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Developing an American Ahimsa: The Rev. James M. Lawson Jr.'s Paradigm of Protest

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This thesis is the product of a question I asked four years ago: why was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis in 1968? I found an answer easily enough, and that was James M. Lawson Jr. asked King to come to Memphis. But how Lawson knew King and why King came to Memphis in spite of his closest advisors' warnings is a much longer story than this thesis can or should tell. However, I was compelled that Lawson knew King so well, and so I traced his life backwards from Memphis to his upbringing. This work has occupied much of my time at ºÃÉ«ÏÈúTV College. Dr. Charles McKinney has been a source of constant
inspiration and a model of academic rigor, and his unwavering support and assistance from my first semester until know has been invaluable. Dr. Steven Haynes and Dr. Timothy Huebner supervised and directed my first in-depth study of Lawson during the 2007 ºÃÉ«ÏÈúTV Institute for Regional Studies, providing guidance and insight as I focused on Lawson's activity in Memphis, TN from the time he arrived here in 1962 until the eve of the sanitation strike in 1968. My research on Lawson continued in the fall of 2007 under the supervision of Dr. Gail Murray in a seminar on the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968. I began formal work on this thesis through a directed inquiry in the spring of 2008 under the tutelage of Dr. McKinney and began writing the thesis under the supervision of Dr. Luther Ivory in the fall of 2008. This work, like all historical work, is the product of an ongoing dialectic between scholars and the past and so I owe a debt of gratitude to my advisors mentioned above, and to Wesley Hogan for stunning scholarship and timely advice; to Ben Houston for his unpublished manuscript on Nashville; to Scott McDuffie for his thesis on Lawson; and to the History Department at ºÃÉ«ÏÈúTV College for the inspiration, the faith and the insights borne
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ABSTRACT

Developing an American Ahimsa: The Rev. James M. Lawson Jr.'s Paradigm of Protest

The Rev. James M. Lawson Jr. was described by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as "the leading theorist of nonviolence in America." In spite of such high praise, little research has been done on Lawson's contribution to the creation of a nonviolent movement for racial justice in America. Lawson's success at teaching ideological and tactical nonviolence was essential to successful campaigns in the modern civil rights struggle, and the historical research and theological interpretations in this essay demonstrate that Lawson's understanding of nonviolent protest became a foundational element of the southern civil rights movement.

By

Anthony C. Siracusa III

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"They had a philosophy, which was the power of nonviolence. And that kind of power, we felt, was more forceful than all of their police force, all of their lawmakers and all of their dogs, all of their billy clubs, all of their jails And that our capacity to and a willingness to suffer outweighed any power they had." Bernard Lafayette, 2001

Introduction 1

Introduction
While the Rev. James Morris Lawson Jr. was neither the first nor the last American prophet for nonviolence in the struggle for civil rights, he is arguably the most important. During a tenuous time in the modern civil rights era, Lawson led an influential nonviolent desegregation campaign in Nashville, TN that carried forth the spirit of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Drawing on the history of nonviolence, religious philosophies, and the lessons learned from his own "experiments" with nonviolent direct action, Lawson taught the tactics later used by a host of civil rights leaders in countless campaigns. An examination of Lawson's early life, his education, and his leadership in Nashville shows that he perfected nonviolent protest politics in America by synthesizing spiritual teachings with nonviolent political tactics to create a paradigm of protest that shaped the direction of the modern civil rights movement.1
Chapter one of this essay will document Lawson's early life, a time when the militant influence of his father blended with the loving "turn the other cheek" influence of his mother. Lawson's childhood makes clear that developing nonviolent methods to combat racism was a struggle that began early in his life. During his time at Baldwin Wallace College, Lawson was introduced to the long history of nonviolent direct action and developed a love for debate. College also served to personally acquaint the budding activist with racial injustice. The combination of intellectual growth and personal experiences with racism fueled Lawson's desire to sink his roots into the well tilled soil of nonviolent protest thought, where

"Then there was the whole question of nonviolent direct action, and what that meant. And Jim Lawson was the foremost proponent of the philosophical construct around nonviolence." Marion Berry in Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s, Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds., (New York: Bantam Publishing, 1990). 62. "He envisioned a militant nonviolence, an aggressive nonviolence..." Julian Bond in Voices of Freedom, 63.

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after reading Mohandas Gandhi, Howard Thurman, Reinhold Niebuhr and others Lawson graduated struggling to apply the ideology of nonviolence to racial segregation.
Chapter two will chronicle two important decisions in Lawson's life: his decision to
refuse cooperation with conscription and his decision to travel south to join the movement for racial justice. After serving 14 months for his refusal to abide by the laws of conscription Lawson was allowed probation as a missionary in India. 2 Upon his return to America Lawson enrolled at the Oberlin School of Theology for a year before traveling south to begin building campaigns for racial justice. Lawson took a job with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) as their first "Southern Secretary" in the winter of 1957 and began full time civil rights work in Nashville, Tennessee. It was in Nashville that Lawson devised and taught a theology of nonviolence and philosophy of history to students that later served as the primary architects of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).
Chapter three will focus on the ideas and tactics James Lawson taught to his students through a series of workshops in Nashville, Tennessee in 1958 and 1959. Culled from interviews with Lawson and first hand accounts from the students he trained, I'll demonstrate the influence of Howard Thurman and Mohandas Gandhi in Lawson's theological teachings and outline the historical narrative Lawson used to teach nonviolence as an integral piece of the American story. Lawson's workshops sparked an interest amongst students to join the struggle for racial justice in America during an ebb in the movement's development largely because the content of the workshops was aimed at mobilizing and training student leaders for nonviolent struggle in America. The content of Lawson's workshops became the necessary ingredient to move students into action.

2 While the pretense for his trip was religious. Lawson took the trip with the goal of understanding better Gandhi's legacy.

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The final chapter of this paper will chronicle James Lawson's role in the nonviolent
•

conflict that took place in Nashville in 1960. While Nashville rarely makes it into what scholar Julian Bond calls the "master narrative" of the civil rights. movement, I will argue that Nashville should in fact be viewed as the paradigm for protest politics in the modern civil rights movement. 3 While chapter four should not be treated as an exhaustive history of the Nashville movement, it can be seen as a chronicle of James Lawson's role in the Nashville campaign. I will demonstrate the importance of Lawson's workshops in Nashville as preparation for the beatings, bombings and expulsions that characterized not only the Nashville movement but numerous campaigns throughout the south, showing that James Lawson's work in Nashville provided movement leadership with the critical training required to respond effectively to violence with nonviolence in campaigns across the south.
In conclusion, this paper will document the Rev. James M. Lawson Jr.'s life and the tactical nonviolent ideology he developed. Lawson's influence on movement leadership and policy is evidence by the commitment's put forth by SNCC in 1960, and SNCC has been cited as a primary influence on the social protest movements of the 1960s. Lawson's contribution to protest thought in the late 1950s thus influenced much of the nonviolent protests of the 1960s, Further, Lawson and the Nashville movement prove most instructive in explaining the advent of nonviolent direct action protest politics in the modern civil rights struggle. James Lawson contributed nothing short of the cornerstone for a nonviolent

movement.

3
The Master narrative is often described as a King-centric narrative of the movement, or a narrative which overestimates the role of the federal government at the expense of local organizing and training. During the Nashville campaign of 1960, neither the federal government nor Martin Luther King Jr. occupied substantial roles. The modern civil rights struggle is defined as the era spanning 1955-1968.

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I. Life in the Shadow of a Methodist Pulpit
The Young James Lawson
Born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania on 22 September 1928, James Morris Lawson Jr.
grew up in Massillon, Ohio. He completed most of his elementary and high school years in Massillon, a steel town of about 30,000, and he attended an integrated high school—the only high school in town—along with 2,200 other students. Massillon was a typical Midwestern Ohio town with a distinctly non-urban character. The maladies of segregated schools and segregated neighborhoods, the problem of the urban ghetto in Lawson's words, simply were not a part of Jim Lawson's early life. 4 Still, Lawson grew up in a home that was conscious of race. "We took a certain amount of pride that on my father's side, my great-great grandfather was an escaped slave ... that on my father's mother's side, there was a whole history of involvement with the Underground Railroad through Philadelphia." Lawson's family taught him that his familial legacy was one of active participation in the struggle against slavery. Lawson grew up on tales about his father's great grandfather who once stole a horse and fled from his plantation at Hagerstown, Maryland. For these reasons, Lawson's family saw themselves as part of a "heroic struggle" against enslavement, and this narrative turned the story of slavery into a point of pride rather than a source of shame for the Lawson family. 5 Lawson's father, the Rev. James Lawson Sr., had a profound impact on Jim Lawson
Jr.'s development. "The son of a Methodist minister and the product of a Methodist parsonage," Lawson describes his father as a "man who had tremendous social concern and

4 James M. Lawson Jr., interview by David Yellin and Joan Turner Beifuss, 10 September 1968, Sanitation Strike Collection, folder 129, p. 3-16, Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned McWherter Library at the University of Memphis.
5

"We took a certain amount of pride..." from James M. Lawson Jr., interview by David Yellin and Joan Turner Beifuss, 21 January 1969, Folder 131 p. 10, Mississippi Valley Collection, Ned McWherter Library at the University of Memphis.

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passion." Lawson almost always sat beside his father at the front of the church during worship services, and this time spent in the shadow of an African Methodist Episcopal pulpit left a deep impression on the young Lawson. The elder Lawson was a minister of the gospel, including the idea that one should love their enemies, but he also taught James Jr. the importance of vigilant defense of character. Vincent Harding claims the elder Lawson "taught (the younger) Jim by word and example the absolute necessity of resistance to injustice wherever he witnessed it." A symbol of defiance, Lawson Sr. carried a thirty-eight-caliber pistol on his hip, an outward demand that all people treat him as a man. James Lawson Sr. demanded fair and just treatment, and according to the younger Lawson "if that meant he had to kill for it, or he had to die for it, he was going to do it." Beginning a life of ministry in Alabama during the 1940s, the elder Lawson had his work cut out for him. He refused to ever stand passively while blacks were treated un-fairly. James Lawson Sr. would pay a price for such open defiance to the fear engendered by Jim Crow in the rural south. Outraged whites forced Lawson and his family north, and rather than staying to face injury or death the Lawson's moved to Ohio. Even in Ohio, Lawson Jr. recalls his father would travel at any hour of the night or day to aid blacks who were in trouble or fearful. Looking back, the younger Lawson defines his father's "vigorous" response to injustice as a living testimony to the gospel.6
The younger Lawson learned from his father that being black in America required a constant defense of dignity if one was to refuse internalizing the inferiority imposed by Jim

6 "I'm the son..." from Lawson interview, 10 September 1968, p. 1-2. "Taught (the younger Jim)..." from Vincent Harding and Rosemarie Freeney Harding, eds. "James M. Lawson Jr.: The Seamless Cloth of Faith and Struggle" in The Veterans of Hope Pamphlet Series Vol. 1, No. 2, (Denver: Center for the Study of Religion and Democratic Renewal at Iliff School of Theology, 2000) p. 4. James. M. Lawson Jr., "He was going to be treated as a man..." from Harding pamphlet, p. 8. James M. Lawson Jr., "I can remember..." Lawson interview, September 10 1968, folder 129, p. 2.

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Crow. Most importantly though, the younger Lawson observed the Christian conviction his father maintained in defense of blacks suffering unfair treatment. Lawson Sr. explained that the Bible forbade him to stand by while people suffered, and the younger Lawson understood this as the crucial, often overlooked "social content" of the gospel. The elder Lawson would inspire his son to pursue a similar ministry, as James Lawson Jr. would later conclude that the Bible prohibited cooperation with Jim Crow because of the spiritual and political violence which accompanied it.7
While Lawson's father demonstrated that one person could combat racial injustice, by recruiting individuals into civil rights organizations the elder Lawson demonstrated the importance of community in forging a movement. He taught the younger Lawson that people are less afraid and more powerful when united. "Every town (my father) pastored, if there wasn't an NAACP he formed one. If there was not an Urban League, he founded one. So all across New York and Pennsylvania where he pastored there are chapters of the NAACP and The Urban League branch that my dad founded." 8 It was the senior Lawson's understanding of the "social content" in the gospel that led him personally and publicly to fight for racial equality, and Lawson recalls the church was "a center of community activity and focus." Lawson watched his father work for civil rights using the church as a hub, and as a result his view of civil rights work and church work became virtually inseparable. Lawson saw that "a personal message and a social message were not... seen as separate compartments, but as a single garment. A single stream of life." By middle school, the

7

Lawson interview, Sept. 10 1968, folder129, p. 2

8 .ibid, p. 3

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younger Lawson's Christian consciousness was directly connected to his development his role as a young black man growing up in a segregated America.9
The elder Lawson'stinabaMied resistance to racism was instrumental in the development of the younger Lawson's political consciousness and personal theology. But Lawson's mother, whose personal code was defined by an ethic of unconditional love and gentle action, proved to be a fitting counterweight to his father's "vigor." "While (my father) accepted the idea of the meaning of Christian love, he did not carry it as far as my mother did by any means." An episode from Lawson's early life illustrates the respective rolessof his parents. The other 'young men in Massillon felt compelled to gauge the tenacity of the preacher's son by challenging him to fight, and so one afternoon during his first grade year a group of boys followed Lawson home. When his father saw all the boys, he asked his son 'why they had followed him. Lawson Jr. responded by saying he refused to fight them, and as a result they would not leave him alone. His father was unequivocal in his-response: he demanded that his son stand Up and fight the boys out on the yard. 10
"My Dad's attitude," Lawson remembered, "was: 'okay, if you fight, fight it out and forget about it.' My mother's attitude was: 'No, Jacob.'---which she always called him `that isn't the way to do it. I don't want out sons fighting.'" LaWson's Mother taught a different kind of strength, a kind of strength hinged on the idea that no human being was any less Important than another. This idea was critical to Lawson's personal formation, as he never internalized the inferiority Jim Crow demanded from black people. Instead, whenever he was called a nigger or treated as a second-class citizen, he took it as an "affront" to his personhood. A famous story from his childhood illustrates this point. A few years after the 9 James M. Lawson interview with Harding, 2000, pp. 7-9
1 ° James M. Lawson, Jr "While (my father)" Lawson interview, Sept. 10 1968, folder 129, p. 4. James M. Lawson Jr., "the only way to test me..." from Harding interview, p.8

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fight on the lawn, a young white boy in a parked car called Lawson a nigger, Upon hearing the insult, he turned without thinking and smacked the child as he passed. Thinking nothing about it, Lawson told his moit'about theincident as soon as he_arrived home. After listening quietly she asked; "Jimmy, what good did that do?" Lawson remembers "she went on talking quietly yin that vein, among other things mentioning the love of God, the love in our family. Jesus and our commitment as Christian people. In the process of this conversation, I remember only the two sentences: 'Jimmy, what good did that do?' and 'Jimmy, there must be a better way.'" Lawson called this pivotal moment "a numinous experience, a transforming eXperience...that (encounter) began my experiment with finding the better way. From that moment on I stopped fighting on the playfield, on the basketball court, the baSeball court, in the neighborhood... from that moment on, I did not slap another person who insulted me personally."
The "vigor" of Lawson's father stood in sharp relief to his mother's commitment to
find a better way of engaging adversaries. These two seemingly oppositional models of strength, the first being violence as a method that' prevent future exploitation and the other being a nonviolent method that in fact questioned the fundamental validity of violence as a Preventative force, were actually complimentary influences that would merge together to form James Lawson Jr.'s method of militant, Christian nonviOlence. His father showed him that he should not shy away frorn bullies while his mother encouraged him to engage them those bullies with a force other than violence. Lawson's up-brining thus encouraged the development of a method that would confront violence without compromising his own Christian ethic or the God given worth that even adversaries were guaranteed.
James M. Lawson Jr., "My dad's attitude...' from Harding interview, p. 8. "Affront" quote from Lawson interview, Sept. 10 1968, folder 129,p. 6. "Jimmy what good did' that do" and "numinous experience" quotes from Harding interview, p. 9.

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The Northern Tyrant
Though James Lawisorf'dichnot grow-up in the`: segregated neighborhoods or attend the segregated schools of larger Midwestern cities like Cleveland, confrontations with racism still forrned a significant part of his early life. Police frequently stopped Lawson to interrogate him as he walked home from high school and officers would commonly call him "boy" as they demanded information about his destination. While teenage harassment by police is not sufficient grounds for a claim of racism, Lawson recalled that as a young black rrian growing up in a segregated society he worried that his troubles with the law were a sign of greater problems to come. It was "one of those experiences where I began to get the feeling that there were going to be problems."12
Lawson's first brush with the public system of segregation came in high school. Out
with his best friend Ben, the two stopped in at a local lunch counter and sat down to wait for service
We sat there for probably forty-five to fifty minutes and nothing happened, and finally the
owner of the store came over and called Ben aside, Ben went over. And after Ben came back
he looked embarrassed, but he told me what had happened- the manager had told him, 'don't
ever let this happen again; don't ever come in here again with THAT! (Transcribers caps and
underline)"
Not long after this incident, Lawson ran into trouble at his first job. After being promoted from porter to stock boy at a small store, Lawson was demoted back to porter when a young white boy with no experience was hired. After an attempt at dialogue with the owner and the office secretary, the owner refused to repeal the decision. Lawson was appalled, but took decisive action: "I told him I quit and walked away...We knew it was race. That much was clear. Lawson describes these incidents as encounters with the "Northern Tyrant," or "-Lawson interview, Sept. 10 1968, folder 129 pp.8-9
i3 folder 129, p. 6

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northern whites that enforced de facto segregation customs but boasted a way of life with no official segregation laws. Lawson found that in fact, racial discrimination abounded in Massillon. He recalls that even people who knew him quite well would occasionally allow racist comments to slip, concluding that racism was no less severe in Massillon or anywhere in the north than it was in the south: it simply enjoyed a veneer of civility that race based southern violence did not. Rather than growing resentful, however, Lavvson used these early experiences with racism as a springboard for his own development. He used the experiences of rejection as a way to begin seriously dealing with the question of who he was and what his life meant. In high school, James Lawson began to discern his life's calling as a black Christian man growing up in a legally segregated nation.14
Lawson found that most of his high school teachers affirmed his personal quest for meaning by strengthening his dignity of character, steeling the "somebodiness" he learned from his family with a strong sense of intellectual curiosity. The young Lawson was. developing a character inspired by multiple influences: the militant resistance to injustice grounded in biblical teaching modeled by his father; the imperative of Christian love as a life ethic modeled by his mother, and his own internal call to understand himself as a human being in a social world that dehumanized black people. Each of these influences conspired to pull Lawson towards formal work fighting racism. In high school he became very involved in the National Youth Association for the NAACP and the Urban League and spent time canvassing neighborhoods in an effort to boost membership for these civil rights organizations) 5

14 all quotes ibid, pp. 15-16
15 ibid, pp. 12-15

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Lawson's social consciousness expanded and sharpened when he joined the high school debate team. Lawson was good at debate, and the team had a lasting impact on Lawson's life:
(The debate team) started me out on what has remained to me a lifelong interest and concern
for what goes on in society. It started me off in reading many newspapers and periodicals
regularly as a discipline, and clipping, saving, putting things away, remembering them, „it
was a very important discipline.
In 1944, Lawson's junior year of high school, the debate team wrangled with the question of nuclear war and its influence on society. After some extensive research, Lawson concluded that the pursuit of nuclear technology and increasing violence and war had the potential to completely destroy all life. These experiences on the debate team provided Lawson with his first opportunity to seriously explore and talk about the most serious issues facing society. It enabled him to publicly deal with "the...questions of religion and tolerance and freedom and

race (and) human relations." 16 In his senior year, the team took up the topic "Does Atomic

Energy Make Mass Armies Obsolete?" Lawson remembered, "being a good American kid, (I) formed an opinion by the end of that year—a personal opinion that we needed a preventive war. That we should take the bombs and drop them on Russia and obliterate t." i This perspective, uncharacteristic of later positions, reveals Lawson's struggle to understand his role as a Christian, an advocate for all life, alongside his role as an American citizen in a time of escalating Cold War. Further, he faced the challenge of understanding "the meaning of love, as particularly I saw it then in the life of Jesus, and war, and what this would mean then in terms of my own life." The debate team allowed Lawson to begin a serious exploration of relationship between his spiritual being and his political being, but it was not

16 all quotes ibid, pp. 8-9

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until college that he would work earnestly towards reconciling the divide between his religious and political parts. 17
While James Lawson's boyhood in MaS-sillOnWaS defined by many of the classical components of American life—baseball, church, and scholarly activities—Lawson wrangled with a unique question in a mature fashion: Lawson struggled to understand the meaning of his life as a black man in a segregated society with responsibilities as a Christian in the face of injustice Examining his role in AmeriCan race relations complicated what would otherwise have been a typical childhood. Heeding his father's message of strength and dignity and taking seriously his mother's call to find a loving alternative to violence contributed to a social consciousness in James Lawson characterized by an ongoing resistance to racism tempered by the demands of Christian love. Lawson's growth as "a student of debate gave him a public forum to wrestle with the key issues of meaning in his own life—namely the just nature of war and the reality of segregation—and provided a foundation for the ideas that would remain at the center of James Lawson's emerging paradigm of protest.

Confronting College: 'Negroes Stink'
A year after the close of the Second World War, James Lawson Jr. graduated from
high school. He took off during the fall of 1946 and spring of 1947 to travel with the Methodist church and reflect on where to attend college. Lawson remembers this year as especially important, as he was struggling with several questions. Should he pursue a career in law: or ministry? In the wake of the most devastating war known to man, what was his role

all quotes bid, p. 19

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in the maintenance of war? What was his role as a black man in a society that treated blacks as second-class citizens? While a year of discernment did not solve his vocational problem it did clarify his goals. By the start• of his freshman year in college Lawson decided he would devote his life to answering a single, "crucial" question: "How do I help deal with the problem of race, and how do I most effect change?"18
In the fall of 1947, James Lawson matriculated at Baldwin Wallace College in Berea,
Ohio. His freshman year proved helpful as he discerned his path, and he describes this year as an "awakening." In his first semester, Lawson saw that, the history department was sponsoring a series of lectures and the first one featured Director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation A. J. Muste. Lawson attended the lecture and emerged with a transformed understanding of history. Muste spoke about FOR's "long history of commitment to love as the way to bring about change, and though the FOR began as a British organization, Lawson began to see that Christian love had been a force for justice in America for decades. Lawson remembered Muste's talk showed him he "was not alone" in his desire to "experiment with love and nonviolence." From Muste, Lawson learned people for decades had used nonviolence as tOO1 for social change.19
After Muste's talk, Lawson set about understanding nonviolence in earnest, using his course work in college as a catalyst for understanding. "In every paper I did in school, whether it was English, World Literature, what[ever] it was in, I did generally readingS in Gandhi and Sarte, Muste, and Reinhold Niebuhr. I did all my research work in this general area; violence and nonviolence." Lawson's intellectual development was hinged on what he realized before college, that the political person was under the influence of the spiritual

18 ibid, p. 17
19 Harding interview, p. 10

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being, and that the spiritual being might influence the political person to act justly in the

world. He read Gandhi's . My Experiment's with Truth; he read the critiques of Gandhi from

thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr; He did an in-depth,study of Leo Tolstoy and whose text The

Kingdom of God is Within You became a landmark in Lawson's understanding of how

activism could help make Christianity into a religion that reflected more fully the teachings

of Jesus. For Lawson, the student life became "a kind of total involvement," though he did

continue to follow closely the work of FOR and Chicago's Congress On Racial Equality

(CORE)•2°

Still; college life was far from perfect. Baldwin Wallace presented Lawson with

many of the same problems he had faced in Massillon. A small, liberal arts institution in

northern Ohio Baldwin Wallace had only fifty or so black students. In this context, Lawson

found that ignoring race was simply not a possibility, and so once again Lawson was

challenged to hone his thoughts on the political significance of being a black man in

America. Throughout college Lawson remembers he was confronted with racial stereotypes

that emerged from a lack of understanding:

I remember... one evening I went up to get a couple of my good friends.,.I noticed that some
of the guys in the hall looking kind of odd, acting kid of odd, not very talkative, apparently
concealing where they were. And so finally someone told me where they were. They
were...in one of the rooms in the hall, and I knocked on the door and someone said, 'come
in!' So I walked in, and here were the two fellows who remained...my best friends over the
years, and about 14, 15 other guys all sitting on the double bunks 'and on the floor and talking. And when I walked in, Jim said 'Come on in, we're just talking about you.' They were talking about race. Now these were guys who on the one hand had elected me president of the freshman class—I knew them all. They were very close, this was a barracks type dorm, 12 barracks, and we were a noisy lot. So we felt fairly close to each other. There were guys in this room at this time who shared in great varieties; I had double dated with them. We had
worn each others clothes on dates, borrowed, exchanged clothes, things like that. But, except
for about three of these guys in this room, the rest of them were saying 'Negroes Stink.' This
was what the debate was about that night. So the three guys were disagreeing with this, you
know, 'what about Harrison? What about Jim Lawson?' you know, they name the various
people on campus, and all the Negroes on campus were exceptions! We were excluded.21

20 all quotes Lawson interview Sept. 10 1968, folder 29, p.20. CORE and FOR were organizations at the forefront of nonviolent theory and practice in America during the 1940s.
21 ibid, p.23

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Lawson remembers, "one kid in-particular and I were extremely close to each
other, ..and yet down in this discussion _he persisted in saying 'Negroes stink.' And of course it did not give me any kind of good feeling to have him say that 'you're an exception, and Bill's an exception." Lawson described this discussion as one of the many "iceberg experiences" in the development of his social consciousness. Like the experience with the police as a high school student and the experience with the lunch counter operator, the "Negroes Stink" discussion revealed to Lawson "the whole iceberg character of this matter of human relations" in America. Such discussions revealed to Lawson the tip of a much larger problem concealed beneath the surface, a problem entrenched in the social, political and cultural life of America. As a young student, it was staggering for Lawson to think about what it meant to truly practice noncompliance with racial injustice. He felt that the issue would require a life spent in constant friction with the mainstream practices of America, and this understanding led Lawson to conclude "it's very difficult for a white person in America to not be a racist."22
Lawson's response to such racism reflects his understanding that there is an indelible
link between the spiritual and political person:
It was a very emotional reaction...a sense of real isolation and alienation and rejection. And
this was a good thing in the sense that it was one of the pivotal experiences in college that
caused me to really deal with this question of 'who am I?' And so it helped to shape the other
years of college in terms of my own search. It helped me to confirm a couple of other
decisions: one was that I would absolutely refuse to act abnormal when I am a normal
person. 23
Lawson made a crucial decision during college: he would refuse compliance with the demands of Jim Crow. But his choice came at a cost; Lawson would lock horns with the power structure at the college until he graduated. As a sophomore, Lawson had to face off 22 all quotes, ibid pp. 23-24
23 ibid, p. 25

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with the head of the Religious Studies Department because he was dating a white girl at the college. The Religious Studies chair called Lawson to his office and encouraged him to break off the engagement imtri-odidtely,; bUt:LaWsonrefused. "I made the commitment that I'm not going to act unlike what I think I want to act like or feel like acting. I'm not going to be disciplined, contorted into something that I'm not."24 Lawson believed Jim Crow required adherence to a model of behavior that was humiliating and unjust, and in college he decided that he would refuse to act as if he was inferior to white people.
Lawson and an entire generation of students preceding the civil rights movement
faced the same problem: abide by unjust laws and codes or refuse cooperation with them. Lawson saw the problem on two fundamental levels: how did external injustices affect him internally or spiritually, and how would he respond as a. political person to the outside world? awson decided to use the humiliation of Jim Crow as an opportunity for personal growth. "This kind of rejection and hostility is what became the kind of external prod for me to seek self examination, Searching, and the inner understanding that should be in the (center) of a person's life.”25 Lawson reflected that he could not remain passive in the face of active injustice, and so on the spiritual level, LawSon those to practice non co-operation with racial injustice—a personal decision with political implications. His response was not simply a reaction to segregation but rather a mode of praxis that allowed him to resign complicity ini the maintenance of racial injustice. This process empowered Lawson to confront racial injustice by dernonstrating the power of non-cooperation in his own' subjugation. Practicing non-cooperation led Lawson to a powerful conviction. He began to see

• himself as an effectiVe agent for social_ change, and he became "deeply committed to . .

24 ibid, p..27
25 Lavvon interview DATE folder 130, p. 3

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revolution" and the process required to "get rid of the monkeys on the backs of himself and all peoples. Lawson began to actively seek "radical overturnings [sic] of the systems that oppress and hurt and cripple people and found personal non-cooperation an, effective method to begin that process of change. "By my first year in college," Lawson said, "I was already deeply committed to this idea that different systems in America needed drastic overhauling and transformation, that they had their built in cruelties," and should be changed. Lawson contends that this commitment, established in college, has remained consistent and clearly recognizable since that time 26
From college days until the present, moment studying social change, particularly from • the
perspective of Satyagraha, soul force, has been a main preoccupation of mine...it's my
contention that in this vast revolutionary age, the human race has to learn co deal with
injustice and conflict in terms of essentially pacifist soul force Satyagraha ways or the human
race is going to commit suicide.27
In high school, Lawson had dabbled in activism by canvassing with the NAACP and
the Urban League, but creating memberships and encouraging citizens to vote far from fulfilled this newfound goal of working towards a nonviolent revolution. In college, Lawson began to actively devise a paradigm of protest based in American history and grounded in religious philosophy that employed as its means nonviolent direct action. Moreover, Lawson began to practice nonviolence. Gandhi's "experiments with truth" inspired. Lawson to conduct his own public nonviolent challenges to the segregation codes of private businesses in Berea, Ohio.
The town did not have (integrated) facilities...and after several complaints, particularly from
an Ethiopian student, two of us finally decided 'Well. why don't we begin? ... Why don't we
start by going down and at least testing each of the barber shOps and seeing if they will cut a
Negroe's [sic] hair?' We did not have any action, as I recall, beyond this plan, except that we
thought that if we discovered a Negro could not get his hair cut, then we could take it to the college administration and say that this was an area in which something had to be done. So on a given afternoon we went, and our tactic was very simple. I would walk in first and take a
seat. Then the white fellow walked in behind me, so we were in that order. And that would

26 all quotes, ibid p. 4
27 ibid, p. 2

Chapter I: Life in the Shadow of a Methodist Pulpit 18 give us the certainty I was ahead of him; If I were not asked if I wanted a chair by the barber
and (the white student) was instead, he would decline and say 'he was ahead of me.' Well,
the first shop we went to we were summarily thrown out. This was our introduction to it?'
This first experience was only the beginning: the two young men dusted themselves
off and carried on to the next barbershop. After a few tries, they discovered a barber in town who would cut Lawson's hair and the boys spread the word at Baldwin Wallace encouraging African American students to patronize the sympathetic barber. Incidentally, the barber was an usher at the Congregational Church Lawson frequented in Berea, and so he speculated that the man capitulated to their request because he could not reconcile ushering Lawson on Sunday morning and refusing to cut his hair on Monday. "I think this was a simple, moral

confrontation for him, and he answered it positively.,,29 This early experiment revealed both the moral appeal of personal relationships in uniting individuals on a human level and the power of non-cooperation in dismantling Jim Crow.

Conclusion

James Lawson's early development, in particular the evolution of his political consciousness and his personal theology, was foregrounded by the question of race in the United States. "Race became a very important issue...because it was the key question...the key force that made me deal with the question of who am I? What's the meaning of my life?"30 Answering this question meant dealing with the question of race, and Lawson decided early on that dealing with race meant refusing cooperation with Jim Crow. His mother, an educated woman with a deep conviction that Christian love is the law that governs life, taught Lawson that violence could not solve all of life's problems, and that indeed,

28 ibid, pp.1-2
29 ibid, p.2
3° ibid

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violence was unlikely to solve any problem. Embracing this ethic of nonviolence at a young age and blending it with the vigilant defense of those who suffer injustice embodied by his father we can see Lawson's family influence as a formative inspiration in Lawson's

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understanding of the power of non-cooperation. This family influence would ultimately compel Lawson towards a militant commitment to active love in confrontation with injustice

through nonviolent direct action, an ethic later evident in his theology of nonviolence. 31

After reading Thoreau, Niebuhr, Tolstoy and Gandhi Lawson began to focus his
writing and thinking on the development an American ahimsa, that is the creation of a method capable of effectively transforming racism using nonviolent means. Reading Gandhi's autobiography expanded Lawson's understanding of how to personally use active love by teaching him that the most active force in the world is in fact a spiritual force, and in years to come, Lawson would travel to India to better understand how - to apply nonviolence to the race problem in America. In conclusion, Lawson's family, his personal experimentations with truth, his dedication to the study of nonviolence in college and his success with non-cooperation convinced him of both the need and possibility of living as a revoiutiOnary in a segregated, Cold War society. As a black man growing up in a nation that legalized racial discrimination, and as a political being under the warrant of his own conscience, James Lawson made decisions early in his life to live in a spirit Ofthristian activism.

31 Chapter 3 deals With Lawson's theology of nonviolence.

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II. Deciding to Live as an Activist: Sit-ins, Jail and a Pilgrimage
As he neared the end of his college career, James Lawson wrestled with his call to
actively combat racial justice in the United States. Struggling with the question of what his life meant as a black man in a segregated nation, Lawson was determined to find a calling and vocation that could reconcile the intrinsic worth nurtured by his parents and mentors with the injustice of racial inferiority directed at black Americans during the 1950s. He joined the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) in college and kept up with the ways they applied Gandhian nonviolence to the race issue in America through newsletters. CORE, and their founding sponsor FOR, deeply influenced Lawson's vision for the possibilities of nonviolence. 32 Before he registered for conscription he consulted FOR leaders A. J. Muste and Bayard Rustin about his options. Rustin had spent two years in jail as a Conscientious Objector during World War H and he advised Lawson on what to expect should he decide to refuse cooperation with the draft. 33 Lawson chose jail over fighting in Korea, was sentenced to three years in jail, and paroled with the understanding that he would travel to India to work as a missionary: James Lawson's experience in India complemented his understanding of CORE's nonviolent tactical ideology as he constructed the cornerstone for a nonviolent movement in America. African American students searching for a way to resist segregation found in Jim Lawson the practical tactics and spiritual philosophy needed to mount a serious challenge to Jim Crow.
32 The FOR was started in 1914 by a group of British Christians refusing participation in the First World War. Rustin was a pivotal figure in the struggle for civil rights in America. He, Like Lawson, was concerned with the creation of a mass movement based in Christian nonviolence. He was instrumental in the founding of CORE and SCLC, and worked for many years with FOR's A. J. Muste. As a gay man working in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, Rustin earned a reputation as being a controversial figure, due in some part also to his history as a member of the communist party' in the, 1930s. See Bayard Rustin, Time on Two Crosses, eds. Devon W. Carbado and Donald Wise,' (San Francisco: Cleis Publishing, 2003), Jervis Anderson Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), John D'Emilio, Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin, (Chicago: University of Chicago. Press, 2003)

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CORE and the Sit In: "A Well-executed Nonviolent Demonstration"
James Lawson added contributed ideas' to a long lineage of protest politics in
America. The work of CORE during the 1940s was a watershed in the development of a Gandhian mass movement employing nonviolent tactics aimed at improving race relations. Activist Bayard Rustin was arguably the first American to begin using the rhetoric of "nonviolent, goodwill, direct action" to combine the ethic he found in Christianity with the aggressive tactics of protest seen mostly in labor struggles, and CORE focused on building a

• mass movement to combat racial segregation in America using a Christian ideology.34
Lawson, who later concerned himself with this same idea of mass movement politics grounded in religious ideology, built on the rich legacy of ideas and actions emerging from much of CORE's work in the 1940s and 1950s to train students in nonviolent confrontation. CORE was the first civil rights organization to formally document a challenge to
racial segregation using the sit in. In October of 1942, the organization sent an interracial group to investigate the racial policies at Stoner 's, a "white tablecloth restaurant in the heart of Chicago's Loop." CORE director James Farmer reports that the group began its campaign by sending an interracial group of three students to the Stoner 's to investigate the restaurant's policy of segregation. The owner refused to served the students, explaining that as a private business owner he could determine the policies of his business in whatever way he pleased. The interracial group sat far forty-five minutes withaut service before leaving. Two white women 'from CORE followed up with Stoner regarding this policy and found that his concern was 90% of his trade would be lost if he alloWed integratiOn, as 90% of his clients

34 Suarshan Kapur, Raising up a Prophet: The African American Encounter with Gandhi, (Boston: Beacon Press; 1992), 117

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were white women who would refuse to eat beside Negroes. He told the women that if the two races were allowed to eat together in his restaurant it would only lead to interracial marriage, which he opposed
CORE continued to send interracial teams to test Stoner 's. Farmer reports
As time passed, some of the small test groups would be seated after a considerable wait, only
to be served meat with egg shells scattered on it, or a plate of food salted so heavily that it
could not be eaten, or a sandwich composed of tomato and lettuce cores picked out of the
garbage in the kitchen (so the group was told by Negro bus girls who witnessed the making of
the sandwiches.)36
CORE eventually investigated all of the restaurants in the 16 square block downtown loop and found that only Stoner 's practiced segregation. This critical first step of investigation in CORE's campaign was Gandhian in nature, and Lawson would later emphasize the importance of investigation in advance of direct action during the Nashville campaign of 1960. Investigation leads to the identification of a target for action, which is a crucial component of Gandhian campaigns and a fixture of the 1942 CORE campaign in Chicago as well as the campaigns organized later by James Lawson.
After identifying that Stoner 's stood out as a business actively practicing segregation, CORE began to apply public pressure to the restaurant. The group published "50 Loop Restaurants Which Do Not Discriminate" and continued unsuccessful attempts at negotiation with the owner. After the steps of investigation and negotiation had failed, CORE attempted a sit in. They sent teams of two and three whites to the restaurant and found they were seated quickly and without difficulty. But when an interracial group of six African Americans and 2 whites followed behind the white groups 30 minutes passed before they were seated. Nonetheless, excited that the group had been seated at all James Farmer stated the only

35 Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century, 2" edition, eds. August Meier, Eliot Rudwicka do Francis L. Broderick, (Idianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1971), 243-246
36 ibid

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drawback to this small victory was Mr. Stoner kicked one of the white team members in the leg. Stoner called the police three times during the sit-in but upon finding no disturbance they left. Before leaving the third time, Stoner was warned: the police would carry him to jail if he called again.37
Patrons throughout the restaurant perked up at the site of the interracial teams and a passing hostess whispered to a participant, "Keep it up—we're all with you." An active dramatization of integration the sit-in had effectively confronted racial segregation with an image of what was possible. The first group's success was only diminished by the second interracial team's long wait in vain at the front door until "suddenly," Farmer wrote, the "deadlock was broken." An older woman not associated with the demonstration approached an African American woman in the second group of CORE demonstrators and asked her to have dinner. Other patrons followed suit and soon only two demonstrators in the group were left waiting for service. A hostess seated the last two demonstrators and the restaurant broke out into spontaneous applause as the final members of the CORE team were seated. "It was a fitting climax to a well-executed non-violent demonstration for racial justice," writes Farmer. Though the demonstration was staged far from the lunch counters of Alabama and Mississippi, and though it was not an active challenge to the legal segregation of the south, CORE's efforts marked the advent of public experiments with nonviolent direct action aimed at transforming the practice of segregation in the United States. The sit-in at Stoner 's informed the strategy of later sit-ins: the use of investigation, the selection of a target, working in interracial teams, and using waves or groups of protestors were each tactics that James Lawson would perfect in Nashville.38

" ibid
3s

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James Lawson and the Draft
As CORE was putting Gandhian direct action to work in Chicago during the 1940s, a single obstacle stood between a young James Lawson and graduation. In-1948, President Harry Truman passed into law the Peace Time Military Act, a law requiring all young men 18 or older to register for military service. James Lawson recalled his attempt of adherence to the law:
I remember very clearly that when I went down to register when I was 18, that I said to the
woman 'you know, I don't think I can go in there. You know, I just don't think my religion
would let me.' And I made very clear to her that I wasn't signing anything that would take
away my right to make this decision apart from that pressure.39
James Lawson, like Bayard Rustin years before, struggled with the idea of complying with a war. From the beginning of college Lawson recognized there would be a problem between reconciling his life as a follower of Jesus and the life of a citizen bound by law to fight a war overseas. "By the end of 1948 and the first part of 1949...1 sent back this draft card and said that I no longer could cooperate with this." 4° Before graduating from college, Lawson committed himself to a position of non-cooperation with the draft.
For Lawson, neither warfare nor the draft were "consonant with the life and teaching
of Jesus." Lawson claimed that Jesus' teaching "permitted a man to lay down his life for another life but it did not permit him to make the choice that the other mans [sic] life should be laid down instead of his own." This understanding came directly from Lawson's understanding of the bible. Since junior high Lawson had been reading the bible closely, understanding it "for himself," and he found that the books of the prophets and the New Testament were clear in their message that people should not harm others—especially in war.

39 Lawson interview, MVC folder 129, p. 19

40 . . p. 20

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Lawson described his decision to refuse cooperation with the draft as the beginning of a personal understanding of how his own life intersected with the Christian faith and the active life of transforming injustice. He explained, "the life and ministry of Jesus or the prophetic tradition was a very important influence on me as a kind of life that I wanted to shape for myself in the twentieth century." The draft challenged Lawson to finally bridge his spiritual and political halves, and his decision to refuse cooperation with conscription at the end of his college career became the catalyst for a life spent actively engaging the forces of injustice.41 Lawson's family was concerned about his doing time in prison for resisting the draft,
but Jim Lawson Jr. wasn't the only child in the Lawson family who had refused to fight: when each of the Lawson boys reached draft age they all refused to register on grounds of conscience. 42 True to the dynamic apparent in Lawson's family, his mother and father differed in how they saw Lawson's willingness to accept jail. His mother was grief-stricken at the prospect of Lawson's imprisonment while Lawson's father was unsurprised. The elder Lawson explained to Jim's mother "they've been raised all their lives to think in terms of love first," which the younger Lawson affirmed, saying "if you have not expected us to take this (idea of Christian love) to heart, why did you teach us then that love was the law of God and the law of man?" 43 Though he had struggled throughout college to decide how to respond as a Christian to what he perceived as injustice, by graduation Lawson had made up his mind. "There were certain laws that the Christian had to disobey: the laws of segregation

41 All quotes from Lawson interview, MVC, folder 130, pp. 5-7
42 Lawson interview, MVC, folder 129, p. 4. There is little information about Lawson's brothers in the MVC records; this appears to be the only passing mention of his siblings.
43 ibid

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and the laws of conscription. So then I sent back my draft cards and said I could no longer cooperate with it."44
Lawson was careful to differentiate avoidance of the draft with active resistance to
the draft: "the image is still that the conscious objector is a draft dodger, and that has nothing to do with the case." 45 He explained:
I felt that the free man must maintain his right to determine those laws that are absolutely
contrary to the meaning of freedom and justice. And I'd read Thoreau and it was very
important to me that where you had unimportant situations...don't break the law but obey the
law. Such as traffic laws [sic]. But certain issues are completely germane to the meaning of
human life—I felt that among these were the segregation laws and conscription. So back then
I said number 1. I would never obey a segregation law, never accept it or obey it, and the
conscription laws were similar to the segregation laws in that they were a complete denial of
the meaning of freedom, therefore I would not cooperate with the law.46
Refusing to fight in a foreign war was Lawson's first attempt at conforming to "the law of love," a law he believed to be vividly illustrated in the life of Jesus and more important than the law of conscription in the United States. "Applying the law of love to life" was the way Lawson described the process of living a Christian conviction, which in this case called for the violation of a national law. This personal decision to choose jail in lieu of fighting was a small piece of the larger process wherein Lawson attempted to understand the principles of Gandhi's Saiyagraha in an American context. Lawson was beginning to apply the teachings of Kieerkegard, Gandhi, Tolstoy and Thoreau to his own life by choosing to intentionally violate a law that he had deemed unjust. Lawson had concluded that conscription ran against the more important laws in life, namely the law of active love for all peoples. Perhaps most importantly, the decision to chose jail over combat in the Korean War marked Lawson's first move towards a life of Christian activism.47

44 Lawson interview with Harding, p. 10
45 Lawson interview, MVC, folder 130, p.29

46 Lawson interview, MVC, folder 130, p.7
47 all quotes ibid, pp.8-10

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When rumors of war in Korea transformed into full blown conflict on 25 June 1950, Lawson was on a camping trip in Iowa. He had sent his draft card back to the draft board and he knew they would soon look to "take care of their back business." In August, the fall of his senior year in college, he received a notice to report for induction which he sent back. He then received a notice saying that he had been inducted. He sent that back also but this time with a letter that explained why he could not in good conscience comply with the demand of military service. When the administration at Baldwin Wallace caught wind of Lawson's intention to refuse cooperation with the draft he was told he could no longer act as a public representative of the school in speech, debate, or athletics. The initial fallout of Lawson's decision was an indicator of the fierce discipline required to maintain a position of conscience while violating the law, a requirement for a life of active nonviolence compelled by Christian conscience.48
Lawson knew he was required to appear before a judge to account for his behavior
before going to trial, so he called A. J. Muste and Bayard Rustin to talk with them about what he could expect if he decided to continue non-cooperation with the draft. Citing Rustin and Muste as "very influential", he learned from them what to expect from the experience of jail as a Conscientious Objector (CO) before he went on trial at the end of his senior year. The judge was clear that he would punish Lawson with special severity because of his refusal to accept a ministerial deferment and on 25 April 1951, James Lawson was sentenced to three years in prison for refusing cooperation with conscription. 49 He was assigned to a federal prison at Mill Point, West Virginia.

48 ibid, pp. 14-17
49 ibid, 19

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For all Of its difficulty, Lawson found prison to be "a formative time." The Quaker
war resisters during the Second World War and the American Friends Service Committee had ensured that the pri§On had a fin: library, so Lawson aspired to rise above his position as garage clerk to prison librarian. He wanted to spend as much time as possible immersed in thought and study, as he had learned from Rustin and Muste that it was essential to "impose your own life upon the prison regime." Each day he would wake before the official time, go to the library, and begin his day by reading. Other COs followed Lawson's lead and within weeks the COs had formed an informal collective of study groups in the prison. Lawson soon organized an official study group which he hosted in the morning and evening, and in this way imparted a certain sense of choice about lifestyle into the regiment of prison life. He- found the study groups to be a redemptive element in the "alien and demoralizing community" of prison.5°
Lawson had begun experimental confrontations with racial segregation in his personal
life and he had followed the efforts of CORE during the 1940s. But it was not until his time at Mill Point that he became embroiled in an official desegregation campaign. Lawson pointed out that Mill Point in 1951 was not in compliance with Executive Order 9981 signed into law in August 1948 by President Truman. The order called for desegregation of the Armed Forces and federal facilities, and Lawson saw the prison's noncompliance as an opportunity. 51

so ibid, pp. 20-21
51 The actual language of Order 9981 is somewhat vague in regards to federal. facilities, but civil rights activists seized the document as an executive order outlawing segregation practices by any federal institution. Truman wrote "it is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale." While the president appointed a board of 7 people to investigate, implement and maintain the' rder, military officials took their time implementing the changes.

Chapter II: Deciding .to Live as an Activist: Sit-ins, Jail and a Pilgrimage 29 The COs and I we talked about this and we decided that something ought to be done. So we
started, first by going and talking to the administration, and asking for a meeting of inmates on
this matter of following the executive order. To which they agreed. Now this was a very
interesting meeting and discussion, the reason being that the place was overcrowded at this
time that summer. .Overcrowded and filled with people angry: about how. bad the food was,
(as well as) the lacVof recreation in; die ciliiy „
Overcrowding and segregation was creating an unsustainable situation at the prison. Lawson remembers thirty-five to forty black inmates would share a room the same size as one hundred whites, and the overcrowded white rooms were maintained solely for the sake of keeping segregated facilities in tact. The practicality of the issue began to sway some whites, and Lawson recalls many of the white inmates grew eager "to move into the Negro dorm." For many of them the issue was not about justice: they simply wanted more living space.53 Still, the white inmates were far from unanimous in their willingness to move in with blacks. Lawson recalls some of the "hillbillies" were after him for pushing prison officials to consider a desegregation policy and one afternoon while at work in the prison garage, Lawson heard "a big trampling of feet" and saw a group of black inmates running towards him and yelling. They came with the news that a group of white inmates were on the way to attack Lawson for his role in the'desegregation campaign. While only a rumor, threats of violence against Lawson continued to circulate throughout the prison. Soon after the warning at the garage, Lawson got in the middle of a fight between whites in the white dorm. Looking around he suddenly, felt that all the anger and hostility of the fight had turned towards him as a result of his role in the campaign to desegregate the jail. Many prisoners, both black and white, believed he was only stirring up trouble with "this integration business." Lawson warned the Lieutenant at the prison that violence might erupt as a result

By the official end of the Korean conflict in 1953, desegregation of the armed forces was mostly complete. Document recovered from http://www.trumanlibrary.org/9981a.fam on 9 April 2009 at 11:20 a.m.
52 ibid, p. 21
" ibid

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of their campaign to desegregate but prison officials paid little attention. Finally, the violence surfaced: Lawson recalls: "about 7:30 or 8 [sic] (the night he warned the lieutenant) three Hof the (white) conscientious objectors who wanted to move over to the (black) dorm were pounced on and thrown out of the dorm by a group of whites." The violence at Mill Point resulted in the transfer of the "troublemakers." Lawson was seen as the "ringleader" of the troublemakers and was consequently the only CO from Mill Point sent to a federal facility in Ashland, Kentucky.54
At Ashland, Lawson was placed in "a close custody cell house" that was separate
from the other COs. He shared a living space with murders and professional criminals. But as with most difficult situations, Lawson managed to find a positive quality about his new circumstances: his solitude provided him with more time to read. He became familiar with Freud and the field of Psychology during his stay in Ashland, and for the first time he got to know a Black Muslim, a man named Jim Cox. Cox was a hard-nosed professional mugger from Washington State with whom Lawson "had a number of real encounters because his thesis was that his profession was as honorable as my intended one," which was ministry. "Jim tried to convert me and I tried to covert him," Lawson remembers fondly. Lawson's experiences with people in prison, people he may not have chosen to interact with otherwise, pushed him to grow in his understanding of humanity and a memorable lesson emerged from his time in prison: "I absolutely refused to (judge) people, and say that they are
corrupt... (instead) I found them still genuinely human with the same fears and doubts that other people have also." Lawson uncovered a shared sense of humanity in prison, and this insight eventually formed a considerable piece of his nonviolent theology.55

54 ibid, pp. 20-24a
55 ibid, p. 26

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In May of 1952, after nearly 14 months in prison, Lawson was paroled with the
stipulation that he would engage in church missions overseas. He had finished his course
. work at Baldwin Wallace College in;the'spnng of 1951 but the faculty of the college refused him credit for the last semester because he was imprisoned. After completing his final semester over again, Lawson spent the summer going to church camps and meetings. He had applied to the Methodist Board of Mission for a position teaching and coaching in Africa, but received a reply that said there were no positions in Africa for student missionaries. There was, however, an opportunity to work with the Student Christian Movement of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon. David Moses, the president of Hislop College in Nagpur, India had requested Lawson because of his interest in Gandhi and his commitment to church work. In April of 1953, Lawson left the United States to begin work for the Student Christian Movement in. Nagpun 56
Lawson's mission in India was manifold. "I was wanting to go overseas when I
finished college among other things to experience living as a follower of Jesus in a different culture from my own, to get acquainted with the world in that fashion." 57 But while working with youth as a coach and organizing the World Student Christian Federation was the official reason for Lawson's trip, his "chief interest" and unofficial mission in India was understanding "the whole social and political area ... of Gandhi." 58 Lawson spent time debating with Indians over Gandhi's relevance—especially to Christianity--and he contended that even as a Hindu Gandhi had done more to further Christianity as a religion that embodied the ethic of Jesus than many Christians. Lawson viewed his time in India as a preparation "to return to the states, and go to a seminary, a theological school, to prepare to 56 ibid, p. 32. See also David Halberstam, The Children, (New York: Random House, 1998), 47.
Lawson interview with Harding, 11
58 Lawson interview, MVC, folder 130, p. 3

Chapter II: Deciding to Live as an Activist: Sit-ins, Jail and a Pilgrimage 32

go to the local parish. .I was determined, too, that I would be in the south working, and

preferably in a city. This was where 1 was moving, even then."59

The•time Lawson spent withille:Methoclisturch in AMerica:during the year after

his parole combined with his mission experience in India to affirm his decision about joining

the ministry His observations about the power of the Indian movement were enhanced by

his firsthand experiences in India, and he became increasingly focused on how to apply

Gandhian techniques to the American race problem. His commitment to confront Jim Crow

as a church leader in the south was secured when he read of the Montgomery Bus Boycott on

the front page of The Nagpur Times.

It was the front-page story in the center of the paper and I read it with great glee and did some
jumping up and dancing and shouting because it represented what I had hoped to see happen
in America. For the first time I saw the name, Martin Luther King, Jr. I made so much racket:
in my apartment that the next-door neighbor in the center apartment came rushing over. Chris
Theopholous, who was a biologist at the college, came running out to see if something was
wrong. I showed him the article and told him that this is what I had been practicing
personally and that this is what I hoped to see happen in America.60

For Lawson, Montgomery proved that massive nonviolent campaigns might work in

America. It also proved that African Americans might muster the communal vitality required

to fight racial injustice using nonviolence. Christian Mystic and prolific writer Howard

Thurman61 had earlier emphasized that training individuals to develop this vitality was

essential in any nonviolent movement:

The effectiveness of a creative ethical ideal such as nonviolence, ahimsa, or no killing
depends upon the degree to which the masses of people are able to embrace such a notion and
have it become a working part of their total experience. It cannot be the unique or proper experience of the leaders; it has to be rooted in the mass assent and creative push. The result
is that when we first began our movement, it failed, and it will continue to fail until it is
embraced by, the masses of people.. I felt, that they could not sustain this ethical ideal long
enough for it to be effective because they did not have the vitality.62

59 ibid, 8
60 Lawson interview with Harding, 11
61 Thurman's significance for the modern movement is discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this essay.
62 Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman, (New York: Harvest Books, 1979), 133

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The Montgomery Bus Boycott, stretching over 381 days and leading to a Supreme Court decision banning segregation on public busses, was proof that the "vitality" required for a nonviolent movement resided with African American people in the south. Although he was an ocean away, Lawson was eager to shape the practical and spiritual resources needed to recreate "the spirit of Montgomery" in countless communities across the south. Ironically, he had traveled to India in search of Gandhi and while he was away the spirit of Gandhi emerged in the American struggle for civil rights. With the commitment to become a minister working in the south in the front of his mind, Lawson returned to America inspired and determined.

Heading South to Confront Segregation: "Don't Wait, Come Now!"
Lawson returned to the U.S. on 1 September 1956 and immediately began studying at
the Oberlin Theological School. He was at Oberlin for all of the 1956-1957 school year but withdrew in the fall of 1957 upon meeting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Harvard Professor Dr. Harvey Cox was the chaplain of Oberlin in 1958 and he had arranged for King to speak at the seminary's convocation. Cox had specifically requested Lawson's presence at the dinner following convocation. Lawson recalls "there was a special group of people who had dinner with King, and it just so happened that I sat across from him at the table where we were. So we had a chance to talk to each other and discovered our common bonds."63
Vincent Harding writes of that meeting, "when he realized that Lawson had spent
three years in India absorbing the teachings of the Mahatma, King knew that he had met his soul brother."64 Claims about what happened that night are conflicting in the record, but

63 Lawson interview, MVC, folder 131, p. 21
64 Lawson interview with Harding, 10

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most scholars report that during the conversation between the two men Lawson told King of

his plans to travel south and work as a minister involved in the movement. King reportedly

replied, 'Don't wait! Come now we don't have •anyone like you down there.",

65

Regardless of exactly what happened, Vincent Harding is correct in asserting that in Lawson

King saw "a magnificent gift to the movement." Lawson, too, was thrilled by the meeting

that evening as the success of Montgomery had proven what he had theorized about and

personally practiced for decades. King likely sensed what Lawson understood later: both

Lawson and King had come to the same conclusions regarding nonviolence around the same

time but in different locations.

Lawson had planned to finish theological training at Oberlin but the unfolding

crisis in the south beckoned him.

My feeling was that if I were really committed to the whole approach of soul force, I would
go ahead and go South [sic] and get involved concretely in that arena. So in the fall of 1957, I
made the decision that I would move South immediately. And the net result of this was that I
took a job with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, as the Southern Secretary, working out of
Nashville.66

FOR asked Lawson "to move into various crisis situations," places were racial injustice was

egregious to "help spread...the nonviolent approach for social change" across the south.67

Lawson's early travels took him to every southern state and he claims the incidents of racial

injustice he witnessed could fill a book. Lawson's job was to promote the use of "soul force"

in the face of even the most atrocious cases of injustice and racial violence he found.

65 In the Mississippi Valley collection interviews, says King made no explicit overtures to him over dinner that night in 1957. Lawson interview, MVC, Jan. 21 1969, Folder 131, p. 21. Vincent Harding offers no citation for the exchange between King and Lawson which he quotes in the introduction to his Veterans of Hope interview narrative. Lawson is not actually quoted in Harding's work as saying King invited him south. See the introduction to the Veterans of Hope interview with James Lawson by Rosemarie and Vincent Harding, p. 3. David Halberstam tells a similarstory to Harding in his book The Children, and he cites page 192 of Jervis Anderson's biography of Bayard Rustin's, Troubles I've Seen. There is actually no mention of Lawson on that page or anywhere in the index of Anderson's work on Rustin. This story about King's invitation for Lawson to come south remains somewhat mythical, and factually spotty at best.
66 Lawson interview, MVC, folder 132, p. 2
67 Lawson interview, MVC, folder 134, p. 6

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Lawson became focused on training southern blacks to respond to violence with a force that was neither passive nor violent.68
Much of LaWson's eXj*rtisO'iii-ilohviOlefiee.came from time spent practicing.
Travelling as FOR's Southern Secretary Lawson spent time on the road with long time activist and nonviolence instructor, Glenn Smiley. 69 On a trip back from Maryland Lawson recalls he and Smiley stopped in at a Howard Johnson for coffee. After a long wait the waitress approached the two men to apologize. She said company policy prevented her from serving them. The two men asked to speak with the manager about the policy and the manager soon appeared with a plaque that said according to the law black and white people were required to have separate bathrooms. Lawson clarified that neither of them needed a bathroom, only coffee. Lawson explained, "no one has walked out since we've been standing here talking to you. What do you think would happen if we went ahead and sat down and you served us?" The manager replied, "well, I'll try anything once." While their waitress still refused to serve the two men, another happily volunteered her services. Smiley and Lawson enjoyed their coffee together and waved cheerfully to the owner before leaving."
Lawson described a similar incident that occurred in a Little Rock bus station. While standing inside the "white" waiting room Lawson attempted to buy a package of gum. Having observed Lawson's disobedience to the Jim Crow signs, the clerk refused him service. Lawson allowed another customer in front of him and then he tried again to purchase the gum. The clerk was adamant: he would not serve Lawson, who he took to be flaunting the rules of segregation. Lawson struck up a conversation with the clerk about 68 Lawson interview, MVC, folder 132, p. 4
69 Smiley is a Methodist Minister who assisted King on his "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence." Sources?
Ibid, 7

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some unrelated topic and within a few minutes of talking the clerk decided to sell Lawson the gum. 71 Lawson's genius lay in his ability to behave as if segregation simply did not exist, as if his being black and,the clerk being'white was a non-issue. His refusal to cooperate with
•

the demands that segregation placed on his personality, behaving instead like a normal person free from the restraints of segregation, often re-introduced humanity into interactions often determined by skin color. By refusing to behave like a second class citizen, Lawson managed to get first class treatment, For Lawson, these incidents were opportunities to identify the fissures in the bulwark of segregation: "in all these things...all through high school and when someone refused me service, I'd never let it end there. I would always either sit, or I'd try to talk to the manager. I'd try to take action right then and there on the spot." Lavvson's theorized that the restoration of hunianity to social interactions could combat Jini Crow's personally disfignring impact, and he tested his theory in these personal experiments with nonviolence.72
Lawson was called into Little Rock in 1957 after the integration of Central High
School to teach nonviolent direct action to the black students who had integrated the schoo1. 73 Lawson recalled that the nine youth who attempted integration at Central "were terribly frustrated, because they were told by their parents and by the NAACP...`you sort of it still, you don't do anything. You turn the other cheek.' And that means you just take it."

71 ibid, 8
72 ibid, 6 ,
73 "Even with the initial'protection of the United States Army, we students gained our inner strength from Dr. King's message of nonviolence. Early in the year we were visited and supported by a young divinity student from Vanderbilt University, Jim Lawson. Jim was a very strong supporter of Dr. King and a student of nonviolence. It was his support and counseling that helped give us strength to endure each day. It was the feeling of faith, family support and the belief that we were doing the right thing that allowed us to look possible physical danger in the face each morning and not blink." Ernest Green, Black Arkansans, 1989 Fall, P. 4, recovered from the web at

http://www.oldstatehouse.com/educational programs/classroom/arkansas news/detail.asp?id =46&issue id-5& page-4 on 23 April 2009, 8:48 p.m.

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Lawson believed nothing could be further from the truth, that in fact nonviolence was the most active force available to humanity. Lawson admitted that the obstacles faced by the students in Little Rock were 'tremendous The white citizens council ,and a small group of students at Central had committed to pushing the students out, and each day the students "were bombed," which meant rocks wrapped to look like paper balls were thrown.at the students. "They were being beaten in gym classes. They were being mobbed by a charge of boys and jammed into their lockers. They were being squirted with ink and water." Lawson observed that matters had gotten worse because the community was confounded by the violence. "I'll never -forget the joy with which the parents and these kids greeted me in Little Rock," he recalled. Lawson's tactics of nonviolent confrontation came as a breath of fresh air to the students. 74
Lawson showed the students how to diminish their day to day suffering while
contributing to the possibility that the social condition that led to racism might be redeemed. Lawson taught the courageous students at Central "nonviolence did not mean doing nothing. It meant trying to find superior skills in resisting." He asked the students what the worst, treatment had been, and they agreed it had been the bombing. He provided them with a tactic. "What do you think would happen if one time when some fellow threw a bomb at you, you went and picked it up and gave it back to him and you smiled at him?" Lawson renierribered that Carlotta Wall's mouth dropped open. "You know," Walls exclaimed, "it would be something." The next day she put Lawson's suggestions to work. After being bombed in English class, she picked up the stone—visibly shaking—and handed it back to the student. "He turned red, and the kids around him started laughing at him, but the next morning when she walked into that class he greeted her with a smile, and to her knowledge all quotes ibid, pp.14-15

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he was never involved in any (more) incidents against them." Carlotta later employed a creative act of salyagraha when a young girl that cussed her on a near daily basis was close to failing a class that Carlotta did Carlotta offered to tutor the girl, and the two soon became friends. Lawson's tactics proved effective in affecting lasting change in the relations between the white and black students at Centra1.75
While Lawson traveled doing this kind of work throughout the late 1950s, his home
base was the Rev. Kelly Miller. Smith's First Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Upon his arrival in Nashville, Smith had invited Lawson "to become the chairperson of nonviolent action for the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC)," the. Nashville branch of the

Southern Christian Leadership Conference which had been organized one year before. 76 Lawson took this role in Nashville because Nashville had been specifically chosen by his colleagues in FOR as a ripe location for a nonviolent movement. The combination of factors that brought Lawson to Nashville would be reflected in the responsibilities he took on with FOR, the NCLC and the SCLC. The first major impression he made on national movement leaders came at SCLC's first regional conference held in Colombia, South Carolina. Lawson taught a nonviolent workshop for Ralph Abernathy, King and the rest of the executive staff. As David Halberstam writes,
The first person to greet (Lawson) in Columbia was King. Then and at every subsequent
SCLC meeting, the normal morning meeting on strategy would be followed by lunch and then
by a workshop on nonviolence led by Jim Lawson. King made sure that each time he sat
down in the first row. It was his way of saying that these workshops were central to the
meeting's purpose.77
Lawson "worked in a great variety of ways with SCLC, inside and outside, (in) cooperative positions of one kind or another (as) volunteer staff...I spoke at every SCLC convention, led

75 all quotes, ibid 13-16
76 ibid
Halberstam, 50

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workshops, and did staff retreats (and) institutes for SCLC..." By 1961, Lawson was named Director of Nonviolent Education, and until 1967 he spent 50% of his time working with SCLC. King and his staffreCOgrliZed'LL awsori as-Ainericas premie,

're voice on nonviolent
direct action, and they supported him as he taught nonviolent theory and action to communities around the nation.78
King relied on nonviolent teachers like Lawson for the success of SCLC and the campaigns for racial justice the organization waged throughout the south. When the boycott in Montgomery started in December 1955, King had called the National Council of Churches for help as the bombing of his home confounded the citizens and leadership in Montgomery. While King and others were the leaders for this effort, they did not have much awareness of
techniques, training processes. So King, in fact, called the National Council of Churches to
find out what resources they could obtain to help them with their problems of learning tactics,
training people. And Oscar Lee, who was in charge at that time of the Department of Racial
Justice, of the National Council, referred him to the Fellowship of Reconciliation. So that
very early in the Montgomery Boycott, a good friend of mine, Glenn Smiley, began to move
in and out of Montgomery as did Bayard Rustin.79
Preceding Lawson's arrival from India, Smiley and Rustin assisted King in his "pilgrimage to nonviolence" by introducing him to the work of Howard Thurman and Harry Emerson Fosdick. The two men helped King begin training workshops on nonviolence, and Rustin helped King prepare articles on the boycott for various religious journals. 80 Smiley and Rustin provided the expertise and experience with nonviolent campaigns that King and the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) needed to successfully carry out the boycott. The need to train activists would only grow in importance as the struggle for civil rights began to catalyze into a movement in the early 1960s, and increasingly King and others would rely on James Lawson to train nonviolent foot soldiers to confront segregation.

7 ' all quotes Lawson interview, MVC, folder 134 pp.6-7
79 Lawson interview, MVC, folder 132, p. 2
8° Vincent Harding 'et. al., We Changed the World: African Americans 1945-1970, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 53

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Conclusion

The push for ciVit ghts. inihe'Onited States;took on a new dimension when CORE
began its application of Gandhian nonviolence to racial injustice in America. CORE's sit in showed James Lawson and an entire generation that active nonviolent resistance to Jim Crow was possible. Lawson's decision to accept jail over combat in the Korean War marked a commitment to life as an activist, and Lawson's trip to India in the middle of the 1950s catalyzed a commitment to fight for racial using nonviolence. Lawson emerged as an expert on Christian nonviolence and effective direct action that could be practiced on a massive scale in the 1960s and became the fitst black leader to initiate tactics in America that most resembled Gandhian campaigns like the siege on the Dharsana Salt Works. Lawson was arguably the first activist in America to effectively combine religious appeal, the tenacity of labor struggles and Gandhian principles of engagement with a lasting agenda for political and

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social change in America:
While Sudarshan Kapur claims nonviolence would not become a tactic to "grip the imagination of ordinary African _Americans" until the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, it was James Lawson training and teaching that fanned the flames of Montgomery's Success. Lawson's nonviolent tactics and philosophies became the catalyst for a movement in the late 1950s, and though Kapur 'argues that the movement ought to r be seen in "terms of a pre-Montgomery and,post-Montgomery model, closer examination reveals that Montgomery did not effectiVely combine the nonviolent tactics and philosophy that characterized many of the the struggles in the movement in the way that the Nashville campaign did. Nashville may in fact provide a better starting place for protest politics in the American movement for racial

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justice. The Nashville movement gave birth to the tactics of massive nonviolent confrontation that defined much of the modern civil rights era, and an examination of James Lawson and the Nashville struggle shows hoW the philosophies and tactics of nonviolence became the catalyst for a movement

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III James Lawson's Theology of Nonviolence and Philosophy of History James Lawson's early life—his family, the influence of the church, his time in jail,
his period in India, and his "experiments with truth" throughout south—provided him with an excellent foundation for defining and teaching nonviolent protest politics. Lawson had come to see the power of nonviolence as a force for social change in the example of Montgomery, and he was eager to conduct another successful nonviolent campaign in a major southern town. In the fall of 1958, Lawson devised a method of resistance to the internal and external demands of Jim Crow by bringing together history, theology and direct action in a way that inspired a group of students to take courageous action against segregation. 81 This chapter begins by focusing briefly on the evolution of nonviolence and continues into a more substantive discussion on the ideas James Lawson used to move students into action.

The Roots of Nonviolence
An Oxford trained Indian lawyer named Mohandas K. Gandhi made the idea of "non-violence" most famous waging battles for citizenship on behalf of Indians living in apartheid South Africa and later in his effort to lead Indians to independence from Britain. Gandhi made a significant contribution to the evolution of nonviolent thought by clarifying what Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy called "non-resistance" in 1893. Tolstoy borrowed this idea from the Gospel of Matthew 5:38-39, wherein Jesus quotes the Hebrew Bible saying, "you have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer ... "82 Tolstoy interpreted Jesus' quote in this way: "I say unto you,' it

81 James Lawson, "An American Gandhi" in My Soul Looks Back in Wonder, ed. Juan Williams and David Halberstam, (2004: Sterling Publishing, New York), 49
82 The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Matt 5:38-39

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is written in the Gospel, 'resist not evil,' do not oppose injury with injury, but rather bear repeated injury from the evil doer." 83 At the heart of Tolstoy's interpretation of this passage is the idea of passivity, the notion, that simply not fighting back is a powerful Christ-inspired witness. Gandhi, however, took aim at this understanding of nonresistance as power through passivity, claiming instead that doing nothing was neither an adequate nor an effective response to violence.
Gandhi advocated a form of active nonviolent resistance that was as opposed to
passivity "as the North Pole to the South Pole." 84 He called this active force satyagraha, which 'is literally holding on to Truth ... Truth-force." He claimed that "Truth is soul or spirit," and that satyagraha "is, therefore, known as soul-force." 85 Truth and God for Gandhi were synonymous, as "Sat or Satya is the only correct and fully significant name for God." The pursuit of God for Gandhi could be achieved only through ahimsa, meaning a lack of violence in both deed and thought.
One can realize Truth and ahimsa only by ceaseless striving ... In the end we see that it is
better to endure the thieves than to destroy them ... enduring them we realize that thieves are
not different from ourselves, they are our brethren, our friends, and may not be punished. But
whilst we may bear with the thieves, we may not endure the infliction. That would only
. induce cowardice. So we realize a further duty. Since we regard the thieves as our kith and
kin, they must be made to realize the kinship. And so we must take pains to devise ways and
means of winning them over. This is the path of ahimsa.86
In this passage, Gandhi points to two elements within the same action. While Gandhi claims we must first "bear with the thieves," refusing to punish them for any suffering we may incur, "we may not endure the infliction." A refusal to "endure the infliction" is the "further duty" duty described by Gandhi. This second duty of resisting the "infliction" is what some

83 Leo Tolstoy, The Kingdom of God is Within You: Christianity not as a Mystical Teaching by as a New Concept of Life, (Rockville, Maryland: Wildside Press, 2006), 17
84 M. K. Gandhi, Nonviolent Resistance (Satyagraha), (Mineola: Dover Press, 2001), 6
ss Gandhi, 3
86 Gandhi, 41

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scholars claimed Jesus intended in Matt 5:39, using the verses which follow 5:39 as eVidence In verses 40 and 41, Jesus states "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wantsZto sire -37'0u and takeyour coat, giye your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." 8 7 Walter Wink, an eminent theologian and author of The Powers trilogy explains the historical context of these passages from Matthew in a way that binds Gandhi's idea of ahimsa to Jesus' reinterpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

. . .

The gospels do not teach nonresistance to evil. Jesus counsels resistance, but without
violence. The Greek word translated "resist" in. Matt. 5:39 is antistenai, meaning literally to
stand (stenai) against (anti). What translators have overlooked is that antistenai is most often
used in the Greek version of the Old Testament as a technical term for warfare...In short,
antistenai means more here than simply to "resist" evil. It means to resist violently, to revolt
or rebel, to engage in an armed insurrection.88
The phrase "resist not" in Matt 5:38, then, means Jesus forbids the use of violence in resistance to evil. It does not counsel passivity in the face of evil. Wink goes on to demonstrate Matt. 5:39-41 are examples of resistance that are neither violent nor passive. Offering the right cheek to someone who strikes you was a refutation of inferiority in the Gieco-Roman world, while offering the creditor who sues you the clothes off ones back functions to shame the creditor. Roman Law permitted peasants to carry a military soldier's gear one mile, but taking it a second mile was a "military infraction." 89 Thus, each of the situations cited by Jesus following Matt. 5:38 are creative methods of resistance to evil that are both active and nonviolent.
Gandhi believed that to live ones life according such teachings required intense
training'and discipline. Gandhi trained his satyagrahis; or students of nonviOlence, to live in community arid required them to take vows before teaching them the practice of ahimsa. The

87 Matt. 5.38-41

88 Walter Wink, The Power That Be: Theology for a New Millennium, (New York, Galilee Press, 1998), 99-100 89 Wink, 100-107

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devotion and training Gandhi required led him to conclude that nonviolence was far from "a weapon of the weak " 9° In was, in fact, "a weapon of the strongest," both more difficult to hone and more powerful than violefiëè:'
It is totally untrue to say that (satyagraha) is a force to be used only by the weak so long as
they are not capable of meeting violence by violence .,. It is impossible for those who are
weak to apply this force, Only those who realize that there is something in man which is
superior to the brute nature in him and that the latter always yields to it, can effectively be
saty agrahis." 91
Satyagraha was "an intensely active state—more active than physical resistance or violence." To maintain the power of Satyagraha required the ceaseless striving and straining that defines ahimsa. 92 "Every problem lends itself to solution if we are determined to make the law of truth and nonviolence the law of life" Gandhi said and in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., by the time of the civil rights movement "Christ gave us the goals and Mahatma Gandhi provided the tactics" to actively dismantle segregation in America.93
Seven African American leaders sought the Mahatma in 1935 on a "Pilgrimage of Friendship" sponsored by Student Christian Movement of India, Burma and Ceylon. Howard Thurman and his wife Sue Thurman led this first delegation of African American leaders invited to India for the purpose of exchanging religious and social perspectives, but Thurman worried he would be perceived as an apologist for a "segregated American Christianity" while traveling in India. He decided to go only after asserting the difference between the religion of Jesus and "American Christianity, which, from (Thurman's) point of view, lacked much that was fundamental to the genius of the faith itself."94

9° ibid, 3
91 Gandhi, 35
92 ibid, 161

ibid, 384. King quote from the Martin Luther King Jr., Strength to Love, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981),
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94 All quotes from Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart, The Autobiography of Howard Thurman, (Orlando: Harcourt and Brace Publishing, 1979), 104

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On Thurman's first night in India the chairman of the Law Club at the Law College of Ceylon confronted him with a difficult question: how could he be Christian when Christians sold black people into slavery, brought black people to a Christian country, held them in slavery as Christians, and freed them not on Christian principles but on nationalist and economic grounds. Burned, lynched and brutalized in the wake of slavery—all by Christians—the man asked "how can you account for yourself being in this unfortunate and humiliating position?" Thurman responded with typical incisive grace:
I think the religion of Jesus in its true genius offers me a promising way to work through the
conflicts of a disordered world. I make a careful distinction between Christianity and the
Religion of Jesus. My judgment about slavery and racial prejudice relative to Christianity is
far more devastating than yours could ever be. From my investigation and study, the religion
of Jesus projected a creative solution to the pressing problem of survival for the minority of which He was a part in the Greco Roman world. When Christianity became an imperial and
world religion, it marched under banners other than that of the teacher and prophet of Galilee.
Finally, the minority in my country that is concerned about and dedicated to experiencing that
spirit that was in Jesus Christ is on the side of freedom, liberty, justice for all people, black,
white, red, yellow, saint, sinner, rich, or poor. They, too, are a fact to be reckoned with in my
country.95
Thurman's delineation between the religion of Jesus and American Christianity became a hallmark of his theological contribution and a fundamental tenant of James Lawson's theology of nonviolence.
With the trip nearing a close, Thurman realized that he had not had a chance to meet Gandhi. He traveled to the post office in Bombay to send Gandhi a last minute telegram when to his surprise a man in a khadi hat approached Thurman with a meeting request from Gandhi. 96 Excited and eager, Thurman traveled with his wife Sue to the ashram at Bardoli to meet Gandhi, a meeting Thurman remembered as the most thorough interrogation of his life, For more than three hours, Thurman answered questions about the long history of African American perseverance from slavery to the brutality of Jim Crow. Well into their meeting,

95 All quotes from Thurman, 113-114
96 Khadi was the homespun Indian cloth that was the symbol for the Indian Independence movement.

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Gandhi realized he had not provided Thurman the chance to ask, any questions and so seizing the moment) Sue Thurman asked Gandhi if he would come to America to teach the wisdom of his political and spiritual philosophy: Gandhi said only after the Indian independence struggle had succeeded would he. "make some helpftil contributions toward the solution of the racial trouble in your country. /597 Thurman then asked Gandhi, "is nonviolence, from your point of view, a form of direct.action?" Gandhi replied,
It is not one form, it is the only form.., without direct active expression of it; non-violence is meaningless...(it is) the greatest and the activest [sic] form in the world...a force which is
more powerful than electricity and more powerful than even ether...Ahimsa means love in the
Pauline sense, and yet something more than "love" defined by St. Paul, although I know St.
Paul's beautiful definition is good enough for all practical purposes. Ahimsa includes the
whole creation, and not only human. one person who exercises ahimsa in life exercises a
force superior to all forces of brutality."
Thurman went on to ask Gandhi how to train individuals and communities in nonviolent resistance. Gandhi replied by emphasizing "nonviolent living...study, perseverance, and a thorough cleansing of one's self of all the impurities." 99 Before finishing, Gandhi left the two with a profound prediction: "He said with a clear perception," Thurman wrote; "it could be through the Afro-American that the unadulterated message of nonviolence would be delivered to men everywhere."loo
In India, Howard Thurrhan discovered the heart of his ministry. "The central question
was: Is Christianity powerless before the color bar? If it is powerless, what do you have to tell us that has any meaning... if Christianity is not powerless, why is it not changing life in your country and the rest of the world?" Thurman realized "a way must be found to answer the persistent query of the Indian students about Christianity and the color bar." 191 Drawing

Thurrnan, 132
98 Kapur, 88
ibid

loo ibid
101 Thurman, 136

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on Thurman's challenge to make American Christianity powerful "before the color bar" and Gandhi's interpretation of biblical nonviolence, James Lawson rose to the challenge by developing an American Ahnnsa lie used to train individuals in nonviolent direct action and theory. He subsequently proved that the Religion of Jesus was in fact a force with the potential to break the back of Jim Crow in America.

James Lawson's Theology of Nonviolence
James Lawson influenced the direction of the modern civil rights movement in the
wake of, the Montgomery Bus Boycott by creating a curriculum for protest that under-girded the demonstrations of the 1960s. After traveling to Nashville in the winter of 1957, Lawson taught C. T. Viivian, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Marion Barry and Bernard Lafayette—among other courageous young people—how they might become leaders in the struggle for civil rights in America Lawson used weekly workshops in 1958 and 1959 to develop practitioners of " a specific form of nonviolent direct action, an American ahimsa, that could be practiced in a mass movement.
Lawson's curriculum was immense. His teaching Spanned eastern philosophy to Writings-on Christian pacifism. From Henry David Thoreau to Leo Tolstoy, Lawson chronicled the history of nonviolence and civil disobedience using Richard B. Gregg's The Power of Nonviolence as a textbook. 1 °2 He focused his workshops on the "pSychological and theological sources for satyagraha love," the sources Lawson had found personally liberating earlier in his life. 103 ,He tied this variety of ideas together with the central concept of justice, claiming the central theme of all religion as the stride towards justice. "Spiritually and
102 Richard B. Gregg, The Power 6INonviolence, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1934) Published in the midst of Gandhr s campaign in India
103 Lawson interview MVC, folder 134, p.11

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religiously, I am absolutely. persuaded that God did not stop working with the human race witKChristianity,” Lawson remarked, and his ability to link examples from the HebreW Bible and The New Testament to a variety of religious traditions enabled him, to teach a group of young, mostly Christian students that the idea of nonviolence was a very old idea. Moreover LawsOn was able to show that within religious diversity there was also commonality.1°4 Perhaps most importantly, Lawson's success as a teacher of nonviolence lay in his ability to devise a set of political tactics that were guided by a host of spiritual principles.
In spite of his emphasis on world religions, Lawson and his students were Christian,
and so like Thurman Lawson was intent on developing an active form of Christianity that most resembled the life and teachings of Jesus. He imbued the group of young ChriStians With the responsibility of making Christianity the most loVing religion it could be: 'We were, unabashedly, biblical and spiritual in our theological and spiritual analysis throughout,"

Lawson clamed. 1 05 So while Lawson's workshops included a number of philosophies a primary goal for Lawson and his students was reclaiming the Christian tradition in fundamental ways. Lawson used the story of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets as a fundamental model for his paradigm of protest, claiming the bible embodied both an ethic of dissatisfaction with injtistice and an ethic of care. "If the bible, if the prophetic traditions of the bible have any value or teaching at all, it is that we do not judge people by their failures or their weaknesses, their sins, their strengths... you judge them by the fact that they're people. And you care for them first." 1 °6 One of Lawson's basic principles, then, was the idea that "a person is never the enemy." This idea emerged from Lawson's ethic of care for all people, including violent Segregationists. TO care for others meant treating others with
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104 interview with Harding, 7
105 ibid, 15
106 Lawson interview MVC, folder 131, p. 14

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esteem and dignity, and so "the key question" for Lawson was "not why are people poor, why are people bad, or why are people black or white. They key question is how do you care for them? Jesus doesn't seem to judge by how we analyze problems but the we go about solving them." 1 °7 Lawson taught his students that the best way to solve the problem of segregation was to resist the evil of segregation while bearing the pain or violence doled out by the segregationist.
Resist the evil without imitating the evil which is, or course, what that passage Matthew 5:38
actually means. It doesn't mean do not resist evil. King James would not permit a translation
of the bible that said you resisted authority and evil, so you couldn't do it, that way. But the
actual language means that you don't resist evil in the way of evil. The actual word there
means an armed rebellion which was very common in Galilee where Jesus grew up. So, the
actual language means you do not resist evil with an armed rebellion; [that] is the better
translation of it by far.1"
Lawson worked with his students to forge a method of resistance to evil that did not replicate hatred but was instead guided by an ethic of care and love.
Lawson used examples from the bible to illustrate what this ethic might look like
when practiced on a massive scale. Lawson described Moses' struggle against pharaoh in Exodus Chapters 6 through 9 as a nonviolent battle, concluding that "the campaign out of Egypt... was basically a nonviolent movement..." 109 He claimed that Moses and Aaron continually preached nonviolent liberation and justice to the Hebrew people 'but they would not hear it because of their broken spirit." 110 This, Lawson taught, was a crucial problem in social movements. The suffering and fear of violence led to a collective broken will for the Israelites, and this, Lawson claimed, was an example of how fear was used in the maintenance of oppression. Such fear was the lynchpin to violence, and so the first step in

1°7 ibid
108 James M. Lawson interview with Harding, 9
109 James M. Lawson interview with Harding, 15. Moses campaign against pharaoh was seen as an example of the application ofbonviolent pressure towards the liberation of a people.
ibid

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preparing his students for nonviolent campaigns required the effective management of fear. "Fear is always of course, a major form of conquest," a conquest of the spirit and the body, Lawson claimed: Mastering feafhecaniefor,Lawson's, students the initial step in resisting the domination that follows fear:
Lam-son's ability to teach biblical nonviolence was the result of his own
understanding of the Bible alongside many of Howard Thurman's ideas.
Howard Thurman in his 1949 book, Jesus and the Disinherited, (described) the gospel as a
survival kit for those whose backs are against the wall. You didn't have any control over the
hostility, but Jesus taught that you can have control over the way you responded to it. You do
not need to respond with an eye for an eye ..you could make a decision, you have the power
of choice, not to imitate the evil, the hostility. Thurman points out that anger, fear, deception
and hatred are the four hounds of hell, often...nipping at the heels of the oppressed. Any
number of black preachers in the movement especially worked on that very hard."'
Thurman's "Religion of Jesus" became for Lawson a model for those attempting to throw off the cloak of oppression "without losing their humanity or betraying their souls." 112 In Jesus and the Disinherited, Thurman reminded readers that the life and teachings of Jesus took place in an occupied nation, and that Jesus' preaching was directed at showing people how they could resist domination of their spirit. Thurman argued that Jesus recognized the need for a spiritual solution to the cycle of fear, deception and hatred that dominated the psyche of both the hating and the hated, and for this reason 1 st century Palestine and 20th century America both posed "the problem for creative survival" on the part of the oppressed.111 Thurman rejected violence as useless, futile and imminently expected by the
dominating party and maintained that only a nonviolent response could embody what he defines as the cunning "psychology of Jesus."' 14 Nonviolence, he argued, defies the

111 James M. Lawson, interview with the author in July 2007
112 Vincent Harding in the foreword to Howard. Thurman's Jesus and the Disinherited, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996)
113 Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 34
ibid

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expectations of the dominating party. "If a man knows precisely what he can do to you or what epithet he can hurl against you in order to make you, lose your ternpet, your equilibrium, then he can always make yoLt lo ge your temper, your equilibrium, then he can always keep you under subjection." 115 Violence works because it is calibrated to invoke a response of fear, which leads individuals to assume that violence is an effective form of domination. Black people in America, he argued, having faced the constant specter of having "no available and recognized protection from violence" end up constantly confronted by fear. "Violence," Lawson said, "was of course the effort of the 'enemy' to scare us off. Violence has a very simple dynamic: I make you suffer more than I suffer. I make you suffer until you cry uncle. And.you surrender. That's what a war is It's violence. The difference with nonviolence is, we don't want to beat the opponent up. We don't think that does any good." 116 Lawson taught his students the importanCe of mastering fear, but most critically, he taught them about fear's role in cycle of violence.
Lawson showed his students that nonviolent direct action could defeat the fear of
personal harin that resided within an individual and simultaneously demonstrate an ethic of care for an attacker. Fear of violence, Lawson contended, was a natural reaction. But mastering fear under the threat of violence became for Lawson and his students a kind of experiment. "When...I get pinto a situation where there is hostility or there is an effort to bruise and or reject, it's More of a challenge and an opportunity to see what can happen..." To keep from lashing out Lawson encouraged his students to maintain an abiding faith driven by Thurman's model of Jesus. This strategy, Lawson claimed, could only emerge from a

115 Thurman, Jesus and the Disinherited, 28
116 James M. Lawson Jr. in A Force More Powerful, DVD, directed by Steve York (2000, Washington, D.C. York Zimmerman Inc., 7000)

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"deep sense of personal identity and security—inner security.'.' Lawson claimed this inner security meant rarely could external threats ever be truly threatening. 117
Lawson was also clear'abotif,the:cost of Continuing to abide by segregation.
Conformity to the laws of segregation, even under the threat of violence, meant that a person remained a participant in their own fear and oppression. "Oppression always requires the participation of the oppressed," he argued, and while on the surface "the Negro...continues to deny consciously to himself and to his children that he is inferior ... each time he uses a colored' facility, he testifies to his own inferiority." 118 Lawson showed his students that to truly defeat an inner sense of inferiority required much more than an outward demal of inferiority. Instead, a decisive and courageous action was needed, and such action could not be spontaneous or whimsical. As prescribed by Gandhi, such action should result from training and discipline.
Lawson claims that his ideas about nonviolent resistance are directly in line with the biblical tradition:
My contention is that when Christians talk about, 'it's political,' then they obviously haven't
decided that there is anything like the Kingdom of God, or the- politics of God, or the
economy of God, or the sociology or the ecology of God. They have compartmentalized their understanding of theology and faith. Politics means to me the dynamics of building the
community of faith and :justice- and liberty where the institutions are moving towards
community and where every man and every woman and every child is respected as a child of
God. "9

According to Lawson segregation was a dehumanizing system in which African Americans participated in their own oppression. Thus the only means of defeating segregation, was to master the fear of violence by refusing to cooperate with Jim Crow. Courageous nonviolent, action, the ceaseless striving that Gandhi used to describe ahimsa, was the strategy that

117 Lawson interview MVC, folder 134, p. 7
" 8 Lisa Mullins, Dianne Nash: The Fire of the Civil Rights Movement, (Miami: Barnhadt and Ashe Publishing, 2007, 18
119 Lawson interview with Harding, 17

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Lawson devised. Using the story of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets Lawson created a theology of biblical nonviolence to inspire students to action by placing them in an ongoing history and drama of human liberation.

Lawson's Philosophy of History: A Nonviolent Narrative for America
James Lawson taught his students that civil disobedience had been a powerful force throughout American history. America, he claimed, had been impacted by "ordinary citizens" who have "affected and stimulated those elements" required for social change, and the tactic of nonviolent direct action had been the most powerful tool used by Americans to shape the nation. I20 Lawson argues nonviolence in American history has been subsumed in the "traditional narrative" because it does not conform to the domination mentality of "pushing the Indians back," or "taming...the wilderness," or "the wars against nations."12I Most Americans have suffered this misunderstanding of history and as a resulted concluded "the King approach (to nonviolence) was Indian." Lawson calls this "an appalling kind of ignorance," because while American nonviolence may have had similarities to the Indian independence movement, the American philosophy and practice of nonviolence was in fact rooted in the history of change over time in U.S. This recasting of the American historical narrative enabled Lawson to show his students that nonviolent action was a fundamental part of the American tradition.
Lawson claims "aggressive (nonviolent) action (from) people like Roger Williams
and Mary Dyer" is responsible many of the civil liberties enjoyed in America today. "In fact, the first religious liberty ordinance, the first religious liberty right or resolution was passed

120 Lawson interview MVC, folder 131, p. 7
121 ibid

by the Virginia assembly. It was proposed by Patrick Henry, and Patrick Henry is supposed

to have come to that position because he heard Baptist preachers in Virginia preaching in

jaiL,,122 Lawson cites the story. of Mary Dyer,, a.Quaker hung in the Boston Commons

because she refused to stop practicing her religion, as a vivid depiction of the power of

nonviolence in early America.

Every time they kicked her out (of the colony), she came back ... You see, people don't
realize the extent to which, in actual fact, the patterns of law in the United States came about
by virtue of people who acted in creative civil disobedience and or created demonstrations of
one kind or another.123

Lawson cites the movement for the free practice of religion in early America, the labor

struggle of the early 20 th century, and the American women's suffrage movement as evidence

that "American society has been shaped by essentially civil disobedience."124

The American Revolution alone was incomplete in Lawson's estimation because it

did not produce the major rights we enjoy today.

Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of peaceful assembly ... Those freedoms
came about through the people in the colonies who resisted the established church idea, who
resisted bringing King George's censorship of the press over here, and who resisted the idea
that the country was going to be organized around a military order. Freedom of religion
especially, was established through the protest of the people...slavery became impossible to
maintain in the 19th century because the abolitionist movement...all across the north and parts
of the Midwest... all kinds of people (were) protesting slavery. 125
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In the period between the wars of the 20th century, Lawson evidences the success of CORE in

Chicago alongside the "the experiences of black people in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and

New York where they prevented Jim Crow railroad cars and carriages by basically

nonviolent methods." 126 For Lawson, nonviolence has been a fundamental force in the

nation's development.

122 ibid, folder 131, p. 6
123 ibid, folder 131, p. 7
124 ibid

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125 James M. Lawson Jr. interview on CSPAN, 2000

126 Lawson interview with Harding, 15. For a discussion of CORE see Chapter 2

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In his workshops, Lawson used examples outside of the U.S. to assemble a nonviolent narrative of world history, He would create case studies using "the nonviolent experiences of people from India to Europe, to South, Africa..., Lawson would use stories from history

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"that indicated both the risk and the sacrifice that you had to make as well as the discipline of nonviolence." 127 His goal in defining history this way was "to point out...that (nonviolence) was not something new, and it wasn't something so foreign to the American Scene [sic]. But that really, its possibility for social change, for establishing justice...hadn't really been tapped or studied or explored." 128 Because nonviolence had not been refined as a technique but rather was used informally for decades, Lawson continually emphasized constant experimentation and creativity for refinement. Using examples from his own life of the lives Of people he knew he would show how experimentation could lead to small victories or conversions. In one example; Lawson wished he had used creative nonviolence instead of suffering a beating. In 1957 he was in Detroit during a campaign to integrate barbershops. He sat dOWn in a white barbershop until "after some angry shouts (the owner) jUstsiniply attacked me and dragged me out.'' Afterwards, Lawson thought: "another form of resistance...might have been...rather than sit there and let him do it, I might have...run around the chair, stay out of his way, and not let him touch me." Lawson thought it would have been "real funny" to play a game of keep away around the barber chair 129
Lawson used lessons like these to show his students that throughout history,
individuals had worked towards the creation of a moral "Jiu-Jitsu," a creative and nonviolent

way of resisting evil or oppression. t3° He stressed "again and again that when we talk about

127 Lawson interview with Harding, 14
128 Lawson interview MVC. 143, p. 11
129 Lawson interview MVC, folder 132; p. 14

130 Jiu-Jitsu being Japanese for "the superior way."

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satyagraha or nonviolent resistance, we're talking about men putting their wits, their minds, their spirits to work by developing superior ways of overcoming enmity and the enemy." For Lawson, nonviolence was creative or nothing at all. But creativity should not be confused spontaneity. Lawson taught his students they were ',scientists in a laboratory," and an examination of creative experimentation was as critical as the experiment itself This notion of examining creative experimentation after period of preparation is the crucial process that for Lawson produces nonviolent possibilities. This is why Gandhi characterized satyagraha as a weapon of the strong will and creative mind. Nonviolence was in fact a "superior way," both more effective and more difficult to learn than violent resistance because it reflected the ability of humans to adapt to survive. This ability to adapt rather thari to overpower is the prope description of the survival of the fittest, and Lawson argued this "capacity of life to adapt and to adjust and reason, balance and respond" is at the heart of nonviolent practice. Seen this way, Lawson concluded that though informally practiced nonviolence had been the most powerful force throughout history. 13

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From Tolstoy to Gandhi to Lawson and King we can observe innovations and
corrections that strengthen the power of "soul-force." Lawson's essential correction to our understanding of nonviolence was the assertion that nonviolence is an effective means of self-defense. Rather than an invitation to suffer bodily harm or death, nonviolence could in fact be used as a defensive posture. Lawson taught his students to remain upright and forward facing when responding nonviolently to violence. Recalling his athletic days, he said
I knew that if I receive a blow, I wouldn't want to be laying on the ground curled up...you
could be severely injured that way. There's not very much you can do to protect yourself that
way, because some people can bend over you and strike at will, or they can use their feet on
131 Lawson interview folder 132, p. 17

you, or clubs. When you're standing up, this is one the reasons, why police use clubs, it's
remarkable how little fatal injuries, how few fatal injuries are going on...If a man pulls his
club out... if he pulls it down and you're standing up here (Lawson is illustrating here) he
can't do the force as if you're over here or down here, you see. He can't really smash you
with the force that he can if, you're standing with your height, and he's standing with his
height. He can't really muster all.of his might 'on you. 132
Lawson showed that nonviolence was a practical form of self-defense. "My whole point has been that the self defense mechanism is not one of covering up. That is a way is hiding. My own thesis, has been to try to face the opponent. It's my contention that it's much more difficult for the average human being to do evil against you if he's looking at you in your face and your eyes." Nonviolence requires a face-to-face confrontation with the aggressor, a defensive posture. "I maintain, I've always maintained,, that when people talk about self-defense they ignore the fact that we have built in mechanisms by which we defend ourselves. And what you're really talking about is developing that form that best preserves one's life."

133 Nonviolence, in Lawson's estimation, had proven a better means to maintain survival than violence and was in fact a superior form of self-defense.
Because nonviolence figured so prominently into history, and because it represented a
way "superior" to violence in its ability to win change and provide for self-defense, Lawson concluded that he and Dr. King represented the best of the American tradition. He attempted to prove that as a process of change over time, civil disobedience had been a hallmark of the American story and he used this history to illustrate the potential for an American ahimsa. But while nonviolence has assumed a significant portion of the American story, Lawson claims it is a mistake to assume that black culture, much less mainstream American culture, has accepted nonviolence as a fundamental force of history. "Nonviolence has never really been accepted as such, as an approach either tactically or philosophically," rejecting the idea

132 Lawson interview MVC, folder 132, p. 12
133 All quotes from Lawson interview MVC, folder 132, p. 12-13

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that black people accepted nonviolence early in the movement and gave it up after the rise of black power in 1966. 134 He calls the NAACP's tradition of nonviolence t`passivity," and
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rejected the idea of integfkion'threitigh court decisions and legal battles as a false peace. "The definition most Americans have Of nonviolence is that you get hit in the face and you take it, you don't do anything." 135 This is perhaps Lawson's most critical contribution to the modern movement: he recognized that nonviolent direct action had never been taken seriously as a political, philosophical and spiritual strategy for liberation in a mass movement in America, and so he illustrated this method's roots in history and its ability to empower people to actively engage injustice.

Conclusion
The teachings above constitute some of the foundational principles of JameS
Lavvson's workshops on nonviolence. His workshops were for a group of students preparing to fight Jim Crow beginning with the desegregation of downtown Nasvhille, Tennessee. These students, according to Wesley Hogan, were the proof that in 1960 "Lawson began to serve as a central pivot by which ideas about equality moved into action in the American South." 136 Lawson's trainings were essential in providing not only the tactics but also the vision for what was possible if Jim Crow fell. The vision Lawson inspired in his students was the "beloved community," a community which American Baptist Theological Seminary student John Lewis "immediately felt...defined his own vision" for what might be if the

134 Lawson interview !YEW, folder 134, p. 3
13 ' ibid, folder 131, p. 6
136 Hogan, 20.. See also pg. 22--31 for a discussion of why segregation is immoral and the importance of practiCing non-violence over revolutionary violence. See also an extensive discussion of Lawson's workshops, a source second only to John Lewis' deScription in Walking with the Wind. See also Hogan "Movement. Ecology" pp„ 229 on Lawson's ability to mobilize tenants of the Judeo-(ihristian philosophy.

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restraints of segregation were broken. "In training for nonviolence," Lawson said in 1959,

"study, discussion, and fellowship" became core components of the participant's time

together' ogether and historian David lialberstam has dem6nstrated that this fellowship amongst the

Nashville students led to the forging a ",beloved community" amongst the core groups of

demonstrators in Lawson's workshops. These ideas resonated throughout the years:

The Nashville movement, did of course, affect the entire movement in the country and in the
South. Martin King called out movement the model movement up to that time. Eventually,
any number of us served the SCLC staff, including C. T. Vivian, Diane Nash, Jim Bevel, and
Bernard Lafayette became director of nonviolent education for the SCLC ..Jim Bevel,
Betnard Lafayette and Diane Nash in particular became identified with the larger struggle for
social justice and peace here in the United States...so the Nashville scene perhaps more than
any other single scene, with the possible exception of Montgomery in 1955-56, became ..the
most significant movement in terms of its ongoing effect across the country.137

In Nashville, James Lawson showed students how to file their grievances against Jim Crow

at lunch counters instead of court rooms. He also showed them they could win.

137 Bobby Lovett, The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 155

IV. Nashville in 1960: The Nonviolent Battlefield

James Lawson came southin the winter of 1957 for the express purpose of creating a "model" of protest that could be used in communities across the south to achieve the federal and local success equivalent to that of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and 1956. Lawson had "immediately recognized the Gandhian liberation potentials of the bus boycott and its leader" Dr. Martin Luther King. Jr., and he was inspired by the success of the first successful grassroots, nonviolent movement for racial justice in the United States: 38 Lawson wanted to use the Bus Boycott as an inspirational model for how nonviolent demonstrations might be effective in America:39
In those years, since I was stationed in Nashville, we had to develop a model that could stand
next to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, (a model that) could demonstrate the feasibility of a.
non-violent approach.. That in fact was our intent in Nashville, it was the intent of the
Nashville Christian Leadership Conference, and FOR supported me in saying that I had to
make an example. I had to show forth what non-violence could do. And we could not afford
to have the Montgomery bus boycott as a pieCe apart from itself. That was a very critical
decision that Kelly Miller Smith and C.T. Vivian made because the Nashville movement was
the catalyst for much that went on the rest of that decade. 140
In Nashville, Lawson devised and taught principles and strategies of nonviolent confrontation that were intended to establish a paradigm of protest that might be used in other southern communities. The following chapter will examine the Nashville campaign, offering a glimpse into the ways in which Lawson's teachings took hold amongst the Nashville students. Thus, while the Montgomery Bus Boycott proved inspirational for nonviolent protest in the movement Nashville became the "nonviolent laboratory" for young civil rights

138 The busy boycott was successful in the sense that it earned validation from the Supreme Court when the court ruled that segregated seating on busses was unconstitutional. Lawson hoped "to introduce people to the meaning of Montgomery." Vincent Harding in introduction to Veterans of Hope, 3
139 Lawson Interview, MVC, folder 34, p:11
14° Lawson interview with author. July 2007

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activists developing an American Ahimsa. The Nashville student movement might be seen as the model for nonviolent direct action protest during the modern civil rights era.

James Lawson's Role in Nashville
John Lewis remembers that James Lawson had come to Nashville with a mission: he
was intent upon "indicting the people of the south who are mistreating us and visiting violence upon us and trying in every desperate and despicable way to deny us the dignity and the rights that belong to every human being. ... Our governmental system is on trial," he claimed, asking honestly, "is this the land of the free, or only the land of the white free?" 141 Lawson's workshops, detailed in chapter three, were intended to provide students with the tools needed to publicly place Jim Crow on trial in Nashville. The workshops were the product of a coalition of groups concerned with developing a strategy of protest that might be applied across the south, and Lawson was paid by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and supported by the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC) to train students in nonviolent action. 142 Tennessee Civil Rights scholar Bobby Lovett shows that after a trial workshop in March of 1958, the NCLC encouraged Lawson to begin teaching his workshops regularly. 143 In mid-1958, Lawson was appointed the "social action leader" of NCLC and in the fall of 1958 he began teaching three hour workshops weekly with the support of the FOR, SCLC and the NCLC at the Rev. Kelly Miller Smith's First Baptist Church.144

141 Lovett, 122
142 Bobby Lovett, The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005),
159
143 Lovett, 164
144 Wesley C. Hogan, Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 19

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In his memoir, Walking with the Wind, Lewis recalls the first workshop. "Even before
he began speaking, I could see there was something special about (Lawson). He just had a way about him, an aura of inner peace and wisdom that you could sense immediately upon seeing him." 145 Lawson outlined for his students an ambitious agenda: "We took the whole group through a holistic view of nonviolence. Its history, its roots in the bible, its roots in Christian thought, the methods of nonviolence; we told the stories of nonviolence. And I stressed the Gandhian idea of our being engaged in an experiment." 146 Lawson told the Nashville students that they were a part of an ongoing experiment to establish justice through nonviolent means, and he prepared to lead and execute a Gandhian campaign in Nashville. The first step, he explained, was choosing a target. Through what Lawson called a "non-violent scientific method... investigation, research and focus," the group "settled on an issue."' 47

Lawson sent students to investigate the policies of each downtown business to assess
the quality of treatment. Usually, the interracial teams would purchase goods from a department without a problem, but when they asked for service at the store's lunch counter they were refused service. Most businesses cited a company policy that forbade serving African Americans. Workshop participants agreed that this was an unjust and chose as their target for desegregation downtown Nashville's department stores, setting as their initial goal the desegregation of the lunch counters. "That of course was the first Gandhian step," Lawson recalled, "the first step of nonviolence. To research and examine and focus on an issue. Choose a target." 148 Lawson then drew up plans for the winter workshops based on

145 Lewis, 75
146 James Lawson Interview by Steven York on video A Force More Powerful, 30 minutes.
147 Hogan, 17
148 James Lawson, Steve York interview 31 minutes.

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their goal. The emphasis on strategy and planning emerged from Lawson's understanding that Gandhi required intense training of individuals for participation in active nonviolent campaigns. Such training, accordiiig to Gandhi, was required to develop the discipline

necessary to wage nonviolent war against segregation. 149 "You cannot go on a demonstration with twenty five people doing what they want to do," Lawson said.
They have to have a common discipline, and that is a key word for me...the difficulty with
nonviolent people and efforts is that they don't recognize the necessity of fierce discipline
and training; and strategizing; and planning; and recruiting and doing the kinds of things you
do to have a movement. That can't happen spontaneously. It has to be done systematically.'5°
Lawson began his work in Nashville by systematically laying the foundation for a movement. Lawson's workshops were not simply concerned with the creation of a socio-drama in Nashville that would draw the attention of the nation. Vincent Harding contends that Lawson, "as a leader ... places people in positions to use whatever talents and skills they have ... to develop these even further." 151 Lawson was teaching his students "to live up to their own best possibilities," a trait which Harding says is "the mark of a master teacher and master organizer." 152 Lawson was intent on training nonviolent people, not simply nonviolent activists, that could witness to nonviolence as a way of being in the world. Seen this way, Lawson was creating a group of students capable of embodying an ontological ideology. "We wanted people (to participate) who could see (nonviolence's) spiritual and moral base and want to experiment with nonviolence as a way of life." 153 Lawson used his

149 On the theory and practice of satyagraha, Gandhi says "prolonged training of the individual soul, is an absolute necessity, so that a perfect satyagrahi has to be almost, if not entirely, a perfect man," 35
159 James Lawson, Steve York Interview
151 James M. Lawson interview with Harding, 4. Dr. Luther Ivory notes that James Lawson was amassing, assessing, utilizing and developing the talent required to create a successful nonviolent campaign in Nashville. 152 Harding, 4
153 Harding, 14. Lawson was based in Nashville but traveled extensively, carrying this ideology across the south. This goal is perhaps most evident in the extensive traveling Lawson did to teach the practical and spiritual dimensions of nonviolence. "I traveled extensively with...the first workshops on nonviolence, calling Negroes essentially to the movement in places like Nashville, Little Rock, Memphis, Jackson, Mississippi,

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philosophy of history to provide the students with a sense of urgency that affirmed the importance of committing to nonviolence. The workshops were about forming individuals who could respond nonviolently to even the most difficult circumstances. They were effective, for as Lovett notes "the students were eager to transform their studies into some `protest demonstrations.'" 154 Lawson would soon lead his modern satyagrahis into battle in Nashville.155

The Nashville Movement: A Nonviolent War

James Lawson used his nonviolent workshops to prepare students for a war against segregation in Nashville. With theology of nonviolence and philosophy of history as his foundation he taught tactics that were both effective and nonviolent. Nashville proved to be the perfect place for such a campaign because unlike many southern cities, segregation was not written into law but was instead preserved by the threat of violence. Scott McDuffie argues "Nashville was a perfect starting point for Lawson...because it was a city where it was possible to break the back of Jim Crow without launching an expensive and time-consuming legal battle.156
A fight outside the legal system, however, meant a fight in the streets, and only later
did John Lewis understand that Lawson had prepared the students for a potentially long and bloody battle. "Jim Lawson knew--though we had no idea when we began--that we were being trained for a war unlike any this nation had seen up to this time, a nonviolent struggle

Columbia South Carolina, Charlottesville, Virginia, Anniston, Alabama, Savannah, Georgia. I led and conducted, sponsored always of course, by some local group...by some local people (workshops on nonviolence). James M. Lawson interview, MVC, folder 134, p. 3
154 Lovett, 123
155 On satyagrahis, see note 154
156 McDuffie, 36

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that would force this nation to face it's conscience." Lawson prepared the students to practice nonviolence but made clear their adversaries would probably not be nonviolent. He illustrated, though, how a carefully planned and executed nonviolent responses to overt violence could be redemptive, how nonviolence could change the perspective of the attacker. The students began to understood their actions as movements towards the "beloved community," which Dianne Nash called "a community recovered or fulfilled, a community that could become more of what its potential was...a community that gave to its citizens all that it could give and allowed its members to then give back to the community all that they really could." Lawson's philosophy of history was in fact the story of individuals striving towards community, and Lewis remembers describes the power of this move towards community
as inexorable, as irresistible, as the flow of a river toward the sea. Wherever it is interrupted
or delayed by forces that would resist it—by evil or hatred, by greed, by the lust for power, by
the need for revenge—believers in the Beloved Community insist that it is the moral
responsibility of men and women with soul force, people of goodwill, to respond and struggle
nonviolently against the forces that stand between a society and the harmony it naturally
seeks. 157
While Lawson taught that Christian nonviolence might lead to the creation of such a community, Nash was initially skeptical. Lawson maintained that only through experimentation and action would students be persuaded and indeed, Nash concluded "it was only in the process of using it that I finally became convinced." 158
Before moving to nonviolent direct action, the students had to seek continual
negotiation with business owners in order to avoid alienation or surprising confrontation. This was the second step in a Gandhian campaign. The Rev. Kelly Miller Smith and James Lawson visited downtown merchants and asked them to voluntarily desegregate their lunch 157 Lewis, 78
158 All Nash quotes in Lisa Mullins, Dianne Nash: The Fire of the Civil Rights Movement, (Miami: Barnhadt and Ashe Publishing, 2007). P. 18

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counters in mid-November of 1959 but the stores refused to repeal the company policy of segregation. The students, however, were eager for action. The NCLC remained sympathetic to the students position, to their desire for action. They embraced their role as "different from the NAACP," and as Lawson claimed, "the Christian Faith should dictate the things we do," not simply respectable politics. In November, as direct action seemed increasingly to be the method used by the students in their desegregation campaign, the NCLC named Smith co-chair of the projects committee and Lawson was named strategist.159
On Saturday, 28 November 1959, Lawson's students began their tests of segregation
in Nashville's downtown stores. Like the stage of investigation, an interracial group of about a dozen students purchased a few items at Harvey's department store and then sat at the lunch counter and asked for service. The manager refused the group service and the students left the store without incident. Lawson recalls that these early sit-downs were "to allow people to test themselves, but also for us to find out who was responsible for the decision regarding de-segregation and to see how the protesters were treated—and if possible, to talk to a manager or a policy maker in each of the places." 16° On Saturday, 5 December 1959, an interracial group of 8 students peacefully walked in to the Cain Sloan department store and asked for service at the lunch counter. They were turned away, and the store manager cited the company's policy of not serving African Americans at the same counter as whites. For the students, these early tests confirmed a number of points. First, segregation was private company policy rather than public law and second, it Lawson's students gained a clear sense of what they were up against.

159 Lovett, 123
160 ibid

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Lawson recalls that after the experiments were concluded, "we shared our
information and experiences with each other and then we waited until after Christmas to start back up again." The Nashville campaign had not yet passed from the stage of investigation and preparation to action when four students at North Carolina A&T College would "electrify the nation" with their bold rejection of Jim Crow through a somewhat spontaneous

sit-in at a Woolworth's on 1 February 1960 in protest of a segregated seating policy. 161 Not knowing how to carry forward the momentum of this early demonstration, the Reverend Douglass Moore in Durham, North Carolina called his friend Jim Lawson. Lawson seized the opportunity to catalyze the momentum generated by the North Carolina sit-in and organized a meeting in Nashville on 10 February 1960. Nearly100 students gathered in the Fisk Chemistry auditorium and agreed to begin the Nashville sit-in campaign on 13 February

1960.

Lawson recalls the first day of the Nashville Sit-ins:
It went very well. The police were orderly, the managers kept people from congregating
without shopping, and the police did the same thing. There were plainclothes detectives, so
for those two weeks the demonstrations went on with complete smoothness, well organized
without a hitch, we had observers in the streets. Will Campbell [a white civil rights activist]
had put together a number of other white observers to be present every time we sat in, in case
we needed witnesses—so we had that organized. Others of us walked from place to place and
kept our eyes on things. 162
The Nashville police commander stated his perception of the first sit-ins: "I went and asked each and every one of them separately to leave. They didn't leave, so I instructed the men to place them under arrest. We placed them under arrest. When we cleared the stools, some more colored boys and girls and white boys and girls sat on the seats." 163 John Seigenthaler remembers the novelty of the first sit-in: "we knew it was a news story, but we didn't really

161 Hogan, 20 See also discussion of Gandhian non-violence
162 Lovett, 125
163 Nashville Police Commander in A Force More Powerful

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know how to cover it." 164 But as the sit-in movement in Nashville gained momentum it became clear that neither the sit in nor the students were going away. Lawson maintained close contact with local officials and store owners as the protests continued: "we...were staying in touch with the pulse of the community...with the official government, police especially, and we were staying in touch with managers and merchants." This contact, in fact, led to a number of breakthroughs. "We had uncovered by this time a number of friends in the merchant community downtown. We discovered that Harvey's Department Store was owned by a group in Chicago and...they were interested in making changes that could be made." By contrast, the Cain Sloan store was locally owned and more resistant to desegregation. The sit-ins continued alongside these negotiations and on 18 February, the largest sit with more than two hundred participants took place. Two days later, three hundred and fifty students sat down.165
The sit in on 27 February 1960 marked a turning point for the Nashville campaign.
Some in Nashville's white community had become irritated that the students were making downtown into an "un-pleasant" place to be. Many from the white community wanted the demonstrations to end, and seeing that arrests were not working they employed a new tactic. During the sit-ins on 27 February, the police allowed white toughs to respond to the demonstrators in whichever way they chose, and many chose to beat the students participating in the sit-ins. As students were pulled from their stools and beaten, new waves of students rose to take their place until by nightfall the Nashville jail was full: by the end of what was called "Big Saturday," nearly 200 arrests had taken place. I66 Big Saturday is an

164 John Seigenthaler in A Force More Powerful, DVD, directed by Steve York (2000; Washington, D.C. York Zimmerman Inc., 2000)
165 All quotes from Lovett. 125
166 Lovett, 125-126

especially significant chapter in the Nashville story because it is perhaps the first time that force of nonviolence clashed with the force of violence in a public confrontation. Lawson's students relied on the drama of the beatings to awaken the conscience of Nashville's citizens to the injustice of segregation and the violence required to maintain Jim Crow's code of behaviors.
On Tuesday 1 March 1960, the students shifted their focus from the intensity of the downtown lunch counters to the Greyhound Bus Terminal. Sixty-four students were arrested at the bus terminals as the police kept a close watch on the downtown lunch counters.167 Four demonstrators at the Greyhound terminal were beaten with special severity because the demonstration was perceived as "a conspiracy to obstruct trade." 168 The sit-ins in Nashville had become a major local issue, but they were occurring concurrently with sit-ins across the South. A list of instructions had been copied and distributed in Nashville and other cities where sits were taking place but intersingly enough, they had been typed out by Nashville's own John Lewis. Nevertheless, The Nasvhille Banner newspaper's owner James G. Stahlman concluded that because these directions had appeared in cities outside Nashville, the city's sit-ins were "an organized effort projected from outside sources." 169 Lawson had been the student's instructor, the movment spokesperson and was a recent transplant in Nashville, and so much of the blame for the sit-ins landed in his lap. The Banner claimed [Lawson] was sent here deliberately to create trouble and was planted in the Divinity School
at Vanderbilt as a sanctuary behind which he could pursue his nefarious enterprises with the
least suspicion and subsequent penalty. He is a fraud of the first magnitude. There is no place
in Nashville for flannel mouth agitators, white or colored.170

167 Houston, 26
168 Townsend Davis, Weary Feet, Rested Souls: A Guided History of the Civil Rights Movement, (New York: W. W. Norton Publishers, 1998), 350
169 Houston, 26
179 Lovett quoting the Banner, 129

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This accusation against Lawson was fairly new in the rhetoric against civil rights
leaders. The idea that "outside agitators" were creating problems for local people would become a common complaint leveled at Dr. King and other national leaders throughout the 1960s, but Lawson's ability to apply pressure to the political structures using protest politics– a novel method for civil rights in 1960—infuriated many whites in Nashville largely because it was effective. The events of Big Saturday led Nashville Mayor Ben West to agree to a meeting with the NCLC. While the NCLC has suggested no media attend the meeting, West asked reporters to cover the gathering, an invitation that soon proved problematic for Lawson. The day after the meeting, he was quoted in The New York Times as saying "the power structure" in Nashville was "try[ing] to end the sit-downs without considering the morality of the issue." He went on to say "the law has been a gimmick to manipulate the Negro and keep him in his place in the South." The next day, the Nashville Banner took Lawson's quote from its context and wrote that Lawson had advised students "to violate the law." Lawson responded by saying that he had never "advocate[d] lawlessness or the incitement of riot" as this was "contrary to my own understanding of God's call to me in the Christian ministry."171
Still, the damage had been done. The controversy led to James Lawson's expulsion
from The Vanderbilt Divinity School by chancellor Harvey Branscomb, a move that appaled most of the Vanderbilt faculty. Lawson was an exceptional student in good standing with the school, but the Banner simply concluded that "Vanderbilt did its duty." 172 When friend Will Campbell encouraged Lawson to sign a letter of withdrawal, he refused. "I did not anticipate

171 Lovett, 129. See also Paul Conkin, Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University and Halbertsam's The Children.
172 ibid

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being expelled from Vanderbilt, but when it happened against my will and wish, nevertheless I went on with my life. I held no towards (Chancellor Harvey) Branscomb as a consequence of my expulsion." 173 Many of the faculty at Vanderbilt were disgusted by the decision, which was, in Lawson's view, a pivotal moment for the school. "The question was what each of us was going to do. To emerge from being a Southern finishing school to become a viable university was the course it had to take." The faculty threatened to resign en masse if Lawson was not re-admitted, a backlash that Houston characterized as a "mini-drama of personalities and internal conflicts" which "hurt the school's reputation for years."174
Lawson would only continue to pay for his role in the Nashville movement. On 4
March 1960, Lawson was arrested "on charges of conspiracy to obstruct trade and commerce" by the Nashville police. Police entered Kelly Miller Smith's First Baptist Church, handcuffed Lawson, and drug him to a police car out front. Many had gathered to make sure the police did not "accidentally shoot Lawson" while he was being arrested and a photo captured the fitting words posted on the sign in front of First Baptist quoting the passage from scripture which Rev. Smith intended preach from that Sunday. It read simply, "Father, Forgive them."175
As the Nashville campaign approached Easter, movement leaders increased the
pressure on downtown store owners by calling for an economic boycott of downtown stores. While the boycott escaped the view of most Nashville residents—niether the Banner nor the Tennessean covered the boycott because of the papers dependence on advertisement sales— the boycott was nevertheless successful. A Fisk economist reported that the boycott enjoyed 173 Lovett, 129-130
174 Houston, 29
175 Lovett, 130

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a participation rate from blacks in Nashville of nearly 98%, and that sales were down by as mush as 40%. 176 The white backlash to the boycott, including threats of lynching and open racial violence, only further alienated whites from downtown Nashville. This violence also alienated many whites from the cause of segregation. These nonviolent tactics continually shifted the public spotlight to the immoral and unjust behavior of segregationists attempting to enforce behaviors for blacks. The student's actions served to illustrate that segregation simply was no longer just. In Lawson's mind, the boycott was especially powerful not simply because it led to a drastic decrease in sales for most store owners, but because it allowed for the whole community to be participants in the movement. Because that's one of
the things that we in the nonviolent world always teach, namely that in a nonviolent
movement everyone can be a participant. Children can participate, women can participate,
men can participate, young people, old people. Everyone can do the work."177
The Nashville campaign reached its climax on 19 April 1960 when black Nashville attorney Z. Alexander Looby's home was bombed. Looby had assisted the demonstrators with legal representation throughout 1960, and though he was not hurt in the bombing a silent march was organized to draw attention to the violence. Beginning with just under 1,500 people the marchers numbered nearly 4,000 by the time they reached city hall. Upon arriving at City Hall student leaders confronted Nashville Mayor Ben West. After a heated exchange between West and C. T. Vivian, a prominent civil rights leader in years to come, Dianne Nash intervened: "I asked the Mayor, first of all, Mayor West, do you think it is wrong to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of his race or color," to which West responded: "I could not agree that it was morally right for someone to sell (African Americans) merchandise and refuse them service. And I had to answer it just exactly that 176 Houston, 33
177 James M. Lawson in A Force More Powerful. Ben Houston reports that because the lunch counters accounted for 40-50% of total sales for a store, black buying constituted between 5-15% of most downtown Nashville store profits. "With the combination of sit-ins and boycotting," he writes, "economic pain rippled throughout the city." Houston, 34

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way." 178 With Mayor West's statement, the tower of cards that was Jim Crow policy in Nashville suffered a fatal blow.
Ben Houston writes that rather than a crash, the end of segregated seating in
downtown Nashville came as something of a murmur. "On May 10, at 3:15, carefully selected African Americans purchased a bite to eat at six stores, waited on by white servers and sitting next to white patrons." 179 The NCLC had made an agreement with the downtown store owners that included voluntary desegregation so long as the public desegregation was not advertised or boasted. They agreed that the organization Church Women United would provide volunteers to ensure that no violence followed this humble desegregation and no incidents were reported. The struggle to desegregate downtown Nashville had paid off, and for a time, downtown life began to resume something of a normal character. Nashville had voluntarily desegregated its downtown lunch counters after constant negotiation and nonviolent pressure had been applied in a strategic manner. The students had achieved the goal they set out to accomplish a year before, and no one had been killed in the nonviolent battle that took place.
James Lawson recalls the novel nature of the Nashville campaign:
The city and police were ill-prepared for a mass civil disobedience effort. They had
anticipated that once the violence took place and the arrests began, that our movement would
dissipate, would be chased away. Because that's the purpose of doing the violence and it's
the purpose of doing the arresting. Its hopeful that then whatever this is will vanish, and
that's the end of it. That didn't happen.m
As the campaign in Nashville neared its end on 20 April 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated his support for the movement. King praised the Nashville movement, calling it "the best organized and the most disciplined in the southland...I did not come to Nashville to

178 All quotes from A Force More Powerful
179 Houston citation needed
180 James M. Lawson in A Force More Powerful

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bring inspiration but to gain inspiration from the great movement that has taken place in this community... [S]egregation is on its deathbed now, and the only uncertain thing about it is

the day it will beburied. 7 181 -Was the site where active rebellion against Jim Crow sounded the death knell for segregation. Unlike Montgomery, where a boycott had been the predominant tactic, nonviolent direct action led to voluntary desegregation on the part of local business owners. James Lawson had created a movement and tactical ideology that other nonviolent civil rights leaders would draw inspiration from.

Conclusion
Wesley Hogan described the Nashville students as "young people armed with a
dream." Hogan's assessment is accurate, but more importantly. Nashville's students were young people armed with an understanding of how to employ the force of active love to demonstrate violence was the force used to maintain racial segregation in Nashville. From the beginning, James Lawson reminded his students that they were proving the efficacy of nonviolence. He told them they had "an opportunity to analyze non-violence, to analyze what we were doing, and to learn more about non-violence. I went to many of those (workshops), and tried to persistently help people keep their focus on the nonviolent anvil, so that practical problems were discussed around a nonviolent ethos." Lawson saw the Nashville movement as an opportunity to develop a paradigm of protest that was hinged on nonviolent confrontation, and he steeled the character of his participants for battle. Hogan argues that because the Nashville students were "grounded in shared experience over a long

181 Ernest MI Limbo, "James Lawson: The Nashville Civil Rights Movement,'" in The human Tradition in the Civil Rights Movement, Susan M. Gfisson ed., pp. 157-179, (2006: Lahman, Maryland Rowman and Littlefield Publishers); 176

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period," they had developed the "internal strength and cohesion as well as a fierce determination to act despite dangers, which drew others in the first year after the 1960s sit-

9 9

ins began.' 182 The students used the- idea of interracial community both as a model of protest and as an emblem of what they aimed to achieve.
Wesley Hogan claims that Lawson's workshops mustered the "non-violent muscle to
kill Jim Crow." Indeed, the Nashville campaign marks the first time in American history when Jim- Crow was defeated by determined and courageous nonviolent direct action. Whats more, the desegregation came voluntarily from business owners. As Scott McDuffie argues, Nashville had something Montgomery did not: the campaign was defined by active resistance to segregation rather than an abstinent refusal of cooperation. Lawson provided the missing ingredient needed to inspire students to risk their lives by providing them with a sense of purpose and timing that extended beyond their own life and times. "Your idea is not small," he told them, "and because your idea is not small your numbers will not be small either." He showed his students that because their cause was just and true, and because the forces arrayed against them were immoral, a basic equation could be deduced: "The greater the injustice, then the greater the force of the idea which opposed it." Using a philosophy of history and a theology of nonviolence as the cornerstone for carefully crafted nonviolent tactics, James Lavvson taught his student how to live their ideas.183

182 All quotes from Hogan, 30-31
183 All quotes from Hogan, 43. In Wesley Hogan's words, "Lawson confronted the final hurdle (to massive direct action}--moving people to act."

Conclusion: "A Lot of Nonsense Over a Hamburger?" 77

Conclusion: "A Lot of Nonsense Over a Hamburger?"
On Friday 15 April 1960, 200 student activists from all over the American South
gathered at Shaw University at the behest of Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) executive director, Ella Jo Baker. Their agenda was both simple and profound: the students sought to channel the momentum of the sit-in movement—a movement that had taken southern cities by storm in early 1960—and coalesce that energy into a nationally organized effort with a clear philosophy, The Reverend James M. Lawson Jr. opened the conference that Friday night with a speech that encouraged the students to seize their moment in history. "Very few of them had heard of Lawson," wrote Taylor Branch, "but his keynote address on the first night created a mass of instant disciples."184
"Reflect how over the last few weeks," Lawson began,
the 'sit-in' movement has leaped from campus to campus, until today hardly any campus
remains unaffected...The rapidity and the drive of the movement indicates that...American
students were simply waiting in suspension; waiting for that cause, that ideal, that event, that
`actualizing of their faith' which would catapult their right to speak powerfully to their nation
and their world.

Lawson's speech imbued the students gathered that evening with the zeitgeist of their. collective action. He claimed the student's efforts as "a witness not to be matched by any social effort either in the history of the Negro or in the history of the nation." 185 For the first time in history,. Lawson observed, African American women and men were in open rebellion against Jim Crow. "Is it just a lot of nonsense over a hamburger?" he asked, "or is it far more?" With his next statement he challenged both the students and those at the vanguard of the movement--namely the NAACP--to reconsider the goal of the unfolding struggle. "[I]f

184 Taylor Branch, "America in the King Years, 1954-63," (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 291
185 James M. Lawson, Jr., "From a Lunch Counter Stool," address at SNCC conference, Raleigh' N.C., April 1960 in A History of Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century, August Meier, Elliot Rudwick and Francis L. Broderick, eds., (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Printing, 1978), 308-309

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the students wanted a legal case, they had only initiate a suit. But not a single city began in

that fashion...the sit-in movement is not trying to create a legal battle, but points to that

which is more than law." Lawson told the crowd that the students sought more than the

opportunity to sit at an interracial lunch counter and have coffee; Lawson claimed the

movement's goal as making God's will for human unity a reality. "The Christian favors the

breaking down of racial barriers because the redeemed community of which he is already a

citizen recognizes no barriers dividing humanity. The Kingdom of God, as in heaven so on

earth, is the distant goal of the Christian. That kingdom is far more than the need for

integration."186

Before the conference closed on the 17 April 1960, the delegation of students voted to

approve the Temporary Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee's Founding Statement.

James Lawson drafted this statement, which provided the theoretical backbone for the

student protest movement of the early 1960s:

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our
purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it
grows from the Judaic-Christian tradition seeks an order of social justice permeated by love.
Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.
Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.
Love is the central motif of non-violence. Love is the force by which God binds man
to himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving
even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even
more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.
By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence,
nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual
possibilities. 187

The adoption of this statement constitutes a critical moment in American history, a moment

in which the swells of protest thought in the black community and the evolution of American

186 ibid, 310-312

187 James M. Lawson, Jr., "Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Statement of Purpose," in Black Protest, Joanne Grant, ed., (New York: Random House, 1968), 273. See also Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 23-24

non-violent theory catalyzed into a practical agenda for Americans battling Jim Crow. It was Lawson who demonstrated to the students that theirs was a movement built on the ideas and actions of past generations struggling-to be free: Lawson showed them that they stood up for the best in the American tradition. "Eventually our society must abide by the Constitution and not permit any local law or custom to hinder freedom or justice." Lawson challenged the students to use the tool of nonviolence to destroy the barriers that separated people from one another: "The extent to which the Negro joined by many others apprehends and incorporates nonviolence determines the degree (to which) the world will acknowledge fresh social insight from America." The future of America, Lawson claimed, depended on the nonviolent efforts of the burgeoning student movement188
SNCC's founding statement and Lawson's speech constitute the pinnacle of
nonviolent praxis in 201h century America. 189 While African American leaders for decades had taken nonviolent action, engaged in reflection, and struggled to decipher an effective method for dismantling Jim Crow, James Lawson perfected this process through personal practice and devout research, developing a theology of nonviolence, a philosophy of history and a set of tactics that he taught to a generation of student activists. 196 James M Lawson became the fulcrum upon which decades of black religious protest thought, nonviolent confrontation, and American experimentation with nonviolent direct action tipped towards a decade of social, cultural and economic revolution in the United States.

189 'Praxis is defined as the active practice of a set of knowledge or skills. In theological studies, praxis is often used to define action taken after a period of reflection and refinement.
199 Wesley Hogan has advanced Our understanding of Lawson's contribution more than perhaps any other scholar. She captures Lawson's most basic contribution here, his ability to help people move from idea to action: In Lawson, King saw a superior mastery of the crucial democratic skill of training people to move from idea to action." Hogan, 9

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