

## **Conversations with Andrew Young** **“Transcript”**

I'm Andy Young. For years I worked along side Martin Luther King. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth would leave everyone blind and toothless. For injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

I want to thank you for agreeing to sit down and have this conversation with me. I've been very eager to meet and chat with you.

Oh, it's my pleasure.

Need less to say you spent much of your career focusing on civil rights and I want to if you can to take the term civil rights and tell me what it meant to you as a young man in the fifties and the sixties and what does it mean to you today. Well I think that for me civil rights almost started in the thirties, uh and it meant equal opportunity. It meant that the fact that in our society, the fact that I was born to a black family meant that I would have less educational opportunity, less job opportunity, less opportunity to borrow money or to work in a free enterprise system. I didn't have the right to vote, and it meant leveling the playing field, and that's essentially what we were trying to do. To be treated fairly, and how to define that fairness.

How does it compare to it's definition in your mind today.

I think it's still the same. I haven't changed much on that, except that it applies in different ways to different people, and we tend to use the term diversity more than civil rights. In large part because diversity is a more inclusive term, and it's not a racial term. When I think of diversity. I think of poor and working class White males or Hispanics as well as Blacks. I think that we have established a concept of a religious sense of justice, but it's not yet understood that in today's world you gotta get along with people that are different, and that's why I like the term diversity. Because the most significant differences in our lives are the ones that are closest to us. The difference between men and women. The difference between fathers and sons. The most bitter feuds quite often and the most emotional conflicts in my life have all involved family members, because that's where you are the most vulnerable. And so learning to get along and except the differences in your own family is a beginning place. But then you've got to learn to accept the differences in your community. The differences in the world in which we live, and the world does function much more independently than any of us admit. There's not a thing that we have on or a thing that we eat that has not had some impact from people thousands of miles away.

You were born in nineteen thirty-two in Louisiana. Your father was a dentist, middle-class family. He assumed you would take over his practice. You even went to Howard University, his Alma Matre, but you decide somewhere along the line that you were going to pursue seminary school, which you ultimately did. What happened? What was

the time frame that made you realize that with all due respect to your father that your life was going to be played out on a much bigger stage?

Well I didn't know that it was larger. In fact I thought it was lesser. When I selected the ministry, I also ended up in a small country church in South Georgia and I really always thought of myself as a pastor and the situation changes, but in the New Testament the apostle Paul went from place to place. During my time in the civil rights movement we thought of ourselves as moving from place to place, and advising the churches of how to live out the meaning of their Christianity in the nineteen sixties. When I went to Congress, I frankly saw Congress as a four hundred and thirty million person church that had billions of dollars of God's money to preside over, and so I tries in my own think, I never said it publicly, but I was very active in the prayer breakfast, and I related to even the people I disagreed with as my bothers and sisters.

At what point did you gain the confidence to believe you could make a different and really make a change?

I don't know. I really think that's something my parents instilled in me. It wasn't a belief that I could make a difference. It was a requirement that what ever I did, I had to make a difference, and I remember two little books that they gave me to read that I read because they were small. One was Wendell Wilkie, "One World", which made start to think about global issues, but I was .....

How old were you when you read that? Do you remember?

I was about thirteen, fourteen

Had you not thought about the world before? Was that sort of your first....

No I had thought about the world, because I went to Sunday school, and in the Sunday school we sang "this is my father's world". We raised money for missions in Africa. In fact I thinking about being a missionary in Africa largely because missionaries had come from New England and had come south and educated my family. My grandparents and my grandparents had an opportunity to get a very good education at a time when it wasn't easy. But they did it because somebody else sacrificed for them, so I felt that it was my turn to make sure that other people had those benefits as well.

Do you remember your first meeting with Dr. Martin Luther King?

I remember the first real meeting I had with him was a riot almost, because I had spoken to him in Florida and I then ended up on the same program with him in Talladega College in nineteen fifty-seven when it was religious emphasis week and we drove back to his home because my wife was from the same little country town in Alabama as his wife and they were both pregnant. Well no, they were both pregnant, but we each had one child already. So I wanted to talk politics, I wanted to talk ideology. He was already involved

in the bus boycott. His home had been bombed by that time. He only wanted to talk about his baby. I mean he was so crazy about his kids.

What was your day to day relationship like as you continued to develop a relationship?

Well, we were always just friends, and the two things that I think made him relate to me was: One I didn't want to be him.

Where other people did?

Other people wanted to be the leader. I saw myself as strictly as supporting him and doing whatever he needed done. I mean if it was getting his shoes shined, or answering the mail, or kinda doing some research on a speech, or talking to people that he wanted to talk and hadn't had a chance to. I did whatever I thought was appropriate and whatever he needed at that moment, and that included telling him some things sometimes that he didn't want to hear.

How was that? How did he take that?

Well, One he really appreciated that.

Was that a role that most people didn't want to play?

Most people didn't want to play. Most people wanted to tell him how great he was. Most people wanted to you know get close to him, and I wanted to be close to him, but I was afraid to be close to him.

How come?

Because he was such an awesome character. I mean he really felt that the destiny of the world was on his shoulders, and I didn't want to feel that way, and I wanted to help him, but I had no no, I mean I didn't want to take those burdens.

Well you know in your book, "An Easy Burden", you comment that he really sort of found himself in the middle and he realized he couldn't back away.

Well, I think that as a young man there was no question that he was a child of destiny. Now I don't know who did it. Whether he did it himself or his parents did it. I know that Coretta did a lot of it, but in looking at his papers he's got his examination papers from high school. I mean the little blue books that we use to write in.

Does he really?

He had the papers that he prepared that he wrote in college. He had his report cards. Everything is very well organized and it's all there. Including that fact that he made a C in preaching.

Well If I remember correctly your best grades were in speech.

Well it was the only thing that I made an A in, I think in school.

Tell me this, during your time that he worked with you. He referred to you as his negotiator. Why did he call you his negotiator?

Well I don't know if he did that so much as the others did that.

OK

Everybody had to have a role, and I grew up in a neighborhood that had an Irish grocery store on one corner, an Italian bar, a German American bun on the third corner. It was a completely mixed up neighborhood. Most of my father's business suppliers were Jewish.

You use to go to the store and shop for dental supplies for your father too.

Yeah, and I was I mean I grew up in a totally integrated society that was legally segregated, and I had to learn to relate to people respectfully, but not feeling or exhibiting any sense of inferiority. And my parents actually you know from the time I was three, four years old always said you know like the Nazi's were heil Hitler, and he said you know, my father said that's a sickness, that's not that white supremacy does not exist, and he took me to a segregated theater, one of the few time he took me to a theater, to see Jesse Owens in the Olympics of nineteen thirty-six refute all of Hitler's master race kind of ideology. So you don't get angry with sick people. You help heal sick people. So he laid the foundations for my nonviolent training even though he had guns and he taught us to shoot, and we had no problems. He made sure we learned how to box we could. He said if you can fight, then you don't have to fight. You have to lean how to defend yourself, but he also said that if you in a fight and you lose your temper, you lose the fight. Don't get mad. Get smart. And that was the thing that he said to me over and over again, "don't get mad get smart". Think your way through a fight. You see.

You have probably thought that in your head a hundred times since those early days, and I know that you refer to it in your book, and it was something that kept you cool. You often talked about not having emotion during the heat of an argument, it would be after or..

Well you have to keep your head about you, and everybody is losing theirs and blaming it on you.

So it was an early age you learned to be a negotiator and those skills obviously continue to serve you well.

Well it was also I went to school young, so the kids were bigger, and I had to either run, fight, or negotiate.

And negotiate looked like the best option.

Yeah, and I did a lot of all of them, but I was it was the most sensible way to relate to people was to be friendly and to take the initiative in establishing a friendship.

You've made the comment that often you would go in ahead of time because you found the results of a protest could be better waged if you dealt up front when the emotions were calm.

Yeah, if you could explain to people in advance why this was going to happen, and what your point of view was. They would never agree, but it was easier to understand. First place, they wouldn't believe it was possible. You see. So they didn't have to take it too seriously, but you would have laid out the territory, and that was true in international negotiations. It was true in, most problems I had was with the city and my city council.

Really

But at the UN you wanted people to know as much as possible your view of the conflict and wanted to understand their view approach.

And it served you well. I would like to read to you a brief excerpt of what appears to be a eulogy or something that you wrote immediately after Dr. King's assassination. Your first line: Martin Luther King is no longer present in body, but his marvelous loving spirit has been unleashed across the length and breath of history. You went on to say: A man like Martin Luther King comes but once a century. We who have lived in his time have glimpsed a glorious future, which he exemplified in his life. What was it about Dr. King that made him larger than life?

Well he was trying to do something that nobody else had really tried to do in America, and that was he was committed to solving problems without hurting either person or property. His nonviolence, his belief that the power of his spirit was greater than political power, economic power or military power, and he sought spiritual victories in the midst of a world that was being dominated by political, economic, and military power. But in doing that I think he unleashed a spirit that certainly was caught in South Africa. It was there already; in fact we might have gotten it from South Africa. South Africa, Gandhi started in South Africa, then he went to India, and we really didn't see a way to deal with our problems until Gandhi's independence. Indian independence was nineteen forty-seven. That was the year before Martin finished college, and it was the year I went to college, but both of our college presidents had been invited to India to the Indian independence, so all I heard all the way through college was talk about Mahatma Gandhi, and it wasn't until I finished college that I bothered to read it, and as soon as I read Gandhi, I said this makes sense. This makes sense for us, and Dr. King, well both of our seminary education really was largely influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr and it was anti-pacifist. I mean Reinhold Niebuhr was a believer in the just war that essentially said that in a sinful world, somebody has to take the responsibility for dealing with evil. So we started out excepting that some violence or political restraint was necessary, but that it wasn't the only way. That if you could get ahead of that violence, you could resolve those problems with a spiritual power that was even superior than the violence, because after

the violence was over, to succeed, you had to go back to restoring some kind of human relationship or spiritual or emotional trust. There had to be a framework for civilization which is not built on things alone, but which is built on relationships. Some people say they are spiritual. Some people would think of them of enlightened self-interest. It doesn't matter how you say it. We are together on this planet and we have to make it work.

Is there any way that you can put into words the true impact that Dr. King had on your life?

Well I think that I was always very shy, I would much rather avoid problems than confront them and I think that he used to give me a hard time about that. He said you are too well adjusted. He said you think your way through a problem and you don't need to react to it. He said there are some problems that we ought not to be able to adjust to. There are some things that we just have to change no matter what it costs, even if it costs our lives. And I think that getting me to realize that taking risks and assuming responsibility was, well I probably would never run for congress or get involved in politics at all, or wouldn't have been at the UN. Wouldn't have had, you know wouldn't have been mayor or even thought that we could bring the Olympics.

There was an interesting quote where you said that despite all that happened in your twenties and thirties, you said that my life did not really begin until I was forty, and we should note that you were elected to congress and to be about to turn forty.

Well I always say that life begins at forty because I'm getting older and people think of forty. In those days the young people used to say when you are thirty, you are over the hill. That all change had to be done by kids, young people, teenagers. A lot of it is, but I like to remind people that really are not secure and sure of yourself until you are forty. You almost don't know what you are doing until then, and I say that Moses was eighty before he started leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, and so that age is a number, and it's of little or no significance at any point in life.

If Dr. King were alive today, what would you want to discuss with him?

I'd almost be afraid or ashamed to discuss with him.

Why?

Because I think that had he lived. We have completed this human rights revolution. It continued around the world politically, but he always that the triple evils affecting America were racism, war, and poverty, and that we had to redeem the soul of America from these evils, and I don't think we quite have.

As we sit here, two thousand four, soon you will be seventy-two years old, and as a young man you said it won't be until I'm fifty-five that I can truly judge my success in life. Has your life been a success?

Well my life has been fun, and I guess I'd have to say it's a success, but have never felt that I have lived up to my potential. I mean I've always thought of myself as not quite making it, and making it means being a little more disciplined. I admire Jimmy Carter's writing. Martin Luther King did that. On every vacation, right after Christmas he went to the Islands for about three weeks, and he did an outline of a book, and he did a first draft of a book, and he changed the world in many ways through his writing as well. I have been too scattered and I'm not disappointed with myself, but I don't think I deserve any particular credit because I had so much going, so much given to me, and it's the other thing my parents always said, "to them whom much has been given, of them will much be required". Given all of the blessing that I have had. My association with my parents, my church, my education, Martin Luther King, the US government, and working with Olympic committee, and mayor of Atlanta and all of this, I've just been so well blessed that I think that I've not been able to do enough. I haven't been able to pass enough of that on yet.

Is there anything that you wished you had done or would still like to do if given time?

I think the thing I think about now is I'd like to find a way to put down in a small book why I think this world makes sense and why I think we can make it work for all our citizens. You know I was blessed. I figured out in you know. I visited personally a hundred thirty-seven countries in my lifetime, and in most of those I've been meeting with everybody from students to the presidents and the business leaders, and the world is not a frightening place for me. I mean, I'm not afraid of the Arab world, I'm not afraid in Africa, I'm not insecure in China, or in India. I love these places because. I've been embraced by people. It seems like everywhere I go I meet only the best people, which makes me believe that we can get all the good people in the world together around a common vision, we can make this place work, and that's preaching. That means earth becomes something like, more like the kingdom of God, and I haven't figure out a way to do that yet. I still go back to the, It really is a New Testament model. God decide to take this little place in Bethlehem, and make it work. See for his son. We decided or were led by Martin Luther King to say, OK Montgomery is insignificant, but if we can make something work here in Montgomery, it'll spread. If we can make something work here in Birmingham, now that's we have tried to do here in Atlanta. If we can have a city where Blacks and Whites, rich and poor, Protestants, Catholics, and Jews can live together in harmony here and do well then we can, it'll spread, and I, that's what I was in the process of doing. Nine One One temporarily disrupted that, because with it came the war in Iraq, which unfortunately I felt I had to support because Saddam Hussein had already killed more than a million people, all of them Arabs. It wasn't an east, west thing. This was a tyrant that had to be stopped. I believe in nonviolence, but as mayor I had to have a police force. People need to be restrain, and you cannot allow violence to overcome society.

What would you best like to be remembered for?

Well, I don't know. In fact I would best like to be seen today. I don't want to be remembered because I want to be around for a while.

Ambassador Young I want to thank you so much for your time today. It was such a pleasure to talk to you.

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