Beyond Ideology

Julius Lester

This article was originally delivered as a speech at The Second Thoughts Conference in Washington, D.C. in the fall of 1987.

The Movement. It was a special time, a time when idealism was as palpable and delicious as a gentle rain, a time when freedom and love and justice seemed as immediate as ripe oranges shining seductively from a tree in one's backyard. It was a time when we believed that the ideals of democracy would, at long last, gleam like endless amber waving fields of grain from the hearts and souls of every American. It was a time when we believed that love was too wonderful and too important to be confined to our small circles of family and friends because love was a mighty stream that could purify the soul of the nation, and once purified, the nation would study war no more, and everyone would sing "No more auction block" because we all were slaves of one kind or another. We had a vision of a new world about to be born and that vision burned us with a burning heat.

In its beginnings, in the latter half of the fifties, The Movement challenged us to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, a land in which we all sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept, though only a few of us knew we were weeping. In Montgomery, Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr. was saying that yes, segregation was wrong, but that one was not justified in destroying it by any means necessary. "All life is interrelated," he said. "All humanity is involved in a single process, and to the degree that I harm my brother, to that extent I am harming myself." We must be careful, he admonished, not to do those things that will "intensify the existence of evil in the universe."

From a monastery in Kentucky, a monk named Thomas Merton was writing essays and books imbued with a clarity and authenticity unlike anything many of us had ever read:

"our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love; and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy if anything can."

And on the West Coast, in a place with the romantic name of North Beach, there came the voices of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Alan Watts, and Gary Snyder stripping the Eisenhower and McCarthy years of their gray-flannelled fear, and through their words we were invited to live life in all its fullness and blinding complexity. Henry Miller, the elder statesman of the Beat Generation, put it this way:

"I am not interested in the potential man. I am interested in what a man actualizes—or realizes—of his potential being. And what is the potential man, after all? Is he not the sum of all that is human? Divine, in other words? You think I am searching for God. I am not. God is. The world is. Man is. We are. The full reality, that's God—and man, and the world, and all that is, including the nameable."

The Movement was not born from the desire to change the system. We wanted to move far beyond systems; we wanted to create community, and in the words of one of the earliest white members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Jane Stembridge, that community was to be "the beloved community."

What made The Movement such a compelling force in its early years was that political action was merely the vehicle for spiritual expression. The values by which we lived were what really mattered—the quality of who we were and the subsequent quality of our relationships. Ending segregation was not sufficient as a goal. (Anybody who really thinks that the aim of the early Civil Rights Movement was to sit down at a lunch counter next to a white person and eat a hamburger and drink a cup of coffee insults not only the intelligence of black people but also our tastebuds. We had always known that the food was better on our side of the tracks.) We wanted to create a new society based on feelings of community, and to do that, The Movement itself had to be the paradigm of that New Community.
SPRING, 1960. I stood in the Student Union Building at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, staring at the bulletin board. The sit-in movement had begun in February of that year in Greensboro, North Carolina, and it had spread quickly to Nashville and other cities in the South and become national news. That spring afternoon of my senior year, I stared at the bulletin board reading the telegrams tacked upon it. They were telegrams from schools all over the country expressing support for the sit-in movement: Harvard, Yale, Stanford, the University of Chicago, Oberlin, and on and on and on.

I was bewildered. I didn’t understand their what or their why. I had lived my then twenty-one years shuddering within the lingering shadow of slavery—segregation. I had learned to walk great distances rather than sit in the back of segregated buses, to control my bodily functions so that I would not have to use segregated bathrooms, to go for many hours without water in the southern heat rather than drink from the Colored Fountains, and to choose hunger rather than buy food from a segregated eating place. I was fourteen before I ever spoke to a white person. Although I had encountered whites during a semester at San Diego State College the previous year, and although there were white instructors and a few white students at Fisk, white people had no reality as persons. They were an implacable force as massive and undifferentiated as an iceberg, and somehow I would have to find the way to steer the fragile craft of my life around it or be thrown into the icy waters, another victim of that hard and blinding whiteness.

What made The Movement such a compelling force in its early years was that political action was merely the vehicle for spiritual expression.

But as I stood there reading those telegrams, I recognized for the first time in my life that white people were not an undifferentiated mass, an unfeeling negative Other. There were whites who cared, who did not think of segregation as a Negro problem, but who knew it for what it was—an American problem. For the first time in my life I felt that I was not alone in America.

That is why the New Community that the early Movement tried to be had to be Black and White together. The Old America had been one of Black and White forcibly kept apart by segregation, economics, and prejudice. In 1960, most states had laws forbidding interracial marriages, and the southern states had additional laws forbidding social relationships between blacks and whites.

“Black and White together,” we would sing in one of the choruses of “We Shall Overcome.” What a revolutionary statement it was! Black and White together on such a scale was unprecedented in American history because Black and White together was not how the nation had ever perceived itself. It was not surprising, then, that during demonstrations, it was the whites who were singled out for the most vicious beatings. They were traitors to America’s conception of itself as a white nation. William Moore, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, Jonathan Daniels, Rev. James Reeb, and Mrs. Viola Liuzzo were made to pay the ultimate price: they were murdered. Others, like James Peck, suffered for the rest of their lives from the beatings they received. Some committed suicide. Others paid and continue to pay psychically.

We did not know that America would extract such a price to maintain the status quo. We did not know that the Justice Department of Robert Kennedy would not be eager to use the power of the federal government to protect civil rights workers. We did not know that seeking the end of segregation and disenfranchisement would lead the liberal press to accuse us of wanting too much too soon. Above all, perhaps, we did not know that the values we sought to embody—the values of nonviolence and the beloved community—were not values that America wanted for itself.

One can live in the valley of the shadow of death only so long before asking, why am I doing this? I lost fifteen pounds in two weeks that summer of 1964 in Mississippi. The body is an organism with an intense awareness of itself. It knows when its existence is being threatened, even when the mind claims there is nothing to worry about. My mind thought the long and desolate highways of Mississippi beautiful; my body knew that southern trees bear a strange fruit. At night my mind would tell me that the house I was sleeping in might be bombed while I slept, but, it would add blithely, “Everybody has to die sometime.” My body, trembling with incredulity, would say: “Sometime ain’t this time,” and refuse to fall asleep.

Faint whispers of second thoughts in voices like those of the witches in “Macbeth” disturbed a lot of us that summer of 1964. Trying to register blacks to vote was not worth risking one’s life for, especially when one walked into the voting booth and had to choose between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater. And as Navy men searched the swamps and countryside of Mississippi for the bodies of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner, our own mortality stared at us with its hollow eyes and we wondered if America really cared.

In August 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic
party went to the Democratic party's convention in Atlantic City and challenged the Democrats to seat it as the legitimate representative of the party in Mississippi instead of the all-white delegation led by arch-white supremacist, Senator James Eastland. The convention offered the MFD party two token seats.

Those foreboding second thoughts acquired full-bodied voices because of our feeling of having been betrayed by our country. We had offered America love; it played politics. We wanted the constitutional ideals of equality, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, to stroll through the streets of cities and along country backroads with the glowing wonder of lovers discovering themselves in each other. America told us that we were young and did not understand. We understood that America's only interest was business as usual. We could not accept business as usual.

Second thoughts confront us when reality does not correspond to our expectations, when new information leads us to modify or change wholly what we had believed to be true. Second thoughts are important because they are the threshold of self-examination.

I do not remember the first time I heard of Malcolm X but I remember clearly the first time I took him seriously. During the winter of 1962 I worked for the Welfare Department in Harlem. For reasons beyond my comprehension, the month of February at the Welfare Department was devoted to raising money for the NAACP. The department was organized into units of six case-workers, each with its own supervisor. One morning, my supervisor, who was white, informed me that our unit was to raise money for the NAACP the following day and that I was scheduled to sit at the table in the lobby from twelve to two and sell cookies, muffins or whatever it was. I told him I didn't support the N-double-A and had no intention of raising money for it. He looked at me coldly and said, "What are you? One of those followers of Malcolm X?" The way he said it told me all I needed to know about Malcolm, and I returned his cold stare and said, "Yes." Significantly, he treated me with a cool but proper respect after that, something that had been absent before. Such was the power of Malcolm X.

There were a few blacks at the Welfare Department who went to hear Malcolm at the mosque in Harlem, and on Mondays they would give me a summary of his speech. What Malcolm said was fearful to hear, even secondhand. He derided integration and mocked non-violence. He scorned love and extolled power. He had contempt for everything white and a startling love for everything black. What he preached was hard to embrace. It was even harder to deny.

We did not follow Malcolm, but what he said followed us like some nagging super-ego, especially after four little girls were murdered in the bombing of a church on a Birmingham, Alabama Sunday morning, and we began to ask ourselves whether Malcolm was right. Was violence the only appropriate response to violence?

One day in the mid-sixties—about 1965, I think—I was in New York's Forty-second Street Library and ran into a friend whose first words were an excited, "Have you read this yet?" He thrust into my hands a book called The Wretched of the Earth. The author was someone named Frantz Fanon.

If I had learned nothing else, I had learned that one does not turn another human being into an abstraction without becoming an abstraction oneself, and to turn another into an abstraction is murder.

The Wretched of the Earth was a sophisticated reiteration of much that Malcolm had said, and reading it made our second thoughts become new convictions. Fanon gave us words through which to know ourselves anew. In his writings we found the term, Third World, and no longer would we identify ourselves as American. He told us that we were a colonized people, and that we had a political identity that aligned us with all the people of the twentieth century who had struggled against colonialism. Most important, Fanon told us that violence was redemptive, that it was the only means by which the colonized could cleanse themselves of the violence of the colonizers.

We did not have to wonder about the violence of the colonizers because every night on the news we watched the films of U. S. soldiers carrying out a war in a country we had never heard of, a country that none of us thought threatened America's security. The nation was at war and something happened that was perhaps unprecedented in American history: A significant number of young Americans sided openly with the enemy. Young men fled to Canada and Sweden rather than be drafted to fight an unjust war. Draft cards and American flags were burned at antivwar rallies and Phil Ochs sang "I Ain't A-Marching Anymore."

At the same historical moment, the predominantly black Civil Rights Movement and the predominantly white anti-Vietnam War Movement became anti-American. Suddenly, America was the enemy. If ever there was a
moment in history for second thoughts, that was one. Common sense should have told us that it is impossible to transform a nation if you hate it.

But that is one of the dangers of idealism. When it is let loose in the public arena, it is like an animal in heat and in desperate need of a sexual joining. All too quickly, unrequited idealism can become surly and aggressive. All too quickly, it becomes rage, bares the teeth that have been lurking behind the smile as pretty as a morning glory, and enraged, bites itself and never feels the pain, never knows that the blood staining its teeth is its own.

But the signs had been there almost from the beginning. I remember being at a civil rights rally in the early sixties and hearing the chant, “Freedom Now! Freedom Now!” I muttered “Freedom any ol’ time” because I was afraid of what would happen if we didn’t get “Freedom Now.” Later in the sixties, Jim Morrison of the Doors shouted, “We want the world and we want it now!” We should have been frightened, and we weren’t.

Freedom did not come now. We may have wanted the world, but we didn’t get it, at least not warm from the oven, as light and flaky as a croissant. Because freedom did not come now, because we did not get the world, we turned against each other.

It is let loose in the public arena, it is like an animal in heat and in desperate need of a sexual joining. All too quickly, unrequited idealism can become surly and aggressive. All too quickly, it becomes rage, bares the teeth that have been lurking behind the smile as pretty as a morning glory, and enraged, bites itself and never feels the pain, never knows that the blood staining its teeth is its own.

I remember being at a civil rights rally in the early sixties and hearing the chant, “Freedom Now! Freedom Now!” I muttered “Freedom any ol’ time” because I was afraid of what would happen if we didn’t get “Freedom Now.” Later in the sixties, Jim Morrison of the Doors shouted, “We want the world and we want it now!” We should have been frightened, and we weren’t.

Freedom did not come now. We may have wanted the world, but we didn’t get it, at least not warm from the oven, as light and flaky as a croissant. Because freedom did not come now, because we did not get the world, we turned against each other.

But the signs had been there almost from the beginning. I remember being at a civil rights rally in the early sixties and hearing the chant, “Freedom Now! Freedom Now!” I muttered “Freedom any ol’ time” because I was afraid of what would happen if we didn’t get “Freedom Now.” Later in the sixties, Jim Morrison of the Doors shouted, “We want the world and we want it now!” We should have been frightened, and we weren’t.

Freedom did not come now. We may have wanted the world, but we didn’t get it, at least not warm from the oven, as light and flaky as a croissant. Because freedom did not come now, because we did not get the world, we turned against each other.

But the signs had been there almost from the beginning. I remember being at a civil rights rally in the early sixties and hearing the chant, “Freedom Now! Freedom Now!” I muttered “Freedom any ol’ time” because I was afraid of what would happen if we didn’t get “Freedom Now.” Later in the sixties, Jim Morrison of the Doors shouted, “We want the world and we want it now!” We should have been frightened, and we weren’t.

Freedom did not come now. We may have wanted the world, but we didn’t get it, at least not warm from the oven, as light and flaky as a croissant. Because freedom did not come now, because we did not get the world, we turned against each other.

But the signs had been there almost from the beginning. I remember being at a civil rights rally in the early sixties and hearing the chant, “Freedom Now! Freedom Now!” I muttered “Freedom any ol’ time” because I was afraid of what would happen if we didn’t get “Freedom Now.” Later in the sixties, Jim Morrison of the Doors shouted, “We want the world and we want it now!” We should have been frightened, and we weren’t.

Freedom did not come now. We may have wanted the world, but we didn’t get it, at least not warm from the oven, as light and flaky as a croissant. Because freedom did not come now, because we did not get the world, we turned against each other.

But the signs had been there almost from the beginning. I remember being at a civil rights rally in the early sixties and hearing the chant, “Freedom Now! Freedom Now!” I muttered “Freedom any ol’ time” because I was afraid of what would happen if we didn’t get “Freedom Now.” Later in the sixties, Jim Morrison of the Doors shouted, “We want the world and we want it now!” We should have been frightened, and we weren’t.

Freedom did not come now. We may have wanted the world, but we didn’t get it, at least not warm from the oven, as light and flaky as a croissant. Because freedom did not come now, because we did not get the world, we turned against each other.

But the signs had been there almost from the beginning. I remember being at a civil rights rally in the early sixties and hearing the chant, “Freedom Now! Freedom Now!” I muttered “Freedom any ol’ time” because I was afraid of what would happen if we didn’t get “Freedom Now.” Later in the sixties, Jim Morrison of the Doors shouted, “We want the world and we want it now!” We should have been frightened, and we weren’t.

Freedom did not come now. We may have wanted the world, but we didn’t get it, at least not warm from the oven, as light and flaky as a croissant. Because freedom did not come now, because we did not get the world, we turned against each other.

But the signs had been there almost from the beginning. I remember being at a civil rights rally in the early sixties and hearing the chant, “Freedom Now! Freedom Now!” I muttered “Freedom any ol’ time” because I was afraid of what would happen if we didn’t get “Freedom Now.” Later in the sixties, Jim Morrison of the Doors shouted, “We want the world and we want it now!” We should have been frightened, and we weren’t.

Freedom did not come now. We may have wanted the world, but we didn’t get it, at least not warm from the oven, as light and flaky as a croissant. Because freedom did not come now, because we did not get the world, we turned against each other.

But the signs had been there almost from the beginning. I remember being at a civil rights rally in the early sixties and hearing the chant, “Freedom Now! Freedom Now!” I muttered “Freedom any ol’ time” because I was afraid of what would happen if we didn’t get “Freedom Now.” Later in the sixties, Jim Morrison of the Doors shouted, “We want the world and we want it now!” We should have been frightened, and we weren’t.

Freedom did not come now. We may have wanted the world, but we didn’t get it, at least not warm from the oven, as light and flaky as a croissant. Because freedom did not come now, because we did not get the world, we turned against each other.

But the signs had been there almost from the beginning. I remember being at a civil rights rally in the early sixties and hearing the chant, “Freedom Now! Freedom Now!” I muttered “Freedom any ol’ time” because I was afraid of what would happen if we didn’t get “Freedom Now.” Later in the sixties, Jim Morrison of the Doors shouted, “We want the world and we want it now!” We should have been frightened, and we weren’t.

Freedom did not come now. We may have wanted the world, but we didn’t get it, at least not warm from the oven, as light and flaky as a croissant. Because freedom did not come now, because we did not get the world, we turned against each other.
BEYOND IDEOLOGY  
(Continued from p. 56)  
Arthur Cohen has his heroine say:

The mind has its work and its materials; it has no choice in this respect. It can do nothing else but work properly—balancing thrust with caution, intuition with verification, argument with detail, interpretation with groundwork, grand truth with the webbing of subtle argument. The working of the mind is a slow and patient procedure. It cannot be rushed. . . . Clarity is the moral luster of the mind.

This was our birthright as intellectuals, but to possess it we needed to withstand the terror, loneliness, and isolation inherent in intellectual life. The intellectual must be an Outsider because only from the outside can one see clearly what is occurring on the inside. We succumbed to the understandable human need to be at the party, standing beside the fireplace, drinking hot cider.

Such failings were predictable because it is only a short step from idealism to ideology. Both hold out the promise of giving life meaning; both promise to shelter us from the uncertainties and anxieties of self-knowledge. Ideology does not permit second thoughts, however, because ideology is a cosmology, answering all questions, past, present, and future. Eventually, thoughts become unnecessary, even first thoughts, and the struggle to be human is scorned as individualism. The factionalism and political name-calling that had alienated so many of us from the Old Left became the language of the Black Movement and the New Left.

In the spring of 1969, SDS passed a resolution asserting that the Black Panther party was the “vanguard” of the Black Movement, the true representative of revolutionary
nationalism. In my weekly column in The Guardian, I objected and wrote, in part: “What is at issue here is the correct relationship a white radical organization should have to the black revolutionary movement. By presuming to know what program, ideology, military strategy, and what particular organizations best serve the interests of the black community,” SDS was being “more white than revolutionary.”

Two weeks later The Guardian published a response by Kathleen Cleaver, the Panther secretary of communications. Among other things, she called me a “counter-revolutionary,” “a fool” peddling “madness,” a “racist,” and ended with these eloquent words: “Fuck Julius Lester. All power to the people!”

I did not understand. I remembered Kathleen from when she had come to work in the Atlanta SNCC office, a young woman with a big grin and a lot of enthusiasm. We were pals, in the best sense of that word, able to laugh and play together. What had happened to her? What was happening to us all? Why did Kathleen need me to agree with her? Why did blacks need me to leave my wife so they could be black? But when the personal becomes political, persons cease to exist. When persons cease to exist, war is imminent.

I was not surprised to hear rumors that the Panthers were going to kill me. I believed the rumors because I knew people whom the Panthers had threatened with guns because of political disagreements. But all my second thoughts crystallized into an unshakable conviction: I would choose death, because to live and not write what I believed to be true was not to live at all.

The rumors were only rumors and nothing happened, but a new round of second thoughts arose. What did it mean that I had more space and freedom to think and write in Nixon’s America than in The Movement with all its revolutionary rhetoric?

In September of the same year, Ho Chi Minh died. I had been in North Vietnam for a month in 1967, and had witnessed U.S. bombing raids at a time when the government was still denying such bombing raids. Most of all, though, I remembered the lyrical beauty of that country. Perhaps that is why my response to Ho’s death was to write a poem and publish it as my weekly column in The Guardian. This is the poem:

Half awakened by the light of morning
choking in the greyness
of a third of September Wednesday,
I reached out for the
roundness
softness
fullness
allness of her
and she, awakened,
began to move,
softly,
silently,
gently,
and my hand found that place,
that hidden place,
that secret place,
that
wonderful place
and in the quiescent light of
a third of September Wednesday morning,
I felt my penis being taken into the
salty
thick
fluidity
of her swirling movement
casily
softly
gently
(as the children were waking.)

Afterwards,
my penis, moist and warm,
resting on my thigh like some
fish washed onto the beach by full moontide,
I turned on the radio
and we heard that
Ho Chi Minh lay dying.
(The fog covered the seagulls that
sit on the rocky beach when the tide is out.)

I retreated from her,
not talking that day as the radio told me
(every hour on the hour)
that Ho Chi Minh lay dying.
Finally, when night had covered the fog,
we heard that
Ho Chi Minh was dead
and I came back to her.
Ho Chi Minh was dead.
I wanted her again.
The softness
the roundness
the fullness
the allness.

Ho Chi Minh was dead.

When the next issue of The Guardian came out, a poem of Ho’s was in the space where my column usually appeared. Angry, I called the office wanting to know why my poem had not been published. The editor told me the staff had decided that if the poem were published the week of Ho’s death, it would not be understood as the appreciation of Ho that it was.
They had decided to delay publication of my poem for a week. I asked why they hadn't let me know, or discussed it with me. The editor said they had been too busy. I was not convinced.

They published the poem the following week, and the week after my final column appeared announcing the Atlanta SNCC office. In the summer of 1967 George had gone to West Point, Mississippi to organize and had died under suspicious circumstances. The police claimed that George's car accidentally ended up in a creek, George inside. I did not learn of George's death until my return from a trip to Cuba. I also learned that SNCC had not sent flowers to his funeral. I was outraged. SNCC's failure to send flowers to George's funeral had been in my eventually leaving the organization:

> It became too much to have to fight the enemy and those with whom I was working. We had been through too much, I guess. The burdens had gotten too heavy and the frustrations had become so painful that we could no longer give each other the personal support each of us needed to do our job—make the revolution. Our love for black people was overwhelmed by our inability to do everything to make that love manifest, and after a while we could not even love each other. We got so involved in the day-to-day functioning of an organization, so enmeshed in fixing the mimeograph machine, writing leaflets, raising money, sitting in interminable meetings where we said what we were going to do and had forgotten what we were going to do by the time the meeting was over; and eventually we forget, can't even remember that the revolution is an "embryonic journey" and that we are the embryos inside society. If we cannot be human to each other, the revolution will be stillborn.

I had thought that the revolution was to create a society in which power elites did not arbitrarily determine what "the people" might and might not understand. Well, I should have known that the revolution wouldn't be erotic.

I left The Guardian but it was hard to leave The Movement. It had been my identity and life, my family and community. When Dave Dellinger's magazine Liberation, asked me to write for it, I agreed. Less than a year passed, and once again I wrote something that a Movement publication did not want to publish.

The occasion was the trial in New Haven of seven members of the Black Panther party who had been accused of torturing and murdering Alex Rackley, another BPP member. Three party members admitted their active participation in the torture and murder of Rackley. Yet, black and white radicals were demonstrating on the New Haven Green, and many articles were published in the radical press demanding that the New Haven Seven be freed. The rationale? It was impossible for blacks to receive justice in America. White sycophancy toward the Black Movement had set a new standard for madness. I sat down to the typewriter:

> ...we can self-righteously cite the verdict of the Nuremberg Trials when we want to condemn the military establishment and the politicians. We can say to them that you are personally responsible for what you do, that you do not have to follow orders and there are no extenuating circumstances. Yet, we can turn right around and become Adolf Eichmann's, eloquent apologists for the Movement's My Lai... Our morality is used to condemn others, but it is not to be applied to ourselves. We can react with outrage when four are murdered at Kent State, but when a professor is killed in the dynamiting of the Mathematics Building at the University of Wisconsin, we don't give it a second thought. When we kill, there are extenuating circumstances. It was an accident, we say. The blast went off too soon.

The murder of Alex Rackley was the logical culmination of the politics we have been espousing, a politics of violence for-the-sake-of-violence, a politics which too quickly and too neatly divides people into categories of "revolutionary" and "counter-revolutionary." The murder of Alex Rackley is the result of a politics which more and more begins to resemble the politics we are supposedly seeking to displace.

The editors of Liberation held the article for three months. Finally, I had a tense meeting with them in which they argued that the prosecution could use my article against the Panthers. Did I want that? I was asked. How many times during my years in The Movement had someone tried to control my thoughts, my words, or my deeds by saying that such-and-such would not be in the best interests of The People, that such-and-such would merely play into the hands of the "enemy," that I was being individualistic and that people in The Movement had to submit to discipline, and that their individual thoughts and lives were not as important as those of The People.

I knew only that as a writer and an intellectual, I was responsible for conveying whatever minuscule portion of the truth I could find. And as a person, my responsi-
bility was to be as fully human as I could. Giving one's soul to ideology permitted one to rationalize murder, to attack friends, to deny the power and beauty of the erotic. Allegiance to ideology gave one permission to turn other human beings into abstractions, and as a black kid growing up under segregation in the 1940s and 1950s, I knew what being an abstraction felt like because, dear God, my soul still bled from the wounds. If I had learned nothing else, I had learned that one does not turn another human being into an abstraction without becoming an abstraction oneself, and to turn another into an abstraction is murder. I recognized, moreover, that even if murder is justified in the name of God, freedom, justice, socialism, revolution or democracy, it is still murder.

_Liberation_ published the article, but our relationship was over. Nevertheless, among my feelings of sadness and hurt, there was a strange, new feeling. I was free. I was free to be whoever I was and would be; and slowly and painfully in the ensuing years, I came to love all the contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in being human.

Robert Frost said that he was never a radical in his youth because he didn't want to be a conservative in his old age. I was a radical in my youth, but I have not become conservative in middle age.

I am not radical or conservative because I do not see an essential difference between the two positions, despite appearances. Both are political worldviews that divide the world into an Us against a Them. Radicals and conservatives merely disagree on who is the Them. Because I am Black, because I am Jewish, I must resist the succulent temptation to define another human being as a Them, and sometimes that is very hard.

This does not mean that those responsible for the evil in South Africa should not be held accountable for their deeds. But I do not have to define another as a Them to hold him or her accountable. It is sufficient to say that they have failed, on even the most minimal level, to live humanely.

I am not politically naive about the Soviet Union, but neither do I forget that it is a nation that lost twenty million people in World War II. I cannot imagine what impact that can have on a nation's character and policies. I look at Iran and see madness, but I cannot forget the impact that can have on a nation's character and policies. I am not politically naive, but I am convinced that unless I know and accept my humanity, I will be able to see others as they are, as nothing more and nothing less than utterly human. When we are able to do this, we will have moved beyond ideology into terror and then, only then, will we be free.

There is a Them, but it is not out there. Them is always and eternally Me. To the extent that I take responsibility for the Them that is Me, to that extent do I free others to be persons in all their crystalline fragility. That is the vision with which The Movement began, and it is a vision many of us are still trying to live.

The Movement disappointed us and we disappointed ourselves. Perhaps, then, it is important to remember these words of Bertolt Brecht:

You, who shall emerge from the flood
In which we are sinking,
Think—
When you speak of our weaknesses,
Also of the dark time
That brought them forth...

Even the hatred of squalor
Makes the brow grow stern.
Even anger against injustice
Makes the voice grow harsh. Alas, we
Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness
Could not ourselves be kind.

But you, when at last it comes to pass
That man can help his fellow man,
Do not judge us
Too harshly.

I sincerely hope that, in our second thoughts, we will judge ourselves, but not too harshly. Judging ourselves too harshly is to think that the proper expiation for radicalism is conservatism. Having attempted to balance ourselves by standing on our left legs, we must not shift all our weight to our right legs.

Standing on both legs, the weight distributed evenly throughout the body, is an intricate and demanding task. It means being neither radical nor conservative. It means examining issues and recognizing that in certain cases a radical methodology is wisest. In others, a conservative methodology will bring us closer to realizing the ideals of freedom and justice and economic equity. Though both theories present themselves as if they are truth incarnate, they are not. But each does carry a truth, and each must be listened to for its truth.

Radicalism and conservatism are merely two ways that one attempts to make sense of the world. We delude ourselves when we use them to seek our identities, when we wear them and think we know who we are. Identity cannot be resolved so easily.

Ultimately, the task is to be utterly human. Only to the extent that I know and accept my humanity will I be able to see others as they are, as nothing more and nothing less than utterly human. When we are able to do this, we will have moved beyond ideology into terror and then, only then, will we be free.