

A Conversation Captioning Script- Dr. Joseph Lowery

Hoffman: 01:00:41:02 Dr. Joseph Lowery, I'm so glad you're here to have this conversation with me. I appreciate your time.

Dr. Lowery: 01:00:45:27 My privilege, my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Hoffman: 01:00:48:24 Well, I'm glad you're here and I want you to start with me here. You are called the "Dean of Civil Rights" by so many yet, you call yourself a preacher, an advocate, and a professional agitator. Why do you use those words to describe yourself?

Dr. Lowery: (Laughter) 01:01:04:02 I don't remember the professional agitator part--

Hoffman: 01:01:06:25 --Do you agree?

Dr. Lowery: 01:01:07:08 I think somebody else called me that. I don't know...yea I think I'm a preacher, I feel called of God to spread his word and that's been my joy that he chose me, unworthy as I am, to be a vessel of his gospel and his love for us, as his creatures. Advocacy, I think that's the nature of the gospel. The gospel is a plea for a reconciliation of those who are separated from themselves, from each other, and from God. And so the agitation, I was first called that by a little old lady in tennis shoes in Mobile, Alabama...was a member of my church and when I left Mobile to go to Nashville to serve in the Bishop's office, the local paper said that, "Local agitator leaves town." And I was offended by it.

Hoffman: 01:02:12:07 Are you still offended today?

Dr. Lowery: 01:02:13:25 No, because she took me home with her and told me not to be offended and showed me this brand new washing machine that she had in her house and she said, "You see that red, round thing in the middle?," she said "that's an agitator," and she said, "No matter what kind of detergent you use, no matter what brand of washing machine, nothing happens positive until that agitator does its work. It separates the dirt from the fabrics, the clothes; so don't feel bad about being called an agitator. So after that I wasn't bothered anymore. I don't know how the professional part got in there.

Hoffman: (Laughter) 01:02:50:21 You embraced it then.

Dr. Lowery: 01:02:52:04 Yes, yes. I, if agitation means trying to stir the waters so that creative tension can help us separate the wrong from the right, the just from the unjust, I accept it, I plead guilty.

Hoffman: 01:03:08:00 You were born in 1921, in Huntsville, Alabama--

Dr. Lowery: 01:03:10:29 --That's correct. I'm a northerner, that's north Alabama.---

Hoffman: 01:03:13:21 That is north, north Alabama. And you grew up a time when African Americans had very few rights. What do you recall about your early childhood?

Dr. Lowery: 01:03:22:00 I remember an instance when I was--my mother carried me to a railroad station to go to Chicago. We had relatives in Chicago and once a year at least and sometimes twice we would go to Chicago. Now Huntsville was on the southern railway

which didn't go to Chicago but Decatur, Alabama, 24 miles west of Huntsville, the L & N went to Chicago, so my father carried my mother and me to the station in Decatur and we went in the waiting room. My mother was very fair skinned and the police officer came in and looked and said, "Hey you can't stay in the colored waiting room you have to go next door to the white waiting room." She said, "okay," I don't know where I was, but she found me and carried me into the white waiting room. Then he saw her again, he saw me, and he said, "Uh-uh, he can't stay in here." And she said, "Well he's my boy and I'll go wherever he goes." And so she started back to the colored waiting room but the train came and as I recall we got on the train. But, I worried about that for a long time and I asked my mother about it, I was a small lad, but I believed, as far as I can recall now, that was my first cognizance of race, and racial distinctions, and racial discrimination.

Hoffman: 01:04:44:29 Your parents wanted you to have a good education so much that they put you on that train and they sent you to Chicago for roughly five years when you were 11 years old. You went to grammar school at Saint Elizabeth's where you were taught by very strict nuns who you say, beat you more often than you deserved.

Dr. Lowery: 01:05:01:03 Well, beat is probably not the--

Hoffman: --whipped--

Dr. Lowery: 01:05:01:18 --Whipped, punished. Usually in your hand with little switches, sometimes a belt, sometimes a—but more often than not but I treasure that experience. Because--

Hoffman: --Why?--

Dr. Lowery: 01:05:14:22-- Because they taught, they really taught. They cared about their students and I learned in that school and I was disciplined. I learned to respect discipline. I learned to respect religion that was not mine. I was Methodist and the Catholic, the catechism, was different to me even at the young age I recognized distinctions but I learned to respect another religion. So, I think I am more tolerant today of different religions, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and the family of Christianity in Catholicism, Protestantism, so I'm more tolerant because of that experience, in that school.

Hoffman: 01:06:00:12 You ultimately wound up in college, a Presbyterian college in Knoxville, and it was at that time that you decided that you did want to be a preacher even though your father had decided that you should really go to law school and be a businessman, so what prompted the decision to be a preacher?

Dr. Lowery: 01:06:13:10 Well, you know, when I was a little boy in Huntsville, several pastors told me, probably because I made so many speeches in church. My mother was in charge of almost every program and you could go out of the back of our house on Church Street, across a vacant field, to Jefferson Street, in the back of the church so, I went back and forth. We had a little path that my family beat through this field to the church. So I made speeches, and one minister, Rev. L. G. Fields said to me, "Boy one day you gonna make a preacher," and I told his son, who was a good friend of mine,

“You know I thought your father was intelligent until yesterday when he told me I was gonna”—So the seed had been planted but I’d ignore it, trampled on it, pushed it aside--

Hoffman: 01:06:58:07—Well, as a young boy you resented going to church and said, as a young boy, “I’m not going to go when I’m an adult,” so that was a 180.

Dr. Lowery: 01:07:04:13 When you are forced to go you have this rebellion that when I get where I can make my own decision, “I’m never going to church.” But, when I got to college there was the college pastor, who was a Presbyterian pastor by the name Evans, he was very inspiring and he resurrected the thoughts and the feelings of this planted seed, which lay dormant so many years. So, finally I decided to stop, stop running and accept the call to preach.

Hoffman: 01:07:39:10 And you did in several churches throughout the south, and then along about 1955 you met Dr. Martin Luther King in Boston at a seminar. Do you remember your first impressions of him?

Dr. Lowery: 01:07:50:09--Yes, he was a scholar but, I was impressed with him and didn’t see him again until he came to Montgomery to pastor the Dexter Church, and I was pastoring in Mobile, and the Alabama Council on Human Relations had a meeting and we both were on the program to make contributions. I admired his speech and he was kind enough to say something nice about my speech. We engaged in the usual preacher exaggerations about you know, “You were great, man” and so forth but we were attracted to each other and promised to exchange pulpits and come and preach for each other at sometime in the future. But, he was an attractive, scholarly fellow, but despite his scholarship he was warm, and down-to-earth, and friendly, and winning. He had a winning way.

Hoffman: 01:08:45:16 Was he easy to be friends with?

Dr. Lowery: 01:08:47:13 Yes, we developed a friendship that--and once the boycotts started I was heading the Ministry of Alliance in Mobile, and I read about the boycott.

Hoffman: --the bus boycott--

Dr. Lowery:01:09:00:27—the bus boycott, in Montgomery and read something in the paper that disturbed me. It was that the demands of the movement led by Martin asked the city fathers to let blacks begin seating at the back of the bus, as they were and fill up if they did but, that they would not have to get up if a white person got on the bus. Rosa Parks sat in the front because the bus was full and when a white passenger got on she was asked to get up; she refused. Well, I called Martin. I said, “We already have that in Mobile, we don’t have to get up if we fill up the bus and he said, “You’re right. We should ask first-come, first-serve but it doesn’t matter, they are not going to grant this request. It will make them look foolish, it will make them look stubborn to hold on to segregation and we’ll win away.” And he was right, they turned down the request and the rest is history.

Hoffman: 01:10:01:05 Well, In that time-frame you actually started, with Dr. Martin Luther King, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which had

started informally, conversations with you, and others, Abernathy, and others, and ultimately formed this organization that you were vice president of--

Dr. Lowery: --Yes.

Hoffman: 01:10:18:00 The Mobile situation, the bus boycotts in Mobile went relatively smoothly but there were violence and outbreaks in other areas. At what point was the decision made that we will go forward with a non-violent movement and did you think it would work?

Dr. Lowery: 01:10:33:22 Well, we weren't sure. It was Martin's idea. We knew very well we could not win a violent battle. We checked the black army and it was nonexistent. Our navy didn't even have a foot in the water, nor even a toy boat so we knew we couldn't win. That all the police officers were white, all the military divisions were white, and so we couldn't win that type of battle, and so we agreed to take the nonviolent approach. And we called on a group called Fellow of Reconciliation, FOR, and they still exist today. Glen Smiley, a white Methodist preacher, and they conducted workshops and taught us how to react to potentially violent situations in a non-violent methodology that could temper the situation. So, when we rode the bus for the first time in Mobile, I was heading the group, and so they said that I should ride the Pritchard route, the route 5, which was out into Klan territory and Rev. Sam McCree, pastor at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and I rode that bus and we went along I guess for the first ten or fifteen minutes without any incidents at all. We took the first cross-seats and then a fella got on with a bottle and a sack and obviously there was something in his sack that was disturbing him and he had been in by me. He sat on the first, the side seat right behind the driver and for a block or two it didn't occur to him that two black men were sitting on the front seat and there were a couple of white people behind us. And, but it did finally occurred and he told the bus driver to make them "the N-word" fellas get back. And the bus driver said, "You ride, I'll drive. I'm in charge of the bus, just ride." And he said, "By God, if you don't I will." And he got up, and Reverend McCree said, "Well, here's our first test of the nonviolent workshops." And we sat there and he started toward us. And one of the lessons was, "If you can, take the initiative." So I took the initiative and said, "Sir, it's dangerous to stand up on a moving bus, please sit down. We mean you no harm. I'm sure you don't mean us any harm, please sit down." And the two most surprised, most surprised two people on the bus were Reverend McCree and me that he did sit down. And we said afterwards, "By God it works, nonviolence works." And we felt good about it and we reported that back to the workshops and to others and so nonviolence became, hopefully for many of us, a way of life, not just a methodology.

Hoffman: 01:13:26:29 Move with me to the very historic Voting Rights March from Selma to Montgomery. Can you give me the historical thumbnail sketch of what happened in the planning of that event?

Dr. Lowery: 01:13:37:04 We went to Selma and remember we had diverse personalities in SCLC and then you throw in SNCC and it was a grand array of great minds, and spirits, and determinations but, strong wills so there were heavy discussions and heated debates. But, on Bloody Sunday Dr. King did not come back, he stayed in Atlanta at his church and had suggested that they probably ought not march that day.

Hoffman: 01:14:07:12 Was he afraid something might happen or did he simply want to be there?

Dr. Lowery: 01:14:10:16 Well, I'm not sure. I think probably both, a little of both, we hadn't done enough planning and he wanted to be there. But John and Jose decided the time was ripe.

Hoffman: 01:14:18:23 And did you agree?

Dr. Lowery: 01:14:19:25 I wasn't there. I stayed in Birmingham. I knew Martin wasn't going so I stayed at my church in Birmingham. And, I wasn't there. So John and Jose marched and the rest in history.

Hoffman: 01:14:31:18 Did you ever think it would turn out the way it did?

Dr. Lowery: 01:14:34:19 No, well...we felt we'd win the victory. We didn't know how long it would take but we knew we were right.

Hoffman: 01:14:40:22 What about that day, did you think it would end in what is now called Bloody Sunday?

Dr. Lowery: 01:14:44:22 Oh no, we never...We expected them to turn us back, to turn them back. We really didn't know what to expect on that day but, the troopers were adamant, mean, they had received orders from George Wallace not to let them march and so they met them at the bridge and turned them back. Unfortunately, and fortunately as God would have it, the brutality of segregation, the inherent nature of segregation, which is brutal and dehumanizing, was on in everybody's living room across the world.

Hoffman: 01:15:22:00 What did it do to push the hand?

Dr. Lowery: 01:15:24:27 It sent a message. People saw the brutality. They saw the marchers beaten. They saw them trampled by horses. They saw tear gas. They saw the ugly nature of racial segregation and racial oppression. And people who never would have supported us, probably at that point in that right to vote saw that they were on the wrong side. That "if this is what it means to deny people to right the vote, we don't want any part of that. We're wrong; segregation is wrong." And President Johnson was moved by it and determined to see the legislation through, as he did.

Hoffman: 01:16:05:04 Later, decades later, Governor Wallace apologized to you, what was that like?

Dr. Lowery: 01:16:09:28 Thirty years later, the governor well we had reenactments in 85', 90', and 95', the thirtieth year, I led the group from Selma to Montgomery again and when we got near Montgomery and St. Jude, the city of St. Jude, a Roman Catholic institution on the edge of the city, the governor said he'd like to meet us there and he wanted to offer us an apology. And so I called the staff and we had a heated discussion. There were some who didn't want to, didn't want to do it, "he doesn't deserve it." But, as a preacher, and as a Christian, I believe in repentance and I decided we would not stand in the doorway of his repentance, as he stood in the door at the University of Alabama, denying black kids an opportunity for education. So he came in a wheel chair

and sang “We Shall Overcome” with us, on the steps and St. Jude and apologized for his behavior in 1965.

Hoffman: 01:17:19:04 Take me back to the mid-sixties when there was a lot of rumor and talk that Martin Luther King might just win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Dr. Lowery: 01:17:28:09 Well, that rumor got out and all of us were excited about it. Martin had given miraculous leadership. We were just delighted that he might get the Nobel Peace Prize but we didn’t celebrate because it was still an era when there were more negatives than positives, when discrimination was still the order of the day and we felt he might be overlooked as blacks were overlooked here, there, and everywhere.

Hoffman: 01:18:01:21 When you found out he won, what was your reaction?

Dr. Lowery: 01:18:02:27 It was a time to shout. And I regret very much that I could not make the trip. I had commitments that wouldn’t let me go but, I was so thrilled, it was almost as though I were receiving the prize and we were very, very honored and he deserved it. He was our chairperson, he was our leader, and so we—there was no jealousy, may have been some but they didn’t dare express it if they did.

Hoffman: 01:18:33:04 People didn’t jockey to be closer to him or his closest confidant or friend?

Dr. Lowery: 01:18:36:15 Oh, we were all human beings and I don’t want to give the impression that neither Martin nor any of the rest of us were saints. We were all human beings with all the human frailties that other human beings have. But, we were inspired by his leadership, we felt, all felt called by God to participate in the divine journey from wrong to right, from injustice to justice. And we just were glad God sent Martin.

Hoffman: 01:19:08:21 In that respect, how can you measure the impact of his death?

Dr. Lowery: 01:19:15:00 Well, I think it’s immeasurable. I don’t think you can measure it. It was a great, great loss. And because so much had centered around him til many people assume until this day that that was the closing chapter in the movement. I think they were wrong but because it would have been a disservice to Martin to have let the movement perish. It took different shapes and forms. Media interest waned. They put civil rights from ‘68 up until now, the issue of Civil Rights on the media scale of priorities is about two notches below the darter snail. With all due respect—of course except for public television, but, the movement has been a victim of its own effectiveness for we won a lot of battles. We won the battle of the customer side of the lunch counter; we won where you sit on the bus, and public accommodations. The law is on our side now, the matter of the heart, the matter of the dollar, those issues are still very much relevant.

Hoffman: 01:20:43:19 So, be very specific with me. What should the Civil Rights Movement be doing today?

Dr. Lowery: 01:20:49:09 Well, I think there are three areas that need a great movement involved to complete the change. One is the criminal justice system. I think the criminal justice system has probably been the least impacted by social change. In Georgia for

example, where I live and where Martin was born, African Americans constitute about a third of the population, general population but, we're two-thirds of the prison population. Much of that is due to the fact the blacks are still seven or eight times more likely to be arrested, and convicted, and imprisoned. The disparity in sentencing. Crack will bring you one hundred times more time than powder cocaine because the poor use crack. Mandatory sentencing is a dark spot in the criminal justice picture we need to address it and even some federal judges and even one Supreme Court Justice has said, "We got to change that." So, the criminal justice system needs to be addressed. The second one is the area of economics. We've made tremendous progress and Time Warner and American Express, in the corporate world, are headed by African Americans, that's a tremendous progress, and yet, we are less than two-thirds of the median income. And so, we got a long, long way to go. One out of three black families still lives in poverty. And we've made progress because that means that two out of three do not live in poverty. Probably would be more if we had a more realistic poverty level because we're talking about a family of four living with minimum wage, they are still in poverty. But, that's an issue that must be addressed. The third of course—and part of that is education—which you acquire skills, and knowledge and so forth. But, I think there is a bigger picture, that, is a part of the struggle of human rights and justice and that's the whole picture of war, and hate and love, and how we relate to each other as human beings. I'm saddened and Martin would be saddened that we have a mentality that thinks that we can solve all the global problems by sending smart bombs on dumb missions. It can't be resolved. We've got to find a better way to resolve our problems in this world, other than to rely on military might.

Hoffman: 01:23:44:15 In general, there are many, such as Bill Cosby, who's been very outspoken and said that African Americans simply don't value education like they need to and if they don't they will never be able to become part of the mainstream. Do you agree?

Dr. Lowery: 01:23:59:15 Well, I think Bill is more right than wrong in his analysis. I don't think it a racial issue. Poor whites, some Hispanics don't value education as much--and many of them however are victims of a system which makes it more difficult for them to see the value of education. Where in this country, class is going to become the next battleground and we're got to find way to level the playing field and make educational opportunity available to all citizens. I just wish we could put the resources in education and educational opportunity, and reaching out, and providing day care and after-school care and so forth so that parents can assist and grow with their children in the education experience. If we just put half the resources we put in war, in peace, Martin would smile all over heaven.

Hoffman: 01:25:16:09 If you could talk to him today what would you ask him?

Dr. Lowery: 01:25:19:16 But I do talk to him. They question needs to be, "what would he say if he talked to me," cuz he doesn't talk back except as I read what he said, and what he wrote, he still speaks to us. I think we've lifted Martin so high and put him on this rotunda of sentimental irrelevancy we're taken him out of the marketplace. We quote him on the "I Have a Dream Speech" so much we don't quote the letter from the Birmingham jail, which is much more relevant today because it speaks to issues that we

are now wrestling with. Martin talked about Communism and Capitalism. And he said neither is ultimately the answer to our problem. Communism makes people a servant of the state, Capitalism makes everybody servant of the dollar. We've got to find a better way. And, I think that Martin offers a blueprint for us in this redefining of America that we're not taking advantage of. So, we need to hear his voice today as we try to find new ways to help America grow and become the great leader for peace and not the leader for destruction.

Hoffman: 01:26:40:19 Many of your Civil Rights colleagues like Andrew Young and John Lewis ran for elected office and you never did, why?

Dr. Lowery: 01:26:46:27 Well, I never got the bug. That's why I guess I'm the preacher. God never told me to run for office. I admire those who did. I encouraged them to run. I have no problem with preachers running for office. I think the more people that are committed to that which is right and ethical ought to offer themselves for office. So I think John Lewis has made a good congressman, I think Andy made a good mayor, and a good congressperson, good United Nations Representative. I just, it wasn't my baby, it wasn't my cup of tea.

Hoffman: 01:27:31:24 At eighty-three, are you able to judge your life as a success.

Dr. Lowery: 01:27:36:08 Oh I'm sure I wouldn't be unbiased and fair. I'm not ever going to be rich. I'm not ever going to get the Nobel Peace Prize. I'm not ever going to be elected to public office because I'm not going to run. But I've been elected to president of the SCLC that, when it was committed to what it was born for. I've been patted on the back by people I don't even know who say, "thank you," that's all reward I need. I wouldn't take nothing for my journey because I've been trying to sing the Lord's song in this strange land. And that's what the title of my book will be.

Hoffman: 01:28:15:25 With that I have to say thank you so much Dr. Lowery, I really appreciate your time.

Dr. Lowery: 01:28:20:08 Thank you, thank you. Can I pass the offering plate?

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