

## Light at the end of a Dark Road

As Jesse Jackson cried and Barack Obama spoke, I thought of my Dad who, like Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream for America. A white Quaker pacifist, he returned from a prestigious scholarship at Oxford to study at Yale and with my mother, who was four months pregnant with me, decided to risk his life in the name of that American Dream.

Dad drove a borrowed car down a dark road one hot summer night in 1964. He was twenty six. He had attended the Freedom Democratic Party state convention in Jackson, Mississippi. This political party had been set up that summer to select delegates for the Democratic National Convention to protest the inability of blacks to participate in existing all-white Party. He was driving back across the state, through counties known for violence against local blacks, desperately trying to get home. His borrowed car was leaking oil profusely.

He replenished the oil over and over but the car limped slower, the engine laboring until he knew he had to stop. He managed to roll to a cross-road diner before engine died.

He entered the diner and walked past a policeman and several menacing-looking locals. He avoided their gaze as he went to the pay-phone on the wall at the far end of the counter. Opening a list of names of safe house organizers along his route so no else could see it, he dialed the local contact and spoke in a low voice, struggling to explain who he was and why he needed help—why, in fact, the black man should come out in the

middle of the night to pick up a white stranger—while everyone in the diner watched intently.

Dad walked back outside. He stood and watched the door of the white-only diner uncomfortably as he waited for a ride that he wasn't sure would ever come.

My parents had arrived on the campus of Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi where Dad taught so one of the black faculty members could go north for advanced study. He worked tirelessly to register black voters. The week before my parents arrived in Mississippi, local white night-riders shot into the windows of their dorm building to warn black students, and white Northerners there to help, against trying to register to vote. My parents that they were distinctly not welcome.

Soon after they arrived, my parents heard the news that two northern students who had also come to Mississippi as part of the civil rights effort, along with a young black man, had disappeared after being trailed by local police. A tip led the FBI to the charred car in a swamp two days later. In the process of looking for the bodies that summer the FBI dredged the waterways and found a number of other bodies, black men who had gone missing over the prior months. They finally found the bodies of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney in August on a local farm. The two whites had been shot in the heart and the black man beaten severely and then shot multiple times.

Back at the diner, a pick-up truck finally pulled up. Dad got in and they sped away into the night. When they arrived at a farmhouse, the man's wife offered Dad a home-cooked meal of brown meat and grits.

Robert Miles and his sons took turns sitting on the front porch, passing a shotgun between them. In Dad's retelling, I can hear Mrs. Miles calmly telling Dad how they had

been shot at night after night, but that her boys would protect him. In the morning a local black mechanic picked up Dad's car. He worked on it for two days to get it running again. On the third day, Dad continued back to Holly Springs.

So as Obama took the stage in Chicago, I thought of Dad, now seventy and retired in Maine, and how that dark night forty-four years ago played a part in this national celebration. Thanks, Dad. Thank you for having the courage to face the threat of physical violence with renewed determination to do what was right. Thank you for having hope then so I can have hope now.