

Moral Integration: Four Stories

From 1960 to 1965, I observed the onset of school desegregation in the South. I met the African-American children who pioneered that effort, in New Orleans, Atlanta, Charlotte, Jackson, and Birmingham. In Atlanta, two of the ten teenagers who led their race into previously all-white high schools had also begun to work with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, known popularly at the time as SNCC, and one of the major civil rights groups. Soon enough, I was working at the SNCC offices myself and participating in various political initiatives undertaken by the young people of both races who came together during those tumultuous civil rights years. Most especially, I was involved from start to finish with the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964—a critical moment in the struggle to enfranchise over a third of the citizens of an American state who, in the second half of the twentieth century, still could not vote. In Freedom Houses across the Delta students took their then quite dangerous stand. Three of them died. Scores were injured. The Voting Rights Act of 1964 was surely, in part, a political testimony to that effort—a consequence of the aroused public notice those Freedom Houses secured across the nation (be-

cause of all the activity taking place in and near them). At great personal danger, hundreds of youths of both races and from all parts of the United States planted themselves firmly on Delta soil, confronted Dixie's bastion segregationist state, and thereby set in motion a great deal of social and racial change in a state hitherto immune to such a development.

Over the years much has been written about the civil rights activists, the students who pioneered school desegregation, the young SNCC leaders who envisioned and then made real the Mississippi Summer Project. In the first volume of *Children of Crisis*, I wrote at some length on the children who endured threats and mob action in order to go to school with other (white) Americans; I wrote, too, about a number of the SNCC members who, in their teens and twenties, took on sheriffs and state policemen and, not least, armed terrorists who set fires, shot rifles and pistols, and used dynamite—a day-by-day attempt to prevail over Freedom Houses, raze them to the ground, scare and injure and kill those inhabiting them. I tried, as well, to learn through interviews how ordinary white people viewed a moment of dramatic racial confrontation; and to learn how ordinary African-American men and women responded to what was a risky call to arms by a relatively privileged cadre of outsiders, whose ideals were, indeed, tested strenuously that summer of 1964 but who knew that at any point they could simply leave, take up with honor a life elsewhere, and be remembered, celebrated for the bravery they had demonstrated under quite dangerous circumstances.

When I did my writing, I relayed the events I observed through the eyes of (the voices of) the various protagonists; whether the court-appointed children who were to initiate "integration," that much disliked word among the South's white people in the early 1960s; or the SNCC members, who set up those Freedom Houses and set in motion the activities planned and sponsored by them: voter registration drives especially, but also, health care and tutoring programs. I myself worked with those medical and educational efforts, and thereby met a number of African-American Mississippians who weren't in the civil rights struggle as combatants—were, rather, meant to be the beneficiaries of

what had been started, as one tenant farmer in McComb County put it, "for our sake," but then he quickly added this: "We could get hurt a lot, of course, on their account, before it gets any better hereabouts."

What follows calls upon those days; and here in this chapter I have protected the privacy of individuals through changes in names, locations, and personal characteristics (a contrast with the rest of the book, whose protagonists are publicly well known).

1. MORAL SUPPORT: THE THOMASES AND THE TOMASELLOS OF MISSISSIPPI

I still remember that man using the phrase "on their account"—a clear split intended: "us colored folks," as he often put it, against (in several senses of that expression) "the SNCC people" who were doing their best to "stir things up," a phrase not only used by the white people of that county and others across the Magnolia State. That tenant farmer was younger than many of the veteran leaders of SNCC. At twenty-seven he was a husband, a father of four, a man who had been working the land since childhood, and who expected to do so until the Lord "called" him—a time, a moment he'd many times tried to imagine: the ascent and arraignment before Almighty God. He summoned impressive descriptive powers as he related what he thought was awaiting him: "They'll check me in, one of the angels, maybe, who lives up there. They'll call my name: 'Andrew Thomas, you be the one here?' 'Yes, sir,' I'll answer them. 'Okay, tell us why you think you should be tapped by the Lord, and allowed 'life forever after,' tell us!' That's when I hope I have something to say. You come up there empty-handed, and you're a goner right away. That's the big test, and your whole life is your case you're putting before the Lord, and He's the judge of it, and your future life is what's to be decided. I try to tell my little ones, it's important to be good, because there's a record you make down here, and you carry it up there, and it's in your soul, written on

it, and they must have some way of looking it all over and coming up with their decision, and it's *yes* or *no*, it comes down to that. You pass or you flunk. Your life's been good (pretty good—no life is perfect, for sure); or you've fallen down bad, really bad, and they can't overlook it, no sir."

Such a way of thinking (and talking) was his by virtue of a devout religious life. Every week he and his wife, Ruth, and their children went to a "tabernacle" church, to listen and pray and sing and exclaim and, not rarely, cry worriedly or shout joyfully. Neither Andrew nor Ruth Thomas could read, but they had committed to memory parts of the Old Testament, and, of course, the New Testament, and they owned a Bible, which occupied a shelf all its own in the humble rural cabin they lived in, at the edge of the land they both worked.

Not that they were too far from McComb. Ruth Thomas walked two miles five days a week in order to "help out a lady" who lived "in the town," and she was back in time to cook supper. Her mother had once worked for the same white family whose name, Tomasello, resembled the one her daughter, also named Ruth, would assume upon her marriage. Her mother, whose name was Sarah Holmes, talked of her one-time employer with respect, even affection: "They be good people. He owns a hardware store. He owns a couple of houses, besides the one he lives in. His wife, she has her troubles—she has a 'sclerosis,' they call it, of her nervous system [multiple sclerosis], and so she gets wobbly, and she's headed for a wheelchair, the Mister would say sometimes, and shake his head, and he'd pull his handkerchief out and blow on it. We chuckled sometimes, the Mister and me. He'd come home a lot to look on his wife, and we got to talking. He said, when I told him my daughter, Ruth, would be marrying Andrew Thomas—he said her name would be 'kin' to his. That's the time he explained to me that his grandfather came from Italy, and so his name is different from the others, the white folks. I always did know that—I liked the sound of it; there's a ring to it. He said little things can make a big difference—people sometimes will ask him if he goes back to the 'old country' on visits. 'They have an 'old country,' too,' he said, 'but you'd

never know it by how they talk. You'd think they've been here forever and a day.' That's what he told me. I'd never heard a white man talk like that—so honest, and out of his heart!"

That story became part of table talk in the Andrew Thomas household. Years before the civil rights movement came to Mississippi, Andrew Thomas had learned something important from his mother-in-law—had taken a moment's confidence, offered by a prosperous white man to his "cleaning lady," and turned it into a reason for social reflection: "I've often remembered what 'Mamie' told us. She liked it that our name and her boss man's sound alike; but I've told her a hundred times that, like our minister will tell you, the truth comes in lots of disguises, so many of them, and Mr. Tomasello was confessing something then. He was letting Mamie in on a secret—that the white folks have bad blood between them, some of them: they can treat their own the way they treat us, not all the way, not as whole-hog, but they can go sideswiping each other (see what I mean?)—and for us colored, that's news."

"No, sir, I can't say I didn't know that before I heard Mamie tell us what he'd told her. But it's one thing to have your suspicions, and another to hear the evidence come right into your ears. My brother works in the town; he loads and unloads in the Piggly Wiggly [supermarket], and he hears lots of fights going on among the white folks. But that's different—it's human nature to fight, you know that going back to the Bible. There's fighting, and there's fighting! Mr. Tomasello, he told Mamie that he couldn't count on people, his white folks, not one hundred percent, because they've always got this 'idea' about him, that he's not the same as them, not completely [because of his Italian name]. When Mamie first told me that, I laughed it off. I'd think, she's got the biggest imagination I've ever met, and it will run away from her if she don't watch out. I'd say, 'White folks don't go after other white folks—not when they have us colored to kick around!'"

The time came, in late summer of 1964, when that hunch of Mr. Tomasello's came true, so Andrew Thomas would come to realize. Moreover, Andrew Thomas was to some extent responsible for Mr. Tomasello's experience with his neighbors and business colleagues in a

Mississippi town that had heretofore boasted of its "friendly atmosphere," so a Rotary Club description once averred. "The whole thing got going by an accident," Mr. Thomas always insisted. He had gone into town to buy some seed at Mr. Tomasello's store. He'd talked with his mother-in-law's employer for a few minutes and was preparing to leave, when a SNCC "field-worker," there to buy a flashlight, approached him and engaged him in an informal conversation. The field-worker identified himself as such, gave his name, Rob Simpson, and told of his background. Andrew Thomas remembered that initial encounter this way: "He was a colored fellah from up North; he told me his folks hailed from near Memphis, not so far from Mississippi, and they tried it up in Chicago, and they missed their kinfolk down in Tennessee, but it's better up there. He wanted to know if I'd ever been away from here, and I told him no. I asked him about being a field-worker. He told me he was trying to help us out here—so we can have a better life. I wasn't sure what he meant. I thought if he was a field-worker, he was doing what I'm doing. I'm a field-worker, all right! But he said no, it was the vote he's working on—and was I interested?"

"I shook my head and told him I had enough to do without taking that on, the vote. I could tell he wanted to persuade me, but he looked at Mr. Tomasello, who was looking at us, and so he asked me if I'd mind if he paid me a visit sometime, and I said no, I'd not mind. When he left, Mr. Tomasello told me he was wondering if my mother-in-law could do some extra work, come the next weekend, and I said yes, I was sure she could. That's why he'd been looking my way. I realized afterwards that 'Chicago Rob,' the way I first thought of him, had made a mistake—he thought Mr. Tomasello was cross because I was talking to a field-worker from one of those civil rights organizations."

Within days "Chicago Rob" had found his way to Andrew Thomas's "place," as he always called his home and the land around it. The two men talked, and Andrew kept telling Rob that he wasn't interested in voting. When Rob asked why, Andrew responded with his own, shrewd social and political analysis: "Things here are pretty well set. You can't vote the folks who own everything out of office, because they don't have any offices to their credit. I mean, they have their offices,

but that's where they count their money and make their calls! My aunt, she cleans a law office, and she can tell you a lot!"

But the two young men, for all the differences in their lives, had further talks, got on well. Andrew made clear, however, his political indifference, based on his sense of how things worked in McComb County and elsewhere—rather than his fear of the consequences that an attempt on his part to register, to try to become an eligible voter, would set in motion. Andrew also got into a conversation one day with Mr. Tomasello—a discussion of SNCC and the fieldwork being done by Rob and others: "I was in his store, and Mr. Tomasello and I got to talking. He told me Rob had come by, and he seemed nice, even if he was 'mistaken.' I told him I agreed, it [the voter registration drive] was a mistake. He said you don't come in from a distance away and think you can turn a world upside down, all in one summer. I said yes, sir—but then he asked me if I was just 'yessing' him, and I was about to say 'yes, sir' again, but it came to me that if I did, I'd be admitting to him the wrong thing, so I out and told him what I believed. I tried to be nice, but I said what I told Rob over and over—that you can't vote on a lot of things, the most important things, because they're just *there*, the way it is. That was when Mr. Tomasello turned around; he said, 'Yes, that's true, but there's always a start.'"

Such a comment, a seeming offhand banality, struck fear into Andrew Thomas, who fell silent. Even in retrospect, he was hard put to figure out that moment, or describe it fully: "I heard him say the words, but then I got confused or something. He didn't say more; it was my turn to talk, but I didn't know what words to use—they didn't come to me, not one. I think I looked at him, at his face, and then I looked away fast, because he was looking at me, staring. So I said I had to go, and I did. There might have been some talk before I left—I'm not sure. I was so lost in my thinking. I drove home, and on the way, I got to wondering: has Rob gone and persuaded Mr. Tomasello? I didn't think so, though."

Once home he spoke with his mother-in-law, recited the sequence of events at the hardware store. Mamie wasn't surprised. Indeed, she was only surprised that her son-in-law was surprised—that he hadn't

given any thought, apparently, to Mr. Tomasello's relationship to certain other white people in the town: "She gave a big laugh, Mamie, and she told me I'd better 'widen' my eyes and 'alert' my ears, because there's 'lots to' Mr. Tomasello I hadn't been taking in! She said she'd seen him watch the TV, and there'd be reports of those three young men, who'd disappeared [the SNCC members who were killed in Neshoba County, Mississippi, early in the summer of 1964] and he said, 'They're dead, for sure, and it's a damn shame.' That's what he told his wife, and she said she agreed, and she said, 'There are a lot of people who end up doing wrong, because there's no one to show them how to do right.' I think on her deathbed Mamie will remember hearing that—she told me she never heard anything better come from a white person, not in her whole life!"

In fact, Sarah Holmes and Andrew Thomas didn't see eye to eye on that score. "We had ourselves a bit of an argument," the younger of the two recalled as he tried to give a chronicle of what happened to him in the summer of 1964. Always practical, and more attentive to the world than his mother-in-law's estimate of him allowed, he quickly challenged Mrs. Tomasello's comment on moral leadership, its prevalent absence as an explanation for what had occurred in Neshoba County: "I said I wasn't one to know better than the missus [Mrs. Tomasello], and I know she got herself a college degree, but someone can stand up and try to tell people what's right, and they'll get shot down, and that's what happened to those three guys in Neshoba, and it would happen here, it's the same here. People hear what it suits them to hear—that's what I told her, and if they do bad, they've got a reason for it. You know what? They think they're doing good—that's the truth!"

He hadn't convinced his mother-in-law with that earthy take on social behavior as a response to money and power as they, in turn, shape the moral standards of a particular community. She had argued strenuously for the potential influence any one person can exert. To clinch her point, she summoned "the Lord Himself"; she spoke passionately of Jesus, *His* lonely moral vigil and its eventual significance, the sway it came to hold over so many. But Andrew Thomas was not at all won over: "I had to stop myself from laughing! I said, 'Mamie, stop yourself

and think.' I told her God isn't likely to show up and start leading people to be good and stop hating their neighbors on account of this or that. He spoke up, Jesus did, you bet, but they killed Him. Now, He's in heaven, with God, His father—but that doesn't make people down here, most of them, behave the way Jesus did. No sir, they go ahead and do what's best for them: that's what they're figuring—what will work out one hundred percent in their favor. Then they'll go to church and tell Almighty God that they love Him."

He stops abruptly at that point in his narrative account of this important moral discussion held weeks earlier with his mother-in-law. She had been shocked by that last comment—she told him that the devil had caused him to say it. He had made the mistake of dismissing her out of hand, had pushed the matter further, declared the devil as a powerful protagonist, still, *within* the various Christian churches, never mind in his thinking. She was aghast, and let him have it: "She told me I was sounding worse than the worst white man! She said it was 'ideas' like I had that had given us all the trouble, forever! I tried to get her to slow down, but she kept coming after me with talk of the devil, and she said she'd pray for me, but I should remember that God hears everything, and He doesn't forget. That's when I came back at her. I said, I wish He'd come down here again and straighten out this sorry, sorry world. I said that's the trouble with church: you pray and pray, and you hear all these good things to think, and good things to do, but then folks walk out, and they're right square in the devil's hands again, and if I'm in the devil's hands for saying it's so, then all right, I'll own up and admit that I could be one more slippery shoe that the devil wears, but let me tell you—I told her—there's no one who doesn't get used by the devil, even that minister who comes and tells us what's right and what's wrong every Sunday. There's lots of them around, ministers, be they white or colored, and I don't notice them leading folks, any of us, out of the land of bad and into the land of good, the way the missus told our Mamie people need leading."

They had reached an impasse, a man and his mother-in-law; they had repeated discussions over a couple of weeks, and those fractious engagements of mind and soul became amplified by Mamie's insis-

tence on sharing with Mrs. Tomasello what she and her son-in-law had talked about—even as Mr. Tomasello soon enough heard from his wife about her conversations ("chats," she called them) with a maid who had become a constant, enabling presence in her life. Indeed, Mrs. Tomasello's very vulnerability made for her moral sensitivity, so her husband once observed as he looked back from the vantage point of 1966 at the complicated relationship between him and his wife and Mamie and Andrew Thomas during that hectic, intense, politically and racially momentous summer of 1964. "You'll note," he told me to keep in mind, "that Sally [Mrs. Tomasello] spent more time with Mamie than anyone else, even me."

He stops to sip a Coke, lowers his head a second or two, resumes: "The two did a lot of talking! If she wasn't sick, and could get around like others, she'd not have dug beneath the surface of things the way she did then (she still does). She was *there* with Mamie, helping her do things, and the two are both talkers. Here in the store, I mostly listen; I've learned to let each customer talk and talk! Back home, those two really hashed things out. Mamie would get all riled up, on account of what young Andrew said to her. She'd tell Sally that her son-in-law was coming up with 'devil talk.' My wife wasn't so sure! Andrew laughed at her thought—that over in Neshoba, and right here (and everywhere) people need to be taught how to behave better. Sally said for years that a good leader, and a leader who fights for the good, finds followers—and that's the story of Jesus' ministry on earth. Mamie is right on Sally's side—but when [Mamie] got angry at Andrew, Sally wasn't upset, not as much as his mother-in-law was with him! Sally told me she thought Andrew had a point—that 'he'd taken the matter further.' You know, people aren't always ready for that 'good leader.' In fact, they're *not* ready for him at all a lot of the time—isn't *that* the Christian story, too? I mean, Jesus came here with all those good things to say, the best of intentions, and look at what people did—the same as in Neshoba. Hey, I'm not saying those SNCC guys were like Jesus. Don't get me wrong! I think they were pushing an agenda, a 'voting rights' agenda, they called it, and they had a right to do it—that's where I parted company with ninety-nine percent of the whites of this state, or

maybe ninety-five percent (I could be underestimating some of us!). But those SNCC people weren't the Lord, or His agents or ambassadors—I don't think so. But, you know, there is this truth: that if you come into a community from outside, or if you come *at* a community from the inside (if you start criticizing it or going against the mainstream, you could say), then you're sure as hell headed for a lot of trouble—as we put it here, God's share of it, and doesn't that [expression] fit!"

He stops to reflect upon his own extended stretch of words, which have actually taken him by surprise. It is as if someone else, a provocative moralist or religious historian, has been reminding him concretely of the implications of Christianity, and has also been commenting on what might be called the sociology of everyday life—the way some people have accommodated themselves and their revolutionary religion to the normative requirements of the status quo. He seems to want to return to the comfort and luxury of an attitude that goes with going along, adjusting one's views to those held by the privileged majority. He is, after all, a member of a town's, a county's, a state's bourgeoisie. He has a substantial sum of money in the bank; he owns a store, his home, and even the homes of others; he has a tidy sum invested in the stock market; he carries a "bigger life insurance policy than most others," because he worries constantly about his wife's illness and what would happen to her were he to "go," given the medical costs of her condition.

Still, he can't quite clear his head of Jesus and His life, of McComb, Mississippi, and the contemporary challenges of *its* life. He moves from Jesus the outsider come to naught (during his lifetime here on Earth, at least) to "all the civil rights trouble" taking place during that summer of 1964, and finally, to his customer Andrew Thomas, who has his own terse way of talking with him, a counterpart conversation, as it were, of what has been happening between his wife, Sally, and Andrew Thomas's mother-in-law, Mamie. He worries that Andrew may "get himself a bundle of trouble" because he's been "listening a little too hard to those SNCC people" and most especially to "Chicago Rob," who has become a friend of Andrew's. Not that Mr. Tomasello

thinks the two of them don't have a lot to say to each other that is interesting. He himself confesses that he'd like to be the proverbial fly on the wall in that cabin of Andrew's, "taking in what they say to one another." But soon, he worries, idle but weighty talk might lead to risky, maybe calamitous activity: "It's one thing for someone to come spend a summer here; it's another thing to live here, and have to take the heat for the rest of your life if you do something that stirs people up, so they start trying to get even with you! Those civil rights folks, they fill Andrew's ear with right-sounding talk, and I can understand if he's convinced, but he's a smart one: he's a man of strong will, and he loves his wife and those four kids they have, and he doesn't want to bring the roof down on them. It's not much of a roof they have, anyway!"

He stops abruptly—just as I'm convinced he has a lot of wind in his sails, and will keep going for some time. When he resumes, only a few seconds have passed, but they seem much longer—he has both changed the subject and not at all done so: "Let me tell you, I don't know how they live the way they do. I've taken Mamie home many a time—when Andrew can't come get her—and a lot of the time I'm too busy with my own thoughts about my life to stop and take a hard look at theirs. But there will be times when I *do* notice, and I try to put myself and Sally, and our kids, when they were younger and growing up, into that old shack—that's what it is—that they call their home (and they're proud to [do so], they really are). Those times, I bleed for them; yes sir, I do. Maybe if I was living there, I'd listen real closely to the civil rights folks when they came knocking on my door. But even so, I'd know the danger: every member of that Thomas family would be in much worse trouble if they get tied to the civil rights folks than they are now, living in such a broken-down place. There's trouble, and there's *trouble*, you know!"

Another unexpected break in the narrative run of his words, which have quite a tug to them, a consequence not only of their meaning, but the emotion he conveys, the anxiety and the worry, as he speaks. It is as if he's picturing the worst in order to prove his last statement true: he has lowered his head, maybe because in his mind some shots have been fired by night riders, or a tenant farmer's cabin, Andrew's to be exact,

has been torched to the ground—neither rare occurrences all through that summer, at that moment only half over. Finally, he is addressing me again—and I begin to sense an urgently delivered exhortation: “We’re soon headed for more trouble here. The civil rights people won’t leave until they have some kind of confrontation, and our local police, and the state police, will be waiting for them, and besides, there’s the White Citizens Council, and you must know, the Klan. I don’t know how it’ll happen, or when, but as everyone says, colored and white, ‘the day is coming!’ I’ve refused to join the White Citizens Council, and if there was another hardware store in town I’d be out of business. My Sally pleaded with me not to join, and you know what they told me when I didn’t want to? It was three years ago, and it was something said that I’ll never in my life forget: ‘Well there, Mr. Tomasello (boy did they linger on my name!), you’re not really one of us anyway with a name like yours!’ They didn’t say anything else; and I didn’t pursue the matter. I was angry, but I’ll confess, I was scared. I thought of my business—and my wife, and our kids, even if they’re up in Oxford [in college at the University of Mississippi]. I was almost ready to reverse myself, sign up with them. But I just couldn’t find the words to.”

“I sat there shaking with fright and rage, the two feelings in a mix I couldn’t separate then, I can’t now—and you know, I’ve told Andrew about that [incident] recently. I thought he should know what I thought: if he’s letting himself even *consider* joining up with those civil rights ‘types’ (as they’re called by a lot of my [white] customers), then he should know that even for me, a white man who is way ‘up there,’ compared to him, it could be scary, plenty scary, just not signing a private piece of paper, never mind walking up those courthouse stairs to try to claim the ballot, what ‘they’ want Andrew to do, that Rob guy and the others [who have] come here these last few weeks.”

Now he seems ready to work himself into a fit of vexation and fury against “them,” against “Chicago Rob” and the rest. He takes his glasses off, pulls a handkerchief to wipe them, and I regard that gesture figuratively: he’s all steamed up, and his glasses are a clue to that mood, hence his need to make them clear again. But I’m dead wrong. I will

shortly learn that he is, rather, trying to achieve for himself a clarity, a lucidity of vision: “Hell, I’m with them, in my heart. My wife, Sally, she’s sure with them—the sooner the colored become American citizens like everyone else, and vote, the better off we’ll all be: I’ve heard that a hundred times this summer! Maybe so—but *we* won’t be so ‘better off,’ I tell her—they [the white customers of his hardware store] will start driving twenty-five miles to buy a rake or a pair of pliers or a hammer, and they’ll use the hammers they’ve got to smash my store’s windows, and they’ll come here and try to scare us to death. Two can play that picketing game, you know, and the boycotting—and the white people are the majority and have most of the money! I’ve told Andrew all this—I tried to be tactful, the way I put it in words, but I want him to know, to get the message, otherwise he’s headed for the worst trouble. Why, he could just disappear, you know. It’s happened before. Or he could be arrested for some trumped-up charge: they’d be waiting for him somewhere, the police, and by the time they’d finished with him, doing their ‘questioning’—he’d be lucky to be breathing. He’d be one sorry fellah!”

“If you ask me, Andrew isn’t going to pay me no mind. I see him as headed for that courthouse, no matter what. He’s weighed everything, and he knows the odds of success—zero, I’d say; but he just doesn’t seem to be able to control himself—he’ll be skeptical about the civil rights people for a few minutes, but they seem to have roped him in, that’s my estimate.”

Unaccountably, his face shows a smile. He has stopped talking, has directed his eyes toward the street. He shakes his head, returns his attention to the room where we sit, his study in his home. He jokes that he’s surrounded by “integrationists.” His wife would like to walk up those courthouse stairs with Andrew “and the others.” His wife, actually, doubts Andrew will end up taking that big step—he’ll worry too much, finally, she estimates, about his family. To try to register to vote, after all, likely means to make a widow of your wife, to make your children fatherless. Andrew has the “gumption” but he’s not “rash,” not a “fool,” not anxious to “take it on the chin—or the belly or the chest.” His wife once put it this way, “on the dime”; she asked a rhetorical

question: "Does Andrew have the will and the brave soul in him to be a leader of his people—to be their real leader, who stands up, through thick and thin, for what is right and true?"

Mr. Tomasello looks around the room. There are family pictures on the wall—including one of his grandfather who came to America from Turin, in Italy; he landed in New York City and got a job helping a peddler, and soon thereafter, "cleaning up after the customers left" in a series of stores. He worked all night, every night. He scrubbed floors on his hands and knees. He did what would "now," in Mississippi, be called "nigger work." He wasn't one for self-pity. He never voted. He wasn't a citizen. He simply wanted to "get a leg up here," and he did.

Then, "a fluke," an accident or incident that "changed everything." This immigrant from Italy, walking on a New York City street after an arduous night of toil, saw a man get out of a taxi, pay the fare, and begin to walk—but he inadvertently dropped his wallet: it hadn't been put securely in his pocket, and so it fell to the ground, noticed by that immigrant, who spoke up. "That was how he got here," his grandson tells me: a grateful southerner whose wallet had been saved took an interest in the honest Italian immigrant who helped him, and who was more than willing to "take a chance," to "move anywhere," to "try to make a go of it" where this southerner lived.

A pleasant, proud reverie, a story of assimilation and success, comes crashing down, though: "I'm still an odd one, in the eyes of lots of folks here. 'Tomasello, he's a nice guy, an Eye-talian—he'll try to please you all he can': I overheard that once in my own store! I was in the next aisle, out of sight. My own father-in-law had to practice and practice, so as not to call me an Eye-talian. He wasn't all that happy at the start, I'll tell you, to call me his son-in-law! Now my wife is telling me to practice: 'Don't say colored, honey,' she'll tell me. So, I say 'nigrah.' 'No, honey—Negro.' I have trouble using the word, saying it right, so Sally said: 'Think of a knee growing, a knee-grows, then it'll come out all right, and you know that works!'"

He has laughed; but abruptly he is straight-faced, serious—and mordantly self-critical: "I am ashamed of myself, talking this way! My grandfather adjusted to everything in this country except for segrega-

tion. He ended up being a shoe repairman—he had his own shop. He bought the building [that housed his present day hardware store], and other buildings. He took care of the buildings, built up equity. That's how I learned to buy property: my dad got into the real estate business, through his dad. My folks always felt sorry for the colored. I remember Daddy paying them more than anyone else in town would dream of—he'd say it often: 'It isn't fair, the way they're treated.' I guess we were enough outsiders, with our background, with the name Tomasello, to sympathize with those on the outside, the colored! It could have been different, though—I'll say that in self-defense. There's my cousin, who's in Greenwood, and he's an outstanding lawyer, the leader of the White Citizens Council there, and he talks segregation all the time—I get sick, listening to him, I feel like reminding him of our family's past, and telling him what I've overheard—not just once! But he'd blow up at me, I know. He can sense where I'm at, though—I keep quiet when he comes out with his hate talk."

He was tempted to keep quiet when he learned of Andrew's intention to go ask for the right to vote. He was also tempted to tell Andrew that he was making a big mistake "to mess around in this protest stuff," as he put it to Andrew when they had occasion to talk. Andrew remembered it well. "We had ourselves a talk like I've never had with anyone, be he colored or white! I told him I was likely going to 'take the step.' He turned whiter than white! He said I should think twice, three times, four times, a hundred times, before I dive into water as deep as that, especially since I can't swim! Well, I told him I'd learn how when I got in the water and I'd have to—besides, us black folks (Rob says we should call ourselves), we're always in water above our heads, and we're always trying to stay afloat, and you can drown any second, being who you are, the colored."

"What about your family? Your wife, your kids? He asked me that several times. I said, 'Mr. Tomasello, I should let you know—my family has no future, the way it is now here. This is their big chance, to feel there's something ahead, waiting for them. As it is, we're treated like things. Maybe someday we can be something.'"

On the other hand, Andrew confessed to apprehension, even alarm.

He believed what he'd told Mr. Tomasello, but he wondered if he himself would ever really "go through it"—he envisioned himself as becoming wobbly, hesitant, and, in the clutch, reluctant. He knew he might well be arrested on the spot, taken to jail—and thereafter hurt beyond repair, if not killed. What was the point, then? Such an acknowledgment on Andrew Thomas's part, surprising to his white listener, elicited an unexpected response—indeed, a stunning reversal on the part of Mr. Tomasello, one that would prove to be a memorable, critical moment in the summer of 1964: "I think I took leave of my senses—I wasn't thinking coolly and rationally. I told Andrew I'd support him in what he did, if he decided to do it. I told him I'd do it for him—and my wife, and for the people of the state. I said, 'Hey, our [last] names are practically the same, and we've been helping each other out for years and years—why, his mother-in-law is my wife's 'best friend,' that's what she says. So I said it's about time we shook hands and agreed we're friends, and we'll stand by each other!'"

Not so easy to accomplish, this asserted desirability of a friendship, a newly balanced manner of getting along. Mr. Thomas kept silent after the handshake. Mr. Tomasello had more to say, but also kept quiet. Then, a remarkable admission from Mr. Thomas, as later relayed by Mr. Tomasello: "He told me he wasn't going to show up the next morning—that he felt he'd be 'walking out on his family,' leaving them for good, and it wasn't right! He was going through agony, I could see. I wanted to give him a hug." Did he? "No, I didn't—because I thought he'd get frightened! All of a sudden, standing there, I realized what it was *really* like for him, what it meant to be a colored man, a Negro in our society. I felt overwhelmed with shame; for what our country had allowed—no, for what it forced on all of us, from the start of our history. There we were, in the second half of the twentieth century, and the segregationist laws were on the books, and in the hearts of us white folks, and a few blocks away, the sheriff and his police were ready to make sure things stayed as they are! I wanted to ask for Andrew's forgiveness, but I knew he'd think I'd done gone loco!"

Instead, the two men had a "practical talk," Mr. Tomasello called it. He did most of the talking. He told Andrew that "whatever he did,

whatever he decided to do," he had "friends" in the Tomasellos. He spoke a lot through his wife, through references to her opinions and values, and told a taciturn, somewhat perplexed, definitely astonished Andrew Thomas that he had "admirers" in McComb, two at least, among the town's white population, and that "if worse came to worst" those two would "stand up and be counted." That last phrase stuck hard in the minds of both the one who used it and the one who heard it used. Neither of them at the time quite knew what those words were specifically meant to suggest, imply, convey: maybe they were meant as a gesture of affiliation, connection, rather than as a plan or strategy spelled out. Yet, in retrospect, both of them believed that somehow those words pushed matters along decisively.

Andrew Thomas: "I'm not one for being smart with words, but I do know this—I kept hearing Mr. Tomasello, when he said he and his missus would 'stand up and be counted,' if trouble came my way. I never knew whether I'd go there and face those police, but I thought, it's about time someone stood up and be counted on the colored side and on the white side, and there we are, Mr. Tomasello and me!"

Mr. Tomasello: "I wasn't sure what I intended to indicate when I spoke like that. On the way home, I was asking myself: what *will* you do if you find out they've gone and arrested Andrew—or God forbid, that he's 'missing.' I wouldn't let myself go further—I knew in my bones, though, that those so-called law enforcement people were perfectly capable of taking his life, *murdering* him, and pretending it was some accident. Look what happened in Neshoba County! I got home and I told Sally, and she said *she* knew what I was doing—I was giving young Andrew some encouragement, some moral support. I was telling him he's not alone, and if he dares take on the Klan and the [White Citizens] Council, then so will I. Sally said the two of us were standing together—'You're working for the good, to make it better here,' she kept saying, and 'you're getting your own kind of integration going—it's moral integration you're bringing to Mississippi.' Well, what's that? I wanted to know! 'It's two Americans agreeing they'll stand up and be counted, just like you said, and one is a Negro, and one a white man, and they're both doing what's right, come what may—

that's moral integration.' I guess I saw what she was trying to tell me, but that sounded pretty high and mighty, those two words, and I was a lot more worried and afraid than she realized; or maybe she *did* realize."

On his first try, Andrew Thomas was firmly rebuffed—no way he'd be allowed to vote. But the international furor occasioned by the Neshoba tragedy, the killing of three civil rights activists, gave the McComb ballot applicants a good deal of protection. "They were unfriendly, that's all," Andrew remembered. Meanwhile, as he left the courthouse and descended its steps, he saw his newly declared "friend" standing on the sidewalk, watching. A smile, a wink, even a public thumbs-up came Andrew's way, and the smile, the wink were cautiously returned. "I couldn't return the thumbs-up," he remembered. "I think I would have gotten wobbly knees and fallen down if I'd tried that. Someone would have arrested me, I feared, for being a 'sassy nigger'—that's what they'll call you at the drop of a hat! But you know what? I felt like one! I felt like I was on my way to a little of that 'freedom' those civil rights people keep talking and singing of. Once I'd climbed those stairs, I knew I'd be back, until they finally gave up stalling on us, those folks in the offices there—just to start the ball rolling, that was what I had to do. I told Mr. Tomasello: he and I got this started—I told him he was a big help to me as I tried to figure if I'd dare. He's here 'for the duration,' just like me, he says, and it helps to know a white man who's ready to be counted on your side."

By 1965, a voting rights bill had passed the Congress, and Andrew Thomas was readily (if still reluctantly in spirit) put on the voting list in McComb, Mississippi. As soon as he registered, he drove over to see Mr. Tomasello at his hardware store. The two of them stood and talked in the front of the store, then went back to the office, where they *chatted* over coffee. They called the Tomasello home, shared the news with Sally and Mamie, who excitedly congratulated both of them, as if somehow they'd together discovered and explored a new world, led an expedition that, finally, had gotten somewhere—hit together the moral pay dirt that for so long eluded them and so many others in their town, their state, their region.

2. A TEACHER'S MINICOURSE IN MORAL LEADERSHIP

In 1960, when school segregation came to New Orleans, all eyes were on the four African-American girls who had entered two formerly all-white elementary schools, and on the subsequent boycott by the parents and children heretofore enrolled in those schools. What would happen to Ruby Bridges, all alone in the William Frantz School, heckled and threatened? What would happen to the white children who once went to school on weekdays and now stood with their parents and shouted at Ruby as *she* went to *their* school—and who afterward, "hung around and horsed around," as a boy described what he and his pals had been doing since "that nigger girl showed up"? I would spend years trying to learn the answers to such questions, and so doing I would have many opportunities to observe the courage that hard-pressed children and their families could mobilize—and the fear and meanness of spirit that could envelop other children, and of course, their parents, brothers, and sisters. As I wrote up that research, I concentrated on all those children, those families—and learned from them much of what happened in their lives. But there were other stories that unfolded in connection with those early, fiercely contested efforts at school desegregation—stories in which the protagonists weren't even directly involved in the two particular schools that were so embattled, and yet who chose to take seriously the moral challenges a racial crisis posed for everyone, for onlookers as well as those who became, suddenly, out-and-out combatants.

When the federal judge J. Skelly Wright chose only two schools in New Orleans as the scenes of desegregation, and only four children as the bearers of that mandated educational future, he was hoping to ease a particular city gradually past its loudly stated outrage. At a meeting of the city's teachers that followed, by a week, the actual onset of integration (such as it was) in the city's school system, I heard a virtual refrain of relief from those not assigned to the Frantz School or the Mc-

Donogh 19 School—the term being “spared” kept being summoned. Another word used, often in conjunction with “spared,” referred to the deity—as if a divine intervention had rescued certain people from a tragedy inflicted on others: “Thank God, we’ve been spared,” or “Lord, we sure are grateful we were spared.”

It was, actually, just such expressions of relief that first bestirred Elaine Vogel, a fourth-grade teacher in a McDonogh School, but not McDonogh 19, the school besieged by a mob in response to the fact that three six-year-old African-American girls were attending. One of those girls, Tessie Prevost, had been quoted in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* as calling for divine scrutiny and assistance: “I say to God, in my prayers, please don’t let those people push their way into the school and ruin everything here.”

Elaine Vogel read that comment of that six-year-old child, and when she did she couldn’t help but go back to her days as a religious studies major at Sophie Newcomb College in New Orleans. She had always had a meditative side to her, even as she wondered where it came from. Her father was a banker, her mother an amateur artist; they lived a privileged life in New Orleans’s Garden District, and were rather surprised, even concerned, when their only daughter decided that she wanted to teach elementary school children, and do so in the city’s public schools. Elaine’s brother, Carl, had gone to Tulane, then headed north to business school at Northwestern. Her parents were constantly comparing the two, wondering why their daughter “takes life so seriously.” Their worry had become hers: “I’m twenty-seven, and my folks think of me as in trouble, because I’m not married to one of the eligible lawyers or stockbrokers of the city! They thought teaching was ‘nice’ until they learned that I wasn’t going to be at Metairie Country Day [a private, suburban school]—I was hoping to be at a public school here in New Orleans.

“When my mom heard I was going to church every week, and teaching there, too, in Sunday school, she called me and said maybe I was ‘turning too serious.’ She said I shouldn’t carry the whole world on my shoulders! I had to laugh: I’ve got all this money in a trust fund, and

this nice apartment off St. Charles [Street], and a convertible, and all the clothes I’ll ever need in a lifetime, and I’m in good health, and I’m not the worst-looking gal in the city of New Orleans, and I like my work with those kids, and I’ve got some really great friends, but my mom and pop are in a sweat over there on Prytania Street because their Elaine hasn’t tied the knot with some young millionaire, and she’s spending her time with children who live in ‘one of those troubled neighborhoods,’ Pop called it—meaning any place in the whole city where folks work hard, hard, hard for a living but aren’t rich like they all are where my parents live!

“And now, for God’s sake—well, that’s it: I’m asking God what *He* wants, what *He* would have us do, to advance *His* purposes, and my folks are throwing up their arms and groaning as if I’ve lost my mind. The last straw was the other night: Mom had met a ‘marvelous doctor’ at a party, and she told him what I was doing, and she asked him if I might come and see him. ‘Mom,’ I said, ‘I’m feeling fine. Why should I see a doctor?’ She came back at me with this: ‘Dear, he specializes in talking with young people.’ ‘Mom’—I laughed—‘are you trying to fix me up with some shrink?’ She didn’t know what to say—I’d made a joke of the whole thing, when she was trying to be so damn serious! But later, I was fit to be tied! My parents love to go to that Episcopal church every third or fourth Sunday, it’s a big social time for them. They don’t pay the slightest attention to Jesus, to what *He* preached, to what Christianity is supposed to be about. ‘What a lovely man, a sweet one, that minister is,’ I’ll hear, or ‘The music was *wonderful*.’ I’ll hear those ‘reports,’ Mom calls them, of their activities, like going to church, and I wonder what God thinks of, makes of them. I sure know what they think of Him—He’s a ‘sweet one’! That’s why Mom wants me to go talk with that doctor—so I’ll stop having all those ‘troublesome matters,’ she calls them, on my mind.”

Even before the city of New Orleans was ordered to make a start at school desegregation, Elaine Vogel was beginning to teach her fifth-grade American history classes in her very own way. She used the standard text, but chose to emphasize parts of it that her colleagues, as she

put it, "glided over," even tended to ignore outright slavery, and its continuation as segregation, most especially. She also asked the children to stop and think about "all the Negro people have done to build up our country; the labor they have given to it." She even worked with those boys and girls on the word "Negro," worked very hard in that regard. Indeed, that effort first made her teaching controversial. She was merely asking children to pronounce a particular word correctly, but in 1959, in Louisiana, in a working-class neighborhood, such instruction had many consequences.

What started as an afterthought of sorts turned into an occasion of argument, strife: "We didn't have mobs like those you're seeing in front of the two schools, but we had parents coming in here to see me, to see the principal, and they were complaining (*were they!*), and a few threatened to take their kids out! I couldn't believe it! The principal called me in, when all this started, and she said: 'Elaine, how did all this get going? What did you do—what did you say to the children?' I told her I was simply trying to be a good history teacher—and English teacher! I was asking them to read a book, and I brought in newspaper clippings and magazine pieces I'd cut out. In all of them the word used is 'Negro.' But when I called on the children to recite, they talked about 'the colored,' and if they were trying hard to do the right thing, they spoke of the 'nigras.' I heard some of them snickering behind my back and during recess—talking of the 'niggers.' I even heard a couple of boys calling me a 'nigger lover'! I sat on it all for a few days. I was tempted to move on—get us past all this touchiness, get us into a subject they'd enjoy, and [one in which] I'd not be inclined to badger them, 'correct' them too much. You see, I'd overlooked the fact that when you start going after the way children use or pronounce certain words, especially a word meant to describe—well, *Negroes*—you're touching on their home life, the way their parents think, their values. I was dumb or naïve—"innocent" would be a nice word, or if you want to be critical, *foolish*." That's what the principal thought of me, I could tell right away: I'd been *stupid* to get all this going! You know, it didn't take her long to start in with *me*—as if the problem wasn't the children and

their language, or the parents, and their complaints, but my background. 'Elaine,' she said to me, 'you've been protected by your life, and you can speak as you like—but for a lot of people here, it's not so easy.' I wasn't clear on what she meant, other than that I was from a well-to-do family, and the neighborhood where I teach is—I guess you'd call it modest."

Not that those in her own family, or their neighbors, were any more inclined then to favor the word "Negro" than were the children she taught. She wanted to argue, as she did with the principal, in country clubs, in elegant living and dining rooms, in galleries, and yes, at musicales: "Friends of my parents play music beautifully: he's a violinist and she's a cellist. They have friends over; they're part of a quartet, and they play in their 'music room' for a dozen or so guests. First, Bach or Beethoven or Brahms, then great food! You know who cooks it, prepares the tables, serves the fanciest of *cuisine française*? The 'colored,' or 'our good nigras.' I've been to those soirees; I've heard what liquor does to tongues, the crude jokes, the stories out of their lives: 'I was trying to get some gas in a hurry, and they have this real slow nigger, who can't shake a leg to save his soul, and he spills some of the gas on my car after he's filled the tank and I say something to him, but he's too slow to understand me.' I heard that from a woman of 'great refinement'—those are my mother's words about her. If the white man who owns the gas station had waited on her, she'd have found patience for him, and she'd have overlooked a little spilt gas on that fancy Lincoln Continental of hers. She might 'overlook' my teaching her children how to use 'Negro,' pronounce it, but if I started talking about what happened here in Louisiana during Reconstruction, if I started asking her children to start learning about the wrong done to those 'Negroes' in Louisiana, and the way it affects the *doer*, that wrong done—I think she'd come marching into the Newman School or Metairie Country Day [both private schools] to 'register her reservations,' a polite way to say *complain!*"

*The Worth of Indirection:
Teaching "Approved Moralists"*

In fact, as she well knew, certain teachers in both of those private schools were entirely in sympathy with what she was trying to do, and were even pursuing the same kind of morally energetic historical inquiry. But, as she put it, "in a private school you can find, *sometimes*, nooks and crannies where you're left alone, [whereas] in a public school, when you take on something that's a 'live wire' with people, you've got to be careful, that's what I've been learning." Yet she wanted to keep at her job; she wanted her schoolchildren to continue the kind of learning she was offering them. She began to realize the worth of indirection, of a gradual approach to matters she'd heretofore taken on vigorously, frontally. She let the pronunciation of "Negro" go for a while, confined herself to books and magazine pieces, to established writers and their pronouncements, and she paced herself carefully: a gradual buildup of a point of view buttressed by various "approved moralists" she called them, sages such as Emerson and Thoreau, the remarks of presidents and generals and cabinet officers that, in their sum, emphasized (in her words) a "certain tone"—the fair-minded, egalitarian side of our nation's political and social thought.

Especially interesting was her original and shrewd use of C. Vann Woodward's *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel*, a story of the political rise and moral fall of a southern politician—a man who eventually became a U.S. senator, but who in so doing turned away from his early interest in furthering the cause of the poor of both races. Here was a book favored by college professors, now being used in an elementary school—the teacher read certain passages aloud, copied them on the blackboard, asked the students to contemplate what an Arkansas-born white historian of great distinction had to say about a nineteenth-century Georgia leader's career. She used that word "leader" often, and its kin "leadership," but not as a political theorist might, or for that matter, a moral philosopher (though she was tempted in the latter direction). She

worked hard to come across to the children as "plain, direct"—she regretted her early "exercise in finger-pointing." She was tempted to ask her class to think of children in other schools, to consider Ruby Bridges and her situation, that of the other three African-American girls and their experience at another McDonogh School, but she held back, even as she had her moments of regret, frustration, self-accusation.

All during that first year of civic turmoil in New Orleans, while those four children struggled for a toehold in the schools abandoned by white families, Elaine Vogel tried to enrich and provoke the moral imagination of her class of twenty-eight ten-year-old boys and girls, whose parents worked in stores and factories and offices, wore blue collars and white collars, and, as she once starkly told me, "worried about the color black as if their lives were in danger of being blackened." She was, naturally, being the "amateur psychologist," so she characterized herself after giving expression to such a characterization of others. But she had come to fathom the depth and complexity of race as a constant and many-sided presence in the lives of those she taught, not to mention those she knew socially or as kinfolk. She read and read books, many by social scientists, some by writers she admired, such as Robert Penn Warren, or Faulkner, and those white southern novelists were helpful to her, indeed—enabling her "to get some distance" on her own melancholy assessment of her beloved city's seemingly endless racial turbulence. More than anyone, however, she relied upon C. Vann Woodward and his "story," as she called the Watson biography: "I showed the children pictures I got from the [Tulane] library of the young Tom Watson and the older man. I read to them what Watson said he believed when he was starting out, and what he said he believed when he was a leader of his state of Georgia, a leader in the United States Senate. I asked the children to take that word 'leader' very seriously, instead of worrying how they pronounce 'Negro'; I worked day after day at getting them to stop and think how one person can mean something important to another person, become a leader. I asked them what they think our leaders should stand for. I have to be careful, because their parents are the chief leaders they know in their

lives—and maybe, some others: religious people or Scoutmasters or athletic coaches. But we're studying history, and I try to get them to react personally to the people we come across in our lessons—vote for them, you might say, and explain why [they're doing so]. Of course, there's no magic to this—the kids don't suddenly turn into civic-minded citizens who are respectful of others and want to make their country better through idealistic actions! There are days when I wish I had that tape recorder of yours in my classroom, because what I've heard is so amazing and often discouraging, but always interesting and revealing. You hear a whole range of opinion, that's always the case. But if the children knew they were 'on record,' I suspect they'd not be so candid—and besides, the principal (and their parents!) would be alarmed. Anyway, I don't forget the gist of what goes on, and there are things said that I'll never forget: I can hear them in my head, word for word—those ten-year-olds trying to figure out where the country should be headed, and they with it!"

Needless to say, I wanted to hear all she could recall—whereupon she told me, first of all, about what she called an "amazing" class she'd had only a week earlier. She'd brought in a copy of *Life* magazine, showed the class several pictures in it of our American envoy to the United Nations, Ralph Bunche. She talked about his education (a doctorate from Harvard), and his work as a representative of this nation—someone who had tried to mediate conflicts in various parts of the world. Then she posed this question: if you were Mr. Bunche, what would you try to do—what would you consider to be important enough to take up your time? At no point had she referred to his race—nor did any part of the magazine pages she handed out mention that he was a Negro (the descriptive word that would then, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, have been used).

At first the children were "slow on the draw," as she remembered it. They weren't sure, most of them, what the U.N. was, nor did they have any substantial idea of its responsibilities—though one very bright girl, who loved "current events" and read the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* from cover to cover, went to the library to browse through

magazines, and had told the class several times that she dreamed of being a foreign correspondent ("a reporter who keeps traveling"), helped her teacher by talking about the U.N. ("a place where all the governments come and they decide things"). This youngster also got the discussion going by saying that if she were in the job held by Ralph Bunche she'd bring the Russians and the Americans into a room and tell them they *had* to settle things, or they'd not be let out.

The comment prompted a wide-ranging debate. Some children took offense at such an arbitrary confinement—wondered, anyway, whether "anyone could get away with it," meaning Mr. Bunche. Soon enough, these children pointed out, the respective governments would "come to the rescue." Moreover, it didn't seem right to use force this way in order to end the use of force by two governments. A boy put it this way, so Elaine Vogel remembered: "He's a quiet one, so I was surprised when he raised his hand, and tackled the problem in a thoughtful way, as a moral philosopher might, actually: 'Miss Vogel, I'm not sure, but two wrongs don't make a right, that's what my mom and dad say.' I hadn't thought about this like that—I guess I hadn't thought about what it means to lock the door on two parties who are disagreeing. I guess, really, I was thinking about not 'locking the doors' physically, although my student, Beverly, made the point literally—*did* tell us, specifically, that she would lock that door, and she even said she'd hide the key so no one could go find it when she was busy eating and sleeping! (Otherwise, she intended to 'keep guard' outside the conference room.)

"We went on and on. A girl said that 'if you force people to do things, then it won't work in the long run.' They'll *pretend* to agree on something, she guessed, to get free, then they'll go back to their former positions. That really struck a chord in the children—and that's how we got closer to home! Another girl pointed out that 'the government up in Washington' is now forcing 'the colored and the white people' to stay in the same room! She'd found her metaphor! The children got it immediately! Yes, 'they, up in Washington are forcing nigra people and the rest of us,' a boy said, 'to stay in one room,' and then the children

mentioned movie houses and restaurants and motels and schools, and they pointed out that 'force is being used, just like in the U.N.' (Beverly's speculative scenario).

"I was stunned. I have to admit it; I admired the way these kids picked up on one child's idea, her dramatic elaboration in class, her story, and connected it to their lives here in New Orleans. In fact, the more the kids talked the more I realized how much they actually knew about the desegregation struggle. Ordinarily, they're mum on the subject—they must worry that it's controversial, or that I'm one of these people who worries about 'fairness' and who can't be trusted with some of the resentments they've heard expressed at home, but in their bones know shouldn't be spoken lightly or casually in a classroom. (I'm speculating here!) But all of a sudden they were running away with themselves: they told one another about their more or less uniform sense of felt jeopardy: 'The way it's always been is being stopped by people who don't even live here,' one boy put it, a bit awkwardly (his sentence structure!), but I'll tell you, everyone got it real fast—except for poor Beverly. She'd started all this, and it didn't take long for her to become the class outcast! She dared disagree! She said we should all remember that the Supreme Court 'speaks the truth,' because it is our highest court. She said that if you disagree with the law, that's your right, but you have to obey it. She said that we were all wrong (her classmates, not me!) in making the analogy between New Orleans and Mr. Bunche and the U.N.—its international disputes, on the one hand, and the civil rights struggle on the other. I can't remember all she said, word for word, but I do remember that she tried hard to distinguish between a rift between two nations and a disagreement between citizens of one country who, all of them, are under the jurisdiction of a national government. I'm dressing up the language, but she sure got her point across."

That intense class started a lot going in Elaine Vogel's mind. She hadn't, for one thing, gotten around to mentioning to the class that Ralph Bunche was a Negro, even though no one in the class regarded him as such, or if some did, the matter was not brought up. She had intended to use the magazine story, with its photographic accompani-

ment, as a means of discussing racial attitudes—but Beverly's sophistication, shared with the class, triggered a lively series of exchanges that had to do with the local scene rather than the U.N. and its relatively different responsibilities. She had been surprised by the willingness of her students to ponder the nature of leadership, albeit indirectly and anecdotally. She wanted to hear more on that score—but she also wanted to put to rest her own wish that Ralph Bunche's eminence, his leadership, be considered, and ultimately done so in connection with his racial background. Moreover, she was quite anxious to learn, at some point, in some way, whether anyone in her class had actually taken note of Dr. Bunche's skin color. (He was a light-skinned African-American who wore glasses and whose facial features were significantly "white.") She debated whether to "finish one piece of business" (with respect to Dr. Bunche) before starting another (a hope on her part to ask the students to tell one another what they would do, were they a senator, say, or president, or what they would recommend or declare important were they a minister or a priest, hence moral leaders—there were no Jewish students in the class). When the class reconvened (for its social studies session) she was knocked off her feet by Beverly, who raised her hand, and when called, announced what she knew by asking this of her teacher: "Miss Vogel, did you know that the man we talked about yesterday is colored—the man from the United Nations?"

"I didn't even think to say yes," the still-surprised teacher recalled later that week. She had instead dwelled on Beverly's choice of words—a real disappointment coming from such a sophisticated and smart girl, who was so widely read. She sat at her desk "for three or four or five seconds, a long time under those circumstances," and then blurted out a dismayed "Beverly!" Silence for another second or two, and then: "I thought we'd all agreed to use the word 'Negro' when it's called for." Now a public apology from an articulate, self-confident child, not usually inclined to speak of her missteps or mistakes: "I'm sorry. I should have known the right word to use, but I forgot." Then, a compelling, poignant explanation: "My daddy says 'colored' is the right word for most people here [in Louisiana], and 'Negro' is the word people use if they're in college and educated, or if they're friends of colored people."

A smile from her teacher, both in that class and afterward, as she contemplated the irony of that statement, never mind its sociological savvy. "I was stymied," she pointed out days later. She had been made aware yet again and concretely that if she was going to ask the children to make a change in the language that they use, she would have to go beyond yes and no, approval and disapproval: "I can mark a word 'right' or 'wrong,' 'correct' or 'incorrect,' but the word 'colored' or the word 'Negro'—that's different. Beverly sure taught me to stop and think there, and I did: I tried to come up with a way of making us all in that class realize the power of certain words, their meaning. I set aside the words 'colored' and 'Negro.' I got us talking about the history of our country: we were 'colonies' of England for a long time, and then we became the United States of America—a new name to describe us. I pointed out that there were arguments back then—not everyone in the Colonies wanted them called the United States. It occurred to me, as we talked, that many of the 'loyalists,' who sided with the British, were from the upper class—so, as Beverly had pointed out to us, our class background affects our choices in many ways, including the words we use to describe other people, or to describe our country itself. Sure, the analogy doesn't completely hold between what was going on back then and what's happening now, but there is a political struggle taking place here in the South, just as there was in the Colonies before they became the States—and my point to the class was that words can count a lot, some of them, and they can tell a lot about what you think is good or bad, what you think of other people.

"The children were surprisingly thoughtful as we talked about the American Revolution. They could see how hard it might have been for some people, as a boy, Tim, said it, 'to give up the king.' His friend Jimmy couldn't see that, so they argued out loud before all of us—an example of a difference of opinion, all right! Jimmy said he didn't think the loyalists really cared about the king—only about 'being on top.' Tim said that there were probably some folks 'back then' who weren't 'big-shot types' (he kept using that phrase, and I kept thinking of the young populist, Tom Watson, who we'd been studying!)—but they had learned to 'worship' the king, and they weren't going to give up that at-

titude so quickly. I was moved by the way he spoke—more simply and directly than I ever could. If I recall correctly [he said]: 'You don't just forget what you believe. If you sort of worship a king, you stick by him, when others are telling you, "Hey, forget it!"' Then he brought us to our time—very nicely, to suit my purposes! He said that if you live in a neighborhood, and everyone is 'the same,' and then someone tells you to 'forget it,' because some 'new kind of people, really strange and different' are going to move in, then you *could* forget it, and not worry about those newcomers, or you might decide you just won't forget it, and that means trouble, lots of it."

She stopped there, interrupted a narrative account, to register the charged atmosphere in a classroom. The subject was the American Revolution, but somehow the boys' use of the topic had brought the entire class well into the twentieth century. At first their teacher thought *she* was the one who had made a connection between the loyalists of yore and the defiant segregationists of mid-twentieth-century America. But the brief silence, she noted, was "electric"—somehow, in some region of those many young minds, a similar connection had been made. The pause was broken by Beverly, who delivered an observation both banal and yet strangely affecting: "It's hard to change your ideas, but sometimes you do." Immediately, others wanted to explore the implication of that remark—the class had moved from history to psychology. The children wondered out loud why some people could shift their opinions, while others did so with great reluctance or, indeed, wouldn't budge an inch. Their teacher didn't need to encourage the discussion so much as moderate it. She was constantly tempted to refer to the contemporary racial tensions in Louisiana, but she feared that such a maneuver on her part would be self-defeating. There was such a flow to the class—it was, she mused afterward, a real "pow-wow." She had trouble remembering specific comments—all the remarks seemed to "merge," by which she meant this: "I honestly believed they all convinced one another—that you have to change your way of thinking sometimes, but you also have to understand why it is that some people have more trouble doing that than others do. I was so impressed and touched by their sensitivity on both scores—the need to

move along' in your thinking, but the need to be aware of the reasons some people can't do that easily, or at all."

She kept having reservations about her own behavior during that "extraordinary time of it" they'd all had. Why hadn't she, at an appropriate moment, "steered them" a bit—gotten them to make their changes more specifically tied to the everyday struggle then and there taking place in the American South? Why had she resisted what was on the tip of her tongue, an observation about "our changing attitudes toward colored people, Negro people," the very words that crossed her mind but never got spoken? Had she "failed at being a good leader of the class"?

That question wouldn't let go of her—it was asked with obvious reproval. There were other questions, too—all of them, really, versions of the first, and all of them meant to query her moral leadership of a fifth-grade classroom. She strongly believed that integration would be coming soon to the school where she taught, and elsewhere across Louisiana, across the states of the one-time Confederacy, hence the obligation on her part (and, of course, others') to prepare the young for the inevitable and, she strongly believed, the desirable. Yet at the time, segregation was the law throughout Louisiana, and in its neighbors Mississippi and Arkansas. Moreover, the parents of her schoolchildren strongly opposed the early efforts at desegregation then under way, and their sons and daughters, unsurprisingly, echoed in corridors and classrooms and playing fields what they'd heard handed down as "right" and "wrong" at home. How might she, nevertheless, "carve a wedge," she put it, "get a conversation going" with the aim of "opening up some eyes"?

Like her students, she had to contend with "home," with what her parents thought, and their friends, and hardest of all, her own brother, two years her senior and an outspoken segregationist. He was a stockbroker, and owned a significant amount of real estate in downtown New Orleans. She had tried to appeal to his self-interest, warned him that riots and public conflict that enveloped the schools would be "bad for business," but he had held firm, spoke of his "principles"—whereupon she was moved to self-doubt: "I don't know what to think or do!

I know in my heart what I think, what I believe, but is my opinion 'correct,' when my own family disagrees with me, and my friends do, and the parents of the children I teach do, and most of the people who teach with me do? Sure there are some who will look both ways, then whisper to you that they think integration will be here soon, and it's 'the right thing.' But even they will cover their bases—tell you it's wrong to impose something on people, when they're overwhelmingly opposed to it, and not only wrong but dangerous, and not only dangerous but un-American. That's why I was so upset when I let that opportunity in my class go—to connect what happened when this country was being established, in the eighteenth century, with what is happening now. But I guess I feel in my heart that I have to pace myself, and wait for the children themselves to see the point, to understand that history isn't only something that happened in the past, but something that is happening right now—and so we're all part of it, we're all participating in it, and so we should stop and think hard about what we believe and want to see happen in our country."

After much soul-searching, Elaine Vogel decided one morning while sitting at her desk in her fifth-grade classroom to work into her teaching of American history "one theme," which she'd try to bring up in various ways. Weeks after she'd begun doing so, she would remember the details of that early-in-the-day spell of rumination, followed by a particular bout of activity: "I was thinking about the teaching ahead of me. We were headed to the Civil War in my history class, and I was remembering how unpopular Lincoln was in my home. He may be the favorite president of most Americans, but among us—it's different. By 'us' I mean conservative southerners. The Negro people down here like him, I'm sure, and southern liberals do; but my dad used to say that Lincoln 'brought on the Civil War,' and he was a 'stubborn man,' and if he'd been a better leader—well, a lot of lives would have been spared. My sixth-grade teacher disagreed with my dad, I could tell—I knew, even back then, not to tell my parents some of what I heard in school, for fear they'd get real upset, and they'd go to the school and demand that the teacher be confronted, and maybe fired, and I'd be the one responsible.

"Anyway, all of that was running through my head on how to teach the kids about Lincoln, and slavery, and the Civil War. I wanted to show them the photographs of Brady [Mathew Brady documented nineteenth-century battle scenes with his camera]. I wanted to read to them from Carl Sandburg—his biography of Lincoln really moved me. I wanted to have lots of discussions about slavery. But we shouldn't do much on the Civil War—that's what I was told. 'It's not an easy subject to teach.' I had a scratch pad in front of me, and I picked up a pencil and I started to doodle. I do that a lot when I'm thinking! I was writing 'battle words,' like Shiloh and Gettysburg and Antietam. I was thinking: wouldn't it be great if I could take the class to those battlefields; and [then] we could talk [while there] about what had happened *and why*. About all those young soldiers, and their *lives*! That's what I'd like to do—not just look at those historical markers, but ask the kids to think about causes and reasons, about how it all got started, and for what reasons: people treating other people as 'property,' calling them 'slaves' without the slightest embarrassment. You know, the Negro people were treated so badly—but the white people treated *themselves* so badly: if you end up being callous to others, you're in bigger trouble than the people you mistreat! But how in the world do you get children to think that way—I was sitting there, wondering!

"I can remember thinking the word 'moral'—after all, the Civil War was a war fought by people who had different ideas about right and wrong. I wrote the word 'moral' down, and then I thought: it is our leaders' job to steer us toward the good, away from the bad, even if it's hard to do, and hard on them to do. So, I wrote the word 'leader' down—I was thinking of Lincoln, Lincoln the leader. I was going to write *that* down, the phrase 'Lincoln the leader,' but then I heard my brother's voice saying, 'Yankee propaganda!' I don't even listen to him when he gets going, and yet I know what he keeps saying: it's all in my head; 'this integration thing,' he calls it, has this strange influence on me in some way! All of a sudden I drew a line from the word 'moral' to the word 'leader'—and I looked, and I thought, and I knew I had something: we would be studying 'moral leaders'—their influence on our history! So I got up, I went to the blackboard, I picked up the chalk

and wrote the words 'moral leader,' *printed* the words, actually. Then, before them, I printed the words 'who is a.' When I was finished, I turned around, and what I remember noticing was how quiet, real quiet that classroom was. Those boys and girls were really paying attention!"

Yet for all the silent regard extended that question posed by their teacher, the children were reluctant to try answering it, perhaps because Elaine Vogel had put the matter to them so unconventionally, with no preparation, and, too, as she later realized, with her back to them—as if she were, yes, backing into the matter. Moreover, when no one raised a hand, she didn't say anything to clarify her intention, or to encourage the children before her to speak. She could feel her own indecisiveness, even a bit of apprehension—what would they all have to say, and just as important, what did she herself have to say about a topic not exactly on any teacher's agenda at the school, so she knew.

She "froze"; she felt no words coming to her; she moved on to the "regular order" of the class, began a spelling lesson that had been promised the afternoon before as the first order of business in the morning. As she recited the words, though, and the class wrote them down, she kept going back to the dramatic but anticlimactic moment that had just passed, to the point that she became absent-minded, waited too long between her recitation of the words, forgot her place, and so repeated certain words, rather than moving on to the next ones. Finally, a burst of spontaneity: she went quickly to the blackboard, grabbed an eraser, and wiped away the sentence she had earlier written. Then, she asked the children to spell "moral" and "leader," and heard murmurs of delight: "They laughed, and they clearly enjoyed the connection I made between what had happened a few minutes earlier and what we were doing then and there with that list of words. That's when I said to myself: come on, Elaine, just plunge into the water and try to stay afloat! So when we'd finished our spelling quiz, I said to the class: 'Now that we've all *spelled* those two words, "moral" and "leader," let's try to find out what the two of them, together, actually mean!'"

The class exploded with comments, and she tried days later to remember what she'd heard from the children. She emphasized, as we

talked, that she may have "jumbled" the remarks, omitted important ones, misinterpreted what had been spoken—but she was at least certain that the children had "strong ideas" on the subject, and had been more than willing to share them with others, with her as their teacher. She especially remembered what Beverly, one of her favorite students, anyway, had to offer: "A moral leader is someone who isn't only out for himself. He'll do something that he knows is right to do, even if it'll give him some trouble"—that's the gist of what she said, not exactly word-for-word, but pretty close."

She tried hard to convey not only what took place in that class, but her own various responses to the children: "I was amazed at the level of sophistication—what got going once the kids let loose! I think it was Freddy, just about the quietest one in that class, who took on Beverly, who is so *formidably* articulate and smart. He said that maybe the person who does the right thing, even if it's not so popular—'well, he hopes it'll get popular, and then he'll be popular, like he was before he had to make his decision.' I had to intervene there, at that point, because I felt we were slipping into opportunism! But maybe I was being unfair to Freddy! I basically rephrased part of what Freddy said—I used the phrase 'a sense of history': some leaders take the long view of things, and they hope that they'll be proven right, that the right they do will be accepted and praised years later (rather than at the time). Of course, the children quite properly worried about what would happen to the leader who had such a perspective—might he be roundly defeated, and disappear into one of history's many dustbins? No, they didn't quite put it that way, but that's what they found bothersome, you could say: they didn't want to see someone trying to do good end up failing, and never coming back—not being recognized, approved for what he did! Freddy also stopped us short when he asked 'if a woman tries to do what's right'—whether people would believe her more than they'd believe a man. His question took us all by surprise, and stopped us in our tracks, the girls and me as well as the other boys! One of the boys, Andy, I think it was, was contemptuous: women aren't mayors or governors or senators or presidents! Yes, the children nodded. But then one of the girls, Francie, said that 'we' aren't only talking about politicians. She'd

read in Sunday school about Joan of Arc, and there were other saints who were women, and besides, she was sure 'some women had been politicians,' and besides—well, what about all the women who teach in school (and take care of their children at home)—aren't they 'moral leaders'!

"It was then that the class fell silent, as I remember. They were suddenly looking at me, as if I was now an example of a 'moral leader'—so I'd better speak up! I didn't know what to say, though. I thought I should continue the discussion we'd been having—but I also felt they'd done a great job, and they'd almost exhausted the topic. Then I thought I should say something that would get us going again—get *them* going. But I glanced at the clock, and I realized that we'd been at it for fifteen minutes or so—that's a long time in the daily life of a fifth-grade class to stay on one subject! We were supposed to go over an arithmetic assignment, lots of multiplication, and my conscience was telling me we should just stop, and get to our 'numbers.' But I also couldn't help but feel that maybe I should say something myself—that maybe the children were expecting me to give them my 'answer,' my opinion, or maybe even give an example of moral leadership, some story. The best moments in teaching are when you share an anecdote with your class, and you can see it lighting up the minds of the children in front of you, connecting with some memory, some moment, some experience, some concern in their lives."

No matter the depth and extent of her moral introspection as she stood before her class, she found herself unable to "complete things," unable to "come up with comments that would summarize" what she had heard, and most devastating to her, in retrospect, unable to "be a little bit of a 'moral leader' " herself. She knew, in that last regard, why—knew later that same day, in the privacy of her apartment, while taking her late afternoon cup of tea: a time when she regularly revisited her classroom, remembered the pleasant times, the successes, even breakthroughs, but also remembered the failures of imagination, of will, of ingenuity and improvisation. In fact, she was often inclined to turn things upside down, regard what seemed to be a success as a failure, and vice versa. So it went that day—she had been witness to a spir-

ited examination of a substantial, even crucial subject matter, and she had, in turn, knowingly negotiated the class's transition from that lively session to one in which a more dry, more pedestrian obligation (that of working well with multiplication and long division) had been fulfilled—yet, at four-thirty or so, even with the boost that strong tea can supply, she had felt strongly dispirited. She could have said *this*; she might have pointed out *that*. She had a chance to seize a favorable moment, and she had flubbed it, retreated into the safety of a regimen. Why? Worse, she had, thereby, taught the children something—that a teacher could stir them to contemplation on a moral matter (who leads whom, in what way, to what effect), but herself abstain from teaching by example. “I could have brought that ‘symposium’ we had down from the clouds of speculation to the earth of our city here, New Orleans”—her way of summarizing her self-critical afterthoughts.

The next day she woke up with a resolve, “to regroup”: she would manage to find time for a remark or two—a time in which she’d “redeem” herself (the use of that word a measure of the almost religious nature of her self-arraignment the previous afternoon). Just before a “time-out” period, a fifteen-minute spell in which the students were encouraged to do free reading, or catch up on their schoolwork, she asked for the class’s attention. Somewhat dramatically she once again approached the blackboard, wrote those two words, “moral leader,” on it, this time underlined them, put the chalk down, and launched on her statement, whose content she’d mulled over nonstop after waking early that morning: “I cleared my voice and told the class I wanted to ‘pick up from where we left off yesterday.’ They were listening carefully; I could see right away. None of that half-dazed look you see when you try to get them to spell ‘enough’ correctly; and you can see on their faces the word itself: *enough!* I told them I’d been thinking about what we’d all said, and that I wished I’d said ‘a little something’ myself. Then I told them that maybe I didn’t [say anything] because I needed to stop and think. I said it’s like that sometimes, I’ll bet, with our ‘moral leaders’: they have to weigh all the choices, and try to predict, in their minds, what will be the outcome, if they go in this direction, or in another direction. Then I said I wanted to talk about ‘the here and now.’ I

said we’ve got a ‘big crisis’ right in our city of New Orleans, with the Negro children coming into the schools, to be in classrooms ‘with all the other children,’ that’s how I worded it, I said, ‘you know, citizenship is our birthright.’ I explained that ‘a citizen is a citizen—that’s what the Supreme Court is trying to tell us!’

“Well, I’m giving a digest, a summary of my ‘oration.’ I remember translating Cicero’s ‘orations’ when I was in high school, and I think all I needed was to be wearing a toga to qualify as one of those ‘senatores’ Cicero was trying to persuade. I suppose you could argue that *he* was a ‘moral leader’! Anyway, it was a beginning for me: I told the children, I got the point across, somehow, that I thought we had to be on the lookout for ways to be moral leaders *ourselves*, not just students who *discussed* moral leaders or moral leadership! I told them that ‘history isn’t only some subject you study in the fifth grade, or the eighth grade, or when you’re a senior in high school, or in college—it’s *something happening right before your eyes*; it’s what the newspapers are recording, and it’s what you’re seeing on the TV.’ I mean, that’s obvious, but I needed to say it and I needed to get specific—to remind those children that a few other children, only three or four years younger than they were (those first graders a bit across the city from them), were ‘making history’; and then I added (I said it): ‘maybe they will go down in history as moral leaders, who helped our city of New Orleans become a better city.’ I quickly added, ‘a fairer city.’ I could see when I used that word that it struck a bell—but I needed to do more explaining. So I went into another mini-oration on ‘fairness,’ what it is, what it means, how we’ve got to work all the time so that people are fair to other people. Of course, even as I spoke, I wondered if some of the kids were thinking I was being fair or unfair in the way I was talking about our school desegregation struggle!”

In fact, even by her account (she was always tempted to find fault with herself) those boys and girls had responded quite favorably to her talk, universally so, she had to admit. She resorted to musical imagery at one moment—she had sung an aria, and the audience had been thoroughly won over. She was sure, however, that there were, substantively speaking, more than a few “naysayers,” with “boos” in their hearts, no

matter their apparent assent to her "performance." The question now was what, if anything, further to do? She vacillated: one moment she had plans to proceed, to keep bringing up the issue of school desegregation, of Negroes and their position in our nation's history, not to mention that of the South, including Louisiana; but the next moment she felt jumpy, fainthearted, even panicky. She feared she would be called to the principal's office; she would be told she had lost her job; she would become the subject of "those investigations" by one of "those Louisiana politicians" who represented "the segregationist bloc" in the state legislature. More significant, she feared that she'd be called on the carpet by the parents of some of her schoolchildren—that a boy or a girl would tell his or her parents that Miss Vogel was saying things she shouldn't say, that she was causing some of her class anxiety, apprehension, prompting ire and outrage in them. She knew, after all, what most of the parents of the children in her class believed with respect to the rights of Negroes, even as she knew what her own parents and her brother and her various relatives on both sides of her family firmly believed. In her more tremulous times she was ready to call herself a needlessly stubborn, persistent "troublemaker" who had in her a large self-righteous streak. At those moments she posed (maybe, hurled) questions at herself: why was she sticking with "this moral leadership idea"? Why did she feel it necessary to be so forthcoming with the children about her own social concerns, political values, race-connected worries? Why had she been so "emotional" that first time—and thereafter, as well? Three weeks after that "outburst" (one name she gave for her "Ciceronian oration") she was still "plugging" the same tune: "my tolerance song." So doing, had she "taken possession" of the class, denied dissent to it in the interest of a stern disapproval of those who denied expression, freedom to others?

Still, she kept up her self-allotted fifteen or twenty minutes of free-for-all—"serious palaver," she called it. She taught the children that latter word, its meaning and spelling both. She kept using that word, a slightly offhand, even pejorative one, with reference to what she, at other moments, called their "morning gabs," that phrase casual but not critical. She gave voice, on certain days, to opinions and attitudes other

than her own, a running dialogue, as it were, if not a recitation of arguments as she had heard them, and now, was trying to articulate them. It didn't take long for the children to join her, and to follow suit: they, also, learned to argue with themselves, to put in spoken language not only what they had come to (been taught to) believe, but what they felt to be "the other side." That was the phrase they all used when they "switched," tried to guess how "others," holding ideas different from (adverse to) their own, would have their say. For Miss Vogel, anxious to conceptualize, occasionally, for the class, this was a "debate within ourselves" as well as a chance to speak openly about one's beliefs.

For a school year, then—the same one in which mobs took occasional control of certain New Orleans streets and four Negro girls dared enter two once all-white elementary schools—slightly older children in another elementary school in that old, cosmopolitan port city tried to figure out what was happening. The time spent, the topic, became known to some of the children as "palaver about plenty of things." No one lost sight of that phrase "moral leader," or "moral leadership." Some described Elaine Vogel as anxious to teach about "Negroes, and all that's been done wrong to them," and others, less specifically, as "talking about what's going on in Louisiana." Once Beverly, always the master at verbal enunciation and negotiation and reconciliation, proposed "learning what's wrong in Louisiana"—and hastened to remind all her listeners that such a description could be "anyone's," that is, applied as that phrase fits the mind of the person in question. Such a spaciousness of thinking, such an ambiguity and subtlety of conceptualization, struck everyone, and especially the teacher, as appropriate, desirable. They all *were* learning precisely that—what others thought was wrong, what *they* thought was wrong; and, too, what might be, what would be, very much worth happening. Elaine Vogel's minicourse in "moral leadership" had, in its realization and furtherance, become itself an act of collective moral leadership, a witness to it: dozens of worries and ideals and frustrations and fears and excuses given air, and not rarely, a moment of agreement—that, for instance, "there's change ahead for us, whether *you* like it or not," as Beverly and others put it, and that being the case, "you need to be a step

ahead of trouble, if you can." The latter was tendered by Beverly as the essence of her definition of the "moral leader": "the person who is looking ahead, to prevent trouble, even if it causes you a lot of trouble when you do try to look ahead and spare everyone getting into hot, hot water," to which a teacher said "Amen," and with her all factions in this fifth-grade seminar on ethical reflection as it pertains to one's authority as a citizen or government official.

3. DONITA GAINES AND RALPH MCGILL: WRITERS AS MORAL LEADERS

In 1961 Jane and I moved from New Orleans to Atlanta. High school desegregation had begun there, and the office of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee was located there. We felt it was more important for us, then, to commute from Atlanta to New Orleans than the other way around. The ten high-schoolers who desegregated Henry Grady High, Northside High, Murphy High, and Brown High told us a lot about what leadership meant—there were no riots to confront, but plenty of resentment, rancor, whispered threats in hallways, on steps, in the streets. "Atlanta is a city of law and order," its mayor, William Hartsfield, had proclaimed, and so it was—yet when Lawrence Jefferson (one of two African-American students who entered Henry Grady High in 1961) walked from class to class he heard insults, found spitballs sent his way, and had no friends coming to his side. Many times he told me he wanted to "pull out," end the constant tension he experienced; but he knew the practical and symbolic significance of his effort, and so he quietly persisted. His was a calm stoicism, occasionally interrupted by bouts of moodiness. On those occasions he mocked his white classmates—their haughtiness or calousness: "The more uppity they get, the more pathetic they are! They all talk about going to church on Sunday—I wonder what God thinks of the way they act in school, Monday through Friday!" Every once in a while he told God what *he* thought of some of his classmates—but he

also told God (and his folks and his sister and his childhood friends) that "no way" he'd let them get the better of him.

Not so with Donita Gaines—she was one of two of her race to enter previously all-white Brown High School in 1961, and rather soon she found the behavior of her fellow students "a terrible drain." She was especially upset by the snide looks and comments of certain "cracker girls," she called them, with the undisguised, retaliatory anger in her voice meant to accompany the words she used. After three months of day-to-day isolation, loneliness, and countless moments of alarm (off-hand warnings of danger that would come upon her) she decided to call it quits. Her father, a postal worker, tried hard to dissuade her, but she had had enough. I heard from her a searing indictment of young parochialism, smugness, insensitivity (not to mention racism), and finally, I heard from her this self-rebuke: "Maybe if I was stronger, I could just hold out. But I'm not meant for this! Some people are, I know. I admire them. But not me—I told the [NAACP] lawyer, I made a mistake [agreeing to be one of the pioneers in school desegregation]—I'm not a leader. I like my privacy. If you're going to be a leader, and do what's not been done before, you're going to be on display, all the time. That's not for me. Everyone tells me I'm 'doing good'—they mean I'm adjusting to all the trouble I go through at school; and they tell me I'm 'doing good' because I'm 'leading our people.' But I have nightmares all the time: it's the same thing—I wake up and I can remember that I was in a building, and there were a lot of people, and they were making fun of me, calling me 'coon-girlie' [she had heard such comments at school], and so I see an elevator door open, and I rush in, and the door closes, and I'm alone, and the elevator is going down, but it's very fast, and I'm afraid it's gone out of control, and it'll crash, and I'm looking at the switches and buttons to see if there's any way to stop it—and that's when I wake up, and it takes me a few seconds to realize that I'm in my bed, at home, and not in that horrible place in my dream."

She needed no help from anyone about the meaning of that dream—its implications for her were obvious and portentously telling. One morning she balked, announced to her stepmother and father that

she wanted "a day off." Was she sick? No, not sick—but rather, sick and tired. Encouragement by her parents meant little to her. Indeed, she became morose as they tried to boost her spirits. Finally, they relented, reversed themselves, told her to take a day, even two days off—such a respite would be good for her. She did take those two days off, and when they were over, she wanted two more—and by then it was clear, too, that she had no desire to return to Brown High School, ever.

In no time, the newspapers and television stations had caught wind of what was happening, that one of the two students at Brown High, one of the handful of African-American students whose assertion of their constitutional rights was (to quote Atlanta's mayor again) "changing the face of Georgia and the South," had for some reason decided to quit, give up a fight that seemingly, by then, had been securely won.

It was then that my name first came to the attention of newspaper and television reporters. They had flocked to the Gaines residence and tried with all their might to learn Donita's reasons for pulling out of the desegregation struggle. The family fought hard for its privacy, kept saying the same thing, that it was "best" for Donita that she return to her "old school." The firmer the resistance to self-disclosure on the part of Donita and her folks, the more persistently inquisitive the journalists became. Eventually Donita's father mentioned that she was seeing a psychiatrist. She most certainly had been "seeing" one: Jane and I regularly visited her home (twice a week), as we did the homes of other African-American youths attending those four Atlanta schools, and as we did the homes of some white students in their classes: we were in the midst of a research project that, in Atlanta, was sponsored by the Southern Regional Council, a group of "white and Negro citizens" interested in furthering "interracial understanding and progress." The council maintained close connection with journalists from all over the country, and especially, of course, the South. With Donita's decision a front-page story in the Atlanta papers, and elsewhere across Georgia and its neighboring states, Jane and I soon enough had our own problem with the press: what to say—both in connection with Donita and with respect to the overall work we had heretofore been doing in welcome privacy.

I refused to talk with anyone until I had spoken at great length with Donita and her parents. I asked Donita whether I should meet with the reporters, and if so, what I should say. Her response was as interesting a comment as I'd heard in the months I'd known her: "You've got to say something. I've learned that! When all of this got going none of us realized we weren't just going to be high-school kids anymore. We've been on a stage. We've been up there, for folks to come and look at; that's the purpose: to show the whole world how it's changed, here in Atlanta. The Negro people are standing up for their rights, and the whites are saying 'Okay, okay, we'll let you come be with us, but we won't welcome you, mind you, and we don't want you near us, not as our equals, only looking after us, picking up after us.' 'Sure,' they're telling us, 'if you keep getting the government up in Washington after us, we'll give a little ground, but we'll make you pay for it, each one of you.'"

"I've heard them talk like that—no exaggerating! 'We'll make the goddamn niggers pay for this integration, boy will we!' That's what I heard, in the *women's* room, not the men's room! They have filthy mouths, those honey-blond ones!" Abruptly, a pause, then an apology, followed by a recommendation: "I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk like that! That's what happens to you—that's why I want *out*! When you start thinking and talking bad, real bad—like the people looking down on you and out to get you—then you know well, 'full well' my daddy says, that you're in deep, deep trouble. It's then that you need to figure things out. Are you ready to stick through it, or are you down to the bottom of the barrel, your strength all gone from you? For me, the answer is clear: I've given all I have, and it's not enough! To be honest, really honest—it's hard to be honest—I'm not as idealistic as I should be. If I was idealistic, *really* idealistic, I'd stick with this battle. That's what our minister calls it, a battle. But I'm not a civil rights person. My daddy isn't, either; nor anyone in our family. We sort of got caught in all this! They asked Daddy—they said he had a good federal government job, so no one could 'get' him, he was safe, and they promised, they said it would be all right, and I'd get a scholarship to college, for sure, and it would be a big feather in my cap. 'You'll be a hero,' they

said 'You'll be a leader, doing good, doing the best, the top of the best, for your people,' they [the NAACP folks] said. They said they'd get me a dress, or two or three, if I needed more. I didn't really need new dresses, but a lady came over, and she said she wanted to do something for all of us, the 'pioneers,' and couldn't she just buy me a dress, and I said sure, all right, and Daddy said it would be helping *her*, because she was one of the first colored, the first Negroes to get to vote in this city, and now there's another war to be fought, she says, more battles, and I'm one of the 'generals'! I didn't know any girl, any woman, has ever been a 'general'—but that was fine with me. I mean, I knew I wasn't what she was building me up to be—some boss, someone at the head of the class. They said in church we kids doing the school integration are 'moral examples.' I looked at Daddy and smiled. If we was at home, I'd have had me a belly laugh over that one—maybe for some of us, maybe, but not for me, it isn't meant for me!"

I wasn't sure why she so insistently excluded herself from the morally elevated company to which others believed she belonged. She replied that she knew herself well—that was why. I asked her, again, whether I ought respond to the numerous requests coming my way with respect to her and her reported withdrawal from Brown High School, her supposed (and proposed) return to an "all-Negro institution." Her instructions were clear, forceful, relatively terse: "You can tell them the truth. You can say Donita thought she'd better leave that school, because it was all too much—she felt she'd be happier where she was than where she is now. That's what I've decided—that I *could* stick it out, but I don't want to, and that I think they made a mistake when they picked me: I like the company of people, my friends. I'm not the person to bite my tongue and be alone and be a leader. I'm not the person to be out front. I can't 'lead' those white kids—to be better, to behave themselves as Jesus would want them to, so I'll go to a place where I can try to 'lead' myself—to find what's good and what's right in life."

In fact I said very little to the reporters—other than to indicate the obvious: Donita Gaines had felt uncomfortable where she had been going to school, and so she concluded, after much reflection, that she

ought to "bow out," a phrase she used several times with her parents, so they told me, but not during our conversations. Amidst heavy press coverage, including editorial comment from *The Atlanta Constitution*, the city's major newspaper, Donita did, indeed, "bow out"—and refused any interviews or opportunities to make statements on the telephone, or through intermediaries. Her father said that she had made her decision for "personal reasons," and that was that. Meanwhile, a number of reporters were trying to learn whether this attractive, intelligent young lady had been "driven" from her new school by an unfavorable set of circumstances. Interviews with students at the school told little—and Donita's one African-American fellow student, Madeleine Nix, was steadfastly unforthcoming. At the same time, student activists in the civil rights movement (in SNCC and CORE and Dr King's SCLC) began asking publicly whether there wasn't something inherently and outrageously wrong in sending one or two black (then the word) students into what James Forman, the head of SNCC, called "a sea of unwelcoming whites." It was then, against such a background, that I received in the same week a telephone call from Ralph McGill, editor of *The Atlanta Constitution* (his front-page-left column ran seven days a week in the paper) and a letter from Lillian Smith, the distinguished writer, whose novel *Strange Fruit* and nonfiction book *Killers of the Dream* had been an extraordinary and personally dangerous witness of sorts for a white southern lady: in both volumes she probes the psychology of racist hate unflinchingly—and she did so (in the 1940s) when segregation ruled without any real social, cultural, or political challenge in the universities, never mind the newspapers, radio, the state legislature, and yes, even the federal government.

It turned out that Ralph McGill wanted to know more about Donita Gaines and her experience with desegregation than his reporters had been able to learn. He was close to various members of the Southern Regional Council, and through them had learned of the work Jane and I were doing, even as we were quoted in several published stories as saying that Donita did not have a "psychiatric breakdown" and was not afflicted with any "medical condition." One morning I received a call from him: would I be willing to come over to the newspaper, discuss