The Texas Observer

A Journal of Free Voices

A Window to The South

OCTOBER 29, 1965

FOCUS ON INTEGRATION

25¢

'But My Heart Is Black'

By Jonathan Myrick Daniels

SHOT DEAD AT HAYNEVILLE, ALABAMA, NEAR SELMA, ON FRIDAY, AUGUST 20, 1965

Episcopal Seminarian Daniels Preaching in Alabama, as Photographed by His Co-Seminarian, Judith Upham

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 rain chills bones and floods 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 midst 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.

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

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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 Eucharist 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 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. "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 whined, "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 should 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. . . ." Oh, the drolleries one could spin! 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. Hear, O Israel: given an irony or two in the holy mystery of His economy, I am indeed "a white nigger." I wouldn't swap the blessings He has given me. But *black* would be a very wonderful, a very beautiful color to be.

Bunnie sat astride my knee. She is four, the youngest of eleven (it would have been twelve, but there wasn't room for a premature black baby in the white hospital). 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 very 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. 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. 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 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

*The Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity.

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We will serve no group or party but will hew hard to the truth as we find it and the right as we see it. We are dedicated to the whole truth, to human values above all interests, to the rights of man as the foundation of democracy; we will take orders from none but our own conscience, and never will we overlook or misrepresent the truth to serve the interests of the powerful or cater to the ignoble in the human spirit.

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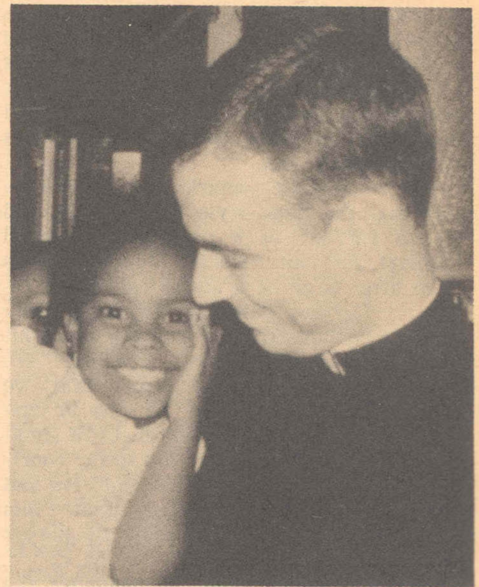
elegantly appointed office in the Dallas County courthouse, we were terrified. We knew what this man could do, and what we had heard from our friends among the high school kids. We concluded with something more-or-less coherent about the situation in St. Paul's. He began: "You, Jonathan and Judy, will 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 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 might be one of the sweetest, prettiest girls in creation. Then anger rose in us—a feeling akin, I suppose, to the feeling 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 (a less symbolic phenomenon is real enough) he had raped our sister and friend. If she were older, if she had already shared more of the "cultural" and life experience that, for better or worse, has gone into the making of me, I would court her. From that moment, we loathed the man—perhaps a bit more acutely than he loathed her. His sin . . . and ours. "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 (of which we hoped the Episcopal Church was a part,) 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 commingled 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.



—Judith Upham

He was quite sure 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.

Towards the end of the interview, the judge brought up the matter of the photographers who had accompanied the first group who had attempted to integrate the church. Though we had been energetically involved in the attempt, we too, had not been entirely happy about the photographers. The judge insisted that we had brought them, which we denied. We made it clear that to an extent we sympathized with his objections. But he insisted on pursuing the point, claiming that since we were in the group we shared in the guilt of the group. Though we had not known that the photographers were with us until we got almost to the church, we agreed with the judge that we shared the "guilt" of the group. (It is not a guilt we lament particularly: the photographers made the moment an object of national concern, which was entirely appropriate.) Then we suggested that, by the same token, 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 said: "Sir, you're a legal mind, trained to be consistent. Don't you see the inconsistency of what you've just said?" A crafty smile spread across the judge's face as he replied, "That's not inconsistent.

'He Returned to Selma'

The day Jonathan Daniels was shot in Hayneville, and died, the Rev. John B. Morris, executive director of the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity in Atlanta, Ga., wrote, as an explanation to go along with mimeographed copies of the article Daniels had written that is printed this issue, this short statement:

Jon Daniels went to Selma immediately following the violence at the bridge on March 7th, together with another student at the Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Mass. With the permission of the seminary and their respective bishops they returned to Selma several weeks later to stay through the spring, continuing their studies by correspondence. They hoped to be able to communicate something of the love of God in Christ Jesus to the people of Selma among whom they lived. They sought to build bridges across the white community. Both returned to the seminary in mid-May to take their final examinations. Jon wrote this article in April, before his return to Cambridge, for publication in the ETS Journal.* After visiting his family in Keene, New Hampshire, he assisted with a diocesan summer camp. At our request he returned to Selma in early July as a part of a continuing ministry of presence in that torn community. Admired by persons in the Negro community, and respected by some in the white community, he moved around Selma with a patience, persistence, and gentleness which could not but be effective in having others realize that he served Someone else. Jon overcame in his own example the divisions in Selma. He crossed the great gulf fearlessly, seeking on the one hand to say to the Negro community that the churches of the nation still cared about Selma, and endeavoring in the white community to be a catalyst for reconciliation. On Saturday, August 14th, he was arrested with others in Fort Deposit, Ala., in what was a peaceful demonstration for justice. Fr. Stines of our staff went to Selma and saw Jon. He could have been bailed out, but it would have meant leaving the rest for further funds to be raised. It was not like Jon to retreat at anytime, but neither was he foolhardy. In the deepest sense of that word, he was faithful. While he was in jail an Episcopal priest, the Rev. Francis Walter, arrived in Selma to join Jon in this ministry of presence. Fr. Walter only had the opportunity to meet Jon through bars at the jail in Hayneville. Today, August 20, 1965, Jon and the others were released from jail. Shortly thereafter he was shot.

Tom Coleman, accused of the murder and tried in Hayneville, was acquitted by a jury of twelve whites. Thereupon, on Sept. 30, Rev. Morris issued a statement:

We have watched an almost-total conspiracy of the civil and religious leadership of Lowndes County to exonerate one of their own.

Last Saturday, Oct. 23, in Hayneville, a white jury, four members of whom had declared they believe Negroes and white civil rights workers are inferior persons, acquitted Ku Klux Klansman Collie Leroy Wilkins of the nightrider murder of Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, a white civil rights worker from Detroit. UPI said the jury "received a resounding cheer in the century-old Lowndes County courthouse."

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*The mimeographed student journal of the Episcopal Theological Seminary of Cambridge, Mass., where Daniels was a student. The article was subsequently published in the June issue of the diocesan magazine of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire.—Ed.

Courtesy of The Texas Observer

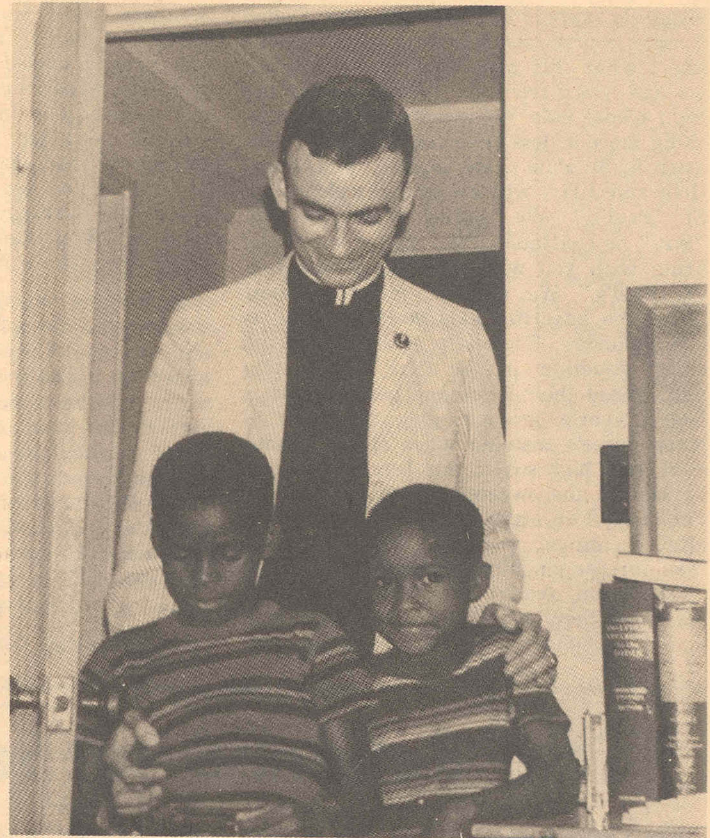
That's the way we think here, those of us who have spent all our lives here and really know the situation." He had made the same point in several other contexts that only a Southern white man who had never left the black belt could see things as they really are.

His concluding remark was more concise that the home-style filibuster he had staged earlier (at a particularly crucial moment he had insisted on reading us page after page of a statistical school report): "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 had 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."

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 up town, 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 stumbles 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 goddamned scum. . . ."



—Judith Upham

The disappointments of Holy Week and the bitterness of Easter Communion at St. Paul's . . . we assume you have seen a copy of our letter to Bishop Carpenter*—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 seem 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 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 of 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 tensions 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 talk with white men in their homes and offices, sometimes we sit out a murderous night with an alcoholic and his family because we love him 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 lives in Selma are filled with ambiguity, and in that we share with men everywhere. We are beginning to see the world as we never saw it before. 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*. □

*On April 21, 1965, Daniels and his student colleague from the seminary, Judith Upham, wrote the Rt. Rev. C. C. J. Carpenter, the Bishop of Alabama, telling him that the rector of St. Paul's had told them that Bishop Carpenter "had directed that our racially mixed group of worshippers could not be excluded from the Eucharist, but that the ushers might seat us at their own discretion." At the service last Easter Sunday, Daniels and Miss Upham continued, "we were seated in the left rear pew, six pews behind the nearest communicants in front of us, and without access to the central aisle. Not only were we thus the last to be communicated, but we were furthermore forced to remain in our seats until after the rest of the congregation had communicated and returned to their seats. Only when the altar rail and the several aisles were empty were we finally allowed to approach the altar." They asked the Bishop to correct the situation.

Eight days later, the two students and three ministers in the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity in Atlanta signed a statement about Bishop Carpenter's role in this matter which said in part: "The Carpenter of Birmingham must not be allowed to forever deny the Carpenter of Nazareth. . . . Segregated seating, now largely discarded on public conveyances, must not be allowed to gain a foothold in Alabama Episcopal churches or elsewhere."

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