

STAUGHTON AND ALICE LYND
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

With
STAUGHTON LYND
By
DAN KERR AND CATHERINE MURPHY

THE LYND RESIDENCE
January 13, 2017

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NARRATOR: Staughton Lynd
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INTERVIEWER: Catherine Murphy
PLACE: The Lynd Residence

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Catherine Murphy 00:00:01

So, TCI, I am curious about how you and Alice—how the course evolved and how you determined the content. How that—how you started out, and how that, what road that took?

Staughton Lynd 00:00:32

Well, Thomas, in the teaching for livelihood that he does, teaches a course in American history and of course in world history and so we began with world history. And we took a look at what was discovered in caves in southern France. For example, there is a cave where next to one another you find the footprints of a child and the footprints of a wolf. Was the wolf tracking the child and did it eat the child, were the wolf and the child friends, were the inscriptions created in different periods of time and just accidentally turned out to be next to one another? And we worked our way up, but when we got to what you might call modern times, the advent of capitalism, 15th-16th centuries, without any particular decision to do so, we found ourselves substituting a curriculum based on violence and non-violence as a way of trying to grapple with what world history had amounted to in the last 500 years and that still continues and we-we still seek different ways of-of approaching that topic, which of course, surrounds them every moment of every day in prison and is more evident in the lives of the rest of us outside the bars then we might sometimes like to admit.

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And, so we've done different things. Thomas has quite a repertoire of things that he's found on the internet. And so we have a series of visual experiences with, not slavery, but the use of a kind of semi-slave indentured labor from India and South Africa and other countries. Thomas showed us a chilling documentary made with a group of men in Indonesia who had been members of a death squad at a time that the United States sponsored slaughter of Communists and alleged Communists in Indonesia took place, we showed the British film on the life of Gandhi. We showed a film of the remarkable speech that Martin Luther King made the night before his assassination when he said he had been to them—he might not make it with them to the promised land, but he'd been to the mountaintop. And then we saw a play that had been

developed at another, much lower security, prison under the supervision of the same administrator who is responsible for TCI. This man is a friend of ours. He was a warden at the supermax, at the time of our class action, and at the end of it we were better friends than at the beginning because he too wanted changes in the supermax. For example, when the supermax began there was no outdoor recreation, and I asked the then warden, why? And he said, well the Lucasville riot began on the recreation yard. So, with the kindness and guidance of our friend, the former Warden at the supermax now regional director, we went to a couple of other prisons in his jurisdiction and we saw, you know, some remarkable dramatic productions. And when Thomas originally suggested the idea of the listening project, which involved telling each other stories about ourselves, I assumed that all of this was preparatory to a dramatic production which we could then put on a television channel that's used within the prisons. They don't yet have an outside face, but it's called the Hope Channel and the prisoners like it. And I thought that would be a natural progression, but no, Thomas wasn't ready for that. We-we hadn't done enough listening to one another, and so our—my accident last fall and our absence for the last three months has kind of interrupted a process of three teachers trying to figure out together what the next stage is, and I know that Thomas has been diverted by the election results and given some classes on fascism.

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And so it's much too soon to say what the TCI program amounts to. It's always been entirely voluntary. Classes are larger and smaller and no discernible rhythm. People sometimes leave in the middle of class because it's their only chance to get to the commissary and so on, but it's been a rich experience and, in general, confirming of educational indism in the sense that we sit in the circle. No one is in charge of anyone else, but we create something together. I, at the moment, not being allowed to brave the snow and ice and go out too. TCI, have been doing the same kind of thing with the group that meets in our basement every month. Where it will always go in the end, where it will go in the end, I am not certain because I have recognized that some of these heroes who made the most of their prison experience did so in significant part because of the outside movement of which they were a part. There's nothing like that in the United States.

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Now I should say at the same time, and this might be a good moment to say it, we assembled the class action that went to the United States Supreme Court about due process violations in the Youngstown supermax, and the central experience was that I would shake you awake at 4:00 in the morning and say pack up your stuff you're going to Youngstown, which meant you were going from a medium level person to the most restrictive. And naturally your reaction was, well, wait a minute, why am I going? What's this all about? I want to be offered a chance to-to explain myself and so on. And we won, we won enough that we began to get letters from all over the country. And Alice just has the most

marvelous way of combining empathy with professional distance. And so, it came to pass that in 2011 there was a group of men at the Pelican Bay supermax in California, and they said we're going to go on hunger strike and we'd like you to publicize what we're doing. And those were the small beginnings of something became-became mighty. There were three hunger strikes in 2011 and 2013. It was totally nonviolent. The, and—and thousands of people, not just at Pelican Bay but all over the state, were involved for shorter or longer periods. You could take part in the hunger strike if you wished by going without food for a weekend or going without food for 60 days, which is about all a human being can do. And the really remarkable thing that happened was that we persuaded the man who had been our, well, he'd been Alice's teacher at the Pittsburgh law school and Center—president of the Center for Constitutional Rights and a very close colleague. We persuaded him to take on a class action at the—California on behalf of these men who were in the most restrictive circumstances. Tiny cells, no windows, some of them for more than 20 years. In indefinite solitary confinement.

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And I guess one of the kind of overflow experiences in my life that I'll never forget is that a month or so ago Jules came to see us and he said, you know, enforcing the settlement agreement is more demanding than winning the lawsuit. And he said, now imagine this, I'm telling him how guilty I feel that I got him involved in trying to run a transatlantic and transcontinental lawsuit, which requires endless long-distance phone calls, plane rides. He said, Staughton, my life may be shorter because of what you got me into but this is the best thing I ever did in my life and don't you regret it for a single moment. People don't usually talk to each other that way.

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And in the process, I feel we made a very dramatic discovery. And like several other discoveries of almost infinite importance in my life, I don't think people are sufficiently aware of it. And what we discovered was this, is there a non-violent way to change a prison? And the answer cannot be just a hunger strike because the administration waits you out. And after 60 days, you have a choice between the continue as Bobby Sands did and die or to set or—and to set a pattern for your intimate colleagues that if they are really men and strugglers and saints of the movement, they will do likewise, as I believe. Nine other Irish prisoners did. Total of 10 deaths. Exactly the same number of people who died in the Lucasville uprising. And what we discovered, I think, was the—if your one hand is the nonviolent, hunger strike and you vigorously publicize it, and if instead of making up an excuse for why you're stopping, which is the general pattern, you say, oh no, we're putting this in the hands of our lawyers now, we have a class action which the most repressive prison system in the country settled. You've devised a formula for social change that is unmistakably successful at least in this instance and didn't get anyone killed. In contrast to what I now believe, there's a new book on Attica, 1971. There was a hideous prison uprising in Santa Fe, New

Mexico in 1980, which was all prisoners torturing and killing one another. And then there was the uprising Lucasville, where Alice and I had become involved. And the formula was take over a part of a prison, be sure to capture and make hostages several conscientious object-correctional officers and hope for the best. And the result has been 85 people killed in those three uprisings and no significant change. The new book on Atticus says for a while there was an appearance of change but that Attica is now worse off in 2017 than it was in 1971. So, I mean, this—this is a, I think, a very dramatic discovery. And Alice and I have written a book that tries to celebrate it.

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And then the other thing that we have encountered of late, on this same path, is the phenomenon known as moral injury, and just to make sure it's said once and for all, as part of this series of photo exposures, post-traumatic stress disorder is apparently typically an experience of fear. You hear a car backfire and you hit the deck, if you go out for a meal, you sit with your back to a wall in a chair where you can watch whoever comes in the front door and a variety of improvisations on this theme, to the detriment of your wife, your parents, and very often yourself because the rate of suicides among combat veterans is roughly twice that among civilians. And, in this universe of post-traumatic stress disorder, a man named Dr. Shay at a veterans hospital in Boston discovered there was a distinct subset. And these are people who are not threatened by the future but are irrevocably scarred by something that happened in the past, either they did it or they witnessed it, but they couldn't prevent it, and it's so interesting to me as a lifelong agitator, a word by which I will financ-finese the controversy about organizing, as a lifelong agitator I'm just sick and tired of trying to get other people to do things.

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What moral injury is about. Is that volunteers for military service, failing to comprehend the kind of war where nobody wears uniforms, where women and children may be part of the oppositional forces, etc. etc., etc., reach a point where they don't need you to organize them. They cross a line within themselves that causes them to feel, often in a tragic and lamentable—well, I've done things that I can't imagine I did. How could I think of my grandmother, think what she would have felt? Could she have seen what I did yesterday down by that river and so on. And I think for the first time in my life, even thinking of Mississippi, where there was such hope and such courage and an atmosphere so different from that that you find in the inner city today, even thinking of that, I don't think I've ever experienced anything as hopeful as the idea that the very decision of those who run this country to substitute a volunteer military for conscription, which they did in the belief that all the problems in Vietnam, the fracking and so forth, were the result of forcing people to be in the army. It makes absolutely no difference because the volunteers, who often have economic and other motives for volunteering, but leave that aside, who volunteer with no realistic possibility of understanding what they're volunteering for, they too reach a point within themselves

where they say, I won't do that or I've done it and I'm going to feel shame and guilt for the rest of my life.

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And so these are, I would say, two of the frontiers for Alice and myself, the moment—number one, the idea of combining a nonviolent tactic, which in prison for more and more people all over the world means a hunger strike with a coercive tactic, with a legal approach. I've gone back over Dr. King's campaigns in the South. They always had this condemnation. He won the Montgomery Bus Boycott at a moment when the city of Montgomery was about to put him and his friends in jail for creating any illegal bus service, and he won because a three-judge federal court and then the United States Supreme Court said what Montgomery is doing is unconstitutional, same way with Selma. When everybody was ready to march at Selma, after the massacre on the Edward Pettus Bridge, Dr. King led the forces of good out to the bridge and then turned around because the federal judge hadn't yet decided whether to permit the march, and Dr. King wanted to have the law on his side when he did this remarkable mass nonviolent enterprise. And sure enough day or two later, Judge Johnson said, yeah, this is protected by the Constitution, you can march. And, I just feel that what hope there may be for us on this planet, which we're doing our best to extinguish and destroy, may lie in-in-in these combination of non-violence and legal activity, and with what energy and number of days remain to me I mean to do all I can to explore that.

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And, I mean, who knows? Maybe we can find a way to-to deal with the steel mill kind of situation that we confronted here in Youngstown, but to do it differently, more creatively and find a way to create a new world within the shell of the old. And unless you can do that, how do you expect people to-to want a new society, to really desire heaven on Earth, to want the kingdom of God with all their hearts and souls unless they've had a chance to experience it. I think that's too much to ask of human beings, and really in the way sinful to ask of children or of anyone else, because people live and die and grow through experience, and so we have to find ways to help people taste what that blessed community would be like, and-and if teaching means anything—and I'm afraid often it doesn't—but if it has any significance in people's lives, I understand we have to learn to read and write and add and subtract I'm not against that, but what we really have to learn is to hunger and thirst for the kingdom of God. And whatever you call it, I'm not attached to that—the words, and I think there are some beginnings. Little flickers, little sayings. We can get down on our knees and blow on them and help them become real fires.