

ROBERT PENN WARREN VERNON JORDAN TAPE # 4

Mr. WARREN: This is Tape #4 of conversation with Mr. Vernon Jordan, continue - Let's turn to another topic - some weeks ago I was talking to a lawyer, successful, prominent lawyer, who is a Negro, who said to me, Suddenly I find myself spending a lot of energy inverting symbolisms in the society around me. When I find anything that's white or bright equal in value, I'm turning this around and to myself. Living in a white culture, where the symbolic values are white and bright and light equal good, and dark and black - these things equal the opposites - I find myself defensively turning these around to - in my own mind - all these hidden symbolisms. How do you respond to that - his condition - how do you feel about his condition?

Mr. JORDAN: I think that this is a problem that many Negroes are having - rejection of - and I guess what he means to some extent is a white man's standard.

RPW: White equaling good - a symbol.

VJ: For me, I don't have that problem, because -

RPW: White has white robes.

VJ: Yes - sure. I think it requires some sort of decision-making on the part of the individual Negro concerned, and I think it's a part of a value system, that he sets up himself, despite whatever valuation is placed by the use of that particular symbol on what it means in the white community. For me, it's a matter of individual choice, and I don't attach any significance to a particular thing

because it's characteristically white or characteristically Negro. If it concerns my self-interest or the self-interest of my wife and daughter -

RPW: You don't find that the symbolisms of the blaze of light equaling truth offensive - you don't find the white robes of God offensive - these are the white - and values somehow being equated in a whole symbolism in the society in which you live?

VJ: It doesn't bother me.

RPW: It doesn't bother you?

VJ: No.

RPW: It does some people to the point of - almost - you know - of physical stress.

VJ: I think it does. It doesn't bother me because I feel secure enough to feel I can determine my own values, in terms of not what they mean to my peers or to my neighbors or to - but what they mean to me. And those persons whom I must necessarily immediately relate - my wife, my daughter, my mother, my father, or my in-laws -

RPW: Or your white friends?

VJ: That's right. If these values have meaning for me, and there might even be some conflict here with my wife -

R PW: You actually don't - you wipe out the symbolic structures around you entirely and say what it means to me in literal terms?

VJ: That's right - for me. Now, I think that there are some people who are not so disposed - and I think that many Negroes have problems with this. I've been exposed to the white culture and it's

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level best, and it's a result of my college days -

RPW: Sure - the red shirts that's full of it - the Bible - the King James version is full of it.

VJ: But I did not take on these things as being sacrosanct, because they were white. I compared the two cultures, compared the two systems of values necessarily, and arrived at my own -

RPW: That is, you went behind the symbolism to your personal realities?

VJ: That's right - and evaluated them on the basis of that which is most advantageous, and that which mostly pleases me, and this to me is the most important thing. If I'm pleased and happy, then to hell with what John Doe thinks.

RPW: The fact that truth is given a white robe or a blaze of white - this doesn't strike you as anything -

VJ: Well, it's not going to be repulsive to me. But this is to say also it doesn't mean I'm going to like it or love it. It depends upon how in a given set of circumstances - or what in a given set of circumstances this means to me - maybe that's talking in circles.

RPW: No, it's not. I think it's not talking in circles at all.

In this connection there's - I don't want to talk as an anthropologist, by the way, but you have some strange facts. The same symbolism of white equaling truth or good, and dark equaling, you know -

VJ: Bad and dirty.

RPW: - untrue and bad - are African symbolisms, too. It's a strange anthropological fact. There are some dances - I won't go into all

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this - there are some dances where you have a struggle between virtue and vice - these are native dances - traditional dances - virtue is white plumed headdress, white robe - there's no make-up, you see - the faces of both, you see, are the natural, untinted faces - yet the vice or evil is clothed in black - these are traditional tribal dances going back before European contact. The Chinese the same way - although they paint their faces white for this traditional dance.

VJ: Yes - maybe this follows through in our own culture. We drape things in black with death, but we marry in white as a sense of purity. But I don't associate the lady in the wedding gown in white with - necessarily with any value of the white man.

RPW: Now, what' I'm getting at - you don't - some do. What I'm getting at is this - we have a strange situation where a regular contrast between the Negro and the white man in America, has led to a whole kind of symbolisms which is no problem to the African and no problem to the Chinese - no problem for the Malay. We have enough traditional stuff as far as the anthropology I read to carry over, where day and night are carried - without reference to complexions. Yet this is said to have become a real issue for many American people -

VJ: I think one manifestation of that is that - the old blue blood or blue vein notions that used to exist in the Negro community, that the light skinned Negroes are better than the dark skinned

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Negroes. I think that this is a manifestation to some extent of what you're talking about. But to me this is tommyrot, that - I guess the indication is that if you are light - and certainly this is biologically true, that somewhere or other there is some white blood or white ancestry. But this to me means nothing. The only significance that I would attach to it is that there is some white blood somewhere, or some white ancestry, and - what does this determine for me? It determines nothing except that there is some white ancestry somewhere.

RPW: Let me - I'll just make a statement here - a revolution aims at the liquidation of a ~~group~~^{regime}/or a class - there's always been somebody who had his head chopped off, literally or figuratively - at least the liquidation of the power of that regime. It does not have to set itself with a mutual way of life, a modus vivendi, after victory. The revolution looks forward to a crucial confrontation -

but the Negro movement must look forward to a settlement, not a liquidation. Therefore, there must be new techniques and new objectives for this to be a revolution. Does this make any sense?

Let me go back over it now.

VJ: Well, let me say this here - as I see the revolution, the revolution is a revolution fought, number one, not to take over, but it is a revolution -

RPW: That's one difference. No liquidation, in other words.

VJ: That's right. But it's a revolution wherein you assume or

that you take unto yourself, not anything superior, or not anything less than what is already given, but you assume some equal stature or equal recognition or equal opportunity or equal chance. This is not to say that you're going to hog the show, but this is to say that if two apples are being passed out, that you're going to get your two apples right alongside the next fellow, and that because you are Negro that you necessarily are limited to ~~one~~ a half apple. And I think that this is what the revolution is about, is that a half a loaf, or ninety-nine of one hundred percent is not enough - that you've got to have all of it, in terms of your equal share, or in terms of your share. And what goes on, in the opportunities and in the privileges - and also with this, the rights and privileges, that you also share in the responsibilities.

RPW: This does not conform to any previous social movement so far as I can make out - there's no parallel in anything in history - I'm inclined to believe - I don't want to be dogmatic about this - this is new. Now you may say this is therefore not a revolution, that is a word. If I follow you right, this is not at all like any revolutionary event that ever occurred before - it does not aim for liquidation of a class or a group of people - ~~the~~ only for a change of idea - is that right?

VJ: A change of idea and a change of status, from one of number 2 to an equal place, and moving into this you do not usurp anything that the people who ~~are~~ already have these rights have.

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RPW: In other words, this might be represented as the first democratic revolution to the world?

VJ: Yes - I'm not sure that I'm in a position to substantiate this - but I do think that the most important thing about this revolution is that it is not a revolution geared to liquidate, as you used, and it's not a revolution that builds street barricades, and it's not a revolution that's fought with arms, but it's a revolution I think that operates on a very human level whereby you try to get people to do things on the basis that people are people.

RPW: Well, going back, then - this would seem to be the first democratic revolution that's ever existed under this definition, where it's not aiming to liquidate a class or regime, but merely to re-interpret the light of a whole society.

VJ: That's right - overthrow is a good word. There are some people in the society who say they're trying to overthrow us. But I think that this thing is a matter of presently the white man being in the driver's seat and ~~saying~~ saying gee and ~~haw~~ haw - pulling both reins - but here is a Negro who is saying let me too get up there in the driver's seat and let me have some of the say about which way this horse is going to gee or which way he's going to haw.

RPW: That is, the white man you're talking about misinterprets the whole movement then, is that right? He doesn't understand the nature of it?

VJ: That's right. I think this is partly true, especially in this - he doesn't understand that when a Negro gains this right

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of first-class citizenship, he doesn't understand that when the Negro gains this, that he does not lose anything.

RPW: Right. There's the formula right there - he doesn't lose anything.

VJ: He doesn't lose anything, because you can't lose that which you in a sense don't have a right to exclusively.

RPW: That is, he does not conceive of the nature of this revolution - he thinks it's the same as the previous revolutions - if we called it a revolution - what did we call it.

VJ: This revolution is not a coup -

RPW: It's not a power prayer - put it that way.

VJ: That's right - that's right.

RPW: Undoubtedly I think we must submit this, ~~that it is some people~~ for some Negroes it is.

VJ: But I think that even those Negroes - this is a myth, it seems to me -

RPW: For most people outside the actual social process, I think - yes - but for some it is clearly - everybody

VJ: Yes, and there is some vindictiveness involved in this, but I think that -

RPW: Vindictiveness, you say - some people would say in identifying revolutions of the past, they would say there are two dynamic forces in a revolution - hope and hate. You can't have a revolution until you have a hope for change - some guarantee of success - until you beat them down you can only have a servile revolt, which would lead

nowhere. A revolution means a dynamic hope for a change that is envisionable, plus a hate. Now, here is -

VJ: I think you have to address yourself to hate of what? I think it -

RPW: Good - go ahead.

VJ: I think it has to be hate of what - whether it's a hate of the system or whether it's a hate of the people who perpetuate the system.

RPW: All right - now we have a distinction which has never been made before in any revolution - this is the first time. Always before it has been of the perpetrators and not of the thing perpetuated.

VJ: Yes. And I think that this revolution, if you're going to use the word hate - hate here must be used as hating the - not the perpetrators, but that which is perpetuated - the system itself. Because I think that to hate those people in power, those people who perpetuate it, would lead to the overthrow or the liquidation - ~~not~~ necessarily.

RPW: Well, you are now talking like Dr. King.

VJ: I don't mind talking like Dr. King.

RPW: I'm not saying that as an affront to you at all - I'm just saying you are.

VJ: But now of course, I think you also ought to understand that personally I'm not out to redeem the soul of America either.

RPW: Well, wouldn't you just in passing perhaps, with your left hand -

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VJ: Well, I think that - you see, I take the position that when I exercise my constitutional rights, I don't care how the man sitting at the table next to me feels about it, or whether my presence there changes his heart or not. I don't give a damn if he regurgitates or if he gets up and leaves, or if he turns over his glass or spills his coffee on the waitress - that's his problem.

RPW: Wouldn't you have a slight preference in that matter?

VJ: Well, there's nothing like eating your meals sort of in some quietude or some tranquil situation. But by the same token, if this man is uneasy, if he gets ants in his pants - that's his problem. And it only becomes my problem at such time that he comes and stands over me or disturbs me in the peaceful or tranquil enjoyment of my meal. Now - by that I mean, my presence there is not geared to redeem him - it's not geared to redeem him - to love me or to think well of me. But I also feel that if I sit next to him in a classroom long enough, or that if I sit next to him on an airplane long enough, that somewhere along the way he's going to come to the same realization that my classmates came to who had to live with me. Without their consent. That this guy - he's just another guy - that he has - basically he does many of the same things that we do, but he doesn't like asparagus and I don't like brussels sprouts.

RPW: Well, how different are you from Dr. King, then?

VJ: Well, I think that Dr. King's philosophy is such that through this creative buffering - I think he calls it - that you reach out and you make this man love you - it's because of the - and I'm not

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- I've never been quite sure what he means about love, because when he talks about this love, he says that I can assure you that you can't like everybody. Well, I agree with him on that - a lot of folks I don't like - a lot of folks I don't want to live next to - a lot of folks I don't want in my house for dinner or collecting my bills or for anything else. So I have no quarrel with that. But this business of redeeming the soul - and I guess this is through some sort of spiritual revelation as to the goodness and to some sort of perfect situation where the Negro is concerned - I'm not interested in that. When I send my ~~son~~ child to school or when I go to school or when I use a public conveyance or when I pay my taxes, I just don't want anybody to disturb me in the free exercise of my constitutional rights. Now, how he feels as he sees me exercising my rights - that's his problem.

RPW: Tell me this - suppose we had all matters of constitutional rights clearly defined and clearly settled so there's no friction on that level - the civil rights, the constitutional rights - what remains?

VJ: Well, I think if you had this thing clear -

RPW: All clearly settled.

VJ: And you had the behavior of folk as a result of this clarity controlled -

RPW: Controlled by what?

VJ: By the law itself, by the operation of the law - to say that when this man comes to register to vote, that you cannot impose

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upon him arbitrary standards because he's black, that when you get these kind of things dissipated, that somehow or other as this Negro operates freely in this situation, that even the most prejudiced white man will come to see, as he sees him operating freely - and this has been his problem - he's always seen him operate under given set of circumstances and can only appreciate him for him acting under this given set of circumstances, dictated by custom, mores and uses - but when he sees him acting as a free agent, and at that time he will come to, I believe, ultimately, some appreciation of this person, not as a black man but as an individual.

RPW: That is, you are putting your faith, then, in a legal framework which allows the human free play after that.

VJ: That's right - that's right. And once you get this free play, once you get this intercourse, once you find that when you sit next to this man that he reads a newspaper, that he's tired on the bus going home, that he's anxious to get home to his wife and a warm bowl of ~~stew~~ stew just like you are - that you find here similarities, you find here a similarity of hope to some extent, a similarity of despair, and these are common bonds -

RPW: This is the human communion you put your trust in - once the legal framework is settled.

VJ: That's right. But now, until such time that the bus driver knows that it's illegal for him to crack me across my ~~hat~~ head, or that he does not have the sanction of the state to hit me across

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my head because I sit on the front seat, then we can never reach this point of human communion, because he always sees me in a servile or - well, a different situation. He cannot see me as I really am. He sees me in a condition imposed upon me by circumstances.

RPW: What happened in Germany - and I don't know the answer to this -

VJ: I hope you don't expect me to tell you -

RPW: - in the late '20's, about the Jews, where total legal protection and apparently full participation in a society, for all practical standards -

VJ: I think that you have to look at the leadership there - a man who - take this certain group of people and exploited them because of their religious difference.

RPW: That was a small matter, though, wasn't it - something else was involved - religion was just something that was - a difference, in other words - not a religious difference.

VJ: Yes - here were some people different, and if I attacked them on the basis of that difference, then I can ride the crest of power.

RPW: Let me ask the question - shifting around a little bit - when James Baldwin writes that the Southern Mob, that is, the street gang, or the cops in Jackson, act the way they act, they do not represent the will of the Southern majority. Does that make sense?

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VJ: Well, it makes sense in that I believe the vast majority of Southerners, white Southerners for some reason or other would be reluctant to be identified with this lunatic fringe, and I also believe this, that you got on the one extreme maybe twenty percent of the people who are totally opposed to it - on the other side this - other twenty percent -

RPW: Opposed to the mob, you mean.

VJ: Opposed to the mob and the tactics of the mob, this kind of thing - and who also believe in the complete equality and freedom of the Negroes. And then you have the other twenty percent that composes a mob. But then you have a sixty percent who will go pretty much the way that the populace goes, so long as it does not involve them, having to make a personal witness, a testimony. And this is why I think leadership is so very important.

RPW: There's no leadership in the South now except for the segregationists, is there - no real leadership. There's some - a little spotty - but there's no fundamental is there?

VJ: Because I think that the real fundamental leadership is silent and the people -

RPW:

VJ: That's right. And their silence makes them ineffective, and once a guy like Chuck Morgan in Birmingham, who vocalizes - and this takes an awful lot of courage, and ultimately it resulted in Chuck's having to leave Birmingham - and it takes a great deal of courage, because what the man is faced with, or what he thinks he's faced with, is a very bread and butter matter. He's a lawyer who

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must necessarily depend upon white clients for business, and this business depends upon his house mortgage - or his house mortgage and the grocery bill depend upon the business - then he's got considerations - and maybe if you can dispel these fears you can get more people to act.

RPW: One historian said to me sometime back - fear is the curse of the South - that is, the fear of the white man for the white man.

VJ: How do you want me to respond to that?

RPW: Whatever you say - want to respond.

VJ: I think that the white man is afraid, not only of his white brother but of himself. He's not sure how he's going to act in a given set of circumstances. And then the laws, the customs and the usage is - of the community, make him feel compelled to act in a certain vein, because, as Reisman says, we all like to belong. And nobody wants - everybody wants the pleasure of his brothers and of his peers.

RPW: You just said a big thing there - and let's stop at that point. He's not afraid of his neighbor but he's afraid of himself.

VJ: I think this is -

RPW: I think it's right, too - it's a big thing.

(end of tape)