

Draft
Transcript of a Conversation with
MR. WHITNEY YOUNG - April 13, 1964

MR. WARREN: You were going to tell me about the history of the Urban League in relation to its present function, is that right?

MR. YOUNG: Yes. The role of the-- the importance of the Urban League, Mr. Warren, is only understood if one recognizes at the outset that the solution to the problem of race relations involves many courses of action, that this is not a monolithic problem and there needs to be, therefore, a variety of activities. The Urban League conceives of itself as working towards the same goal, and that it supplements and complements, the activities of all other organizations, that we are the organization that will give meaning to the slogans "Equal Opportunity" or "Freedom Now" in that first-class citizenship is more than the removal of barriers; it's more than the establishment of new laws, it's more than the right to go into a restaurant or into a neighborhood. Also involved is the necessity to have the resources in terms of qualification, in terms of economics, in order to take advantage of new opportunities. So the Urban League in this sense is the-- we are the social engineers, we are the strategists, we are the planners, we are the people who work at the level of policy-making, policy implementation, the highest echelons of the corporate community, the highest echelons of the governmental community - both at the federal, state and local level - the highest

echelons of the labor movement. In terms of the-- providing them with the necessary facts, we do the research. We're the professional arm. You'd have to understand that the Urban League, unlike the other organizations, is a professional organization. We have some 525 full-time staff -- 350 of these are professional people with their master's degrees and over,-- working full time in some 65 communities around the country where 85 per cent of the ~~Urban~~ urban Negro population lives. We have some 13 leagues in the South, and 52 in the North, all in urban cities; each of these organizations, affiliates, like the National Board, must, under its constitution, be interracial, and increasingly the staff reflects that same philosophy. But the boards throughout the country are composed about 50-50 of responsible white and Negro citizens who meet on a monthly, even every-other-week basis, in order to discuss and to resolve some of the basic problems.

MR. WARREN: This leads us to a fundamental difference between your organization and some others, and between your philosophy and some other philosophies, on these matters. Let me read you just a quote. May I?

MR. YOUNG: Yes.

MR. WARREN: It's a question with relation to the white man. This is a summary in a forthcoming book on race relations. I'll read the quote from it and we'll see if it makes sense, whether it makes sense or not. "In Baldwin,

James Baldwin's 'Cosmology,' in fact: "There seems to be no decent white of any sort and no way a white man can prove his decency. If you are hostile you're a racist; if you express friendship or sympathy you're a liberal, a par for the course of innocence. If you commit yourself to action this merely proves you're condescending towards the Negro, to purge your own conscience." Well-- you see the line.

? MR. YOUNG: Yes, I see the line, and my analysis would differ. Besides that, first of all I think that neither white people nor Negro people have any monopoly on virtue or on vices. My analogy of this situation is that the present plight of Negro citizens-- and that plight is really a very serious one -- results not so much from historic ill will or good will, but actually what we've had in our society is about ten per cent of white Americans who have been actively concerned and who have been actively working toward integration, about ten per cent who have been actively resistant, who have worked to preserve the status quo, or to even send the Negro back to Africa. But about eighty per cent of white Americans have been largely indifferent. This has been active apathy, active indifference, so it hasn't been ill will or good will; it's been no will that is largely responsible. This is characteristic of Americans. We tend to focus on the pleasant and the beautiful and the gay, and to push in the subconscious that that is ugly and unpleasant, particularly if we feel some

responsibility for it. So what's happened largely is that white Americans have ignored the Negro; they've not taken the Negro seriously, they've driven around the slums, they keep their heads buried in The Wall Street Journal as a commuter train stops at 125th Street. This is a significance, it seems to me, of the Negro revolution, say of '63, is that all America was ~~xxxx~~ forced to look at the Negro, there was a confrontation for the first point in the lives of many people, and this is where '64 becomes a year of decision-making. We have assumed up till now that good racial relations meant the absence of tension and conflict, and not the presence of justice and equal opportunity. I don't think that anybody can generalize about all whites being this or all Negroes being this. Obviously, now that we are confronted, many white people find themselves out of fear and insecurity and ignorance, identifying themselves more with the racists -- they'll not vote for Wallace. But I think, increasingly, white America, when it's confronted with the grim realities, with the tragic consequences of their ^{dis}inference, with the threats to their way of life, with the inhumane kind of consequences that result from indifference in considering race relations as a spectator sport, will find themselves on the right side. But I'm not distressed by the unrest, by the tension, by the conflict; I think this in many ways is healthy, because it's bringing the real attitudes and feelings to the surface where we can deal with them. It's like a boil. You make

a decision about whether you put a Bandaid over it and act like it doesn't exist, or whether you lance it. Temporarily it doesn't look good, but this is the only way of getting at the roots and bringing about some change. Historically, Americans have only reacted to crisis, and they've fixed a bridge when it fell in, or they-- there was an accident at the corner and they put up a stoplight.

MR. WARREN: Taking that two ways at this point, in the past, at least there's one historical theory that says this, Negro gains have come as byproducts of national crises of one kind or another, but this brings on now in the last few years, a great drive on the part of Negroes to separate the present (quotes) revolution or movement or whatever we should call it, from this byproduct status in history.

MR. YOUNG: I wouldn't say this entirely. I think we can attribute this heightened impatience, this accelerated kind of aspiration of the Negro directly to a number of historical forces. I think we can attribute it directly, in part, to the mobility of Negroes as made necessary by World War II when Negroes were taken out of the South and for the first time in their lives they travelled throughout the world, they saw how-- they got a taste of freedom, a taste of what it meant to be a man, they found out that their lives did not have to be lived in misery and abuse. I think the increased and perfected system of communications which immediately threw on the screen what was

happening throughout the world; I think the increased education of Negroes, I think the Cold War, the competition between America and Russia, America attempting to prove ~~has~~ more world leadership was forced to commit itself publicly over and over to a certain concept of democracy and freedom, that did not go unheard by the masses of Negro people. I think the emergence of African nations into independence and their subsequent receptions in America by the highest government officials, their appearance on television frequently at the U.N., gave to Negroes a new sense of destiny, a new sense of pride in race. It made them shake off their-- any feelings of inferiority. This, I think, all led up to, say, the incident in Montgomery with Mrs. Rhoda Park, where she sat on the bus for reasons even she cannot tell you now. In Montgomery, ^{led} ~~then~~ up to Tuskegee, the sit-ins, a direct result of the inability of the power structure to absorb the increasing number of intelligent Negroes. As long as it could absorb them into dependent positions they could control them and have them, but you began to get more, and-- but I don't think this can be separated from certain larger forces that were at work in the total society that contributed.

MR. WARREN: There are a lot of ideas that come in here, and I'm going to hark back to the question we started with. It's the conception among Negroes, or conceptions-- I'm not sure there's not one of the role of the white man,

in this matter. We have all sorts of pronouncements, you see, of course like Miss Hansberry who, as you know, with the burning house, dismissed this middle-class American civilization, and do what with it after that, you see. Or a Black Muslim view ~~or Baldwin's~~ statements or the statement you know of Farewell to Liberals -- all of these. You're-- in a special position because your organization has been committed to a cooperation of a special kind even more positively than under NAACP, and this puts you in a crucial position-- your organization in a crucial position about what can the white man find to relate to in terms of this?

MR. YOUNG: I mean this is a very basic question. Let me say--

MR. WARREN: It's a basic question.

MR. YOUNG: Yes. Let me say first that it is quite true that the Negro today no longer conceives of his goal in life as simply a replication of that white society, that he is at this point viewing a bit more discriminately white America as to whether or not this, in toto, is what he wants to adopt as the best way of life. He is conceiving of integration now, more as a synthesis rather than as a complete dropping of all that is Negro and the adoption of all that is white. What he's saying, in effect, is that all that is white is not good; it couldn't be good, or else we wouldn't have been kept in slavery and suppressed all these years that there must be some more bankruptcy here somewhere, there

must be some value orientations that are not proper and good. He said that I think that I can bring something to a new society even though I-- I cannot bring, certainly a superior technological knowhow, certainly I can't bring the money, I can't bring in many cases the same level of education, but out of suffering one develops something that goes beyond just jazz and music. One develops compassion, one develops a humaneness, one develops a-- certainly the Negro has developed a tolerance, a patience, that maybe the larger society can use. Maybe General Motors can use some of our compassion. And what we're saying is, is that we--

MR. WARREN: Don't be a dreamer.

MR. YOUNG: Yes. What we're saying is that we would really like to-- well, first of all we don't like the implication that what is black is bad and what is white-- Negro is bad and the only way to be right is to be white. Now--

MR. WARREN: May I tell you now?

MR. YOUNG: Yes.

MR. WARREN: Black equals bad; white equals good. I talked that long ago with a very distinguished Negro lawyer who said to me in a burst of passion: "I've disciplined myself now to retranslate the imagery, the symbolism of the white world, the white values, the bright light, of learning all the symbols. I now reverse them. And then one remembers that these symbolisms are not American. In African *dancers* you'll find the figure of being good with a white robe and

the figure of an evil with a black robe; or μ in Chinese the chalked face and a charcoaled in these matters. Now/so it's not merely a cultural difference. Now how does one deal with this fact?

MR. YOUNG: Well, I would say--

MR. WARREN: How does a Negro deal with this fact and say it's not a white man's trick, you see it's perfectly simple.

MR. YOUNG: Yes, I would think it's childish to reduce this as a kind of immaturity, to reduce this purely to-- I'm going to reverse and call black good and white bad. I think what we're most concerned today about is, is ^{white} ~~whites~~ as being a symbol not of a race but as a kind of character and value system, and a kind of maturity. I think what we're fighting against isn't so much making white bad as not making black bad, and what we are working toward is a society where we borrow the-- we lift the positives out of both cultures, reject the negatives, and we can find negatives in both cultures, and move toward a new society that is much better than either of the old. You see I have a theory that with work and with thought, we can-- if we can't change status-seeking and if we can't change conformity, at least we can change the norms to which people are conforming, and we can change the symbols that represent status; and instead of exclusiveness as it relates to a neighborhood or school or bus, exclusiveness being good, if we can change that

and make inclusiveness possible, we can somehow get people to see that only the hopelessly insecure and inadequate person needs to surround himself with sameness.

MR. WARREN: Don't you find the same problem among Negroes about exclusive?

MR. YOUNG: But it's a different reason. The Negro who chooses--

MR. WARREN: Now let's say the fact.

MR. YOUNG: The fact. And the Negro chooses or who will say that he prefers to be in the all-Negro setting, either housing or in his social company, is saying this out of a fear that he will not be accepted in the other-- and it's a defense, where the white person is saying, "I want this because I think it represents superiority and exclusiveness."

MR. WARREN: Let's take it then a little further. When Miss Hansberry or when Baldwin or when others say, "White liberal, stay away; we are running this show," this is exclusive. . . .Or . . ."White man we don't want to integrate with because he is for the Black Muslims," or take it as I've seen a lot quoted--

MR. YOUNG: I think this is unfortunate--

MR. WARREN: It's true, though. It's one element we have to deal with it.

MR. YOUNG: You have to deal with it, but one of the tragedies in this whole civil rights struggle is the inability of the white person to distinguish leadership. For

example, any Negro who achieves a certain amount of popularity or prominence, whether it's a Cassius Clay or a baseball player Willie Mays, he immediately, you see, when he utters something about the race relations problem he is treated and thought of as an expert.

MR. WARREN: Like the white Southerner.

MR. YOUNG: Yes. The analogy to this was to ask Primo Canera, or Tony Gallento, you know: What do you think about foreign policy. Or to ask some-- you know, Mickey Mantle. I think we ought to keep in perspective here, that while Lorraine Hansberry is a very gifted playwright and while Baldwin is a very gifted writer, these are not people who either by their experiences or by their training or by their whole emotional orientation, are by any means leaders of the Negro revolution. ~~Fjxy~~ They are people who describe it, who react to it, who write about it, but who themselves are not people equipped to suggest strategy, to interpret the social implications. And again, it reflects the lack of contact that the average white person has. The only Negroes that some white people know are the popular entertainers or writers or athletes, and so they're pretty much a victim or beneficiary, as the case may be, of that person's interpretation. It must be remembered that when the struggle was really hard and tough, Baldwin couldn't take it. He left the country; he wasn't even here, that many of these people who are now able to write about

it, make a wonderful living on it, but let's not confuse this leadership. You see Time Magazine made that mistake. Baldwin should have been on the cover of Time Magazine if Time Magazine was going to do a story on contemporary American writers who are addressing themselves with some impact to the current American scene, but instead they had with-- him on there, they were talking about the Negro revolution. Well, then, you should have possibly had a Roy Wilkins or somebody, who--

MR. WARREN: Who~~you~~ In his role as a writer has been tied to his work.

MR. YOUNG: Yes, but this-- again, this only reaches the intellectual kind of white person, who is moved by this, who has a great deal of guilt feeling and whom Baldwin knows well, are in a masochistic kind of mood of mind where they don't feel like they're going to do anything, but at least they will permit themselves to be ridiculed and punished.

MR. WARREN: Now masochistic he means white people or Negroes now?

MR. YOUNG: White people. Pardon me. I think a great deal of the player--

MR. WARREN: Isn't there some of that in Baldwin? He talks about the gas chamber for the American Negro; isn't that masochistic?

MR. YOUNG: No, I-- but my point is that a great deal of the preoccupation of the white press, whether Malcolm X or Mus

or Muslim movement or Baldwin or Adam Powell, is a kind of guilt feeling, and saying well, beat me Daddy, you know I'm willing to be punished, I feel guilty. A couple-- of course with Malcolm X and some of these others, it's-- many white people are saying, unconsciously: You know I'm sort of sympathetic to this notion of separatism. You take the Muslims, for example, there's many a white person who's irritated about the tension and the conflict, frightened by the threats of integration of their neighborhoods and all this, and along comes a man of philosophy who says, "I don't want to integrate your schools. I don't want to integrate your neighborhoods. I don't want to integrate your daughters. I'm going to get rid of crime and welfare," There's many a white person who subconsciously says, "Look, this isn't too bad an idea."

MR. WARREN: Let's subsidize him.

MR. YOUNG: Yes, see if we can't play this up. So instead of talking about Whitney Young and his efforts to integrate let's play up the Muslims. But this is very stupid, because the truth of the thing is, is that there wouldn't be ten Negroes who would follow Malcolm X to a separate state, even if America was going to give him one and they aren't going to do that. Africa doesn't want our welfare load any more than New York wants a welfare load; they aren't going to import them to Africa. The appeal that a Muslim has is a kind of an opportunity for a

Negro who's been beaten down all day, had to get a vicarious pleasure out of hearing somebody cuss out white people. But Negroes-- this is not a serious--

MR. WARREN: Like the Ku Klux Klan in reverse.

MR. YOUNG: That's right, it's precisely-- it's the capitalizing on and exploitation of misery and despair and hopelessness, and it's very easy to the demagogue--

MR. WARREN: Is there one thing more-- back to DuBois, for instance, his talk about the great split, in the American Negro's psyche, on one hand the pull toward Africa, the pull toward the mystical black the pull toward a special cultural heritage, that pull-- as opposed to the pull, splitting in the other direction, to identify with the Western European American tradition, the Judaic-Christian tradition, even to be absorbed totally and lose his blood identity in that tradition, in that race. Now this great split, for some this is a real live problem right this minute, they tell me, at least.

MR. YOUNG: It's probably more now than--

MR. WARREN: is it more or is it not?

MR. YOUNG: It's probably more now than ever before.

MR. WARREN: How does that-- how do you feel about that? Personally, or

MR. YOUNG: It's probably more a dilemma now than before, because historically--

MR. WARREN: Now that's very interesting, than now, that's very interesting.

MR. YOUNG: Yes, you see, in the past, ten years ago even fifteen years ago, Negroes made very little attempt to identify with Africa. There was no real effort. In fact they denied any real relationship. It's been only in more recent years, as Africa's come into independence, and all this. I think what's working here is not so much the conflict between retaining his black identity as important, ^{that's} for importance sake, as the feeling-- that unless we have this kind of group solidarity we won't achieve the other, that this type of solidarity has been practiced by every other group in our society-- minority group -- the Irish, Italians, or the Irish, the Italians, the Catholics, Jewish people did it, and so the pull is more toward this as a tactic, as a survival technique than it is any basic, I think, conflict with do I want to worship the idols in Tanganyika or do I want to worship Jesus Christ? I don't think it's-- you see the Negro basically has not this kind of historical contact and relationship with Africa, he's never been really that close.

MR. WARREN: He's cut off.

MR. YOUNG: He's been cut off, yes.

MR. WARREN: This makes a difference. The question is what kind of difference and how much of a difference is the real problem, isn't it?

MR. YOUNG: Well, I think that the new pride in race

is a very positive thing, because as long as a person felt that his being a Negro made him inferior or made him an object to be despised, then being a Negro was something he couldn't help but subconsciously wish he wasn't. Now there is developing, as more Negroes attain their rights and are recognized, and all this, as Africa has come up, there is this new pride in race. My concern is-- is that America move quickly enough to reward the Negro, give him his just rights, so that this pride will not degenerate into chauvinism and into a kind of blind nationalism which he feels is necessary for survival. I think that the big problem here now is to, as part of the dilemma that the white liberal is facing, is that what the Negro is saying today to him is that you've had all the institutions in our society and had an opportunity to do something about our plight: the churches, the businesses, labor, every other group. But you haven't done it. Now I understand why. The group who's offended, who's hurting, must cease hurting. So the Negro has assumed the initiative, but having assumed it, he feels that he will never again turn it over to anybody else, so that white people, if they want to express their liberalism today, must accept the fact that the Negro must lead or that the Negro will accept him only as a peer.

MR. WARREN: The fellow isn't always taken.

MR. YOUNG: That's right.

MR. WARREN: The fellow that's negotiating, anyway.

MR. YOUNG: That's right. So that the-- and in many cases he must follow. Now what worries me is that most white people spend their time today bemoaning the methods and the tactics that Negroes are using, sitting around evaluating what's good and what's bad and what's going to alienate and all this. Instead of saying, well, I don't like the sit-ins or I don't like the blocking of traffic, so I'm going to go on the Urban League's massive Marshall Plan to get better housing and better education and better jobs.

MR. WARREN: You mean that the white ^{man} ~~man~~ is saying this.

MR. YOUNG: The white man is spending more time concentrating on the inconveniences and the disturbances than he is on the basic causes of the problem, to begin with: the poverty, the one out of four who are out of work, the one out of six who are in poor housing, the 500,000 Negro kids between the ages of 16 and 21 who are out of work and out of schools.

MR. WARREN: But you have to wonder about which are you going to support, though.

MR. YOUNG: I don't think I have to make this kind of basic decision between either/or.

MR. WARREN: Well, I mean this way. I mean there are clearly some people do, when it comes down to the traffic blocking when the Fair opens up, or having a demonstration in the Fair or particularly in pavilions

MR. YOUNG: Oh, I'm going to make it.

MR. WARREN: That's a problem of actual choice.

MR. YOUNG: Yes.

MR. WARREN: In terms of policy for various people.

MR. YOUNG: And you'll find responsible Negro leadership.

On some things we have endorsed, other things we have not, we certainly will not endorse. We'll take a public position against the stall-in. On the other hand, we would not oppose the picketing of the Maryland pavilion or the Mississippi pavillion inside the Fair. We have to make these kind of choices, but if '63 did nothing else for us, it said this: that no longer can we generalize about our friends and our enemies in this whole struggle. In this-- in the past we've said Northerners are liberal and Southerners are bigoted and management is bigoted and labor is limited. We found, in 1960s, some of the most sophisticated and brutal bigots in the North and in labor than we ever found in the South, among management, and we found the reverse was also true.

MR. WARREN: You should have asked me; I would have told you, earlier.

MR. YOUNG: Well, actually, I was disappointed but not too surprised. I knew that when the ~~skimp~~ chips were really down that we'd find a lot of these fair weather friends would desert us. As long as they could express their liberalism in terms of indignation about a lynching in Mississippi, this is one thing; when it came to moving next door to them this was something entirely different.

END OF TAPE

1. See Tape 2