

WOMEN IN THE MOVEMENT

INTERVIEW THREAD ONE: CORETTA SCOTT KING

ANDREW YOUNG

“. . . I don't know whether I was aware of it, and I'm sure he wasn't, but they both went to the same high school, Marion, Alabama, Lincoln School, and had led pretty much parallel lives. Because Marion, when Coretta was growing up, and when Jean was growing up, was a pretty rough place.

I mean, Coretta's family had several businesses, so did Jean's family, and they were all destroyed, for no reason -- just because there was a resentment of successful, aggressive black people. They destroyed, they burned down the grocery store that Coretta's father had formed, and they sabotaged a saw mill and a logging company. Jean's family had little shops downtown. Her great grandfather had been a postmaster or something in Reconstruction, so they owned almost a whole block of property with a grocery store, and a shoe shop, and a candy store, and it was the black business community. And somehow, they were swindled out of it. And Jean's grandfather committed suicide, and her father became an alcoholic for a while, and her mother was fired from her teaching position because she resisted the advances of the superintendent.

And so during their early teen years, from about 12 to 16, Coretta was a little older, so for Coretta it might have been 14, but they had both lived very traumatic lives, and they both had experienced the raw cruelty of racism and segregation, and would have been very bitter I think, except that a young Quaker couple, Fran and Cecil Thomas, came down and took an interest in both of them and arranged for Coretta and her sister to go to Antioch College, and Jean and her two sisters went to Manchester College in Indiana.

Now, the significance of that is that I think in the '50s, '40s, those were the only two schools I know of that had a required course in nonviolence. Jean had taken a course in New Testament nonviolence. Coretta was a member of Women's Strike for Peace and I don't [know] whether we could have found two beautiful, intelligent, black women, who were committed to the values that we were struggling with as students.

Now, it wasn't as easy. I think both Martin and myself grew up 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, not to be victims, and we're taught that racism was a sickness and it was the white people who were 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 with that, but that's not our problem.

And so, 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, and 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 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 if you would have heard of either of us if we had not married these two women."

XERNONA CLAYTON

"So, when I look at their lives together, she was such a good partner and I can tell you this, the world owes her the debt of our hearing his words today because she was relentless in seeing to it that a microphone and a tape recorder were present every time he spoke. And she would get agitated and she would say to me, "Where is that boy with that microphone?" She would insist on having it. And had she not been that type, we wouldn't have his words today. She kept every piece of paper. That's why we have his papers. Now, of course, at his office his secretary was well-organized, but the stuff he had at home, Coretta was responsible for that. And so, we would not have his words to hear and live by and capture were it not for Coretta, the best partner he could have ever chosen."

SAM MASSELL

"Coretta handled the tragedy in a very, you might say, mature demeanor, in that she felt she had a job to do of being the widow of such a giant. And she had enough vision to see and learn that she was going to have a great assignment for life ahead of her. She and I worked together. I was a point man to get the birthplace of Martin put on the historical register. And I had us in -- but she -- when I would meet with her at her home, which is where we'd normally get together to talk, she was very determined as to what she should do, could do, would do. She maintained her composure in a calm way. She certainly felt the loss that we all shared, but she was the -- she was his voice now. She was his face for the public and she maintained that stature in a very mature way, in my opinion.

Coretta Scott King was a leader in her own way. As the widow of Doctor King unexpectedly, all at one time to be the focus of this movement for the rest of the world, she rose to the occasion. She conducted herself in a very mature, sophisticated manner. She obviously felt the loss greater than anyone else could, but she knew that she had a responsibility. I think she had the vision that she would now be in charge of a legacy that would have to be protected and nurtured, and that all of a sudden, she was taking on a whole new lifestyle. And I believe this demeanor was all that could be expected of her at that time, that she had to be the voice and the face for Martin, and for the movement from then on."