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Rev. James Lawson and the Power of Nonviolent Action

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr., who would one day be cited by Martin Luther King, Jr. as “the leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world,” was born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania in 1928. To Congressman John Lewis, he is “the architect of the nonviolence movement.” Jesse Jackson calls him the teacher. According to author David Halberstam, he was responsible for sowing the seeds of change in the South as much as any person except maybe King. Today he continues his life’s work, melding his knowledge of Jesus and Gandhian nonviolence in the service of direct action for social justice.

Lawson has opposed violence and injustice in all its forms. He joined the international pacifist organization, Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), while a freshman in college, and soon after served 13 months in prison during the Korean War for resisting the draft. Upon his release he accepted a job as teacher and athletic coach at Hislop College in India. During three years there, he made an in-depth study of Gandhi’s life and work, taking advantage of every opportunity to visit ashrams and meet people who had known Gandhi well and been to jail with him in the nonviolent resistance to British rule.

It was in Nagpur, India that he read newspaper accounts of the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott--through which black citizens successfully and nonviolently challenged racial segregation in bus service--and first read about Martin Luther King. Though he had been convinced for years of the value of mass direct action and had

often thought of bringing Gandhian methods to the civil rights movement in the South, his intention was first to obtain a graduate degree. These plans changed two years later. Lawson was attending the Oberlin School of Theology and King, visiting the campus, insisted his expertise was needed—not someday, but immediately.

Lawson told his friend and mentor A.J. Muste, then the Executive Secretary of FOR, that he was about to move South. The phone rang with a job offer: the position of FOR field secretary for the Southern region. Basing himself in Nashville, Tennessee, Lawson became the troubleshooter in all the crisis places of the US South. For the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference, affiliated with King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), he led workshops to prepare for direct action—a full range of marches, boycotts, sit-ins, and picketing--aimed at desegregating the entire downtown. The Nashville model vastly influenced the Movement for the next decade.

He also transferred to Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, a campus that had just begun to accept a small number of highly qualified black students in the graduate schools. Lawson immediately raised some hackles by acting like a normal human being—eating in the campus cafeteria along with white classmates and joining in intramural sports, none of which the administration had anticipated. When trustees became aware that their black divinity student was the organizer and key figure behind the downtown protests, two members of the board demanded and won his expulsion. However, even in this city where racial discrimination reigned, the white faculty rallied to his support with letters of resignation. Lawson was reinstated according to terms satisfactory enough that the faculty members did not have to resign but Lawson himself

had already moved to Boston where he chose to complete his Masters degree at Boston University, the same school of theology that had granted Martin Luther King his Ph.D.

He soon returned South to continue the struggle to dismantle legal segregation, coordinating the Freedom Rides and working steadily on campaigns throughout the region.

In 1968 while serving as pastor of Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis, Lawson became the coordinator of the wildcat strike when close to 1,000 black sanitation workers walked off the job. The movement in Memphis wanted King to come and join the struggle. Lawson made the phone call to invite him. When Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis on April 4th, Lawson reeled from the loss. True to his conviction, however, that every person without exception is endowed with spirituality and humanity, he later went on to visit James Earl Ray who was imprisoned as the assassin after accepting a plea bargain.

In 1974, Jim Lawson relocated to Los Angeles. As pastor of Holman United Methodist Church he began offering nonviolence training there as part of the Christian education program but then opened these workshops to the general public. As pastor emeritus since his 1999 retirement, he has continued to bring people of all races and faiths—including no religious faith—together at Holman, asserting that justice is a tenet of all religions. He teaches that nonviolence must become a way of life in which love and compassion are integral to character and compel action for change. He warns that energy and enthusiasm are not enough but that a strategy for change must include

research, analysis, and experimentation with tactics, moving step by incremental step to achieve short-term and then long-term goals.

Through decades of service he has joined the struggle not only for racial equality but wherever he sees the yoke of oppression—standing up for women, for immigrants, for gays and lesbians, and above all, for the poor.

Taking on the cause of low-wage workers who live in poverty, he founded Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, (CLUE), to enlist the faith community in this struggle, strategically targeting service-sector jobs that cannot be outsourced.

After 9/11, he was a founding member of Interfaith Communities United for Justice and Peace (ICUJP) through which Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other faith leaders join in activism dedicated to the proposition that “religious leaders must stop blessing violence and war.”

In recent years he has fasted on behalf of fulltime workers who could not support their families. He has been arrested more times in Los Angeles than in all his work in the South and though he now has moral authority and significant influence with elected officials, now past the age of 80, Lawson still believes he can accomplish more in the streets than in the halls of power.

His relationship with Vanderbilt was renewed—or perhaps redeemed--in 2006 when the one-time subversive was named Distinguished Visiting Professor. Back in Los Angeles, he again joined forces with Kent Wong, director of the Center for Labor Research and Education at UCLA, to co-teach a course in Nonviolence and Social Movements as they've done since 2002. They soon had to lift the cap on enrollment due

to demand for the class which included a real-world component with some students volunteering at the Black Worker Center while others organized to see that the California Dream Act passed, providing financial aid for college and employment opportunities to the 25,000 undocumented youth and students who arrived in the US at a young age and graduate from high schools in the state each year.

In October 2008 we met for a first interview in the Crockett Library at Holman. Our conversations continued for months--after the inauguration of Barack Obama (and after Rev. Lawson's and wife Dorothy's 50th wedding anniversary) and beyond as he went over our pages line by line, concerned that misinformation about him appears widely in print and in cyberspace. Since then, public discourse from the right, as well as from their media and web surrogates during the 2012 campaign, erased any skepticism I had about Rev. Lawson's comments on the persistence of the white supremacist ideology.

Lefer: You've said we have sufficient activism in this country to have a better country than we have. What are we getting wrong?

Rev. Lawson: Activism is not appropriating and practising the Gandhian science of social change. What Gandhi called nonviolence or *satyagraha*—soul force—is both a way of life and a scientific, methodological approach to human disorder. It is as old as the human race and can be found in the oral and written history of the human family from way back. Then Gandhi began to put together the steps you need to take to create change. He is the father of nonviolent social change in the same way that Albert

Einstein is the father of 20th-century physics--not the inventor but the person who pulled it together. Gene Sharp wrote the classic book in the field, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Looking at different centuries and different cultures, he discovered 198 different techniques--various forms of protest and agitation and strikes, sit-ins, and civil disobedience, and there are many more because people have invented other techniques. Activists ought to study this so they can become like military strategists, not just operating out of the adrenaline that develops out of anger but that puts the anger together with reflection. Today, much of our activism does not discuss, study, and apply what nonviolence theory offers the struggle.

Then, too much activism gears itself to lobbying legislatures and Congress and the President. That activism does not have the clout that the Council on Foreign Relations has or that Exxon has or the Pentagon has, so it's lost. We want to leave it to the political parties and to follow their leadership rather than to work on empowerment of the people.

Again and again when a movement begins to raise its head in the United States, immediately the so-called political social progressive forces try to surround it and try to guide it into the channels they think is important. I experienced this as early as 1961 with what I think to be very wonderful people in the Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations because there was antagonism to our getting into the streets and marching and to the sit-ins. Robert Kennedy was mobilizing foundations and others to put money into voter registration. In meetings, he pushed very very hard and eloquently that we should end the Freedom Rides and go towards voter registration. In 2006, when

the coalition of immigration groups came together to start the big marches, they were immediately approached by foundations and political groups that said the way to do this is to lobby for a good bill.

Lefer: But voting rights and voter registration paved the way for the election of Barack Obama. Doesn't that show we can bring about change through the ballot?

Rev. Lawson: Pulling down the *White* and *Colored* signs across the country, the *No Jews, No Mexicans, No Irish, No Wop, No Indian* signs all across the country has done far more to prepare the mind of the nation for a black president than voter registration. Does any football fan in the country not know that the coach of the Steelers who won the Superbowl--the largest event seen on TV annually--is 35 years of age and in his second year as head coach and is a black man? Desegregation of the sports world and the university and the professional world has done more to prepare the American mind than the Voting Rights Act of '65. The country has grown since the 50's and 60's precisely because we put into play those forces that began the desegregation process while real access to the right to vote still hasn't been settled in the United States.

Obama is one man, and we are still trying to establish a democracy. In the meantime, there's the chaos and the greed. JP Morgan publicly said that this time of recession is a great time for them to buy up assets. The bailout was used to give dividends to their investors. There's no indication that these engines for self-destructing our country have stopped or slowed down. And while the visible signs of segregation have come down, the systemic stuff is still there. Blacks are still largely the last to be

hired and the first to be fired. People still need to be empowered.

The peace movement has failed to slow down militarization and the Empire elements in our country and they have failed to stop war because they do not understand that the road to peace is justice. The peace movement does not have the focus that dismantling racism and poverty in the United States is the critical issue for the security of the nation. Stabilizing families by good work, by health care, is the critical issue for the security of the land and the wellbeing of the land.

Only by engaging in domestic issues and molding a domestic coalition for justice can we confront militarization of our land. We must confront that *here* – not over *there*. Iraq and the Middle East are not the central, pivotal places for the wellbeing of the American people. The central pivotal place for 300 million people here is the United States and our domestic policies.

Lefer: You were willing to go to prison to protest the Korean War.

Rev. Lawson: That's not how it happened. I was already determined to resist segregation and I felt conscription was as immoral as any Jim Crow law. You know the early settlers in US came here fleeing British and Dutch conscription. Still, I registered for the draft at age 18 but I scribbled in the margins of the pages that I didn't know if I was doing the right thing. A wrestling match was going on in me over the legality and morality of the act and whether I could participate in the armed forces. I believed as a follower of Jesus I could not go into any man's army. Then I joined the FOR. My decision firmed up in 1949 and I sent my cards back. But you see it was peacetime and

I wasn't protesting a war, but the draft itself. Then the Korean War caught up with me and I did go to prison.

Lefer: But there's such a sense of urgency about the war. People are getting killed—we are killing people--right now over there in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Rev. Lawson: The urgency is to stop the violence in our midst. Five women are killed a day in the United States by intimate partners or former partners. Five a day! Domestic assault is the major cause of pregnant women going into the hospital. Two to four million women enter the hospitals primarily out of a result of domestic assault.

Sixty-one thousand people die every year as a consequence of their work. Some of those deaths include homicides in the workplace. Sixty-one thousand a year. This figure was in the Los Angeles *Times*, from 2000. The urgency needs to be connected here.

Nobody even knows in this country how many unarmed people who are not committing a crime are killed every week. The Stolen Lives project back in the 90's documented four a week by police forces. Some of the lawyers from the National Lawyers Guild with whom I was working here in Los Angeles at the time told me that was the tip of the iceberg because there's another number of people being killed every day and every week in prison and jails, and those figures aren't even known. Rarely is a police officer held responsible. Those deaths in the 90's ranged from age 13 to 79 and while they were mostly black, there were also Anglos and Asians and Latinos in that

group. Two or three years ago the LAPD SWAT team killed a father and a 19-month-old. I could have gotten that father to surrender if they'd been willing to back off and give me the time to do it or I could have gotten the daughter from the father. There's probably dozens of people on the police force – women – who could have done it. Instead we send in the SWAT team. The Christopher Commission report after the '92 urban riots commended the women on the force for quelling violent situations without pulling a weapon. That got almost no attention. I asked the chief, Willie Williams, if they were going to highlight how women in the LAPD went into situations and calmed things down, made arrests, stopped abuse in the family, very often without raising their voices and without pulling a gun. He acted as though I was trying to provoke him. Another study showed many women officers had masters degrees in education or social work but could not find jobs that paid as well as the LAPD. So the women came in not only with a higher educational level than the men but a whole different approach to law enforcement.

Lefer: Not to defend police killings, but isn't that a relatively small number compared to the way we civilians kill each other?

Rev. Lawson: My point is that the violence we're facing is not the violence over *there*. As an aside, *Newsweek* for this week came in and they have an interesting piece on the history of terrorism in the US in the 20th century. There's not a word there of more than 6,000 black people who were lynched. Nothing about major riots in Rosewood, Florida and Tulsa, Oklahoma and I don't know how many other places where white mobs

destroyed black communities. That's terrorism and that's the problem about talking about violence in the US--there's a very limited picture, a limited perspective. What about the death penalty in this country and the numbers of innocent people who've been executed? Isn't that terror? A number of scholars say the United States has the most violent history against labor unions in the world. At the turn of the century you had 100 people lynched and 100 shot down during strikes and labor disputes in a single year.

Personally I have no doubt that violence in the street is coming from violence in society—violence in speech, in thought, in behavior. The violence in films is just astounding. Then you've got a problem with some hiphop and gangsta music and there's nothing happening in American society to deal with correctives. It's left entirely up to the household and the parents though all of us live in a social environment that is just as influential on our personal development. We maintain that we are a culture that has a high regard for the sanctity of life but we have never had that and this is compounded by the fact that we have never examined our own violence. So I maintain that the Iraq war and Afghanistan war and 800 military bases around the world are an emanation of the violent spirituality in the US. Hugo Chavez isn't the problem. Castro isn't the problem. Those things out *there* are not the primary shapers of how we come to certain policies.

We have a problem as a culture. We believe that violence is effective. That violence works.

We call the Revolutionary War of 1776 a good war and we continue to teach that

this good war produced benefits. When we study that war we do not study the agitation and protest which took place fifty years before. The Liberty and Justice cry, the town hall meetings, the fact that as the colonies developed government, citizens -- mostly white men, went directly to the legislature to talk about the issues and to challenge them. We don't talk about the civil disobedience before that war. No taxation without representation. The petitions and protests to King George. The refusal to buy British cloth. The whole range of nonviolent protest and agitation.

Lefer: I did learn about that in school, but we were always taught that we had to have a war because nonviolent protest didn't work.

Rev. Lawson: Yes, I agree, that's the way it's taught, *when* it is taught. But those protests represent the empowerment of the people and the sense that people could play a role in making the decisions, that they did not have to consent to their own shackles by government, that they had the right to say no. That is essential nonviolent theory. Even an authoritarian government has to have the consent of the people. When the people withdraw that consent the government can't survive. It's inevitable that the government will falter. You were taught by people who had never experienced the 20th-century explosion of nonviolent struggle and had never read or studied Gandhi. The Gandhian methodology claims that always before you get involved in a nonviolent campaign there's a whole period of persuasion and consciousness raising. It's clear that was happening in the colonies there and then.

Lefer: So the colonists gave up on nonviolence too soon?

Rev. Lawson: It was the 18th century. For whatever reason, the human race wasn't ready to see this. Look what happens in the 20th century, the explosion of knowledge in biology, physics, psychology, surgery. New knowledge of the brain and the heart.

Lefer: OK, I think I get what you're saying--that we don't dismiss the advances in science just because people in 1776 didn't make use of them.

Rev. Lawson: The word "nonviolence" wasn't even really used until Gandhi took a term from Jainism—*ahimsa*—that means *do not injure living things*. He translated it as "nonviolence" and used that term with the Muslims and Hindus in the challenge to racist policies in South Africa.

When you study the history of our country, most of the people in the settlements came from a Europe shackled by monarchy, tyranny, conscription and wars. They weren't ready. The only people in that era who thought there was a better way were the Quakers. Their 17th-century movement said in every human being there is a spark of God. And they were imprisoned, they had their hands hacked off for this peculiar understanding they had of God and the New Testament and Jesus. And here is successful nonviolence. From around 1681 until 1740, there were no Indian wars with the Quakers in eastern Pennsylvania under William Penn. He wrote to the Indians before receiving the charter from King Charles II. He wrote "We are coming and we want to come as brothers, not to hate you or mistreat you in any way." Indian wars were raging all around them, but as long as Quakers were the dominant force in that colony,

not a single settler was killed by an Indian and no war took place.

There has never been a serious look at the successes of nonviolence and the failures of violence. We live in a society where the Reagan Revolution, so-called, takes credit for ending the Cold War whereas I use a textbook, *A Force More Powerful* by Ackerman and Duvall, that describes the nonviolent campaigns in the 80s and 90s in Europe and around the world. For example, the Solidarity movement in Poland. In the American newspapers, it was always described as being anti-Soviet Union. But when the movement began in the 70's they were mad at the Communist government and they wanted independent unions but they never dared to think they would be able to topple one-party rule. Their movement was crushed. Then they reorganized around nonviolence. Solidarity followed Gandhi and King both of whom had been translated into Polish. That was at the heart of the Solidarity struggle and that isn't mentioned or talked about and that's what toppled the Communist tyranny in Poland. The movement was able to recover and about the middle of the 1980s Lech Walesa and others added the demand for free parliamentary elections to the negotiations.

By the way, Solidarity is the only overseas union-organizing effort that the US has ever supported. Union organizing under the apartheid regime in South Africa was called Communist. We killed off union leaders in Central America and we're doing it now in Colombia. We encourage the killing even when we don't teach it. We did it in Vietnam which I learned when I was there during the war.

Lefer: I didn't know you'd been in Vietnam.

Rev. Lawson: Well, it's an unknown story. Much of my life is unknown except that I lived it! In 1965, FOR decided to send international clergy to Southeast Asia. Martin was asked to go, but felt he could not—strategically. If he had become a public critic of the administration and the war in '65, there's a whole slew of legislative action that would not have gotten passed. He would have dealt a death blow to the Voting Rights Act, Head Start, the antipoverty programs that he cared about, the Affordable Housing Act, the first immigration bill to move toward fairness. Adam Clayton Powell worked with the White House to pass the most progressive legislation that the country ever had. There's a notion that King first challenged the Vietnam war in '67. But he always criticized it at SCLC meetings. In '65 Martin King was sending Coretta to represent him at peace meetings and had agreed to let Jim Bevel work part-time in the peace movement. So much depended on King and he was already being attacked by the FBI, CIA and military. What more could he do to demonstrate to the peace movement where he stood? He asked me to go to Vietnam in his stead, greet the Buddhist leaders for him, and report back to him.

I was very much opposed to the war but I really had not been exposed to a full discussion until I met Buddhist leaders there. The Phoenix operation in Vietnam was our CIA-sponsored operation to kill off community leaders to make it easier to control Vietnam. Union leaders, church leaders, community activists. Some of that is now well documented.

Our denial is ruthless. And I maintain that there are four other major factors which have taught us to depend upon animosity and violence. One is what can be

called the American Holocaust, the decimation of the Native peoples, the indigenous people, 13-15 million people who we cut down in size in less than 200 years to less than 250,000 people. That has made us sense the efficacy of violence: We stole, we took the land.

Then the establishment of slavery taught violence. It continues to teach violence. Concomitant with slavery was the development of the very rigid ideology of racism and the systems of racism. Part of this comes out of the treatment of the Native American, but slavery for 250 years was justified with the ideology that the slave was out of the jungle, the slave was immoral, the slave was lazy, the slave could not learn, the brain of the slave was smaller, all sorts of stuff that is still the rockbed ideology that has convinced at least 50 million people in the United States of the fundamental inequality of people of color.

Lefer: That's a shocking figure. I can't quite believe it. Do you have a source for it?

Rev. Lawson: Joe Feagan who is a sociologist teaching at Texas A&M has done a series of studies. He was president of the American Sociological Association so that surely makes him a reputable source. He's not saying and I'm not saying that the Ku Klux Klan or the Identity Church or other white supremacist organizations and hate groups have 50 million members. But there are 902 hate groups across the US today and they increase in numbers. There are 50 million Americans who believe in the superiority of white civilization. And a majority of white people still assert the inherent inequality of people of color. Vast numbers of white people practice a certain degree of

graciousness in public life but use racist language in private circles, what you can call “backstage racism.” Sociological studies find again and again that two-thirds of black people experience racial hostility every day. I was speaking recently in Missouri and my wife and I were staying with a family. The 14-year-old girl came home from school and said her teacher told her “I’m gonna have to have a lynching party with you or I’m gonna bring you a hanging noose.” When Andrew Young was UN Ambassador living in the ambassador’s penthouse he was repeatedly mistaken for the bellhop or parking valet. And the average American doesn’t know this is going on.

Lefer: But there’s a big difference between racism now and back in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s. The election of Barack Obama must show things have changed.

Rev. Lawson: A majority of whites voted for McCain. The black community, the Hispanic community, the Jewish community and the Asian community voted Obama by landslide. Those four groups of people are the most sensitive to the issues of racism. The majority of white people voted twice for George W. Bush. At best he was incompetent. At worst he had no notion of what it meant to be president of the United States. At worst he allowed poverty to increase while saying the economy was strong, he lied to the American people about Iraq and 9/11. He behaved in ways universally seen as causing great harm to the nation. Yet in the past election, the majority of white people still voted Republican. And look at the Southeast where they still vote under the bondage of slavery. It remains the poorest section of the nation with the highest illiteracy and infant mortality rates.

I maintain that racism and slavery are major contributions to the violent perspective. And sexism is akin to racism. Women were excluded from the Constitution which denied them the vote. Women were not created equal, not included in "All men." The whole anti-abortion business is but a subterfuge to maintain power over women--to say that women are not equal moral agents in the sight of the Creator as are we men. Various aspects of Christianity teach what they call the "headship" of the male. In 1996 the Southern Baptist Convention adopted that as one of their belief principles and there are other denominations that have the same principle. The Vatican insists that a woman cannot be called by God to be a priest. Their position is that Jesus was a male and Moses was a male so a woman was never called and can't be called. If there's any task in the world that a woman can't do, that supports the inequality and submission of the woman and all of that is a violent perspective. It has continued to encourage family abuse.

Finally, I think a major influence is "plantation capitalism" with its emphasis on greed. That's not the Adam Smith form of capitalism.

Lefer: What do you mean by "plantation"?

Rev. Lawson: I do not think that you can have 250 years of a peculiar national institution like slavery without it affecting economic thought or the attitude toward labor. At the heart of plantation economics was the notion that there are people who do not deserve reaping the benefits of their labor. Workers were property, not human. Slaves were paid nothing but subsistence and died early. Today you have all kinds of

demands on the part of capital that workers are not to receive wages enough to live on.

Lefer: In England, the treatment of workers was every bit as bad.

Rev. Lawson: When you have the divine right of kings, there's a drive of domination and control which also affects economic order. But much of Europe has advanced far beyond us, putting an emphasis on education, transportation, and health care to a degree we have never done. The collapse of certain financial institutions won't have the same social damage in Europe as here because they have a fabric in place that allows families to sustain themselves in tough times. We have no such social fabric. What we did have has been pretty much devastated and destroyed.

Lefer: Didn't Thatcherism in Britain and now the policies of the EU cut back on the social safety net in Europe?

Rev. Lawson: Since World War II, Europe has not had the levels of homelessness and hunger that we have. For twenty or thirty years now a number of reports from nonprofits such as the Rand Corporation, also the World Health Organization and the International Labor Organization, on the state of the world and progress in the eradication of illiteracy and poverty, in the provision of health care and quality education show the US has moved further and further down in the list of nations. There's an annual publication, the *State of the World*, that indicates over and over that the United States barometers of wellbeing have lingered behind the advances of Europe and Canada and Japan. Very little of that is ever reported in the American media so the notion is we are still the

greatest country in the world. Compared with what? Infant mortality? We're atrocious. Literacy? Health care? Housing? Senator Kennedy has referred to this from time to time over his long career. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the barometer of wellbeing is not infant mortality but how many millionaires are created. Then they changed it to billionaires. Our social fabric is atrocious. It's because we're in the grip of plantation capitalism.

The militarization of the last sixty years has certainly compounded our belief in the efficacy of violence, but these four factors—genocide, racism, sexism, plantation capitalism--are all part of it. These forces have welded the culture of violence.

Lefer: When I think of 250 years of slavery and that the struggle isn't over yet, I wonder if that historical consciousness is what gives you the understanding that we need a longterm strategy, that even a very urgent fight won't be won overnight.

Rev. Lawson: Exactly. I began working in Los Angeles with Local 11 – the Restaurant and Hotel Workers Union – with nonviolence workshops twenty-five years ago.

Lefer: Good. Let's talk about that. The Movement of the '50's and '60's has been so well documented and David Halberstam wrote a wonderful account of your role in his book *The Children*, so I'd much rather hear about how you've applied nonviolent methodology since then.

Rev. Lawson: David Halberstam got the facts right. But I've found a lot of inaccuracies in print and on the internet so I would like the chance to tell you more.

Lefer: I do have a question about those days. I often find the quote from Martin Luther King about you, but when did he say that? What were the circumstances?

Rev. Lawson: It was on the eve of his assassination. Wednesday, April 3, 1968 he arrived in Memphis and we were having a mass meeting—thousands of people—at Mason Temple. He spoke of me before giving the speech in which he said “I’ve been to the mountaintop.” And the next day...

What King saw in me was that I studied Gandhi and call him the father of nonviolence but I taught about it from the perspective of Jesus of Nazareth. That was my value to the Movement because we were mostly talking to people who’d been baptized and I had carefully worked on nonviolence from within the Christian tradition and lodged it in Biblical thought. I combined the methodological analysis of Gandhi with the teachings of Jesus who concludes that there are no human beings that you can exclude from the grace of God.

During the time I was a troubleshooter for FOR, I was in and out of Birmingham, Alabama. First in ‘58 when Fred Shuttlesworth had a bombing. In those years we called the city “Bombingham” because of the bombs that went off in black homes, churches. I would go in and see what was happening and give support and give the National Council of Churches a report and also to Martin. That helped prepare the groundwork for the SCLC campaign for which I was advance staff person. Bull Connor [the notorious segregationist police chief] sent a letter to the police about some “negro” coming from Nashville to stir up trouble and we want to give him a good Birmingham welcome. That

“negro” was me.

I worked with the Little Rock Nine, the students who integrated Central High School. As the White Citizens Council and the governor worked to get them out of that school, the students had been told not to fight back. I gave them a quick two-three hour course in fighting back with nonviolence. Four or five of them gave me credit for saving their lives. I went back many times working with them and working with white students, too--about 100 of them, who were actively engaged in supporting them and confronting segregation.

Lefer: I don't think I've ever heard about the white students.

Rev. Lawson: There were several very courageous white kids who took beatings. I wonder what happened to them, what they are doing now.

I went sometimes weekly. My classes were usually Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and maybe a Friday morning class. That was traditional back in my day for seminary so I traveled Friday and stayed through Sunday and came back Monday.

As for the Nashville campaign, it was never merely about desegregating lunch counters but about pulling down all those *White* and *Colored* signs. It was about department stores teaching their clerks to treat black people with dignity and good cheer and not in a reluctant hostile fashion. Just like the bus drivers in Birmingham, the drivers in Nashville insulted black riders all the time. It bored into the soul of the black community. You never knew when a white driver would mess over a respected person in the community. A woman could not try on a hat if she wanted to buy it or a dress. A

man could not try on a pair of shoes. Mothers could not have their children try on clothing or shoes. All this grotesque indignity. We in Nashville were the first group in the country that made as our demand the desegregation of a downtown in the South, confronting all the humiliation and indignity. No one else targeted that goal.

That goal and training--using the picket line and sit-in and boycott, were all taught in workshop as preparation for the campaign so from when school started in September till Christmas break, we met weekly for 2-3 hours. It was a community event. We had pastors and housewives and mothers as well as students. The mistake I made was in not recruiting my fellow Vanderbilt students from the very start. They joined in later, vigorously.

As for being pastor in Memphis, you have to understand the context. At the time I was the Coordinator for the Freedom Rides, on staff for the Birmingham campaign, '64 Mississippi Summer, staff and counselor for Selma in '65, coordinator for the Meredith March in 66, the Chicago campaign. Ralph Abernathy, Martin King and I were the unpaid staff of SCLC, working steadily--the only three—and we were all pastors of churches that primarily supported us.

Lefer: So Centenary Methodist was your day job.

Rev. Lawson: It was my source of income, but more, we knew that we couldn't be faithful pastors of our congregations without dealing with segregation and racism, those everyday experiences in the lives of our parishioners that had to be transformed. I have always known that what my people are doing in their work, how they earn their living, is

a critical part of my ministry. It's not secondary any more than children are secondary to the congregation. Ministry is not primarily preaching Sunday morning and the worship-- as significant and important as I think that is, but ministry and servanthood involve my connecting with people and trying to help them be strengthened in their fight, in their struggle. My dad and Martin's dad felt the same way and we learned from their example.

What I learned in the Movement I applied later in the campaigns you're asking me about now. With Local 11, first I wanted to help people develop the character and the courage to organize. The workers were heavily intimidated and harassed on the work scene so that they were not willing to talk about their work pain, their wages. We found a major barrier in their fears, frustrations, and complicated acquiescence. Some of that produced anger in them, some of it also produced abuse in the family. But what we decided to do was to work on one-on-one activities—and I called it evangelism. One-on-one. We taught going to the worker in his community, in his home, and not doing this once, but doing it systematically, maybe once a week, for as long as it took. The organizer was to be generous and kindly throughout, use no harsh language and approach the person with compassion and love. Do not concentrate on getting the person to join a union. Concentrate on helping the worker talk about his situation on the job, in the family, in the community. Get to the point where the worker is talking about his fear, his frustrations, his pain. So the organizer concentrates on allowing the person to talk, to get his story out. Then find the right questions to ask to allow the worker to analyze the story that he's told.

What I had found in my ministry--and I did not really fully understand it at the time and I don't fully understand it now-- but what that did was ignite a spark in the worker to begin to come to terms with his own journey. And the worker formed a bond with the organizer and the worker took small steps on the job to express himself and the worker proceeded to help his family to understand what he was going through on that job and how much it hurt. So the worker began to build a small frame of another community who began to understand his plight, began to sympathize. Then, with the organizer, it meant beginning to connect with other workers and beginning to realize that organizing with them is the key to changing his scenery. That represents nonviolence: helping this harassed person re-find his basic humanity and talk about it. This approach came directly from my understanding of nonviolence and my experiences in the 50's and 60's.

Then I began to have conversations with other clergy, getting them involved in recognizing that poverty--economic injustice--especially with people who are *working*, is a major wrong that has to be corrected. In 1996, I invited a number of my colleagues to come—in fact, we met in this room—to talk about this. We organized CLUE to get clergy involved in the plight of the poor worker. We would get a local congregation to organize an Economic Justice committee where they began by investigating their own congregation and their own people. That is, find out how many poor folk we have who are working people. Find out how many union members we have. Find out what their situations are. It also meant looking at church staff. Are we participating in poverty wages? We have to clean up our own act.

Then on the other side of the coin, we asked the janitors—one of the groups we

worked with, I asked the question specifically, “How many of you are members of churches, synagogues?” And always, hands went up. So my second question was always, “Have you talked with your rabbis, with your pastors? Have you sat down with your priest and talked to him about your job situation, and your family situation?” Those are two of the questions I still ask. That helped the union organizers recognize that a natural ally would be the congregations where they had members. And that’s how the bridges began to be formed.

What CLUE did then was to try to counsel the clergy about what it is they were finding and seeing. And then help them find the character and the spirituality to speak up.

Lefer: For the hotel workers, that included actions like congregations writing to the hotels to say we’re not going to book rooms with you.

Rev. Lawson: Then we did engage with the workers in civil disobedience actions and we were arrested.

Lefer: Which brought media attention, visibility to the cause and won over public opinion. In the case of the janitors, many of the businesses that were tenants in the highrises challenged the building owners and took the side of the workers.

Rev. Lawson: Then also we persuaded the Mayor and City Councilors to talk to employers about many of these matters. So we enlisted the political apparatus, insisting that justice was one of the rallying cries which produced this country and it has to be an

essential part of what community means.

July 4, 1776 did spell the beginning of a transition in history from the domination of the divine right of kings, the monarchs and the dictatorships and the aristocracy, towards the participation of all. We're still in that transition.

Lefer: That's the long view!

Rev. Lawson: July 4, 1776 did not in one stroke of a pen overthrow all the forces of tyranny in the world. That's nonsense. Alexander Hamilton called the people the beast-- "the great beast." When you talk about the beast, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. You have to manage the beast, so you work on undermining education. You continue with plantation capitalism. You keep orienting yourself toward wars. You don't even see the possibilities of peace. And if male domination was the case for 4-5,000 years, we haven't understood that we haven't gotten rid of it yet. The contributions of women have not yet really been allowed to emerge with any kind of force.

Lefer: How did you come to your own commitment to nonviolence? Because you once told us about using your fists on someone—

Rev. Lawson: Oh yes.

Lefer: -- and you had a twinkle in your eye when you said it.

Rev. Lawson: When I was four, my Dad was appointed to the St. James AME Zion Church in Massillon, Ohio. And I probably romanticize it, but for me it became another

kind of womb that nurtured and framed and formed me. At the same time, however, it is the first time that I became aware of people who called me racial slurs on the street where we lived and in the parks. Even by that time I had a sense of my own being and my response was to slap the person or to fight the person. My mother was very much opposed to violence in all its different forms and said so. My Dad was not and in fact when he pastored in Alabama and South Carolina, he carried a gun and he showed us that gun. I remember that very well.

Lefer: I've always wondered about your father. On his side of the family, you're descended from men who escaped slavery and traveled the Underground Railroad to Canada.

Rev. Lawson: My great-grandfather and my grandfather as a pre-teen.

Lefer: They found refuge in Canada, but then your father chose to make his life here in the US, and he came here at a time when racism was particularly vicious.

Rev. Lawson: My father was born in 1883 in Ontario where the family had a farm and he was ordained in the British Methodist Church which was the black church in Canada. It was small and limited and Dad was more ambitious. He studied under one or two white ministers in Guelph and then went on to McGill University for further studies. He came to the US for greater opportunity which was the reason my mother came from Jamaica as a teenager. They were typical immigrants. There were real problems for them just like for other immigrants. European Jews faced problems and the Irish faced

problems. They all faced discrimination and untoward circumstances, but they came anyway because there were still greater opportunities here.

But just why I struck out with my fists? That's all I knew in the sense of insisting that you're going to treat me as a human being. But you can be taught compassion out of the family and out of the church and that will become a very powerful force in your life.

When I was in 4th or 5th grade, I came home from school, and my mother had an errand for me to run. It took me up Second Avenue to Main Street where I made a left turn and just after I turned left onto the Lincoln Way block, the main business section, there was a car parked at the curb. The windows were all open--it was a warm, beautiful day, and as I approached on the sidewalk, a child stood up in the front seat and yelled the "N" word at me and I went over to the car and slapped the child. I ran on and finished the errand and ran on back home.

Then, in the kitchen with my mother, I told her about this incident and she said to me--I remember the two major things she said. The first one was "Jimmy, what good did that do?" And I remember her finishing with, "Jimmy, there must be a better way."

That moment was a numinous experience, an experience in which the whole world stood still. And to this day I do not know what was happening in that household. We were a fairly noisy household. There were at least eleven of us at that time in that house and we had a piano and radios so there was always movement. How that place was so still that day, I can never, I can never, I can never know. But in any case, it was. The world stood still and in the midst of that experience, I heard a voice which I later

began to recognize was my own voice and yet it was not my voice because it didn't come from me. It came from way beyond me and it was also in the depth of me. That voice said, "Jimmy, never again will you get angry on the playground and smack and fight. You will never again—" And then I heard it say, "And you will find a better way." So I did from that moment on never again strike out at youngsters who used the "N" word on me. I never again got angry and engaged in a fight on the playground. I tried to find a better way.

Lefer: Did you find it?

Rev. Lawson: Some time later on the street almost the exact same sequence occurred. I was running an errand on Lincoln Way, a child in a parked car yelled a name at me. But this time I went over and I didn't hit the child. I talked to the child. I asked his name and I gave him my name in a way that was not confronting him but engaging with him. We had a good conversation and after I'd had enough time to let the child see me and touch me and know me, I ended by telling him he should not call people names. We parted in a very friendly fashion. I wanted to wait for the parents and talk to them too, but I did have that errand to run and in the end I couldn't keep waiting.

Lefer: Is it a struggle to give up the anger? Is it a decision you made at that moment in the kitchen, or is it something you work on constantly?

Rev. Lawson: Well, you know you still have to work on it, at 80. But no, it was, as I say, it was a numinous moment and it changed my life forever. That doesn't mean that I

didn't get angry in the 60's. It's just that you do what the great religions all teach: Be angry but do not sin. Be angry but don't be foolish. Be angry, but direct it in a way that is commensurate with who you are as a human being.

Between those years, 4th or 5th grade, and college, 1947, I was a reader and I was fascinated by Jesus so I read the four books in the Bible about Jesus frequently and had become very much aware of what's called "The Sermon on the Mount." Matthew 5, 6, and 7. That's where "turn the other cheek" is specifically mentioned and as I worked for the better way, that's what I practiced all through junior high and high school. By the end of my high school years, I came to recognize that that whole business -- *walk the second mile, turn the other cheek, pray for the enemy, see the enemy as a fellow human being*-- was a resistance movement. It was not an acquiescent affair or a passive affair. I saw it as a place where my own life grew in strength inwardly and where I had actually seen people changed because I responded with the other cheek. I went the second mile with them.

Then in '49 or '50 I read the black theologian Howard Thurman who said that the Gospel of Jesus is the survival kit for people whose backs are up against the wall. His book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, was very powerful for me because it was my experience reaffirmed. Thurman says that the oppressed will be angry, they will have great fears of all kinds, they will practice deceit, and he calls these "the hounds of hell" for these people. He talks about the way in which the anger can consume you and destroy you, so the management of that anger is important and he says the Gospel of Jesus is a vehicle for handling and dissolving that anger and directing it.

We think of the Eastern religions as teaching us to detach and handle our emotions well. In my experience, Jesus of Nazareth has been a major force for my detaching myself from my fears and not being overcome by fear. Gandhi said that he read “The Sermon on the Mount” every day as a part of his reflections and meditations.

Lefer: I’m listening to you talk about Jesus at a time when we see so much fundamentalist hard-line religion. You are a deeply religious Christian and I’m trying to figure out how you do it. How you work very comfortably with people of all faiths, and people like me of no religious faith. Is that a spiritual understanding, or is it pragmatic, for political purposes?

Rev. Lawson: It’s spiritual. I maintain that anyone who gets arrested by the spiritual urges of life, by God, or by a sense of eternity, or by the gift of life itself and the universe in which we live, they get transformed. They get changed, personally, so that love and compassion become fundamental to their understanding.

Lefer: So you have a different notion of what “conversion” entails?

Rev. Lawson: What changes is the sense of belonging to life, belonging to God, belonging to the universe—and that what the person has come to see and feel and know embraces *all* humankind. I think many fundamentalists don’t have that deep sense of conversion and transformation into the agency of love and compassion.

Lefer: So that is why you sometimes substitute the word “life-force” for “God”? And the way you define faith—

Rev. Lawson: I do not define faith as very different from the way in which Jesus defined it. Jesus uses that word quite a bit in those books that we have about him and there it is faith in God because most folk believed in God whether that God was well-defined or what-not because they didn't think that they got on earth by themselves. So Jesus meant that the person had faith in God, which encompasses *life*, that he knew his life was meant to be, that he belonged to God and that his life was meant to explore the possibilities of access and opportunity. A concrete example of this would be in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 5, one of my favorite chapters, and a story there of a woman who for twelve years had internal hemorrhaging. She was obviously a resourceful person because she went to doctors. She got no benefit but she did not despair. That's the important part of faith. She believed she had the *right* to be healthy. And she had the confidence that God or life itself *wanted* her healthy, not sick. And so when she heard about Jesus as one who was healing in the area she did everything she needed to do to get close enough to touch the hem of His garment. And it says she felt immediately in her body that something had changed. She then slipped back into the crowd but Jesus turned and asked "Who touched me?" and the woman came back, fell on her knees and told Him her story. And He said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed." So that is a very powerful use of the word "faith" and it is what any human being can have.

Lefer: For secular people—

Rev. Lawson: You cannot be human and alive if you do not have faith. It's faith that

makes you wake up in the morning, makes you get up, causes you to have goals and purposes for the day, causes you to love, and I would also say maybe even hate—though that’s wrong, but –

Lefer: When you said that once, about getting up in the morning and about farmers having faith when they plant the seeds, I thought, well, that’s not faith, that’s hope. Then I realized I do *expect* the sun to come up in the morning.

Rev. Lawson: Yes.

Lefer: I don’t just *hope* it will

Rev. Lawson: That’s right. It’s not just hope. You have confidence in the universe. You have confidence in Life. We all do. So that makes me critical of religion because I think that they often put so many layers around faith that people then think that to have faith they’ve got to believe in the Virgin Birth or believe the earth is flat or something. Whereas that’s not really faith. Faith is the dynamic of you getting yourself connected up to the gift of life and you don’t have to do that by believing in God. I think the artist does this in ways that can teach us. I think many of the great scientists have done this in ways that teach us faith.

The use of the Scriptures of the Bible has become very idolatrous in many different ways. Take the clergy who recently met to condemn same-sex marriage and pretend that it’s in the Bible. But the Bible does not know the word “homosexual.” It doesn’t know the word “heterosexual.” It does not have any kind of a serious concept of

human sexuality. That's a 20th-century concept.

Focus on the Family and people from their religious perspective see what they call traditional marriage as more powerful and significant than the right of gay and lesbian people to have full human dignity and rights. But at the heart of both the Jewish and the Christian Bible is the notion that you cannot get to God if you are alienated from your neighbor, if you have pushed the neighbor into nonbeing or you hate the neighbor or deny that another being shares your own humanity. You shall love the alien, you shall love the stranger, treat the stranger as you treat your fellow citizen. That's clearly in the Torah and then Jesus comes along and summarizes it in the first law: Love God with all your heart and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. This is in the New Testament. How can you claim to love God who is invisible if you hate the neighbor who you can see?

Lefer: I've been very interested when you talk about seeing the enemy as having the same feelings as you do. That the enemy is capable even of shame.

Rev. Lawson: That, of course, comes concretely out of the teachings of the Bible, and especially Jesus, and he was a Jew, and a Jewish teacher, and a Jewish prophet, who concretely moved the religion of Moses to the notion that God offers grace to all humankind, without exception, to enemy and friend, without exception to the just and the unjust, and to the saint and the unsaintly. Therefore while I say "the enemy," at the same time, I am not describing someone who I try to pretend is different from who I am at the point of their basic humanity. They may have put shackles on their humanity. Too

many people have tried to sickly over their humanity. Then they pretend that killing people is a healthy exercise. Beating up on people. They pretend that racism is a healthy view.

Lefer: But has class become the dividing line now rather than race?

Rev. Lawson: I do not personally or intellectually see the class issue as being that powerful an influence. Racism and sexism are still more powerful in the United States. White male supremacy is still more powerful. I sort of resent the folk who want to do a class analysis. In the movements of black people, even now, on a local level, there is an intermingling of people with relationship to education, to income, to professions and all of that. There is a persistent mixture in the black community. So I don't see the class analysis. As *yet*. If we could get rid of the sexism and the racism, then maybe we could go to the class analysis.

Lefer: You've also said the only movements that have ever worked—whether the Christian movement of the 1st century or the civil rights movement of the 20th century, were those in which people from every class participated.

Rev. Lawson: Yes. Any good movement is intercultural and interclass. People of different genders are involved, and young and old. Educated and uneducated people are all involved. And that's the only kind of democratic nation possible--a nation in which all sorts of people participate in helping to shape the government in the right direction.

Lefer: Which brings us back to the question of how we do it! You've said the movement

doesn't need a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King. But don't we need leaders?

Rev. Lawson: Absolutely. Always. You cannot have a human movement in which some people do not emerge as particularly able and competent in the struggle. When we think about why the Great Society wasn't continued, what is forgotten is that the assassinations of the 60's cleared the way for the emergence of Reagan. What would have happened if the Kennedys had lived and Malcolm X in his transformation and King and Medgar Evers and a range of other people? I'm thinking of any number of the Black Panthers who were killed, like Fred Hampton in Chicago. While the Panther emergence might have scared a lot of people, a lot of others weren't scared by it like my brother Philip who as a pastor was a major reason why Emanuel Cleaver went positive. Cleaver's a former mayor of Kansas City, Missouri and he's a Congressman now. The killings of the 60's robbed the social awakening of the times of so many other highly intelligent creative human beings. When you kill off your young in that fashion, what are you doing about the future of your country?

A movement will produce sergeants and captains and generals. We lost many of them.

Lefer: You use military language a lot and I imagine some people criticize your use of the language of war.

Rev. Lawson: Bernard Lafayette called our Nashville workshops a course in nonviolence that was equivalent to having gone to West Point for military purposes. There are similarities between armies and the military and nonviolence. We call for our

troops to be willing to suffer and die or be injured and hurt in Afghanistan and Iraq so there has to be a doctrine of suffering. Over the years I've heard people say, "Well, if I do it nonviolently, I'm going to get hurt." In nonviolence we have to teach you can be injured, you can be killed in this action, in this work.

Lefer: And I guess when you use the language of war, it also emphasizes that nonviolence is a powerful force. It's not passive.

Rev. Lawson: The military are the most highly organized people for violence and when I use some military language I am indicating the extent to which nonviolence must also be a highly organized and disciplined affair. It is not passivity that acquiesces. It is action that engages in serious study, investigation, analyzing, understanding the scene and the problem you're trying to deal with and then organizing to do it. Activism has to have strategic plans. It has to have longterm and short term goals. It must try to institutionalize the process.

Gandhi did not like "passive resistance," "non-resistance" which were Christian terms. He did not like "pacifism." He was not satisfied with any of the historic terms used out of either Western Christianity or out of Western pacifism and I didn't like those terms either. I adopted Gandhi's term of "nonviolence," see, and that made more sense to me. Part of my critique of pacifism was that, in my college years, many of the people at the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the American Friends Service Committee said that love is non-coercive, that love could not pretend to power. And that did not strike home with me. It was clear to me that I had been empowered and that I had met power.

I'll never forget the very first question that King asked me in the first workshop on nonviolence that I helped to lead for SCLC in Columbia, South Carolina. The very first question that King asked was about power. I knew that Martin was being besieged by all the pacifists in the country who were saying, *You're too aggressive. You're too militant.* So I answered him that nonviolence uses power. The Greeks defined power as the capacity to accomplish purpose. Power is a Creation-given thing. A baby could not develop into an adult human being unless there were power in life itself. And so I insisted that nonviolence does seek to push, engender, and change power in every way possible. And that our movements did not use power as the police did it or did not use power as segregation did it, but we pushed by engendering the demonstration, the economic boycott, we encouraged the reconfiguration of power so that power then could be used to desegregate and to change. I've never forgotten that day, that afternoon.

Lefer: Is there a point where nonviolence won't work anymore? Does society reach a point where things have gone too far?

Rev. Lawson: Before we decide that *nonviolence* won't work, we should do a deep historical analysis of where the *violence* has not worked. Violence has not worked in the Middle East. It's only escalated for 80 or 100 years. Until we de-escalate the military budget in the US and turn that budget into plowshares, building a worldclass educational system that embraces every boy and girl anywhere in the country, until these things begin to happen on a serious note, we can't know if there's a place where

nonviolence will not work.

I think most people in the United States want a more peaceful society and want peace in the world but they do not recognize that in many ways their own attitudes prevent peace. White people in particular are afraid of wrestling with the issues of racism. Men are unwilling to give up their perceived superiority in dealing with the issue of sexism. Violence has persuaded many white male leaders in the United States that we have the right to have 8,000 nuclear weapons but Iran does not have the same right to do it. Israel has the right to nuclear weapons but North Korea should not be getting them. All of that is a double ethical standard. And how do you have a world in which we have ethical principles that apply to women but not to men? That apply to white people but not to black people. Or to black people but not to white people. I mean how do you do this? Over the millions of years of our journey, the wisdom of the human race developed ethical standards for us human beings on a personal individual basis but these are the standards that States repudiate. Thou shalt not kill. I know of no ethical system that wants to reverse that and say, Thou shalt kill.

Lefer: And we make the exception for States.

Rev. Lawson: No! The States take the prerogative of making an exception. The States have taken that prerogative by virtue of their power. And the people have not challenged it. The States claim if I kill in the name of my government, it's OK. If I electrocute a murderer, it's OK. But I say, as an ethicist, that the ethical standards developed by the human family also apply to the States.

We can only have the world that will really provide for babies' health and security if we the people not only demand of ourselves high standards but demand that our corporate entities and government must do the same and we must stop pretending that this is not possible.

Lefer: You've been teaching nonviolent theory and action for a very long time and we haven't done a whole lot with what you've taught us. Have we let you down?

Rev. Lawson: I don't see the changes that I would hope for, but I also recognize that may be me rather than the folk I've taught. It may be because I have not been persistent enough in institutionalizing the process. So I don't put all the criticism out there. I look at myself, too. And then let's recognize that there is still yet time to change this.