



ANDREW YOUNG INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Andrew Young, Executive Director, SCLC
April 13, 2017
Interviewed by: Taylor Branch
Total Running Time: 23 minutes and 57 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

00:00:04:00

ANDREW YOUNG:

It was never black and white. Rich and poor, young and old. It was, you know, those who were willing to stand up for what was right, regardless of how they were born. And those who you know could not appreciate and love others who were different.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Learning

King in The Wilderness Collection

Andrew Young

Diplomat & Activist



00:00:37:00

INTERVIEWER:

You met Doctor King before you worked with him. Can you talk about meeting him and what drew you to him?

00:00:42:00

ANDREW YOUNG:

Well, actually, I was pastoring a little country church in South Georgia, Thomasville and Beachton, and I was invited to Talladega College for religious emphasis week. We both happened to be members of the same fraternity. And, they invited him, and I said they weren't sure that...he might have come. So they invited me as a back up, and we both showed up. I don't remember what we talked about, but I was just a little country preacher with 50 members in two churches, and I'd run a voter registration drive, but I knew about him. But...and I had actually heard him speaking in Tallahassee, at Reverend C. Kales- Seals Church, but...so I was in awe. But, we basically talked to college students more or less reflecting on our own, ordinary, not so special college years. I think both Martin and myself grew up pretty in a fairly privileged circumstance. I mean, there was all the difference in the world between Atlanta and New Orleans and Marion, Alabama, Selma, Alabama, Thomasville, Beachton Georgia. We were protected from racism and segregation, pretty much, in the big cities. And it was well, it was there, but...we were taught to deal with it and not to be victims. And, we were taught that that racism was a sickness and it was the white people who are sick, not you. And you don't get mad with sick people and you don't get upset with them. They just don't know any better. They've been taught that they are



better than you. But you know that God created all of us in his image. God created of one blood, all of the nations of the earth. And for some reason, they have a problem of that, but that's not our problem. I think while we had, sort of spiritual defenses, that were part of our growth growing up, we never had them tested, whereas our wives, had been tested and been through the fire, and somehow realized that you could come out without being burned. I always say that, at that time at Talladega, I don't know whether I realized it then, but, that's not just a coincidence. I've learned to say that coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous and that...but if we had not married these two little country girls who had in the...the fire built up in their bones to fight racism and segregation and not to fear death or walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil, they were some courageous women who never tried to hold us back. In fact, they were always pushing us forward. And, I don't know whether you would have heard of either of us if we had not married these two women.

00:04:40:00

INTERVIEWER:

And that's in the 1950s. Could you skip forward to 61 when you're up in New York and the decision to come south to work with him?

00:04:48:00

ANDREW YOUNG:

Well, there again...I was working with the National Council of Churches. I had been in Thomasville in Beatchon Georgia, and I went down to Florida in 1956, 57. I had to do Bible study at an interracial, church conference. And, I



was offered a job in New York, as the associate director of youth work for the National Council of Churches. Well, actually, Jean did not want to go. She wanted to stay in the South. I was enjoying myself, but at that time, they actually said that the young people in the churches, Black and white, need help to go through this difficult period. And while you're moving to New York and would be based in New York, most of your work will be with young people across the nation, but especially in the South. It gave me exposure to young people all over the nation. It also got me involved internationally with the churches, movements of liberation movements in Latin America, and South Africa and southern Africa, and it was a particularly good experience for me. Jean had been to Germany in a work camp with the church of the brethren back in 53, and I tagged along with her there and worked in Austria. So our work with the churches gave us a significant amount of global awareness of what was going on in the world of race and creed and class and color. But, we were looking at the television, put the kids to bed, and, we just bought a house in Queens and had a fire in the fireplace and was sitting down in, and the Nashville sit in story comes on. And we see, C.T. Vivian and Martin Luther King and Diane Nash and James Bevel and Kelly Miller Smith and John Lewis. And I think John Lewis particularly, was a powerful moving figure that Jean immediately related to, and when the program went off, she said, "it's time for us to go home." I said, "We just bought this house. This is home." She said, "no, this is not home. It's time for us to go back south." I ended up moving to Atlanta and being placed in an office that was right across the hall from Martin Luther King. And, I was not officially on SCIC staff, but Dora McDonald, Dr. King's secretary, said to me, "your family's in Alabama, and you're here by yourself. Maybe, I was living at the YMCA. Maybe you could



help with Doctor King's mail." So I said, "I'd be glad to try." And she brought me a cardboard box, you know, packed down with all of the people who were writing and letters and I took it over to the YMCA, and that's what I did for my orientation. I read and answered, you know, all of his mail.

00:08:37:00

INTERVIEWER:

You were there, and he insisted on going straight to Selma. What do you remember about the commitment? Was that a surprise?

00:08:44:00

ANDREW YOUNG:

Actually, the idea of redeeming the soul of America from the triple evils of racism, war and poverty was actually out of the first SCLC gathering in 1957, in New Orleans. And so that had always been, a theme that we probably didn't use until it surfaced in his Nobel Prize lecture. We came back from the Nobel Prize lecture, and we went to New York. We were met at the Harlem Armory by Governor Rockefeller, Nelson Rockefeller and Malcolm X, and Malcolm was there to congratulate Martin. But he said, "I think it's important for us to keep our work separate. But I want you to know that I have a great deal of admiration and respect for everything you're trying to do, and anything I can do I'll be glad to do to help you, but I, I don't think it's good for us to be seen or work together." So he left the armory, when Doctor King got up to speak, Governor Rockefeller, when Martin decided to give the money of the Nobel Prize to the six civil rights organizations divided evenly, governor Rockefeller decided to, to match it. So the amount doubled. And he offered us



his plane, to fly us down to Washington, to meet President Johnson. So, when we got there, the president was in the midst of a—of a very heavy burden, war and domestically. And so we made our case that we really needed voting rights. And, he agreed, and said that he wanted to do a lot more, on poverty and also voting rights. And I think the only difference was that, I think he was more concerned about going into poverty first, and he felt that it was less divisive. And President Johnson's notions of poverty were not just black poverty. His experiences with poverty were from the hills of East Texas. And he had taught children which he knew were coming to school with no food for breakfast. And, we were pushing voting rights, and we would make a case that Doctor King would make a case, and President Johnson would agree. But he'd always end with saying that, "look, I just got a bill through Congress six months ago on civil rights, and public accommodations. I just don't have the power to go back to the Congress for the Voting Rights Act in this session of Congress." And Doctor King kept pressing the case, and President Johnson kept agreeing with him, but saying, "you're right, but I don't have the power." When we left, I asked, "Doctor King. Well, what do you think?" His answer was very—I thought he was joking. And he said, well, we got to figure out how to get these presidents in power. I said, oh, come on now, you are going to get the president of the United States in power and the school rivalry was between Howard, and Moorhouse. And I always said, "you Morehouse men, we always say you can tell a morehouse man, but you can't tell him much." But this is a new level of arrogance from you. You're going to get the president of the United States in power" and...he was serious. He said, "look, I'm not, I'm not being flippant," he said. "We just have to find a way to get this president some power." And when I realized he was serious, but he didn't



have a clue of where the power would come from and how it would come about, I didn't realize it then, but I think that he had already come to be aware from the combination of his death threats, and stabbing in Montgomery...I mean, in New York and, the midnight ride and the jailing, in solitary confinement in Georgia...that I think he'd already come to grips with death and that his view of the movement was never, and I don't know exactly where it happened, but somewhere between, Montgomery and Selma, the movement ceased to be political for him. It was spiritual. And I was still thinking about politics. But he was not thinking politically.

00:14:18:00

INTERVIEWER:

I'd like to shift to talking about Doctor King and anger, but not not anger. There were times when he was depressed.

00:14:26:00

ANDREW YOUNG:

I remember his...I'd rather say, his battles with conscience. I mean, as much as he did. He always blamed himself for not doing enough. And like he was trying to take the blame. He let Bobby Kennedy put him on a guilt trip, and he was very depressed that he hadn't been more forceful in his nonviolence. And I said, "wait a minute. This is not I mean, you're not the savior of the world. You know, you're doing better than anybody else is doing. There's no reason for you to feel guilty." But he always felt he was not doing enough, that he took the burden and blame on himself. And those were periods when he was really just physically exhausted. The only time....well, actually, when he



received word of the Nobel Prize, he was in the hospital and there wasn't anything wrong with him, except that he got so hopped up and so revved up that, you know, he couldn't relax at home. And the doctor checked him in the hospital, basically to slow him down. It was there, I think because of his feeling that somehow he wasn't good enough to be the leader. So, you know, he felt guilty about getting the Nobel Prize and that he didn't deserve it. And one of the most beautiful scenes I remember was him being in the hospital when Archbishop Hallinan of the Catholic Church came in to congratulate him on winning the Nobel Prize. And, I moved away from them, and they were talking and Bishop Hallinan said, "well, I must be on my way. May I give you my blessing?" And Martin said, "oh, of course." And so he made the sign of the cross and mumbled something in Latin, and then he knelt down beside the bed and said, "May I receive yours?" I said, "Damn. I never thought I'd see an archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church getting on his knees to a black Baptist preacher named Martin Luther." You know how far we have come.

00:16:59:00

INTERVIEWER:

Could you talk a little bit about Doctor King's personal side? His sense of humor, his practical joking.

00:17:06:00

ANDREW YOUNG:

He would make you laugh at your own deaths. And he would say, in fact, when we went to Birmingham, the CBS reporter who had been with us since, Montgomery said, "Andy look, I got to keep a camera on Martin." He said, "I



know you don't like us around with the cameras, but if he gets shot and I don't have a picture of it, I lose my job." And, Martin heard that, and he said, "Well, I'm not worried about that because if somebody is going to probably have to give their life for Birmingham." He said, "It's probably going to be one of you guys jumping in front of the camera, trying to get your picture taken that will take the bullet that's meant for me. But don't worry, I think I can preach to you in heaven." And then he would start preaching your funeral, and he would do a very sadistic caricature of all of your faults and foibles and things that you would never want said about you in public. And he'd weave it into a sermon, and quite often he'd have a similar demon from the Bible who had the same problems. And by the time he got through, he had everybody laughing at what was a life and death situation, mostly his life. And so....he was prepared to die. But he was also determined that his death and his life would have meaning. And he used to say that to us all the time, "you know, you are going to die and you can never say what you die of. I mean, how you're going to die, when you're going to die, where you're going to die. Your only choice is what you give your life for." And I've heard him say that 40 or 50 times in different situations. And he was warning us. But I think at the same time, he was reminding himself that whenever his end came, he wanted it to be for the purpose of the least of these God's children. And that's why when we tried to stop him from going to Memphis, we did not want him to go to Memphis at all. There was no need, the strike was going to go on. They had a big union staff running it: a number of pastors were supporting them, and we wanted him to go out and New York. I told him that, "you know, you need to go ahead and sleep till about noon tomorrow. We don't have to be in Washington until, you know, 6:00. We'll catch you at the 3:00 shuttle and have



an easy day. You need the rest." And he said no, "I'm gonna catch the 6:00 flight to Memphis." I think I had gotten to the point where...I really thought we were beyond the dangers. He'd already been stabbed and jailed and beaten and everything...and he'd won a Nobel Prize. And, other than J. Edgar Hoover, we were, you know, doing extremely well with almost everybody on the planet. And, so I didn't see the urgency. I mean, I thought it was okay to take a sabbatical when you're 38 years old. You don't have to die at 39. You know, wait till 45. Sail off at 55. But it was sort of...I think he never used to say that "some of us are not going to live to be 50. So you better live good now and live a righteous life." And, he was constantly...it was almost as though he saw death as an escape and that he could not escape the way we wanted him to escape. He couldn't put it off. He couldn't run from it. And it's I mean, it was more for me, like Jesus' disciples trying to keep him from going to Jerusalem.

00:21:38:00

INTERVIEWER:

I know you must be asked an awful lot about the last day and your reaction and to all of that. But what do you carry with you about that last time?

00:21:49:00

ANDREW YOUNG:

I hadn't talked to him all day. In fact, I didn't even talk to him before we went to court. I was trying to let him get as much sleep as possible. So I got to court, you know, 8:00 in the morning. And I had touch base with him all day, but I was on the witness stand most of that day, and I really don't remember what it was about, except that, I think I was able to answer all of the



questions that they challenged us with, and we got permission to stage the march in the next few days. And, when I got back, he was, you know, childish and giddy and cussed me out, threw a pillow at me. I threw it back. He was, "you know, where have you been?" But it was the happiest I had seen him in a long time. His brother was there. Ralph was there. You know, it was all his inner circle. And, they had been almost having a last supper, because somebody had brought in a whole load of catfish. And he was just extremely relaxed and comfortable and playful and, when he started beating me with a pillow, you know, I kind of feebly fought back, but everybody else picked up pillows, and they were...it was like a bunch of ten year olds. But his last moments on Earth were amongst the happiest that he had in a long time.

END TC: 00:23:31:00