

My Turning Point

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We are celebrating the 50th anniversary of Milwaukee's Open Housing marches which began August 28, 1967. They were marked by unprecedented displays of white racism and at the same time brave and noble demonstrations of protest and demands for human dignity. But for me they also were also characterized by shocking, first person examples of police brutality. The marches helped me to understand the state has a nearly unlimited capacity for violence. The threat those marches posed to comfortable notions of white supremacy led to riots by thousands of whites but also to vicious police violence. Those marches led by Father Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council were the turning point of my life.

My story begins in Clintonville, Wisconsin where I grew up and couldn't wait to leave. I was born in Milwaukee and always considered it my real hometown. My grandparents were one of last white people to leave Palmer Street. My grandfather sold insurance and had been a Socialist Party member along with his neighbor Frank Zeidler. They had few possessions except for the fine china that came out at the regular family dinners that attracted dozens of relatives and their kids. Their neighbors included Billy Bruton and his family. Bruton was the center fielder for the great Milwaukee Braves teams. Even the status of playing for the World Series champion Braves couldn't get Bruton and his family a ticket out of Milwaukee's 1950s ghetto.

My attitudes on race coming out of high school were roughly Kennedy-liberal. My father died the first year I was away at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee where I would eventually get all my degrees. My father's death freed me to act out but at first my rebellion was very tame: I joined the Young Democrats at UWM. In spring of 1967 we did a lot of talking and passed extreme-sounding resolutions about civil rights and the war in Vietnam. I lived with several different groups of Young Democratic Party officials, including Dennis Klazura who was the State Chairman of the Young Dems. I was on track to be a politician and I intended to go to law school. I was seen by east side Democrats as someone who had "potential."

I recruited my friends to join the Young Dems, and we mainly debated and argued over racism and the war. The virtue of these talking sessions was that I learned a lot about both national political issues, like the war, but also local events. There was increasing civil rights agitation, picketing, and demonstrations in Milwaukee. I timidly attended some but mainly read and learned about how entrenched racism was in Milwaukee. For example, the notorious Judge Christ T. Seraphim made regular headlines with outrageously racist talk and court decisions. That he and the Police Chief, Harold Breier, along with score of racist judges and cops were members of the Democratic Party was offensive to me. At that point I thought I would be a champion of Party's liberal wing against Seraphim, Breier, Mayor Henry Maier and LBJ-loving pro war regulars.

The shift in my consciousness began that summer. I was living with another group of veteran Young Dems on Astor Street, just off Brady. This was when the area was mainly Italian, well before the hippie and yuppie waves of the next decades. July 30 of 1967, on my 20th birthday, there were disturbances on 3rd Street, now King Drive. Mayor Maier played the law and order card emulating urban mayors like Richard Daley of Chicago. He called out the national guard

and proclaimed a curfew. I watched jeeps with white guardsmen, called up from rural Wisconsin, drive around the streets with unsheathed bayonets, playing soldier. The guard call up was part of an hysterical atmosphere of fear promoted by the mayor. It led to the belief among the white population that black people were violent, ready to riot and needed force to be put down. Rather than provide a calming atmosphere, Mayor Maier stoked the fears of Milwaukeeans and fanned racism that summer until it was, well you could say, “white hot.”

In August word got out that the NAACP Youth Council and Father Groppi were going to march to the south side and confront the racism in the city. The immediate issue was open housing, but the tactics were Dr. King’s from Chicago, taking the civil rights movement north. He wanted to expose the depth of racism in northern cities. King was assaulted the year before as he marched into Cicero, a white suburb and into the Chicago’s segregated Marquette Park. Groppi’s tactic of a march to Kosciusko Park in Milwaukee was part of a broader urban movement to build the civil rights movement.

i don’t remember how I heard about the first march, on August 28th, 1967. It was surely a topic of conversation among my nearly all-white political friends. But I had never gone to a demonstration that began within the black community. I had never been to St. Boniface, Groppi’s church which had become the moral center of the civil rights movement, and the starting point for the march. When I think back now, I remember being fearful — racial stereotypes die hard. It’s too far back to remember everything that went through my head then, but I was talking a good game on campus, and it seemed that *not* going to the march would make me a hypocrite.

Whatever the reasons, deciding to act that night changed my life forever. I went to the church and was struck by the black painted Christs. It seemed to me as extreme and even blasphemous — of course Jesus was white, I naively thought as I was taught in my white Lutheran small town Northern Wisconsin church. Groppi had ordered the Christ images painted black when he first arrived as priest in the parish. But the joyful hymns and determined mood challenged and upset some of my old racialized patterns of thought. I had never heard a priest or minister preach like Father Groppi. His intensity, emotion, and moral fervor attracted me. And he backed it up with actions. This was unlike any clergyman I had ever met.

I did not know what we would be facing as we marched out of the church that night, but the tension built as we turned south. There were about 150 or so of us and we headed toward the 16th Street Viaduct. When we began the march over the “border” I can still remember that moment when someone said there might be snipers. I squinted my eyes and carefully and nervously checked each roof top. Some things leave an impression you do not forget for the rest of your life and that was the first one that summer, but it would be far from the last. We sang and chanted but mainly we watched and prepared for... well we didn't know what. This marching was no longer just words in a debate on campus, it was becoming clear our lives might be on the line.

Crossing the bridge and entering “enemy” territory was frightening. There were hundreds of angry white people lining each side of the street: young and old, men and women, children and adults. They had “Polish Power” banners, and George Wallace and Nazi signs. Racist chants about “monkeys” and “back to Africa” filled the air along with various objects they hurled at us. Thinking back what I most remember was the intensity of the hate. Those white people hated us. They hated black people and the “n* lovers” who marched with them

Groppi's adoption of Dr. King's tactics had taught me a life-long lesson about the depth of racism. I had heard racist comments and I have to admit I had made one or two in my life, just fitting in. Racist white people were pretty common and some of those who said those things were my friends and neighbors. I had watched Dr. King march at Selma on TV and the coverage of the Freedom rides but I was completely unprepared for the mobilization of racism and hate that I witnessed over the coming nights on Milwaukee's south side.

My memory is not clear. It seems that we were turned back the first night, but the second night we marched all the way to Kosciusko Park. On one of those nights, the picture of Father Groppi marching next to a cheeky white kid with his hand raised toward the menacing crowd made it to the front page of the Milwaukee Journal. Everyone in Clintonville saw it and word began to spread that Hagedorn was a you-know-what lover.

When we got to Kosciusko Park an estimated mob of 13,000 white people were there screaming at us, throwing things at us, and waving racist placards and banners. A second memory that is still fresh was when I was standing in the park when a yell went out, with rioters pointing at Father Groppi, "There he is" and a charge began. I remember that well because when they said "there he is" I looked next to me, and Father Groppi was right there. I was in the line of charge. Joe McClain, one of the Commandoes who protected the marchers was also standing next to me and he grabbed me and said "form a line." We linked arms just as the white charge hit and we held them back. It was all a blur then. I never expected going to a march to end up holding off attackers, putting my body on the line. I had no training, but I didn't really have any choice. How much training does it take anyway to keep your arms linked and not let the bastards through?



After a while, tear gas was fired and I remember canisters falling among the marchers, not among the rioters. I have a distant memory of kicking one away, but I'm not sure I would have had the wherewithal at that point to act. Memory typically portrays you in the best light and it is not always accurate. But I do remember that after what was probably a few minutes, but seemed like an eternity, we beat an organized retreat to St. Boniface. I don't remember anything about the march back over the viaduct. I was coming down from an adrenaline high from the drama at Kosciusko Park. We had lived to march another day.

The next day Mayor Maier made a proclamation banning marches. It did not escape us that he did not ban the 13,000 racist protestors from rioting, but made it illegal for the 150 or so of us to march for open housing. Of course, Father Groppi announced we would march anyway. I don't remember thinking deeply about getting arrested. I was charged up about the confrontation the night before and convinced we were in the right to protest. I showed up on time at the church. I think a few of my Young Dem friends were with me but I'm not sure who anymore. Marching that night meant getting arrested. It would be my first.

We headed out into the streets and the police were there in large numbers and that night the arrests went peacefully. We were led to the courthouse and I appeared before Judge Christ T. Seraphim himself for setting bail. I was pretty cocky at that point and when the racist judge noted the "Young Dem" button on me, he asked if I was from the Young Democrats that started the petition to recall him from the bench? "I wrote it" I told him in a rather less than respectful tone. He doubled my bail.

That night was puzzling. My fellow marchers were bailed out but I wasn't. In the middle of the night I was led to a small room and interrogated by two detectives, who I later learned were from the Red Squad. They kept asking me about my mother. Foolishly I sparred with them rather than shutting up and refusing to speak without a lawyer. My mother, huh? I figured it out later that they were interested in my mother's childhood friend, Nada Hudson. Nada and her husband Jim were public members of the Communist Party, and I think the detectives were looking for evidence that the open housing marchers were "communist dupes" or part of some sinister communist plot.

By 5 or 6 in the morning I was bailed out. Father Groppi had stayed at the courthouse all night. He knew I had been arrested but the sheriffs denied I was in custody and he waited them out. Finally greeting me well past dawn. Neither he nor I knew the next night was going to be worse.

If I had any doubts about my first arrest, there was no doubt I would go back again to assert our rights to protest. The TV networks were covering the arrests in "the Selma of the North" and while I didn't get any sleep until morning I thought to myself being arrested wasn't scary. We were doing the right thing to violate the mayor's proclamation — which years later would later be ruled unconstitutional. We would practice our first Amendment rights and get arrested again. It seemed so simple and painless to do the right thing.

The night of September 1st I recall the march was larger. I was with a fellow Young Dem Shawne Mantyh. Tensions were rising. I think it was earlier that night or the night before that a fire had been set, destroying Freedom House, a residence of many Commandoes and organizing center for the protests. The TV cameras were waiting in the streets as Father Groppi led the march out from the church. There were screams as arrests were made, this time with force and scuffling broke out. Police smashed the network TV cameras so their brutality would not be broadcast. The march was forced back on the church parking lot as our leaders were taken into custody. I saw some small kids throwing stones at the police from nearby as we waited to get instructions about what to do next.

Then it happened. Police charged onto the church grounds into the crowd. I was standing and staring at the police not even thinking I was going to be assaulted. For what? I was at a peaceful assembly doing nothing provocative. I remember the first officer leap at me and bring his billy club down on my face. I recall seeing my glasses break in two and fly into two directions. I went down and covered up as we had been briefed to do by the Commandoes. I put my hands over my head and more than one officer was smashing my head with batons. They broke my hand but I protected my head. Cops were all over me. Shawne later told me there were six cops beating me at one time. I remember one hitting my foot with his billy club because that's the only part of my body not covered with other cops. I remember Shawne screaming but I was curled up just trying to avoid worse damage. They grabbed me and carried me to a paddy wagon and carted me off to jail. Little did I know the night was just beginning.

I was brought back in front of Judge Seraphim and charged with multiple felonies and misdemeanors — assault and battery to a police officer, resisting arrest, and of course disorderly conduct. I recall one cop saying, “He attacked the six of us, your honor” but I’m sure that’s a false memory. It was what I was charged with, however. The beating didn’t take the sass out of me and I remember verbatim what I said to Seraphim: “Your fascist cops beat me up. I want to go to the hospital.” Seraphim set a high bail and ordered me taken for x-rays. I’m not sure if he ordered even more treatment, but much more would happen in the next few hours.

I was put in a paddy wagon with a young black man who I had not met. We sat silently, both injured earlier by police. There were six police officers sitting on the benches next to us, three on each side. All I remember about the hospital was the doctor or nurse saying to the cops, “He’s alright.” Of course, later x-rays showed my hand was broken, but the hospital visit was symbolic or maybe a set up. My fellow prisoner and I were returned to the paddy wagon. We were not handcuffed but sat next to the three cops on each bench as we rode back to jail. I remember looking in the officers’ eyes and seeing something, fear or hate or maybe it was expectation. The entrance to the jail for paddy wagons is a door that opens to the basement of the Safety Building and we waited as the door opened. As soon as the wagon entered the basement, the cops jumped up with their batons. My black fellow prisoner stood up to fend off the attack. I went down and rolled under the bench. The cops were beating on the black guy and knocked him out of the wagon. They grabbed me and pulled me out from under the bench and dragged me out of the door. I rolled and went under the wagon, they swung their billy clubs wildly but I wasn’t going to come out easily to get another whopping.

I saw from the ground my buddy being knocked across the floor. The cops picked him up and slammed him into a big round trash barrel, butt down. He was stuck there and they were beating the crap out of him. Finally I heard someone with authority say “that’s enough, get them up to the jail. I let myself be pulled out from under the wagon and was led to the elevator which would take us up to the floors with cells. I never learned my buddy’s name and he was never seen again at the marches. But when I got to the elevator he was visibly shaking from the beating and the cops were still on adrenaline highs from their beating of us.

I took my left arm — my right hand was the one that was broken — and held it over his body to calm his involuntary physical shaking from his beating. Thomas Wolfman, a cop who forgot to take off his badge with his name on it, pulled out his gun and said to me “Take your arm away from that n* or I’m going to shoot you.” Or maybe he said, “kill you.” Whatever words he used I’ll never forget that instance of fear for my life. It was 50 years ago but I remember that chilling feeling like it was yesterday. I realized right then that the state could do what they wanted, to use violence, to kill and it would be justified. My life was at their disposal and the two of us in that elevator represented a threat to the emotional security of white supremacy. I think Wolfman wanted to shoot me but while he would have likely got away with it, it would be messy killing a white kid. That moment with the gun pointed at me made me an enemy of state for the rest of my life. My intellectual understanding of injustice was merged with my battered body and empathy for the black guy that had got it worse than me. Fighting racial injustice would forever lay in the core of my being.

I don't remember getting bailed out. I did go back to St. Boniface the next morning and found the pieces of my glasses. I'm blind without them. I went to a doctor and X-rays confirmed my hand was broken.

The next big march I think was on a Sunday and it coincided with a State Democratic Party gathering in Oshkosh. I wanted to march but my Young Dem friends convinced me I should go and make a presentation to the State Committee. I did and all I remember was that group was largely officials who were in sympathy with the Mayor and Police Chief. They listened to me talk and dismissed me and did nothing to criticize the brutal police suppression of our march. I was brought later that week by my Young Dem friends to Congressman Henry Reuss at his office in Milwaukee. I told him what had happened and he called the police "fascists." But at a press conference later he declined to say anything and skipped out of town. I quit the

Democratic Party then and would never return. The Democratic Party was made up of many conservatives and moderates who supported the police and I discovered the liberals were cowards. I didn't want to be part of that kind of a party.

I dropped out of school the next year and worked full time for peace and justice. I was a paid organizer — paid meant I sold my own blood twice a month — for the Milwaukee Organizing Committee. We worked on both civil rights and anti-war issues. I appeared before a hearing called by the Social Development Commission later than year and testified what happened to me and to the marchers. While there was shock from the Commissioners and this short article in the press nothing ever happened.

The main effect of my experience was to propel me into a life long struggle for justice. I marched on and off during the 200 nights but I would become increasingly involved in anti-war activities in 1968. I pledged not to join the military and burned my draft card. I conspired with the Milwaukee 14 to seize and burn the city's draft files and was indicted for conspiracy to destroy government records and "hinder the administration of the Selective



Service Act.” But those incidents for me were the aftermath, the consequence of an awakening that began at the open housing marches for racial justice. Those nights changed my life forever.