

Letter written by civil rights activist Heather Booth while she was in Mississippi taking part in Freedom Summer, 1964:

Ruleville
To my brother,

Last night I was a long time before sleeping, although I was extremely tired. Every shadow, every noise – the bark of a dog, the sound of a car – in my fear and exhaustion was turned into a terrorist's approach...I tried consciously to overcome this fear. To relax, I began to breathe deep, think the words of a song, pull the sheet up close to my neck...I became aware of the uselessness of fear that immobilizes an individual. Then I began to relax.

“We are not afraid. Oh Lord, deep in my heart, I do believe, We Shall Overcome Someday” and then I think I began to truly understand what the words meant. Anyone who comes down here and is not afraid I think must be crazy as well as dangerous to this project where security is quite important. But the type of fear that they mean when they, when we, sing “we are not afraid” is the type that immobilizes... The songs help to dissipate the fear. Some of the words in the songs do not hold real meaning on their own, others become rather monotonous – but when they are sung in unison, or sung silently by oneself, they take on new meaning beyond words or rhythm... There is almost a religious quality about some of these songs, having little to do with the usual concept of a god. It has to do with the miracle that youth has organized to fight hatred and ignorance. It has to do with the holiness of the dignity of man. The god that makes such miracles is the god I do believe in when we sing “God is on our side.” I know I am on that god's side. And I do hope he is on ours.

Jon, please be considerate to Mom and Dad. The fear I just expressed, I am sure they feel much more intensely without the relief of being here to know exactly how things are. Please don't go defending me or attacking them if they are critical of the Project...

They said over the phone, “Did you know how much it takes to make a child?” and I thought of how much it took to make a Herbert Lee (or many others whose names I do not know)... I thought of how much it took to be a Negro in Mississippi twelve months a year for a lifetime. How can such a thing as a life be weighed?...

With constant love,
Heather

Credit: Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez, ed. *Letters from Mississippi*. Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2002. pp. 172-173.

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