed to take a break 'cause I was also trying to write for the LA free press in my spare time, so I left that job. And that's

actually when I moved from the Hollywood Hills to Venice because the Hollywood Hills was getting too expensive, and I needed to get a very cheap place. [I] Just kind of became a freelance writer, tried to finish up my UCLA career. I also had a draft problem because I got my draft notice during that time, so I had to figure out what to do with that. I met the woman who is now my wife, and so we were living together in Venice and trying to figure out what to do cause I knew I wasn't going to go into the military, so what was the option? Going to prison? We thought of another option, and that was leaving the country. Right after graduation in '67, I earned some money just driving a taxi, just trying to earn some cash, and she saved up some money. And that fall we left the United States, I guess at that point with the idea that maybe not coming back. So that was a whole other adventure of just leaving the country and trying to survive in Europe, and going to Great Britain, France, Italy, Spain, Morocco. Just hanging out for a while. [It was] 1968, I guess, coming back in the spring of 1968. By that time I guess the reason why I came back is that she was diabetic. She didn't know that, but in Spain we were living very low-level [kind] of life, kind of bread and cheese and a bottle of wine, and lived on a commune for a while. She started feeling really sick and just really completely out of it, and we didn't know what was wrong, but decided that yeah, maybe we really need to go home and get some medical attention. So at that point, I guess around March of '68, decided to come back to the United States. Also, we had applied for landed immigrant status in Canada and they denied that um, probably because of my political activities. So we didn't really have any place to go that was going to accept us at that point, so it was come back to the United States, and as soon as we got back to Los Alamos, where my parents were living, [I/ we] checked her into a hospital and, you know, turns out she was very, very sick. When she got well, at least well enough to go back to Los Angeles, we went there. By that time I'm trying to just survive and got a job programming computers; I'd learned how to do that. [I] did that on the UCLA campus for a while and then made the decision to go to graduate school because late 60's that was when things were beginning to change in terms of bringing more black students onto campus, black studies programs, you know all of that sort of thing. I started volunteering to be a volunteer TA [Teaching Assistant] in one of the classes on race relations, one of these new classes that had been set up in 1968. And one of my professors knew that I had done this earlier writing and so [he/ she] kind of encouraged me to go to graduate school. And also I was doing programming for a professor, a historian, who was doing quantitative history. So all of that kind of led me to think...well, maybe I should go to graduate school, and [I] decided to do that in fall of '69. So, that was my 60's.

Q: So...during this period in your life, did you feel the weight of discrimination? And how did you feel it?

A: I felt more that I was fighting against it. I was part of the movement, you know. I was a protestor, as I said I got arrested a few times. I was very involved in kind of militant black politics, and then of course when the war came, [it] became a big issue. [I was] Very much involved in the anti-war movement. I was just very political and at that point just felt that there needed to be really radical political changes in the United States. So that was my response. I'd had experiences of discrimination and I'd gone through that,

but it wasn't really like I felt oppressed as an individual. I was having the time of my life, so why would I feel oppressed?

Q: So, when you were in Europe, did you feel like you were severed from the movement you were trying so much to be a part of?

A: Yeah, but I felt that I needed to get away at that time. I mean part of what was happening is that the movement itself was changing, and for me the fact that my wife is white and Jewish was a factor at that point because this was the time of Black Power, Black Nationalism. I remember one of the people I had been very active in the movement with...because of her, he said, "Well, I'll never speak to you again," and he never did. It was that kind of personal response, too, and I had never felt that the movement was about that kind of racial separatism. I guess for me it was really about freedom to do what you want, and gaining that freedom. So I think that there was a side of me that kind of felt [that], yeah, it might be good to get away and think about things a bit, and you know, if I want to be a writer, think about that. And so there was a lot of time for reflection going through Europe at that point.

Q: Dr. Carson, to backtrack a little bit to what you said on the March on Washington...you said you saw Dr. King and you didn't really remember much of his speech. What compelled you, then, to become so involved in the study of him and his life?

A: Well that didn't happen until much later. At that point my real connection emotionally and politically was with the younger people, who by that time were becoming restless with King. The young people in SNICK saw that King was too cautious and not willing to go to the places they were willing to go to. So those are the people I identified with, the Stokely Carmichaels, the Bob Moses, people like that who were doing work in the black belt areas; very dangerous areas. So that's what led me to...you know, I wanted to be like them. I wanted to take the kinds of risks that they wanted to take and have their kind of attitude about change. So I kind of shared their notion that King was much more cautious, eventually questioning King's nonviolence. I think that they were more willing to see nonviolence as a tactic, not as a philosophy of life. So that's the kind of attitude that brought me into the movement. In Los Angeles, those were the types of people I related to, the younger people, either college age or just out of college. For example, it was an organization that you could only belong to if you had been arrested, so there were no people in it who didn't believe in civil disobedience. It made discussions at meetings a lot simpler because everyone basically agreed that you had to be willing to do that. And then the question is, just when and how? I think that that organization was kind of the SNICK equivalent in Los Angeles during the mid 60's.

Q: Could you describe one of the times you were arrested?

A: Oh, sure. Well, one of the times that I actually set out to get arrested and ended up not getting arrested was the first time I went with them on a protest. They were trying to bring about change in jobs 'cause in the urban north it wasn't about being able to sit at a

lunch counter, but more about jobs issues. So they had a sit-in at Thrifty Mart, which was kind of a Safeway-like store in Orange County and Anaheim. Well...was it in Anaheim? I think it was Santa Ana, 'cause it wasn't a really big city. We went there on a Friday afternoon, and the whole idea was that we were going to disrupt the store to force them to change their policies. You'd go and get groceries, put them in a cart, get up to the front of the line and then stop. Of course, that would stop the whole store and they would lose a lot of business; if you do this enough times you force them to negotiate an agreement to bring in black clerks and other changes like that. Anyway, we did that...did the whole thing. [We] sat in the doors, [and] kind of closed down the store. We let people out but didn't let anyone in, and of course the store manager was livid. [He] called the police and the police came out. I think the entire Santa Ana police force kind of came over, but we really had them kind of outnumbered because it was gonna be very hard for them to arrest us all. I remember there was this discussion between the store manager and the police because the police wanted to just get us out of town, and the store manager was just so angry and wanted us arrested for trespassing and all. So finally, the police kind of negotiated this agreement. This was over a period of maybe three hours... [they said] that if we would leave, they wouldn't arrest us. So we kind of thought about it, and said, "Hey, you know we've...we've shut down this store for three hours, and if we leave now, we don't get arrested, we don't have to go through the whole thing." So we actually left, and I remember the store owner was just so angry because he had lost three hours of business, [and] we were gonna get away with it and with no charges against us. So that was actually my first sit-in, which resulted in a not-arrest. Later on, of course, we weren't so lucky. I remember Charlie, the guy who got me involved. They started upping the penalty for trespassing. They could charge you with a number of different things, [such as] disorderly conduct, misdemeanors...but certain things were felonies, so you got a long term. Luckily, I only spent short times in jail before getting bailed out and I actually became one of a legal case that went to the California Supreme Court about the right to protest. I certainly would not say that I sacrificed the way people in the South [did], spending times in a Southern jail and stuff. For me it was relatively simple; I just had these charges against me, and spent a few nights in jail. That's not a big deal.

Q: So, as you said, the group that you identified with was kind of...not anti-King, but they didn't see eye to eye with his philosophies.

A: Right.

Q: So why was it, then, that you got so involved with his work?

A: Well as I said, much later I wrote a book about SNICK. That was published in the early 1980's. It kind of made my reputation as a scholar who looked at the movement not from the top down but from the bottom up. But then, in 1985, Coretta Scott King called me, and she had heard about [the fact] that I was this scholar who had been active in the movement. And she asked me whether or not I would be interested in editing Martin Luther King's papers. I was at first kind of skeptical, and said, "Maybe you should get somebody else," but eventually I was persuaded that this was something I should do. It would give me a change to look at the movement from the grassroots up and then from

King's perspective down, and maybe come to some final conclusion about [the black struggle]. I guess that's what I'm still doing, is trying to come to terms with how I would interpret the black struggle.

Q: So then, to what extent do you believe, as of now, [that] Dr. King led or influenced the movement?

A: Well I think in general Dr. King has become wiser as I've become older. I think that I kind of understand. Then, I was an impatient twenty-something. You know, I wanted change and I wanted it now. I didn't have the sense of perspective about that, and I didn't understand that the issue of nonviolence is not just an issue of what tactics you're willing to use to bring about change, but it's also an attitude about the people you're working with. I mean, I went through the experience of seeing black people killing other black people because they were not militant enough or because they disagreed about ideological issues. I was on the UCLA campus when members of the Black Panther party were killed by members of the US Organization, two of them shot dead within fifty yards of my office. I saw what those kinds of attitudes lead to, and once you go down that path...so that was part of my questioning. As a person reflecting back on this experience, I think my work has been both celebratory in a sense of saying, "Yeah, they did a lot of great things," but [is] also looking critically at our youthful indiscretions and understanding that King did offer something special. He had a longer-term perspective and he understood that nonviolence, ultimately, is the way to go. Now it took me a long time to reach that conclusion; I had to go through a lot of experiences to get there. You know, its not like I woke up one day and just decided that King's philosophy was right. It was just a gradual process of seeing that the alternatives led in a direction I didn't want to follow.

Q: What were some of the experiences that led you to, perhaps, understand King's message?

A: I think, largely, that [it was] the internal fights within the black struggle. I mean, probably if somebody had told me, "look, if you just use a little violence here and there and have a brief revolution that's going to be over in a few months, and after that the world is going to be this tremendously better place..." you know, the promise of revolution...there's always that sense that after the revolution, things are gonna be so much better that it's worth all the destruction that you're gonna cause. But I guess what I never really understood was the way in which after the revolution, or during the revolution, how much of that anger and resentment and violence is directed against each other, too. You know, it gets to the point where the revolution eats its own children...I guess it's kind of the classic example of the French Revolution that turned on itself, and you saw that in the black struggle. It's one thing to be angry at the oppressors over there, [but] it's so that anger gets directed at the person next to you, and I saw a lot of that. And I saw the way in which racial resentments became so intense. It was just...it was ugly. It was the kind of thing that I did not expect to see. And so, later, as I began to reflect upon it, it became clear that you had to find some different kind of approach and envision the world in a little bit different way. But that took time; it's still a process that's going on

because at that time I identified with the revolutionaries and I thought Castro was a heroic figure. And [I thought] Ho Chi Min was a heroic figure, and only later do you find out that they're also mass murderers, at least Ho Chi Min and Mao. That goes along with revolution; there's that other side.

Q: So now that you've come to terms with King's legacy and embraced his philosophies by and large, would you say that opening up that portion or into that way of life to the community is the mission of the Institute?

A: Yeah, yeah. I think the mission is global peace with social justice. I think you've gotta have both. I don't believe in people just saying, "okay, let's bring peace to the world," because if you bring peace in [to] a situation where people are being oppressed and [there is] injustice, it's the peace of forcing people to accept their oppression. To me what King offered was a way to bring about social justice. That is, in the end, going to result in a peaceful relationship so that the oppressor understands the injustice and you're not just forcing the change; you're trying to convince and persuade. I think those kinds of changes are much more lasting. I think the problem with revolution is that the people you're defeating are not going to forgive you for defeating them, and as soon as they have the ability to get back at you, they will. So you're creating a situation of ongoing violence, and the only way you can contain that is to become more violent yourself. It kind of takes thugs to win a revolution, and then after the revolution, the thugs are in power, so...you know, you understand the limitation of that.

Q: You expressed to us how you traveled to Europe. Have you ever traveled to Africa?

A: Sure, yeah.

Q: Have you traveled to South Africa?

A: Sure.

Q: Have you found any parallels between your journey towards civil rights and the civil rights journey by and large and the apartheid movement?

A: Oh yeah, yeah. In fact, I've been working on a film about the international anti-apartheid movement. We've got one episode already done; it's a multi-part film, like *Eyes on the Prize*, basically. And yeah, there are a lot of parallels. As you know, the South African struggle went through its nonviolent period, and then it turned after Sharpeville, to sabotage and other things. But I think, ultimately, the South African struggle won because of the strategy of nonviolence. I don't think that they could've overcome the South African government through violence. We know now that the South African government had access to atomic weapons, so it would've been useless for Nelson Mandela sitting in prison to try to think of violently overthrowing the government. I think that it ultimately shows the power of, certainly, a lot of violence associated with the anti-apartheid movement, but ultimately it was not violence that won, ultimately it was the willingness to bring about reconciliation that achieved the victory.

And I think that that was a much more lasting victory than anything that you could've brought about by force.

Q: Do you think that there are both lessons the United States can take from the South African model and lessons South Africa can take from our model?

A: I think that there're lessons that the world can take from both of them, and from Ghandi, and I think all of these movements have lessons to teach the world. I don't read them literally, [thinking] that you can take tactics and strategies from one struggle and apply them mechanically to another but I think the bottom line of any nonviolent struggle is that it envisions, at the end of the struggle, that you're going to live in the same place with the people you're struggling against. I mean, that is the essence of it, is communicating to the oppressor that, "yes, I'm going to struggle militantly to try to stop you from doing something that I think is unjust. But, at the end of the day, or at the end of the struggle, I want to create a world where both of us can live peacefully together." If you can effectively communicate that, then it kind of weakens the resolve on the other [side], like in Israel and Palestine where you have Israelis that really feel that at the end of the struggle they might be in the sea...if they really believe that, then they're gonna hold out. They're not going to give in. And I think white South Africans [are] the same way. I mean, if they really feel that there's not going to be a place for them in a black controlled South Africa, we would still be at it today.

Q: Speaking of effective communication and all of that, would there be something that you'd want to say to people of the United States or the general public about civil rights and the struggle that still exists today?

A: I think the major thing you can say to any more privileged society, and I guess the United States is a more privileged society, is that you've got to create conditions under which change toward justice can occur nonviolently, or else it will inevitably occur violently. I think you can pretend that the world can go along and, you know, you have a small group of "haves" and a large group of "have-nots." You can pretend that that situation can exist indefinitely without people objecting, but in the end it's like an earthquake; you're just building up more and more tension and when the clash comes, it's very violent unless you've created the possibility of some other kind of change. And I think that that's the lesson that I want to teach, that's the lesson I want to take to the world. I think that's what King would be doing today, is trying to take that lesson to the world.

Q: We're speaking about sending the lesson to the world, [to] the United States. And this brings to mind the "Eyes on the Prize" series...

A: Mhm.

Q: ...which is probably the most widely viewed series of its kind; I know most American high school students have seen it, and you are the senior advisor for the series. Could you comment both on the experience of being senior advisor for the series and...

A: Well, I was one of four senior advisors.

Q: Oh, one of four, okay, being one of the senior advisors, and your objective in working on this project.

A: Yeah, I mean...one of the nice things about working on that project is that Henry Hampton got us together even before the filming started, and we had a number of discussions about what this series was going to be about. I think I made it clear, and other people who were influential, made it clear that this was not going to be just about King, it was going to be about the grass roots people, it was going to be about young people who played a major role in the struggle. It was going to really discuss [and] show what was going on in different parts of the country, and I think in that way conveyed the notion that these changes were brought about by ordinary people who did extraordinary things. I think we succeeded; I think to a large degree no series that has that many hands in it is going to satisfy any one person. There're some episodes I like better than other episodes. But I think we did convey that; you see a lot of images of young people bringing about change. You see a lot of images of people with maybe third grade educations, you know, participating in the struggle. You see the Martin Luther Kings and you see the more articulate leaders. You see the way in which they interacted with each other and created just a fantastic movement. It's kind of interesting that [for] the first part of my life as a scholar, I guess for a bout the first twelve years or so, I was always trying to teach something about the movement that I couldn't show [0:54:42]. In a way, creating "Eyes on the Prize" helped my teaching enormously because I could, for the first time, show what I had been trying to describe to my students; it has become a central part of my lectures.

Q: As you said, Dr. Carson, you've come full circle; you've done a lot of things that a lot of us can only dream about. Do you feel like your journey towards civil rights reconciliation awareness is over now?

A: Oh, no, no, not by a long shot. I think that we're at a period of pause. I think that a lot of the changes that occurred by the 1960's were more legalistic changes. More, what we were able to do was kind of like eliminating slavery. It eliminated a legal system of oppression. The Jim Crow system, or discrimination, was kind of institutionalized, and segregation was institutionalized. We succeeded there, and that was a tremendous victory. After that, the country as a whole kind of moved toward a more conservative direction, and now we're in a situation where the real question is: what are the movements of the twenty-first century? What kind of social justice issues are going to grab your generation and see as the crucial issues of the twenty-first century? I mean it's obvious that it has something to do with what's happening in terms of the global economy, the widening gulf between rich and poor and all the implications of that... healthcare, the criminal justice system, you know, all of those sorts of things that are related to that. Somewhere there's going to be important movements. There always have been and there always will be. I can't really judge which ones, but I think all the time when you have these movements, they're going to look to the past to try to get some

guidance, but they're also going to be innovative, they're also going to be creating new things, new tactics, new strategies. I think that my job is to kind of pass on the torch to a new generation. And if you think back in history, it all goes back to the exodus story, basically. I mean, why did they call King the Moses of his people? It goes back to a story of liberation of Jews from Egypt, and how that story of liberation within the Christian tradition, [the] Western tradition, has become the archetypal story of liberation, and every successive liberation story. The French Revolution, the American Revolution, all of them influenced subsequent. You know when King is at the March on Washington, he's referring back to the Declaration of Independence as a model. All of these movements re-use that history and gain inspiration, say, you know, "Yeah, we're faced with all of these issues of social justice, but we can look back and, yeah, see our predecessors, the Wilbur forces, the people who in their day took on a major system of oppression and struggled valiantly over decades and finally were able to achieve a great victory. I don't know what that victory's going to be in the twenty-first century, that's for your generation to decide. But I do know that it is important; maybe "Eyes on the Prize" is kind of the equivalent to the Exodus story. Maybe if the Bible were written today it would be multimedia and it'd be on public television. We got to tell the story well, we got to tell it in a way that makes sense to future generations, and that's my job.

Q: Do you see education in general as having that role?

A: Yeah, I mean, to me education is liberation. Education always has a function of some sort, so it's either educating you to dominate and manage other people, which sometimes it can be, so training the elites of the future to be elites, or it's education about "How can I as an individual shape the world?" and empowering individuals to think of ways in which they can make the world react to them in a positive way. So, if they feel oppressed, education is about teaching us ways to end that oppression. Now often we don't think about it in that way, and often when we don't think about it that way it's being used for other purposes, you know, control and management and those sorts of things. But I think ideally education is about teaching everyone where they are in the world, how to think about that in terms of social justice, and how to change the world to make it better for them and their families, and in that way education is about empowerment.

Q: [question prompted out of range of mic.]

A: One of the things I did was serve on the College Board for a while, and one of the ironies is that the kids most likely to get African American history were the prep-school kids because they got the more innovative education. The kids in public schools were getting the more traditional education so they couldn't answer questions about black history as well as the kid who went to Exeter [a prestigious independent day school], you know? I think what we've been trying to do, and she was part of this when she was head of the Oakland schools, [is] to try to infuse the curriculum with good materials that are not just there as electives but also help kids read better [and] increase their motivation. That's been a major part of the last, oh, twelve, thirteen years of my life. I've just spent a lot of time doing public education activities and, well, that's it. [01:02:03]

Q: Dr. Carson, I wonder if you could just fill us in or comment on what you're doing now, particularly your work in China, I believe?

A: Well it's part of, in general, my notion of King as a global figure, and that has kind of taken me to lots of different places [such as] China. I just got back from Paris earlier, where they're dealing with their own racial issues and, you know, it was a very exciting two months spent there, kind of talking to lots of people about that and going to different places in Europe, in England, in Africa, [and] in different parts of Africa trying to deal with bringing about social change. So, China is really exciting, this was the third time I'd been there. And one of my former students is living there, has been living there for a number of years since she graduated in 2003, and she suggested a couple years ago when I first visited that we bring King to China. The Chinese people are somewhat familiar with King, they get exposed to the "I Have a Dream" speech, it's part of the curriculum in the schools. But they don't know a whole lot about King's life, I mean, they see it as more as just this speech that's kind of in isolation. So she had seen my play performed in Oakland; Danny Glover had done a reading playing Martin Luther King, and she'd been kind of inspired by that back in 2003, so this is 2005 and she says, "why didn't you play the play to China?" and I thought maybe at most we might be doing a reading on a college campus or something like that, but she had something much bigger in mind.

She went to the National Theatre of China, the leading theatre group, and proposed they do it, and they did. They accepted it as a major production, so I went over a few weeks ago and the Chinese cast had already been rehearsing for almost a month. So we have this production with Chinese actors speaking Chinese, and we brought over an African American gospel choir including three Stanford students who were part of the gospel choir. The production brought together the Chinese actors [and] the African American gospel choir in this story of King's life, which I've written, and the music is closely integrated with the action. All the actors did some singing in English, [and] the members of the choir participated in the actions, so there would be exchanges with the actors. This was all on a stage in a theatre in downtown Beijing; we did five performances, all of them to packed audiences. At the end of the last performance, the audience got up and sang "We Shall Overcome," and it was just...I had tears in my eyes, you know. It was something to see.

When I thought way back on that day in '63 when I was at the March on Washington, if I could've even imagined that forty years later here I'd be in Beijing watching a Chinese actor perform Martin Luther King and deliver those great speeches and watch[ing] a Chinese actress performing Coretta King, with whom I worked with for more than twenty years, and doing a great job! I don't speak Chinese, but I could really get emotionally involved. It was kind of like watching an opera, you know, where you might not understand Italian but you know enough of the story that you can get emotionally involved in the action; it was really great. Actually, this mask was a gift from the actor who played Martin Luther King's mother. One of the things that happened was that the relationships between the Chinese actors, most of whom do not speak English, and the Americans, like myself, who came over...by the end of the process with all the rehearsals, we'd become very close. We actually spent a day before the performance going to the great wall and having a good time and did a lot of partying, and by the end we were communicating with each other; we knew a few words of Chinese, they knew a

few words of English. But the important thing was that they had gotten involved, emotionally engrossed, in the Martin Luther King Story. Just one image that comes to my mind is after the performance. One of the gospel singers, Fred from Stanford, he plays the piano, he was just kind of playing gospel songs impromptu after the performance was over, after most of the audience had left, but some of the Chinese students were still around and they gathered around the piano and they started singing gospel songs; they wanted him to teach them some gospel songs. It was just remarkable to see, and the fact that we were able to do this at all...you know people tell us, "Oh, the government's going to shut you down, they're not going to allow either the politics of Martin Luther King because there's all this talk about civil disobedience, or they won't allow the religion of Martin Luther King, too, because all of this is kind of against state policy," but we did it. We pulled it off, and it was a great, great week. I think it was just really historic.

I'm hoping that we can follow up and take the play to other Chinese cities, after all it's the most populous place on earth, and we might as well. One of the things that happened is that Chinese educational TV filmed the performance, so to some degree I know that it will get distributed throughout, but I'd rather do it as a live performance. I think we can just have so much more impact, and I'd like to do this in other places. I'd like to go to South Africa and do the Martin Luther King story, maybe take it to the Middle East. The theme of the play is how to stand up for some great principle, some great cause, whatever the price you have to pay, and that's what makes life worth living. You know, that's a message that resonates. I think that also the message of King, and how he was given support by his family and by his religion, all of that has universal implications. I'd love to see what we did in China as a model that we can take to many other places in the world. Katrine McKiernan, the former student I worked with, she wants to do that. She's got a lot more energy than I have at my age, so maybe we can do this and use theatre as a means of getting across this important message.