



BERNARD LAFAYETTE INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Bernard LaFayette, Staff Leader, SCLC
March 29, 2017
Interviewed by: Trey Ellis
Total Running Time: 27 minutes and 40 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Nonviolence is not confined to any historical period. So, nonviolence today is very effective as well. Some people say, "Well, it won't work," and my approach is that it won't work unless, you know, how to work it.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Learning

King in The Wilderness Collection

Bernard Lafayette

Civil Rights Leader



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INTERVIEWER:

If you could tell us about meeting Martin Luther King. You know, first meeting him, first impressions and your relationship with him.

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

The first time I met Martin Luther King was actually in Nashville. I was part of the Nashville Student Movement and we were having our sit-ins and we had been very successful in accomplishing our goals in Nashville and it was basically because we were trained by James Lawson Jr., was a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School and he had specifically decided to come to Nashville to train in nonviolence and specifically for the sit-ins. So, it was not just in general, but that training he gave us was so basic. It was about Martin Luther King; it was about Mahatma Gandhi and he'd put that together in such a way that it really resonated towards our interests and our passion and we were all concerned about the problem of segregation and discrimination in the South specifically. So, when Martin Luther King arrived to greet us, it was at the gymnasium at Fisk University and after his address while doing his introduction even, actually, he said that he had come to Nashville not to bring inspiration, but to gain inspiration, because he had been observing our movement and we had learned from his Montgomery Movement and we maintained the nonviolent approach, even in the face of violence and that sort of thing, and he was really admiring us. And so, that was my first meeting with Martin Luther King.



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INTERVIEWER:

What was your impression when you met him?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

There was something very special about Martin Luther King and it remained until the very day that he died, and that was -- down to earth and even though he was very, um, you know, involved with all sorts of allocates and that kind of thing, etc. and he'd met with a lot of important people and he was [unclear] -- par none. And so, but you never -- find that Martin Luther King was acting you know pompous or anything like that. He was always down to earth and when you were alone with him, he was very cordial and very accommodating and he used to tell jokes and fact, when I worked for him and I'm leaping forward now, he was the one that was assigned to sit in the front seat of the car when he had to drive late at night to different rural areas. And his job was to tell jokes and to keep the driver away, okay. So he was a very good joke teller and he would mimic preachers and stuff like that. So he was capable of doing that, but he reserved that quite a bit. Only in private moments that he did. But he was very special and he was -- there were some other interesting things about Martin Luther King that you never forgot for a moment that you were in the presence of somebody who was very special. Like for example, when he walked down the streets, from his house to the office, it was only a couple of blocks and he would encounter a lot of the people on the streets who were street people and who didn't have a lot of resources to take care of



themselves. Martin Luther King would pass out dollar bills to them. He would stop and talk to them. So he didn't distance himself from people who were impoverished and they felt comfortable with him and he was treat him as any other human being, but he knew that they had needs and that's what his life was committed to—trying to help them have a better life. That's all that Martin Luther King was interested in—helping others have a better life.

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INTERVIEWER:

How did he get all of you to give so much of themselves for him and his cause?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

When you encountered Martin Luther King, you realized you had, number one, someone who was sincere. He was not interested in being the leader, actually, this is something very important. Martin Luther King was not interested in being the leader. He gave leadership as an example, but only as much as necessary. And the other thing is, there were just no comparison between his ability to deliver a message, and what he was saying was not words, because a lot of people didn't understand his multi syllable words. So that's the other thing that people got to understand about Martin Luther King, it was his intonation more than anything else. They remember some shard quotes from Martin Luther King, but the thing that moved people more than anything else is that Martin Luther King had the movement within him. And when he spoke, that's why he was able to move others and get them also



to have the movement in them. And it was the intonation and his ability to, to get people in tune with the cause.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can we talk a little bit about the nonviolence and how nonviolence is misunderstood?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Well, the whole issue of nonviolence is, is it varies, and that's the important for people to understand, that there's nonviolence with the hyphen, which is really an adjective: non-violence, that is without violence, the absence of violence, okay. And that is a way that people interpret nonviolence and the whole concept with Martin Luther King was advocating was the same as Mahatma Gandhi, and that was a noun that nonviolence is a name of a philosophy or a system of thought and also a way of life. So Martin Luther King embodied nonviolence in his approach to dealing with issues and one of the things that he realized, and his goal, was to bring about a peaceful reconciliation and not just resolution. Sometimes we talk about peaceful resolutions, or nonviolent resolution, which means that you separate the conflicted parties and then you don't have that conflict between the parties. But the conflict is not going away if it's still embedded in each of the parties; they're not just engaged with each other. So reconciliation is the goal rather than just simply having resolution. Now a concept that we advocate with King-ian nonviolence is one that Martin Luther King arrived from many



different sources. Gandhi was one source, but Thoreau was another source, and even Hegel, and that's one of the things that Martin Luther King embraced as he searched for himself—the meaning of truth, what is truth. So from a theological point of view, Martin Luther King wanted to -- for himself continue to strive towards an ideal society and for Martin Luther King it was the beloved community.

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INTERVIEWER:

How does this nonviolence that you learn with Dr. King translate to activism today?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

The nonviolence is not confined to any historical period. So nonviolence today is very effective as well. Some people say, 'well it won't work,' and my approach is that it won't work unless you know how to work it. So age has nothing to do with effectiveness. IT's a matter of being able to use those techniques and use those skills and you can accomplish the same goals, and that's what Martin Luther King laid down—that's why it was universal. It was not confined to any particular area of the country or any country, but there was -- the effectiveness, it had to do with one single thing and that was one no revolution could ever be won or basic changes unless you were able to win the majority. So when you talk about today, okay, we have a majority in our house and senate—we have one political party—but that party, is not united. You're able to win the majority of all of the people involved. When we think of



the action that Martin Luther King took back in the 60s and that sort of thing, you got to realize that you were able to win the majority of whites, okay? And that's in the congress and that's how you were able to get the bills passed. You never had a majority of black on the Supreme Court or the Congress, okay, but they were able to get those bills passed to make some significant changes, and the same thing is true today. So when the Women's March took place and is taking place, that is the thing that's gonna make the difference, and people come to recognize the fact that this nonviolent approach can be used to do that, but you've got to win the majority. And the same thing with the young people, and you don't win the majority by being violent.

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INTERVIEWER:

The election of Donald Trump has been called a sort of revenge of the white working class. Can you talk about that?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

My knowledge of this is that we are at the end of the second reconstruction period. And we need to be aware of the potential and the actions that have taken now to reinterpret our constitution and loss that exist. One of the things that we must become aware of is that the laws that we got changed during the 60s were temporary. That's why they have to be voted on periodically. They were acts; they were not actually constitutional changes. They were simply remedies for a particular problem that existed during that period, but the assumption is that when that problem was solved, those acts



or laws that were passed would no longer be necessary and so therefore, they could simply be removed or ignored. So what change did we make when we realize that? So when we were at the end of reconstruction period, you saw that happen, okay before, and now we're faced with that situation again under the new administration. We have those promises that have been made that can be setbacks for us and they talk about the greatness of the past and how we got to bring the past back to us, okay. Make America Great Again, alright. So that was the greatness some people experienced in those days. There was not so great for others and so we have to be aware of that and we have to teach our young people. That is my urgent concern, is that young people have an appreciation or knowledge of the past and the different stages that we went through and the different phases and how we were affected by those phases and stages and now and what should we be doing now in order to preserve what we have gained, because it's not what you have gained, it's what you can maintain. And if you maintain those things, they still have to be sustained. And we have to prepare our young people to be able to appreciate those gains and the things that have been maintained and how they can be maintained and we, it's because it's gonna affect them. What has happened in the past has been our lives, as older people, we've gone through those different periods and we have suffered those periods and we have also made some progress and gains to those periods, but this is what our lives were about.

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INTERVIEWER:



Tell me just personally about the, when your peers turned away from nonviolence, when you chose Dr. King's route and lived that route.

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Now, here's the concept: It's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And they felt that as citizens, we were justified in protecting ourselves, first amendment rights, okay. Also, first law of preservation, self preservation. But somehow, you had the right and authority to protect your life and your family, and your loved ones, and your friends. Now there were some problem if you were aggressive and go and attack somebody else, but to defend yourself, that was an order, in law. Equal justice, okay. In other words, someone did something to you, you were justified in doing the same thing to them. The only problem with that is if someone knocks your eye out and you knock their eye out, then they knock your other eye out, you can't see how to knock their teeth out, cause you end up with a blind, snaggletooth society. So it sounds, you know, equal justice, whatever, sounds nice and everything, but equal justice is not ever equal, okay. So my point is nonviolence says let's stop knocking eyes out. Let's find a way to save our teeth. Let's see if we can find another way of relating to each other rather than knocking out our eyes and teeth, alright. And then some people not gonna knock your eye out. They gonna shoot you. So what you gonna do to defend yourself? And everybody knows that the strongest defense is a strong offense.



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INTERVIEWER:

Can you tell us about the Poor People's Campaign?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Ah yes. In fact the Poor People's Campaign was spun out of Martin Luther King's frustration, when he saw the little children in Marks, Mississippi just with swollen bellies and stuff like that. I remember his talking about it was like being in a third world country. That's what we called it in those days—third world. And he thought the more progress would have been made by that time and he was disappointed that there was not more progress being made and so his solution was rather than go around making speeches about the conditions of poor people, he would put the poor people in front of the people who make those decisions and that's why we call it putting the face on poverty. He wanted their faces to be the faces of these people who were making decisions about their lives. For example, the food stamps in that day if you gonna have a federal food stamp, rather federal food program, you had to have the local government request that and propose that but also they had to be responsible for the storage and distribution, without any compensation from the government. And that was one of the conditions for having so -- the local cities and the local governments decided in many cases, like Marks, Mississippi and other places in the rural areas, that they wouldn't give them free federal food because in that case, they said that they couldn't get people to work. If they gonna get free food, they could eat. And that's all they were able to do during that period. So therefore while the food program was



available they didn't have access to it and there were a lot of kind of issues and procedures and things that affected poor people that Martin Luther King thought should be changed. And so his attitude was that yes, he's done as much as he could to raise these issues and now the people themselves would have to step forward.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you talk about just personally, did you ever have any personal discussions with him where you saw him down? What was his mood like in this period?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Well, he wanted to do all that he could and from the discussions we had with him, in general, he felt disappointed that more was not done and that he was frustrated because he wondered whether or not he could do any more than he'd done. We went a staff meeting in Atlanta and Martin Luther King got this call from Memphis and when you think about the sanitation workers, they were, which we call the working poor. So all the poor was not like unemployed. Some people working very hard, two jobs even and they still were below the poverty line because the wage was so low. So these sanitation workers were not only on strike because of the wage, but it was a safety situation where one had been seriously injured and they trying to get some support and protection. But when the march broke out in violence, that's when we all went to Memphis, for two reasons: to support the sanitation



workers march, so we'd be nonviolent, but also to continue our discussion of the Poor People's Campaign, be right there. So, when we arrived, we had to get ourselves mobilized so we could do that and there was a mass meeting, okay, at mason temple church. And Martin Luther King was scheduled to go and speak, but it was pouring down raining. In fact, it was raining what we used to call in those days, "cats and dogs." So we in 306 and Martin Luther King is already in his pajamas in bed and we were working on a press statement for Washington DC cause I was scheduled to go and do the press conference, opening up the headquarters for the poor people's campaign. Martin Luther King was scheduled, but he couldn't go, he had to do the march over again, so he was sending me so we could stay on schedule. So what happened was the next day, that morning, we got up early and we were working on the statement, again. And when we finished tweaking the press statement, Martin Luther King said to me, Bernard, the next project we gonna work on is to institutionalize and internationalize nonviolence, comma, to be discussed. And [unclear] press conference [unclear] I said, okay. So, I went and got ready and went to the airport later on and when I arrived at the airport, Fauntroy, Walt Fauntroy, was not there to pick me up. I called the office and find out that there was a riot in the streets in Washington, DC, because he said that Martin Luther King had been shot.

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INTERVIEWER:

After the assassination when you returned to Atlanta, can our talk about the scene when you arrived back here in the office and the planning for the funeral.



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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

I was on my way to the funeral coming down Auburn Avenue and I had to pass the office and the office door was open—our SCLC office—and people were bringing things out of there. I was you know program administrator, so I was one of the top administrators so I knew the office wasn't supposed opt be open. So I went across the street over there and sure enough it was a test of our nonviolence. These people were taking things off the wall and off the desk and everything else. And I had to calm them down because they were frantic and they were moaning and groaning. So they're not like thieves, they were people who had felt they had lost Martin Luther King and they were just trying to find something they could hold onto that Martin Luther King perhaps had touched and would you know that it's sort of a country thing but sometimes even executives who grew up in the country when they got to that desk, or they you know, sitting at that desk, they would take off their shoes. So there's somebody who think that they have Martin Luther King shoes, cause they were under his desk, but they're Abernathy's shoes, okay. And I managed to get most of them to put the things back and come on out the office and I made sure it was locked, but I missed the funeral because I was working in the office trying to preserve okay these things, so that's just another side thing that happened, but I got there in time to see Robert Kennedy and some others come out of the church, but the wagon had -- okay, gone off.

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INTERVIEWER:

How do you want him to be remembered now?

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BERNARD LAFAYETTE:

Martin Luther King and his teachings are still having an effect. IT's multiplying. So it's not a thing of the past. That's the thing that's so amazing. It's not only a thing of the past; it's what will help preserve our future. And my prediction is that in the present crisis that we have facing now, in this country and in the world, those who would rely upon the teaching s of Martin Luther King will inevitably find a way to make peace with each other.

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