

“We Had Set Ourselves Free”

Lessons on the Civil Rights Movement

By DOUG SHERMAN

I was 15 years old when I began to hate people. I hated the white men who murdered Emmett Till and I hated all the other whites who were responsible for the countless murders Mrs. Rice had told me about and those I vaguely remembered from childhood.

— Anne Moody on the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955 in *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968).

What happened in Selma was more than getting the right to vote. We first had to set ourselves free. After 300 years, we had to set ourselves free. That’s what Dr. King was telling us, when he said we couldn’t stay on the sidelines, that we had to get out and march. In Selma, getting the right to vote didn’t set us free. No sir. In Selma, we got the right to vote because we had set ourselves free.

— Rachel West Nelson, describing the victory in Selma in 1965, when she was 9 years old, in *Selma, Lord, Selma: Girlhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days* (1981).

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT lies at the margins of my memory. For today’s high school students, it is a generation or more distant. In spite of good intentions, when the new year brings the anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday and Black History Month, school activities often reduce the Civil Rights Movement to a scenario of “heroic leader and brave followers.” Less often explored is the experience of those whose everyday lives

intersected with the struggle, and who responded with the kind of life-changing decisions that formed the heart of the movement.



Associated Press

The 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago boy visiting relatives in Mississippi, spurred many young people into activism in the Civil Rights Movement.

The autobiographical narratives from which the above quotations are drawn move from headlines and textbook accounts to particular choices young people made during the Civil Rights Movement. Anne Moody describes herself in 1955 as a girl who “didn’t know what was going on all around.” Through fear, anger, and pride, she learned and she changed: “Before Emmett Till’s murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was Black.”

My high school students learn about the murder of young Emmett Till as I tell his story: that he was from Chicago, visiting relatives in Mississippi; that he was taken from his uncle’s house in the middle of the night and killed for allegedly saying “Bye, baby” to a white woman in a store; that his killers were acquitted.

As a class we then begin reading Chapter 10 of *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Moody’s account of the impact Till’s death had in her community. Her friends talk among themselves: “What I mean is these goddamned white folks is gonna start some shit here you just watch!” Her mother warns her to play dumb with the white woman she works for: “You go on to work now before you is late. And don’t you let on like you know nothing about that boy being killed before Miss Burke them. Just do your work like you don’t know nothing.” Mrs. Burke tells Anne the lesson she should learn from Till’s murder: “He was killed because he got out of his place with a white woman.”

As a class we discuss the themes in Moody’s story. I then ask students to write for 15 minutes about an experience that reflects one of those themes in their own lives. The stories in their writing are powerful and varied: Many of my students relate to the fear of physical violence; many have experiences of degradation because of race, class, and gender, or because of age; many sense that they possess “dangerous”

knowledge and attitudes, and have to “play dumb” much of the time. As we write and then tell each other our own stories, we compare them to identify common experiences, and see the ways that what is felt as private or individual experience has a social context that can be explored and understood.

The 1955 Till murder occurred at the beginning of the grassroots “civil rights” period of the larger struggle for racial equality, and it is dealt with extensively in the first episode of the television series *Eyes on the Prize—America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*, titled “Awakenings 1954-56.” Viewing this segment after reading Anne Moody’s account, the documentary

perspective of *Eyes on the Prize* puts the Till murder in a wider perspective. Myrlie Evers of the Mississippi NAACP office, and widow of murdered Medgar Evers, recalls: “The Emmett Till case was one that shook the foundations of Mississippi, both Black and white. With the white community because of the fact that it had become nationally publicized, with us Blacks because it said that even a child was not safe from racism, bigotry and death.” (Hampton and Fayer, 1990; p. 6)

Rachel West Nelson was not yet born when Emmett Till was killed, but at age 9 she and her 8-year-old friend Sheyann Webb found themselves drawn to the movement in Selma. On her way to school one morning in early 1965, Sheyann was passing the Brown Chapel AME Church. Although she saw a gathering there, she went on:

I started to cross the street, headed for school. A car went by and I waited. Then for reasons I can’t explain, I just turned and went down the sidewalk to the church. I knew it was probably wrong. But it didn’t feel wrong. Something inside me just told me I belonged in there, that what was going on inside there was more important than school.

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Sheyann skipped school for most of the next three months; she became a “regular” in the Selma voting rights movement.

Perhaps the idea that there are more important things than school is itself “dangerous knowledge,” but it is certainly a truth most of my students accept. Webb’s decision offers a chance to discuss that truth in her life and in theirs. In deciding whether to skip class or to do their homework, for example, my students balance doing what’s “officially” right against staying with a friend who is upset, a suicidal friend, a friend in trouble; against making spending money, helping support their families; against attending a county commission meeting on homeless youth.

Not all decisions involve what adults might consider “constructive” alternatives, but they are part of students’ lives. Unless we accept the reality of the choices students face, we can’t credibly invite them to consider the reality of the choices those in different circumstances of history, gender, class, race, and culture have faced. The magnitude of the decisions do not have to be equivalent for students to find in their own experience a foundation for a broader perspective on history and the social world and their relationship to them.

Among the many other issues *Selma, Lord, Selma* makes available for the classroom, one of the most riveting is the courage those in the movement showed in the face of violence. Different incidents and different sources can be used to develop this. The shooting of Jimmie Lee Jackson by a state trooper in neighboring Marion, Ala., brought the danger home to Rachel much as Emmett Till’s death had to Anne Moody. “‘Shey,’ I said, ‘This is real bad. If they can shoot somebody over there, then they can shoot somebody here.’” (p. 77)

While most of those martyred were Black, some were white. Soon after the first Selma march was turned back, the Rev. James Reeb from Boston was viciously beaten; he died a few days later. Sheyann writes about hearing the news:

I knelt down beside Rachel and we prayed to ourselves for awhile. I didn’t cry. I just kept thinking how even though he had been white, he had been one of us, too. I kept thinking that he had come to help us, just because he was a good man who couldn’t stand by and watch injustice continue. (p. 115)

Both these incidents are detailed in “Bridge to Freedom 1965,” the sixth episode of the *Eyes on the Prize* PBS series. (It also includes footage of Rachel and Sheyann from both 1965 and the mid-1980s.) After viewing parts of this

episode, and reading excerpts from *Selma, Lord, Selma*, students are well-prepared to write their way into an imaginative world of historical fiction. As an introduction to their writing assignment, I suggest some possibilities: As the sister or brother of Jimmie Jackson; the son or daughter of James Reeb; what might you write in a letter to your favorite cousin in Detroit? What might relatives of each write together in a two-voice poem about the meaning of the deaths? How

might those deaths have been covered in a Black newspaper in Philadelphia, Pa.? A white newspaper in Jackson, Miss.?

Forces of unjust authority, greed, violence, and hatred are powerful and can feel overwhelming. The courage and determination of those who resist, and of those whose form of resistance must be endurance, nourish our hopes. At the same time, identifying real victories, large and small, is important, and the

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Civil Rights Movement for equality under law did achieve major victories. From our vantage point now, seeing such progress in racial justice under attack, we can look at the odds activists faced then, at their courageous decisions, and take inspiration. Fourteen years after Selma, Sheyann reflected: “I’m just so happy that I could be a part of a thing that touched our souls. I am so proud of the people who did something

in 1965 that was truly amazing. We were just people, ordinary people, and we did it.” ■

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Resources

Hampton, Henry and Fayer, Steve. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s*. New York: Bantam Books, 1990.

Moody, Anne. *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. New York: Dial, 1968.

Webb, Sheyann and Nelson, Rachel West. *Selma, Lord, Selma: Girlhood Memories of the Civil Rights Days*. New York: William Morrow, 1981.

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