

From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

1968

We look at them, their fat, sagging bellies, hard faces, tight lips, and we despair. It is logical in our eyes that they should support Wallace, for they are ugly and Wallace is ugly and we are beautiful and gentle and want to do nothing more than love everyone in the rising of each sun. We look at them and the conclusion is quickly reached that they will never change. They will always be filled with resentments, fears and hates. And having so concluded, we end our examination and analysis of them and prepare to wait for more propitious times.

It is difficult to be a revolutionary, for to be a revolutionary means to believe in the innate goodness of man and it is to know that man in this environment has been programmed into non-man. Our job is to change the environment so that man can be 'man.

It is particularly difficult to be a revolutionary at a time when man's capacity for infinite evil is being unleashed. But the job yet remains to look into those faces and to remember that they do not have control of their lives, either. They are the victims, also, and must be made to realize it. Perhaps that is not a task we can do. A Well paid, well fed, well housed and clothed victim is quite often willing to accept his state as long as he is well rewarded. But even if they are as yet unable to recognize their condition, we must not forget what it is. Even if we have to regard them as the enemy, we must not forget that they too, are victims.

All too often, though, we confuse the doer with the deed and think that they are one and the same. It is the deed we must hate, not the doer of the deed.

The policeman acts like a beast, but to call him a beast, a "pig," is only to negate the potential of man that is within him. We must learn that attitude which is exemplified in Cuba and North Vietnam, where any person you meet will say, "We do not hate the American people. The people are our friends. We hate the American government." The Vietnamese and Cuban people welcome Americans to their country, while the one country is fighting for its life against America and the other exists under the constant threat of annihilation. To yell "Fascist!" at a Wallace supporter is only to guarantee that that individual will be a fascist.

None of us were born revolutionaries. Therefore, if we have found within ourselves the capacity to change, we must acknowledge that everyone else has the capacity to change. Once we acknowledge this, we must then begin to live and act as if we believe it. The Cuban rebel army would attend to the wounded enemy soldiers after each battle, for Fidel recognized that the man he had just shot could be a revolutionary. And imagine the shock of the wounded soldier as he had his wounds bandaged by those whom he had just been trying to kill. What manner of men were these? They were revolutionaries. The new man.

People will be changed as much by our words as by our actions. Mao's Red Army converted many peasants to their side because this was an army that did not come into a village and steal the crops and rape the women. It paid the peasant for whatever food was taken and respected each and every peasant. The men in the Red Army were different from the men in the uniform of the Koumintang and it was because they were different that the fears of the peasant were destroyed.

Because the style of our movement has been determined by our need to work out our own problems, we do not know how to reach those who are different from us. We have repudiated their life styles, but if we are going

to reach them, it may be necessary for us to adopt that style which is so repugnant to us. For us, male and female, profanity is the natural punctuation in a sentence. For them, profanity is used in certain social settings and never in front of women. For us a church is a building that people go to on Sunday because they haven't learned the value of sleeping late. For them church is an integral part of life and he who does not attend church is ostracized from the community. When SNCC was organizing in the South, there was never any doubt in the organizer's mind that he would go to church on Sunday morning. He had to if he expected the people in the community to listen to anything he had to say. Yet there were white kids who came South and wanted to argue the existence of God with the local people.

Perhaps it is time for some of us to go back home, to remind ourselves that everything there was not bad. One of the basic problems which has faced many white activists is the fact that they hate the white community. Undoubtedly, the feeling is to some degree justified. Yet there is work to be done there. It won't be as easy as lying around somebody's apartment in a big city, smoking pot and thinking up slogans for the next demonstration. In fact, it's a lifetime job requiring total commitment. But if that revolution is going to be born, the work must begin.

Yes, they are ugly. Their faces are filled with spite and hate. But did they deliberately sit in front of the mirror and create those faces? Or were they forced to live lives which tightened the flesh of their faces into a perverted contortion of humanity?

"One must have faith in the best in men," Jose Marti wrote, "and distrust the worst. If not, the worst prevails."
We must acquire that faith.

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