

(Final Conversation with MEDGAR EVERS) June 11, 1963

There was no strategy meeting the next night. Tuesday, June 11. We were hoping to get a ruling from Federal Judge Cox on the sweeping injunction that prohibited our every move and thought. We hoped his word would come before the next scheduled strategy meeting on Wednesday. The mass meeting that night was the worst meeting with the poorest attendance we had seen. We met at New Jerusalem Baptist Church, a small building on Whitfield Street, a few blocks north of Fortification Street and east of the railroad yards, hard for me to locate and deep within an all Black area with some paved streets and some gravel alleys. Parking was difficult near the church but that sadly did not mean much for our meeting. The heat of the day lingered on into the night and must have been still in the mid-eighties as less than a hundred people gathered at the church. There were only a few college students and John Salter, Steve Rutledge, and I, all from Tougaloo, were the only whites we noticed. Even the press and police seemed no longer to care. It was the first time the mass meeting had been held in this church. The youth choir had no spirit; the singing was listless from choir and congregation. A minor effort was made under national NAACP inspiration to sell T-shirts as a fund raising venture.

The New York national office of NAACP had decided that the Jackson Movement would shift its focus from massive direct action to "massive" voter registration games. The national office promised all the help we needed for this--which was nonsense because most of

the Strategy Committee knew that a successful voter registration campaign would no more be tolerated in Jackson than a successful mass march. We knew that most people even in Jackson, would fail the voter qualification test. And we also knew that the massive effort it would take to get large numbers of people even to dare to go to the Courthouse to take the test would produce mass arrests. No one was against registration. Many of us argued that a registration campaign should be added to the activity of the mass movement. National NAACP made it clear that voter registration was to replace direct action. We knew that with no direct action there could be no voter registration and no live movement. We had no doubts that it was not just the New York NAACP but the liberal Kennedy White House as well that wanted all activity out of the streets and into the courts and traditional hopeless voter registration efforts.

The main speaker, W.C. Patton, had been sent to us by national NAACP to discuss successful registration campaigns in other parts of the South. People enjoyed hearing about success anywhere. The audience was tolerant. The crowning blow of the evening was listening to a well meaning man from Memphis, the local NAACP branch vice-president, brag about the successes of Negro voter registration and political participation in urban Tennessee. I groaned aloud, then whispered to a student, "My God, Boss Crump wanted Negroes registered in Memphis and in his machine but Bilbo never let it happen here." The audience remained polite and bored. Negro political success in Memphis was as relevant to Jackson as a G.O.P. voter drive in Nebraska.

The room was so hot and uncomfortable that I wandered in and out several times. The college students who had come in for the rally were standing around the front yard of the

church, not even pretending interest in the proceedings inside. They were ready to return to the Tougaloo campus. Then I noticed Medgar Evers standing on the steps of the church. He had come outside while the fund appeal was being made. The only marching that Jackson people ever did these days was to march up the aisles of the church to lay their money down on the table placed in front of some speaker who had just made an impassioned plea--for funds, not action. Medgar and I stepped back inside the church but didn't enter the auditorium, remaining on the left side in one of the two small rooms on the front of the building. A door opened out on to the porch and steps. Another door opened into the main part of the church. For the moment it was a private space. We stood there and talked. Medgar was very sad and tired; I knew there was no way I could help with the burdens he had to carry. Late that afternoon Federal Judge Cox had given his decision to give no decision on our crucial court cases. Medgar had two days earlier defied the court injunction against demonstrations, but he had not yet been arrested--and this time it would be for defying a court order, not just civil disobedience of a local white racist law. If the mass movement continued direct action we probably would be basically defying the federal courts as well. Medgar fully understood the new problems involved in defiance of a court order, even the local court injunction, when he took the black students to the segregated white churches. I had thought that was a beautiful way to defy the courts. But for the leader of the NAACP now to be defying court orders would let some naive critics say he was disobeying court orders and in same category as Gov. Ross Barnett and other whites who had defied such court orders as the one ordering the admission of Meredith to Ole Miss. And the Movement wanted the Federal government to jail the Governor for his defiance. Medgar Evers had

already been jailed once, a few days ago. What would happen now I wondered? Medgar and I talked about the legal problems and how unprepared the national office of NAACP was for the kind of struggle we now had in Jackson.

(At this time I had not talked with Mrs. Doris Allison, the president of the Jackson branch of the NAACP, a strong supporter of the current direct action campaign. Later she told me of two painful, almost terrible, conversations the past few days with Medgar. Both times there were tears. Medgar wept. He was alone in his office once when she knocked on the door. He had obviously been quietly weeping alone but he urged her to stay and talk even as she tried to excuse herself and leave. A similar conversation a day or so later also had both these strong, fierce freedom fighters in tears. Their words had been about the awful pressures being placed on Medgar and the local NAACP to halt the direct action campaign, even as the Black people of Jackson were responding in increasing numbers. Medgar even confided to her that he did not have enough personal money to even keep up his life insurance payments. But their words were not a time of self pity for Medgar Evers. He wanted her to understand the pressures he was under and wanted her advice and support which she gladly gave, to him, personally and to the direction of the Movement. When I met with Medgar that evening there were no tears. There was weariness but also calmness and resolution, concern and strength, compassion and dignity.)

Medgar's comments about the national NAACP were never bitter, just spoken to me with immense sadness and tiredness. We discussed the strategy committee meeting of the previous evening at his office. I spoke of how I had always thought we would need Dr.

Martin Luther King in Jackson and how terrible things would get in Jackson for all of us as a consequence of having started a direct action campaign that collapsed. The mass meeting continued in the church but Medgar made no effort to return to the platform. I knew he wanted to talk to me. He agreed that we were now at a very dangerous time. Our weakness might tempt the police to really crack down on us. Then he showed me his own personal agony. "I can not let all these people down, not after all the students and children have suffered in these jails. I know it's time to get Martin King here, and he's let me know he wants to come if we do need him--and if we invite him. Now I know we have to have him here."

"If he comes," I asked, "can everybody work together? When we started all this in the spring I thought N Double A and SCLC and all the rest would find some way to work together since this is Mississippi. But now I don't know whether that's possible."

"I hope it's possible," Medgar responded, but it won't be easy. You know how Mrs. Hurley and Gloster feel. Roy Wilkins doesn't want Martin King and SCLC to step in here and look like they are taking over an N Double A campaign. It won't be easy," he repeated, "but nothing is easy. Maybe there is nothing more I can do. God knows, I've done what I could, what I thought was right. I hope I understand what Mississippi needs. I think I do."

I tried to mutter something reassuring. "Of course you do, Medgar, nobody understands the people and the problems of our state like you do."

"Well, Ed," Medgar sighed, "what I have to do now is clear to me. Roy Wilkins will not like it, not at all. By the end of this week I don't expect to have a job. The National Association won't let me stay on the staff now. I guess I have only a few more days."

The message of Medgar Evers was very clear to me. He had only a few more days to continue as paid staff of NAACP. He was being fired by the national office. He had made his decision to continue leading a direct action campaign. He would welcome Martin Luther King to participate in the Jackson Movement. Here Medgar Evers would stand. He would defy the court injunctions of white Mississippi; he would defy the just as specific injunctions of the Negro leadership of the national NAACP. He knew Roy Wilkins would now carry through his threat to fire Medgar--a threat recently made in my presence, probably to underline its seriousness. White leaders in Jackson would be hostile to Medgar's new firm stand; Negro leaders in New York City would be hostile to Medgar's new firm stand. White leaders in Washington would be hostile to Medgar's new firm stand.

Medgar Evers was speaking softly but with growing strength. In the dim light of this church room I could see a slight smile. "But after all, lots of people lose their jobs these days. Tell me about those ministers at the Methodist Church; you know, Dr. Selah and the young minister. I've been feeling so bad about what happened to them. You know I drove the car with the demonstrators to the churches Sunday. We didn't expect this. But what they said, what they did.--refusing to preach in a segregated church--now that has made me feel better than anything in this whole movement in many days. But now I wonder how they can make out. Will they get new churches somewhere?"

(So, I realized, Medgar felt some personal responsibility for what had happened. But he knew the choice for their words and action was that of the white ministers. He had talked with me at length a week earlier when I had been put out of the white Methodist church in

Mississippi. Perhaps he also felt some responsibility for that. We had first met in the mid fifties soon after he had become state field director for NAACP and I was a student at Millsaps College. We met at one of the integrated Social Science forums organized by Dr. Ernst Borinski at Tougaloo College but I had visited Medgar in his office often in those days. Medgar Evers had been my teacher and my friend for years. Now he was my leader as well. (Now two more white Methodist ministers were leaving their pulpits in Mississippi, having refused to continue preaching in a church which refused to admit Negroes to worship services, and one of these, Dr. W. B. Selah had been one of my models as a preacher for years. His assistant, Jerry Furr, was a friend of my own age. I was thankful to now have Medgar as a leader and a model of Christian action--and as my friend.)

Medgar had more to be concerned about than the fate of two courageous Methodist ministers. I tried to reassure him that the national Methodist church would help them. "Oh sure, Medgar. They will have to leave Mississippi but they'll get another church, probably by the end of the summer. Don't worry about them. I know them both well. They did what they thought was right. They were ready. But you know they both would have liked talking to you."

"I'm sorry I didn't get to know them. I'd like to talk to men like that. And now they will have to leave Mississippi. I'm sorry it all happened like this. Will you tell them I asked about them?"

"Sure, Medgar, I'm going to try to see them this week. I know I can see Jerry Furr and I can probably talk to Dr. Selah."

A Tougaloo student came into our room, stirring up the bugs around the single ceiling light bulb as he opened the door. "Hey, Rev. King, this meeting's going on all night. We decided we want to go back to school. Mr. Salter's ready."

"OK, I'm ready, " I said, feeling just a little guilty that we were leaving before this depressing meeting had ended. "See you at the office tomorrow, Medgar, good night."

Medgar said goodbye and walked back into the church.