

## A Burning Bush

JONATHAN MYRICK DANIELS

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REALITY is kaleidoscopic in the black belt. Now you see it; now you don't. The view is never the same. Climate is an affair of the soul as well as the body: today the sun sears the earth, and a man goes limp in its scorching. Tomorrow and yesterday sullen rains chill bones and flood unpaved streets. Fire and ice . . . the advantages of both may be obtained with ease in the black belt. Light, dark, white, black: a way-of-life blurs, and the focus shifts. Black, white, black . . . A rhythm ripples in the sun, pounds in steaming, stinking shacks, dances in the blood. Reality is kaleidoscopic in the black belt. Sometimes one's vision changes with it. A crooked man climbed a crooked tree on a crooked hill. Somewhere, in the mists of the past, a tenor sang of valleys lifted up and hills made low. Death at the heart of life, and life in the midst of death. The tree of life is indeed a Cross.

### White

Darkly, incredibly the interstate highway that had knifed through Virginia and the Carolinas narrowed and stopped. It was three o'clock in the morning and bitterly cold. We found it difficult to believe that we were actually back in the south. But in the twinkling of an eye our brave, clean highway became a backwoods Georgia road, deep in cracker country, and we knew we were home. We were low on gas and miles from a point on the map, miles from sanctuary in Atlanta. We found a gas station and stopped. While one of us got the tank filled, the other went to the outdoor phone. Our Massachusetts plates seemed to glow in the night. As I shivered in the phone booth, I saw, through a window, white men turn and stare. Then my eye caught the sign over the door. . . WHITE ONLY. We had planned to get a Coke to keep us awake until Atlanta, but I guessed I no longer cared. I heard the operator speak and then Father Scott in Atlanta. His voice was sleepy — and tired — and it took him a minute to recall our meeting at the airport a week or two before. Then he shifted into gear, and I received precise instructions. We would find a small street at the end of the night and a certain door. We would knock and say that Fr. Scott had said that we were to be admitted to the Canterbury House next door. There would be black faces and a warm floor, the Eucha-



The author with one of his friends, who although the victim of hatred, ignorance and intolerance, manages to smile in youthful innocence.

rist in the morning and coffee to send us on our way. What we found there we sometimes think we shall see again only in Heaven. The Love before which we knelt in the morning would not again be visible at an altar, except to souls that had taken their first steps on the long trek out of the flesh. One cannot otherwise kneel in the real presence of a brother's hate, but that is to get ahead of our story. . . We drove on into the night. Incongruously, we came upon an all-night truckstop, midway to nowhere. There appeared to be no sign over the door, and I went in to get coffee-to-go. Too late, I discovered that hatred hadn't advertised — perhaps the sign had blown off in a storm. When I ordered the coffee, all other voices stopped. I turned from cold stares and fixed my gaze on a sign over the counter.

### Nausea

"ALL CASH RECEIVED FROM SALES TO NIGGERS WILL BE SENT DIRECTLY TO THE UNITED KLANS OF AMERICA." I read it again and again, nausea rising swiftly and savagely, as the suspicious counter boy spilled coffee over the cups. It was lousy coffee. But worse than chicory was the taste of black men's blood. It was cheap: only twenty-five cents. At least Judas went for thirty.

It was high noon as we walked into the Selma Post Office to sign for a registered letter, and the lines at the windows were long. In the line next to me a redneck turned and stared: at my seminarian's collar, at my ESCRU button, at my face. He turned to a friend. "Know what he is?" The friend shouted, "No." Resuming, the speaker whinnied, "Why, he's a white niggah." I was not happy thus to become the object of every gaze. And yet deep within me rose an affirmation and a tenderness

and a joy that wanted to shout, "Yes!" If pride were appropriate in the ambiguities of my presence in Selma, I would be unspeakably proud of my title. For it is the highest honor, the most precious distinction I have ever received. It is one that I do not deserve — and cannot ever earn. As I type now, my hands are hopelessly white. "But my heart is black. . ." I was proud, for the redneck's contempt was the obverse of an identity and an acceptance that were very real, if still ambiguous, in another part of town. I am indeed "a white nigger."

Bunnie sat astride my knee. She is four, the youngest of eleven. She smiled, yet there was a hesitancy in her eyes. Her daddy smiled down at her and asked, "Do you love Jon?" Quietly but firmly, Bunnie said, "No." We had lived with Bunnie's family only a few days and I was sure I knew what she meant. A part of me seemed to die inside, and I fought back tears. But there was nothing I could say, nothing I could do. Wisely, her daddy, who was already a dear friend, did not pursue the matter. . . . When, a few days later, Bunnie pulled me down to her, cupped my face with her tiny hands and kissed me, I knew something very important (and incredibly beautiful) had happened. As Stringfellow says in *My People Is the Enemy*, "that is called a sacrament."

We had parked the car at the church. The rector had not been there, so we had strolled a block or two to the office of an attorney whom we had met at St. Paul's and encountered several times since.

### Grapevine

This time our visit was more cordial. We had given him and his wife a copy of *My People Is the Enemy* for Easter, and I think they were deeply touched. This time

he was less suspicious, less defensive, less insistent that we "get the hell out of town." We had talked this time of the Gospel, of what a white moderate could do when he discovered that the White Citizens' Council wasn't all-powerful, of certain changes in the school system that the grapevine said might be forthcoming. We left his office in a spirit of something very much like friendship. Something having to do with human hearts, something like the faith of the Church had been explored and shared with a white man in the black belt. We gave thanks to the One Whom we had besought as we stepped across the threshold of his office, and quietly savored the glory of God as we strolled back to the car. We stopped for a light, and a man got out of his car and approached us. He was dressed in a business suit and looked respectable — this was not a redneck, so we could relax. He stopped in front of us, inspecting us from head to toe. His eyes paused for a moment at our ESCRU buttons and the collar. Then he spoke, very quietly. "Are you the scum that's been going to the Episcopal Church?" With a single voice we answered, "the scum, sir?" "Scum," he returned, "S-C-U-M."

### Christian

That's what you are — you and the nigger trash you bring with you." We replied as gently as we could, "We can spell, sir. We're sorry you feel that way." He turned contemptuously on his heel, and we crossed our street sadly. Yet it was funny — riotously, hilariously, hideously funny! We laughed all the way back home — at the man, at his cruelty, at his stupidity, at our cleverness, at the success with which we had suavely maintained "the Christian posture." And then, though we have not talked about it, we both felt a little dirty. Maybe the Incarnate God was truly present in that man's need and asking us for something better than a smirk. (I started to say "More truly human than a smirk. . ." But I don't know about that. We are beginning to believe deeply in original sin: theirs and ours.)

The Judge, an Episcopalian and a racist, waited for us to finish a nervous introduction. We had encountered him only too often in his capacity as head usher, and we knew our man. Now that we sat in his elegantly appointed office in the Dallas County Courthouse, we were terrified. We knew what this man could do, and what we had not seen ourselves we had heard from our friends. We concluded with something more-or-less coherent about the situation in St. Paul's. He began. "You, Jonathan and Judy, will always be welcome in St. Paul's." We smiled appreciatively. "But," he continued, "the nigger trash you bring with you will never be accepted in St. Paul's." We thought for an instant about the beautiful kids we take with us every Sunday. Especially about Helen, the eldest daughter in the first family who had opened

Courtesy of the New Hampshire Churchman

their home and hearts to us, a lovely, gentle, gracious girl who plans to enter nurse's training when she is graduated from high school this June. She must be one of the sweetest, prettiest girls in creation. Then anger rose in us — feeling akin, I suppose, to the feelings of a white man for the sanctity of southern womanhood. Helen, trash? We should have left his office then, for we were no longer free men. Symbolically he had raped our sister and friend. From that moment, we loathed the man — perhaps a bit more acutely than he loathed her. "The strategy of love" had already been lost. What, Lord Christ, does one do? Sometimes we do not know. Much later we told the judge that we thought the Gospel, as it had been delivered to the Holy Catholic Church rather specifically discouraged his notion that "our Episcopal Church is a white church." He answered that the Gospel also forbade our living with negroes. . . . "since God made white men and black men separate and if He'd wanted them comingled He'd have made them all alike." We asked him to cite New Testament evidence. He replied that he wasn't talking about the Gospel anyway, but about reality. He was quite clear that he knew God's thinking on this point, however. We then talked a bit about white supremacy and some of the means which had been used to achieve it. He denied that human slavery had had anything to do with it — and also that the beating of our kids on "Bloody Sunday" was any exception to his assertion that negroes get more kindly treatment in the black belt than they do anywhere else in the country — and concluded that the real problem was federal intervention in the cotton industry, in voter registration, in the churches. We suggested that the judge himself was implicated in the injustice perpetrated against the negro by the white men in Dallas County (actually he is notorious on his own hook, even by the standards of white moderates in the county). With some belligerence, he replied that he was not, that he had spent all his life in Selma. We missed the point of the last and said: "Sir, you're a legal mind, trained to be consistent. Don't you see the inconsistency of what you've just said?" A smile spread across the judge's face as he replied, "That's not inconsistent. That's the way

we think here, those of us who have spent all our lives here and really know the situation." He had made the same point in several other contexts that only a southern white man who had never left the black belt could see things as they really are. He concluded, "I'm not guilty of anything. Only guilty men have trouble sleeping at night. I don't have any trouble sleeping." We could not suppress the retort that we thought maybe he should. In spite of ourselves, we went through the farce of shaking hands. As we strolled to the courthouse, on our way to see the judge, we had recalled — only partly in jest — that "this kind does not come out, except by prayer and fasting."

### Scotts

When we got an Alabama plate for the car, we made the mistake of giving the Scotts' number in the federal project as our local address. In less than twenty-four hours, Mrs. Scott was notified by the project authorities that her house was being watched and would soon be inspected. If "those troublemakers at the Episcopal Church" or any of their luggage were found, the Scotts would be thrown out in the street. . . . We moved out a little after midnight when the streets were dark and nearly deserted. Fortunately, friends of the Scotts, who owned their house in a negro neighborhood on the edge of town, offered to take us in. Then we noticed that we were being followed uptown, especially when we drove away from the church. Mrs. Scott told us one evening that the police had been looking for "the people who've been going to the Episcopal Church." We discussed the situation with Bunnie's father, who felt that we were too remote in East Selma and insisted that we move in with his family. Now the telephone rings at six in the morning. When somebody finally stum-

bles out of bed to answer, there is only the sound of breathing at the other end.

When we moved in with our present family, we knew where Bunnie's mother stood. A few nights before, she had told us politely but emphatically that she didn't like white people — any white people. She knew from countless experiences that they couldn't be trusted. Until very recently, she would not have allowed white people to stay in her home. Though saddened, we were grateful for her honesty and told her so. We also told her that though we would understand if she didn't believe us, we had begun to love her and her family deeply. By the night we moved in, her reserve had almost disappeared. She was wonderfully hospitable to us, notwithstanding the suspicion she must still have felt. We spent an evening with Lonzie and Alice at the Elk's Club. Late in the evening a black nationalist approached her. "What are you doing here with them?" he asked. "They're white people." Much to our surprise and perhaps a little to her own, she answered: "Jon and Judy are my friends. They're staying in my home. I'll pick my own friends, and nobody'll tell me otherwise." The name for that, Brother Stringfellow, is *miracle*.

The girls looked particularly beautiful as we went into church on Palm Sunday. Their gloves and dresses were freshly cleaned and pretty. Their hairdo's were lovely. There was a freshness, a quiet radiance about them which made us catch our breath. We were startled from our vision by a member of the congregation entering the church as we were. His greeting was unmistakable: "You god-damned scum. . ."

The disappointments of Holy Week and the bitterness of Easter Communion at St. Paul's forced

our eyes back to the inscription over the altar. "He is not here. For He is risen." In a dreadful parody of their meaning, the words seemed to tell a grim truth that was not exhausted by their liturgical import.

This is the stuff of which our life is made. There are moments of great joy and moments of sorrow. Almost imperceptibly, some men grow in grace. Some men don't. Christian hope, grounded in the reality of Easter, must never degenerate into optimism. For that is the road to despair. Yet it ought never to conclude that because its proper end is Heaven, the Church may dally at its work until the End is in sight. The thought of the Church is fraught with tension because the Life of the Church is *caught* in tension. For the individual Christian and the far-flung congregation alike, that is part of the reality of the Cross.

There are good men here, just as there are bad men. There are competent leaders and a bungler here and there. We have activists who risk their lives to confront a people with the challenge of freedom and a nation with its conscience. We have neutralists who cautiously seek to calm troubled waters. We have men about the work of reconciliation who are willing to reflect upon the cost and pay it. Perhaps at one time or another the two of us are all of these. Sometimes we take to the streets, sometimes we yawn through interminable meetings. Sometimes we talked with white men in their homes and offices, sometimes we sit out a murderous night with an alcoholic and his family because we love them and cannot stand apart. Sometimes we confront the posse, and sometimes we hold a child. Sometimes we stand with men who have learned to hate, and sometimes we must stand a little apart from them. Our life in Selma is filled with ambiguity, and in that we share with men everywhere. We are beginning to see as we never saw before that we are truly in the world and yet ultimately not of it. For through the bramble bush of doubt and fear and supposed success we are groping our way to the realization that above all else, we are called to be saints. That is the mission of the Church everywhere. And in this Selma, Alabama is like all the world: it needs the life and witness of militant saints.



JONATHAN MYRICK DANIELS

1939 - 1965

Jon Daniels and other students of the Episcopal Theological School were among the thousands who demonstrated a nation's concern by going to Selma after the violence at Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965. With a classmate, Judith Upham, and with the approval of the seminary and his bishop, Jon returned to Selma for the duration of the spring, during which time he wrote this article. After final exams back at Cambridge, and staff work at the diocesan youth camp in New Hampshire, Jon once more returned to Selma for the summer as our representative in a continuing ministry of presence. On Saturday, August 14th, he and a group of SNCC workers were jailed at Fort Deposit, Alabama, in an arrest which a Federal Court has subsequently ruled to have been illegal. They were moved to the Lowndes County Jail in Hayneville where Fr. Henri Stines of ESCRU visited Jon on Wednesday, prepared to post bond had he been willing to leave before the others could be freed. On Friday, August 20th, the entire group was unexpectedly released, without advance notice which would have seen them picked up and transported back to Selma. Jon, Fr. Richard Morrisroe, and two SNCC workers approached a nearby store where they had been accustomed to making purchases. Thomas Coleman, prominent Hayneville resident and a sometime Deputy Sheriff, was waiting there with a shotgun. Before they could enter he fired twice. Seeing what was about to happen, Jon pushed the friend in front of him to the ground and fell mortally wounded himself. Fr. Morrisroe was critically injured by the second blast. At the trial of Mr. Coleman, termed a miscarriage of justice by Alabama's Attorney General, the defense claimed the shooting was done in self-defense. Coleman was found not guilty. Whether a part of Jon's legacy will be the more vigorous enforcement of existing Federal laws or the enactment of new ones depends on you, the reader. Certainly in this article he leaves a legacy of Christian commitment that will long endure.