COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND THE SEARCH FOR JUSTICE

In August 1961, fifteen-year-old Brenda Travis walked into the Greyhound bus station in McComb, Mississippi, and sat in at the whites-only lunch counter. She was arrested and thrown into jail for a month. The McComb School System then expelled Travis for her civil rights arrest.

Upon learning of her expulsion, over one hundred students at Burgland High School walked out of school in protest after Travis’ release from the Pike County jail. Brenda Travis, along with all of the students who walked out, was arrested again. Those students who were juveniles were remanded to their parents’ custody. The remaining students appeared before Judge Robert Brumfield, who released the students after they posted a $3,900.00 bond. Youth Court Judge Hansford Simmons committed Travis to Oakley Training School, “until such time as the school authorities saw fit to release her,” despite a $5,000 bond that had been posted on her behalf by Dr. Martin Luther King. At the time of her initial incarceration, neither Travis’ attorney nor her mother were informed of her whereabouts. Travis served six and a half months at Oakley.

In April 1962, she was released in the middle of the night to a professor from

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Talladega College who had been instructed by Governor Ross Barnett to remove Travis from the state because he could not guarantee her safety. Ella Baker later became Travis’ guardian. She was able to complete high school and eventually moved to California, where she lives in retirement. Travis never returned to Mississippi to live.

As for the students who protested Travis’ expulsion, fifteen were immediately expelled. The remaining 100 students could return to Burgland, as long as they signed a statement promising not to engage in further civil rights activity. They refused to sign. So, the students had to find other educational venues. Campbell College enrolled 84 of the students. All sixteen seniors were denied graduation from Burgland High School.

These events occurred in the midst of the first forays of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee into the state of Mississippi. Local NAACP chapter president C.C. Bryant had taken the young folks of SNCC under his wing, enabling them to begin a fledging voter registration drive in Pike County and in neighboring Amite County. Bob Moses and later Chuck McDew and others began to prepare black citizens to take the voter registration tests which were then used to prevent black voter registration. Frustrated with the slow pace of voter registration work, two local black youths, Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes (now Muhammad), sat in at the local Woolworth’s and were arrested. Travis’ sit-in and arrest resulted from a mass meeting the night of Watkins and Hayes’ arrest, as a call for increased nonviolent direct action.

This movement activity in 1961 and ‘62, best described in John Dittmer’s *Local People*, was initially thwarted by a concerted and violent backlash from the local white power structure, under girded by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, the spying agency established and funded by the Mississippi State Legislature, the White
Citizens’ Councils, which had formed in Indianola, Mississippi, just after the *Brown* decision in 1954, and the Ku Klux Klan, which was particularly strong in southwest Mississippi. As movement activity spread to other parts of the state, SNCC withdrew from McComb and did not return until 1964 for the Mississippi Summer Project, known as Freedom Summer. White supremacists in McComb continued to resist civil rights efforts through violent means during Freedom Summer, earning McComb the moniker “the bombing capital of the world.” Over the course of a two-month period, the Klan bombed more than a dozen homes, churches, and businesses. Those Klansmen acted with impunity and black citizens who participated in civil rights activity also experienced economic reprisals. Finally, in November 1964, members of McComb’s white establishment called for a halt to the violence. Over six hundred white citizens signed a “Statement of Principles,” which, while denouncing “extremists of both sides,” called for “equal treatment under the law for all citizens regardless of race, creed, position, or wealth,” and urged that “economic threats and sanctions against people of both races,” be ended.

In the summer of 2004, the mayor of McComb requested the assistance of the William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, based at the University of Mississippi, to help improve race relations in McComb. He instructed me, as the director of the Institute, to work with the City of McComb director of administrator Jacqueline Byrd Martin who, as a young person, had participated in the 1961 school walk-out, along with her brother Jerome, Burgland’s senior class president. Martin and I initiated an oral history project to begin collecting the stories of McComb’s civil rights history, and have collected over two dozen to date. In addition, she and I began to facilitate a series of

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biracial community meetings to determine if there was any local interest in addressing the past and its legacies in current interactions between blacks and whites in McComb.

Almost immediately, the McComb School superintendent expressed interest in teaching civil rights history in the McComb School System.

The superintendent, Dr. Pat Cooper, had created an impressive school outreach program, committing funds to in-school health care for students, as well as establishing a daycare for the children of enrolled students. Jackie Martin and I gave Dr. Cooper a copy of *Putting the Movement Back Into Civil Rights Teaching*, a civil rights curriculum resource guide produced by the Washington, DC-based education non-profit Teaching for Change. Dr. Cooper enlisted the Winter Institute to assist him in securing the support of the McComb School Board, which we did through several private meetings and public presentations, to which the larger community was invited. After securing the board’s support for a major civil rights curriculum initiative, Dr. Cooper invited Teaching for Change, along with the Winter Institute, to begin a series of workshops to prepare first his administrators, and then his teachers to develop locally based lessons on civil rights history. In addition, Dr. Cooper invited the New Orleans-based non-profit the People’s Institute to conduct anti-racism training for his administrators and teachers.

Over the course of 2005 and 2006, Teaching for Change conducted workshops with administrators and then teachers. The workshops introduced the participants to the themes of the resource guide, which include the grassroots, local nature of civil rights organizing, the role of women and youth in movement activity, the systemic nature of racism, and the influence of the civil rights movement on other movements for social change. Early meetings were powerful indicators of how little blacks and whites
understood each other’s history and how little both groups really knew of the racial history of McComb. At the outset of the first workshop, the facilitators asked who knew what COFO (the Council of Federated Organizations, which had coordinated Freedom Summer) was and less than a handful of the 30 black and white participants raised their hands. After a series of activities that allowed the group to tell personal stories around race, one white participant shared bewilderingly that “it is as if we have grown up in two separate communities.” Another white participant, weeping, indicated that she had no idea of the struggles and violence experienced by black citizens in McComb. When asked what difference this new knowledge would make to her, she replied, “I think I’ll be more compassionate and understanding.”

Teaching for Change also coordinated workshops with the community group that Jackie Martin and I had formed. It was clear that a great deal of mistrust existed between blacks and whites and much of it centered on school desegregation. The McComb School System operates under a consent decree, established in the 1970s, to oversee the school desegregation process. By many accounts, school desegregation, when it finally came to McComb, went fairly smoothly. The football teams of the black and white high schools set the example. Before the first game of that first integrated season, the coaches of both teams had worked with their players to meld the school colors and school songs and mascots, borrowing elements from both schools. At the first game of the season, the marching bands of both high schools gathered on opposite sides of the football fields. They began playing their respective school songs as they marched toward one another. At the middle of the field, the black and white bands merged, playing a new school song that the bands had picked together.
However, since that initial success, a private, white academy, Parklane, had been created, and many white students began attending it, including “notable” alumna Britney Spears. In addition, some members of the black community expressed public concerns that not enough black teachers were being hired, and that the initial compromise on school symbols was slowly being abandoned, in short, that the Burgland High School identity was being wiped away without any corresponding gains to replace the loss. In the midst of the continuing public suspicion of the school system, Dr. Cooper began to seek an end to the consent decree. He argued publicly that eliminating the consent decree would allow him to recruit white students back to the public schools. But black critics simply saw his effort as a final attempt to eschew equality in the school system. Thus, when Teaching for Change and the Winter Institute began working in the schools and community, there was a great degree of tension and difficult obstacles to overcome to build trust and effective working relationships.

In addition to the workshops being held at the school and in the community, we decided to host a series of public events to help unearth some of the hidden stories of McComb’s past that caused lingering pain. In January 2005, the Winter Institute helped Jackie Martin coordinate a Martin Luther King Jr. Day observance, held at McComb High School. Jackie invited white and black panelists from the nineteen-sixties civil rights era to participate in a public discussion, which she asked me to moderate. Panelists included Bob Moses, who had initiated SNCC’s work in McComb, C.C. Bryant, who had sheltered the young activists, Curtis Hayes Muhammad, one of the first local youths to join the Movement, Charles Dunagin, a white journalist and former editor of the local paper, John Thompson, a white former mayor of McComb, and Robert Brumfield, the
judge who had sentenced many activists to jail for civil rights activity but who was also a
signer on the Statement of Principles and long-time friend of C.C. Bryant’s.

Before the event began, Curtis Muhammad informed me that the movement
veterans would not share a stage with Brumfield and Thompson, whom he viewed as part
of the white establishment that had resisted civil rights activity. As Curtis had been a
mentor to me since 1999, I deferred to him and asked him how he suggested the panel
should go. He indicated that I should let the white panelists offer their version of the
story and then that I should give him the microphone to moderate the comments of the
movement veterans. I agreed, in the interest of ensuring that if we could not have a
consensus history of local events, we could at least make sure that multiple versions of
the story were presented for the audience to sift through.

Remarkably, several of the white panelists presented themselves as friends of civil
rights and as champions who had helped thwart the Klan. Thus, when Muhammad took
the stage after their remarks, he told a notably different story of McComb’s civil rights
history. Indeed, Muhammad called Judge Brumfield over to him, clasped his hand and
said, “This man put me in jail.” While backstage some of the event organizers were
concerned that the panel would devolve into a shouting match, Muhammad calmly shared
his story, invited others to share theirs and then closed with the singing of freedom songs.

At the end of the event, I asked the mayor, who had invited the Winter Institute to
work in McComb, if he was upset by how the panel had gone. He replied that he was
not, that he understood that the work of racial reconciliation involved telling the truth and
that much of that truth was painful. And, he continued, “Judge Brumfield should have
expected to be called out as he was.” I learned that some of the vocal black critics of the
school system were not pleased with the event, largely because it was held at McComb High School, which had been the white school previously. They informed me that they viewed Dr. Cooper as a “dictator,” but they did indicate a willingness to be in touch with me and to help me work through some of the local issues. And finally, I learned as well that many of the school officials were upset with me for turning over the microphone to Muhammad, believing that the interaction he had with the audience was embarrassing to the school. So, if a marker of reconciliation is that everyone expresses his or her anger in order to begin to work through it, I had unintentionally successfully pulled off the first step!

Despite the mixed emotions elicited by the King Day event, I felt that the Winter Institute had gained new traction with members of McComb’s black community, as well as discerning which whites would stay at the table when it was no longer comfortable to be there. The workshops continued through the course of that year, as well as the collection of oral histories. In the summer of 2005, the day after the verdict in the Edgar Ray Killen case in Neshoba County, the Winter Institute hosted the first statewide civil rights summit for teachers in Philadelphia, Mississippi. It was attended by teachers from McComb who had been in the workshops. They suggested McComb as the site for the second annual summit the following year and we agreed.

As planning commenced for the summit in McComb, the Institute worked to ensure that civil rights curriculum was not just taught in pockets throughout Mississippi. Using the momentum of educational efforts in Philadelphia, McComb, Oxford, and the Mississippi Delta, we authored Senate Bill 2718, which mandates teaching civil rights

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3 See supra, Killen v. State, 958 So.2d 172.
4 Mississippi Legislature, Senate Bill 2718 (2006 Regular Session).
history in Mississippi classrooms. It was co-sponsored by senators in each of the communities we serve, reflecting a high degree of pressure from active and committed local citizens, and was signed into law in March 2006.

We began planning the second annual civil rights summit. In addition to presenters from the previous year, McComb teachers would offer examples of local curriculum they had developed. As plans progressed for the summit, the McComb school system staff began to broach the idea of welcoming back those students who had walked out to protest Brenda Travis’ expulsion. The school system wanted to hold an honorary graduation ceremony to offer them honorary diplomas. I was moved by the gesture and encouraged the school system to implement their idea. As they planned, a colleague who grew up in McComb alerted me that he had located Brenda Travis in California and had begun to communicate with her about the developments in McComb. He indicated that Ms. Travis would be willing to speak with me. I called her and we had a long conversation about the travails she had experienced. I offered an apology for how she had been treated and invited her to attend the teachers’ summit to share her story. She agreed and I let the school system know that she was planning to attend. They were pleased and asked me to invite her to offer an address at the graduation ceremony. I called Ms. Travis back, sharing the plans for the honorary diplomas, which I believed were being offered to all of the students who walked out, and asked if she would be willing to offer an address. Through many tears, Ms. Travis indicated both how touched she was by the gesture and her willingness to speak at the graduation. I shared her acceptance with the school system and began making arrangements for Ms. Travis’ visit to McComb.
In early June of 2006, a few weeks before the conference, I received a request from the superintendent. I learned that the attorney for the school board during the walkout in 1961 was pressuring the current school board not to honor Brenda Travis. He was charging that Travis had not been expelled for civil rights activity but rather for what he claimed was inappropriate sexual conduct at school. The superintendent wanted me to ask Ms. Travis if the attorney’s charges were true. I was deeply disturbed by the request and refused to communicate it to Ms. Travis. I cautioned the school system that such character assassinations were typical of white supremacists, that the oral and written record of the time indicated that Ms. Travis’ expulsion had been due to her civil rights arrest, and that we could not engage in character assassinations again. I implored them to ignore this gentleman and explained that the burden of proof was on him, and that he was opening himself to a charge of slander. The school system explained that these charges were creating a great deal of pressure on the school board to cancel the event. My urgings did not seem to help allay the fears of the school system. So, I explained to Governor William Winter my concerns and asked him to intervene. He placed a call to the president of the school board, who indicated that he found these charges baseless and was in full support of the upcoming events.

Word spread of the impending summit and graduation ceremony. Excitement built as the week of the summit approached. I assumed that the episode with the former school board attorney had been resolved. On the Friday preceding the summit, a school official called me on my way to help facilitate a coalition-building meeting of grassroots organizations on the Mississippi Gulf Coast affected by Hurricane Katrina. She explained that the issue of the charges with Ms. Travis had not been laid to rest, that the
school system was very nervous about the whole event, and that I needed to un-invite Travis from speaking at the graduation ceremony. It was in the course of this disturbing conversation that I learned that the ceremony was only to honor those seniors who had not graduated, not the entirety of students who had walked out. I explained to the school official that I believed these gestures were mistakes and would precipitate whatever uncomfortable occasion they were anticipating. I beseeched her to ask the superintendent to reconsider. I explained that I could not address the issue effectively as I was on my way to another weekend meeting and asked to meet with school officials on Sunday, on my way back home. She agreed to set up the meeting. I asked that Jackie Martin, to whom I reported on local matters, be included in the meeting and I alerted her to this latest development.

On the following Sunday, I stopped in McComb and met with Jackie Martin and the school official, along with the superintendent by phone. I explained how deeply upset I was and that I believed it was inappropriate and rude to un-invite Travis to speak. I also shared my discomfort that all of the students weren’t receiving diplomas. The school system would not budge on the diplomas. And they kept suggesting that what had happened to Ms. Travis in the aftermath of her arrest had been done to her by the state, not the school system, therefore implying that the school system was not accountable. I kept pushing for her right to speak, for her right to tell her story. Jackie Martin explained that Travis’ arrest was the catalyst for the walkout, that the students viewed Travis as a hero, that the graduation ceremony made no sense without her. Finally, the superintendent agreed to let her speak but cautioned that I was to instruct her to speak for no more than five minutes. I agreed.
On the return drive home, I called Ms. Travis to explain the turn of events. It was a difficult conversation because I knew that the good feelings that the developments thus far had engendered would now be undermined. I explained that she would not get a diploma, that the school viewed the state as her oppressor and not the school system. She was upset by this news and asked what response we might expect from the state. I said I wasn’t sure but regardless, there would be no response that I could elicit before she was to get on a plane to come to Mississippi the next day. So, I left the choice up to her about participating or not. She agreed to attend, asking that we work toward a response of some kind from the state.

I spent the next day in Philadelphia, Mississippi, facilitating a meeting between members of the Philadelphia Coalition and the newly formed Emmett Till Memorial Commission in Tallahatchie County. The two groups toured the sites connected to the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, and shared the stories of pain and suspicion and need for redress that hovered over Philadelphia and Tallahatchie County. They resolved to work together in prodding an honest appraisal of the Till case. I left that meeting to head to McComb for the teachers’ summit, dreading what I knew could be an explosive series of events.

When I arrived in McComb on Tuesday evening, Ms. Travis came to my hotel room and shared her grave concerns about the school system’s resistance to her presence. She had learned from some citizens in the community of the distrust of the superintendent and the controversy over the consent decree. She had hoped for an apology for her treatment forty years before. And it was not only the school system that had hurt her. She expressed her regret that SNCC had not protected her from the aftermath of her
arrest. It was clear she held a deep pain that had not gone away over the last forty years and which had certainly never been acknowledged or sufficiently addressed by the town that shunned her for her courage.

At the end of this session, Ms. Travis informed me that she was going to call for a walkout at the graduation ceremony and wanted to know my opinion. I was dismayed but tried to hide it. I knew such an action would be taken very badly by the school system and I had just fought for her to be able to participate. However, I also felt strongly that she had a right to make her own decisions. So, I simply cautioned her that neither of us lived in the community and those others who did would have to bear the consequences of our actions after we went home. I encouraged her to reach out to those she trusted in the community and share her plan for local feedback. She promised to do so. Later that evening, after a great deal of personal reflection, I elected not to share Ms. Travis’ plan with the school system. Their reaction to the pressure of an old racist attorney had not inspired confidence in me and I believed they would try to cancel the entire ceremony. I believed in the ceremony’s potential for healing and I hoped that friends in McComb might be able to persuade Ms. Travis to abandon the call for a walkout.

The next morning, I consulted with Jackie Martin about Ms. Travis’ plan and she agreed to speak to her. I then proceeded to coordinate the two and a half day summit, which included honoring Ms. Travis with a moral compass award from the Winter Institute. On that first night, the City of McComb hosted a ceremony in the local community center to recognize several local black activists through a Legends Wall. Governor Winter gave the keynote address, and, after the service, I met with him to
explain what was developing with Ms. Travis. He said he agreed with me that she should be allowed to speak her piece and reminded me again that reconciliation is hard, uncomfortable work.

On the second night of the summit, as the graduation ceremony approached, I was filled with trepidation. I’d spoken to Ms. Travis again about her plan and she again expressed great concern about the consent decree. I simply encouraged her to find out more information and to talk to the school system to hear their perspective before making any decisions. As my students and I left the hotel to go the ceremony, which was to be held in the old Burgland High School, I had no idea how the ceremony would go, if Ms. Travis would call for the walk-out, and, if so, what the response might be from the audience and the school board. Travis said only that she would act out of conscience and I replied that I could not ask for anything else beyond that.

The ceremony itself was very moving. The school had been decorated beautifully. Volunteers passed out candles as we entered the auditorium. Just before the service, a white former resident of McComb, who had been a child during the walkout, presented his bronze star, earned in Vietnam, to Ms. Travis. He explained that, in spite of his wife’s admonition that it should be given to his children, he owed a debt to Ms. Travis, that he had lived a privileged life and had been unaware of the struggles she had experienced until later. As soon as he heard she would return to McComb, he made arrangements to travel from Texas to give her his medal. After this touching gesture, the lights soon dimmed, candles were lit, and “Pomp and Circumstance” began to play as ten adults robed in bright green caps and gowns came into the auditorium, led by their wheelchair bound class president Jerome Byrd. The superintendent explained the reason for
the ceremony and then introduced Brenda Travis to speak. I held my breath.

Ms. Travis, tissue in hand, was greeted by a standing ovation. She spoke movingly of her experiences, and, interrupted several times by applause, thanked the students who walked out on her behalf. She challenged the audience to continue to fight the ills and injustices of society, and she cautioned the local community not to let the school system use their civil rights curriculum project as a mask to undo the hard work done by desegregation. It was a comment that I knew would not sit well with the superintendent. But Travis did not call for a walkout. She concluded her comments and sat down. The ceremony ended and I breathed a sigh of relief that it was over and had continued to be moving. The spirit in the auditorium was celebratory and energetic. As the ceremony finished, I went over to two of the most vocal black critics of the superintendent. One of them had been the person who had accused the superintendent of being a dictator. I asked what they’d thought of the ceremony and they said, “This was good. We can work with him now. If he’s going to do stuff like this, we can work with him.” I was pleased and astounded. It seemed to me that disaster had been averted, that trust had begun to be created. I left the auditorium to find Jackie Martin. She too was pleased with the ceremony. Finally, exhausted, I prepared to go back to the hotel.

On the way out, I saw Dr. Cooper and went over to congratulate him on the incredibly positive ceremony. Dr. Cooper stepped back from me as I approached. He was visibly enraged. I didn’t understand his stance but started to offer congratulations. He cut me off and said, “I can’t trust you.” I replied that I didn’t understand.

He said, “You were supposed to tell her to speak for five minutes.”

I replied, “I did, but I cannot control what someone else does.”
He responded, “You have set back the work we’re trying to do. The school board is furious.”

I again explained that I didn’t understand why anyone was upset, that the ceremony had been positive. I offered to go meet with the school board to address their concerns.

Dr. Cooper lashed out, “No, you have done enough. We’ll continue with this work, but you have set us back. Now I have to repair this.”

“I’m sorry,” I replied, and left.

Not content with our exchange at the school, Dr. Cooper later sent a two-paged, single-spaced letter to Governor Winter to complain of my behavior. He asserted that I had “acted in a completely egregious manner,” and that he doubted my “ability to truly work on reconciliation for all.” After a series of letters and phone calls with various parties, the president of the school board was able to inform me that things had finally calmed down.

Throughout the aftermath, I tried to maintain conversation with the school system staff, who were also angry with me for not telling them that Ms. Travis had been planning a walkout. I explained that I had not trusted their reaction to be reasonable because of the request to ask Ms. Travis about her personal life. In the end, I emphasized, the walkout had been prevented, and a successful event had been held that had created a new, positive feeling between previously vocal black critics and the school system. But it took much of the summer and into the fall for emotions to be reigned in.

Now, what does all this mean? I’m not sure I’m far enough removed from it to tell you. I can share that it was all so upsetting to me that I spent from the summer
through the fall vomiting on multiple occasions. Those episodes became so bad that I sought medical help and was advised that stress was causing my illness and told to quit my job. But, through it all, I knew that this is what reconciliation looks like on the ground. It’s not easy; in fact, it’s horribly messy and complicated. Every person who engages in community reconciliation efforts brings their own agenda, history, and needs. Reconciliation is a constant negotiation between those needs, trying to prioritize them in ways that accomplish the most common good. It is not always clear what the most good is. At the very least, it seems to me, it involves two components.

First, reconciliation is engendered through the empowerment of local communities for purposeful change. This positive change comes from the creation of truthful dialogue that encourages action to redress historical inequity. Reconciliation at the local level can be highly contested; each community must decide together how to “bury the past” in a just and constructive way. The debate is often stymied around the extent to which collective "forgetting" is essential to the task of moving forward. What seems applicable in a national or international theoretical framework may not always fit neatly into local understandings of reconciliation. Thus, it is imperative for each community to define for itself what reconciliation will look like. The Institute encourages this local determination and offers the following conceptualization of what may stimulate a local reconciliatory process.

Theologian Donald Shriver notes that “forgetfulness is the enemy of justice, unless one takes refuge in that untrue truism: ‘There is nothing we can do to change the past.’” On the contrary, Shriver challenges us to change our relation to the past. “The first step for doing so is uncovering its dreaded secrets. There can be no final burial of
the past before an inquest.” He urges communities not to forgive and forget, but rather to remember and forgive, noting that a tangible way of doing so is to have one’s unjust suffering entered into a public record as an increment of justice. Others encourage communities to be experimental in their approach. Historian Charles Maier posits that “reconciliation is not a monument but a process, not a museum but a growing inventory of an active memory, not a theory but an experimental practice.” Thus the dialogue among community members must be persistent and mindful always of including others in the quest for truth and consensus.

Second, justice is a prerequisite to reconciliation. Scholar and activist Michael Ignatieff has suggested that, “justice entails the naming of specific individuals and not the wholesale blame of history.” Questioning whether a nation can ever be fully reconciled, he suggests that the aim of justice should be to “narrow the range of permissible lies in the argument that is the past.” Because truth is dependent upon identity and therefore is interpretive, he insists that justice must be separate from reconciliation, and that truth does not always heal. Reconciliation must respect the emotions that sustain vengeance, Ignatieff writes, which means honoring the dead together. He suggests the enactment of public rituals of atonement between individuals, thus breaking the “spiral of intergenerational vengeance.” It is this public atonement that most aptly characterizes restorative justice—the repairing of that which is damaged between individuals, damaged on an individual and local level. This repairing leads to the healing of communities.

It is in understanding this process of reconciliation—ultimately rooted in interpersonal dialogue that moves beyond rhetoric to action—that there is hope for change. We must move beyond the culturally-encoded language of remembrance and
guilt and strive to supplant mere co-existence with the reality of reconciliation. We can overcome distrust and animosity by restoring not only the dignity of the victim, but also that of the perpetrator. The end result must maintain a vision that sees a way out of the cyclical nature of racism. As theologian Charles Marsh suggests, new activists “working in rural and urban areas remind us of the sobering fact that the difficult work of achieving equality awaits more difficult work, indeed the daily disciplines and sacrifices required to sustain the beloved community.” It is that beloved community to which I aspire.

It is important to close with this last assessment. I do not doubt the sincerity of every person I have encountered in McComb and their interest in making it a better place. I’ve listened enough to know that the goals of those whom we serve there are remarkably similar. They include some pretty specific things: more black teachers, an accurate civil rights curriculum that inspires children there to engage civically, a restoration of a black economic base in the community, whose loss is represented in the dilapidated buildings on Summit Street, McComb’s Auburn Avenue. The differences exist in the steps and strategies it will take to accomplish those goals. And the entire community itself must learn together how to trust and how to shape relationships and policies that will accomplish those goals. Whites must come to understand the privilege they continue to enjoy and the dangerous but almost automatic assumption that things must be done their way. Victims of oppression, conversely, must recognize honest, if uneven, attempts to reach out to address their concerns.

The process must be truthful, transparent, and inclusive. It should also be cathartic for those who are wounded, and retributive where it can be. A community working diligently to come together cannot forever be held hostage to the rage that those
who have suffered understandably feel, but only the specific local community can decide how and when to move forward together. In the end, the entire process will be imperfect and painful and unpredictable. And if it works, it will restore not only the dignity of the victim but also the dignity of the perpetrator.

Finally, it is also important to know that, despite the tremendous disagreements in McComb last year, not one person who was engaged in the work has abandoned it. And neither have those of us who are connected to that work. Brenda Travis has begun to write a memoir and has participated in an oral history project with civil rights veterans in California. She hopes to create a non-profit for youth development and has asked me to serve on an advisory committee. The school system has continued to develop lessons plans, which will be offered for the first time in the K-8 curriculum beginning this fall. McComb’s process of teacher training, local research and oral history gathering, and developing community buy-in is one of the noted models of curriculum development for the Civil Rights Education Commission upon which it will develop a statewide effort to implement SB 2718. And a new mayor elected last year, the first black mayor of McComb, has applied on behalf of the city to be the site of the state’s proposed Mississippi civil rights museum. Albert Camus wrote in *Neither Victims Nor Executioners*, at the end of World War II, that “henceforth, the only honorable course will be to stake everything on a formidable gamble: that words are more powerful than munitions.”

Despite its great difficulties and pain, in spite of different perceptions of the meanings and strategies of the work, no one in McComb has left the table. In the aftermath of the crisis last year, a school official cautioned me that I should “consider
more carefully what reconciliation means.” I assured her that I woke up everyday thinking about it, and that it was an effort all of us must engage in. She and they are answering that challenge, and, in that commitment, that refusal to run away or give up, lays the hope of democracy. The alternative is unacceptable.