ALTERNATIVE PATHS TO RACIAL RECONCILIATION

To set the context for this discussion of racial violence and reconciliation, I would like to read a passage from the notes of Robert A. Murphy, a lawyer practicing in Mississippi for the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice. These notes may be found in the twenty-fifth anniversary report of the Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights.

_August 10, 1965:_
Paul Saltzman, a white Canadian MFDP (Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party) worker, was struck by Byron de la Beckwith, Jr. and 2 unknown white males as Saltzman was about to enter the Greenwood Courthouse for a meeting on the proposed Mississippi Constitutional Amendment. Beckwith was arrested by local authorities on August 13, 1965 and charged with assault and battery.

_August 10, 1965:_
An unoccupied house in Jones County, owned by a white person, was destroyed by fire. The house formerly was rented to Negroes.

_August 14, 1965:_
Seventeen year old David Parker was shot in the head.

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2 This paper was first presented at a conference entitled “Crimes of the Civil Rights Era,” sponsored by Harvard Law School and Northeastern University School of Law, Boston, April 27, 2007.
and critically wounded as he drove through a Negro
district of Laurel.

**August 14, 1965:**
Waller's Salvage Company, a Negro-owned store, was
burned. White man arrested by local police. Outcome
of the matter is unknown.

**August 14, 1965:**
Car of four white youths shot at by Negroes in Laurel
as their car was going through a Negro neighborhood.

**August 15, 1965:**
Jack Bell, a white civil rights worker, assaulted by
unknown whites while Bell and Negro companion
attempted to solicit Negro parents to send their
children to white schools.

**August 17, 1965:**
The house of Mae Carter, mother of the seven children
enrolled in the white school in Sunflower County, was
shot into during the night.

**August 18, 1965:**
A total of seven crosses burned in Sharkey County.

**August 19, 1965:**
A white man, Billy Boone, assaulted FBI Agent
Robert A. Connors, on the grounds of the Enterprise
Consolidated School in Clarke County on registration
day. Boone allegedly said he was going to clear out
the Negroes from the school and/or kill the "god damn FBI."
He was arrested on charges of assault of a federal officer.

Murphy’s notes, which continue through 1965, illustrate the pervasiveness of
rational violence in the South at that time, and the monumental difficulty of obtaining
restorative justice today. It was during the trial of Sam Bowers that I first realized the
need for alternative paths to racial reconciliation.

*Trial of Sam Bowers: Comments of Vernon Dahmer, Jr.*

One dark night in 1966, Vernon and Ellie Dahmer, their youngest son, Dennis,
and their daughter, Bettie, were asleep in their home in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The
Dahmers had already received many terrifying threats because they were active in civil
rights in Hattiesburg; they even kept guns in many rooms of the house, in case they were
ever attacked. That night, two carloads of Klansmen crept up to their home and tossed Molotov cocktails through the plate glass window into their living room. Vernon Dahmer did not survive the attack because he inhaled so much of the superheated air from the fire. Bettie was burned.

The prosecution of Sam Bowers, the man who ordered the attack, occurred thirty years later, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. My partner, DeAnn Sinrich, and I had just picked the jury. Sitting with me outside on the courthouse steps that day in 1996 was Vernon Dahmer, Jr., the victim’s son.

Vernon turned to me and said, “Andy, no one will ever know how many bodies disappeared down the Mississippi River during that time.” That was a turning point in my thinking. I thought to myself that the Bowers trial might well be the last retrial of these anti-civil rights cases. The defendants were growing old and witnesses were dying, and it cost the state time and money to prosecute each case. There was going to have to be another way to address the legacy of racial violence in the South.

When I returned home to Atlanta for the weekend, I saw two stories on the front page of the Atlanta newspaper: one on the Bowers trial in Hattiesburg, and the other on Osama bin Laden. I understood at that moment that while this country was obsessed with terrorism abroad, the terrorism at home was what we needed to cure.

Jerry Mitchell Interview in Birmingham

I was wrong about the Bowers case. It was not the last retrial of a civil rights-era murder. Four years later, I found myself in Birmingham, Alabama. During a break in the first of two trials involving the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, in which

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four little girls were killed, four little girls were killed, four little girls were killed, Jerry Mitchell, a reporter from the Jackson, Mississippi newspaper, *The Clarion Ledger*, was interviewing me. He asked what could be done when the witnesses to the civil rights era murders were getting older and dying and more trials could not be held. I blurted out something about using the South African model of truth and reconciliation commissions, a thought that had first occurred to me during the Bowers trial. Trials were too expensive, too slow, and the witnesses as well as the perpetrators were dying. Nothing came of this idea, but it seemed like such a good idea to me.

*Lynching Exhibit in Atlanta and Bishop Tutu’s Visit*

Later, in 2003, Emory University hosted Archbishop Desmond Tutu and committed the entire school year to the theme of racial reconciliation. Concurrently, at the Martin Luther King Jr. Historic Site in downtown Atlanta, an exhibit titled “Without Sanctuary” made its mark on the consciences of all who viewed it. The exhibit consisted of lynching postcards depicting white southerners standing around in a carnival-like atmosphere, gaping at African Americans hanging limply from tree limbs.

I met with some of the people who had been touched by Bishop Tutu’s call to do something to reconcile the races in the United States, and who had also been instrumental in ensuring that the lynching postcards exhibit received a public viewing. The resulting discussions led to the organization of Southern Truth and Reconciliation, what we call STAR.

*STAR is Born*

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Never has there been a more grassroots organization. The organizing meeting consisted of about six people huddled around a speakerphone, so that we could include a couple of people from the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama.

STAR is made up of people who are studying violence, conflict, conflict resolution, and peace building, as well as people who simply want to do something.

STAR’s Statement of Intent lists five goals:

1. To continue to “connect the dots” between past human rights abuses and current affairs so that observers and participants see the direct relationship between truth speaking about the past and reconciliation in the present.

2. To use truth-speaking, story-telling, dialogue, education, reconciliation, policy recommendations, and other public resources, in order to process incidents of racial and ethnic violence in local communities of the South.

3. To help design and implement such truth and reconciliation forums for community organizations, academic groups, governmental agencies, and other civic groups including faith communities.

4. To develop models not only for such forums, but also for a variety of programs, events, activities, and ways of facilitating conversation that communities may use to acknowledge the past and to have meaningful dialogue about present day issues.

5. To develop a “menu of options” from which constituent communities might discover and develop their own ideas for community-building events, programs and activities to promote restorative justice, healing and dialogue.

In pursuit of these goals, we have become involved in several projects, including one with the Moores Ford Memorial Committee, and another involving the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot.

**Moores Ford Memorial Committee**

STAR’s first project was to find ways to work with the Moores Ford Memorial Committee, which had been up and running for eight years. Some background will help you understand Moores Ford and what happened there.
In 1946, two African American couples were taken to the Moores Ford Bridge in Walton County, Georgia, and murdered—shot by as many as sixteen different people with rifles. The Federal and Georgia Bureaus of Investigation both conducted investigations. President Truman got involved. But no one was ever tried for the crimes.

Moores Ford is located in a rural part of Georgia between Atlanta and Athens. The location is significant because, in 1968, Dr. King planned to meet there with his young lieutenants, Bobby Howard and Tyrone Brooks, after he left Memphis, Tennessee, to discuss their strategies in the area. Dr. King never made it to Moores Ford. Howard and Brooks have continued to devote themselves to finishing the job that needs to be done in the surrounding Walton and Oconee Counties.

As part of their efforts, Howard and Brooks organized the Moores Ford Memorial Committee, to raise awareness of the violence that occurred in 1946 and to lift the veil of silence that existed in that area. They found the cemeteries where the victims were buried, and organized work parties to clean out the brush and to set up new grave markers. They started an annual scholarship banquet at which they give out college financial awards to high school students who write about the 1946 killings. They march annually to Moores Ford, with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and hold reenactments of the killings. They do much more, but those are some highlights.

So it was at the invitation of the Moores Ford Memorial Committee that Moores Ford became our first project. It is hard to say who has helped whom most, STAR or the Moores Ford Committee. It doesn’t really matter. What matters is that we at STAR have become involved in their goals, and they are involved in ours. We are on the same path.
We began by considering a truth and reconciliation commission for Moores Ford, but that never came to pass, because the Moores Ford Memorial Committee wanted justice, which for them means the prosecution of anyone involved in the killings who is alive to be prosecuted. They wanted normal everyday criminal justice in a courtroom, but we at STAR were interested in reconciliation, not what some call “retributive” justice.

And so we faced our first conflict as an umbrella organization promoting reconciliation in a local community that had been separated by outrageous violence for years. Were we going to go with the desires of the local community or were we going to impose our goals on them? After many hours of intense debate and discussion, we decided that we did not know what was best for another community, and that we should offer a “menu of options” to local communities.

*A “Menu of Options”*

One group may want to see a memorial placed at a lynching site, while another group may want to talk about reparations. One community may need years of reporting about past violence before it is ready to talk about wanting to reconcile differences. There are those who want to remember and to learn, and there are those who never want to hear about the past. You have to take people where they are; you have to respect the needs of each community.

Yes, there are conflicting desires and needs, but there are common ones, as well. One of the common, but not always conscious, desires and needs is to heal the divide, to heal the separation. It is through the common need to heal that progress is to be made.

*1906 Atlanta Race Riot*
Another one of STAR’s projects involved the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot. In one of our meetings, we began to discuss our own hometown, Atlanta. While there are exceptions, the city remains largely racially divided, with Blacks living in one section and whites living in another. We have buses with maid runs that have supplanted the old carriage runs carrying black women to work in the homes of white people on another side of town. In contrast, we also have a very successful Black entertainment industry, a lot of very successful Black professionals, and great Black political leaders, such as our mayor, Shirley Franklin. But some of us feel that there is a lingering silence surrounding racial issues and a lurking legacy of racial violence that divides us in ways that are destructive to normal human interaction, and that, if left unattended, will sooner or later bring us to our knees.

And so, we decided to take on these issues in our hometown.

In 2006, an opportunity presented itself in the centenary of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot. Very few people outside of a small community of historians had ever heard of the riot, and so, as a focal point for our incursion into race issues in Atlanta, it was probably not the best public relations horse to ride. And yet the riot had happened, in the Reconstruction period after the Civil War, when the great hopes of the twentieth century were blooming. The race riot represented the dark side of Reconstruction, a way for white people to show black people that this was not, and would never be, “their” town.

People were dragged from downtown trolleys by white mobs and beaten and killed. Maybe thirty people, maybe fifty. No one knows. The governor called in troops to “control the crowd.” It lasted for the better part of three days in September of 1906.
Four of us from STAR were sent to organize the centenary effort in Atlanta. In partnership with the National Park Service’s Martin Luther King Historic Site, we brought together a coalition of people and began meeting in the basement of Old Ebenezer Baptist Church. Within sixteen months, front pages of the Atlanta newspaper and public service announcements on local public radio were being devoted to the Atlanta Race Riot.

I envisioned entire neighborhoods from both the white and black communities interacting, with members of white churches visiting their counterparts in the black community, and blacks and whites visiting each other’s neighborhoods. I envisioned church bells ringing out the names of the victims on the Sunday of the anniversary of the violence. These things did not happen. But other things did.

On a September weekend in 2006, 100 years to the day that the Atlanta Race Riot occurred, we had a glorious celebration downtown with gospel choirs and speeches and recitations and great good feelings. Music, drama, poetry, and art took center stage as poignant ways to communicate the pain and sorrow of the violence in 1906. There were art exhibits and moving performances of W.E.B. Dubois’ “Litany of Atlanta.” We held several panels of historians and authors who discussed the events of 100 years ago.

What had been a forgotten event in the history of Atlanta is now the subject of several books. The Georgia state legislature passed a bill recognizing and condemning the violence that occurred, and calling for acknowledgement of the legacy of that violence. The curriculum of Georgia’s high schools now includes teaching about the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot. There are even monthly tours in downtown Atlanta of the sites
of the violence. So we were successful in some significant ways. We think the conversation has begun in earnest.

But has anything really changed in the City of Atlanta? I can only speak for myself. I have changed. I have a much deeper understanding of the complexities of race relations. I know more about the real history of the city. I have made some great friends, and we have a bond that we cherish.

We are all recovering from our exhaustion, because an effort like this pushes you to the limits of your resources, takes you away from your usual daily pursuits, and forces you to abandon your business. But it never can stop.

So what is the future for STAR?

One idea has kept us in business—if we can join with others on this path, we can keep hope alive. Last year, several of us drove to Birmingham to meet with the organizers of the Birmingham Pledge and the William Winter Institute of Racial Reconciliation at the University of Mississippi. We organized a conference in Oxford, Mississippi, where we decided to create a regional organization of people committed to seeing this movement through. We decided to call this group the Alliance for Truth and Racial Reconciliation. It will be our great pleasure to listen to Dr. Susan Glisson later today as she describes the Winter Institute, which she directs, and perhaps something about the Alliance.

I would like to invite you to become a member of STAR. Join us. We are moving forward. We are challenging the silence. We are pulling off the scab that only covers a deeper wound, so that fresh air can provide real healing. We invite all people of good will to begin asking questions about the past in their own communities.