

THE YOUNG

A CUP OF COFFEE AND A SEAT

Michael Walzer

Durham, North Carolina is probably a town like many others; I doubt that ordinarily I would have found it unfamiliar. I saw it, however, only at night and carried away only two memories. The first is of a drug store with its lunch counter closed, where I did not get a cup of coffee. The second is of a policeman to whom I showed an address, who did not give me directions. The address was that of a Negro church where Martin Luther King was speaking at 8:00 that evening, February 16. The policeman said he had never heard of the street. Later I learned it was the main street in the Negro section of town.

Two days later I was in Raleigh, a half hour by bus from Durham. Raleigh is a handsome town; its main street, dominated by the state capitol, is wide and spacious; the store fronts are plain, not gaudy. In front of four of those stores some twenty Negro students were picketing. As a Northerner I expected, and felt, the tenseness of the city. The day before there had been a fight on the picket lines and a Negro boy had been hit with a tire chain. What I found there, by talking to Negro students and visiting their colleges, was a spirit and a method of action which made such incidents . . . incidental. Dangerous they were—and are—but they are not the key to the sitdowns. For the Negro students, like the earlier Montgomery bus boycotters, are engaged in a new kind of political activity, at once unconventional and non-violent.

Late in the afternoon of Monday, February 1, four freshmen from the Agricultural and Technical College, an all-Negro school in Greensboro, North Carolina, walked into a downtown Woolworth's, purchased a few small articles and then sat down at the lunch counter.

Not one of them had ever sat there before. They each asked for a cup of coffee and were told that they would not be served. This was the customary policy of the store: "We don't serve colored here." Yet the students refused to leave; they remained seated, and ignored, until 5:30 when the store closed. The next morning at 10:30 the freshmen reappeared with sixteen friends and resumed their sitdown. Again they were not served. Again they did not leave until 5:30. During the seven hours they studied or talked quietly. The counter in front of them was not covered with the usual cups and saucers but with books, notebooks, sliderules. Several policemen came in and walked up and down the aisle that ran the length of the lunch counter, staring at the sit-downers. There was no disturbance; nor were the students intimidated.

On the third day the Negroes occupied virtually all the forty seats at the Woolworth's counter. Describing that day one student wrote:

After attending a mass meeting in Harrison Auditorium, I was . . . inspired to go down to Woolworth's and just sit, hoping to be served. . . . By luck I was able to get a ride with six other fellows. We rode down to the parking lot and there left the car, after which we walked to Woolworth's, read a passage from the Bible and waited for the doors to open. The doors opened and in we went. I almost ran, because I was determined to get a seat and I was very much interested in being the first to sit down. I sat down and there was a waitress standing directly in front of me, so I asked her if I might have a cup of black coffee and two donuts please. She looked at me and moved to another area of the counter.

The number of sitdowners continued to increase, spilling over into other chain stores. A few white sympathizers joined in—an act of considerable bravery in the South. Finally the lunch counter was closed. The students agreed to a two-week "truce"; the manager agreed to negotiate. At this writing, a full month later, the counter remains closed.

SITDOWN IN THE SOUTH has a very literal meaning. In the past, the variety and five and dime stores have freely invited Negroes to every counter but the lunch counter. There they were not permitted to sit down on any of the long row of stools, but were served standing up at a far end. Negroes were often hired to cook the food or to wash dishes, hard jobs and especially in restaurants of this sort. But the counter was a color line: on the side with seats only whites sat.

As in the buses, sitting down together at a lunch counter symbolizes a kind of equality which Southern whites have not been prepared to admit. Nor have Southern Negroes, until very recently, been prepared to demand it. Now the sitdowns have made clear the immediate and central issue in the integration battle. "We don't want brotherhood," a Negro student told me when I visited Durham, "we just want a cup of coffee—sitting down." This was a demand for an end to the ordinary, unrecorded, day-to-day indignity of Negro life in the South

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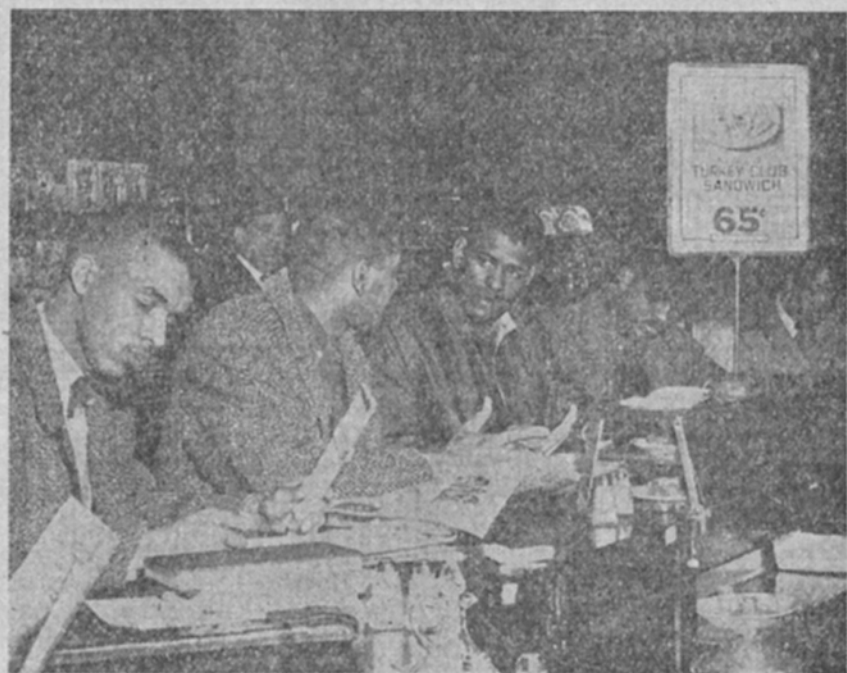
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FOR SERVICE

Students Stage Sitdown Demand



Get In Study Chores

Students from ART College began Monday afternoon what they called a "passive sitdown demand" for service in the cafeteria here's counter at Woodward's downtown five and dime store in Greensboro. Shown above are five students who while they sit are getting in a little study time.

The counter has approximately forty stools, and at times during the third day (Wednesday, when this photo was made) there were only three or four seats left vacant by the students.

—an indignity more demoralizing, perhaps, than the terror of lynching or murder has ever been. The A&T students were “tired of humiliation.” The method which they found in their “tiredness” was so dramatically effective that in the week following their demonstration, sit-downs were staged in half a dozen North Carolina towns and within two weeks had spread to more than twelve cities in four states: Virginia, Tennessee and the Carolinas. The sitdowns spread unpredictably; it is obvious that there was no central organization. Yet it is not entirely fair to call the movement spontaneous. *“In a way,”* one student said, *“we have been planning it all our lives.”*

Everywhere the pattern was more or less the same. The Negro students, well-dressed and quiet, came into the stores—always the local branches of national chains—and sat down at the lunch counters. They were jeered at more frequently as news of the demonstrations spread, but did not reply. There were occasional fights. The counters were closed or roped off after a day, sometimes after only an hour; signs were posted saying “Closed for repairs,” or “Closed in the interest of public safety.” At this point in many of the towns a mayor’s committee hastened to arrange some sort of negotiations. For a moment the students were confused: they could not continue their sitdowns once the counters were closed, yet they had a deeply ingrained distrust of Southern negotiation. “If we negotiate,” the editor of a Negro college paper told me, “my grandchildren will still be worrying about that cup of coffee.”

Now, in the last few days of February, action has been resumed; picketing, boycott, mass marches are the new methods of the students. Their activity continues to be orderly, disciplined, non-violent. Yet the number of incidents, usually provoked by white hecklers, has increased; several students have been attacked and beaten up; many more have been arrested. Negro high-school students have imitated their older brothers, but in larger numbers and without the same organization or discipline. And in the meantime, the movement has spread to the deep South; sitdown demonstrations have taken place in South Carolina and Alabama.

II

I asked every student I met what the first day of the sitdowns had been like on his campus. The answer was always the same: “It was like a fever. Everyone wanted to go. We were so happy.” In Durham students were still pouring into town after the original sitdowners had closed the counters and started home. The two groups met with cheers, many of the students raised two fingers in the air for victory. The news from Greensboro was spread rapidly by the press and radio; more effectively, it spread along the basketball circuit. Most of the schools involved in the early weeks were athletic rivals; basketball games were occasions for the transfer of enthusiasm. A&T played five games in two weeks and students at each of the five schools were shortly involved in sitdowns.

Organization on each new campus was amazingly rapid, accompanied by the usual bickering over leadership positions ("Everyone wanted to be on a committee"), but fundamentally shaped by a keen sense of solidarity. The student council was usually at the center of what was invariably called, with no self-consciousness, the Student Movement. Sometimes command was assumed by the campus NAACP, sometimes by an *ad hoc* committee. Few students talked about anything else; the seemingly endless discussions of tactics among the leaders and within the committees were repeated in the dorms, in the canteen, in the local (illegal) beer hall. Even in the last it seemed to dominate the more usual topics: basketball and girls.

After the counters had been shut in Durham and negotiations begun with a "human relations committee" appointed by the mayor, a sign appeared on the door of the student council office at North Carolina College: *"Please stand by for further instructions concerning movement. (signed) Leaders."*

The office really looked like a room from which a movement was being run. A bulletin board extended the length of one wall. Newspaper articles about sitdowns throughout the state were posted, along with various notices, instructions and a few recently received CORE pamphlets. Piled high on the desk of one of the council officers were schedules filled out by more than 500 students, listing their free hours so that the sitdowners could be relieved and a minimum of classes missed. The office was almost never empty; students came in to hear the latest news, do a little work, or jubilantly read their clippings.

When I reached the council office at Shaw University in Raleigh it was even busier. The students at Shaw and at nearby St. Augustine's College had been the first to begin picketing once the lunch counters had closed. I visited the office on the sixth day of picketing. Two old desks stood at either end of a rectangular room; chairs lined the longer sides. At one of the desks a girl sat, checking the pickets in and out and arranging transportation into town. The students sat around, waiting for their rides, the boys restless, the girls more quiet.

The placards they would carry stood on a ledge along the wall: *"Do we eat today?" "How do we get invited to lunch?" "Temporarily closed. Why? Just a cup of coffee. Shame!" "Let's be Just for a change. No traditions attached."* At about ten o'clock the first carload of pickets, four girls and three boys, drove downtown. Before they left they received instructions which I heard repeated many times that day: "Walk in a single file. Don't bunch up. Don't talk. We'll get relief out." It was pouring outside; it rained all day and well into the night.

At the other desk sat a boy from Jamaica, small, smart, a member of the Intelligence Committee which was running things at Shaw. He was there all day. "We say we don't cut classes," a student told me, "our teachers say we don't cut classes; but we cut classes." On the desk in front of the Jamaican boy were a few old textbooks, left there by student pickets. Among them I found a copy of Big Bill Haywood's

Autobiography, with the bookmark near to the end. The Jamaican boy knew about Haywood, but wouldn't talk to me about him. He spent the day—when he wasn't on the phone—reading an Ibsen play.

Posted on a wall over one of the desks was a giant placard headed "Shaw University-St. Augustine College Student Movement." The placard was covered with a detailed diagram of the movement's organization, which looked as if it had been copied out of a textbook on bureaucracy. At the center was the Intelligence Committee; straight lines pointing downward connected it with the student councils of the two cooperating colleges; lines radiated upwards to various subsidiary committees: transportation, negotiation, etc.

Every night since the sitdowns started, the Intelligence Committee had called mass meetings at both Shaw and St. Augustine's. Together the two schools have about one thousand students; Shaw, slightly larger, is a Baptist school, St. Augustine's Episcopalian. The meetings have been marvelously well attended. But the night I was there the rain was pouring down outside, and only about 200 students assembled in the Shaw auditorium; there were seats for twice as many. The leaders were immediately afraid that student enthusiasm was waning and sent runners to the library and dorms. Meanwhile the meeting began, with a prayer from the floor and the singing of a hymn. The president of the student council called it "our national anthem"; the hymn had as its appropriate refrain: "March on, march on, until victory is won."

There was a leak in the roof of the auditorium and throughout the meeting, during singing and speech making, I could hear the water sloshing about in a giant bucket perched precariously upon two seats about halfway to the back of the room.

In the middle of a report on the size of the picket lines that day, the entire basketball team shuffled sheepishly into the hall; they were dragged along by the captain of one of the picketing groups. He rushed to the front of the auditorium and began denouncing the players for practicing during mass meetings. One of the players, obviously no militant at all, tried to defend the team: "We can't disrupt the whole basketball schedule," he said, "for just one movement." But he was shouted down and the student who had dragged him in took the floor again to display a remarkable talent for oratory. There had not been enough men on the lines that day, he said. (In general the girls were more ardent about picketing than the boys.) Several girls had been pushed, one had been slapped, by white men. That would never have happened had enough male students been walking. There could be no excuses; the girls needed protection, and—after all—the boys might meet their future wives "in the movement."

III

The students in Greensboro called their demonstration a "passive sitdown demand." What was most impressive about it, however, was the number of students it involved in *activity*. None of the

leaders I spoke to were interested in test cases; nor was there any general agreement to stop the sitdowns or the picketing once the question of integration at the lunch counters was taken up by the courts. That the legal work of the NAACP was important, everyone agreed; but this, I was told over and over again, was more important. Everyone seemed to feel a deep need finally to act in the name of all the theories of equality. Once the sitdowns had begun, marching into Woolworth's or picketing outside became obvious, necessary, inevitable activities.

After a week or more of comparative neutrality, the police also began to act, supported by an interpretation of the trespassing law provided by the attorney-general of North Carolina. In that "liberal" state where race relations—so the newspapers but not the Negro students said—were "good," state officials, like the store managers, had at first declined to take the students seriously. They had no real contact with Negro students and were hardly capable of understanding their new temper. During the first week the Greensboro newspaper periodically announced that the sitdowners were losing both numbers and staying power. Someone compared their activity to college panty raids; it was all a prank. But as the movement began to spread, the astonished whites took a harder line. On Thursday of the second week, 43 students were arrested in Raleigh, charged with trespassing on private property. The story of those arrests reveals better than anything I know the nature of the student movement. It was told to me by a boy at Shaw University in a slow deliberate drawl with an undertone of pure joy.

On Wednesday, the Shaw-St. Augustine students had shut down the lunch counters at four stores on Fayetteville Street, a few blocks from the state house. The following day a small group of more ambitious students started out to Cameron Village, a suburban shopping center. There they were told that the entire center, including streets and sidewalks, was private property. They telephoned to the council office and someone consulted a Negro lawyer in Raleigh. He told them that the streets and sidewalks were public; he thought the police interpretation of the trespassing law should be tested. Fifteen more students drove out to the center. They were window-shopping when the vice-president of Cameron Village Inc. appeared on the scene with a single policeman. The students were officially notified that they were trespassing and given two minutes to leave. At the end of the two minutes—the vice-president looking at his watch—the policeman arrested one of the students. Apparently he thought that would be sufficient, for it would provide a test case. *But the other students refused to leave; they crowded around the policeman and demanded that they too be arrested.* One by one they were asked to leave and given two minutes. They waited their turns. When five had been arrested the policeman phoned for a paddy wagon. Eighteen students were under arrest when it arrived. Later twenty-five more came out to Cameron Village to "windowshop." When the news of the first arrests reached campus, there had been a rush for cars. "Everyone wanted to be arrested."

Two weeks later when the now famous forty-three came up for trial, so many of their fellow-students jammed into the courtroom, that the judge postponed the case. The fire chief said that the crowd constituted a fire hazard. Perhaps it did. But the remarkable solidarity of the Negroes constituted a far greater danger to white supremacy. In Tennessee where some eighty sitdowners were fined for "disorderly conduct," thousands of Negroes gathered on the courthouse steps singing hymns and the national anthem. Inside, the sitdowners insisted that they would all go to jail rather than pay the fines.

The fact that many of the Negro colleges were state supported has provided an obvious opportunity for North Carolina politicians to bluster and threaten. At first it was only the college presidents who were under attack; later students were threatened with expulsion. The attorney-general of the state—now a candidate for governor—is widely quoted among Negro students as having said, "If these administrators can't control the kids, we'll get administrators who can." The result of such threats has been that students have sometimes had to fight on two fronts: both in the stores and on the campus—and the fight has become both complicated and confusing. When I left Durham negotiations were in progress between a committee appointed by the mayor, which could not speak definitely for the chain store managers, and a committee appointed by the president of North Carolina College, on which the sitdowners were not represented. Having closed the lunch counters downtown, the students returned to campus and began circulating a petition against their president's committee.

IV

At North Carolina College, Durham, three young men led the student movement. They were described to me by the editor of the campus paper as the righteous man, the prudent man and the proud man. The righteous man most fully embodied the spirit of the movement. He was a veteran and had spent two years in Japan. That was the only time in his life, he told me, when he had lived like a free man. When it was time to come home, the white boys were happy and he was afraid. Now he led the younger students with a quiet determination; he was the only one of the leaders I met who clearly possessed charisma. "We won't stop, regardless..." And he took the strongest position I heard on the confusing problem of negotiations. "If I have to negotiate for a cup of coffee, I won't pay for it. I won't negotiate across the table and then again across the counter."

The most remarkable thing about these students is their self-confidence. They have grown up in a South which is no longer a terror for them, but still a continual source of insult and indignity. They have been in the army or spent time in the North—summers at church camps, a year working in New York, a visit to relatives. They have developed thin skins; segregation is no longer tolerable to them. They have unlearned, perhaps they never learned, those habits of inferiority

which have cursed Negro life in the South for a century. They have felt every insult—as an insult. They could not understand the “complacency” or the “fearfulness” of their parents. Students told me many times that their parents had been “brainwashed.” “When the insurance man comes to the door,” one boy said, “he asks, ‘Is Thomas there?’ I tell him my father’s name is Mister Brown. But my father answers to Thomas and says yes, sir.”

Less than twenty years ago, in the early forties, a Negro soldier was shot and killed by a Durham bus driver when he refused to move to the back of the bus. The bus driver was acquitted by an all-white jury. I learned this from a white man, a German refugee who taught philosophy to the Negro students of North Carolina College. Not one of the students mentioned the murder. Instead they told one story after another about more minor but to them terribly important incidents in the buses, in stores, on the job. The stories usually ended with some version of: “I ran out of that store. I almost cried . . .” One student told how he had held a door open for a white woman who refused to come through. “I slammed the door. I stopped being courteous.”

The schools I visited had one-third to one-half Northern students, most of them from Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey. But it was the Southern students who were supplying the fervor which kept the movement going. And among the Southern students it was especially the girls—perhaps because they are less mobile, more likely to stay South. The Northerners were often too blasé or too cynical to play a major part in the fight for integration. The Southerners were more militant (and more religious), committed to a long and gruelling struggle. None of them seemed to expect anything else. It probably is hard to be a Negro in the South and grow up naive. So their every act seems to have something of calculation in it: on the buses in Durham I noticed older Negroes moving as if by habit towards the back, while the Negro college students sat as far front as possible. And this surely was an act of will; one boy told me that after being insulted once, he had not ridden a bus for two years.

At a mass meeting of more than 1500 Negro adults in Durham a young woman from a Methodist church sang a hymn whose refrain (I may not have it exactly) was: “Give me Jesus, you can have all this world.” The words did not seem appropriate at a meeting whose purpose was so emphatically to win a place for the Negro *in* this world. Yet it revealed the tone of the meeting almost as surely as did the chant begun by Martin Luther King: We just want to be free. A religion which seizes upon, dramatizes and even explains the suffering of the Negro people is joined here to an essentially political movement to end that suffering. Out of that combination, I believe, comes the stamina, the endurance so necessary for passive, non-violent resistance. The new self-confidence of the young people, however, is as important, and among them I found occasional discontent with “camp-fire religion.”

One boy told me that for King passive resistance might be a faith, but for him it was only a strategy. Another boy, smiling, said that he expected God to help the student movement, but meanwhile the students "would help the hell out of God." Though the press has played up the role of divinity students in the sitdowns, I discovered that most of the leaders on the campus were sociology, psychology, economics and physics majors. And yet for all of them, religion is a habit whose forms are fortifying and strengthening. Prayers and hymns are normal features of student meetings.

Several students I spoke with had read Gandhi, more had read about him. But I rarely felt Gandhi present among these Negroes as a significant or potent symbol. It was the Montgomery bus boycott, coming in their early manhood, that had been the decisive event. On the other hand, I have never encountered students so "up" on the law; many of them could literally recite every important court decision since school integration was ordered. Passive resistance and endless legal action were the two political forms with which they were familiar. I was a little surprised to find virtually nothing special—nothing Southern, nothing Negro—in their views of the presidential candidates. A few said they would not vote; a few said they would never again vote Democratic. Many more engaged me in discussions as to the relative merits of Kennedy and Stevenson. Presidential politics seemed to them a universe apart from sitdown, picketing, student solidarity.

FOR THE NEGRO STUDENT these new forms of political activity were a kind of self-testing and proving. Each new sitdown, each day of picketing, each disciplined march, each mass meeting was cause for pride and exhilaration. White students who were willing to participate were welcomed. But I attended two long meetings between Negro and white students at neighboring colleges (most of the students had never met before) and I never heard a Negro ask, or even hint, that whites should join their picket lines. It will be better for *them*, and for us, I was told, if they come unasked. The boy who said this was the same one who had told me that what he wanted was not brotherhood, but a cup of coffee. He was right of course, it is not necessary to feel fraternal towards the man you sit beside at a Woolworth's lunch counter. But what about the man you walk beside in a picket line? For it is there, I believe, on the line, that real equality is finally being won.