

DIANE NASH
Field Organizer, SCLC and SNCC
Interviewed by Trey Ellis
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Total Running Time: 1 hour 9 minutes

00:00:07:00 TREY ELLIS:
So, could you tell us about the first time you met Doctor King and under what circumstances?

00:00:13:00 DIANE NASH:
The first time I met Martin Luther King was in Nashville, Tennessee in nineteen sixty. Lunch counter sit-ins were going on to desegregate lunch counters and restaurants in Nashville. And he came to give a speech in Fisk University's gymnasium. I was a student at Fisk at the time. And many students from Fisk and from about five or six universities in the Nashville area were participating in the sit-ins. He gave a speech. I was in awe of him like everyone. We met him personally, particularly those of us who were in the sit-in movement. And he gave a marvelous speech. I remember everybody being very inspired.

TREY ELLIS:
When you are first meeting him, and you're already knowing about his reputation preceded him. Were you surprised by the King the man versus King the minister? Is there any kind of aspect in his character that was surprising to you?

00:01:34:00 DIANE NASH:
Not- there's wasn't anything really that surprised me. I know that at time in nineteen sixty, sit-ins and use of nonviolence as a method was rather new in the United States. It was extremely new in the United States. And some of our attorneys has said that staying in jail and refusing bail was a bad idea. They didn't understand nonviolence as a method of social change. And we understood that they didn't understand it. So, I remember asking Doctor King if he would make it a point during his address to say that staying in jail, and refusing bail was a valid thing to do and he came through. He said exactly that, did what we needed done.

TREY ELLIS:
How did you see that his role as a minister in the SCLC differently from your role as a student activist? Was there any kind of friction, or disagreement on methods, and tactics?

00:03:05:00 DIANE NASH:

No. I regarded him as an ally. I was familiar with his work in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and knew at the time that he was using nonviolence. And from the moment I met him, I recognized him as an ally.

TREY ELLIS: You called nonviolence “the greatest invention of the twentieth century.” Can you talk about that?

00:03:09:00 DIANE NASH:

Nonviolence... well, I'll put it this way. There is no greater invention of the twentieth century than nonviolence, because it allows us to fight warfare without violence. To-it gives us a method of making social change without killing and maiming our fellow human beings. If we can evolve in to- well, it provides us with the opportunity to evolve a step higher as human beings into a more advanced species. Because what we do now, and with all the wars, and the killing, and the maiming and as soon as somebody does something that we disagree with, the immediate reaction is, "Well, let's kill them," or "let's fight them," without stopping to find out their side of the story.

00:05:07:00 Nobody, no group of people, no country of human beings is perfect. And it seems to me that it would just be more logical, and less primitive if we said, "Okay, you know, what's their position? What's our position?" And tried to come to a civilized resolution of problems, rather than being so quick to fight. In fact, I'm really disappointed that in this country some of our national leaders, if they show an inclination to think or talk before they're ready to fight, they get severe criticism from other politicians. That's backwards. That's uncivilized. I hope that as a result of what Gandhi did, and what we have developed in the Southern civil rights movement in the sixties, I hope we can be better than that.

TREY ELLIS:

But it's also- it takes a lot of courage to be nonviolent in the face of violence. For example, you and the lunch counters. Can you talk about fear? How did fear or fearlessness play a role in the movement?

00:06:40:00 DIANE NASH:

I get really amused because people often say, "Oh, you were so courageous, and fearless." And I have to laugh, because that is not the case at all. I was fearful from beginning to end. I remember having a class that was just before we sat in typically. And I think that's the only time in my life that the palms of my hands sweated. But I used to be so fearful in that class. Sitting at a lunch counter with people behind you that you cannot really see, but you know that they're a threat to you, is pretty scary. That's one of the things that really bothered me. We were able to summon the courage necessary because segregation was so horrible, so demeaning, so insulting, so degrading that the choice was to carry out this nonviolent movement successfully, and eliminate segregation, or to tolerate it. I think by nineteen sixty, black people were so fed up with segregation.

00:08:25:00 I remember that we said, "Whatever it takes, we're going to do it. If the path towards eliminating segregation goes through the jail house, we'll do it. If it means getting beaten up, we'll do it. If it means risking, and even losing our lives, we'll do it." Nobody wanted to suffer, or be injured, or killed, but the commitment necessary to displace that social system that had been in place about a hundred years at the time, and it was tough. And we knew it. We knew that when we started. And so, the commitment was there's only one outcome, and that is the end of segregation. And we will do what we have to do in order to achieve that. Another important element in being successful at eliminating segregation was changing ourselves. We changed ourselves into people who could not be segregated. And once you change yourself, the world has to fit up against the new you. That presented a different set of options to the Southern white racist. They had to actually kill many of us, or they had to desegregate, because they could no longer segregate us. We wouldn't let them.

00:10:24:00 TREY ELLIS:
You were so instrumental with the Selma march. Can you talk a little bit about convincing King to, you know, that this was the next- you know, you're convincing King to take on Selma, or to join this fight? And, you know, you talked about the loss of life, you know, the cost that people paid for that fight and the sense of responsibility to that.

00:10:56:00 DIANE NASH:
The day four little girls were murdered in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, my husband at the time James Bevel and I were in Edenton, North Carolina. SCLC had a voter registration project going on there. It was a Sunday and he came into the living room and told me about the murder of these little girls. We were both crying really. And we decided that an adult man and woman could not allow four little girls to be murdered and do nothing about it. We felt confident that if we tried, we could find out who had done that crime, and make certain that they were killed. We felt that that was one option that we had. Option two was that we get the right to vote for blacks in Alabama, and in that way, they could better protect their children. So, we made a conscious decision, and we choose option two to get the right to vote, and made a promise to ourselves, to each other, and to God that no matter how long it took us, we were going to work on getting the right to vote.

00:12:46:00 One thing that's not widely understood is that the murder of those little girls was horrible. And the only thing that would have been more horrible would have been if nothing positive came out of it. But the fact is that the right to vote for southern blacks is a direct result of their deaths. That afternoon, he and I drafted the original strategy for what became the Selma right to vote movement. He was, my husband was responsible for working on the voter registration project that was going on at the time in North Carolina. So, it became my job to present the draft of the strategy that we had written to Doctor King. My task was to ask him to call a meeting of SCLC and make a decision about what we were going to do in response to the murders. The draft we had written was just so we'd have a possibility of something that we could

do. It was fine with us if the organization decided to do something totally different or decided to do nothing at all. But our point was let's meet and make a decision.

00:14:44:00 So, I took the draft to Atlanta. That's where Martin and... that's where he was at the time. And the first person I saw was Reverend Shuttlesworth. And actually, I presented it to him. And his response was, "We'll see what Martin thinks." And then I did find Martin and present it to him. His initial- well, I should say that the things that we were advocating such as really shutting the State of Alabama down, physically blocking transportation, airports, etc. That what we were advocating was going to take a lot of courage. But there was a whole state of black people who were upset, sad, angry, and wanted to do something. In addition, there were people throughout the country, blacks and definitely non-blacks who were going to be supportive, I felt. But anyway, Doctor King's initial reaction was kind of, "Oh, Diane, get real." And it took us- well, we were- and by us, I mean Jim Bevel and me, we worked for the next four months to try to persuade Andy Young and Doctor King to go into Alabama on this voter registration.

00:16:46:00 Andy was the executive director of SCLC at the time. And we were not successful in persuading them. So, Bevel was the director of direct action. And he and I decided that he should take a few of his direct-action staff and go into Alabama and start working. He could have been fired for insubordination, but we felt if he could not get fired for a couple of months, the organization in Alabama, that the Alabama people would ask Doctor King to come over, and that's what happened. In the meantime, I was expecting our second child, and I had a toddler. And we lived kind of on the outskirts of Atlanta. And I made the supreme sacrifice of the family car for him, and his staff to go to Alabama.

00:17:55:00 And I started writing pamphlets, and gathering statistics of, you know, how many blacks were in which counties and, you know, that type of thing. And so, they worked for a couple of months and the blacks in Alabama asked Martin to come in and that was the beginning of the Selma right to vote movement, which ended with the march over Edmund Pettus B ridge and with the Interstate Commerce Commission ruling that interstate... Wait, that's wrong. I got the Freedom Ride mixed up there. But it ended with the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and actually with blacks in the Southern states gaining the right to vote.

TREY ELLIS:

Let's sort of jump to the end of the Voting Rights Act passing. It's one of the great successes of American history, is that from your note to the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Were you surprised at the eventually passage of- the signing of the law?

00:19:12:00 DIANE NASH:

I did not know exactly what form it would take, but I was not surprised at blacks getting the right to vote in the South because Bevel and I were not going to stop working on it until it happened, or until we died, or something, so it was not a surprise.

TREY ELLIS:

So, Jesse Jackson and others have called it the crown jewel of the civil rights movement. How did you feel? Tell us about the moment that you knew there was victory, when you felt that you had succeeded.

00:19:58:00 DIANE NASH:
Empowered. Success of projects like the- like actually achieving the right to vote, it was satisfying from a deep place. Segregation and being deprived of rights that belonged to us was such an outrage. And to be able to organize people who needed and wanted a way to express themselves and wanted a way that they could make change was- success in things like that was profound.

00:21:03:00 TREY ELLIS:
And on the wake of that success, you know, there's uncertainty it seemed in the movement about what the next fight would be. And the idea of going towards, you know, pivoting towards Chicago and a sort of northern strategy, there was- how did you feel about that? Or were you part of those discussion about what to do next?

00:21:29:00 DIANE NASH:
I opposed SCLC moving north, because we weren't finished in the South. There was a lot of work left to be done. I thought that we should have stayed in the South and done it.

TREY ELLIS:
Why is that? For example, what other- what would you- if you were the leading the movement, where would your next fight have been?

00:22:00:00 DIANE NASH:
I think that we needed to continue politically education in the South, learning what the rights and responsibilities of citizens of voters were, making certain that blacks who were elected to political office understood that they needed to represent their constituents, rather than to consider their positions their own personal jobs. There was a great deal left to be done with the political. And then with the economics, we needed to work on building an economic base in the South. Education, there were many things left undone. The education level of black children were nowhere near on par with the education level of white children. That needed to be corrected. So, I thought that there were just many, many things that we needed to build on our successes in the South.

00:23:32:00 TREY ELLIS:
Could we go back to the- Martin at that time sort of riding on the high of the Selma victories. People talk about he was everywhere at once and that kind of inexhaustible- or just running him all over the place. But he also- there was also, people talked about a darker side of that boundless energy, kind of depression, or where it became too much for him. Did you ever see him, it became too much for him?

00:23:58:00 DIANE NASH:

During the period before nineteen sixty-five, I would realize that sometimes Martin had anxiety because as he put it, "We don't want to flunk." That's the way he said it, when he was saying, "We don't want to fail in our projects." And I always felt like we are not called upon to succeed, we are called upon to do our best. I did not have that kind of anxiety about not succeeding, because we needed to do our best, but the other thing is we need not stop until we have succeeded. If you're not successful at a certain point, you go back to the drawing board and correct what needs to be corrected and continue.

00:25:20:00 TREY ELLIS:

I wanted to pivot a little bit to the personal relationship, you and your ex-husband, and the Kings. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between Bevel and King, and then, you know, vacationing with them in the Bahamas? Just to sort of personalize a little bit the relationship. Any antidotes or feelings of what that might have been like?

00:25:43:00 DIANE NASH:

I said to an audience one time that, "I had double dated with Martin Luther King." And I was really surprised they laughed, and I didn't understand why they were laughing. People generally do laugh when I say that now. And I think it's because they don't associate Martin Luther King with dating. But he was very human and not at all the perfect, super human, saintly, remote kind of impression that a lot of people, a lot of young people especially have. He was very human and his humanness was one thing I found endearing about him. He had a sense of humor. He- I remember he often enjoyed playing table tennis with the staff, and talking smack, and laughing and it was just really, really clear that he was having a great time, as the staff was. Sometimes they would crack jokes and try to top each other's jokes, you know, a joke here, and then somebody would crack another one, another one.

00:27:33:00

So, this particular time though, Martin was going to the Bahama Islands to work on one of his books. And Jim Bevel surprised me and- with a trip. We were going along also. We were in the Atlanta airport, and I remember we had just come from someplace. And I was like, "Bevel, we're going the wrong way. Ground transportation is that way." And so, he said, "No. We're going to the Bahamas." And so, we joined Coretta and Martin. And I have lovely memories of a great restaurant that was cut into the side of the hill and the moon was shining through the palm trees. And for somebody from Chicago, the moon shining through the palm trees is a big deal, and as you can imagine, you know, great conversation. He was a fun person to be with, and Coretta, it was a really nice evening and then the next day a long boat ride. And so, he was to me a likable person.

00:29:04:00

I admired a lot of things about Martin Luther King. I remember really admiring him for the amount of work that he could grind out in a day. He was a person that had an open mind to the extent that he could grow and change his mind over a period of

time. I respect that a great deal in a human being. He was steadfast. He didn't waiver. He kept his hand on the freedom plow, to borrow a phrase from the gospel song. And he didn't want to die. I really relate to that. I didn't want to die either. But he did what was necessary to change things. I admired that deeply. There was a lot to him. He was serious at times. He was courageous at times, a many faceted human being.

TREY ELLIS:

In the Bahamas, was the conversation about politics all the time, or did you feel like he could unplug a little bit-

00:30:51:00 DIANE NASH:

The conversation was about many, many things. We had a lot to talk about. Martin Luther King knew a lot about what was going on in the world. Then, of course, we had the movement, and then we had families. And so, it was very varied.

TREY ELLIS:

Can you talk a little bit about Jim Bevel and what was his ... people talk about how unique- he had a sort of unique position in the inner circle? What was unique about it?

00:31:28:00 DIANE NASH:

Jim Bevel was about ten years younger than Martin Luther King and the ministers that were Martin's contemporaries. Bevel was first with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as was I. He was a member of the Nashville Student Central Committee, as was I. He received, as did I, an excellent education in nonviolence in the philosophy and the strategy. Reverend James Lawson had been to India and had studied Gandhi's movement first hand. And Lawson conducted workshops every week in Nashville in which he taught the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence to students who were interested, community people, other ministers. Those workshops were wonderful. For me, they were life changing. I think for many of the students in the community who went, they were life changing.

00:32:57:00

Bevel was part of many of the workshops and was on the... we called it the Central Committee, these students that gave leadership to the sit-in movement. When we began working with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he and I made a really great team. Some of his strengths were not my strengths, and vice versa. And so, the two of us together really complimented each other and I think one plus one equaled six or seven, instead of two, if you understand what I mean? Bevel was a marvelous strategist. That also was one of my fortes. He was a gifted speaker. He had the ability to move crowds. And of course, I am not that at all. And he was part of the executive committee and was the director of direct action for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He had a great deal of courage, very committed to ending segregation. He loved black people and was motivated by that love.

00:35:00:00 TREY ELLIS:

After Selma and especially after the Watt's riots, this idea of nonviolence was questioned by lots of people, including yourself. Can you talk about your decision to leave SNCC, and sort of your journey away from nonviolence, and back to nonviolence? And how you sort of contextualized that with what was happening in the world in the middle sixties?

00:35:28:00 DIANE NASH:

I grew up in this violent society. And I stayed with those nonviolent workshops in Nashville for one reason, and that was it was the only game in town. There was no other organization trying to eliminate segregation. I really doubted that nonviolence would work. But I also could not just do nothing about segregation. I found it so humiliating. Blacks could not use public libraries, swimming pools, hotels, motels, restaurants. It was possible for blacks to buy food at downtown restaurants, but you couldn't sit down and eat, you had to take it on a carryout basis. So, if you went to downtown Nashville during the lunch hour, the blacks that worked in the downtown area would be sitting along the curbs, along the alleys eating their lunch that they had either brought from home or purchased on a takeout basis from a local restaurant. When I obeyed segregation rules, I felt awful. I felt like I was agreeing that I was too inferior to use the accommodations that the general public used.

00:37:22:00 So, my commitment was to eliminate the segregation. The nonviolent workshops were the only organization that I could find that- the only people trying to do something about eliminating segregation. So, we had the success of the first couple of years, the lunch counters, and restaurants, and freedom rides. And then the violent poetry was surfacing and people who did not believe in nonviolence. And at a certain point I thought, "Well, of course violence is more powerful than nonviolence." And I decided I wouldn't be nonviolent. Well, about a year passed. The only thing that I had done was read a lot of poetry, have a lot of conversation about how blood had to flow in the street. And I had not been to the rifle range. I had not learned to make a bomb or let alone use one. I had come to the conclusion that you'd have to be kind of stupid to do illegal things with people that you did not know well. Therefore, it was not possible to build a mass-based movement using violence.

00:39:23:00 And when I looked back on that year, I decided that I personally was more powerful using nonviolence. So, I came full circle, and moved from using it as a tactic to using it as a way of life. Because it makes sense in so many ways. Usually when people carry out violent movements, they're really trying to achieve something good, achieve a better world. And you don't do that by harming people. If you kill somebody's friend, or brother, or child, or mother, or father, it's not going to create good feelings and brotherhood and sisterhood and harmony like people would prefer. Very often when there's violence the press will cover the violence and ignore the issue. They will cover the violence in great detail. You know, I remember the convention, the democratic convention in Chicago. If you read the accounts, they'll say on this corner, this violence was happening, and meanwhile across the street in Grant Park, and they'll describe some violence there. And then they'll go on. The whole article will be violence and the issues will be absolutely ignored.

00:41:12:00 So, I took note of a number of things such as that and decided that nonviolence is a more powerful way of making change because often with violence you attack individuals and you leave the system or the real problem untouched. With the amount and the different kinds of violence that have been used over the centuries, if violence improved things, and made a better world, we'd be in Utopia by now. So, clearly, it doesn't bring a better world.

TREY ELLIS:

Did your return to nonviolence, sort of, was that the natural leap to the anti-war movement, to your feelings about Vietnam?

00:42:24:00 DIANE NASH:

I remember seeing a photograph of a Vietnamese woman. She was holding a baby. The baby looked like it might have been a year and a half, something like that. And part of the baby's flesh was torn away, and exposed flesh was in that photograph. And the expressions on the child's and the woman's face expressed such agony. And I was a young mother at the time and I really identified with her and how I'd feel if something like that happened to my child. And I decided that if I had the opportunity to help, I would. By that time, I had learned that- I had learned because of the civil rights movement and nonviolence that blowing apart the bodies of people's babies with bombs was not the way to solve human problems. Not long after that, there was an invitation from the Woman's Union of North Vietnam for four American women to travel to Vietnam on a fact-finding mission. And I was part of the peace movement and was one of the four women who went. We were there for eleven days as guests of the Women's Union. And we toured near, well, Hanoi and nearby towns. I think that if the American public knew how and why the war was being fought, they also would be against it, and it turned out that that's true.

TREY ELLIS:

It took Doctor King longer to come around to that position. How did you feel about that?

00:44:52:00 DIANE NASH:

I don't remember having- Well, I wanted everybody to come around to that position. And when he did, I was delighted. And he did so thoughtfully and with good reason. And I was really impressed with the speech that he made where he was announcing his lack of support for that war. That's a wonderful speech. Everybody should read it.

TREY ELLIS:

I want to pivot to the FBI. And did you have any personal- did you ever feel that you were followed, or tapped? You know, in retrospect, we know that they were so devious and so- and infiltrated so many aspects of the civil rights movement and antiwar movement. Did you have a feeling of that it at the time?

00:45:56:00 DIANE NASH:

We would talk about the fact that we were being spied on and phones tapped and listened to. And we thought that it was the FBI. That turned out to be true. And also, it was the state of Mississippi. I'm trying to think of the organization that did that. I'll think of it. But I sent for my files later on and they had things like, "Diane Nash left home at such and such a time, went to the airport, picked up two white women, one white male," you know, the gender and sex of people, "and they went to a restaurant and they stayed an hour and a half and then they left and they went there." And it felt creepy.

00:47:06:00 I didn't know at the time that they were following me, but- the Sovereignty Commission is the name of it, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. But I found out when I sent for my files that they had that. It's really curious that the FBI was doing that because they considered us a threat to the United States when we were doing things like trying to get the right to vote for everybody, and were nonviolent, and, you know, trying to do away with segregation on Greyhound and Trailways, at lunch counters. It really makes me wonder, well who were they, if they considered people like us, the enemy, or a threat to them?

TREY ELLIS:

And we know from the revealing of these wiretaps that they'd obviously bugged Doctor King's, you know, his hotel rooms, and trying to get dirt on his marriage, and all that.

00:48:25:00 DIANE NASH:
Despicable, that they would do that, that they would wiretap Martin Luther King, and... just despicable.

TREY ELLIS:

But surprising or not surprising?

00:48:44:00 DIANE NASH:
Now that I know the kinds of things that the FBI did, I'm not surprised at much. At the time I did not expect it.

TREY ELLIS:

What would you say to those people who look at these, the revelations in those tapes, and try to use dirt against Doctor King to negate his work and the movement as a whole?

00:49:16:00 DIANE NASH:
I don't know any perfect human beings. That's all. That they really don't have their intentions in the right place.

TREY ELLIS:

And so, after this, so for you personally, after you worked with the antiwar movement did you have another fight? What was your next fight?

00:49:44:00 DIANE NASH:

I worked with tenant organizing in Chicago. I moved back to Chicago. My family was there, after I was divorced and I had two small children. I had a number of jobs that were... not freedom f- well, they were a lot tamer organizations. One of the difficult things for me then was making the transition from having been in the South. For example, in Nashville, the Central Committee was approximately thirty students and two ministers. And part of our nonviolent training was that, A, if one person is getting severely beaten a way that you can try to protect them is putting your body between them and harm, especially if there's more than one person, but even if there's just one person. It was an extremely unique experience to be part of a group of about thirty people that you loved enough to put your body between them and harm and to have every confidence that they would put their body between you and harm. And that was the relationship that existed in Nashville in the Central Committee. And these were the people who were giving guidance to the sit-in movement there.

00:51:54:00 When I came to Chicago I was working with organizations where people were not nearly so committed. I was, for example, I was doing tenant organizing for a particular organization. And oh, my goodness, they had so many reports. There was the funding agency that I had to do a report for. I had to do a report for the board of directors of that organization. I had to do a report for the board that was in charge of my project and I had to report to the executive director. And he was always upset because I would get reports in late sometimes. And one day in utter exasperation I said to the executive director who was my boss. I said, "If I just got all my reports in on time and never got in the field and worked with tenants, you'd be satisfied, wouldn't you?" And he said, "Yes, yes, I would, please."

00:53:14:00 Those tenants, it was- you know, Chicago winters can be vicious. I was working with people who had no heat. I was working with the family that, a woman said that she had a baby and when she came home from the hospital with the baby she couldn't stay in her apartment. She moved in with a relative because she was afraid the rats would eat the baby. There was another apartment where the apartment upstairs was vacant and somebody had come in to steal the pipes and things from the sink upstairs and they hadn't bothered to cap them. And water had run into her apartment from upstairs and she's walking around in water a couple of inches deep in her apartment in the winter. People were in dire straits. And so, I felt a need to put more time than my boss wanted me to in trying to help these people. And when he said, "Yes, I'd be delighted if you would just get your reports in, even if it meant you didn't have any time to work with the tenants," that was such a contrast from working with people who were so committed to the issue as well as to me personally and me committed to them, that it was just hard for me to make that adjustment.

TREY ELLIS:

We talked to Marian Wright Edelman and she talks about how his message has been- she calls it trivialized and sanitized. How do you feel that we do remember King or

misremember King and how do you think that we should remember King and his work?

00:55:24:00 DIANE NASH:

I'm going to quote my ex-husband on this question of how we should remember Martin Luther King. Bevel said, "You know, the Wright brothers were probably pretty good guys. Wouldn't it be a shame if we had a holiday once a year where we praised the Wright brothers and talked about how great they were instead of developing their contribution, instead of developing aviation?" With Martin Luther King we have the holiday and talk about how wonderful he was, but we really should develop his work, which was nonviolent social change. We should study nonviolence and apply it and develop it.

TREY ELLIS:

Do you see nonviolence as an answer to this- go ahead...?

00:56:47:00 DIANE NASH:

Let me say something. Back in the nineteen sixties we did not know if nonviolence would work. Now we know that it does. So, I think we should take advantage of it and indeed bring about the better society that we can.

TREY ELLIS:

With the cynicism that we have today and the current- the election, you know, of Donald Trump, do you feel- how does that- when you tell people to be nonviolent in social change, do you find that- is that message as receptive today as you think it should be, your thoughts about nonviolence and its place in twenty-seventeen, twenty-eighteen?

00:57:32:00 DIANE NASH:

In twenty-seventeen we are in what I regard as a frightening period in the history of this country. I'm a patriot. I really think that we no longer have a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. I think we have a- now we have a government of the corporations, by the corporations, and for the corporations. I'm troubled that we no longer have a free press. We have a corporate press, corporate media. The Supreme Court has ruled with Citizens United that it's legal for wealthy people to buy politicians. I think we are in a serious place when it comes to the country that our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren will inherit. And it's up to us to determine what that country will be like.

00:59:02:00

When citizens see the roof leaking in their living unit, if they live in an apartment they call the maintenance crew. If they live in their own home they call a plumber. Because they know that if that leak is neglected, that eventually the living unit will become uninhabitable. It's remarkable that people don't understand that that principle is true also of a society, of a country, of a state, of a city and of a community. When you see- well, societies don't collapse in a single day or a single year. They collapse over a period of time with millions and millions and millions of

flaws. And the flaws are when citizens see something wrong. If you work for a company and you know they're dumping toxic waste in a nearby stream or lake, and you do and say nothing, that's contributing to- that's like a leak in the ceiling. That's contributing to the fall of this country. If you work in a court and you know that a judge is taking bribes, that's contributing to the downfall of our justice system and on and on.

01:01:00:00 And right now, all of our systems are imploding. Our education system, certainly in large cities, our so-called justice system, which is an injustice system where people are incarcerated in order for there to be the new slavery, the new Jim Crow. The education system, the economic system, which has an incredible of people unemployed. And the citizens of this country don't understand that it's our responsibility, everybody's responsibility. There are three hundred million of us. When jobs were moved overseas for the benefit of a small minority of people, all of us did nothing, said nothing, probably didn't think about it, but that was our responsibility to think about it. How many American citizens sit in a quiet corner sometime and say, "How do I want the education system in this country or in this state or this city to be? How do I want the economic system here to be?" Now, if you don't do that why would you be surprised when somebody else builds the systems the way they want them, to your detriment?

01:02:47:00 When the G-Twenty or- the numbers change depending on how many governments are represented, but when those summits meet, you know from the beginning they are not going to be making decisions to benefit you. Why aren't you deciding how you want the economic system to work and then going- why don't you go door to door in your block and in your neighborhood and have a meeting of people and make decisions about how you want things to look and how you are going to get from the point where you are now to the point where you collectively want to be? You have the same equipment that the people who are making the decisions have. One head, two eyes, one brain, two hands, same internal organs. The only thing that's different is that you don't see yourself as a ruler of this country. In a democracy or even a republic the citizens are the rulers of this country. We don't need to worry about who's the president or who's in Congress and what they're doing wrong.

01:04:08:00 The biggest people- I mean, the biggest wrong, the biggest neglect has been that we citizens are not doing our job. And if we start doing our job we won't have to worry about the elected officials. It is a huge mistake to expect elected officials to do what needs to be done in the interest of this country. Suppose we had waited for elected officials to desegregate lunch counters in restaurants or desegregate interstate bus travel or get the right to vote in the South. Fifty some odd years later I am convinced we would still be waiting. And I promise you, if citizens don't take the interest of this country into our own hands, learn how to use nonviolence and make the necessary social changes, fifty years from now those changes will not be made. And god help our grandchildren and great-grandchildren if we citizens don't step up to the plate. And I don't mean a few or I don't mean that you should say "somebody ought to" or "they ought to." I mean you, the person you see in the mirror. That is your responsibility.

01:05:51:00 So, just as your living unit can become uninhabitable, your city, your state, your country will become more and more uninhabitable. Right now, black men and boys who are unarmed can be shot in the back, no one held accountable, particularly shot by law enforcement. The cities where this happened have become uninhabitable for them. Keep neglecting our responsibilities as citizens. It will become uninhabitable for you. That's part of the human condition.

TREY ELLIS:

Do you have anything else you want to add?

01:06:52:00 DIANE NASH:

Yes. There are lessons that can be learned from the movement of the sixties. One of them is that charismatic leadership, whether under Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammed, Malcolm X, Martin King, Jesse Jackson, whomever, has never freed—has not freed us, and never will. I think that the freedom is adult men and women understanding that they are their own leaders. It is rather dangerous to rely on charismatic leadership. The model of that one strong person and many weak people will sometimes produce a benevolent leader like a Martin Luther King, but it also will produce a Hitler type.

01:08:02:00 There are lots of reasons why charismatic leadership is not the best way to go. Another is that it makes it really easy for the power structure or the opposition to manipulate a movement through bribery, threats, and assassination if there is a leader. Movements really need to be issue led, not personality led. All of the accolades, and excessive praise that people were giving to Martin King when he was alive, they thought they were doing something positive. But actually, they were setting him up for assassination. And I don't think we should make that mistake again. As someone said, "If I lead you into the Promised Land, somebody else can lead you back out again." I think there's wisdom in that. I think we have to really change the attitude of American citizens into understanding that social change is the job of each of us. That's the only way that I think we will emerge from this frightening period in American history with citizens having a measure of rights. I can go on.

01:09:57:00 END OF INTERVIEW