

**RICHARD FERNANDEZ**

**Church Activist**

**Interviewed by Trey Ellis**

**June 15, 2017**

**Total Running Time: 1 hour 26 minutes**

00:00:00:00 TREY ELLIS:

Again, thank you so much. It's really an honor to have you here. I just want to begin, if you could talk about how old you were, this first meeting with Doctor King and hitchhiking- you talked about the beautiful stories about the rides you got to get you down to him for the first time. And walk us through that first meeting. Just sort of tell that story.

00:00:21:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

When I was an undergraduate at the University of New Hampshire, I took a course and decided to do a term paper, my government course, on the aftermath of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It had ended about four years earlier. And I did my research in the library and looked at old newspapers, and it occurred to me that if I could go down to Montgomery and interview some of the people that were involved on one side or the other, it would be a better paper. So, I wrote a whole bunch of people in Montgomery, and I got back responses from the four or five African-Americans I wrote and from the governor. The governor had been the editor of the *Montgomery Advertiser* during the bus boycott. And I thought, well, the police chief and the other people that didn't write back, they'll probably see me if I go down. And so, without thinking about it too much, I decided, given the fact I had no money, that I would hitchhike down. And I arranged to have a what they call a rent-a-car out of Atlanta, Georgia, a drive-away-car coming back. I had also secured an appointment to see Doctor King in Atlanta after I went to Montgomery.

00:01:30:00 So, off I go hitchhiking, and I got down to Washington and got in a big Cadillac. And between Washington and Richmond, this guy in the big Cadillac, he had a phone in the Cadillac, which back then was unheard of- he couldn't stop using the N-word. And I thought, my goodness. He's wealthy and he doesn't like African-Americans? He's using that word like he was, what I used to call "white trash." And I was petrified because I didn't know what to say. I'm in the car alone, we're driving at night it turned out. I finally get off, he leaves me off in front of a diner. I went in and had dinner, came out and hitchhiked again. And I get picked up in a big truck going back down to Birmingham. It was a cotton truck, empty. And we talked about a lot of things, the driver and I. And then all of a sudden, he told me he was from Pulaski, Tennessee, and I had actually done a paper on the Ku Klux Klan. I knew that's where it was born and I was a little disturbed. But then later on he began to talk about the fact he didn't care if his kids went to school with black kids. He just didn't want his daughter marrying, you know, a black person, but it was fine otherwise. So, he

dropped me off in the middle of nowhere outside Birmingham. I was going to Montgomery. It's two o'clock in the morning and I'm think of all I had learned before I had gone on the trip. Before I'd gone on the trip, Gunnar Myrdal had told us- this great sociologist- that wealthy people really didn't care about anything except whether you married a black person, and the poor people didn't want them taking their jobs. Well, this guy, my truck driver, didn't care about his job. So, all of a sudden everything I thought I knew was turned on its head, and I hadn't even gotten to Montgomery to interview anybody.

00:03:21:00 So, I get into Montgomery and stay at the YMCA, and I'm there for four days. The first night I'm in Montgomery, at midnight there's a knock on my door. I got out of bed half foggy, and I open the door and there are two gentlemen standing there- it was like a movie- with their little badges identifying themselves as the FBI. And they were pretty rough in the way they looked at me. And then finally one of them said, "Do you belong to the NAACP, the Communist Party, or do you write for the *New York Times*?" And I, who always have a little joke in me, I almost said the *New York Times* because that would have been kind of sweet. I said, "No, no, no. I don't belong to any of those things. I don't write for the *Times*." And then they said, "Well, what are you doing in Montgomery?" And I told them I came down to interview some people about a paper I was doing. "And who are those people?" And I listed the African-Americans. But then when I listed the governor, it kind of made them back off. And they said, "Well, you be careful here because we'll be watching." And they closed the door, and I was just panicked, you know, this is totally out of my experience. I didn't...

00:04:33:00 Anyway, the next day, the next few days I interviewed people, Ralph Abernathy and many others. When I went to Abernathy's house, all the blinds were pulled and he said, "You know, we're afraid we're going to get bombed or shot at so we keep the blinds pulled during the day." Interviewed a number of people. Interviewed the governor. And then on the afternoon of the third day, for reasons I can't explain, I had wired my parents or called them and said I needed some money, and they had sent me by Federal Express a check and I hadn't received it, and it was now almost four days. And that night, when I inquired at the front desk of the Y, have they seen my piece of mail? And they said no. And I turned around to walk up the stairs, and at about the fifth step there was my envelope that had been opened, on the step. That sent a little shock into me.

00:05:26:00 And the next morning I went to see Fred Gray, the lawyer I had talked to earlier. Told him what had happened, told him I felt like I was being threatened. He said, "Well, actually Dick, you have been threatened." And he said, "If you don't have a lot more interviews to do here, I'd suggest you go on to Atlanta." So, I took one more interview and got on the bus. Got up to Atlanta about ten o'clock on that evening. My interview wasn't until the next day at one. And around eleven-thirty at night I'm in bed in the Y, and there's a knock on the door, and I have two policemen from Atlanta there. And they were very apologetic. They said, "Look, when we get a notice from Montgomery we have to go and pay a call on people. But you should know that Atlanta is not Montgomery. This is a better place." And then one of the gentlemen said, "Would you like to come with us? We'd like to show you something." And they

were very welcoming, and I said, "Sure." So, I put my clothes out. I go out, we get in the police car. We go about four blocks to the police station. They take me to the second floor, to the cafeteria. In this big cafeteria at probably one o'clock at night, there must have been twenty people having coffee or whatever with each other, and the tables were mixed, black and white. That's all they wanted to show me. And we stayed... I don't know what I had to drink, it wasn't coffee. I went back to bed.

00:06:46:00 The next day I spent walking around town looking at things in Atlanta. And then that afternoon at one, I went to the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Walked in on the secretary and said I was here to see Doctor King. And she said, "Well, just a minute." Then she came back from the hallway and she said, "Doctor King will see you now." I walk down this hallway, and out of this doorway came this minister, Doctor King. I was stunned by the fact of how small he was. He was shorter than me. He weighed probably thirty pounds less. He welcomed me, "Hi, Dick," he said. You know, I'm a naïve, you know, college student, innocent in more ways than I'd like to admit. And we walked in and we sat down. I had my little yellow pad with my fifteen questions. I had my pen out, and he proceeded for fifteen minutes to interview me. "What brought you down to Montgomery? Why were you interested in the aftermath? What did you find out in Montgomery? What are you going to do when you get out of college? What are you interested in?" So, we had this conversation, and I'm thinking "Am I going to get to my questions?" But his interest in me just, again, took me back, and always in this very quiet tone.

00:08:03:00 So, I got into my questions and I wish I had kept that term paper; I don't know where it went. But during the course of the conversation I used the expression "white trash," probably a couple of times. And three or four minutes after I'd used it the second time, Doctor King said to me, he said, "You know, Dick. When we use words like 'white trash' it's a way of objectifying those who we are not getting along with at the moment. And the more we do that, it creates more distance between us rather than less. And we'll never get much way along the road if we objectify people." The fact that he included himself in that sentence, "when we," you know, here's this head of the civil rights movement. He didn't have to do that, that he included himself. I asked him about the fact that the buses of Atlanta had been integrated for three years, and African-Americans were still at the back, the whites were still at the front. And he said, "Well you know, Dick, the people in Atlanta are like people everywhere. Change is not the thing they like to do the most." And he said, "If you come back in three more years, about three more years, the buses will be fully integrated. People will be..." And he said it takes time for black and whites together to feel comfortable, but he said it will come because now they have the right to sit anywhere.

00:09:23:00 So, I left that interview knowing- not knowing at the time how much it changed my life. But I have never forgot those lessons of including others and making sure that you identify yourself as part of the problem, because we always are part of the problem. So, that was my interview with Doctor King in Atlanta. The next time I saw him... I'd heard him speak a number of times in the Boston area, but the next time I saw him was when I was the executive director of Clergy and Laity Concerned, a group that grew up in response to the Vietnam War and protesting it. And we were organizing strictly in the religious community all over the country.

And I was also part of a number of different coalitions, and one was called the Mobilization Against the War, we identified it as MOBE, M-O-B-E.

00:10:24:00 And the MOBE would be- what was called the New York Avenue, Fifth Avenue Peace Parade Committee was organizing a big, big protest at the United Nations in April of nineteen sixty-seven. And they invited Doctor King to come. And he had never come out quite loud and clear about the war. He had mentioned it a few times in a couple of places, and he wanted to consider it. And in order to do that with his some of his staff, he came to New York and met with a group of about twenty people. I was not in that circle, but a number of them were donors, people who had backed SCLC, some leaders from the anti-war movement, including Doctor Benjamin Spock. And the question was should he go down to this event. Bayard Rustin argued that there were two reasons not to go to that event. The first is you don't want to mix the civil rights movement with the anti-war movement. It will not be good for either. The second reason, according to Rustin and others in the room, was that on the letterhead of this organizing group was the name of Arnold Johnson, who was a member of the Communist Party and it said that right on the letterhead. Now, I happened to know Arnold Johnson personally. He didn't have enough assertiveness to teach a Sunday school class. He was a lovely person. He had gone to Union Seminary, but they were afraid that the Communist thing would stick to King. And as many people know, there were those around the country who were trying to always associate him with the Communist Party, and they alleged this, that, and the other thing during his lifetime.

00:12:06:00 So, King took all of this in, and he went back to Atlanta, had more discussions with staff, and decided about fifteen days later he was going to speak at that event. Andy Young then called Doctor John Bennett here at New York Seminary and proposed that Doctor King give a speech maybe a week or two in advance of the April date at the chapel at Union Seminary and wanted to know if John would see this happening, what he thought. And John told him he should call me because I would be the person that would have to work on this. So, Andy called me. I had met Andy Young once before in my life during the civil rights action. And when he said Doctor King at Union Seminary Chapel, Doctor King and the war, immediately in my mind I thought, "Well, you can't put Doctor King in that little place." So, I said, "Well, what about Riverside Church?" And he said, "Do you think we can get it?" I said, "Well, I don't know, but John Bennett belongs to the church now for fifteen years, and he certainly could ask." And I said, "Doctor King's preached there a number of times." And John called the church, and the pastor said, "Of course." It wasn't even a long discussion, didn't consult with anybody.

00:13:21:00 Well, then there were other stipulations to that of King coming. I was told by one of my board members if I needed help with press relations, there was an Episcopal layman over in New Jersey, his name was Fred Sontag, and he said "You should call Fred and get his help." So, I called Fred, who I never met before. Told him about the person that had referred him and told him what was going to happen. And he said, "Well, sure, I'll help you." But he said, "I have one condition. We have to have Doctor King's speech three days in advance." I didn't know enough or think enough to ask him why. But I called Andy and I said I have someone to help me with press,

but he says I need the speech three days ahead of time. Is that possible?" He said, "Well, sure." Andy understood immediately what that was about, so I was just kind of learning, trying to catch up with the press ideas. So, we planned it for the date in April. We got the speech exactly three days in advance.

00:14:26:00 Fred Sontag arrived at my office so we had the speech. It came in two parts. Most of it was written by Vincent Harding, who was a really close friend of King's and had written other speeches for him. And a small part of it around the rights of conscience were written by a professor down at Wesleyan College in Connecticut, John McGuire. Fred did just a little bit of work connecting them together. He did a little bit more work making sure the grammar was right and the spelling was right. And we had prepared before we even received the speech the press packets, the folders. And Fred had even drafted the press release. He filled in the spaces based on the speech. And at two o'clock on the morning- two mornings before King spoke, we took five hundred pieces of mail down to the post office- this is before we had the internet- and put it in the mail overnight, and they hoped for a release at twelve p.m. on the night that Doctor King was to give the speech, so all the editorials, all the news articles could be written for the next morning's press.

00:15:30:00 King came on the day appointed. He went first, in the afternoon around two o'clock, to the Overseas Press Club, held a press conference. That was Sontag's idea that you can't have it at the church, there would be too much scrambled eggs. You can't have it afterwards because it'll be eleven or twelve at night. So, that's why we got the press release out early. And then he came up to Union Seminary afterwards and had dinner in the refectory with about twenty of our board members. I pulled out the speech and handed it to him. About fifteen minutes later as he sat down, he took a pen out and he kind of quickly went down the columns and put notes. I could see him jotting things. And then he put it back in his pocket. He got up in the pod- well, we came to the church. It was packed. I didn't know at the time there were about three or four hundred people who couldn't get in. Phil Scharper was the MC of the evening, and he was at that time the president of Sheed and Ward Publishers. We had arranged for Doctor Bennett, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and a really well-known historian from Amherst College, Henry Steele Commager, to be on the podium with him to reflect on King's speech. This was really King's idea and Andy's idea, that he wanted some cover- we called it political cover- and he thought these three people would help give him that. He and Heschel were very close friends. Henry Steele Commager paid his way back from London. He was on sabbatical and he paid his way back to be on that stage with King. So, a number of people knew it was going to be a big event.

00:17:12:00 Well, he got up and he gave that speech as if he'd spent all week on it. It was the most remarkable rendition of a sermon or a speech I've even seen in my life. How he could do that, I don't know. I watched him very carefully and it didn't appear he was reading it, but he- I don't think he missed a word, and with his great oratorical skill and the words were great. Three cheers for Vincent Harding particularly, to catch the idiom. And it was long. He covered, as we would say, all the bases. Didn't leave much to your imagination. And the next morning, he was blasted in virtually every editorial column in America except the *Louisville Courier*. And the *Louisville Courier* said, "Well, what would you expect a pacifist to say about the war?" They

didn't think it was a good idea for him to be that way, but that's what a pacifist would say. That's what a nonviolent person would say. But he got really blasted, if you will, by people in the civil rights movement, Bayard Rustin, Whitney Young, and Senator Brooke from Massachusetts. A lot of African-Americans said, "You shouldn't have done this. It's going to mess up the civil rights movement."

00:18:36:00 It's true that SCLC had spent years trying to get into a good relationship with Lyndon Johnson, and they had one at the time, and this just tore it apart, tore it apart. Now, Lyndon Johnson had other problems outside of Doctor King, but this was really a tipping point in the anti-war movement. Only later on would Walter Cronkite decide the war was wrong. That was probably a second tipping point, but this was the first big one. As one of my friends used to say, "A lot of us work on issues all the time for many, many years and nothing happens. And Doctor King comes and the whole country comes, the whole country comes." So, that was really the story of that event. Two weeks later, Andy Young called me and asked if our committee would accept Doctor King as a co-chairperson. I was flabbergasted. Doctor King never associated himself on a letterhead with any organization in the country. Cesar Chavez had the same policy. He'd speak for other groups, he would not put his name publicly on other letterheads. So, I called Heschel and Bennett and others on my committee, and a day later I called back and said, "We'd love to have Doctor King." He came to a couple of board meetings in the year that he was on. He came to one of our rallies in Washington and led a silent vigil in the cemetery there with Heschel. And then he was shot and killed one year to the date of that speech. One year to the date.

00:20:14:00 TREY ELLIS:  
I was going to ask about that paper. What grade did you get on your term paper?

00:20:21:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
When I came back to UNH, I received an A on that paper from a Doctor Robert Dishman, and I had to present the paper in class. Turns out it was such a trip that I also presented that paper on my experience on a number of different venues over the next few years. And of course, in recent years, because of my age and my proximity to King in that specific way, I had the opportunity to share with younger people. And for me, it's been a very rich experience. The younger people sometimes think or will ask, "Well, where is Doctor King now?" And my response is always, Doctor King is with us. He's with us with William Barber down in Carolina. With our best homeless advocate in Philadelphia, Sister Mary Scullion. He is with us in thousands of places across the country and across the world.

00:21:13:00 But if you're asking me how you get Doctor King the way he was, it's a social movement that helped to create Doctor King. And he had first declined being the leader of it. He wanted to be the pastor of Dexter Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and he turned the invitation to lead the Montgomery Improvement Association. He didn't want to do that. He had other things- he was brand new in town and he thought he should pay attention to the church. He was finally convinced to take on the role only in part because Ralph Abernathy and Fred Shuttlesworth were at loggerheads with each other and he was the compromise candidate. So, you

know, life changes, or turns in very different ways for people. If he had not accepted that, I don't know what would have happened to the Montgomery Improvement Association. I don't know where civil rights would have been, or if Abernathy or Shuttlesworth had become the leader. You don't know these things. So, I always say, I don't believe in luck, I do believe that preparation meets opportunity many times in very curious ways. And...

00:22:24:00 TREY ELLIS:

I want to talk a little bit about King and faith. You talked about in your first meeting that he was wrestling with his theological place. So, can you talk a little bit about how he saw himself as a theologian, as an activist, and his relationship with Buddhism, and with Heschel and Thich Nat Hanh. He seemed very progressive as a theologian.

00:22:48:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

One of the aspects of Doctor King's life that has not been very well examined and has not been paid attention to a lot, because his public life was so very important to us, is the way in which his own intellectual and spiritual life developed. Many people know that he was raised in the home with a fire and brimstone father, and that for a lot of reasons this did not appeal to him as he got older into high school and college. But, having said that, he wasn't quite sure what else was out there. And between college and seminary up in Pennsylvania, he kept struggling with, "Where am I in the theological universe?" He was very much attracted to Mahatma Gandhi, and actually took a trip to India during that time. He was also attracted to a professor in New York by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr, who was a great theological thinker. Niebuhr was not a pacifist, Gandhi, of course, was. When he left seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania to go to Boston University School of Theology for a doctorate degree, he was still wrestling with "Where am I as Doctor King the preacher going to be?" And at BU he ran into a group called the Personal School of Theology. And the Personal School actually believe that when you cry, God cries, when you laugh, God laughs, when you're pleased, God is pleased. And he was really taken with that.

00:24:26:00

His PhD dissertation was a dissertation taken from the writings of Paul Tillich, and a naturalist in Chicago, Professor Henry David Wyman. A naturalist is someone that believes that God is in the universe, he's not someplace in outer space. But this informed his personalist views that he was beginning to adopt. So, what I found- this is all put together in a book. It was called *The Making of the Mind* by a professor whose name I cannot now remember at Fordham University. And he goes through this whole sequel. So, to me, the interesting thing about Doctor King is that the idiom he used in his preaching, the bible verses, mainly the Old Testament but the bible verses, you would think that he could have been the most evangelical theologically preacher in town, but that was not the meaning he attached to it. But that was part of his universal appeal. He appealed to Jews and Christians and others because he used this language in such a universal, accepting, opening, loving way, and invited all people to come around the circle. No one is to be excluded, and particularly you're not to be excluded because of your religious conviction or the

absence of your religious conviction. When I think of where is Doctor King these days? That's the first thing I look for. And that's why the Reverend William Barber down in Carolina, I think is a really fit example of King in our day. He's not King, he's not King, but he has this universal approach that includes everybody for this cause of social change, making things better.

00:26:05:00 TREY ELLIS:

You talked about you'd met him a couple times after your first meeting and you'd seen him speak, did he remember you when you'd see him again? Can you talk a little bit to the personal, any personal anecdotes between the first meeting and the Riverside speech?

00:26:20:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

I don't know that. I will say that after his speech at Riverside Church, on two or three occasions where I was in the room with him- once at one of our conferences and there were a lot of people in the room, like several hundred- he said something to the effect- he said, referring to his speech, and said with kind of a smile, he said, "Of course, I want to thank Dick Fernandez because he made it possible for me to be criticized in every newspaper the day after my speech." And he said, "I want to thank Dick. Thank you, Dick," just kind of laughing at it. So, Fred Sontag did a good piece of work. I have often wondered if I had not hired Frank- hired, I didn't pay a thing for him- I often wonder if I hadn't gotten Fred Sontag, if his speech would have been heard the same way, whether it would have been heard, I have no idea. All I know is that Fred did the due diligence and kind of made our organization look really smart. So, I've thanked Fred many times before he passed away.

00:27:24:00 TREY ELLIS:

Could we talk about your personal- when did you come out against the war? And the link between the civil rights movement and the Vietnam, the anti-war movement, and then the clashes between them?

00:27:38:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

I came out of the army in about nineteen fifty-eight, and I was a very right wing, evangelical Christian. And I used to write my minister back home asking if he could become a Christian someday, because at that time he didn't believe as I did, which meant he couldn't be one. I had a very narrow view of the universe. At the University of New Hampshire, I went through a slow maturation process and moved away from my evangelical roots, but not my Christian faith. And as I did that, I also became interested in issues beyond my own soul. I became interested in social issues. So when I was in my senior year at the University of New Hampshire, I went over to Dover, New Hampshire and participated in a silent vigil in front of a five-and-ten cent store in sympathy for what was going on in some of the southern states in front of five-and-dime stores. So, that was kind of my first action in a civil rights field. When I went to seminary, there were a whole bunch of things that kind of worked together. Louise Day Hicks was head of the Boston school system; a time of great



racial division in the school. We had many protests outside of Louise Day Hicks' office.

00:28:56:00 I worked in a community called Roxbury. In our inter-faith ministry there we were very active in the civil rights movement. I went down south to a little town called Williamston a few times and was arrested. I went to Birmingham during that terrible Easter time, and Jim Bevel escorted my wife and I and a student from Ohio University out of town before we get arrested, saying "We can't put you in jail because we don't have enough lawyers." He said, "If you could come back sometime later we may have enough lawyers. But right now, we can't afford to put you in jail, so you should leave town." Which I thought was- looking back, I thought it was kind of humorous. So, I'd been involved in some ways.

00:29:39:00 When I met Doctor King at dinner before Riverside Church, just as he had done in the hallway when I first met him, he called me "Dick." So, I have a feeling that he was busy enough that he didn't pay enough attention to my own development in time with Clergy and Laity to say, "Oh, that's the guy I interviewed many years ago." I don't think he made that connection. You know, after Doctor King died his friends grew into the millions. I'm always taken back in Philadelphia when someone dies. "Oh, he was a good friend of Doctor King's." Let me tell you, if Doctor King had all the friends that claim to be his friends, we would have had a much better, much more quicker transition into civil rights. So, I would never claim him as a friend. I would claim him as someone I interviewed, someone whose speech I helped organize, and it's a limited relationship.

00:30:38:00 TREY ELLIS:  
And in terms of- when did you- You came out against the war well before King did, it felt like. So how did that come about?

00:30:45:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
I was a campus minister. I was director of the Christian Association at the University of Pennsylvania from sixty-four to sixty-six. In nineteen sixty-five, this nice Jewish boy from Long Island walks into my office, Bob Brand, and he said "We want to go to Toronto next week to be at a teach-in. We want to be at a teach-in." I never heard of a teach-in before. And he said- and I said, "What's a teach-in? On what?" He said, "Well, it's on Vietnam." I have to say, you know, it was the second page of the paper at that time. I said, "Why are we going to do that?" He said, "Well, because it's going to become a big issue." And for reasons I don't quite understand- I knew Bob pretty well- so six of us jumped in my car. We went to Toronto and we went to a three-day teach-in on Vietnam. And I was, I was kind of stunned at how ignorant I was and how much I didn't know about what our country was beginning to do and what it had done over time to support the French. And that was kind of the beginning.

00:31:48:00 So, back at Penn, we began to offer draft counseling. A group of about twenty of us students and faculty were in a silent vigil outside the president's house at Penn, and a bunch of fraternity guys came and beat us up. My board of directors didn't like that, they didn't like that kind of publicity. One of them thought I was a Communist. And the short message is that after two years on this job as a director, in the spring of

nineteen sixty-six when they named one person at the Christian Association to be the president, the vice-president, and treasurer as a way to control the staff, I resigned on the spot and so did the seven other clergy. I had just had my- we had just had our first son. He was two months old. I came home and told my wife I didn't have a job, and she just kind of looked. She thought I was joking. And I said, "No, I have thirty days. I'm out."

00:32:45:00 So that's when, after a few weeks I called a friend of mine in New Haven, Bill Coffin, the chaplain at Yale, and said I need a job. And he called back two weeks later and said, "I have an interview for you." But he said, "If you get this job you may never be able to get a job at a local church for the rest of your life." Because Vietnam was not a very popular issue and you didn't know what the aftermath would be. So, I came up to New York and I sat at a table, as I say, with all the people around the table whose books I read in seminary: Daniel Berrigan, Robert McAfee Brown, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, Doctor John Bennett. It was kind of a, you know, a normal person, not naïve and probably a little bit more humble, would have been cautious about what they said. I was asked by Doctor Bennett, he said to me, "Dick, if you had to convince..." This is nineteen sixty-six. I mean, no one was against the war. "Dick, if you wanted to convince businessmen to be against the war, how would you do it?"

00:33:47:00 On the way up from Philadelphia, I had read a whole bunch of editorials by Doctor Bennett in a journal called "Christianity In Crisis." They were really hard, hard editorials, I mean, right to the point. And I said, "Well, Doctor Bennett, I'm not quite sure what I would do, but the one thing I wouldn't do is to give them your editorials because they're too tough for someone who hasn't made up their mind." Well, that was not the right thing to say in an interview. So, I left the room not knowing what would happen. And apparently, Doctor Bennett- John was very, very cautious, "Wasn't quite sure about him." And Bill Coffin said, "Well, now, John, what you have to remember about Dick. He's a diamond in the rough, but he's a diamond." And that saved my bacon, and I was appointed to be the director. And I was given three hundred and fifty three-by-five cards with names and addresses of people who had been contacted by this group around the table, and said, "Well, this is the organization we have. What are you going to do with it?"

00:34:45:00 So, when they accepted me as the Executive Director of Clergy and Laity Concerned, this was a group that was only four months old, which this group of people and a few others had created, all they knew was that they wanted to stop the war and engage the religious community to help do that. They had some seminary students call a lot of people they knew around the country. And of course, the Heschels and Bennetts and Coffins and others knew a lot of people all over the country. And the seminary students called all these people on the phone, tried to get them to urge President Johnson in December of nineteen sixty-five to continue a bombing pause he had begun. And there were in many cities around the country, a response to that where clergy had press conferences urgent the president to continue the bombing pause to see if we could get peace. So, when I took over the job, I had an office with no windows, I had a part-time secretary, and I was given these three

hundred and fifty three-by-five cards which had phone numbers, sometimes addresses, and notes about the conversations that had been held.

00:35:58:00 And my job was to see, well, what can you do with these names. And what I learned very quickly was the fact that we had a letterhead with all these very prestigious religious names down the side. I learned very quickly that that letterhead opened all kinds of doors for me that on my own I would never be able to open. And I made a commitment very early to make sure that clergy and laity around the country, not just in New York- that's where all these people were from that- on my board- became activated. And I think about the fourth month on the job, I took one trip for seventeen days from San Diego to Seattle, right up the coast. I went to Chico and Redding and Eugene and Walla Walla, Washington. And once I got to Seattle, I took a plane to Denver and went down to Colorado Springs.

00:36:50:00 So, I did seventeen cities in seventeen days, and all of a sudden, we have a national organization pulling- what we found at that time- again, nineteen sixty-six- in any town or city I went there were three Methodist lay people, four Jewish lay people, two Catholic sisters. All these people wanted to oppose the war, but in their own congregation they were almost an insignificant minority. And because we were gathering groups together around their already existing faith commitments on an inter-faith basis, they didn't see it as a big step. And they were sure glad to meet other people in the religious community ready to do what they could do to oppose the war. So, that was the genesis of how we became a national movement. We wound up with- I don't have the number in my head, but eighty-seven chapters, and, you know, thirty or forty thousand members. And we did other things, but for me that was the bedrock of the organization. We did other things that were important, but that was the bedrock of the organization, to give other people the sense that they could change history. And they were heady times because we thought we were going to change history.

00:38:02:00 TREY ELLIS:  
And between the- what about the- was your conflict between the CALCAV and the sort of the more radical- sort of the lay the Jane Fonda, Hanoi Jane-

00:38:15:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
One of the interesting aspects of our work at Clergy and Laity Concerned was the fact that our national leadership, as opposed as they were to the war and as often as they did things to oppose it, many of the national leadership were a little bit more on the cautious side in terms of what they were prepared to do. I don't mean a simple demonstration. Most of them did not want to get arrested, that wasn't in their line of work. But they gave me complete freedom as the director to become involved with groups that we would call on the left of Clergy and Laity Concerned. So, I was always part of all the planning of the big demonstrations. I was one of nine executive committee members who planned the Chicago demonstrations in nineteen sixty-eight. One of three that did not get indicted, and the three of us never figured out why. So, what we found locally was there were plenty of clergy and laity- not all of them, but plenty- who wanted to be a little bit left to where some of the members of

our board were. And I'm a great believer in making sure people do exactly what they feel comfortable doing. And if you can write a letter, great. And if you want to get arrested, great. And there's not a hierarchy of saying "no" to policies you don't agree with.

- 00:39:43:00 And the one thing you never do as an organizer is to pressure people into doing things that really make them feel uncomfortable because at the end of the day, you want them to stick around and be there in the future. And using my own life as an example- which, in this case, I think is permitted- I've changed over my lifetime. Well, if someone like me can change, anybody can change. So, it was always the case that whether it was Robert McAfee Brown or Rabbi Abraham Heschel, or people you never heard of, a lot of us went through transitions during the period of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement. And I think one of the things that strengthened Clergy and Laity Concerned was the board never felt a need to create criteria of, you know, "you have to believe this or you can't do that' if you want to associate with us." We never even had that discussion. Not once, not once.
- 00:40:42:00 The one time we had a discussion about a man that was pretty interesting and difficult, was a professor from Columbia University approached us. His name was Seymour Melman. He was a longtime advocate for peace and justice. And he came in my office one day and said, "Dick, we have to do something about the war crimes committed by American servicemen. It's a regular happening. It's reported in the *New York Times*, the *L.A. Times*, *Washington Post*. It goes on and on." He said, "And Clergy and Laity, because of your religious connection, you should do this." Well, I listened and listened. He was very persuasive. And I said, "Look, I don't know what my board would say, but let me see if they would like to hear from you." So, Seymour came to our board meeting and he laid out his concerns and the moral crisis that he thought it put the country in, and we had a general discussion. And then Rabbi Heschel says, "I don't think so." It was near the end of the meeting and he said, "I think..." He wasn't denying it was happening. He said, "I think attacking the government that way would not be beneficial to the anti-war movement or to this organization particularly." We all agreed to table it." Maybe we should think about it next month."
- 00:41:57:00 Seymour Melman then went and had two meetings with Heschel. These are two people that lost a lot of family during the Holocaust. I never asked Seymour Melman what happened in those meetings. I never asked if the Holocaust came up. I have a feeling it probably did in some way. The result of it was, Heschel came back the next meeting and said, "Let's go ahead and do this. Let's go ahead and do this study." So, we, over a year and a half period, with two graduate students doing all the work and Seymour as the faculty advisor, put together a book that we called *In the Name of America*. It went right down a law of war. The mass deportation of civilian populations after the Holocaust was deemed illegal. You can't pick up whole populations and move them, even if they live happily ever after. Well, we had a policy, we had a policy of bombing, bombing Vietnamese peasants into the cities to control them, and to make sure they wouldn't grow rice and be people the other side could recruit. It was a policy to move- well, there were lots of those. And of course,

there were many My Lai's- massacres. We couldn't get anybody to publish the book. So, we self-published it. We were on the front page of fifty newspapers, the front column of the *New York Times*. So, in addition to doing this grassroots stuff, we did projects like that.

00:43:29:00 TREY ELLIS:

Do you think there would have been an anti-war movement without the civil rights movement and the actions coming from the fifties, transitioning?

00:43:38:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

Well, you know, three or four things happened in a twenty-year period. Right? We had a civil rights movement, an anti-war movement, a women's movement, and a liberation movement around sexual ethics, sexual stuff. Twenty years. My view is all those movements created synergy. The women's movement- there was a women's movement inside the anti-war movement. I mean, the anti-war movement was very sexist, and there were women there screaming. I mean, our meetings were quite long for that reason. I'm not smart enough to answer that. I'm not smart enough to know if you could have had an anti-war movement without a civil rights movement. I tend to think there are larger issues in this society that gave people a feeling that they could change the country, and it may be a generational thing, but I think all social movements are such a mixture of things, some of which people control, and otherwise just some things just happen. So, when people say, "Where's Doctor King today?" Well, you just don't create them. It's not like there's a formula. But all revolutions are a liberation of a lot of movements. All big revolutions- there are a lot of different things happening inside of a revolution, and I think we experienced that here. And I do think in response to King's speech people were absolutely right. It probably hurt the civil rights movement. It got less attention. The fact is, it was getting less attention, but this might have sped it up. We don't know that. And we're still in the middle of a civil rights movement. You know, there's still a few things to do, a few things to do.

00:45:42:00 TREY ELLIS:

Yeah, talking about that, the idea that the anti-war movement, that- was there a feeling looking back on it that it sort of sucked the air out of the domestic policy issues, the War on Poverty, any of these other issues?

00:45:59:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

During the course of our coalition meetings in the anti-war movement- and this continues to this day- there was always a discussion. You didn't go through a long weekend meeting where you didn't discuss into the night where are the African-Americans? Where are the welfare rights people? George Wiley, who was head of the Welfare Rights Organization nationally, a few times would sit with us through our long planning sessions, and then have to leave early 'cause he had to raise money. Right? I happened to be the person who said, "You know, the African-Americans I know are very busy doing things in their neighborhoods and

communities. And I actually believe what Stokely Carmichael one time said, he said, 'You know, this is your war. We didn't start this thing, so you clean it up.'" I happen to think there's some intelligent thought in that statement. So, I wasn't the one that kept pressing, "Can we get two more black people in the room, and that way we'll look better. I'm not good on one and two representatives. If you want to turn half the group over, that's fine with me. But you get one woman and one black, and then you get a canary." I just never- and that continues to this day, I have to tell you, in the white world I'm a part of. People are always looking around for one African-American. They don't say it that way, but that's the...

00:47:30:00 So, when I came to the job I held for twenty-four years in Philadelphia, working in an inner-city ministry, and we were a group of at that time twenty congregations, the two questions were: how will you get more Catholics involved, and how will you get more African-Americans involved? And what they meant was, on our board of directors, in our little committees, you know, the way white people organize things. I said, "Well, I know how to do Catholics." And I said, "We'll have to see what the parishes are like here. I don't know what their inclination is. But my experience with African-Americans, they're not going to sit on the board of directors." I said, "First of all, black clergy are leaders in a way in which Protestant white clergy are never leaders. And they won't send people to represent them in important matters, they go themselves. And they don't normally sit around with white lay people. They just don't. You know." And you could be a sociologist and say this is not good for [unclear].

00:48:28:00 I mean, I don't know. To me, it just- it is. And white people don't sit around with black ministers. [Unclear] it's a two way, but we don't [unclear]. So, I said, "I'm not quite sure." I said, "What I do know is African-Americans in their neighborhood, if there's something important to do they always show up. But they don't sit around on boards like we have at the Northwest Interfaith Movement, discussing the budget and personnel matters. And..." So, during my twenty-two years there, we did engage a whole bunch of Catholic and African-American churches, but we did not get a large number of African-Americans to be active on our board of directors and sub-committees. We had a couple, but I didn't kill myself trying. I killed myself trying to get them engaged in the neighborhoods that we were impacting.

00:49:14:00 TREY ELLIS:  
Coming back to the lead up to the Riverside speech, was there a sense... of disappointment that it took King so long to come around? I mean, I know he felt the pressure, but he knew also... Could you sort of lead us up to those discussions? When did you want him to make that speech, and when...you know?

00:49:40:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
It's often said that Riverside Church was King's big anti-war speech. It was his big anti-war speech. It was not his first anti-war statement. A year earlier on the west coast at a meeting of *The Nation* magazine, he made a strong statement against the war. It was like three paragraphs long. You know, the speech at Riverside were pages and he reviewed everything. He had bee-I think it was the summer of sixty-

seven, before the speech, there was a project called "Vietnam Summer." It was a national organizing effort all over the country. And he and Benjamin Spock showed up in Cambridge for a press conference, and they kind of walked through a couple of neighborhoods knocking on doors. That was what Vietnam Summer was all about, to kick off this event. So, it wasn't like he hadn't thought about it, it's just that he hadn't decided to go full bore into that place.

00:50:49:00 And of course, the speech he gave was... he didn't leave anything out. He went through the history of Vietnam. He didn't- it was amazing to me, first that it was that long, not that anybody was bored, but there weren't many speeches during the anti-war movement in my experience that were ever that fully inclusive of all the different pieces of information. He included the fact that there were a number of scholars in the country for that part of the world who said how stupid it was and that the government ought to have consulted them. So, I'm not sure if he did not decide- he did not decide to come out against the Vietnam war at this time, he decided to make a full-blown statement before the event down at the U.N. And he went to that event, he talked for about ten minutes, he left early. He was mentioned in the paper but not quoted.

00:51:51:00 So, he did exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to show up, say something, get out before anything happened, if something was going to happen. And that demonstration was like many others where you have twenty-four speakers, ten or fifteen folk singers or musical people, and usually people can't remember any speech. I've been to a lot of places like that. People don't remember speeches usually. And the interesting thing, over time- in my lifetime- there are two speeches people remember. They were both by King. They were both by the same person. That's rather remarkable. The speeches happened to be very good speeches and they happened to be very inclusive. They happened to be at a critical moment in time. You know, it was kind of a tipping point. Some people think that King's speech in Washington was kind of the beginning of the end of the active civil rights movement, which is kind of interesting. It was such a speech. Where I came from, Boston, in the white communities' people thought it was going to be a race riot. People that went knew it was a Sunday school picnic. So, I think it is remarkable that the longevity of those two speeches far outstretches anything else in the last fifty years. The only thing that probably compares with it is people won't forget Lyndon Johnson resigning, but no one can tell you what he said. But as an event, that was a big event.

00:53:30:00 TREY ELLIS:  
Going back to faith, why did King feel conflicted about the way that some- how Christianity was practiced in America by some ministers?

00:53:45:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
I think one of the things we notice with Doctor King as he went through his formal education particularly, was the way in which he at first reacted negatively- no, at first ascribed to his father's preaching when he was a very, very young boy. He went forward one Sunday to tell his father he wanted to be saved, as that expression is used. He was eight or nine. He later in life reflected that he probably only went

forward because his sister went forward, but he went forward. But it was when he was in high school that the hellfire and brimstone of his father began to not resonate with him. And it began kind of his own journey, "Well, if not this, what?" And as far as we know, through Morehouse, then onto seminary in Chester, in Pennsylvania, and into Boston University, he didn't throw the baby out with the bath water. I don't know from his own words if he's ever given lip service to not liking Evangelicals or Pentecostals or people whose theological position is far different from his own. What do know is he struggled very hard to develop his own theological position that wound up much different than where his father was.

00:55:15:00 I don't think there's any record later in life that he and his father had a falling out because of their theology. I know there was some discussion between he and his father when he got out of the seminary of whether he was going to come and follow his dad into that pulpit in Atlanta. And Doctor King decided he'd be better off if he kind of struck out on his own, so he went to the Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery. But there was that discussion. I assume if his father is offering him the pulpit upon his retirement, that even if there are theological differences maybe his father thought, "Well, maybe times change a little bit." I certainly- I'm speaking now without knowing this, but I assume his father said to himself, "I have no doubt about my son being a Christian. And I may not agree with his theological positions, but I certainly think he could lead this parish." And his son turned him down. He didn't want to come and essentially be his associate until his father retired. I don't remember during his active ministry following the seminary at BU, him ever uttering a word about- a critical word about someone's theological position being different than his own. He was such a universalist. That wasn't in his repertoire, that the God he worshiped loved all people, accepted all people, and that's what he was committed to doing, even though he wouldn't get near the hellfire and brimstone again for himself.

00:56:58:00 TREY ELLIS:  
I was just thinking about him, you know, and yourself too, this idea of the radical priest or liberation theology. Was that in the air? Was he on the leading edge of that, on the trailing edge? Coming into the seminary, the idea of being a political pastor. Can you talk a little bit about that?

00:57:20:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
Well, when King seminary- when King left college and went into the seminary, I presume from everything that I've read, he intended to be a pastor. People weren't looking for alternative places to be ministers at that time. If you went to seminary, he became a minister or a professor, a professor, or you taught religion or you taught in the seminary, but there were no jobs like SCLC for you- the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I think it was certainly the case when he graduated from Boston University School of Theology and he went to Dexter. He was dead serious about being the pastor. He wrote to the trustees after six months at Dexter what he wanted to do at Dexter, and it's not too far-fetched to say he scared his own congregation 'cause he wanted to turn it upside down. He thought it was too middle



class, too polite, that they weren't dealing with some of the poor people in the surrounding neighborhood, and he thought that should change.

00:58:32:00 When I interviewed Fred Brown, the lawyer in Montgomery, we talked a little bit about Dexter and what that meant, and how that was going to- the Montgomery Improvement Association infringed on his time. And Brown said, he chuckled, he said, "Well, I know for a fact there are a number of people at Dexter that were fine with him going with Montgomery Improvement Association and spending a lot more time there because they didn't want him spending a lot more time at the church. You know, let him preach on Sunday and go off to Montgomery Improvement Association." I don't know how widespread that was, but I've read it- it was widespread enough, so it is in several different books that members of the church were a little bit upset with this long memo he wrote about the changes we need to have here.

00:59:21:00 TREY ELLIS:  
I'm going to jump forward now to the... of the speech. Did you have any talks with the- did you know James Bevel before? Can you talk about Bevel and his role and your interaction with him coming up to the speech?

00:59:43:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
The first time I met Jim Bevel was that Easter during which time in Birmingham they were using hoses on demonstrators, all African-American. And without being invited, but having spring vacation, my wife and I and a college student from Ohio University, where I was a campus minister as an intern, we decided we wanted to go down and join forces. So, we just got in the car and drove to Birmingham. Talk about naïve, huh? And here I come into Birmingham in a white Rambler with Massachusetts plates. I mean, it was like a big flashing sign to the police. Right? I didn't know. And we park about two blocks from the church and we start to walk, and two police cars pull up. And they said, "Where are you going?" We said, "Well, we're going to go to that Baptist church over there." They said, "What are you going there for?" "Well, we have some friends there..." "What are you going to do?" And then they said, "We're going to take you down to the police station." We hadn't even gotten to the church. So, we protested and they took us to the station. We were there about fifteen minutes and Bevel shows up with a lawyer, and that's the first time I met him.

01:00:54:00 And so, the police left us alone for a little bit, and Bevel basically said, you know, he said, "You know, we only have three lawyers and we have a hundred and something kids in jail." And he said, "We may at some point here call on people to come join us in Birmingham, but we won't do that until we have enough lawyers and right now we have three lawyers trying to deal with all this. We can't afford to put you in jail." Now, what I do know is, if my name at that time were- if I was Bishop somebody, right, he might have put me in jail for press. But I was not a bishop, my wife was not a bishop, and so we said, "Thank you." The police came and escorted us out of the state of Alabama, all the way to the border. So, it was the first time. The second time, I met him in a couple of the anti-war coalition meetings, and he was always quite

unpredictable. But I never knew him personally enough to know if he acted in an unpredictable way with others he worked with. I picked that up secondhand from reading. And then I picked it up from Heschel, who was a very dear friend, and called me one day, he said, "This person was just here, a Mr. Bevel." And he said, "Could you come and talk to me?" And that's when he shared the story of Bevel saying, you know, he wanted Heschel to do something. He said he wanted to hire boats to go to Vietnam and take over a town or something and create a peaceful town in Vietnam. Heschel was just kind of like, "Do you know this person? Well, you know..." So, most of mine was secondhand except for that one encounter.

01:02:36:00 TREY ELLIS:  
And what about- and why did it strike you to move his speech to Riverside Church- if you could back into that- as opposed to the seminary?

01:02:48:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
You know, as you grow and get older, you come to recognize talents you've had a long time, and way back when you didn't realize it was your talent or a gift. I come from a long line of salesmen. One friend in Washington said I could sell tea pots with holes in the bottom, and I told him I wasn't sure if that was a compliment. So, I have a marketing mind. I didn't know it at the time of Doctor King. I mean, it wasn't conscious. And all I knew was you have this big-name preacher and you're going to stick him in a chapel, and a big issue, and it just didn't make sense. It was instant. I didn't even pause. I said, "That chapel, isn't that a little small? Can't we move him to Riverside?" So that was, I guess, part of my gift. Sontag put it out where people could see it, but that was my spontaneous response to the chapel. And, you know, if it had been the chapel it could have been all filled up with press. It could have been a national story in the same way, but I'm not quite sure. Riverside... I think place makes a big difference.

01:04:03:00 TREY ELLIS:  
What about this place makes a big difference?

01:04:06:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
Well, you know, Rockefeller built this place and endowed it with what at the time seemed like a lot of money. And then he turned to Harry Emerson Fosdick and he said, "Do you think you can be the preacher here given the fact that I put all the money into it with my reputation?" When Rockefeller did this in working class communities around the country, if you were a bad boy or a bad girl your parents would say to you, "You'd better do well or I'm going to get Mr. Rockefeller to come after you." I mean, he had a negative name. And Fosdick's response was, he said, "Well, if you hire me as the preacher, I assume you're going to let me say what I need and you may not like that, so we're even." Now, they had a radio station here up until thirty years ago, twenty-five years ago. And when my friend, William Sloane Coffin, became the preacher, three months before he came they sold it and he was quite upset. They sold it because they didn't have enough money in the endowment,

and he was quite upset. He said, "How can you create a revolution without communication?" He was really upset. He thought he was going to be broadcast, his sermons. So, that's what I know about the church. I at one time thought I was going to come here as an associate minister, but that didn't work out.

01:05:23:00 TREY ELLIS:

Can you walk us through- were you- for King, the day of the speech, his- do you remember anything about his mood before? You talked about, you know, he had the dinner- I mean, the lunch before and he wrote. What was his- you know, did he have a feeling that this was going to be a big speech before? And then after, walk us through a little bit on that, just if you remember any personal anecdotes.

01:05:47:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

When King came to- when King came to the Overseas Press Club, he walked in and he shook a number of hands, including mine, probably fifteen people. He sat down behind a press table with two or three other people, I'm trying to remember. Andy Young might have been one of them. Wyatt Walker was one, from the city here. I don't think there were any donors. And I listened to the whole press conference. It went on for an hour. I couldn't tell you one question that was asked or... I think I was in another world a little bit. I think I was kind of preoccupied with things to do and places to go. And then at Riverside Church, I was kind of in the same state of mind, I think. I had to arrange some of the dinner stuff and make sure people had chairs, and the right people were in the room, and handed him the speech very dutifully and just happened to watch what he did to it. I wasn't- it didn't occur to me that he hadn't seen it, hadn't practiced it, but what caught my eye was the way he took that pen and went down the margins. And then when he got up to speak, if you had asked me what did I think it would sound like, it didn't occur to me that he hadn't seen it and practiced it. I would assume it's going to be like another Doctor King speech that's really great. And it was. And then only later I'm thinking, "How do you do that?" You know, I preached, I know what it looks like to have a manuscript and what you have to do with it to learn it well and be free of it.

01:07:36:00 TREY ELLIS:

And afterwards, was there a feeling of electricity or any kind of feeling afterwards that it was immediately making an effect in the room that was different from past speeches?

01:07:48:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

I will say that when the speech ended, the place exploded and I knew it was electric. I knew he had hit it out of the park. And he went out the door, he was out of there quicker than you've ever seen anybody. He walked slowly off the stage, they shook hands and they waved to some people. But when they got off the stage, King was gone. He didn't waste any time. But I knew from my own- I was in the first row on the right-hand side...Unrelated to the Sontag press stuff, I knew it was a big

happening because he told the whole story about everything you could tell about the Vietnam war in a very cogent, provocative, thoughtful way.

01:08:43:00 TREY ELLIS:

On a personal level, was there any part of this speech, you know, that really stuck you and still strikes you to this day? Any phrases or things that you re-live?

01:08:57:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

Well, I'm always reminded of the fact that he thought it was important to refer to some of the scholars that warned us about this engagement. And particularly, when I reflect back on Robert McNamara's memoir *After the War*, and McNamara- one of the brightest and the best, we're told, saying to us in his memoir that one of the reasons they didn't know what to do in Vietnam was Joe McCarthy had taken all the foreign service people out of that part of the world because of their "Communist connections," and they really didn't have much insight into the kind of nationalism. And all I could think of was, well, in Doctor King's speech he quoted from several people- Bernard Fall and others- who knew a lot about that part of the world. They'd spent their life writing about it. And why could not a brightest and the best person access their information if they chose? I mean, how bright do you have to be to realize people have written about this at length? And you don't have to believe what they say, but you can take it in and evaluate it like everything else.

01:10:19:00 And I often thought to myself if I were a parent that lost a child in that war and read the memoir, I would really be... I would be really aggravated. So, that was one thing. You know, he began the speech by saying, "A time comes when silence is betrayal, and that time has come for us." That was a quote out of a policy paper we had written at Clergy and Laity Concerned that he chose to quote. Well, we have those times all the time. The time comes when you have to speak or do something. So, there's not a... there's a lot of what I call great universal King language in it. And some of it's at the very end, that I've used a hundred times, but I have not memorized his words. One of the phrases he uses quite a bit, and this is not the first speech he used it in, "If you want to be involved in the social change you have to take the first step up the ladder. Not the second, just the first one." There are steps and you're going to take the first one. Don't think you should do nothing because you could only do little. All of us can only do little. That's how we begin. And what you think is little today, tomorrow may be the biggest thing in the world.

01:11:40:00 TREY ELLIS:

What about today then? Do you feel that today? Like, when you think about his... what's in his speech today with what's going on the world today? Is there anything prophetic there?

01:11:52:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

In the speech he says at some point we have to be worried about three issues, and I can never recite them verbatim, but it's militarism, I want to say consumerism, and racism. And some of my colleagues in this day and age think that those are the

marching orders for today. I think they are very important issues for today, but I think King had no intention for those to be the marching orders. So, what I have written about Doctor King is, I think the marching orders are first, paying attention to his universalism, paying attention to the fact that we who are advocates on the left side, if I can say that, or on the progressive- whatever the words are, that we need to get out of our little holes we've dug and we need to make common cause with people who've dug holes elsewhere. We need to re-institute the word "compromise" as a good word in the American lexicon, and compromise means you don't get everything you want. So, I'm one of those people who thinks the Democratic Party needs to open its door for people who may not believe in having abortions. It doesn't mean that has to be their platform, but by God, you read them out of the party and your universalism just took a death blow in other issues. And the reverse is true of people on the other side. I think it's- so I'm big on King's universalism, that that's the way forward for a democracy that wants to be healthy.

01:13:39:00 Now, you can go forward in an unhealthy way. We could, we could win the next election in an unhealthy way and continue this stuff, fighting each other every inch of the way, and making sure congressmen never go out and have lunch together across the aisle. I think that is a awful thing for our country. And so, I think we need to suck it up a little bit. It's a... one of the quotes I always use is, "We should far less concerned with the purity of our thoughts and much more concerned with the integrity of our compromises." There aren't many people who believe that on the left or the right. They think purity of their thoughts and getting all that they want is more important than a compromise, and that to me is scary. I think that leads us down a road that is not good for many people, and it just gets worse and I worry about that.

01:14:49:00 TREY ELLIS:

What about the global perspective from his speech? Was that considered radical? Did that feel new for Doctor King to sort of- besides coming out against the war, talk about sort of the global issues of peace and poverty and...?

01:15:06:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

I think when King made that speech against the war, he included such a wide variety of related topics it was unlike any speech he ever gave before or after. It was a huge... I mean, there must have been eight or ten or fifteen different subjects, and he blended together all of them, you know, encompassed by his universalism, by his feeling for justice, by the need to do something, not to wait, that the moment is here, if not you, who? But I've never seen anything he's ever written that was so encompassing. Now there were people in the anti-war movement, writers, who would do that kind of stuff and turn it into books. But a lot of it came off as very ideological. King's stuff was not very ideological. He was not saying that, you know, people in the Soviet Union are more just or... You know, he wasn't trying to paint a picture of the rest of the world as a perfect place, that there were conflicts everywhere, that we needed to find our way through joining hands. So, it was one of a kind in terms of speeches for him.

01:16:41:00 TREY ELLIS:  
Did King and his message change after the Riverside speech?

01:16:47:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
After the speech he lived one more year. He chose to associate with our organization. He showed up at two board meetings, stayed for the whole meetings. Came to one of our big demonstrations in Washington. Began the Poor People's march. So, I think the common understanding is, although he didn't go out again and make a lot of anti-war statements, it was not quite once and done because he did show up for some other things. But he and SCLC were, even before the speech and then after the speech, trying to figure out for goodness' sake where's SCLC to go? They'd had the foray into Chicago, that from all accounts did not go the way they hoped. It was not a good turn of events for SCLC or the people of Chicago. Now, they had the Poor People's Campaign beginning, and I think they hoped both for something important to take place as a result of it, and I think they hoped that it would also breathe some new life into SCLC.

01:18:05:00 Now, whether it would have had a different- whether the result would have been different if he had lived, we'll never know. We'll never know. But it seemed to me that the Poor People's Campaign was another one of those closing chapters of the civil rights movement. Even though it was well attended, some good things happened of a small scale. So- or I'd rather not even say the closing of the civil rights movement, it was taking another turn. It didn't die, it didn't go away, but you don't keep social movements alive for fifty-sixty years, you know, they usually are burst. And so you had several bursts. It looks from a distance like they came... they interlocked with one, and then that one interlocked with the next one. And my presumption is that each succeeding one after the civil rights movement gained strength and courage because of the previous movement. They changed things, we could change things. Why not us? We can be a... we're not objects of history. We can be subjects. We can change, the government can change, people will change, but you have to persist, you can't let up. So, you know, that was a kind of a building process. So, we were fortunate to live in that time. And as I say to young people, "I wouldn't want you to have to live through that time." It was a hard, hard time. Assassinations and wars and... But I'm glad I did live through that time.

01:20:00:00 TREY ELLIS:  
Can you talk about the... where you were when you heard about the assassination?

RICHARD FERNANDEZ:  
Oh, yeah.

TREY ELLIS:  
How the congregation reacted... or just...

01:20:08:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

I was in Sarasota, Florida with my parents. My mother had never had a- what do we call it? She never had a thought she didn't talk about. She never had an undisclosed thought. And I'm there with my wife and three kids for a week, and he was shot- it's on the television. And the first thing out of my mother's mouth was, "He deserved it. He was a rabble rouser." And my wife and I just walked out of the condo. We didn't even say a word; just told the kids we would be back. That was my mother. Not an undisclosed thought, not a political brain in her head either. I mean, she was a very nice woman in many ways, but she never had a political brain in her head. And she was raised in Ohio and she talked about African-Americans as- she called them "colored." And I'd always say, "Which particular color now? Black? Brown? What color am I?" And she didn't like that... So, we walked the beach in Sarasota, and the debate was whether I was going to take a plane to Memphis. So, then I called my friend, Bill Coffin in New Haven, and we talked about it. Then we talked the next morning and we decided not to go. But that's what you felt like doing, not because you could do anything. I'm not sure to this day whether I should have gone, but I think if I weren't with my family I would have gone just that night. But we didn't. So, it was devastating. And then when I think about it, Doctor King should not have died of old age in a nursing home. And God smiled when he died for justice for garbage workers. Absolutely the way he should die, and I wish he didn't. But, yeah, he died as an advocate for justice. Yeah. Fine. We should all live a life like that, even preceded by a pillow fight. It was terrific. I mean, it's a terrific tale, and only because it's distant I can talk about it. I mean, at the time, I just would start crying. How would Doctor King- what's the best way for Doctor King to die- I mean, all of us, how would you like to die? My wife used to say she'd like to ace a guy on the tennis court and fall over. How would Doctor King die? A pillow fight with his staff as he advocates for garbage workers, and he got killed. Shouldn't have gotten killed. too bad, wish it didn't happen. Great, great. That was Doctor King. And I'm sure he had a premonition more than once that the end was coming. That speech the night before, "I may not get there with you." So, I think he had a premonition. And so, again, I wish he lived for five hundred years, but I think his last piece of ministry before his death was just so terrific. Symbolizing a life of justice... special.

01:21:43:00

01:23:37:00 TREY ELLIS:

Do you think that we properly remember King and his legacy? Are there misconceptions about King? The image you were talking about, you know, raising up people to be a God or on a pedestal?

01:23:50:00 RICHARD FERNANDEZ:

You know, one of the things I try to do when I talk about Doctor King, particularly if the audience happens to be young- for you young people, you know, I try to make Doctor King a human being. So, you know, I tell the story of when he was a young boy probably of six, with his brother. The parents said, "You may not slide down the banister in the house. It's dangerous." And, like, three weeks later, Martin and his brother slid down the banister, and when Martin came down, his grandmother was walking up on the first step and he knocked her over backward. And he was so

distraught because he knew his parents were going to come around the corner. He ran up to the second floor, shut his bedroom door, and he jumped out the second-floor window, and didn't hurt himself. That is just like a regular boy. And when he went to Morehouse, some of his buddies used to call him "Tweed" 'cause he liked to wear tweed jackets, you know, to take the girls out. So, in many ways... He didn't volunteer for the Montgomery Improvement Association. He wasn't going to do that, he had a better idea. He was going to do the Dexter Church. "I committed to that, I'm going to do that." And he had to be persuaded more than once to do that.

01:24:59:00 I'm sure Andy Young and others could talk about other things just like that because all of us are a little bit of a mixed bag. And what I sometimes fear- not all the time, but sometimes fear- is that people want to put Doctor King on such a pedestal he can't be reached by us, and kind of the adoration. And Doctor King's up here, then there's the rest of us. I don't believe that. I believe that William Barber down in North Carolina is a good follower of King, and King would be pleased. I know he would be pleased with Sister Mary Scullion in Philadelphia who's been an advocate for the homeless for thirty years. Doctor King would approve of my friend Ron Young in Seattle, who's been advocating for Middle East justice for forty years. And all of them inspired in different ways by Doctor King.

01:25:52:00 So, I think his work goes on. The songs of the civil rights movement have been sung all over the world, in South Africa particularly. So, people have been inspired by a movement here that was terrific, led by him, and I don't think that'll go away soon. And... but sometimes, sometimes, particularly on his birthday when people celebrate his life, you would think he'd lived an impeccable life and it was always up. Well, no, he was like most of us. He was sometimes down, that's okay. He seemed to recover from the down times quite well. And I think his integrity, and I come back to it again and again, and his universal appeal to us will live for a very, very long time. And I'm so glad that he's influenced so many people after his time, a mark of a true leader.

01:26:57:00 END OF INTERVIEW