

FATHER MAURICE OUELLET

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MYSTIC, CONNECTICUT

OUELLET: You more know what you want actually or in what direction you want to go. I can get fairly...and talk about a whole lot of things off the subject. So I'll let you guide the discussion here and...whatever is important for you, you know.

S: Okay. Had you heard about Jon Daniels before you actually met him?

OUELLET: Yes, I think I first heard of him through my curate, Father who was down there. He told me that he had met Jon and Judy, and I just recall this vaguely, but I remember him telling me this. I had not met them. He met them before I did, and asked them to stop by the house sometime. I guess they had asked about me, and so he said, "Drop by and Father would be glad to see you." And that's when I met them. But I really heard through him that he was in town and this is all I had heard. Really in this whole thing I must confess that when I first met Jon I wasn't particularly impressed by the whole situation and for this reason. This was after a whole lot of other people came. As you know, we had people running in and out, and we had all kinds of people running in and out, and so the fact that somebody was around that was interested--so he was one in a thousand, you know. That didn't particularly interest me. So I really didn't pay it much mind. And when Father told me this I recall very precisely I said, "Oh, yeah, sure," sometime," and I didn't really think much about it any more. I figured well probably sometime I'll say hello, but I wasn't going to go out of my way for the thing. I just bumped into somany people. I spent hours and hours and hours talking to people who wanted to know the local situation. So many people, along professional lines even--Justice Department men who wanted to get the feel of the local situation, every newspaper reporter that ever walked into Selma would wind up in the office. And then just interested people from different organizations would come and they'd hear my name and they'd want to come over and talk. So I had had it up to my ears. And so I wasn't really too much interested I knew that both Jon and Judy were fairly young. There were a lot of young people around and a lot of them didn't know toomuch what they were doing, and so until I met these--met people and was actually able to size them up, I lumped them all in one group and said well, they're all interested but they don't too much know what they're doing. So this was the reaction to Jon. The one thing that kind of set it apart when I first heard it was that he was living in the community, in fact he

was living with a parishoner of mine, the West family. So right away this struck me because I knew the financial condition of the Wests, and I knew that Lonzie (sp?) West was not a great lover of white men, and so that and the fact that he would be living in the negro community and living with the family kind of struck me as something--over a period of time that he was doing this--struck me as rather unusual. That somebody should be willing to do this.

I met him I think the first time after mass one Sunday. He began--and that's where I first saw him, I think, was in the congregation one Sunday. I looked down and saw a collar sitting there, and then I made the tie-up in my own mind that this is who it must be. And he had come to mass with the Wests. I guess he used to do that. He would go probably to St. Paul's on Sunday, and then come down to our place. And he did it with a fair amount of regularity.

S: So yours was a parish church, is that right?

OUELLET: Right. See, there were two Catholic parishes. There is one actually in the negro section and one in the white section of town, and mine was the negro parish within the negro section. And so I met him after mass I think it was the occasion when I first met him, he introduced himself and I said hello. It was kind of a passing thing because I used to meet everybody as they came out of the church on Sunday. Sometimes it was my only opportunity to talk to certain people during the week. And so he didn't stop or he didn't tarry to make conversation. He said hello and he introduced himself. I knew he was living with the Wests. He had some of the children with him. And so I kind of let it go at that.

S: What was the name of the church?

OUELLET: St. Elizabeth's.

And then he said to me, and I don't know if it was on this occasion or another occasion, I just remember his saying it and I can't localize it at all. He said something to the effect that he so much enjoyed the ceremony or he enjoyed the liturgical service because he felt part of it, and I remember he had his missal in his hand--whatever occasion this was, and I looked at it, and as I said before, my knowledge of other faiths is rather limited and I was startled at the similarity to our own missal which really shouldn't have startled me, but I just found it so very similar. In fact as I recall, he forgot the missal at the rectory. We got to talking whatever occasion this was, and he forgot the missal because I had it for about a week. And it was lying on my desk. So, but he did mention then how much he did enjoy it, and how much he felt a part of the ceremony. In this letter, and probably I'm jumping a little bit ahead of time, but one thing that he said that I will always remember was that--he mentioned it in that letter--

was that he felt that the time he was in Selma that I was his pastor. He found this strange himself, but he felt that this was the community. This was the negro community. He could come and worship with this community, and I was the pastor of the negro community, whereas in the white community this was not the community in which he was living really. They were outside of the negro community, and since there was such a split between the two, he felt like an alien there. He went out of loyalty I think and out of a desire probably to help fuse the two communities and yet was probably a little--er, aware of the fact that such a fusion wasn't very close to accomplishment. So that he did feel that this was his church, that he could come here and worship and be a part of this Christian community. And I was rather proud of that, really, at the time, that he would say that even though he himself was not catholic that he considered himself--er, considered me his pastor. It was a nice touch, part of that gentle touch that he had I think.

S: And obviously true, you know, because he got no acceptance by his own church there.

OUELLET: Yes. I remember feeling at the same time myself, he would come and he would participate in the worship and sing the hymns and follow the mass, say the prayers of the mass with the people and yet could not come to communion. I remember thinking to myself how sad that was. Was it really necessary? Maybe that shouldn't be quoted, I don't know, but I remember thinking that at the time. Here is a man who felt so much a part of the community--maybe I could tie up a story with that. One of my very elderly parishoners who came and had attended a service held at Brown Chapel by an Episcopal priest and they had come down to our place to get vestments and so on. They couldn't get them up town. So they had vestments and whatever they needed for mass from us. And so then they took the vestments and so on and went over to Brown Chapel. I think it was Brown Chapel--and said mass. And one of my elderly parishoners was there. And one of my other parishoners came and said, "Did you notice so and so was at the service and that he went to communion." And I said, "Is that right?" And so I called ^{him aside} ~~later~~ the next time I saw him and I said, "You know, I heard you were at the service up town and that you went to Holy Communion." And he said, "Well, it was just like being at mass at our place," and I felt so much a part of it I had to go to Communion." And I was saying, well probably some day it will happen but right now it's just not within the discipline of what we do, you know, and so you better not do it. But I weighed that with this thing here that Jon felt that--I think he felt that he would have liked to participate more fully in the thing and yet because of the disciplinary measures which are enforced he could not do so.

S: It certainly points up the connection between Communion and community.

OUELLET: Yes it does. And when you live as a Christian, you know, isn't this the thing? That a Christian community exists and people live Christianity. Then doesn't the disciplinary part of it kind of fall into place where it belongs. It's no longer paramount, which it shouldn't be. It's Christianity. I think it's the whole basis of ecumenism. Probably this is getting away from the point a little bit, but my relationship with people of other faiths has been limited, particularly as far as ministers or priests of other faiths and had been up to this time quite limited. I have known people of other faiths, worked with them and even in Alabama and developed some close relationships--friendships--but never with clergymen. There always seemed to be this bar between us. And you know that bar just melted completely during these weeks. It was to me the greatest ecumenical moment possible. I think probably in terms of interpersonal relationships among these clergy, this was the greatest thing in ecumenism in the United States. People lived ecumenism. You had to live this ecumenism. I recall one meeting we had in the house. I had called this meeting very innocently, and I understand that some of the men were quite upset. The clergymen got quite upset. They thought I was trying to pull something without their knowing it. And they came kind of with fire in their eyes demanding to be admitted to this meeting. And I was quite taken aback that they should feel that they had been denied. I wasn't trying to pull anything. So they came in, and the meeting proceeded, and I think they were a bit chagrined. They came with a real chip on their shoulders and it had to melt. And subsequently one of the men who was there who was quite high up in one of the denominations sent me a \$500 check from his own church for the courtesy that had been extended by way of food and so on by our parish to the people of his denomination who had been there. So in action really it--a thousand words or days of words would not have brought this about. Christian charity had to exist if we were going to accomplish anything, and they all saw it very quickly...So I think all along the line...

But getting back to Jon, after I met him and talked to him, the first thing that I think struck me about Jon was his idealism and his youth. I thought he was younger than he was. Jon looked very young. I thought he's real young, you know. And I had no inkling as to his intellectual ability at all. Judy was with him, and Judy was very quiet. I've learned since that she's quite an intellect in her own right, but you know Judy doesn't say much. She just kind of hangs back and very quietly observes a whole lot of things. So I was bothered by this fact and wasn't terribly impressed. I'm trying to be very candid about this thing. I was not terribly impressed, and I thought here's a good kid who wants to

do well, but he's like a thousand other kids who really doesn't know what the story is all about. Jon and his idealism--probably not so much from his idealism but from his own thorough Christian commitment was shocked by the lack of Christian communication and the lack of Christianity between the whites and negro. He was shocked by the reception he had received at the Episcopal Church uptown and by the minister and the people involved. He was himself very emotionally involved and affected by the treatment that negroes received at the hands of whites. He couldn't visualize it, that one human being could treat another human being this way. In saying this, my own reaction is, buddy, this is reality. This is what happens. This is what people do to one another. We're fighting against this. But I have been living with this for so many years and to see this young fresh mind aghast that this could be, well, I guess I just got a little paternal about the whole things, and said, well, you'll learn with time. And even his relationship--and this here I suppose would have to be--don't quote this at all--but his own relationship with the Wests, now I know the Wests, and I know the problems that existed within the family and so on, and I was not too optimistic about the solution of some of those problems. Just off the cuff, even though this is on paper, I'm sure you wouldn't quote it. Well, Lonzie is for all practical purposes an alcoholic. Lonzie not too long before this, I had gone over to the hospital because some gal had shoved a knife in his gut when he had been drunk someplace. And so the atmosphere--there's some real fine kids in the family, but oh, as far as the parents are concerned, they've stood one another I don't know how. But it certainly wasn't the great Christian family. And Jon was very idealistic about doing something about this, and realistically there was just no chance. So I kind of felt I had a babe in arms here who wants to do what is right and yet doesn't quite know what the score is. And so this was the first impression. And so I bumped into him here and there, and then I would hear about things he was doing. I was concerned. I was concerned in this respect that I thought--I'm not saying this from hindsight--I said to myself, this guy is going to get himself in trouble. He can get himself hurt because he doesn't know what the score is. And this was a common problem at the time of the demonstrations. I spent most of my time trying to guide people because most people didn't know the dangers that were there. Jon had no idea the dangers he was facing. Jon would walk down the street carrying a little negro child. Well, man, you just don't do that. Somebody will kill you. He didn't know this. And so I thought to myself, you know, he'll hurt himself but what worried me most is that he'll hurt the people that he is trying to help, and this you can do sometimes in this type of thing. You can expose these people to danger, physical danger, in trying to help them. And I saw it happen so many

times. Like I remember one day, the demonstrations were on then. This was down in the project where Brown Chapel is and where Jon was living. A young white girl, tall blond very nice looking girl, was walking down through the main drag holding hands with a negro boy. And I went up to them and I said, "Hun, don't do that." And she looked at me and as if to say, "What do you mean, don't tell me what to do." And I was saying, "Well, maybe you don't care, but do you want to see him get killed? Leave him alone." She was just in all innocence trying to show that she was not going to treat a negro any differently than she would treat a white boy. And this is as it should be. She should have the same freedom and the ability to hold hands with a negro boy as she should with a white boy. But in Selma you just don't do it for his sake. He could wind up real dead. So this is the type of thing I worried about for Jon. Here he was living first of all with a negro family, and in all innocence he didn't know what Lonzie could have done to him at any time. He subsequently found out. He came to me and talked to me about it. He'd gotten into an argument with Lonzie over the way Lonzie treated his wife. Well, it could only go from bad to worse. Lonzie could end up shoving a knife into him in a drunken rage or something. So Jon then was a type of person who saw no evil and walked in just wide open. And really this is what got him killed. Very simply. I would never have done what Jon did, and I say this not to say, well, Jon shouldn't have done it. Jon did what Jon had to do. And I say I wouldn't have done it. Probably I would lack the courage to do what he did. In my own rationalization I would say I would know better than to do what he did. I would never have gone into Hayneville, and the reason I wouldn't go into Hayneville under the conditions that he did is that his chances were very good of being killed. How much aware of that he was I don't know.

S: You mean Lowndes County, more than Hayneville specifically?

OUELLET: Yes. In Lowndes County, to go in, I would go in as a white man, civil rights man or someone interested, as a group, a fairly large group, but to go in in just a small group like this. See, Jon didn't know what that hate was. He doesn't know how deep it is. And he didn't know I don't think that men could kill for this. As I understand the story told, when Coleman called something to him, Jon turned and said something to him.

S: Yea, he said, "Are you threatening me?"

OUELLET: Well, man, that was all he had to say to him for that man to pull the trigger. I'd have been long gone myself, not because I want to be bullied by a thing like this, but just because, realistically, I know there would be a good chance of being dead as a result of saying this. And I wonder--you know, Jon

his openness to people, whether he realized the danger he was putting himself in. I'm sure he had some inkling of it, because he'd been there long enough and been --in fact, I'm sure when he was in jail, the reaction of the cops in the jail, the hate that emanates from some of these men I'm sure he had felt it already.

S: Well, Mrs. had been killed, James Reeb had been killed. I'd think that that would have--on the other hand sometimes you live in a world where it can't happen to you.

OUELLET: I think that's probably it. I go back to one thing he mentioned, and I don't remember the exact details of it, but on his trip down, he came down once and went back up, and he and Judy were driving together, and they stopped in some little woodsy place one night to pick up a sandwich or something. I don't know what it was, get some gas. And started a discussion with some white men who were there and acknowledged what they were there for. And I remember telling them that night--that was the night we had a long conversation--I said, "Jon, you/it just don't do things like that." I said, "They could have left the two of you for dead, you know." And he was looking at me puzzled as if this--and I don't remember the exact conversation, but it seems to me that I can remember that this didn't quite sink in or he found this kind of strange. I was telling him something new when I said this. He was aware that they weren't pleased, but I was saying to him, "Jon they kill people for things like this. You just don't do this kind of thing." Keep going, man, stay out of those places." Especially having Judy with him. "They're looking for people like you," you know. So, this was my first reaction and for that reason I wasn't too anxious to get involved. I thought he was going to have to learn some things while he was there and really as far as a common effort was concerned I didn't really know exactly what he was doing in the work that he was trying to effect there. I hadn't talked to him to find out what he was trying to do, except live in the community and be concerned, and so, I said no more. So that was about the extent of our personal contact initially. The only other thing--the only other knowledge I had of him was through parishoners. Two of the littel West girls who used to work at the house. They would help cook with the dishes, set tables and stuff like that. This was Alice and Mella, who were the two girls in high school, and I've known them since they were babies. And they used to--they'd talk about Jon once in awhile. Jon had been here, there, I don't even remember much of what they said. That was about it, or I would see him--I would be driving through the project or something like that and I would see him with some kids. That was about the only contact I had.

And then there was this one evening he came to the house for dinner. And we talked at great length. I guess more I talked at great length. We had dinner with the rest of the men who were working with me which probably lasted about

an hour or so, and then we went into the sitting room I had and just sat and talked for a couple of hours. I think we just talked about the--some of the things, like I've just been describing--the mentality of the people, and he told me some of the things that had been happening at the West house, you know. They were troubling him. And things were not going so well. The problems that existed in the family, and so I tried to give him some background about it and what he could expect.

S: Was this last summer or was this in the prior to his going back to ETS?

OUELLET: That was prior to going back. I never saw him last summer. I was gone. I left in July, so I never saw him. He came right after I left. So, this was prior to that.

So, then I guess the conversation was pretty much one-sided in that he asked some questions about how I felt about working in the community, how I had come to be involved in it, what had prompted me to work with negroes and what was my reaction now and what did I like about it or dislike about it. And what had been my experience in working with negroes--the initial days of--I kind of gave him a history of the movement as it has--had--progressed when the SNCC workers came in first, and then how we had formed an organization for negro leadership, the demonstrations of 1963 when some of the kids were jailed and what happened in those days. And the problems we'd had at mass meetings and the relationship with the police, etc., etc., the whole bang! All the way through. So it was kind of just a reminiscing over the whole civil rights movement as it had progressed in Selma.

Then he told me of some of his plans of what he intended to do, why they were going to go back. In fact, this was not long before he'd left to go back. They were about ready to go back I think in a few days. Then he said he would be in touch with me. And then he said, and I had no idea of what he meant at the time, he said, "When I come back, there is something I very much want to discuss with you, I want to talk over with you, and can we get together then." And I said, "Yes. Be glad to. We can talk at length." And he just said something about "Well, it's concerning the ~~church~~ spiritual life and some of my thinking about it." Just wanted to talk about things spiritually. And he said, "I have no one else that I can talk to around here and maybe we could sit and talk." And I said, "Fine. Get in touch with me when you get back."

So then he went back up north and I heard from him, a short note saying that he was getting ready for his exams, I guess, that all was going well, and that he was looking forward to coming back. And so I answered the letter. In fact, I answered at his home, I believe. He had gone home to see his mother, and I think

I addressed the letter to his home. And in the letter I told him what had gone on since his departure, as I recall. I don't recall the letter much to tell you the truth, except that it was more than just a short note I think. And very simply mentioned once again that when he got back we could get together. And that's when I got his return letter. And he waited some time to answer. So, then I got this letter which must have been about ten pages--five sheets--it wasn't large stationery, and on it, as I recall, as best as I can recall, he mentioned how more than ever he was convinced that he had to return to Selma and how important this was to him as a person. That the involvement with his fellow Christians on this level had added new dimension to his life and that he felt compelled really to return. That mainly the letter concerned itself with entirely new avenues that were opening up for him, whole new horizons that he saw in his life as a result of his involvement here. The closeness that he achieved with people, people with whom he had been living and other negro people in the community. He mentioned also the fact--well, we had talked at some time about the--my own--relationship with the white ministers in our conversation that we had before he left that night. What happened in fact between the ministers and myself--he had posed the question, "Have you tried to get these ministers to help you? Are they working with you?" And I gave him a history on this, how we had tried and failed miserably, and how I had hoped somehow we could reestablish communications. How possibly in the throes of involvement I just had not had the time to try to reestablish some type of communication with these men and try somehow to get them to commit themselves to some course of action in this as leaders in the white community.

S: Did you know the rector at St. Paul?

OUELLET: I had met him. To say that I knew him, no. I think he knew my name. He knew who I was by sight but that's all. We had never sat and talked...I don't think he would have consented to talking to...

S: How do you analyze the unwillingness of...?

OUELLET: Well, probably I missed the boat. To go back a little bit on this, how this came about. When the demonstration was started--this was early in 1963--I went to Birmingham to see our home Bishop ^(sp?) and to talk over the situation as it was developing in Selma. And Bishop Dureck and also there was Bishop Tulle (sp?) . And the Bishop was certainly in favor of my taking part in voter registration program and so on. And I told him what I was doing and what I hoped to accomplish and he gave me the go ahead. "Go ahead and do it," he said. Bishop Dureck (sp?), who was his auxilliary then, called me aside and ~~said~~ said, "You know, what you want to do

in the community, if you are going to get the community together, is try to do what we did in Birmingham, is get all the ministers together and try to get a common front, try to get them at least to issue a statement." Well, my reaction was, "I don't think much of statements." I saw all the statements they made in Birmingham. A lot of people got...down, and four little girls got killed, so in my book you could make statements until hell freezes over and I just don't think they're worth that. And yet he recommended this very strongly. I felt that since he was an auxillary Bishop the least I could do was to try. They had been very willing to allow me to go ahead in what I was doing, was to pursue this thing which was his recommendation. So I went back home and wrote a letter to every minister in town of every white church in town and asked them would they be willing to meet to talk over this situation because it was becoming explosive and possibly we could do something to avert real tragedy in the community. And I just sent them a little note saying "please check if you will come." Nope, that wasn't it. I set the night for the meeting and told them a meeting would be held and we would be very glad to have them. But this was a personal letter to every minister. Some twenty odd letters I sent. One showed up--two showed up, excuse me. One Lutheran minister who was pastor--well, actually, they ran a Lutheran Academy for negroes. So he was the only other white man like myself in town who worked exclusively with negroes. He showed up. Trying to remember his name...Rev. Elwanger. Tremendous man. I'll tell you a little story about him later that's quite interesting. But anyway he came and then one other minister who came, and I don't recall his name. The name that comes to mymind is...I don't think that's it, so this probably doesn't have muchworth without his name. But anyway, he has a real bug on communism. He's constantly writing to the newspapers about communist takeover in our country. And he came that night and when the meeting started there was just Rev. Elwanger and myself, my curate and my own immediate superior, Father Gallen (sp?). I think we were the only ones there. And the conversation started very quietly and all at once this fellow, communist man, started on me, and he really leveled a barrage at me, and I just sat there stupified. He caught me completely off guard. I was here to try to establish some dialogue. And the man was ruthless. He had all his arguments prepared and all kinds of accusations--direct accusations. And after awhile my blood began to boil a bit. And I saw that the man did not come to try to establish contact. It was really to antagonize. And Rev. Elwanger seemed at that time, though he subsequently changed his position, seemed not to want to commit himself too much. But then I got a letter from the head of the ministerial association saying that the rest of the men felt that they were being drawn into a Catholic--he didn't put it this way but it came to that--a Catholic plot, that

by attending such a meeting something could be proposed to which --or with which they would not agree at all and yet their names would be attached to it and so on. They would get in bad with their communities. So they felt reluctant, but the ministerial association was holding a meeting and I would be--they would gladly receive me there to air my views. They were meeting at a local restaurant for a regular meeting. I did not belong to the ministerial association not because I didn't want to but because it was a diocesan regulation over which I had no control. And in addition to that I had never been invited to join. I had been in Selma four years and nobody had ever extended an invitation, so I had never pursued it. I didn't know there was such a thing to tell you the truth, probably should have but I didn't. At any rate I went to the meeting and the head fellow said I had something to say and I could say it. So I got up and in about ten minutes I tried to outline what the situation was in town, something of which they were completely unaware really. They knew there was trouble, but they didn't know that things were getting real bad, that people were talking about demonstrations and marching on the court house, the jail and all of this stuff. So I told them we're reaching a real explosive situation here and I had information--I think this meeting was held on a Saturday--I had information that the demonstrations were starting on Monday. This meant that people could be killed. I was tense, I was upset about this thing. I couldn't tell them that demonstrations were starting on Monday. All I could say was--because this was information that was for the civil rights people and you just can't let things like this out. You destroy the only tool you have. So I told them the situation was explosive and that I thought--I gave them three alternatives. I said first, we make a real strong statement as a body calling upon all people with whom we work to seek a peaceful solution to this thing by sitting down and establishing communications between the white and negro communities. And I outlined how the negro community had repeatedly tried over many months to establish communications with the white power structure/ And then failing this, with businessmen. Nobody in the white community would talk to us, no one. And so I was coming to them asking them as leaders, spiritual leaders, to try to get people in their communities to establish communication with the negro community. That was the first alternative. And then really to get something constructive done. By trying to listen to the grievances of the negro and what could be done. Secondly, if this were not so, at least--or if this were not possible, to issue a letter simply stating the fact that communication had broken down and that this was a tragedy for the community and just kind of state the fact rather than make a recommendation. Or thirdly, just to get up in our own pulpits and to advise their people the situation was bad and that certainly they realized that violence was not the answer, and that violence was a great possibility. People were arming

themselves in the white community and this was known. One man agreed out of some twenty-six, I think, with the fact that a strong statement should be made. And then another fellow got up--his denomination is immaterial, I think--got up and said that maybe Catholics could tell their people what to do, but this wasn't the case with them...put stuff out, then all their members would simply mouth what they had told them to mouth, and that this just wasn't realistic for them and that besides this was not the church's business and it died right there just like that.

Now, I attended this meeting in a real panic. I was real busy. I had my finger in a hundred things, and so it was dead, so I left. I had to get back. I had other meetings to attend and to try to set the things up for the coming Monday and so on. But I sat down and I wrote a letter to the editor of the paper asking--proposing the very thing I had asked them, you know, can't the two communities establish communication. In the letter I did say that the religious leaders of the community had failed the community in not providing leadership in this area. I didn't mention the meeting. I just asked where are the ministers, where are the leaders of this community and man, the phone calls started and the irate letters to the editor, and one fellow, well, he was incensed how I had not stayed after the meeting to share in fellowship with them, you know; Had I given up on them completely and here I was asking for communication and yet now I had cut off communication entirely. And I had insulted them by dropping a bomb in the community. I had insulted every religious man in the community by accusing them of failing in their Christian duty. I never answered any of the letters. This is what later I regretted. In doing this probably I set them apart. They hated my guts after that. And I used to get it from other people who would go--who were trying to establish communication between the two communities--would go to ministers and talk to them privately and they would ask well what about that priest that priest they call the nigger priest down there. Do you know him or anything? And always they just shied away from talking about me. They wanted nothing to do with me, that I was some kind of a kook. So, in the conversation with Jon I had told him that maybe I had failed and that I felt now that since the worst of it was over that maybe I ought to try to reestablish--if they weren't going to come to me, maybe I had to try once again to go to them. Maybe the man had been right. Maybe I had severed communication. Maybe I should be the one to try to reestablish it. And I had been much motivated by Dr. King in something he had said to me. The idea that you just can't stop loving people because they don't love you. And so I felt the real responsibility and so I wanted to reestablish the communication. So that's what we had gotten into.

forget what your original question was now.

So this is what I talked over at great length with Jon. I pretty much told him what I have just told you. This bothered him a great deal that this had happened. He felt very sorry for me and, you know, felt that the very thing he had experienced with ministers in town who would have nothing to do with him, now he could identify with me because I had received--in fact, he said, "I thought I was bad off, but really you've been subjected to a whole lot more than I have in terms of these men probably should have been a mainstay and support in a common cause." So, getting back to his letter, again, I don't know, things mix together. I don't know if they were in the letter or if he spoke them. Somewhere along the line in the letter--I think it was in the letter--he was very conscious of the fact that he felt an obligation to St. Paul's as much as he had been rebuffed there, this stuck with him. He felt that he should go back and try to reestablish communications that this was not a lost cause. I think he felt badly about it. And yet, this was something I was never going to mention that was in that letter, and the reason I didn't want to mention it was because of Mrs. Daniels, I don't know what her thoughts would be on the subject and for that reason I never said anything to anybody about it and never mentioned it to a soul. And I mention it now because Judy mentioned it as if it were common knowledge and when I say it to you I think something you said earlier today seemed to indicate that you might be aware of this. In the letter, and if this were not known I wouldn't want it to be known and I would never want Mrs. Daniels to know it because I don't know what her reaction would be and she'd be the last person in the world I'd ever want to hurt in any way--the principal reason for writing this letter and maybe he told his mother himself was that he wanted to talk to me about becoming a Catholic priest. Now, do you know this?

S: We had talked about it.,

OUELLET: So it is common knowledge then. I didn't know and then after Jon was killed I said well I'll never tell anybody that, because I don't know how serious he was about it and what point is there in mentioning it except in the context that if a lot of people know it --to show his thought and so on, fine, but he did mention it to me and it was his principal reason for writing was to tell me that he was extremely anxious to come and to talk to me about it. From the way we had talked before he said he felt that I would understand and that he felt that some of the things he had in mind he felt he could talk to--who could probably help him to resolve the problem for him somehow. And he said "since you are such a priest, maybe you can help me." And precisely some of the things he said were pushing him in this direction. He felt, and I don't know what word he used, but I remember it meaning that, that he was kind of being forced in this direction. Circumstances

were forcing him towards this. And that's not the word he used--it wasn't 'force' and it wasn't 'push' and I don't know what the word was...but anyway, he was going in that direction. The involvement he mentioned personally. He said that he felt I was the only person in Selma he had met as a religious person who was this close and involved. And what I had said that it was my faith that caused this involvement and therefore, this is why he felt compelled. So, he mentioned no more than that about it.

S: Do you remember about the date of that letter?--the month?

OUELLET: I sure don't.

S: You received it while you were still in Selma?

OUELLET: I was still in Selma. Yes, it was pre-July. I would say it was probably pre-June or probably in early June or May. I think it was at the end of his scholastic year. I think possibly he had just finished exams. He was home I think. Other than that, I'm not sure.

...(machine turned off at this point)

OUELLET: ...he felt so intensely about things so that what might have been to someone a very simple, uncomplicated situation, he could probably make quite complicated and very intense.

S: Yes, I think intense is one of the most descriptive words that could be used about Jon.

OUELLET: He was not a man of moderation. You just mentioned this...quite strongly, I think this is quite characteristic of the man about all things that I think a man either is or is not and this pretty much applies to his whole character. He was an intense man about all things. He felt these things very deeply. Without a real fine mind to distinguish as he did, I think that probably most of these things would have been very difficult. If you'll excuse me for just a minute...(machine turned off at this point)...

S: Well, several times you talked about for instance Jon's naivete, the situation and his idealism. And I wondered if you would give me something substantial. I mean you have your impressions out of something, and I would just like to have you just implement that a bit...

OUELLET: Well, the one thing that I mentioned earlier, like in living with the West family, he actually thought--he felt that he could really do something to help them you know, to effect some kind of reconciliation between the two. Maybe I'm just pessimistic, but I had known them for close to fifteen years and knowing cir-

cumstances, knowing Lonzie West's personality and everything about him really, it was an impossible situation. Even a young person who would come to Selma pure of mind probably would react in the same way. I don't mean a naivete in a bad sense at all. I think that it is common to all youth, but judging things in black and white, the good and the bad, and Jon saw so much that was good. He wanted to see so much that was good. Possibly in some things, like in this particular instance I don't think he was very realistic. Now, to mention something specific is hard in relation to the whole negro problem, just the fact that he was so thrown back for instance by the reaction of the--I can't think of his name now up at St. Paul's--Frank Mathews. So Jon's approach to Frank Mathews at St. Paul's was reflected again his naivete, that he very much wanted to come back and felt that he could really effect a change in this man, I don't mean to imply that Frank Mathews was beyond all change, but because of his lack of experience in the South and the lack of the knowledge of things that would produce a man like Frank Mathews--and again he approach it very simply. It was more complicated than he saw it. Frank Mathews can't change his spots overnight and this is the product of a man's whole life. And so much is involved in a man like Frank Mathews--socially he was prominent in the town. Judge Reynolds and people like this in town are very influential in the way Frank Mathews thinks. This is a big man, Frank Mathews. He's well accepted everywhere, and if he were just to breathe a word of support for Jonathan Daniels, he's finished. His throat is cut, so he's not about to support Jon. Not because he basically disagrees with Jon but because he's caught by the very fabric of segregation and this is what Jon could not see. He saw very ideally that here was a man, he was a man of God, therefore, he should ^{n't} react this way. So, because of Jon's background he could not see all that made up Frank Mathews. And so he I think the story you told about Jerusalem is a little indicative again of this spirit that was in Jon. Concretely, since my relationship with him was so limited, it was more a thing I sensed than anything else in listening to him. The very fact that he would go to Lowndes County with a small group of youngsters which is the way I think he got there originally to try to effect a change I think it a reflection again of this naivete. He didn't know Lowndes County.

S: Did he ever talk to you about that, about going there?

OUELLET: No, he never spoke to me.

S: Did he ever talk to you about the danger, I mean you obviously pointed this out to him, did he ever react to this in any way?

OUELLET: Yes, he was astounded by it. He asked me in that conversation that night that we had in my sitting room, as I recall, he was quite taken up with the idea

that I had been personally threatened a number of times. The phone calls I received in the night, my own reaction fascinated him, how at first when I was threatened I reacted always as fear prompted me--I'm not nonviolent by temperament, and I reacted in a violent manner a couple of times out of fear, and how I had come finally to the point where I could not react violently anymore, and this intrigued him, how had I come to this point? The evolution of my own thought in this area of nonviolence fascinated him. He was struck that I could react this way now after feeling so strongly that I would react violently. And we sat in my sitting room and there were guns up on the wall. I've always hunted all of my life and I know how to handle a gun and there was a time in my life when if any man had threatened me I wouldn't hesitate to use one or if he threatened somebody I love--you know, I mean real violence--threat of life. I would defend, and that suddenly those guns were on the wall to stay and I was not about to use them. This fascinated him that I could now react this way, and when he asked me why I reacted this way, this sounds ^{when} very trite really, really I think it was the growth of love. You love people and you love you can no longer hate that way, no matter what the price is to you personally. So it's a certain maturity in your own approach to people. So this he reacted to. I think probably his major reaction to it--this sounds egotistical--was admiration. And again this is his naivete. I read somewhere where he called me an extremely saintly man, and I'm a man like all men, and I'm not saying this out of false humility. But Jon would say this about me because, again, of his idealism. He saw me, he saw how I had emerged. I was a man like other men. There are hundreds of other men like me, but he idealized me right away as epitomizing what he hoped probably he would achieve after being there some time. I had been there years and this is what I had come to and he saw this as something desirable. I think he saw it as being Christlike. So naivete, not in a bad sense, but a good sense which he held in common with all young people.

S: Well, when Jon and I said goodbye to one another and this was just within hours of that long conversation we had, after which I didn't see him again, he said "well, I may get killed, but if I am, it won't be because I was careless."

OUELLET: Well, I don't really think he was careless. This is kind of news to me, because I was away from him. I think that night we talked we became aware a little bit of the danger, like when he mentioned that trip he took with Judy I told him, I said it's real dangerous, that he should never do this. I think he started to be probably a little beware of it and probably intended to be careful, but I don't know if he was knowledgeable enough to know what being careful was.

S: Well, this is what I wonder, you know, because he would talk about this business of life and death and the danger, and yet you wonder if--reality, you know, whether he really were asked it in terra firma terms or whether it was kind of an abstract causability.

OUELLET: I would agree with you. I think that ^{the}probably this was ~~a~~ case. I don't think he had been in Alabama long enough. I don't think he had been hated enough to really grasp the full significance of this thing. (End of Tape Side One)

OUELLET: To get back to this 'did he fully realize,' the extent of his experience in Alabama I don't think was sufficient to make him fully aware of the danger to which he was exposed. His experience was very limited. I think he was made aware by what he saw, like you mentioned ...and so on, and I think anyone in the South had to consider this as a possibility. Like I think all the people who came to the demonstrations, academically and intellectually were convinced that there was a possibility of death or harm of some kind and yet when you dealt with them in the concrete, they hadn't the foggiest notion of what it really meant, you know. This was something rather nebulous, that you could die, but it was strictly in this nebulous atmosphere. In the concrete I don't think it was a full realization.

S: In a sense, though, maybe it was better that it was that way or nobody would have--

OUELLET; Well, I've always said the greatest thing that ever happened to people who came to Selma to help was that they didn't know what they were doing. Had they realized, like in the demonstrations, had those people realized the extent of personal danger in which they were involved they'd have been long gone. I really feel that. I'm convinced of it. And I know it from speaking to them. They really didn't realize the danger they were in, and some of the things they did were--! Had he realized the danger he was in, he'd have never walked down that street the way he did. And when that man threatened, he would have run like his tail was on fire, because I know. The same thing has happened to me. And man I ran. I got out of there real quick. I knew what could happen. But he didn't. He just said, "This man is harrassing me, I'll ignore him until he clobbers me over the head." Not me. I'd run because I'd know this man could do it. So it's a valid conclusion that you draw. It's a good thing that they didn't know, I think, for a lot of them.

S: I have two impressions that I'll give you, just to see if you want to reflect on them at all. One, I don't think if Jon were sitting here, that ^{he}would say that he thought he was going to get killed in Hayneville. Two, I don't think that Jon

would have gone back to Selma after that summer or in fact, I think that--I was interested when you said this was a chapter in my life and it's closed. Because I used precisely those same...I can show it to you on a tape about Jon. I think that this was going to be a chapter at this point closed.

OUELLET: Very affirmative on both of those. On the second one particularly. It's very possible because really Jon in a concrete way could not be very effective in Selma. He was there as many other people were, but I think he would have come to see very readily that he could not--that he could do nothing but be a passing witness, and he was intelligent enough to have realized this. He wasn't raised in the South, he hadn't lived in the South in any length of time. He didn't know the people of the South. He was a stranger in a foreign land. And he didn't fully understand the negro really. He had a sympathy for the negro that came from his own spirit of charity I think, but he didn't really understand the negro because in talking--about the Klans or other people--Jon didn't really understand the negro, mentality, the Southern negro mentality. He had begun to, but he didn't really grasp it yet. It takes years. It took me I'd say at least five years to really get into it.

S: Can you elaborate on that?

OUELLET: When you go South, you know only what the negro wants you to know, and yet you don't know that this is so. You speak to a negro, any negro, I don't care where you talk to him, if you're a white man you're going to know exactly what he wants you to know and nothing more, and it will be years before he'll let you know anything. I spent four years in 1952 and 1956 in Alabama, and I worked on a real grass roots level. I was "in" you might say, with negroes, at least I thought so. I never really got "in" with negroes, even though I thought I was. I thought any negro was real frank with me. I think most of them were, but there were some who were real important negroes who weren't. The day I really got in with negroes was when I went to a mass meeting and then my life was on the line. And as I got further immeshed and threats came to me, that the negroes knew of, and I became completely identified with the negroes to the extent that I was daring to do things for the negroes that some negroes were not daring to do for themselves. Then the bars fell. Then there were no more reservations. Then I could sit down with a group of negroes and they would talk. They never forgot I was white. I don't think they could. Some might, but by and large they would say, well, he's a white man but...and they would go ahead. I don't think there were three white men in Selma of whom this could have been said, and probably can't be said of a dozen white men in Selma today even though there were probably three hundred who would say that it was so of themselves. They would think that they were in with

negroes but they were not. The negro has a whole life of defending himself against the white man, and he's certainly not going to let those bars down. Psychologically he can't. And though Jon was living in a negro home and even though the children in the family probably accepted him and spoke to him just as they would speak to another negro, Lonzie West never spoke to him as if he were a negro. Never spoke to Jon. And even his wife, who would have opened up more, could not have been completely open and so he could not fully understand. It takes a long time. Not only do you have to be there a long time, you have to suffer with negroes; you have to completely identify with them for a period of time. Then they will accept you.

S: Did you learn things that you didn't know after you'd had the experience of acceptance?

OUELLET: Yes. I learned what some negroes thought of some white men in town. I learned what some negroes thought of some white men who were close to me who worked with me who were identified with me. Negroes would tell me that they didn't trust them, and yet I had thought before that these men were trusted. Fellow clergymen who I thought were trusted and who thought they were trusted. I would then have a negro say to me, 'you know, he's a pretty good fellow, but, you know, on this point here he's a little bit out in left field. He doesn't go all the way. He's not with us completely.' They would never tell this to this white clergyman themselves, but they would say it to me.

S: Why not? Why wouldn't they tell?

OUELLET: You just don't tell a white man these things because you can't trust a white man.

S: And was it because he was a white man that they didn't trust him more than because of way he acted or was it from his actions that they said, "well, this is typical of a white man."

OUELLET: Well, a little bit of both. Initially, it's because that he's a white man. Then they watch you as a white man. They observe you, and they know everything about you. They've seen that reaction in white men so many times. And finally it has to be this white man is what it comes to and then they accept you despite your whiteness. You are not acting like the white man usually does, but you have to do an awful lot of proving before they get to that point.

S: I know one of the girls, I think it was Ruby, said that Jon was the first white person that she had ever been able to talk to. Now whether this is--how much depth there was in that being able to talk to him I don't know.

OUELLET: He was probably the first white man she ever had an opportunity to talk with. How old was Ruby?

S: She was, you know, late teenager.

OUELLET: So, this is possible in a teenager. She was younger. What I'm thinking now, I'm thinking of negroes who are mature. Young people, and the younger you go down--you get a negro child, he accepts you like that. No problem. You meet an eight-year-old boy, he accepts you with no reservations. By the time he's twelve he begins to have a few reservations. By the time he's fifteen, he doesn't trust you any more. By the time he's twenty-one he may hate you. But the younger the more easily they accept. Now the young people, the teenagers, who want more than anything to be accepted as a part of the white world, this is the greatest thing to them. If you will accept them even though you are white, if you will accept them, wonderful. And Jon had that certain openness about him and they would very quickly. Teenagers--like myself and my relationship with teenagers--real quick acceptance with them. Now as she grew a little older she would have probably had a few more reservations. But what white man would she have ever known? He was probably the first white man she ever knew and ever sat and talked with. Another white man, well, "you're a nigger girl, stay away from me, or all right Ruby" and that's it. But here comes Jon who treats a young negro girl like she's a lady. It's probably the first time she ever experienced this and right away she's going to react with acceptance. So I think that's probably the explanation for it.

S: I'd like to go back just for a minute to this clergy business. I think maybe you've answered the question, but I'm going to ask it anyway. The analysis of the clergy responding or lack of response, was this, do you think, largely due to their social position in town and the fact that they were threatened by the whole white community if they showed any--?

OUELLET: Yes, if they showed any sympathy for the situation, they were done. It's as simple as that.

S: Well, what happens to these men's integrity?

OUELLET: This is a big problem. How does a man live that way? I don't know. You see it's very easy for me. I had no family to have threatened. As far as position is concerned, I could leave there and come here and work and probably be respected for the stand I took. But they found themselves in the same position because of family and because of the particular structure of their organizations in such a position as businessmen would find themselves in. For instance, I had a banker who said to me, "Father, I'll try to get some men together and we'll try to talk." He came back to me with tears in his eyes. "I looked/over^{all} town,

and I couldn't find anybody." When a manifesto later came out in the paper against the negro struggle in Selma, he signed it. Yet I know that in conference this man--his heart went out to the negro. And he had come to me privately and wanted to do something and yet because he was a bank vice president, if he had not signed that manifesto, he would have been dead. He was finished. So you have to be realistic about this thing. Now these men, and this has happened to men in Selma, what happens to any man in a town like Selma if he gets up on his pulpit and says "this is wrong," he is no longer pastor. What happens to him then? I think the man has to consider this. Now, after that, he has the problem of reconciling that with his conscience, and he can only do that on an individual basis and I won't pretend to try to judge him. I can only feel sorry. Basically in my own situation I did some things that most priests in Alabama were not doing for the same reason. They're on the spot. Suppose a fellow belongs to the Diocese of Alabama and he knows the Bishop doesn't want him involved in any way, that's his career. He's finished. I'm not finished. Now I say this. I couldn't be that kind of a priest if it meant I had to leave and go in exile somewhere or do something I'd have to. My concept of the priesthood is such that I couldn't accept this type of a compromise. I just couldn't.

S: But wasn't this largely what Jon was sort of saying? He couldn't accept the kind of compromise that was being made?

OUELLET: And that's why he saw in me one who would not accept a compromise.

S: But he also believed that there was a way in--say to a guy like Frank Mathews, so that he would come and be able to view things in a different way.

OUELLET: He hoped that there was.

S: I think that he believed that there was...

OUELLET: Whether there is is another question. I think they're caught, very badly caught in a structure. And I don't know if they have a way out. That's why I wouldn't pretend to judge them. I'd rather just stay away and do what I have to do and say, "well, all right fellows, you find your own way." Its a delicate thing.