

KENNEDY: I REMEMBER THE DAY WELL

I was in my first year of teaching--two and a half months I had been at it. I taught social studies at Broad Street School in Greenwood, Mississippi. You might remember, Greenwood was the hometown of Byron De La Beckwith, the alleged assassin of Medgar Evers.

1963 had been that kind of year right from the very beginning. On the first day of January we had celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Many had thought we had come a long way and there were others who were disappointed at the progress blacks had made in the ensuing one hundred years. There were demonstrations of all sorts throughout the south and, in June, Evers was assassinated in his driveway. August brought the single largest demonstration of the movement in the March on Washington. There were many who wished to maintain the nightmare of the American dream for black Americans and others who were part of the great mass of oppressed who would do anything to thwart any advances. So, while it was surprising, I was not surprised by anything that happened--especially that year--not until that day in November.

From the back of my classroom I could see the parking lot at the school and from any other point of the room I could look out of any of the row of windows and see the street for which the school was named.

I remember that I was speaking about John C. Calhoun to my class and was about to tell a story about the conflict between him and President Andrew Jackson, when I noticed a car speeding into the parking lot. The car was not just traveling at a high rate of speed, but it was a speed which connoted urgency. I could tell right away that something was monumentally wrong.

Greenwood, Mississippi in 1963 seemed to have been one of the centers of civil rights activities in the south. A good number of the students from both the senior high and the junior high divisions of the school were quite active in acts of civil disobedience. My first thought, upon reading the language of the car entering the parking lot, was that some sort of confrontation had occurred in the downtown area where the marches were taking place.

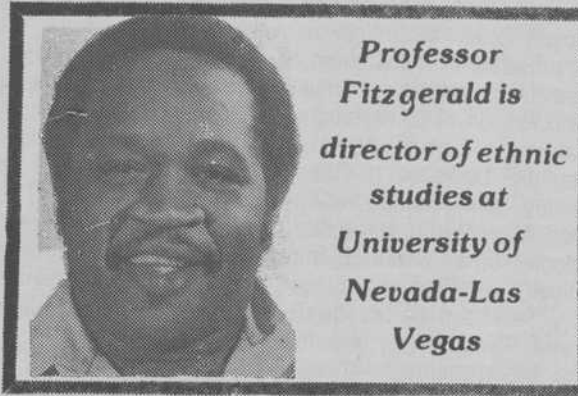
As a member of a small group who had volunteered themselves to reciprocate any acts of violence directed towards the activists who were themselves proponents of non-violence, I felt a surge of adrenaline and even as I had that experience, I heard someone running down the corridor and yelling, "They shot the President. They killed Kennedy. They shot President Kennedy in Dallas, Texas."

I don't know if you've ever been hit on the head with a nightstick or any other kinds of instrument of death with such power that you were stunned, but that is the feeling I had when I heard the news. From out of nowhere, my cheeks were drenched with tears and my eyes were stinging. When I returned to some semblance of consciousness, I noticed that my charges--seventh graders--were also crying. Their shoulders shook and I could hear their sobs. The "A" students and those who were failing, the nice kids and the troublemakers, the well-dressed and the ragged were all alike in that moment and through their tears, they looked at me and to me for some kind of sign or word which would allay their fears.

What do you say to children who are conscious of what is going on in the world around them? How do you tell them that the man they had pinned their hopes for the future on is dead, and that along with him, perhaps their future?

There was something mystic about those times. Older black people, many of them without formal education and younger black people who lacked maturity, seemed to place themselves in the crucible of the times and mix the maturity and the ambition and the energy of both groups to formulate a new American citizen who had never existed before. I saw older people who had never been or felt themselves to have been a part of the American fabric metamorphize into something new and exciting. I saw young black children and teenagers who, while still at the marble-shooting stage, the running and playing stage, the age of hilarity, take on a new sense of high-seriousness asking questions, not being satisfied, growing up from participating in marches and sit-ins simply because they were means of missing school to doing those things, and more, because they

by Professor Roosevelt Fitzgerald



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wanted something and the something they wanted was freedom and they wanted it "now" and would use "any means necessary" to get it.

Suddenly they were stunned as if unplugged. They knew that they were in Mississippi and that Mississippi was a place where people like them had no rights and therefore no protections. They knew that their lives hung by so many slender threads and during times of crisis--times when lives were on the line or being taken, that their's were right up there at the top of the list. I could see in their expressions the recognition that if those people would kill the President--a white man--a white man who had spoken in their behalf, who had phoned a few years earlier and made possible the release of Martin Luther King, Jr. from a jail in Alabama--that those same people would think nothing of killing them.

Whatever frivolity that might have been in those children when they left home that Friday morning was dissipated by the events of that day. We sat there in the room for a while and talked. Since my father's murder all those many years before in 1947, I had been detached, angry and filled with hatred. I didn't know tenderness, but Otis Redding once sang about it. I touched those children, dried their eyes, brushed their hair, patted their shoulders and backs, cleaned noses and, in short, was given an opportunity to become a human being again.

I told the children that they must all prepare themselves to carry on the work that had been started and a "hundred years from now when others study our history and come upon the assassination of our leader, they would see tyhe

leader, they would see that the country did not shut down and that out of Broad

Street School the leaders of the future came."

I remember that after a bit we went outside. There were others already there. Car radios were on and there were many standing in the rain waiting to hear some further report of what was taking place with the President. We did not hear too much. Some thought that there was not anything or any more to hear. Some of us knew better.

We had no reason to disbelieve that the President had been assassinated. We

even knew who had done it. Over the quarter-century since then, I have found it particularly interesting that with all the conspiracy theories which float around, the most obvious group has not been given due examination. We hear about the "mob", Castro, the communists, but not about the obvious suspect. All of those other groups are either foreigners or acknowledged evil people that some would rather have be guilty of having committed the deed. In that parking lot, in the rain, we and others knew who had killed the President, and why--American racists who feared that Kennedy would somehow cause the Constitution to come alive for all of us.

Today, like in 1963, we do not wish to believe or even contemplate the possibility that the President was assassinated by the "man next door."

I was wearing navy blue pants, a pastel blue button-down collar shirt, maroon

windbreaker and black Stacy Adams shoes. I needed a haircut and a couple more boxes of shells.

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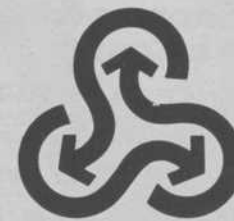
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