

FROM: Judy Walborn

RE: Selma Alabama and the white northern liberal

To my friends at Stanford,

Yesterday I stood on the steps of the federal building in Selma, Alabama and watched while between 500 and 800 Negro people lined up to register to vote. I watched while the Dallas County police, with their billy clubs, their guns, their gas masks strapped to their belts, their crash helmets and their eyes full of hate watched every move the Negro people made. I watched the sheriff's special posse, in civilian clothes, with crash helmets and billy clubs, lined up as if ready to stop an invasion -- an invasion of Negro people wanting to vote.

I walked around the block, past those policemen and past the local white people, to give moral support to those hundreds who were standing in line waiting to be registered and knowing very well that they would not be registered. The usual comments -- the usual stares followed me every step; so did the cameras of the local police, mugging me for future reference.

Those hundreds of Negro people had been pushed to the back of the courthouse -- had been told to use the back door to the courthouse, just like they had always been told to use the back door to the john, to the home of the white lady they scrubbed and cooked for, to everything. In the afternoon they returned -- this time to use the front door or be arrested. They were arrested -- 62 the first day, 200 to 300 the second day. Not one Negro was registered.

There were people who all their lives had said "Yes, Sir, Boss," and "No sir, Boss;" who had been called "Alice" instead of "Mrs. Brown," "Boy," instead of "Mr. Smith," and sometimes just plain "nigger." "Hey nigger, come here! Hey nigger, go there! Hey nigger, do this, do that." Nigger, Nigger, Nigger, until it rang in their sleep.

Now these people are saying "Yes," or "No." "Did you say Alice? You must mean my daughter. My name is Mrs. Brown." "I am a Negro." "We are a dark and beautiful race, and will rule the earth someday in light."

Yesterday a Negro lady of about 63 years took me to a formerly all-white restaurant for a cup of coffee. She took me! I didn't ask her to go; she insisted on going. It was her idea. All of this in a town in which, last year, Negroes were so terrified that the Movement had great difficulty even getting Negroes to think seriously about trying to register to vote. The incredible courage, the incredible courage.... One of these men said to me: "Sometimes anger gives you the strength to do things you never could do otherwise."

As I stood in overcrowded Churches at mass meetings while young Negro leaders led their people -- leaders who make northern white student government leaders (most of them, that is) look like babies playing their irrelevant little games. And I thought of a line from a play, The Zoo Story, by Edward Albee in which Jerry,

who has provoked Peter into a confrontation over who shall possess a park bench, says to him: "This is probably the first time in your life you've had anything more trying to face than changing your cat's toilet box." And many white Americans were Peters. (But most Negroes were not Jerrys, because Jerry commits suicide in the end.)

And then Ron Kaufman told me that most Stanford students were tired of hearing about Mississippi. And my blood boiled. So I'm writing this -- partly in cynicism, partly out of desperation. But no longer with the sympathy I once felt for northern white liberals who 'really couldn't understand it and really couldn't care, because they hadn't ever seen it." Because I think that argument is shit, and I won't buy it anymore. Perhaps you are tired. But so are Negro people, only they're tired in a different way. They're tired of freedom always being somewhere else, for somebody else, and never being HERE and never being NOW.

Judy Walborn