

PRELUDE

JAMES FARMER

On Cracking White City

In 1941, fresh out of Howard University's theology school, he hired on as race-relations secretary with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a staid, old-line pacifist organization in Chicago.

In the course of my work there, I began studying Gandhi, Gandhi's program, his work in India in nonviolence . . . I sent a memorandum to A.J. Muste, who was executive director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, proposing that the FOR take the lead in starting an organization which would seek to use Gandhi-like techniques of nonviolent resistance—including civil disobedience, noncooperation, and the whole bit—in the battle against segregation. . . .

The decision was that the FOR would not sponsor it and assume that measure of responsibility for its outcome, its success or failure, but . . . I was authorized on their payroll to try to set up a local group of the sort I had suggested—in one city—and the FOR would not sponsor it. They would just pay my salary, fifteen dollars a week, while I was doing that.

He convened the first meeting simply by calling together his friends—“most of them graduate students at the University of Chicago . . . pacifists and socialists who were similarly studying Gandhi.”

That was an all-night session by the way, deciding what the name was going to be. And one fellow—I have no idea where he is now—name of

Bob Chino, who was half Chinese and half Caucasian, came up with a name during this all-night meeting. He said, "Why don't we call it CORE because it's the core of things. It's the center around which all else is built." Then the problem was, what does C-O-R-E stand for? [Laughs] We then decided that it should be *Committee of or on Racial Equality*. A lengthy debate transpired on whether it was to be *on* or *of* Racial Equality. And my side won . . . it became *of*.

Our first project then was a sit-in, or stand-in, I guess you'd call it, at a roller skating rink that was appropriately named White City Roller Skating Rink [laughs], which was at the corner of Sixty-third Street and South Park Avenue in southside Chicago. . . . This was in the ghetto, really, several blocks within the ghetto, but all white. Blacks were not admitted.

I should say that at this same time we met and consulted with an Indian, a Hindu, a Brahmin named Krishnalal Shridharani, who had been a disciple of Gandhi's in India, was with Gandhi on the famous march to the sea, the Salt March.* He at this time was working on his Ph.D. at Columbia in sociology and his dissertation was a book analyzing Gandhi's technique, Gandhi's method. It was entitled *War Without Violence*, and this caught our imagination because that was precisely what we were aimed at. It was not acquiescence, as most people at that time, when they heard of nonviolence, assumed that it was . . . In this book Shridharani had outlined Gandhi's steps of investigation, negotiation, publicity, and then demonstration. And we adopted those steps as our method of action.

At White City we first investigated in order to confirm what we already knew existed by having blacks go in and try to skate and they were stopped, of course, and told, "I'm sorry, we can't sell you tickets. You can't come in." This was done several times to be sure that there was no mistake about the policy. . . . Then we had whites, several whites, try to go in, with no apparent connection with the black group, and they were promptly admitted and skated around. Then we had an interracial group

*Gandhi's Salt March of 1930 provided both a spiritual example and a tactical model for the Civil Rights Movement in the South. With the march Gandhi launched the campaign of civil disobedience which broke the power of the British raj in India. First, Gandhi announced that he and a few followers would walk two hundred miles from his Sabarmati ashram to the coastal town of Dandi to protest the British tax on salt, an essential in the peasant diet. Then, on the beach at Dandi Gandhi broke the law guaranteeing the British monopoly in the manufacture of salt by evaporating sea water to make his own untaxed salt crystals. The British arrested Gandhi about thirty days after he arrived on the coast, but by that time it was too late. Gandhi's act of defiance had unified the Indian nationalist movement, and an estimated one hundred thousand Indians followed him into the jails. The protests ended only when the British made the first of the concessions which led eventually to Indian self-government. For comments on the influence of the Salt March on Movement tactics, see Bayard Rustin and Laurie Pritchett.

go in and seek admission, and this threw White City persons into confusion. Obviously they were part of one group, so what were they going to say?

So finally they had to use the club-night line and they said, "I'm sorry, it's club night, and you can't come in unless you have a club card." And our group said, "Are there no exceptions?" "Absolutely no exceptions, nobody gets in without a club card." "You know, that's strange. Some of our friends are already skating in there, and we know that they have no club card. They are not members of a club." "Well, are sure of that?" "Yes, we are sure of that. We see them skating right through the door there, and one of them waved at us." So they then consulted with the manager and everything else and said, "I'm just sorry, you can't come in."

We stood in line for a while, . . . then went back every night to do the same thing, and finally tied up the line so that nobody else could get to the gate, and it became pretty rough. A little violence when some of the young tough whites wanted to skate badly. . . . This campaign against White City went on for several months before there was a conclusion, and finally we were victorious. White City admitted everybody after [our] picket lines and standing in line and cutting down on their profit, virtually bringing things to a halt. They began admitting blacks.

. . . during White City—the thing was dragging on for several months—somebody suggested, "Well, why don't we sue? Let's go to court and sue on the basis of century-old civil rights laws." We rejected this because that would be reverting to the old techniques which we knew could work under certain circumstances, but it would not tell us whether nonviolence would work here, direct-action techniques. In the meantime we sat in at restaurants. The first restaurant, which turned out to be the first CORE success, was at a little place in southside Chicago near the University of Chicago at Forty-seventh and Kimbark Avenue called Jack Spratt Coffeehouse or Coffee Shop, and we discovered discrimination there by accident.*

The "accident" occurred one evening after a CORE meeting. He and a white member named Jimmy Robinson stopped by Jack Spratt to continue a discussion of establishing CORE chapters in other cities.

The manager walked over and said, "I can't serve you," to me. And I said, "Why not?" And he said, "I just can't serve you." And I said—

*Portions of interviews set off in this manner—indented and with a hairline rule at left—appear out of sequence. They have been transposed by the author for reasons of clarity and continuity.

here again I was going back to the old legalistic approach—"I suppose you realize you are violating the state law." And he walked away, and I then called and asked him if he would give me his name and his title, his responsibility there. It was the implied threat of a suit, you know. [Laughs, as if at his own innocence] We were not imaginative enough—then.

He then walked back to me and said, "Whaddaya want?" I said, "Coffee and a doughnut." And he said, "The doughnuts will be a dollar apiece." Now this was the day of five-cent doughnuts, or two for five, you know. I said, "That's pretty steep for doughnuts, don't you think?" He said, "That's my price." Robinson said, "I know better. I've gotten doughnuts here many times and it's a nickel for a doughnut and not a dollar." So we went on and ate, and when I paid the bill with a dollar, the man gave me correct change, charging the nickel rather than the dollar for the doughnut.

We decided we owed it to him to return to his place of business, and we went back in a group of about, oh, six or eight and ordered food, and he thought for a while and then had us served. And we said, "Well, I guess there's really no problem here." We put the money on the counter near the cash register and started to go out and he raked the money off the counter, rushed to the door behind us, and hurled our money out into the street, screaming, "Take your money and get out of here. We don't want it."

We left the money there scattered in the street so he couldn't charge legitimately that we had refused to pay our bill and taken the money or had stolen money from him. So we then went into a session, battle session, to decide how we would proceed on Jack Spratt.

"We tried to negotiate then—the Gandhian technique, the Gandhian step." The Jack Spratt management refused all overtures, hanging up when CORE members phoned, ignoring letters. Two members were dispatched "to try to negotiate on the spot, without any appointment." They found in place of the original manager a woman who was apparently his superior. Hers was an argument which twenty years later would be repeated by white businessmen all across the South. "She said, 'Of course, I have no objections to serving you, personally, but it's just a matter of business. We're here to make money; we're not crusaders. We're trying to make a profit and we wouldn't make a profit if we serve you because we'll lose all our white customers.'"

Still clinging to the "Gandhian goodwill bit," the CORE negotiators offered to stand good for any money lost in a one-month trial integration. But finally, the woman said she was sorry, she simply didn't want to talk about it anymore.

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We went in with a group of about twenty—this was a small place that seats thirty or thirty-five comfortably at the counter and in the booths—and occupied just about all of the available seats and waited for service. The woman was in charge again. She ordered the waitress to serve the whites who were seated in one booth, and she served them. She ordered the waitress to serve two whites who were seated at the counter, and she served them. Then she told the blacks, "I'm sorry, we can't serve you, you'll have to leave." And they, of course, declined to leave and continued to sit there. By this time the other customers who were in there were aware of what was going on and were watching, and most of these were university people, University of Chicago, who were more or less sympathetic with us. And they stopped eating and the two people at the counter she had served and those whites in the booth she had served were not eating. There was no turnover. People were coming in and standing around for a few minutes and walking out. There were no seats available.

So she walked over to two of the whites at the counter and said, "We served you. Why don't you eat and get out?" They said, "Well, madam, we don't think it would be polite for us to begin eating our food before our friends here have also been served." So a couple of minutes went by and she announced that she would serve the blacks, the Negroes, which was the term used then, in the basement. We, of course, declined and told her we were quite comfortable. She then said, "If all of the Negroes will occupy those two booths in the back we will serve you there." We declined again. She said, "I'll call the police."

Then I said to her, "Fine, I think that might be the appropriate step." By the way, we, still following the Gandhian motif, had called the police in advance, being completely open and above board, everything, in notifying the authorities. We called the police department and told them what we were going to do. In fact, we read the state civil rights law to them. They weren't familiar with that. [Laughs] They assured us that if we followed the pattern which we outlined to them over the phone, there was nothing they could do to arrest us. They'd have no grounds for making an arrest because we were within our rights to insist upon service. And we asked them if they would see that we were served as they were obligated to do by law, but this they would not do. No, they wouldn't do that, but they wouldn't arrest us.

So we said, "Perhaps you should call the police." She did. Two cops came a few minutes later, looked the situation over, said, "Why, lady, what did you call us for? I don't see anybody here disturbing the peace. Everything seems to be peaceful." She said, "Won't you throw these people out on the grounds that we reserve the right to seat our patrons and would serve some of them in the basement?" The cop didn't know. He

went to a telephone booth and made a call. I guess he was calling headquarters to see if they could do that. Came out and said, "Nope, sorry lady, there's nothing in the law that allows us to do that. You must either serve them or solve the problem yourself." And the cops then walked out. On the way out they turned around and winked at us. [Laughs]

We stayed there until closing time and then got up and left and went back the next day, a little bit earlier, and stayed until closing time. And so on. Then tried again to negotiate—without success. We went back in, oh, several more times and tied up the whole afternoon, tied up all the seats. They were doing no business at all.

Finally they cracked. The next time we went in, they served everybody. And accepted money. Did not overcharge us. We then sent an interracial group, a smaller group, in the next day. Everyone was served. We then sent an all-black group in and they were served. We waited a week and sent another black group in, and they were all served. We sent individual blacks in and they were all served without any problem. So we then wrote them a letter thanking them for their change in policy. . . .

At this time, this period in history, it was more the rule than the exception that places of public accommodation in Northern cities excluded blacks. It was more the rule. It was quite exceptional to find any restaurant in downtown Chicago that would serve blacks. And we took on some big ones . . . Stoner's Restaurant that seated, oh, five hundred or six hundred people downstairs and upstairs, and we had such experiences as being served garbage sandwiches and having trays of hot food spilled over our heads, and some of the members were kicked in the shin by the owner and such things as that. Finally all the Negro busboys quit their jobs in protest, and they hired Negro busgirls, and they finally quit in protest. Stoner's finally changed, but this took several months of activity, and they began serving everybody. Later they went out of business. I don't think there was any connection, although I couldn't be sure. [Laughs]

Were you having any success in the publicity component that you mentioned?

No, we were not. We'd get a little item, a small item in the *Chicago Defender*, which was a black newspaper . . . a small article, and they would come in and take a picture occasionally. As I recall they never used the pictures really. They were not really interested because this was a rather bizarre technique to them. . . . "They hit you and you are not going to hit them back? . . . What is this nonviolent crap?" They had not warmed up to it, and we had discussions then with a number of the Negro

leaders of the time, and they simply could not see nonviolence: "No, no, that is just unrealistic. If they hit you, you've got to do something. Hit them back. It just won't work."

White press displayed no [interest in you].

. . . if we were lucky, we would get a small paragraph on the back page of the *Chicago Tribune* saying in effect that a half-dozen nuts and crackpots sat-in this restaurant—they didn't say "sat-in" because there wasn't such a phrase then—tried to get service in this restaurant and refused to leave and stayed there for two hours or three hours or until closing time or until they were thrown out, whichever came first. That was all, but there was no TV then, no TV coverage, anything. The thing did not spread by itself, but we moved from restaurant to restaurant. We also had stand-ins in cafeterias. We had wade-ins at public beaches, and since there was no owner there to put us out or order us to leave, we had to confront hoodlums who tried to throw us out or tried to drown some people, literally. On some occasions it was difficult to stick with nonviolence, so we did have training sessions. In those days, since we were comparatively small, we had training sessions in the discipline of nonviolence, using sociodrama and so forth. And our members at that time were largely young, largely intellectuals, and I would say more means-oriented than ends-oriented. They were concerned with nonviolence as a technique and proving that it worked. We were not a rank-and-file movement, not a mass movement, and had not begun at that point recruiting from the, quote, lower classes, unquote. We were middle class, all of us, students.

What racial make-up?

Largely white. I would say two-to-one or maybe even three-to-one white, because it was difficult to find blacks who were willing to go through that. In the first place, you had to be some sort of a crusader to go in there and put up with all of this when the focus was on you. *You* were the person being told you couldn't be served. And how many people had skins that thick, to deliberately walk into that kind of situation, especially when they weren't gonna fight back? . . . We found more whites who were cued in to the idealism of the technique and thus willing to do it.

By the following summer, there were three or four CORE chapters, enough to have a "national convention" in Chicago. He was elected president. By the second year there were chapters in New York, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Detroit, Los Angeles, Seattle, and San Francisco.

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We debated at each of our conventions, annual conventions, whether we were going to move into the South. This was in the forties, the early forties. The term we used was, quote, invade the South, unquote, since we were Northerners. I opposed it at that point, and we did not do it. I opposed it on the grounds that we were new. We did not have the support of the black community or the white liberal community or any masses. We were just a few individuals. I thought the violent reaction we would encounter in the South would be overwhelming, that the movement, the organization—it was not a movement then—would be destroyed and its participants probably killed, if we had begun sitting-in in Birmingham or Montgomery in the early 1940s or sitting-in in waiting rooms or freedom riding then.

I should say that there was a kind of a Freedom Ride that was cosponsored by the FOR and CORE in 1947. This was called the Journey of Reconciliation. . . . This was stimulated, sparked, by the Irene Morgan Supreme Court decision in 1946, where the court ruled that segregated seating on the buses was unconstitutional, should not be allowed. So this group of reconcilers rode the buses with the blacks sitting in the front and the whites sitting in the back through the upper South. They did not venture into the Deep South. They went through Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia. That was it. And there were arrests. In North Carolina, in fact, a number of people spent thirty days on the chain gang for refusing to leave the bus. That was in 1947.

The organization continued to be small. At one point we wondered whether we had to give up the ghost because we weren't growing, and it was hard to keep the chapters alive. We weren't getting any publicity—oh, a little paragraph here and there. There seemed to be no interest in the black community or anyplace else. Nonviolence was still an unknown technique and the word caused adverse reaction. It only began to grow at the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of King in 1956. . . .

BOOK ONE
