

Karl Keller, "Every Soul Has Its South."
Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought,
Vol. 1 No. 2 (1966): 72–79.

EVERY SOUL HAS ITS SOUTH

Karl Keller

The editors wish to encourage essays, such as this one, in which the author responds to his involvement in crucial events and issues of our time. Karl Keller, Assistant Professor of English at the State University of New York at Cortland, where he is the L.D.S. Branch President, has published poems and essays and is finishing a book on Emerson.

"You leave God behind, you know, when you enter Kentucky," the driver of the car said as we crossed the Ohio River bridges into Louisville. "This is the South, the damned and damning South."

We were driving Highways 65 and 40 south to Somerville, Fayette County, Tennessee, the center of a civil rights project with a militant and well advertised life of four years. We (and eventually about forty others) were students and faculty of universities in New York and Pennsylvania committing ourselves to a summer's life of fighting Jim Crow and Mister Charlie and Uncle Tom with voter registration and literacy schools in a rural area of southwest Tennessee. It was Faulkner country, and we were benevolent invaders. We were no pioneers in a cause, no curious in search of messages, but merely volunteers hoping that this brief human contact would assure us of our humanity and others of theirs. I wanted to feel that God too was crossing that state line with us that day.

There had been scuffles and beatings and shootings on the project in the summers previous. There had been progress too. And from what we could learn about the project beforehand, the Negroes in the area now had the initiative, though they were still a thousand years behind in their desires. We entered this summer at midpoint in the project's life, and our hopes for convincing the Negroes of their rights and encouraging their civil efforts were modest. I felt at one with the others because of those hopes.

But I was a *Mormon* going civil-rights-ing and that made a difference. To *me* it made a difference. Local church members had advised me not to go ("It's not approved," "You're needed here," "It's beneath you," "You can't change things"), and an ilk of friends had begun the stigma of radicalism ("You're not the type," "How idealistic!" "So you want to be a hero?"). But little did they know the reasons of the blood.

I went because I was frankly worried: worried that my wife and children should find me slipping after talking intense brotherhood, worried that the church members I led and taught should know where the doctrine but not the action in life is, worried that the students I counselled and read and philosophized with where I taught should reach for meaning for their lives and find no guts, worried in fact that I should somehow while propagating and preaching the Kingdom of God miss it, miss it altogether. The rest was nonsense.

On that first night in Tennessee, at the home of a generous and incredibly poor Negro family where two of us were staying for the summer, while I was lying on a deal bed passed down generations from a white man's junk heap, watching the badly pieced walls gotten bit by yellowed bit like a colored man's life and listening to a long hot summer's wealth of flies swelling the poor society of a light bulb, my mind made dialogues out of my decision to spend the summer as a civil rights worker. Meditation is discovery and justification.

This I knew that night in Tennessee, first of all: that one sure place the Kingdom of God militant can be found *in our world* is in the social battlefronts: in the radical urgency of social welfare work, in the radical urgency of civil rights marches and picket lines, in the radical urgency of passive protest against malignant politics, and in the radical urgency of socially conscious experimentation in humanistic education. This sense of social urgency grew in my blood gradually, I guess, out of Moses's heroic stories on brothers' keepers, and Christ's example of compassion for poor and accused, and King Benjamin's celebrations of personal charity ("If I had I would

give"), and a thousand sermons and examples from knee-high on. In me, time had gradually made personal involvement in humane problems a spiritual necessity. Involvement was after all the *only* dialogue a man has with God, action the only angel, risk the only Kingdom.

This "Christian" urgency was dormant in me however — suppressed, I should almost say, by home and hometown ignorance, by diversions of church and school, by the work for an education and professional status — until loving identification with a formidable issue like the race question fired my blood. A mulatto uncle's story had gradually unfolded in my early years and had shocked me into initial recognition. He was left as a baby on my grandparents' farmhouse doorstep in Southern Utah, and was raised by them with the usual human expectations. But he fell in love with a girl of scornful faith in the community, and because of his difference, he was disappointed in love. Cynical friends shortly after that threw him out of their car between towns one winter night and he lay in the snow all night and his fingers froze dead in the cold. I pitched hay with him several summers, and ten fingers that were off up to the second knuckle were awful reminders. Doom, drink, and disillusionment were in his eyes after that. My blood never forgot Uncle George.

But besides that there was in early years a growing awareness that my father had gone as a missionary for the Church in the South. His missionary stories at home were unintended stimuli. The work in Arkansas was difficult in those years, and he had to spend most of his mission teaching Negroes and whites to read and write before others later could teach them gospels of light. That was a noble thing, it always seemed to me, a very noble thing. Two weeks before he died, when I was a young man coming into my own ways, he voiced a strong hope that I too might "do something."

Later, I had had a gradual realization of the hypocrisy of indifference among the positioned and the promising, who love and are loved, but who, having conditioned themselves to be children of light rather than children of this world wise in their generation, made themselves unaware of social wars and incapable of social depth. Then finally, finally, I had gradually learned awe before the spat upon. All these reasons of the blood made a place where my social self could plant its testimony.

In Tennessee, this dialogue in my mind continued as we talked with the Negroes hot day in and wet day out in cotton fields and shacks during the weeks to come. It was much like the work I had known as a missionary in Germany several years before — going two

by two in the name of an ideal, looking for signs of hope in the eyes of a half-forgotten and half-deplored people, getting commitments for action from oppressed and ignorant, drawing the reluctant and the backward together to discuss spiritual and material welfare — like missionary work, except for one thing: because of the nature of the project I could not tell them, neither the white workers nor the Negroes, that the main impetus behind my interest and energy was the Mormon Church. They would not have understood. One does civil rights work, after all, because *society* is his church and *humanity* his theology and *action* his expression of faith, and not because a particular church self-centeredly trains and sponsors certain ones to promote a special social viewpoint in order to gain souls for itself. And they would not have believed me either. To the civil-rights workers, Mormons do not stir; they are not aware; they do not care. And of course the Negroes (through no fault of their own at all) wouldn't know that the Church cared — or even existed — for them.

Yet I found the Church coming out in me those days in Tennessee in a thousand ways. The Church in me made me frankly unafraid of the badgering county sheriff and his trained badgers who were constantly after us. The Church in me made it possible to endure the spitting looks and the distempered rudeness of the whites in the area who had no insight into our intentions with the Negroes. It drew me to old ladies on their fallen porches shelling peas all their lives and all their lives oblivious to causes; drew me to diseased and broken men chopping cotton late into the night in their depleted fields, ignorant of interracial kindness; drew me to young couples with more naked children than they could care about, ignorant of possibility; drew me to distended and distorted children that had seen hell yet knew no evil. Sympathy is a cheap virtue: all of us on the project had that. Beyond that in me there was the Church-born desire to recognize the divinity in each smashed soul and to be so bold as to wish for the godly means of making a miracle in their lives. In specific, the Church in me emboldened our search for people who would register and vote, who would enroll their children in all-white schools, and who would attend our literacy schools at night. I spoke frequently in their gatherings in an attempt to stir enthusiasm among them for *our* work and *their* rights, and because as a missionary among the fishermen and factory workers on the Baltic years before I had had to become “as the weak, that I might gain the weak,” as Paul advises, I was soon dubbed “The Preacher Man” for want of a better term of approval. I liked that; it made me

one with their deepest interests. They invited me again and again to teach in their Sunday Schools, to "preach" in their meetings, to talk comfort and encouragement with them. I of course taught them *the* Christianity I knew; I knew no other kind, believed no other. They loved its tenor. I had not gone to them in the name of the Mormon Church, yet the Church came in a little way to them.

Every day we talked with scores of Negroes in our work. By now they were used to civil rights workers in and out of their fields and shacks. Our work was to stir them up to greater individual and collective use of their rights in elections that excluded them, in schools that eluded them, in stores and theaters and restaurants that either cheated or barred them. Of these possibilities they were doubtful (it was easy to be impatient with their patience for change), yet we met with them some evenings of each week to get them to organize themselves in their own causes. On those occasions, they always sang spirituals and prayed, and what they were saying as they sang and prayed was that they wanted God, just as I did, to be in on the new world that was coming to them in our guise.

Sunday church meetings were their best times for combining such godly and social concerns abundantly, and our most productive occasions for communicating to them our social concern for them. These occasions were a mortal shock at first: we were not prepared for such spiritual fervor among them and such loving communion with each other. At first we felt like intruders in the black man's heaven. Only those of us who had known such spirit at some time in our own religious lives penetrated the divine difference.

Their testimonials, their praying and singing, were more alive than I had ever experienced before. They were born of suffering and transcended skin and history. The glorious woe of their double burden — the burden of being and of being black — weighed heavily on them and gave their rowdy devotions spiritual solidity. With them my spirit too transcended blood and time, just as it had on special occasions as a missionary. As they sang and prayed, I became black and felt initiated into their kind of spiritual greatness. The Christianity I knew communicated with the Christianity they knew.

But the director of our county voter-registration and literacy project, a professor of economics and a man of keen social insight, admitted in a rare moment of lucidity that, while as civil rights workers we were giving the Negroes a social ethic they had never had before, we were also part of society's gradual but inevitable erosion of the Negro's religion. Their churches become "white," you see, as the economics and education in the area conform to that of the

whites. Protestant hymns replace deeply felt jazz devotions, set prayers replace cadenced cryings to an immanent God, formal theology replaces the felt love of story and example, articles of faith replace human sympathy, meetings replace personality, genteel satisfaction replaces spiritual pride in the beauty and integrity of race. To break into their fiery devotions Sundays to promote our project in their midst was flies in the balm of Gilead. In areas closer to Memphis, the project director said, where Negroes had achieved much higher social status and material well-being, their religion had become formal, well-dressed, dull, and therefore, like most other American Christianity, in practice dead. And the same would happen to all this holy burning: the fire of their intense love of God put out. After all, affluence is suspicious of emotion; success thwarts dependence on the divine; lack of social conflict reduces hope for the future life. To be accepted by whites, the Negroes must make themselves acceptable, and the black man's God goes out first. The immanence of God is thus swallowed up by eminence.

I think I broke down crying only once while on the project in Tennessee, and it was never at the smell of poverty or at the look of the socially trapped or at the sound of ignorance; only once — at the thought of the dying of that fire of faith. I have never met the like; we may never again. I have wondered how that fire, amid the social change, might be kept alive.

The project in the county was in part a failure: our goals were too high and our abilities too little. True, many Negroes went to register and to vote. A handful of children quietly integrated several white schools. The local white authorities were put in their place a little. The literacy schools attracted hundreds for a few weeks and left small encouragements here and there. And confidence in the help of white men rose among the Negroes.

But most of the workers were never really one with the people, and that made quite a difference. We had not totally become black like them. The whole of the Negro life is religious, the workers' lives almost entirely secular. Where for example the Negroes would be singing, "Help me prepare [for the next world]," the whites would get them to sing, "We shall overcome [this world]"; where the Negroes would address each other as brother and sister *all* the time, the whites would beg off from the moral intimacy; where the Negroes lived constantly in *hope*, the whites often turned that into anger. Both Negroes and whites had the same goals in mind, of course, but the approaches and needs of the two were very different. The leaders of the project, for example, were interested in the political force of

mass action and the economic power of the whole Negro community and for the most part overlooked individual needs — needs like nutrition in one family, moral stability in another, a son's rebellion against excellent but poverty-stricken and discouraged parents, a daughter's premature desires, and so on. Overpopulation was more of an issue with them than the sustenance of integral culture. Too, the white workers had difficulty in seeing how the Negroes resolve their phenomenal problems of disease and poverty and lack of security with faith and hope, how they long for divine as well as social relief from wretchedness, how they demand of themselves that an educated mind and social aspirations be commensurate with Bible inspiration, and how *The Promised Land* is to them both economic and prophetic. We had the consistent difficulty of white pride, it seemed to me; that is, we wanted so much for the Negroes to be like ourselves, "white," that we overlooked the spiritual advantages of being black.

I remember Maggie Mae Horton, a Negro mother of eighteen children who at forty gives all her time to stirring up feeling in the Uncle Toms of the delta. The language was biblical, her tact in her work forcefully Christian. She kept God and godliness in every part of her work, for to her civil rights and *The Kingdom* are one. Yet she wondered (and did it out loud once) why the white leaders and workers on the project had another bent, why their social orientations were essentially secular, sensitive but secular. She saw, as I was beginning to, that in many of them social work was compensation for the lack of spiritual concerns.

As it was, we could not get into the Negroes' lives well, because for the most part we were unreligious though dedicated young people, critical of Negro religion, often unwilling to love the spiritual life with them, unable to pray with them, unfired by their spirit. Those colored people who sang and prayed in their human agony deserve, it seemed to me on those genial hot Sundays in Tennessee, better teachers and examples than we were.

In late summer the project (by this time connected loosely with CORE and the Freedom Democratic Party in Mississippi) fell apart. There were far too few of us to handle the political and educational problems that arose. The Freedom Schools we had set up week-nights in almost every backwoods churchhouse in the county to teach literacy and democratic ideals had soon declined into pep rallies for strikes and sit-ins. And we were politically inept young people bucking the apt and evil representatives of the county and state, and therefore bound to fall fairly if fightingly flat. There was

no strong leadership to inspire all our work, and individual initiative in working with individual families' problems — that is, loving them into the recognition of their human dignity, their spiritual superiority, the source of their individual and collective problems, and the necessary aspirations to individually transcend their lot — was discouraged. Then public denunciations finally blew up the whole project. For example, some Negro leaders charged (correctly) that sex between a few of the workers and between a couple of workers and local Negroes degraded the project, and newspapers in the area charged (incorrectly) that we were all Communists or at least Communist-led. Yet another summer will bring another attempt to make the project work better. It *has* to work, or all is lost in the area, for there are no others who help them. Otherwise they just lie there.

I left the project for New York to teach and to be with my family. To me, as a Latter-day Saint, the experience had been cathartic, apocalyptic, metaphysical. I returned home not primarily with a greater sense of mission or message, nor a greater sense of urgency or pride at personal involvement, nor with greater knowledge and sympathy than when I went. Time can teach these things anyway. But in more significant measure, I returned with greater identification with the moral self which I know as a Mormon that I must, driven by time and temperament and teachings, become.

When time no longer ties me to certain necessities, I will turn again — and it doesn't have to be to Tennessee, but maybe to a local neighborhood or to Another Country — to lose myself among the trapped or degenerate. How else am I to find what I in this world must find — myself? Every soul has its own South. Especially a Mormon's.