

Commencement Address
Reunion 2013

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: The following address was given Saturday, July 13, in Greenwood, MS at the 2013 SBT Reunion Golden Anniversary Graduation Ceremony for the classes of 1962 and 1963. John O. Hodges, the speaker, and Minnie Elliott Whittaker, who introduced him, are members of the class of 1963. The author has relied to some extent on research and material found in his book, *Delta Fragments: The Recollections of a Sharecropper's Son* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 2013). All rights reserved.

Citations by Thoreau are from his "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," which is available online at www.guttenberg.net. The Harriett Tubman and Martin Luther King citations are readily available online. One place is www.biography.com. Documentation for other cited material is found in *Delta Fragments*.]

Thanks, Minnie, for that wonderful introduction. Indeed, we have been friends for a long time. I extend greetings to you all. A special thanks to the Reunion Steering Committee for having chosen me as your speaker, for I realize that there are many others who are as equally or more deserving than I am of this singular honor. To my former teachers, several of whom are here tonight: Dr. William Ware, Mrs. Minnie Barfield Baker and Mrs. Helen Griffith Adams who were my homeroom teachers in the 7th, 8th, and 9th grades respectively. Mrs. Leola Pickens Norman was my 7th grade science teacher and I believe the first teacher to suggest Morehouse as a possibility for college. To my family who have made the journey to see me graduate: my wife, Dr. Carolyn Richardson Hodges, professor of German, and vice provost and Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Tennessee and our son Daniel Oliver Hodges, who is Senior Manager of software engineering at a company in Dallas, Texas. More than any of our own accomplishments we glory in those of our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. While we are proud of their accomplishments, we still prefer Gladys Knight and Al Green to Lil Wayne and 50 Cent.

Tonight the focus is on us, the 50-year Golden Graduates of the classes of 1962 and 1963. For us and for this nation, 1962 and 1963 were significant years in the history of our nation. This significance is best conveyed by the Greek term for time, *Kairos*. *Kairos*, unlike *Chronos* or clock time, refers to an opportune moment, a time, as the theologian Paul Tillich says, which is pregnant with possibilities. It is a time that is appropriate for some significant undertaking.

1963 was the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. As high school graduates fifty years ago, we were perhaps not so cognizant of the utter significance of that year. But for MLK and others in the movement, it represented a stark reminder that after 100 years, blacks still were not free. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, King said that blacks had been given a blank check that had been returned "insufficient funds."

Earlier, John F. Kennedy noted in his civil rights address on June 11, 1963 that though Lincoln had freed the slaves their heirs, their grandsons, were not yet freed from social and economic oppression. "And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be free until all its citizens are free." Within hours after uttering these words, the Nation got the news that Medgar Evers had been gunned down in his driveway the early morning of June 12. Kennedy himself would be assassinated a few months later on November 22, 1963. Between these two assassinations there was the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963, where four young black girls were killed. By all accounts, then, 1963 was a pivotal year in our history.

1962, the year earlier, was no less crucial, especially for those of us here in the Delta. A voting registration campaign began in the Delta in the summer of that year. Around August Bob Moses, Sam Block and others came to Greenwood, which served as the central hub for the movement in the Delta. While we were somewhat reluctant at first to welcome these strangers some called freedom fighters and others called Communists and outside agitators, we eventually accepted them into our homes and churches. Thus began the greatest voter registration effort in the nation.

The major aim of the voter-registration project was to increase the number of registered black voters. In 1962, according to government statistics, in six Mississippi counties 4 percent of blacks were registered, as compared to 72 percent of whites. Furthermore, a larger percentage of blacks than whites were ruled ineligible. The figures are astounding and, if one assumes that blacks were attempting to vote, offer evidence that blacks were systematically being disfranchised. Literacy tests and poll taxes were not the only hindrances; on November 8, 1960, the legislature added good moral character as a requirement for voter registration. Although these restrictions technically applied to all applicants, they were actually used as a means of maintaining white racial supremacy by insuring a white electorate. In addition to these "legal" means, intimidation and reprisals also kept blacks from registering to vote. The newspapers, which didn't print anything positive about blacks, made sure that it recorded for public information those blacks who had attempted to register to vote, along with their addresses. Once their names were published in the papers, they could expect to receive phone calls or visits that encouraged them to withdraw their names from the registration rolls. Employers were routinely contacted whenever any of their black employees showed up to register to vote. Thus, there were very few black registered voters in Mississippi during my youth. My parents never registered; neither did those of most of my schoolmates. I doubt that many of our teachers or ministers were registered.

After serving his country in World War II, Medgar Evers found his path to the polls blocked by a gang of white hoodlums. Medgar told his story to Jack Mendelsohn, the author of *Martyrs*. "We fought during the war for America, and Mississippi was included. Now after the Germans and Japanese had not killed us,

it looked as though the white Mississippians would." He concluded, in what was a sad commentary on our country at that time: "I was born in Decatur, was raised there, but I never in my life was permitted to vote there."

Blacks thus had no voice in the political affairs of the state or the nation. Unabashed and unashamed, white candidates tried to outdo each other with their promises to maintain white supremacy and keep blacks under foot. They followed the trail blazed by the "Great White Chief," James Kimble Vardaman, who served as Mississippi governor from 1904 to 1908 and later as U S senator from 1913-1919; among his openly racist campaign slogans was this: "A VOTE FOR VARDAMAN IS A VOTE FOR WHITE SUPREMACY, THE SAFETY OF THE HOME, AND THE PROTECTION OF OUR WOMEN AND CHILDREN." The right of blacks to vote would not only mean that more blacks could run for political office and stand a chance of winning but, even more important, that candidates could no longer make such blatant racist appeals with impunity. Getting more blacks to vote in the Mississippi Delta was a most difficult task that was fraught with danger for voter rights workers and those citizens they were seeking to register. Next to the commandment that forbade black men from consorting with white women was the commandment: "Thou shall not vote! Fannie Lou Hamer lost her job on a plantation in Ruleville and the Rev. George Lee of Belzoni lost his life because of his involvement in voter rights campaigns. Though it was very dangerous work, there were individuals who decided that they would no longer be victims of fear and intimidation. They were individuals, who had the steel resolve of Harriet Tubman who, risking her life to rescue fellow slaves, said that she had reasoned this thing out in her mind: "There was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other." Or maybe it was the determination to fight for the

victimized that we hear in the words of Esther: "And so I will go unto the king, which is not according to the law, and if I perish I perish." Or, maybe the inspiration came from Henry David Thoreau's commitment to conscience: "I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also." And to his friend and fellow transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who asked him why he was in jail, he would respond: "why are you out of jail?" For "under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison." Now this type of civil disobedience can come at a heavy cost, even the risk of death. So it is not for the faint of heart, not for those who are not willing to lay their lives on the line if need be. Few of us are prepared to say with King who, in refusing to obey unjust laws, "Don't be afraid; don't be afraid to die."

Thanks to sacrifices of others, we today don't have to make such a great commitment as this. It was made by those who came before us. Many we know very well but have yet to truly appreciate and thank. We have taken their activism for granted. They are not strangers. They are our parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts, or friends of the family who prayed and played with our family. As children, we knew them as Miss Laura, or Mr. Dewey (Big Daddy), or Mr. Dave, or Rev. Johnson, or Mr. Burns, the photographer. They have received more recognition nationally than they have in Greenwood. This must not continue.

Mrs. Laura McGhee was an early staunch supporter of the movement. She is certainly one of the unsung heroines of the civil rights movement in the Delta. Her brother, Gus Courts, was president of the Belzoni Chapter of the NAACP and worked alongside Reverend Lee to register black voters in that town. Since she had the reputation for standing up to anyone, white or black; word got around that she was a bit "off." When a number

of other black parents were discouraging any participation in civil rights activities, Mrs. McGhee, though certainly anxious about the safety of her own children, supported their participation in the movement. She had always taught her children to respect and love—yes, even love—everyone despite their color. She simply demanded the same for herself and for her children. That was evidenced one time when she refused to allow her children to call a white playmate "sir." The McGhees regularly rented their farmland out to whites. On one occasion, a tenant whose child was about the same age as two of her boys, Silas and Jake decided that although the boys had played together as children, they were now maturing. So he demanded that the children, if not Mrs. McGhee herself, start addressing his son as "sir." It wouldn't do for his friends to know that he had a son who was not respected by colored people. When Mrs. McGhee flatly refused, she knew she was committing a serious breach of Jim Crow etiquette.

On another occasion, she punched a white officer in the nose who shoved her as she was trying to see her son Jake who was being held in jail. And when he in turn reached for his pistol, he was grabbed by two of the civil rights workers who had accompanied Mrs. McGhee to post bond. Though shots were fired into her house and her family constantly received threats, she never wavered in her support of the movement. This type of defiance, no doubt, was passed along to her sons, Ben, Silas, Jake, and Clarence, which fed the belief that the whole family was a bit "touched." How else could one explain this total disregard for the power of white folks?

No doubt one of the most frightening experiences occurred just outside a café where the freedom fighters were hosting a party for those returning to their books at the close of Freedom Summer. Silas was shot point-blank in the head, the bullet

traveling down his neck. Since he was denied treatment locally, he had to be taken all the way to Jackson to be treated. It was a miracle, the grace of God, that the bullet missed the brain or some other vital organ.

The kind of heroism displayed by the McGhees was also evident among the Greenes and Sanderses and Johnsons and several other families in Greenwood. Dewey R. Greene Sr., for example, was a leader of the local NAACP and its first president in Greenwood. A painter by trade, he had established a reputation for doing excellent work for both black and white homeowners. While he wasn't wealthy, he certainly could provide a decent living for his family. His business suffered mightily, however, as a result of his open support of voter-registration activities during the early 1960s.

Like Laura McGhee, Dewey Greene never discouraged his children from taking part in the movement, a matter that unsettled many whites. The younger Dewey, for example, caused quite a stir in his efforts to apply to Ole Miss. As a result, of this act, the whole family was subjected to recriminations from the White Citizens Council and to intense investigations by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. The commission ran a thorough check of Dewey Senior and his family, which involved credit reports and police records. They could uncover nothing at all. But this only served to intensify their efforts to intimidate the family. Shots were fired into the Greenes' home in late March 1963, and they suffered other recriminations. Rather than deter the family, George and Freddie seemed to become even more involved in civil rights work. George especially had a reputation for speaking his mind to white police officers who attempted to use their authority to bully blacks, and only his expert driving skills saved him from sure death on more than one occasion.

Dave Sanders, the grandfather of John Pleasant, one of my classmates, rented space to the movement for a library and citizenship-training classes. His place was constantly threatened. But Mr. Sanders, who had once put a bullet into a white man who wanted to take his cotton, was not about to buckle under threats from anonymous whites who were afraid to show their faces.

And there was Rev. Aaron Johnson, who offered his church on a number of occasions for mass meetings. He spent many sleepless nights trying to keep his church and family safe. As a barber, pastor, civil rights worker, no one worked harder than Aaron Johnson. Some blacks and whites thought that he should just preach and cut hair, but that was not his understanding of the gospel. Aaron Johnson was a man of conscience. So John Pleasant, I share the pride you have in your grandfather, Dave Sanders, who provided a place for the civil rights workers and space for a library. George and Freddie, I know you are proud of your father Dewey Sr. and your bother Dewey Jr.

Wyneva and Carl and John, and John Albert aren't you proud of your father and brother who despite threats continued to provide a place for our mass meetings? Aren't you proud of all the local workers for Civil Rights represented by many in the graduating classes and in the audience who said "no" to segregation and discrimination and "yes" to their own humanity and sense of personhood. We should all be proud.

They understood exactly what Frederick Douglass meant when he said: "Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. . . . This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

The work of these noble soldiers led to the passage of civil rights legislation that has changed our nation: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. There is no doubt in my mind that the work done in the 1950s culminating in the actions of the early years of the 1960s led to the ascendancy of our first black president, Barack Obama, to the presidency in 2008 and to his reelection in 2012. We all should be proud but in no way should we be satisfied and content. For the very moment we become content and satisfied and begin to rest on our laurels the very moment we become startled by some form of racism in one of its many guises—for example the attack on the Voting Rights Act by the Supreme Court just recently.

We have come a long way, but the journey is not yet over. Our class motto in 1963 was: "We Have Crossed the Bay, the Ocean Lies Ahead." Well, we are in the ocean now. The waters can be choppy and turbulent but we cannot turn back.

Commencement is not an ending but a beginning. So it was in 1962 and 1963, and so it is today. So what we have now is a recommencement, a rededication, a recommitment to what still needs to be done to make this a truly just society for all. Let us not be satisfied as long as poverty, racism, sexism, exist in this country. Let us not be content as long as crime, high unemployment, poor education exist in the Delta. Classmates let us dedicate ourselves to all the work that remains to be done. Thank you.